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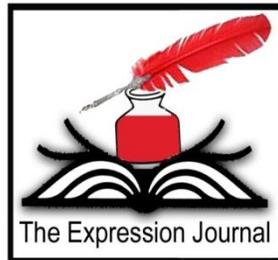
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CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES IN OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S *JOOOTHAN: A DALIT'S LIFE*

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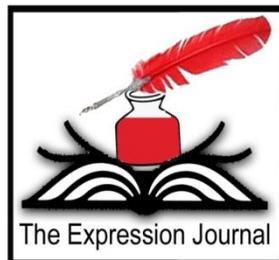
Abstract

Dalit Literature, since its inception in 1950s, has acquired a great place in Indian English Literature. Many novels, short story collections and plays have been written on Dalit themes and these writers of these themes have used their imagery as these works are fictitious but there are some other Dalit writers who have penned their autobiographies which are the authentic and chronological records of their life. Dalit autobiographies are not like other autobiographies which present only the simple incidents of their life. Dalit autobiographies depict the pains, pangs and problems of the writer, his family and even his whole community. Though there are many autobiographies in the public spheres but out of them Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is a moving record of his life in which he has described all those problems of his life which make other people think to work to uplift the marginalized sections of the society who are not getting the fundamental requirements of life. Through this paper, their problems and struggle for identity crisis have been tried to examine in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. It has been emphasized to cover all the childhood experiences of Valmiki's life with a focus on dalit discrimination even in his school. This autobiography describes the inhuman conditions under which Dalits had to live just a few decades back. This autobiography narrates Valmiki's struggle and his efforts to get rid of the caste discrimination.

Keywords

Dalit Literature, Indian Writing in English, Autobiography, Hunger, Poverty, Marginalization, Discrimination, *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki.

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Omprakash Valmiki's name is taken in the renowned dalit writers who have won reputation due to their autobiographies. Though there are several other dalit autobiographers such as Daya Pawar, Laxman Babu Mane, Sharankumar Limbale, Balbir Madhopuri, Narendra Jadhav, Arjun Dangle, Vasant Moon, Sidhhalingaih, Aravind Malagatti, etc. but among them, Omprakash Valmiki is the forerunner of Dalit literature because his Hindi autobiography *Joozhan* become more famous worldwide than most of other writers. Actually, Dalit literature is a bit different from the mainstream literature as Manisha Singh also remarks, "Dalit Literature consists in many qualities which differentiate it from rest of literature. It has an authenticity, a sense of social mission, a fiery strength and vigourness" (Singh 667).

In ancient time, our society was divided into four *varnas*: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. According to this social stratification, all these sections were assigned some roles. Brahmins were the teachers, Kshatriyas protected people, Vaishyas were engaged in different business and trades and Shudras were engaged in farming. Apart from these four categories, there was a fifth category and the people of this category were called untouchables. These people were not allowed to touch the upper caste people. Some people among them were called Dalits. These people were exploited, suppressed and oppressed. Omprakash Valmiki also was a Dalit writer whose autobiography *Joozhan: A Dalit's Life* is a worth reading book because it describes the extreme poverty conditions of his family and community as well. Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joozhan: A Dalit Life* is a heart-rending tale of his community. This autobiography was originally published in Hindi in 1997 and later it was translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee and was published in 2003 in English. He writes in his autobiography:

"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? Those who call themselves the standard-bearers of this country's great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into?" (Valmiki 133-34)

Jaiprakash Kardam says only ash knows the experience of burning. Likewise, a dalit person can better understand the pain of belonging to a dalit community. Sanjay Kumar also writes in this context, "Being a Dalit is a curse and only a Dalit can better understand the real anguish of a Dalit" (Kumar 162). Thus, Dalits have the real experience of agonies and to some extent it is true also: Shushupna writes about Dalit autobiographies:

Dalit autobiographies are realistic depiction of life of torment and anguish experienced and being felt by the Dalits. Dalits are treated either as marginal people without a history of their own or as objects rather than as subjects. (Shushupna 349)

Among several Dalit autobiographies, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* delineates how Omprakash Valmiki's family had to live separately from the upper caste people just because they belonged to a Dalit community and they were extremely poor. They lived in a joint family. The writer narrates, "Our family lived in this *Chuhra* basti, five brothers, one sisters, two chahchas, one tau and his family" (Valmiki 1).

In Dalit autobiographies, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* states that Omprakash Valmiki's family belonged to the Dalit community and had to live away from upper caste people only because they were very poor. Omprakash Valmiki writes in his autobiography that they had to live away from upper caste people of their village. There was a pond that separated them from the upper caste people. This autobiography opens with the following words, "...Right from Chanderbhan Taga's gher was a little johri, a pond, which had created a sort of partition between the Chuhra's dwellings and the village" (Valmiki 1). Thus, the pond separated them from the mainstream. Their home lacked basic facility of latrines and they had to go out to relieve themselves in the morning. Omprakash writes about it, "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" (Valmiki 1). These people were also often deprived of their wages simply because the higher caste people knew they were socially weak and there was nothing they could do. People of higher castes and even young people addressed them with demeaning terms such as "Oe Chuhre or Abe Chuhre" (Valmiki 2).

Omprakash lived in a very large family with five brothers, one sister, three uncles and his parents. Their communities were considered untouchable and even animals such as cows, dogs, cats, and buffaloes were touched, while the touch of Dalis could defile them. Omprakash ridiculed the so-called upper castes who purify themselves with cow urine. The autobiography also addressed the issue of economic and social backwardness. As a rule, Dalit children did not go to school, their parents helped in the family business, and the girls helped at home. Their main problem was poverty. They could not get proper food and had to go hungry at times.

Omprakash becomes a successful person and settles later in city but his childhood experiences remain very bitter. Dalit children were not sent to school at that time and the upper caste people also liked it. A Christian named Sewak Ram Munshi came to teach Dalit children. In this way Dalit children learn to read and write. In most cases, upper-caste children study in public schools where the students and well as teachers showed discriminatory attitude with them. With the help of Sewak Ram, Omprakash Valmiki's father takes him to school and requests the teacher to admit him in the school. He says, "Masterji, I will be forever in your debt if you teach this child of mine a letter or two" (Valmiki 2).

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Omprakash has to face many problems in the admission in the primary school of his village. The teacher concerned kept putting off his admission in the school because he did not want that a dalit student may take admission in his school but Omprakash's father Chhotan Lal was a man of determination and he kept on going to the school until his son was admitted.

Omprakash writes in his autobiography how there was a huge difference between dalit students and upper caste students in their school. The students of the dalit community were not allowed to touch the tape of water and only upper caste people were given rights to utilise everything. Dalit students were not allowed to sit on the benches like other upper caste students and they had to sit on the floor in the corner.

It was also the sad thing to say that Dalits were criticized for their dirty clothes and when they would wear new clothes, they were also mocked at for it also. Thus, they were criticized in every condition. Omprakash writes about it, "Abe Chuhre ke, get away from me, you stink" ... "Abe Chuhre ka, he has come dressed in new dress" (Valmiki 3).

His fourth standard experience remained very bitter as the headmaster Bishambar Singh was transferred and a new headmaster Kaliram came. During this transfer process, another teacher also came and with the arrival of his two teachers, his three Dalit children at school, Omprakash, Ram Singh and Sukkhan Singh, were targeted by the new teachers and suffered greatly. These teachers would beat these dalit children without any rhyme and reason.

Omprakash Valmiki narrates an experience. He says that his friend Sukkhan Singh had a boil on his stomach and one day the teacher started beating him on the boil and it started bleeding. When Sukkan cried in pain, the teacher showed no mercy. Omprakash also he starts crying with Sukkhan. Their teacher starts calling names to him.

There is another childhood incident in this autobiography. The headmaster Kaliram knew Omprakash's caste and his family background that's why instead of teaching him properly, he would keep him busy in other works. One day he told Omprakash to clean the school. He said, "All right...See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom and sweep the whole school as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation" (Valmiki 5). Omprakash didn't want to clean the school but after all, it was headmaster's order and a student must obey it. All this keeps happening in the school for three days and the headmaster orders Omprakash to clean the playground. When Omprakash sits in the classroom on the third day, his teacher shouts at him in a loud voice saying, "Abey, Chuhre ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding... your mother...Go sweep the whole playground...Otherwise I will shove chillies up your arse and throw you out of the school" (Valmiki 5). It was a coincidence that his father was passing by the school and he noticed his son cleaning the playground. On being asked, Omprakash blurts out and tells his father everything. His father gets out of his control and says, "Who is the teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep?" (Valmiki 6). He goes to the headmaster and starts shouting at the headmaster angrily. Kaliram, the headmaster, also starts abusing Omprakash's father, but his father boldly stands up to the headmaster. Even the villagers also say that it is not good for a Valmiki to get education. They think that a crow cannot become a swan. They said, "However much you study...you will still remain a Chuhra" (Valmiki 32). The same problem has been depicted in many dalit autobiographies that Dalits children were not allowed to get education even by the people of their own community. There is one incident in Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli* in which Geeta starts teaching children of the maid-servants

and even many maid-servants were not in the favour of it and for them, education was not important. Headmaster keeps Omprakash in the school only after the intervention of the village sarpanch.

Omprakash narrates one more terrifying incident of his childhood in this autobiography. He writes that the dalits of his community would not get proper food to eat and they had to live in unhygienic environment. They had to eat left-over food. Omprakash Valmiki writes about it, "The joothan was eaten with a relish. The bridegroom's guests who didn't leave enough scraps on the pattals were denounced as gluttons" (Valmiki 6). There was no source of income in the family except labour or daily wages.

Omprakash Valmiki narrates one incident of his life how he and his mother were publically insulted at the occasion of wedding of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's daughter. When Omprakash's mother asks some sweets from Sukhdev Singh Tyagi, he humiliates her saying, "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" (Valmiki 10-11). Omprakash was a child at that time but he could feel the pain. He could not forget this incident and he says, "These words of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's penetrated my breast like a knife. They continue to singe me to this day" (Valmiki 11). In fact, Dalit autobiographies are the real records of pains and these autobiographies work to aware other people.

Omprakash Valmiki continues his studies but his caste does not leave him. When he was studying at school, his chemistry teacher, Brajpal Singh Tiagi, would not allow him to attend his practical classes properly. As a result, Omprakash failed. One day, his teacher Brajpal sent them to his village to have lunch offered by an elder but when the elder comes to know about his caste, he gets angry and lifts a heavy stick and hits Bhikhuram on his back. The other people also take his side and they also suggest him to tie him with a rope and hung on the tree.

Omprakash narrates how his Mathematics teacher Narendra Kumar Tyagi tells Omprakash to bring water. He orders him just because he did not know that the student belongs to a low caste. Omprakash openly tells his teacher, "I belong to the Chuhra caste. If you still want me to get you water, I will go" (Valmiki 64-65).

Omprakash writes how love of poor untouchables does not remain successful. Sharankumar Limbale also writes about it in his autobiography *Akkarmashi*. Mohandas Naimisaraya also writes about this theme in his autobiography *Apne Apne Pinjre*. The same thing happens in this autobiography.

Omprakash falls in love with Kulkarni's daughter, Savitha. Savisa also loved him under the impression that he was a Brahmin, but when she found out about his caste, she started crying bitterly, which again made Omprakash feel guilty about her lower caste. After that Omprakash feels thwarted and disenchanted due to his caste. He writes in his autobiography:

She started crying as though my being an SC was a crime. She sobbed for a long time. Suddenly the distance between us had increased. The hatred of thousands of years had entered our hearts. What a lie culture and civilization are. (Valmiki 98)

Conclusively, Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit Life* is replete with many such themes which were prevalent in the society at that time. The evil of untouchability has been demolished by implementing laws by the Indian constitution but the caste discrimination has not been uprooted by now. It is still prevalent more or less both in rural and urban areas.

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