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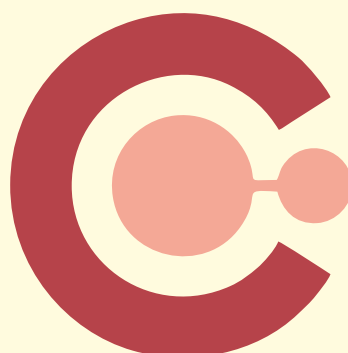
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Om Prakash Valmiki's 'Joothan': A Symbol of Soreness, Humiliation and Dearth

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ABSTRACT

Om Prakash Valmiki (1950-2013) was a well-known Indian poet, a leading Hindi Dalit writer, a short story writer and a story teller. He was a resident of Barla village in Muzafurnagar district of Uttar Pradesh. He was nurtured in Chuhra caste. His contribution for Dalits made him 'Masiha of Dalits.' He bestowed the voice to the long felt agony of Dalit community. He set a mile stone in Dalit Literature by writing a celebrated and debut autobiography entitled as Joothan (1997). In Joothan, Valmiki communicates the conflicts of Dalits and their disquieting communal occurrences. Joothan is in the real sense, a saga of Dalit unfairness and societal proscription. It compels the readers to ponder over to investigate the self-esteem and uniqueness in the Indian Hindu society. It also highlights the heartrending situation of India's untouchables and their experiences of soreness, sufferings, tribulations, humiliation, dearth and poverty. One cannot deny the fact that even after independence; Dalits are still facing the evil practices such as chauvinism, monetary insufficiency, injustice, resentment and disrespect. They are still struggling for their rights. Joothan highlights the glimpses of Dalit history and a scheme for a far-reaching change of civilization and human perception. The prime objective of this paper is to portray Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan as the symbol of rebellion, soreness, humiliation and dearth.

Keywords: Joothan, caste, discrimination, conflicts, mortification, poverty etc.

FULL PAPER

Introduction:

Joothan, the true and heart touching story of Dalit people, is the first Dalit autobiography in Hindi literature. Later it was translated into English by Arun Prabhas Mukherjee in 2003. It is the marvelous autobiography and painstaking presentation of sufferings offered by Hindu society to underprivileged and oppressed class. It is a social document of people who reside in the region of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh where Indian Caste System is revealed at a greater extent. It reflects the horrifying disgrace casted on Balmiki / Valmiki Samaj in Uttar Pradesh.

Joothan delineates the communal domination and evils that he faced while budding as a Dalit youngster. Om Prakash Valmiki describes the dealings when he was differentiated against the others of his times. He plays a vital role in the reformation of Dalits in Indian society. He depicts long deprived of sufferings of the Dalit people. In *Joothan*, Valmiki reveals the divergences of Dalits and their disquieting communal occurrences. It is the journey of Dalit discrimination and societal prohibition. It compels the readers to ponder over the search of self-esteem and eccentricity in the Indian Hindu society. This reveals the disastrous situation of India's untouchables and their journey of throbbing, sufferings, tribulations, dishonor, poverty and dearth. It represents the spiteful genuineness of Dalit's life.

Research Methodology:

The researcher has employed qualitative method and close reading of the texts related to the thematic concern of the novel. This helps to figure out the sufferings of underprivileged male and female characters with deep understanding. Reading a text helps to interpret several thematic aspects of the novel. It also helps to generate textual and numerical evidences from texts at large scale so that comprehensive information can be visualized and put before the readers extensively. Therefore, the researcher has interpreted the literary texts for better insight.

Literature Review:

Literature review is the significant characteristic which analyses the former researcher's perceptions on the supposed topic. Here the researcher has portrayed Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* as the symbol of rebellion, soreness, humiliation and dearth. He has proved the facts wherever necessary. This literary review is projected in the bibliographical part.

Introduction of Key Terms:

Before going to discuss Dalit study in detail, let's try to comprehend some specific terms such as pain, humiliation, dearth and poverty in this research paper.

The term *pain* is a stressful sentiment often caused by passionate stimulus. It is a poignant experience associated with damage and can be in the form of pricking,

tingling, injuries, diseases, burning or ache. It is a signal that conveys something is going to wrong with the body.

Humiliation is a feeling of indignity or thrashing of self-respect. It is the awkwardness and ignominy you suffer when someone makes you appear unintelligent. You feel dishonored when someone intentionally does something that formulates you feel mediocre or look dreadful in the eyes of others. Mortification and isolation are experienced as extremely as corporal soreness.

Dearth means insufficiency, absolute need or condition of not having adequate of something. Poverty is a multifarious concern that involves shortage of resources to fundamental requirements which creates problems such as communal intolerance, segregation, starvation, undernourishment, and inadequate access to edification and healthcare.

Dalit Literature:

The major function of Dalit literature is to render the temperament of Dalits. It is emerged after 1960 in Indian English literature. It is the painful and mortifying experience for Dalits to endure unbearable aggravation and rational agony by this cruel and brutal society. Dalit literature is the combination of soreness, unhappiness and misery of Dalits. It helps to empower Dalits to raise their voice against all kinds of discrimination and mortification.

Joothan mainly focuses on identity crisis, caste discrimination, untouchability, Brahmanical atrocities and humiliations. Through *Joothan*, Om Prakash Valmiki as the representative of Chuhra reveals the caste supremacy and enmity between upper caste and lower caste people. *Joothan* encapsulates the memories of the writer's childhood filled with difficulties belonging to the 'Chuhra' community.

Pain, Humiliation, Dearth and Poverty in *Joothan*:

The meaning of '*Joothan*' is the leftovers and waste in plates that are given to Dalits to eat which is supposed to eat by animals. It is a symbol of the humiliating survival forced on the Dalits. In *Joothan*, the readers experience the glimpses of brutality, deficiency, caste cruelty, endurance, grief and oppression. Valmiki highlights Dalit life and their experiences. He depicts minute details of racial aggression during his school and adult life. He acquaints the readers about the harsh realities and cruelty of the society and the complexities of caste oppression. Valmiki reveals the life style of Chuhra, untouchables (Dalits) in small huts who clean the flesh and leather from rotten streets. They are considered as degraded labourers and victims of ridicule and oppression. *Joothan* is an expression of the oppression of the Brahmanical, feudal attitude of western Uttar Pradesh, India. It is an emotional expression of a Dalit struggling for education in the rural areas of eastern Uttar Pradesh. *Joothan* glorifies the self-respect and self-confidence of Dalits. The upper caste zamindars used to compel Dalits to work in their fields. If someone denies, he is punished. This tramples their honour and dignity.

Valmiki ridicules the colorful depiction of the villages that has been portrayed in Indian literature written by conventional writers. In Joothan, Valmiki delineates the authentic description of village life where Dalits Chuhras, reside at the outskirts. They are denied the fundamental needs such as food, clothing and shelter. They are compelled to do hard works without expecting the fruit of their labour. They were paid nothing for their hard and under pressure labour. Their physical and mental pain proved futile. Valmiki in the preface addresses,

‘Some people will discover all this incredulous and overstated. Those who say such things don’t happen here, I want to say to them, the throb of this hurting is known only to the person who had to experience it. (xxxvi).

Valmiki asks the readers,

‘Why is it a crime to ask for the price of one labour? ‘Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word on our lives? Why are Hindus so cruel so heartless towards Dalits?’ (xxxvi).

Valmiki claims that,

‘All characters and events in Joothan are truthful, masquerades a significant confront to postmodernist critics who recommends that autobiography’s certainty is constructed that the autobiographic raconteur outlines as presentable self by reprocessing his / her reminiscences in order to fit the present.’(xxxvii).

Joothan, a marginalized regional nonlinear autobiography, conveys the resonance of Valmiki’s sincere voice, its resentment, its disdain and its grief.

Painful Experiences of Dalits:

Om Prakash Valmiki as a protester conveys experiences of soreness, struggle and anguish of the entire Dalit community and raises his voice for voiceless Dalits. He attempts to stimulate the inhuman and callous mutual order of the society which muscularly supports caste- based discrimination. He fights against the dissimilarity and wishes to eradicate the societal disturbances of his society.

Here the authentic portrayal of lower caste people is delineated. Valmiki stays in slum area named Chuhra basti with other Dalits. Their regular work is cleaning, farming and other general works. They find difficult to cater their daily needs and always are in the zone of hunger. Nobody was paid for their work. They were considered as a low material and were below the sub human level. There is a village pond where we witness young girls, women, men; children etc. are busy in carrying shits and exposing their private parts in public whereas naked children, pigs, dogs and everyday quarrels are also a part of their daily life. People love to spend time in discussing the quarrels that occurred in the village.

Prohibition for taking Education in School / College:

The children from Chuhra community were not allowed to take education. Valmiki’s father knows the importance of education. Therefore, he humbly requests

to the Head Master of the village, *'I will be forever in your debt if you teach my child a letter or two.'* (Joothan: 2) After admitted in school, Valmiki experienced inhumane treatment by his upper class teacher. His teacher deliberately beat and abused him every day in the class. He was asked to sweep the school ground whole day. When Valmiki's father noticed the painful situation of Valmiki, he raised his voice against the authorities of school.

Humiliation, Dearth and Poverty experienced by Dalits:

A meeting was conducted every year at the time of harvest to demand for their wages. The Dalits were given some grains or leftovers or scraps along with the roti. At the time of wedding season, Dalits were used to consume Joothan happily. There was not any bitterness or dishonor or remorse in it. If they demand for more food, they get piercing words from upper class people, *'You are taking basket full of Joothan and on top of that you want food for your children.'* (Joothan: p. 10-11) Valmiki feels embarrassed by hearing such ruthless words. Valmiki witnessed an avatar of Goddess Durga in his mother when she emptied the basket in anger in front of a Tyagi named Sukhdev Singh. Immediately the poor Chuhra consumed it with extreme anguish as they didn't have any option of their survival.

He struggled a lot in getting school admission. His parents were under threat of monetary crisis when Valmiki lost his brother. Meantime, he mustered his courage, studied hard and succeeds as a topper in the class. Consequently, his confidence was strengthened. Once in school he was daring enough to question his teacher after hearing the story of Dronacharya and Ashwatthama from Mahabharata. The teacher highlighted the poverty of Ashwatthama that instead of milk he was given flour by mixing water. Valmiki questioned his upper caste teacher that:

'Ashwatthama was given flour mixed with water instead of milk, but what about us who had to drink mar? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't an epic poet even write a word on our lives? The whole class stared at me as though I had raised a meaningless point.'

His teacher rebukes him, *'Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back. You will still remain a Chuhra.'* (p. 23, 32) At this critical hour, his father advises him, *'You have to improve the caste by studying.'* (p. 59). These expressions encouraged him to study well. He took interest in his studies. Thus, Valmiki breaks the conventional system of his caste. Instead of being illiterate, he progresses as a literate person. During the wedding time, the Chuhra's have to go door to door of Tyagi's house to get some gifts by keeping salaam. He eradicated the custom of begging from upper class people. Valmiki's father found Valmiki restless with towards this sort of custom. He decided to break down this custom in his elder son's marriage. He obtained this high status only because of his spirit of learning. Valmiki's school experience shows how Dalit children are ill-treated verbally, publicly and physically for no reason. Thus, Dalit writing proves an effective instrument to smash down the wall of stillness and repudiation.

Identity Crisis:

Valmiki was basically from a Hindu background. He didn't show much interest in worshipping any of the Hindu Gods or Goddesses. His father vigilantly asked him, 'Munshiji, I hope you haven't become a Christian.' (p.11) Here few questions raised in the mind of Valmiki,

'Neither am I a Hindu' If I were really a Hindu, would the Hindus hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill up with caste inferiority over the smallest things? I have seen and suffered the cruelty of Hindus since childhood. Why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak/ why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits?' (Valmiki: 2003)

This was the question always burning inside him from his childhood. At any cost, he did not think of conversion. He wanted to be of his own identity and he was not ashamed of revealing his identity as Dalit. Valmiki had pride that he was the first to appear for board exam from his community. He only remembered his father constantly telling him that he should improve his 'caste' through education. For the very first time, Tyagis' visited Basti to congratulate Valmiki. The reason for this kind of transformation is education. This incident motivated his Basti people to adore education for their future generation. Valmiki was trying to get rid out of his dark cave of wretchedness when he entered in his Inter-College. It was only during this period he was aware of the revolution against caste and it encouraged him both physically and mentally to be powerful.

'After reading books, he realized a new word 'Dalit.' It was added in his vocabulary. This word was not the substitute for 'Harijan,' but an expression of rage of millions of untouchables. The deeper I was getting into this literature, the more articulate my rage became. I began to debate with my college friends, and put my doubts before my teachers. It was this literature that had given me courage.' (p. 72).

He became the friend of Valmiki's and Jatvas which the people of Indresh Nagar didn't like. He feared that once again his education would be interrupted. He was determined to continue with his studies, despite the cost.

Heroic Deeds by Valmiki's Parents:

Valmiki dedicates his text Joothan to his parents. He praises them for their heroic deeds. They worked hard for their child's betterment. They fought enormously for the augmentation of Valmiki's education. Valmiki felt so pompous on his father's attitude when he revealed his anger to Valmiki's principal for making him to sweep the school ground the whole day. It was for the first time he happened to see his father with full of courage and resilience in front of the ruling community. This occurrence taught him to obtain self-reliance in unfavorable situations. Throughout Valmiki's writings, his father's ambition is evident. His tone is reflected for his people who put up with mortification in the present society. When a Tyagi asked his father, 'He only

got him to sweep up; did not ask for his thumb in the gurudakshina like Dronacharya.’ (p. 6).

Dronacharya, a Brahmin teacher asked his disciple Eklavya, a lower caste student to cut his thumb as a token of reverence so that Arjun, the Kshatriya follower could never be encountered by Eklavya, he associates the caste affairs that has subsisted two thousand years ago by comparing with an happening that overcome in ‘Mahabharata.’ Joothan showcases the temperament of Eklavya situates as an emblem for the negation of Dalits learning. Similarly, Valmiki describes his mother’s gallant accomplishment. Her annoyance was compared to the resentment of the goddess Durga when her mother flings the ‘Joothan’ from the basket offered by Sukhdev Singh Tyagi, her act of courage propagates the seed of rebellion in him.

Caste Discrimination:

Valmiki and his wife were on a trip to Rajasthan. After their trip, they were returning to Chandrapur via Delhi. They get their seat from Jaipur in Pink City Express. They were like from a prosperous family. In their compartment there was an officer and his wife as co passengers. After some time, officer’s wife asked Valmiki’s wife what caste they belong to? Immediately Valmiki replied that they belong to Bhangi community. After hearing this, officer and his wife made no conversation with them throughout the journey. (p.133)

Here Valmiki shares his own struggle. He says that right from his childhood to this day, countless stings have stung not just his body but also his heart. He further adds that caste is one of the most important elements in Indian society. In India, the caste decides his or her destiny. Being born in a meticulous caste is not in the control of a person. Valmiki tries to explain that no one has the power to determine their caste by birth. The protagonist in Joothan can be seen as the representation of the whole Dalit community.

Valmiki’s Contribution for the Upliftment of Dalits:

Later on, Valmiki discontinued his college education and he joined as an apprentice in the Ordnance Factory at Dehradun. Now Valmiki breaks the traditional customs and decides to work in the company on the basis of his education. His father appreciated Valmiki for joining his duty at Ordinance Factory. He feels proud for his son’s decision and asserts, ‘At last you have escaped the caste.’ (p. 77)

This note made to pity on Valmiki’s father because he was not aware that the caste follows one right up to one death. At Jabalpur Ordinance factory, he intermingled with new colleagues and obtained new experience of life. In this training centre, he learnt the Marxist literature along with other trainees. He involved in theatrical performances and formed a theatre group and staged many plays in the Institute’s auditorium. Then he became expert in writing poems, short stories and fictions. In addition to this, he showed his excellence as actor and director. He could not able to complete his higher education in AIME because of financial problems.

Valmiki actively participated in several conferences and presented papers. He also participated in cultural activities. He displayed his keen interest in literature. He demonstrated his perspectives on social issues. He penned down Dalit problems through a newspaper entitled *Navbharat Times*, Bombay. His interpretation of Dalit literature had brought an enormous alteration in his conception of literature.

Valmiki decided to execute his plans into practice during his stay at Chandrapur. Soon he made himself engaged as a social worker and started to fight for the issues of Dalits. He came under the influence of social reformers like Phule and Ambedkar. Thus, he laid a strong establishment for Dalit insurrection and several people joined the struggle. This offered him a new facet to his writings. Many Dalits confidence has boosted because of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's encounter of Dalit selfhood. Valmiki attended several programmes on Dalit issues all over India. He tried to collapse hegemony of upper caste people.

Valmiki met Dr. Sukhvir Singh who was Hindi scholar, critic, and poet. He was a reader in Delhi University's Shivaji College. He disliked the surname of Valmiki. He asked Valmiki to change his surname as Khariwal. He doesn't want to reveal his identity along with Valmiki. Valmiki's friends also insisted him to change his surname so that he will not be mocked by the upper-caste. Once he delivered a lecture in a conference on the topic entitled *Buddhist Literature and Philosophy*. The moment he came before the mike, one of the audiences shout, 'How can a Valmiki be permitted to speak on Buddhist literature and Philosophy? Aren't you feeling guilty?' (p. 131) Valmiki took this occurrence very casually and considered it as an enlightening experience.

Valmiki's relatives and friends demanded him to conceal his surname. They believe that his surname would disclose his background. Once in a Dalit Conference at Chandigarh, Dr. Dharamvir inquired Valmiki not to transform his name as it was his genuine uniqueness. Dalip Singh makes encouraging remarks on his surname in the conference, which offers him much support. His surname turns out to be a part of his name, without his surname he was not recognized later. His comments elevated certain concerns that led to a lot of excited argument on the surname of Valmiki in the afterward session of the conference. Some of the Sikhs in the conference were in disputing vivaciously, 'Whatever you articulate, a Chuhra will remain a Chuhra. Howsoever towering an officer, he may turn into; he cannot revolutionize his caste' (p: 131). Thus, they tried to exhibit their supremacy, reverence and worth in the society.

Findings:

Valmiki, as a prominent Dalit writer, appeared on the canon of Dalit literature and raised his voice for Dalits. He became their spokesperson and put their issues in the society. He worked as the writer, leader, motivator, philosopher and inspirer. He chooses the innovative genre like autobiography to project the sufferings of Dalits. The findings underscore how the Dalit autobiographies bestow us more poignant and outspoken description of Dalit's life, their experience of unhappiness,

throbbing, torments, accomplishments and breakdowns from the knowledgeable and genuine person. Here Valmiki has delineated himself as live participant and Joothan, the text as his own acknowledgment. He depicts his own disturbing experiences and judgments passed by the people right from his childhood. Valmiki has rightly presented caste as an authentic tool and autobiography as a medium of instruction for the readers. He takes delight in raising his voice for his own community as a spokesperson.

Conclusion:

Through this research, the researcher has connected the throbbing and struggle of Dalits with the feelings of the reader. *Joothan* itself is the representation of soreness, ignominy and paucity. Valmiki asserts that even if India is changed as comprehensive dominant country with advanced ethnicity, still the condition of Dalits is identical. Valmiki wishes to revolutionize this impression as a communal reformer and wants to exterminate caste oppression system from this society. The writer summarizes the tenderness, embarrassment, dreadful conditions and dearth of the untouchables and venerates their individualism through his autobiography. He shares specific issues which are silenced for the years together. He feels that something should be done for the betterment of his people in this globalized era. He raises his voice for the acquaintance of their plights to masses through his autobiography. Valmiki's affection towards writing literature gives him potency to elevate his voice against discrimination and grievance. His sincere attempt is that in future Dalits should not be considered as subjugated.

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