

ISSN: 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal

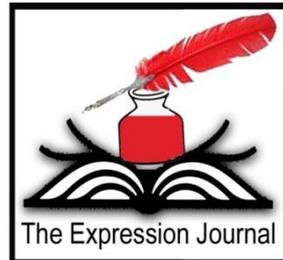


Vol.1 Issue 4 Aug. 2015

Editor-in-Chief : Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com



**A STUDY OF HELLISH LIFE IN OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S
*JOOZHAN: A DALIT'S LIFE***

Kusum Kanger

Assistant Professor

B.A.R. Janta College, Kaul

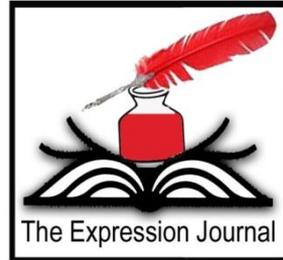
Kaithal, Haryana, India

.....
Abstract

The objective of this paper is to purport the hellish life of the dalits in Omprakash Valmiki's novel *Joozhan: A Dalit's Life*. This novel beautifully depicts how Dalit people have to live a hellish life and the upper caste people are responsible for this life. They are deprived of all the opportunities of life and they are kept under suppression. They have to live segregated from the upper caste people in the village. Their life is not better than animals. They are deprived of their human rights and thus, they become the puppets of the upper caste people as they have to dance at their tunes. They have to eat joozhan or left-over food. The life of the women is also not good and they also have to live under suppression with the other male. Untouchability and starvation is the biggest problem for these people. They have to borrow money on the high interest and their life is spent only in paying the interest of that amount. Rainy season is like a curse for them and their legs and hands develop redness due to infection. Through this paper I have explored how their caste becomes a stigma for dalits. It follows them wherever they go. They are not given equal opportunities in their life and that's why they have to adopt the inferior kind of occupations for their livelihood. Thus, under such circumstances they live a life that is lived only for the survival in pain and they are not able to enjoy a bit of their life.

Key-Words

Dalits, Joozhan, Autobiographies, Caste, Untouchability, Exploitation, Survival.



**A STUDY OF HELLISH LIFE IN OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S
*JOOOTHAN: A DALIT'S LIFE***

Kusum Kanger

Assistant Professor

**B.A.R. Janta College, Kaul
Kaithal, Haryana, India**

Man is a product of society and societal rules play a pivotal role in shaping man's life. He behaves and acts in the society in which he is born and there are some people who try to come out that environment and want to live the way they want. Omprakash Valmiki's novel *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* was first published in Hindi in 1997. It was translated into English in 2003 by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. She is an English professor at York University in Canada.

Joothan is generally called scraps of food left after eating the meals. Omprakash Valmiki's novel *Joothan: A Dalits' Life* is a horrendous tale of the dalits. This novel is best known as an autobiography in the Dalit literature and it revolves around the real life pictures of the dalits. The novel does not seem relevant in the present contexts as the life of the dalits has been changed drastically these days and they are not discriminated to that extent as they are depicted in the novel but this novel seems relevant in the time when it was written.

The novel has its setting in a village in Gaya district in Bihar. It is about Chuhra community and the people of this caste are involved in inferior types of jobs like sweeping, cleansing, leather-work, grass-cutting etc. These dalits have to live segregated from the upper caste people as has been depicted in the opening of the novel: "Our house was adjacent to Chandrabhan Taga's gher or cowshed. Next to it lived the families of Muslim weavers. Right in front of Chandrabhan Taga's gher was a little johri, a pond which was created as a partition of between the Chuhra's dwellings and the Village" (Valmiki 1). These people belong to the low caste and are the victim of poverty and starvation. They are not sure about two times meals and thus, they have to live from

hand to mouth. The women's condition is not much good and they have to work just to support their family. They have no latrines in their houses and that's why they are forced to sit in the open ground to relieve them:

All the women of the village, young girls, older women, even the newly married brides would sit in the open space behind these homes at the edge of the pond to take a shit. Not just under the cover of darkness but even in daylight. The purdah observing Tyagi women, their faces covered with their saris, shawls around their shoulders, found relief in this open air latrine. They sat on Dabbowali's shores without worrying about decency exposing their private parts (Valmiki 1).

Their caste becomes a major problem in their life. Sen writes that caste is "an ever-present feature of communal and sectarian violence" (Sen 209). The novel beautifully depicts the caste as a stigma on their lives. The people of this community work hard from morning till evening and still are unable to feed the members of their family properly. Omprakash depicts this problem of his family in this novel:

Our family lived in the Chuhra basti. Five brothers, one sister, two cha-chas, one tau lived separately. Everyone in the family did some other other work. Even then we didn't manage to get two decent meals a day. (1-2)

The novel tells the readers about the relationships of the lower caste people, Chuhras and the upper caste people, Tyagis. The upper caste people were affluent and dominant in the village. They designed all the rules of the village and they were financially stable also. The lower caste people were called bhangis and they had to live in the mud walled huts. They worked under the upper caste people for their livelihood. Their life was not much better than slaves. They worked hard during the day but in the evening they had to return empty handed in their homes. They had no rights to ask their wages. "We would often have to work without pay. Nobody dared to refuse this unpaid work for which we got neither money nor grain. Instead we got swarm at and abused"(10). Omprakash Valmiki hated this life as they had to depend on the left-over food offered to them after the hard-work of the day, "What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan" (Valmiki 10). These people's identity was not their name but their caste as the people called them by their caste. "Omprakash "They did not call us by our names. If a person were older, then he would be called "Oh Chuhre". If the person was young or of the same age, then 'Abe Chuhre' was called." (2)

Dalit literature is an authentic and real record. Dr. A.P. Pandey writes that, "Dalit literature looks at the things from the Dalit's point of view" (Pande 10). The novel depicts the problem of untouchability. They were considered impious and their touch may defile the upper caste people. Upper caste people touched the animals but touching the dalits made them impious. Immediate bath was must if any Dalit mistakenly touches the high caste people. That's why Dalits had to pass from a safe distance from the upper caste people because if they touch them then they may get not only abuses but the hard beating as their punishment. The people had to take bath for their purification again:

Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch the dogs and cats or cows or buffaloes if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or pollution. The Chuhras were not seen as humans. (Valmiki 2)

Dalits lived under such circumstances that their development was impossible. They had inferiority complex since their birth. They were deprived of getting education. There was no any facility for the education of the girls. A pastor named Sewak Ram Munshi comes to teach Dalit children. Omprakash Valmiki's father, Chhotan Lal understands the importance of education and that's why he decides to send his son in the village school. The upper caste people of their caste also raised their voice against it. They had already accepted this life as their destiny: "What is the point of sending him to school? When has a crow become a swan?"(6) But Chhotan Lal was firm in his decision. He takes Sewak Ram Munshi with him one day and reaches the village school for his son's admission. He begs to the headmaster, Harphool Singh, "Materji, I will be forever in your debt if you teach this child of mine a letter or two" (2). He does not know that the circumstances are not in their favour here also. He is told to come the other day and after many problems he is admitted in the school. Even after admission the life for Dalit children in that school was not so easy. He has to sit away from the other students on the floor:

I had to sit away from the others in the class, that too on the floor. The mat ran out before reaching the spot I 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. (2-3)

The life in the school was also not good for Omprakash. One day his headmaster calls him and passes a strange order for him: "All right...See that teak tree there? Go climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as mirror. It is often all, your family occupation" (4). And all this does not end only in a day. The next day also he is told to do the same job instead of studying in the school, "Abey Chuhre ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding...your mother... Go sweep the whole playground...otherwise I will shove chilies up your arse (anus) and throw you out of the school" (5). It was a mere coincidence that his father passes that way and he notices his son sweeping the school. He loses his temper and he burst on the headmaster but headmaster was not a bit affected by his anger. He warns his father, "Take him away from here. The Chuhra wants him educated...Go, go...Otherwise I will have your bones broken." (6). His school children call him 'Chuhre Ka' (the son of a scavenger). They also beat him without his fault just because he belongs to a Dalit class. Dalit children have to drink water with the cupped hands and they are not allowed to touch the glass. Arvind Adiga also depicts the same theme of untouchability and the problems of dalits in his novel *The White Tiger* that's why he writes, "The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian. That's what I ought to call my life's story" (Adiga 8).

Joothan or left-over food is the central theme of this novel just because dalits do hard work and they get joothan in return. When they go to in any marriage and they do work there after that they are given only joothan. They have to wait outside and wait for the time when all people have eaten and they would get some joothan in return. In

hunger this joothan also was a good food for them, “The joothan was eaten with a relish. The bridegroom’s guests who didn’t leave enough scraps on the pattals were denounced as gluttons” (6). Omprakash’s mother had to listen to very biting word from Sukhdev Singh Tyagi at the occasion of his daughter’s marriage when she asks some sweets from him. He points to the pattals and says, “You are having a basketful of 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” (10-11). Omprakash was badly hurt by his words but he was a child and he could do nothing except bearing this humiliation.

Omprakash’s brother dies due to lack of health facilities and excessive work. He was the bread-earner in the home. After his death the family had to see very bad days. There was no money in home at the time of Omprakash’s admission. His widow sister-in-law offers her anklet to her father-in-law to help them from coming out from the bad condition. Omprakash’s father denies it and says, “No bahoo, don’t sell it. ... How can we sell that too? Go and keep it.” (14) But circumstances were so tough for them that he has to accept her anklet as there was no any option left. Even dalits and other backward class people also don’t have good relationships and even the dhobhis of the village don’t wash or iron their clothes.

One day when Omprakash went to one of his dhobhi friend’s home to get his school uniform ironed; the father of his friend reprimands him and says, “We don’t wash the clothes of Chuhra-Chamars. Nor do we iron them. If we iron your clothes, then the Tagas won’t get their clothes washed by us. We will lose our roti.” (17). The dalit people has to live in constant debt, “Most of the residents of the Bhangi basti were drowning in debt” (18) and they have to borrow money at the high interest. A money-lender, Teja Tega charges so high interest from them that whole life of the dalits is spent in paying the interest and the principal amount would remain untouched but they were helpless. They suffered everything in silence, “Most people of our basti suffered everything in silence” (18). During rainy season, the life of these dalits was very sympathetic as they have to sweep the lanes. The mud and human excreta flowed in those lanes. Their hands and legs would get infected and developed redness, “Our arms and legs would get smeared with dirt. The feet became mangy. The space between the toes filled up with reddish sores started itch. Once they started to itch, they would itch nonstop” (19).

Rainy season proved a curse for them. They faced the problem of getting work in rain, their homes were not worth living. Their health deteriorated. They have to face the problem of the clean water also. They have to drink dirty water from the only well of the village. There were worms in the water but they had to drink only this water and they were not allowed to bring water from the well of caste haste people,

There was one well in our basti. People had raised money to get it cemented. Both the plinth and the parapet of the well were quite high. Despite this safeguard, the water in the well was full if long worms during the rainy season. We had no other alternative but to drink that water. We did not have the right to take water from the well of Tagas. (Valmiki 19)

They have to face problem of living during rainy season as their muddy houses may collapse at any time and they lives in these house under the shadow of fear, “We had to stay awake during these rainy nights. A fear constantly dogged us: who knew when a wall might collapse...That night a huge piece of our baithak in our basti. People were screaming and shouting” (19). In this situation they have to temporarily shift to Mamraj Tyagi’s baithak. There they had nothing to eat except rice and mar (rice-water) was drunk with great relish. When Omprakash’s teacher gives an illustration of Dronacharya that he has go give mar to his son, Ashwatthama instead of cow-milk, Omprakash says that they have to drink mar all the time. At this his teacher says:

Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back... Chuhre ke, you dare compare yourself with Dronacharya...Here take this, I will write an epic on your back (Valmiki 23).

Omprakash’s Chemistry teacher, Brajpal doesn’t like his entry in the Chemistry lab, “I felt that whenever I went to the lab for practical. Brajpal would keep me out on some pretext or the other” (65) and that’s why he gets failed. Consequently, Omprakash was declared failure in the result.

When Omprakash starts working in a factory, his caste follows him there also. He writes that “‘Caste’ is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, ‘caste’ determines his or her destiny. Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one’s control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household?” (Valmiki 134) Bayly writes that “Caste as jati—to be seen as a concrete ethnographic fact of Indian life, a source of historic national strengths and organized self-improvement or “uplift.” (Bayly 154)

As a conclusion, Omprakash Valmiki’s autobiography *Joothan* depicts the hellish life of the dalits whom have to face the cancer of caste since their birth. Though Omprakash died in 2012 yet his memories are mortal in his autobiography.

Works Cited

- Adiga, Arvind. *The White Tiger*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2009. Print.
- Bayly, Susan. *The New Cambridge History of India: Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteen Century to the Modern Age*. Vol. 3. Cambridge: CUP, 1999. Print.
- Pandey, A.P. “Dalit Subalternity in Omprakash Valmiki’s Autobiography: Joothan.” *Research Chronicer: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*.1.3 (2013):1-10.
- Valmikis, Omprakash. *Jhoothan: A Dalit’s Life*. Kolkata: Samya, 2003. Print.