

Quest for Identity Through Endless Struggle and Resistance - A study of Omprakash Valmiki's *JOOZHAN*

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ABSTRACT: The disgrace and mental torture to which Dalits have been subjected to for centuries is not only unbearable but also leave one numb to feel amazingly how they received inhuman treatment at the hand of their fellow men. Their limitless pain can easily be felt only if we come across Dalit literature that is replete with pain, miseries and anguish of Dalits and the readers realise the pain Dalits have undergone. Literature, as a mouthpiece, empowered Dalits to put across their voice against all type of discrimination and humiliation. Besides Kabir and Ravidass, Dr. Ambedkar, Swami Achhutanand and Adi Hindu Mahasabha through their literary production articulated a community consciousness of Dalit people. They tried to create their identity. Dalit autobiographies seek to unveil the wretchedness and miseries which were a part of Dalit life and experience. Autobiographies have always been a popular form of writing because the unique experiences of an individual have instructing values. Omprakash Valmiki, like other writers of autobiographies vociferously depicts Dalit resistance in *Joozhan*. He lays bare before us every detail of his traumatic experiences by describing his whole life. Thus Omprakash Valmiki's *Joozhan* is about the journey of a Dalit family struggling for education and status in society. Meanwhile, it is also the story of a Dalit family in search of Dalit dignity and identity.

Keywords: Composites; Metal matrix composites; Magnesium oxide MgO and Taguchi method.

INTRODUCTION: Undoubtedly, Dalit pain is unbearable. The humiliation and mental torture they suffered for centuries leave one numb to feel amazingly how fellow human beings could be so callous and heartless. We can assume rationally as well as feelingly the miseries and disgrace Dalits have been made to suffer. One stands aghast to know how these down-trodden rung of the society were forced to put up disgrace and ill-treatment with silence. Their limitless pain can easily be felt only if we come across the Dalit literature which is replete with pain, miseries and anguish of Dalits. Their afflictions are laid bare before the readers just to make them feel how they will feel, in turn, if they happen to replace their position.

It is literature that is considered as the mouthpiece of the society in which it is written. So, it was the power of words that empowered Dalits to put across their voice, so that people may understand what wrongs have been done to them. Words are used as weapons to express their trauma as well as anger against the wrongs and ill-treatment meted out to them. It is in the Dalit literature that all dogmas and prejudices related to casteism and man-made barriers are attacked. Dalit literature stretches back to times before Kabir and Ravidass. Dr. Ambedkar, Swami Achhutanand and Adi Hindu Mahasabha through their literary production articulated a community consciousness of Dalit people. All of them tried their best to create their iden-

tity. The book *Adi-Vansh Ka Danka* authored by Swamiji has the central argument that untouchables were embodiments of racial purity that they were indeed the earliest inhabitants of *Bharatvarsha* and they did not discriminate amongst themselves as on the basis of birth, skin-colour or gender. Thus they hardly deserve to be looked down upon. Hindi Dalit poetry was inaugurated with Swamiji's composition, "Manusmriti Hamko Jala Rahi Hai" ("*Manusmariti is Burning Us*"):

Day in and day out,

This Manusmriti is burning us, burning us,

*Not letting us climb up, it is degrading us,
degrading us,*

*While Brahmins and Kshatriyas are allowed
to rise and rise,*

"Wear your old clothes," for us is advice.
(Singh: 4)

In 1946 Mahatma Gyandas 'Vivek Bhushan' published a book of poems under the title *Bharat Ke Achhut* (India's Untouchables). These poems give expression to Dalit sufferings. The book of poems by Bihari Lal 'Harit', *Azadi Ki Larai* (The War of Independence), was published in 1947. It contains some of his most significant creation in one of which we find the lines:

The grandson toiled very hard to pay grandfather's debt,

The three rupees he had loaned,

Became for the Zamindar a seventy year asset. ((Singh: 4)

Literature, since the time it has been written, has tried its best to entertain the readers and it also mirrors the evils like casteism and untouchability. Dr. Jugal Kishore Mishra avers that Dalit is not a caste; it is a symbol of change and revolution (Mishra). The aim of Dalit writings is to bring about a change and revolution in the society where plight of Dalits is brushed aside with indifference, and construct an identity of their own for them. Hence the main purpose of Dalit writings is to ensure the benefits of India's independence accrued to the Dalits as well. As the aboriginal population of India, the Dalits must be accorded due pride and status within the nation. They must be freed from the shackles of *Varna* and *Jati* and the hierarchies of the caste system.

Through struggle and Dalit writings writers have tried to throw away the heavy odds. The trauma of Dalits is expressed so delicately and clearly in a very straight forward way that these writings become a tool of resistance. The authors have very clearly exposed the irrationality of those who believed in the theory of castes and discrimination. The degradation and horrendous misbehaviour is resisted through Dalit writings. Besides, Dalit expectations are profoundly expressed that it is their plea that they should be treated as human beings.

There has been a long tradition of intellectual reconstruction of the Dalit identity in India. The eminent activists who contributed to the process include Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar, among others. Before them, the Bhakti saints made a remarkable contribution in the form of questioning the Brahmanical hegemony. They questioned the religious restrictions on worship during the 10th and 13th centuries, because of which the Bhakti movement became popular among the sudras and ati-shudras. Dr. Ambedkar's attempts of the intellectual re-construction of the Dalit identity and the identity movements in the contemporary period leading to the culmination of the reconstruction of the Dalit identity are also noteworthy.

Taking the lead from Ambedkar's theoretical basis of the Dalit identity, literary writers and activists began to narrate the Dalit experiences. Dalit writers and activists brought awareness among the Dalits. The concerns of the writers include denial of access to resources, participation in political processes, exclusion from social institutions, construction of Dalit identity, demanding equal share in resource, among

others. Their writings are aimed at building awareness. Gopal guru identifies that the Dalit literature is classified into literature of Dalit cities and that of mud house writes. To him, mud house Dalit literature means writing about oral traditions of the Dalits which is ignored by the elite Dalit writers.

As Dalit writers themselves being the victims, they use literature as a vehicle to propagate the Ambedkarite ideology. The Dalit literature, that includes all the genres like short stories, novels, poetry, critical essays, plays and autobiographies, provides critical insight into the question of the Dalit identity. The teachings of Ambedkar sharpened their sensitivities, and made them outward-looking, articulate and assertive in their expression. The Dalit writings are used to educate the Dalits. The prose narratives, especially mediated between Dalit writers and the Dalits to form the modes of social protest. The Dalit narratives are used to raise awareness that caste is the root cause of social discrimination. The Dalit narratives capture the local idiom finding global space. Subverting the conventional epistemology, Dalit writers challenge the Brahmanism through their writings. The modern Dalit writing became visible with the publication of Arjun Dangle's *The Poisoned Bread* (1992) followed by Waman Nimbalkar's *Dalit Literature: Nature and Role* (2006), Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004), Omprakash Valmiki's *Dalit Sahitya Saundarya shastra* (2001). Though Dalit writings consist of all literary forms like poetry, short stories, songs (folklore), plays, and novels, the Dalit autobiographies seek to unveil the wretchedness and miseries which were a part of Dalit life and experience. Autobiographies have always been a popular form of writing because the unique experiences of an individual have instructing values. He further states that the entire Dalit literature pretends to be autobiographical because Dalit writings refuse to soar high in the wings of imagination. The Dalit autobiography is understood as a genre because it adds to the growth and development of Dalit literature as a whole. The personal narratives of the Dalits speak about the heroic journey of the entire community in the process of self-assertion, liberty, self-respect and empowerment. And the same journey gives than a unique identity which is nothing but exploring the experiences of an entire people's history through narratives. Laxman Mane's *Upara* (1997), Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* (1998), Vasanth Moon's *Growing up Untouchable in India* (2001), Narendra Jadav's *Outcaste* (2003), Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003), Joseph Mackwan's *The Stepchild* (2004), Aravind Malgathi's *Government Brahmana* (2007), and of women writers Bama's *Karukku*

(2000), Viramma Josiane Racine Jean Luc Racine's *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* (1997), Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2009) and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) are the Dalit autobiographies in which the protagonists trace out the genesis of Dalit identity and celebrate the self of their community. Dalits' search for identity brought out a new consciousness in modern India. The Dalit identity does not merely mean identify oneself with the Dalit self, but to bring awareness among the fellow Dalits. When a Dalit narrates about himself, one does not narrate one's personal history; what one narrates is the history of his community. In India Phule's *Slavery*, Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste, the Riddles of Rama and Krishna* and several of his writings and speeches awakened the Dalit consciousness. They are the prime resources to understand and contest the caste issues in Indian literature.

Influenced by Phule and Ambedkar many Dalit writers, who experienced the travails of caste oppression, narrated their experiences in their works. The Dalit autobiographies are found suitable for narrating their experiences. Dalit literature is a protest against all forms of exploitation based on class, race, sex, caste and community. For centuries they have been suffering mutely. It does not mean that they were immune to the pain they have been inflicted. On the contrary, the fact is that they wished to resist but they were not empowered to do so. They were denied the excess to education—a weapon—through which they could voice their unbearable and horrendous ill-treatment at the hands of those who were mighty as well as empowered. This is the reason that Dalits kept on putting up with the dishonour, mal-treatment, and discrimination silently as their voices were forcefully hushed up.

It is education that empowers Dalits to communicate their pain. Words are used as weapon to attack that society which is full of dogmas, prejudice and injustice towards the section of the society whether it is a Dalit or a woman. Besides, literature does attack the man-made barriers that divide human beings.

Some Dalit writers dared giving voices to the bitter and painful experience of those who belong to a community of downtrodden. One such example is Arun Kamble's poem "The Life we Live", which depicts the pain and suffering of the Dalit and resists by saying what has changed for the Dalit:

If you were to live the life we live,

*We: kicked and spat at for
Our piece of bread*

*You: fetch fulfilment and
name of the Lord*

*We: down-gutter degraders
of our heritage*

*You: its sole repository
Descendants of the sage*

We: never have paise to scratch our arse

*You: The golden cup of offering in your
bank.*

Yours bodies flame in sandalwood

Ours you shovel under half twined sand

Wouldn't the world change, and fast,

If you were forced to live at last

*This life that's all we've ever had?" (Zelliot:
212)*

Dalit Literature is a Literature in which Dalits have depicted their pain (Jain: 12). One such attempt is made by Daya Pawar, a Dalit poet who resists the beastly treatment and at the same time desires to wreak revenge. His anger is reflected in his, "You wrote from Los Angeles":

In the stores here, in hotels, about the streets,
Indians and curs are measured with the same
Yard-stick.

"Niggers!" Blacks! This is the abuse they
fling on
me.

Reading all this, I felt so damn!

Now you've had a taste of what we've suffered

In this country from generation to generation.
(Abedi: 5)

So these writings belong to those who are downtrodden and made to suffer in the worst way. Omprakash Valmiki begins his autobiography by asserting: Dalit life is excruciatingly painful charred by experiences. Experience that did not manage to find room in literary creation. We have grown up in social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman. And compassionless towards Dalit. (Valmiki: viii)

But this pain is hardly ever alone, along with it, there is also the "awareness, the desire to resist, to fight it out, to try to rise above it." (Jain: 16) In Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan*, it is the desire of the father of the author to make his son educated; he does not want that his son should receive the same treatment as he has got in his life. Valmiki's father, who struggles hard to get admission for Valmiki in school, has to face bitter comments from society, 'What is the point of sending him to school', 'when has a crow become a swan?' 'However much you study, you will remain a

chuhra'. (66). In the school he is humiliated, discriminated, and oppressed in the name of caste. He is forced to sit apart; he is beaten up by the upper class students and he becomes the subject of humiliation by his teachers as well. So *Joothan* reveals the reality of caste prejudices, as well as it denies the educational institution's claim that caste no longer functions as a social force in modern India.

Omprakash Valmiki, like other writers of autobiographies vociferously depicts resistance in *Joothan*. He writes that "Dalit Literature is the literature of the masses. It is a literature of action based on human values, which wages a struggle born out of anger and rebellion against feudalistic mindset." (Mukerjee: xxvii) The seeds of rebellion are sown early in the oppressed life of Valmiki. He lays bare before us every detail of his traumatic experiences by describing his whole life. But the most powerful incident in the *Joothan* is Valmiki's mother overturning the basketful of *Joothan* (leftover), after she is humiliated by Sukhdev Singh Chaudary, a rich man from upper caste. Valmiki is inspired from this act of his mother so much so that later in his life he resists against mighty and powerful people to establish an identity for himself and others like him. This incident takes place when the marriage ceremony of Sukhdev's daughter is going on. Valmiki mother waits outside the door, with Valmiki and his younger sister Maya. They sit hoping they will get a share of sweets and food. When all *baraties* finish their meal and leave the place, Valmiki's mother goes to Sukhdev Singh Chaudhary and requests him, "Chaudhary ji, all of your guests have eaten and gone....Please put something on the pattal for my children. They too have waited for this day" (10). Then Sukhdev Singh Points at the basket full of dirty pattals and says, "You are taking a basketful *Joothan*. And on the top of that you want food for your Children. Don't forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going"(11). These words are enough to make one rebel, just then Valmiki's mother puts down the basket full of *Joothan* and overthrows it in front of Chaudhary's face and says, "Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the *baraties* tomorrow morning" (11).

Sukhdev Singh pounces on her to hit her, but she confronts him like a lioness. Valmiki finds resemblance between her mother and goddess Durga (8). Her act of defiance sows the seeds of rebellion in little Valmiki's mind. Since that day Valmiki has never accepted *Joothan* and advises his community not to accept any *joothan*.

Valmiki's father is also portrayed as a heroic figure, who always desires something better for his` children and fight for their safety and growth with tremendous

courage. He always stands by Valmiki and tells him that he should always do what he desires. Valmiki's father's ambitions for his son are evident in the nickname, Munsihiji, that he calls him by this name. The child, Valmiki, rises on his shoulders and becomes the first high school graduate. He pays his debt by giving voice to the indignities suffered by his family and community.

Valmiki also gives words to the pain caused to his psyche by caste discrimination by telling how he is continuously kept out of the chemistry lab on one pretext or the other and is not allowed to conduct experiments. He is not treated equally in the class. Valmiki is good at chemistry but his chemistry teacher, Brajpal Singh's prejudiced and cold attitude how can one expect him to do well in the subject? Though he complains against the teacher to the principal, nobody cares a little. The principal assures him that he will discuss with Brajpal and things would be clear to him, but what happens is just the opposite. During the whole year he is unable to conduct the experiments. He writes, "Not only did I do poorly in lab tests in the board exam, I also got low marks in the oral even though I had answered the examiner's questions quite correctly."(65). When results are announced, he is astonished to know that he is among the failures. However, he has good marks in all the subjects except chemistry. His career is shattered on the altar of prejudices against Dalits. Success of a student depends on the caste to which belongs not to the efforts he puts on to excel in studies.

This incident makes him so pessimistic that he decides to leave his village and he goes to Dehradun to do his further study, where he is again discriminated on the basis of caste. At first principal of D.A.V College, Dehradun refuses to give him admission after having a look on the caste certificate, but after several days of visiting the college and pleading and begging, he succeeds in getting admission. The pain and struggle that leads him to resist against the prejudices he faces in his early life are clear from the following lines: "Running around for my admission, I went through bouts of total hopelessness. My self confidence had been badly shaken by failure. I felt that life had nothing left for me" (68). Even getting admission does not guarantee respect for him and others in the society. Again, he is humiliated. But now he ignores all this because his experiences have made him immune to such ghastly acts and he becomes brave enough to tolerate all this. Valmiki says, "... I learnt to tolerate. How much my ability to tolerate hurts flung at me, has taken out of me." In this way, he overcomes all the obstacles and bears the pain that is inflicted upon him due to caste hierarchy, he becomes the first higher school graduate not even in his own community, but in the whole

Barla district. Valmiki's achievement in getting higher education is itself a step to resist and a step to ascertain identity.

As a student Valmiki resists against and questions the ill-treatment meted out to students even during the period of The *Mahabharata*. One such episode is recorded by him in *Joothan* when he questions his teacher in the classroom, "...So Ashwathama was given flour mixed in 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 ever write a word on our lives?" (23)

Valmiki is right. The untouchable remained 'useless' and their traumatic life remained unsung in the history of India. Their trauma was seldom paid attention to by the people of the upper caste as well as the literary artists. This opposition and the daring act of Valmiki asking his teacher about the plight of their life is a symbol of resistance by the whole untouchable community.

Valmiki tried hard throughout his life to ascertain an identity to the Dalit community. A writer's involvement in various activities in the society where he lives to realise the essence of man is not a part of caste only. When Valmiki stayed at Chandernagore he participated in many social gathering and other conferences and seminars to uplift the social status of Dalit people. Ballapur Paper Mills sponsored a drama competition every year. This competition for Hindi and Marathi plays was important not only for the theatre people but also for the audience in the Ballapur area. Meghdoot Natya Sanstha had made a name for itself in this competition by staging plays like *Adhe Adhure*, *Himalya Ki chhaya*, *Sinhashan Khali Hai* and *paisa Bolta Hai*. For all these compositions and their projection on the stage brought laurels to Valmiki and his wife Chanda. Through these stage plays Valmiki's approach enhanced and he met Hira Lal who was a good playwright whose play *Mercy Killing* had been well received. (120).

The writers, thus, played a vital role in their quest for identity. The real picture is animated through the stage shows. It was owing to the deep scars caused by the caste prejudice causing humiliation, exploitation and atrocities in their mind permanently that they started to think about education, political freedom, uses of public resources, place of Dalits and their aspirations towards good life and its ultimate solution in their mind frame. Though the writings by the Dalits are the writings of the oppressed, one can easily decipher, in them, the voices of resistance as is obvious in one of the poems of Daya Pawar:

I'm the sea; I soar, I surge.

I move out to build your tombs.

The winds, storms, sky,

Earth.

Now all are mine.

In every inch of the rising

Struggle

I stand erect. (Abedi: 5-6)

The story writers also have the prominent role to expose the tortuous lives of the Dalits and naked reality is brought to the notice of those who were responsible for the heinous crimes against them. The writers like Valmiki had to wait for their literary work to get them published owing to the apathy of the publishers. Valmiki waited for ten years to get his story 'Jungal Ki Rani' a story based on adivasi life. The editor of *Sarika* made him wait for that long. There were many new writers who were struggling to establish their identity in the literary arena. Valmiki questions the apathy of the publishers in *Joothan*, "Who knows how many writers like me were nipped in the bud by the *Sarika* editorial board.

Thus *Joothan* is a potent voice of the author to fight for identity in the society that has for centuries been following the tenets of caste system. He questions at the closing of the book, "Why is my caste only my identity?" (134). Badri Narayan opines that the Dalit narratives are the narratives of identity and self-respect: "The new narratives of the Dalit politics, which appear as cultural narratives of identity and self-respect are filled with memories of dissent against dominance and oppression." (40)

The construction of the Dalit narratives is based on a sense of self-respect. Badrinarayan writes:

Dalits, for acquiring social respect, use their personal narratives through which they glorify their community. The identity created through their narratives of the past by the Dalits renders instable the canons determined by Brahmanism for granting status in society, such as purity-pollution beliefs, birth-based ascription, specific caste characterization and caste hierarchy, and status ascription. (95)

Thus Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is about the journey of a Dalit family struggling for education and status in society. It presents the story of a Dalit family in search of Dalit dignity and identity. It depicts the oppressive and exploitative village life as well as the success of the author in completing his education and earning a name as a writer of stories based on Dalit life. The central narrative follows the transformation of the family.

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