

Finding aspects of Protest and Resistance in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*

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Abstract-Dalit narrative is an emerging genre to establish to show silent voice of a depressed section. Mainstream literature has no space for Dalit cause. The works of established literature ignore the pain and sufferings of downtrodden people. Dalit literature emerged due to Dalit panther movements. Dalit Panther movement is inspired by American Black Panther movement, which has encouraged Dalit writers to start write. *Joothan* is a text by one of the Dalit literary genius Omprakash Valmiki. He tries to depict discriminatory mindset of upper caste people. *Joothan* itself tries to show the traumatic experience of the narrator in particular and Dalit people as a whole. The narrator endeavours to depict the conflict between upper caste Tyagas and lower caste Chuhra. Readers find a voice of protest and resistance through the narrator's parents.

Keywords-Dalit, Protest, Resistance, Exploitation, Injustice, Autobiography

Introduction- Omprakash Valmiki is a Dalit writer who has experienced true painful realities of life. Through his auto narrative, he recalls the unforgettable memories from Childhood onwards to later age of life. He shows how much supports he has got from own parents to fight against upper caste hegemony to establish a dignified life. His work *Joothan* is a tool of protest against establishment, the work is a representative of unheard voices of depressed section those who have been silence for long. Valmiki endeavours to depict socio-cultural conflict between powerful and powerless class. He picks Chuhra and Tyaga communities very consciously, while Chuhra stands for Dalit community and Tyagas designate as Upper caste Brahmin caste. Tyagas manipulate Chuhra that is in the form of daily wages, which is in the form of foods that is in the form of shelter, which is in the sector of formal education. *Joothan* is a Post-Independence Dalit work which shows the lack eradication still prevails in our Indian society though we have got a very strong constitution under the leadership of Dalit messiah Dr. BR Ambedkar.

Experiencing Protest along with Resistance-

Omprakash Valmiki is a Dalit Hindi writer; he belongs to Northern belt of India. He had experienced injustices and oppression in childhood. He endeavours to document all his real life experiences in his literary works. *Joothan* is a very important literary piece ever he has produced. The text is located in Muzzafarnagar of Uttar Pradesh, India. Mr. Valmiki delineates Chuhra and Tyagas in the text to show caste conflict.

The narrator belongs to Dalit Chuhra community. The Chuhra community gets lesser respect from upper caste communities. The narrator, till his later stage of life feels the trauma of his early life. The writer has symbolically used the word 'Joothan', which stands for polluted mean. It can be considered as humiliation, it can be considered as injustice. Readers find in the text about caste and class stratifications, while so called upper caste maintains their dominant position to exercise fake self-made power. The text usually enforces readers to doubt that untouchability has no boundaries. It attacks irrespective of educated and uneducated people, and it is exercised by even educated people.

School teachers of the narrator have always discriminatory mindset. The narrator has bitter experience in school premises, wherever he had to work as per instructions of his teachers. One day narrator has asked about why not epic poets dared not to write about dalits. The Teacher got angry and ready to punish for asking such a silly question, which hurt the prestige of upper caste Brahmins, 'Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back' (Valmiki 23). The teacher ordered him to stay in rooster position. In India, caste oppression or injustices due to casteism cannot be denied. It is an integral part of Indian social system.

Joothan has focused on the matter 'forced labour'. Residents of the Basti area community people have to do labour for Tyagas. They cannot protest against the intolerance, sufferings. Upper caste always stays in safe distance from Dalit people so that they are contaminated. Tyagas do not give proper respect to Chuhra people. Even animals have better respect than Chuhra in day to day life. The narrator in school premises not allowed to access drinking water like other students. He cannot iron his cloths whenever need. Dhobis don not clean clothes of dalits. Because if Dhobis clean clothes of untouchables, as soon as they will lose job to clean upper caste customer's clothes. Dhobi replies while

wherever the narrator visits Dhobi to iron his clothes, 'we do not wash the clothes of the Chuhra and Chamars. Nor do we iron them. If we iron your clothes, then Tagas won't get their clothes washed by us, we will lose our roti' (17). Roti metaphorically applies here as earning source of Dhobis. If the wash clothes of Chuhra, then will deprive of their income.

The narrator depicts that Omprakash Valmiki's father is a very strong figure who protest and has tried to resist. He visions a new life where unavailability of caste discrimination and liberal society will replace casteist society. The narrator's father has been repeatedly encouraging him to study well to improve their social life, and they must get the respect what actually they deserve. However, the thing is quite different, only having good education cannot improve Dalit life. One must be born in upper caste Brahmin family to one's level high in Indian society.

Chuhra have to work for Tagas without getting proper wages. Their lives are like slaves. They must act as servants to their so called upper caste masters. Dalit children are not allowed to attend schools. If they attend govt. schools, teachers humiliate dalits students in every possible ways. In schools dalit students must maintain a gap from upper caste students. The students of Tagas taunt Dalit students. Tyaga children call Chuhra as 'Chuhre ka' (3) without any specific reasons. Even Chuhra could not wear good neat and clean dresses, they are insulted by their classmates, 'Abey Chuhre ka, he has come dressed in new clothes' (3)

Omprakash Valmiki has introduced a character Kaliram, who is a teacher. His character is sketched totally in a unique way. He has treated Omprakash brutally in school.

He orders the narrator to clean and sweep the entire school campus. He says, 'Break some twigs and make it broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. He is after all your family occupation...after you have swept the rooms, go and sweep the playground. (4)

The text focuses on identity crisis. Dalit communities like Chuhra and Chamars donot usually go to schools. They feel that they are not made for formal education. Being educated is for upper caste. This kind of stereotype has been broken by the narrator Omprakash Valmiki by going school. He cannot tolerate the pathetic conditions of his communities, because they do menial works and there are lots of chances to be sick by doing such works. He thinks that why only Dalit section must do such hard labours. He becomes assertive about painful lives of Dalits.

Omprakash himself has tried to progress. Amidst issues and challenges from upper caste educators, amidst negative forces of dominant caste section, he has admitted his son Omprakash at school for learning, even he has not got much moral support from own family. Father has treasured his dreams to craft Omprakash as a better human being and to let him achieve a dignified life in the near future.

Omprakash Valmiki through his text *Joothan* portrays traumatic experience of his life. His life has lost its meaning in chaos in early childhood. The narrator endeavours to give a taste of literature of trauma through the lenses of his text. Trauma appears due to brutal, unprecedented, atrocious incidents. Each and every literary productions of Dalit flourish due to traumatic real life experience. The Dalit narratives asserts, and it protest and resist against dominant forces. Their writings become a voice to voiceless. Dalit people are considered as untouchable, while upper caste assumes them as touchable. Being a native Hindi speaker, he has written his texts in the Hindi language, his texts are translated to English for readers.

If anyone asks what trauma the narrator has experienced? Being a fourth-fifth standard student, he has jolted whenever the teacher has ordered him to clean and sweep the entire school campus. The class what he has studied shows, how little he was! Aforesaid incident always strikes a teenager's mind. Because that is the time, a little boy enjoys his life freely. If somebody experiences this kind of bitter incident, then affect last forever. The narrator suffers all these due to his caste; caste plays a crucial role in Indian social system. Still in 21st century people are stuck to caste politics. Valmiki says, 'Caste is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as person is born, 'Caste' determines his or her destiny...' (133-134)

Omprakash has not only documented individual life story in his autobiography *Joothan*. It is a collective account of entire Dalit section, irrespective of Chuhra and Chamars, upper caste treat Dalit people always as 'other'. Once professor Kamble visited Savita's place, he was served water in a separate glass which was meant for Dalit guests. It shows, upper caste families do not use the glasses and cups if they serve those to Dalit guests.

Valmiki as an individual belongs to Chuhra caste (Bhangi); he is assigned to perform labour for upper caste section. Tyagas are the upper caste Brahmin in the text. They cannot live with upper caste in the same village. They have to live outside the village. They live in Basti area in unhygienic conditions. They are not allowed to use public wells. They have to drink water from ponds.

In an incident, in marriage feast party, Chuhra were staying outside for left overs.

And Chuhra baskets were filled with left overs (Joothan). But Valmiki's mother had asked for some more foods for her children. But the Brahmin person had asked her to live with what she had. Valmiki describes mother's anger due to humiliation; he has witnessed psychological protest in her eyes-'That night the Mother Goddess Durga entered my mother's eyes, it was the first time I saw my mother so angry. She emptied the basket right there. She said to Sukhdev Singh, 'pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the baratis (marriage guests) tomorrow morning'. She gathered me and my sister and left like an arrow. Sukhdev Singh had pounced on her to hit her, but my mother had confronted him like a lioness. Without being afraid. (qtd in. Arora)

Dalit is a literature of Dalits. The literature portrays the unheard voices of Dalits. It has developed as integral part of Indian English Literature since later part 1960's. There were well known pioneers of Dalit literature such as Bama, Baby

Kamble, Laxman Gaikwad, Arjun Dangle, Omprakash Valmiki etc. Through the writings, they have established the literature as a form of resistance.

Joothan has depicted unheard realities to the readers. During Post-independence period, people could expect to be liberated from those caste injustices, untouchability etc. However, *Joothan* has showed readers a very different picture, while characters of *Joothan* still struggling to gain their rights. Indian constitution was framed under the chairmanship of Dr. B.R Ambedkar, but the constitution is not able to give safeguard to the depressed caste people. The narrator Omprakash has been fighting for his schooling, it seems, society is not taking easily of lower castes to be educated and upper caste assumes that once downtrodden people will be educated, as soon as power will be shifted to lower section. Therefore, upper castes are afraid of, and keep depressed section from formal education. Independence was not in true sense even during Post- Independence period. The narrator feels untouchability in the school, whenever he sits separates from other upper caste students in the class:

'I had sit away from the others in the class, the too in the floor. The rat ran out before reaching the spot! Sat on. Sometimes I would have to sit away behind everybody, right near the door. And the letters on the board from there seemed faded. (qtd in. Rathod)

Joothan is a text which demands rights for lower caste. It demands a dignified place for Dalit (untouchable) caste. Chuhra community women loose their dignity. They have to live as per their dignity. They have to live as per the regulations of Tyaga women. Tyaga women play a role like authority to Dalit women. So, *Joothan* shows as the tool to protest. It shows the painful struggle of the narrator Valmiki. Lower caste people like Chuhras have to work for Tyagas free of cost. And nobody is brave enough to protest against the decision of not payment of wages to Chuhras.

The autobiography itself develops form of its own style of Bildungsroman form. It depicts the narrator's life cycle from his childhood onwards, i.e. till matured individual. The story lines signify the author's own development, beyond it highlights entire family's progress as a whole. The author has developed a kind of resistance to the structural dominance of the caste politics. He uses very selective languages to mock the hypocritical society. Some of the vocabularies, he has shown in '*Joothan*', which is word of Hindi language. Omprakash Valmiki has deliberately used a word 'Chuhre ka', which is used in the context of giving insult to downtrodden Dalit communities. Tyagas utilize every possible opportunity to demoralize lower castes.

Joothan is symbolically used. *Joothan* means left over food. Lower caste accepts the leftover food from upper caste. This shows the acceptance of the upper caste dominance without any protest by lower caste people like Chuhras. It signifies the dominant position, social hegemony. 'Chuhra ka' which stands as psychological manipulation to Chuhras. They feel that getting insults and abuses from Tyagas is their daily routine. That is like their in born fate to be humiliated by upper caste Tyagas. It shows the traditional caste system of India. Caste is divided into four folds. The lowest starta of the caste has the duty to serve upper caste people.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* carries all the elements of Dalit literature. Dalit literature challenges the supremacy of mainstream literary theories and ideologies; it tries to see the unseen pictures of the society. Barbara Harlow tries to see the narrative as a storehouse of weak, marginalized voice, institutionalized practices of dominant groups. 'If resistance poetry challenged the dominant and hegemonic discourse of an occupying or decolonizing power by attacking the symbolic foundations of that power and erecting symbolic structure of its own-resistance narratives go further in analyzing the relations of power which sustain the system of domination and exploitation'(Singh). Dalit autobiographies work as resistance force. The writers of Dalit autobiographies use the language of domination. It comes with the identity questions, caste determines one's destiny.

An individual has everything if he is born in privileged caste.

Omprakash has narrated in the text that he is so much frustrated of sufferings due to his birth. And he has led to comments in disguise of resistance- 'Being born is not in control of a person. If it were in one's control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household. Those who call themselves the standard-bearers of this country's great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into? (133-34). He feels the dangerous virus caste politics in day to day Indian lives. He wanted to be educated by hook and crook. And which has assisted him to be literate and to protest against caste violence.

Omprakash Valmiki has through his mother's character showed the rebellious attitude of her towards Sukhdev Singh. Sukhdev told her and she showed the resistance- "you are taking a basketful of *Joothan*. And top of that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place Chuhri"(11). His mother has retaliated verbally against the abusive words of Sukhdev and emptied the basket, she has left away. Valmiki has depicted his resistance against powerful Hindu institutions. He is able to understand that due to religion, he suffers, 'If I were really a Hindu would the Hindus hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill me up with caste inferiority over the smallest things? I also wondered why does one have to be a Hindu to be good human being...' (Singh)

Dalit narratives cover entire suffering of the society. The works do not only portray personal issues.

Conclusion- *Joothan* has beautifully captured the picture of Dalit society of India. It has diplomatically given a platform to the silent to be assertive. Through the characters of the text Omprakash Valmiki has attempted to convey a message of anti-establishment, a message against prejudicial distinction on the basis of caste. It shows the basic denial of respect and honour due to caste, they are treated like animals. They expect the treatment like human beings where they can live a dignified life with pride.

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