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Calamities in Om Prakash Valmiki's Joothan

[1]Mrs. A. Princy, [2]Dr. S. Latharani

Research scholar, Madurai Kamaraj university,Madurai

Assistant Professor, Department of English,NMSSVN college,Madurai

Abstract: Literature serves as a voice for the voiceless, the marginalized, the neglected and the excluded community. Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan represents the voice of the unheard, the untouchables, and captures the evils perpetuated by casteism which hinders the development of the marginalized. Dalit writers, like Omprakash Valmiki, not only record his life experiences but also reflect the sufferings of his people. The narrative often mirrors the predicaments of the underprivileged and fights for social justice. As a social activist and humanist, he writes about the evils of casteism. Through his writings, he highlights the suffering and injustices faced by the Dalit community and strongly condemns the inhumane practices against them. The life journey of the author provides a tale of segregation and marginalization of his individual struggle amidst caste-based discrimination. Valmiki's biographical plan highlights his experiences with social isolation and economic suffering. This article examines the exclusion and marginalization of Chuhra community and presents experiences of caste-based prejudice, elimination, marginalization and untouchability of the author and Chuhra Dalit community in the social realm. It also captures the author's purpose of bringing awareness to the brutal practices of untouchability, social oppression and marginalization and his assertion to bring an end to caste-based discrimination.

Keywords: Discrimination, Casteism, Untouchability, Exclusion, Marginalization, Emancipation, Equality

Omprakash is a prominent Hindi Dalit writer and his famous work is titled *Joothan*. In Dalit autobiographies, the story of the narrator glorifying himself or self -confessing represents the trials and tribulations faced by the entire community. Bhangi community faces worst kind of social discrimination and injustice. This community people, by and large, are ignorant and are victims of untouchability and summarily rejected in the society despite rendering a crucial service to the society. The life style of Bhangi people has been thick with poverty, slavery and filth. They have pan India presence. All communities have their own culture based on their living and thinking. The social thinking and writing of Dalit is an outcome of writers' social stratifications. Dalits get displaced due to atrocities committed on them such as burning their huts. While observing this violence on them, the Dalit writers felt a need to document their lives along with social and biased events which play a crucial role in the study of Dalit literature.

The Joothan , community of Bhangis do not live in concrete houses and they were confined to the outskirts of the village earmarked for them by the upper caste people**.** Their houses are separated from the village by a high wall or a pond from Chuhra basti or cluster of shanties. Both men and women of upper caste, despite their ages, came to the extreme of the pond to finish their morning ablutions. They defecate in open by exposing their private parts under broad day light. In this connection, Valmiki observes as follows:

There were muck strewn everywhere, the stench was so overpowering

that one would choke within a minute. The pigs wandering in narrow

lanes, naked children , dogs, daily fights, this was the environment

of my childhood.(Valmiki : 2006: 1)

During rainy season, the narrow lanes of the basti wore a horrible sight. They were filled with pig's excrement, flies and mosquitoes thrived in it. The arms and legs of the inhabitants became dirty and developed itchy sores.

There was only one well for the entire basti community and thirty families had to manage their drinking water needs from it. Although the well had a guard wall, during rainy season, the water was mixed with long worms. The Basti people had no other option but to drink the water. They were forbidden from using the well meant for the upper class people. Their huts leaked everywhere during rainy season. It is in these pathetic conditions that the author of *Joothan* Om Prakash Valmiki lived.

In post-independence India, education was free for both upper and lower caste people. The constitution says that all Indians are equal. However, it necessitated Om Prakash Valmiki's father to plead Mater Harphool Singh for getting his son admitted in a school. After repeated pleadings from his father, his son was finally admitted, but was forbidden from using chair or bench. He had to squat on the bare floor and that too behind all students. Both in government and non-government schools, there was hardly any fair treatment given to them. Omprakash's native place is Barla in Muzaffarnagar district in Uttar Pradesh. The name of his father is Chotan Lal and his father's name is Buddha. Buddha had another son named Suganchand. Chotanlal was an illiterate with a very stubborn temperament. Yet, he was known for his honesty and self -reliance. Though he was an illiterate, he was devoid of any inferiority complex .He treated his cousins in a very fair manner. The mother of Ompraksh is Mukundi and she hailed from a village named Khajoori in Saharanpur district located on the banks of Hindan river. Om Prakash's parents were blessed with five sons and two daughters. Their youngest one was named Somti and she passed way when she was just five years old. Their eldest son was Sukhbir and the next one was Jagdish and he also passed away when he was eighteen years old. Next to him was Jasbir and after him was Janesar. The novelist Omprakash happened to be the youngest among all. Among all sons, Omprakash was the most pampered one. Maya was his next sister's name. Both Chotan Lal and his brother were almost identical in terms of height and structure. In addition, they had a similar moustache and gait. All his family members did some work or other. Despite it, they struggled hard to get two decent meals every day. They did all kinds of menial works to Tagas such as cleaning, general labour and agriculture works. They were sometimes compelled to work without any pay.

The author Omprakash lived in Barla village where some Muslim Tyagis lived. In the village,

they were called Tagas. These Tagas behaved in the same manner as Hindu Tagas. The novelist's mother used to clean the baithaks and the ghers of both Hindu and Muslim Tagas. For the work she carried out, they were given 'Joothan', the scraps. Despite toiling day and night, their hardest labour was compensated with just joothan. The family was in pieces financially and for a few annas, the entire family had to toil very hard. Omprakash never bought any text book and managed borrowing them along with clothes. He wore whatever he got and ate whatever was offered. He was an atheist from his childhood onwards. Valmiki started his schooling eight years after independence and during that time the entire nation was resounding with Gandhiji's movement against untouchability. He was made to short on the floor behind all students. From his place, the letters on the board were not visible in a clear manner. At school, his class mates used to taunt him by calling him ' Chuhre Ka'. When he felt thirsty at school, he had to go and stand nearer to the hand pump. Both the teachers and the students punished him . Efforts were taken to drive him away from school so as to take up the work for which he was born. When he reached fourth standard, he was a lanky fellow. He did all sort of menial work at school so as to continue his education. He withstood all kinds of ill treatment given to him by the head master Kaliram. There was only one inter college in his locality and it was known as Tyagi Inter college. Valmiki had some good friends there and came across a good teacher named Baburam Tyagi. It was he who taught him to take part in the debate as well as in Hindi. Due to his constant encouragement, Om Prakash was able to grasp the essence of Hindi language. Hence, his teacher Baburamji has to be credited for his expertise in Hindi language. He came first in half yearly exam. He was made the class monitor. They started behaving indifferently with him and dissuaded him from taking part in extracurricular activities. Even during annual day functions of the school, he had to stand outside the door. Almost all teachers and students belonged to Tyagi community and therefore it was next to impossibility to say anything against them. With great difficulty, he completed M.A in Hindi literature. From his school days onwards,

he started reading Tagore, Sarath Chandra and Premchand. He was deeply impressed by the characters of Sarathchandra. Reading became his passion and he also started reading for his mother. His reading started from Alha, Ramayana and Mahabharata and to the stories of Premchand.

Dalit writers have fought against the gross injustices meted to them by the society. They gave their voices to achieve equality in the society. They found support from the progressive thinkers of the society and their movements gained momentum for the welfare of the Dalit community. Among the Dalit writers of India, Omprakash Valmiki started writing about Dalit travails of the ordinary individuals rather than talking about past glory. From childhood onwards, he was attracted to Buddhism and its philosophies. What impressed him most about Buddhism is the philosophy on human freedom. It was a long cherished desire of Omprakash Valmiki to give verbal expression to his writing. Though he made several attempts, he was notable to attain success . He was not sure about where to begin and where to end. During his attempts , there came a letter from Rajkishoriji asking him to contribute ten to eleven pages of his life for the book titled Harijan se Dalit (From Harijan to Dalit). It gave him much needed inspiration to write some pages about his life and post the same to Rajkishoriji. The book got published and it started with the writing of Omprakash entitled Ek Dalit Ki Atmakatha. (A Dalit's autobiography). It is impact in the society was spontaneous. There were several letters received from readers and there were several Dalit readers who saw their own pain and anguish reflected in the pages of the book. It was a request made by many of the readers that he should write in detailed manner regarding his life. It served as an impetus for Ompraksh to write about his life history without any fear of losing reputation in public. He gave a factual account of his life in a painful manner. After a long procrastination, he began his wring and completed it. In his autobiography, he made significant contribution regarding realities and contradictions of Indian society which is rampant with untouchability and casteism. Joothan , the autobiography of Omprakash Valmiki was written and published in Hindi in 1997. Later on, it got translated in English and was titled Joothan : A Dalit's Life and published in 2007. The life story titled Joothan is thick with sorrows. The novel delves into the life story of man who was born in Chura caste and brought up in a village named Barla near Muzaffarnagar of Uttar Pradesh. The novel makes a telling account of the cruel social order as well as devoid of any compassion towards the Dwon trodden people. The title Joothan means the left over from meal. In another way, it means about a food that is polluted and unpalatable food. For ages, the Dalits have bene compelled to eat the Joothan for their living. The novel's title expresses the pain and humiliation experienced by the author as well as his community which has remained at the very extreme social strata. Their community has been treated as inferiors deserving no fair treatment . They have been used as Joothan and thrown into trash bins for centuries. The author's early life is nothing but a heroic struggle experienced by a boy belonging to sweeper caste. When he talks about Valmiki's Joothan, Arun Prabha Mukherjee opines that , " it is 'among the first texts in Hindi that identifies itself as a part of Dalit literature , one of the mostliterary movements to emerge in post-independence India." (Mukherjee 2007). Through the novel, Omprakash Valmiki portrays a Dalit life that has not been discussed by anyone in Indian literature in Marathi in fifties . Until Dalit literature emerged, literature belonged to the domain of high castes. The Dalits were nowhere found or conspicuously absent as individuals devoid of any agony or voice. Hence, Joothan is hailed as one of the major works of Dalit writing that gets fused due to an ideology, agenda or literary aesthetic. The novel serves as an apt introduction to the new genre of writing that triggers a social movement for justice and equality. The novel Joothan to be in all fairness is a seld conscious Dalit literary text. It makes an impactful statement against the oppressive caste system that has both marginalized and excluded the Chuhras. The novel, infact, symbolizes the efforts taken by the Dalit community to establish its dignity and human rights. It also gives a telling account of the dream nurtured by the author Om Prakash for a transformed society that is both desirable and possible in future.

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