

OMPRAKASH VALMIKI AND THE DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Kusum Lata

Associate Professor in English

Sri Aurobindo College Evening

University of Delhi

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore how Omprakash Valmiki and the other Dalit writers use the genre of autobiography to shake the conscience of the upper castes and show mirror to the society. The silence of centuries is broken and these autobiographies, particularly Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothang* give voice to the dumb masses belonging to the lowest caste in the caste hierarchy. Valmiki charts not only the course of his life but also draws simultaneously a sketch of the social order established since ages in the Northern India. The stark realities expressed in the life account touch the painful nerve of the readers of the oppressed class and simultaneously shake the sensibilities of the readers of the other classes. The paper also shows that the autobiographies are not just narration of the life events of an individual rather they represent the lives of the people of the entire community. Struggling through defeats and failures Valmiki transformed his life and stirred the consciousness of millions to rise and assert themselves. Constitutional provisions in themselves are not sufficient to bring about the change. The paper rests on the premise that Dalit pain cannot be felt as intensely and expressed as poignantly by others as by the Dalits themselves. If the Dalits have to improve their conditions and social standing they will have to speak up about the hurt. Autobiographies by Dalit women also play a significant role in creating a Dalit discourse and talking about the various facets of oppression of the Dalits.

KeyWords: Autobiography, Dalit, Valmiki, caste, oppression, humiliation, untouchability, hierarchy, varna

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The star-studded sky of Dalit literature has hundreds of notable writers now but the name of Omprakash Valmiki is like the brightest star just next to the everfixed star on the Dalit horizon, the name of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar. Valmiki is known as much for his life as for his works. The account of his life is given by him in his autobiography *Joothan* published originally in Hindi in 1997 by Radhakrishna Prakashan, New Delhi and later translated into English by Professor Arun Prabha Mukherjee under the title *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* and was published in 2003. The translation was published by Columbia University Press, New York U.S.A. in 2008 - *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life*. *Joothan* is not just the autobiography of an individual rather it is the life account of millions of humans living their lives or at least the earlier part of their lives in an identical way. It is not only the representative life account of an entire community, it is the shared consciousness of the Dalits which constitute at least 15 percent of the Indian population. Valmiki charts not only the course of his life but also draws simultaneously a sketch of the social order established since ages in the Northern India. The popularity of the text rests on the fact that it touches the painful nerve of the readers of the oppressed class and shakes the sensibilities of the readers of the other class. It was by all means a heroic feat for a Dalit to be able to pull himself out of the quagmire of the tyrannies of being born in a Dalit household and to be able to resist and oppose being pushed back every now and then. His struggle to survive and rise above the physical and psychological hurt and humiliation really makes a curious study. Facing oppression, suppression, starvation, exploitation and an overall dehumanization and struggling through defeats and failures how Valmiki transformed his life and stirred the consciousness of millions to rise and assert a subject for exploration.

Valmiki was born in 1950 and his autobiography relates events right from his birth so the account contained in the book relates to the period when India had newly become independent and many social reforms had been introduced by way of constitutional provisions and enacted legislations. But the situation at ground zero was too rigid to accept the change. *Joothan* challenges the so-called ideal constructs formed around such concepts and entities as childhood innocence, equality before law, Panchayat's verdicts as God's orders and the teacher as the Guru. The most challenging struggle for Omprakash, the child, was to attain primary education and somehow complete schooling. Valmiki found

his voice after he left his native village Barla in Western Uttar Pradesh and came to the city of Dehradun for further studies. It was here that he came to know about the great Dalit political leader B. R. Ambedkar. His friend gave him a copy of Ambedkar's biography to read. Ambedkar at once became the greatest influence in his life. He read all his works, visited Maharashtra, came in contact with the Marathi Dalit writers, worked for some time in Ambernath and Chandrapur and transformed into a powerful and frank Dalit writer who was a witness to the oppression and exploitation which he endured as an individual and as a member of a stigmatized community. The Marathi translation *Ushtaby* Mangesh Bansod published by Lokvangmya Griha has just been published in 2018 i.e. 21 years after the publication in Hindi of *Joothan* and 5 years after the death of its writer. Poet Loknath Yashwant from Chandrapur said, "Omprakash Valmiki was shaped by Maharashtra and its Ambedkar-Dalit politics. In Uttar Pradesh he was exposed to the conventional narrative epics such as Ramayana and Mahabhart. It was only Rama and Krishna and the Hindu Gods. It was in Maharashtra that he grasped the importance of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the contribution of the Dalit panther movement and the tradition of the Dalit autobiographies in Marathi."

Who is Dalit? The Hindi word literally means the oppressed and the suppressed and refers to an individual as well as the whole class of people. Dalits are people who are treated with cruelty by those who occupy an upper status in the social hierarchy. Dalits are those who since centuries have been prevented from having equal opportunity, benefits, freedom and dignity as others. As slaves of the society they were treated as chattels anyone could use and then forget. The common understanding of all including the children was that the Dalits are born to serve. The various terms referring to this class are Achhoot meaning untouchable, Mahar meaning great enemy, Bahishkrut meaning the outcaste, Antyaj meaning one who is at the far end, Chandal referring to those whose work was to burn dead human bodies, Shudra or Kshudra meaning small or insignificant, Panchama meaning the fifth group outside the four 'varnas' besides the various derogatory terms of address like Bhangi, Chuhra or Jamadar referring to the sweeper class. Gandhiji called them Harijan meaning God's people. But gradually 'Harijan' also came to be carrying derogatory connotations. After India became independent the law makers realized the need to uplift this section of the society and a list of castes was prepared. This list of castes was among one of the many schedules like the schedule of languages appended to the various

Articles in the Constitution. The castes and tribes listed here are referred to as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes abbreviated as SC/ST. Even this is now used sometimes as a derogatory way of address. The relationship between the society and the Dalits is of the master and the servant, the exploiter and the exploited, the oppressor and the oppressed.

Valmiki and many other Dalit writers believed that the Dalit pain cannot be felt as intensely and expressed as poignantly by others as by the Dalits themselves. Valmiki also believed that truth should come out in its naked form. The bitter facts should not be presented with a sugar coating. The writer should speak straight and not act as an upholder of social morality in the face of stark and dark realities. His description of events, incidents and personalities in *Joothan* shook the elite sensibility of many upper class writers and controversies surrounded the narrative. Autobiographies by Dalit writers became a powerful tool to show mirror to the society and stir the dormant valour and honour of the class uniting them to rise up and secure for themselves social justice. "Dalit autobiography is seen as an instrument of amelioration and regeneration of Dalit subjectivity and hope, an optimistic hope for a utopia." Among the notable Dalit autobiographies are: *Against All Odds* by Kishore Shantabai Kale, *Outcaste: A Memoir* by Narendra Jadhav, *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, *Viramma* by Viramma, *Akkarmasi* (The Outcaste) by S. Limbale, *Growing up Untouchable in India* by Vasant Moon, *Karukku* by Bama besides, of course, *Waiting for a Visa* by Ambedkar which relates just one incident. The Dalit autobiographies in fact were a move towards the creation of Dalit Literature. Dalit autobiography, it is reiterated, is not just an autobiography of an individual; it is the narrative of the community. The 'I' in Dalit autobiography always symbolizes the 'we'. Through these autobiographies the authors chart the harrowing tales of their arduous journey from being born as Dalits to being emancipators of the Dalits. These authors are the mouthpieces of the dumb and silent sufferers from their community. The incidents and their description are real as they are based on the writers' personal experiences which are the common experiences of many. Their struggles followed by success serve as inspirations for the members of their community.

Most of the autobiographies mentioned above are accounts of lives lived under the oppression of untouchability, crisis of identity, financial instability, economic disparity, forced unpaid labour and physical and psychological atrocities at the hands of the upper castes. It is noteworthy that several autobiographies have been written by Dalit women

writers as well. *The Prisons We Broke* by Babytai Kamble is an account of how women joined the revolutionary struggle of Babasaheb Ambedkar in their quest of equality with the upper caste Hindus. *Viramma* is the story of an illiterate Dalit woman who sings village ribaldry, works as an agriculture labor, is a natural story teller and is full of life. She has calmly accepted her relationship of bondage with the local landlord. The story is recounted by Josiane and her husband Jean-Luc-Racine, a French academic, as it was told to them by Viramma. Bama's autobiography *Karukku* is unique in several ways. Unlike the spate of autobiographies in Marathi, *Karukku* is the only autobiography by a Tamil Dalit Christian woman. It is "concerned with the single issue of caste oppression within the Catholic Church and its institutions and presents Bama's life as a process of lonely self-discovery." *Against All Odds* by Kishore Shantabai Kale is an account of a mother's life as viewed by her son. *Against All Odds* stalks of double exploitation - one by the members of the upper castes and another by the members of one's own family. The victim here is doubly helpless firstly because she is a young woman and secondly because her oppressor is her own community. Kishore's mother Shantabai is pushed into the flesh trade which is the family occupation of daughters and sisters in the Kolhati tribe settled in Western Maharashtra. Traditionally people of the tribe used to earn their livelihood by jugglery, puppetry and acrobatic acts but penury gripped the tribe and lack of audience and lack of benefactors of their art pushed them towards making their girls dance in front of men in Jalsa parties. The girls are not allowed to marry. They are sold for money to suitors. Mock nuptials called Chira Utarans are arranged which turn them into sex workers while simultaneously they continue to dance to earn money for their father's family. The illegitimate children born to them take the name of their mother. Their Chira owners abandon them at will and they are resold. The author Kishore Shantabai Kale has woven his autobiography around the predicament of the life of his mother Shantabai who was the eldest among eight children. She was a very intelligent and diligent student who wanted to live the dignified life of a teacher but was forced into the occupation of dancing and flesh trade to financially support her father's family.

Though there are class and caste hierarchies in every society and religion, the Hindu religion has certain typical features- its varna system being the most prominent one. The pyramid of varnas has the Brahmins at the top and the Shudras at the bottom. The gradation in the descending order of varnas is Brahmin > Kshatriya > Vaishya > and Shudra.

The Brahmins are the repositories of knowledge and learning, Kshatriyas are the warriors, protectors and rulers, Vaishyas are the landlords and the traders while the Shudras are the workers and the servants. There is a clear gradation even among the Shudras, like tillers, vegetable growers, oilmen, washermen, boatmen, barbers, potters, tanners, sweepers and scavengers. The common factor among them all is that they all are meant to serve the other three varnas. It was service and labour which justified their existence. It is extremely shameful for a civilization that humans are made to do such dehumanizing acts as were traditionally imposed upon the people of the sweeper class. Valmiki, as a child, could not understand how the least physical touch by a person of his caste was taken as a polluting act while it was ok to touch cattle and animals like cats and dogs. For every varna and section within the varna Manu, the codifier of this system, made different rules and regulations of the ways of life and also codified different punishments for people of the different varnas for the various crimes. The Manusmriti spelled out rights and duties and rewards and punishments according to the Varnas.

The division of caste system existed in India for centuries. The occupations of the untouchables included ritually polluting activities like disposing off of dead bodies of animals, supervising burning of dead human bodies, cleaning latrines, washing urinals, carrying cow dung to the dung heaps, sweeping and so on. On account of these lowly activities the Dalits were subjected to social discrimination and restrictions. They were outcastes in several ways. Their houses could not be within the village. They lived at the periphery of the village, generally towards the South of the village. The layout of the villages was such that the land sloped down towards the south and thus the drainage of the entire village was through the sweepers' quarters. Just close to their houses used to be the pond into which the village drains got emptied. Women sat around this pond to ease themselves and the place always bore unbearable stink. Valmiki talks of this real Hell in which his family lived. How oppressive this perpetual stink during the rainy season was defies imagination and can only be explained by one who has lived in this Hell. The punishment for the Dalits for eyeing the women of the upper castes was so severe that their men always kept their eyes low and heads bent. Women would not hide their faces behind the veils as they feared no physical outrage from the Dalit men.

Omprakash Valmiki emerged as the forerunner among Dalit writers as an authentic and powerful voice. Besides social constraints, the financial difficulties of people of this class

are even more severe. Most of the times they were made to do unpaid forced labour and whatever bounty they used to get was in the form of some grain, left over rotis, buttermilk with a lot of water mixed in it and the 'right' to collect scraps of food from the plates during occasions like festivals and marriages. It is this 'kindness' which is called *Joothan* to which Valmiki refers in his autobiography titled *Joothan*. His writings are the throbbing examples of the pain and agony of his life. He definitely placed Dalit literature in a new paradigm. He did not present the shit wrapped in a nice looking package rather he hurled the shit at the face of the so-called protectors, preservers and perpetrators of the stinking customs and traditions. He attacked at the aura and façade of respect and civility attached with the profession of teaching and brought out the ugly side of monsters like Kaliram who in the name of teachers were actually wolves in sheeps' clothing. Valmiki minces no words in talking about such teachers who would sodomize good looking Dalit boys and would use such choicest of epithets of abuse that one who heard them would feel as if his ears were polluted. Knowledge is power and education is the biggest emancipator. The teachers who instead of disseminating knowledge and encouraging the young pupils to pursue education not only discourage them but actively engage in humiliating them, diverting them towards menial work and closing in on them the doors of the classroom are in fact a blot on the name of teachers. Valmiki rightly calls them the progenitors of Dronacharya and compares the Dalit children eager to study to Eklavyas. By choosing to keep his penname and surname as 'Valmiki', the author emphasizes that the Hindu religion is not the fiefdom of the upper varnas rather the Shudras are the seminal contributors to its growth and that he denounces the aberrations and distortions that crept into the religion and can have faith only in the Hinduism of the pristine times of the period of Lord Rama when a person born in the Dalit family could become first poet, pen down the life account of the king, adopt the queen as his daughter and bring up the royal children.

Joothan contains traumatic experiences of Valmiki's life. It represents the marginalized groups. Valmiki is an authentic voice who talks about the lowest caste of the Indian society to which he himself belongs. His fight was for the entire community for demand of education, food and dignity. "The autobiographies explore the connection of caste and subjectivity and go to convince the reader that the construction of the interior of selfhood of the oppressed is an area which cannot be mapped with authority from outside the concerned group howsoever well intentioned the mapper might be."

Valmiki depicts the life of Chuhras, who were considered to be outcastes and were devoid of basic amenities. *Joothan* could be considered a protest against the social injustices meted out to the Dalits. Valmiki has depicted the tyrannical social systems. The author describes his ill treatment at school level when he was asked to sweep the school class rooms and play grounds and not allowed to attend the classes. Somewhere he felt the pain of Eklavya whose thumb was taken by a Guru so that he could not compete with Arjun. Though the government through its policies was trying hard to help the Dalits by introducing reservation and scholarship for education but the society was harsh enough to allow the benefits of the policies to reach the targeted groups. Valmiki not only talked about the oppression and suppression meted out to the Dalits but also rejected many practices practised by Dalits like always bending themselves on meeting any member of the upper caste anywhere. Valmiki tried hard to empower himself through education but faced discrimination and humiliation in all walks of life. Even his surname was mocked at. He wanted to give vent to all his anger by excelling in his studies but the psychological pressure of caste discrimination was so intense that he failed in his exams. Inspired by Ambedkar, he took up the revolutionary work of “transformation of the society and human consciousness”.

Valmiki as a Dalit writer has showed his power in expressing pain and agony of the Dalit community. As a voice he has paved the way for the coming generations to know how to face the world. He will always remain an inspiration for the coming generations and he would always be venerated for his contribution to literature in making autobiography a powerful tool of expressing the resentment of the masses and transformation and reformation of the society.

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