



Impact Factor : 5.7

UGC Approved Journal



# IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

**ISSN-2321-7065**



**Volume 6, Issue 3  
March 2018**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

Dr. Ranjana Singh

Department of English and Modern European Languages

University of Lucknow, Lucknow, India.

[ranjanajjay@gmail.com](mailto:ranjanajjay@gmail.com)

*Joothan: A Journey from struggle to survival*

Abstract

Caste is a distinctive issue of Indian society which spreads injustice, dispersal of thoughts, dilemma in mind, racism, discrimination, humiliation and inequality. Actually it is rigid mode of division which divides Indian society into several different categories and communities. The Hindu religion is majorly divided into four groups Brahmin, Kshtriya, Vaishya and Shudras. Dalit (Shudras) comes into the lowest cadre of Indian social system. Dalit autobiographical narratives are perceived as the actual site of the struggle and survival. *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki is one of the promising dalit autobiographies which represent the sufferings, trauma and the painful agony of whole community. *Joothan* plays an important role in the social revolution for equality, justice and for making a new path to the whole low caste community. It depicts the importance of and significance of education in the life of a Dalit. According to Valmiki Dalit writing emerges as a weapon to express their needs, trauma, sufferings and dilemma being born in such a suppressed community.

Key words: Dalit, Autobiography, Caste, Quest for identity, Caste discrimination

Caste is a distinctive issue of Indian society which spreads injustice, dispersal of thoughts, dilemma in mind, discrimination, humiliation and inequality. Actually it is rigid mode of division which divides Indian society into several different categories and communities. The Hindu religion is majorly divided into four groups Brahmin, Kshtriya, Vaishya and Shudras. Dalit (Shudras) comes into the lowest step of Indian social ladder. The word Dalit originally comes from Sanskrit which means crushed, broken, oppressed, downtrodden, marginalised, and suppressed. According to Prof. Aravind Malagatti ,

“The people who are economically, socially, politically exploited from centuries, unable to live in the society of human beings have been living outside the village depending on lower level of occupation, and unable to spell

out their names, lived as untouchables are regarded as Dalit". (qtd. in Kargi 17)

Because of this caste system, some specific categories of the Indian population have to bear injustice, discrimination and exploitation and they continue to fight against the system. Therefore writing has emerged as a strongest weapon for those people who were silently suffering all these traumas in their day to day life. Om Prakash Valmiki is one of the prolific dalit writers who dared to portray his life's struggle and resistance in the form of an amazing autobiography. *Joothan: A dalit's Life (1997)* is an autobiography of a dalit individual besides of that it represents the pain, trauma and survival of whole community. It was originally written in Hindi later translated in English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee.

Being a Dalit Valmiki beautifully narrated the experiences and sufferings of his life. While narrating the story Valmiki's mind seems much crowded with the variety of thoughts and dilemmas but finally he succeeded to portray them emphatically. In the preface to the Hindi edition of *Joothan* Valmiki claims about his reason and motive behind writing the autobiography. He says

"Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations" (vii).

Actually from the eyes of an upper caste writer there is always a gap and misrepresentation while narrating a Dalit character and their sufferings, because they are not the sufferer of that trauma and pain. On the other hand a dalit writer portrays his experiences more realistically. Hence being a Dalit Valmiki expresses his pain, struggle and experiences in a simple but effective way.

The Dalit autobiographical narratives are perceived as the actual site of the struggle and survival, where the voice of the marginalized individual contests the institutionalized narrative of the dominant group. Therefore Harlow writes,

"If resistance poetry challenged the dominant and hegemonic discourse of an occupying or colonizing power by attacking the symbolic foundations of that power and erecting symbolic structures of its own—resistance narratives go further still in analysing the relations of power which sustain the system of domination and exploitation. (85)"

These autobiographies are considered as the narratives of pain which converts sorrows, trauma and pain of their lives into asserts not only an individual but of the whole community. Hence Sarah Beth rightly says

“It is pain which strings one narrative event to the next, and it is pain that binds individual Dalits together into an ‘imagined community’ of fellow sufferers. Yet the experience of oppression does not imprison Dalits in eternal victimhood, but rather is then used by the Dalit community as a tool mobilized against this “cruel and inhuman social order’ which supports caste-based discrimination” (1).

Valmiki belongs to Chuhre caste which lived outside the city. This caste basically works for cleaning and unpaid wages. Usually the people of this caste had been called not their name but by their caste, as he himself claims “They did not call us by our name. If a person was older than we were, then would call as “Oe Chuhre”. *Joothan* represents the story of a poor dalit’s life which starts from his birth and upbringing. Therefore Arun P. Mukherjee writes in the introduction of the autobiography, it draws the story of Valmiki’s life “as an untouchable in the newly independent India of the 1950’s to today and his pride in being a Dalit” (XVII).

Being a dalit he has to face many difficulties in his day to day life. Like he could not touch the common water pump, even he was not allowed to sit with other students of upper caste in the classroom and the students of upper caste were used to tease and harass him. Valmiki was very good in studies but he was never appreciated by his teachers. The head master of his school ordered him to clean the school as being a member of the ‘Chuhre’ community it was his social duty.

One by one the experiences of life make him know the realities and rigidity of this social system. It was his very first experience, once he went for his friend’s wedding to be a groom’s best man. He was very scared by that. All his happiness completely escaped when he came to know that they have to go for ‘*Salaam*’. “Is it right to go for *Salaam*” (39)? Valmiki dared to ask a question against the stereotypical costume. Valmiki opposed this caste system prevailing in the society and his caste as well.

The autobiography emphatically raises the voice of a voiceless community; it says that education is the only weapon which can give them their right place in the society. *Joothan* is a collage of many experiences and pain of every individual being born in such low caste. Once he asked to iron his clothes to washer man but the person literally refuses, which shows the typical mind-set of the society. He was very upset to see all these therefore He writes “one can get rid of poverty but get rid of caste is very tough (28)”.

On the one hand it highlights the narrow mindedness of the society but on the same time it also highlights the artificial faces and hypocritical nature of the people of upper caste,

as some upper caste people love to eat the pig's meat and they come to eat it in the dark hours of the night. Valmiki was very much inspired by his father as he used to tell him to get more educated and always encourage him to do something for his community.

Valmiki raised his voice for a voiceless community when the Hindi Literature was dominated by the upper Caste people. Nobody wants to know about the sufferings and survival of the lives of low class people. Eventhey were not interested to read the agony and pain of their class. Therefore the miserable condition of dalits or injustice on them was not a part of the literature. Regarding this Arun Prabha Mukherjee in *The Forward* writes "No untouchable studied with me in my school or later at college" (IX). While translating *Joothan* this question was in her mind therefore she further claims,

"I believe that here in *Joothan* readers of English Language texts will find another answer to Gayatri Spivak's famous question "Can the Subaltern Speak?"(X).

*Joothan* seems to be a part of social revolution for equality, justice and for making a new path to the whole community. Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is one of the pioneer texts in Hindi literature that identifies as a part of Dalit literature and Valmiki has become a torch bearer for his whole low class community. Valmiki struggles but survives, in this respect he encourages other Dalit communities who have been struggling in the society to get their rights. He says is very encouraging,

"this battle cannot be won in a day we need an on- going struggle and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that bring a revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change" (203).

Dalit literature emerges as a protest against all forms of exploitation and humiliation based on caste, class, culture, ethnicity, race, orcommunity. Like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Valmiki accepts the significance and importance of education for dalits. Perhaps the most important and touching realisation of the needfor education expressed in the autobiography. Valmiki claims that only education can fight against this prejudice and give their rights to live properly in the society. He is well aware ofthe fact that only education can help them get rid of this dreadful, supressed and tortuous life and can uplift their life's miserable condition. *Joothan* asserts,

"Beingborn 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 cultural heritage, did they decide when they would be born?" (144).

Dalit literature is not only literature of pain and sufferings but also literature of change and revival in the society and this change can be brought only through education. Somewhere it challenges the narrow mindedness of the upper caste people. Dalit writing embraces the complexity of the sociology of variety of cultures, even sub-cultural and regional variants dealing with the legacy of Pain, sufferings, Humiliation, resistance reconsidered for the reader's experience. Dalit writing is not for pleasure it is a testimony of survival of marginal which claims that Subaltern can also speak.

*Joothan* ignites the fire of deeper scars upon the body and the soul as well and pain inside the writer. These scars never let forget them that they have born as a marginal, suppressed and dalit in terms of Caste-based hierarchy. Anguish and agony of the Caste as Valmiki indicates, somewhere becomes able to 'heal' the wounds, as they form both the psychological and physical negatives enforced upon in the name of Caste to be shared forever.

The title itself encapsulates the pain, poverty, humiliation and discrimination of Valmiki's community, which not only had to rely on *Joothan* but also relished it. Valmiki gives a detailed description of collecting, preserving and eating joothan which is so heart touching, painful and reflects the rigid and inhuman nature of upper caste society at the same time. The writer also introduced us to the term 'joothan' at this point of time. The 'joothan' or the left over remnant food from weddings and other feasts were relished by the chuhra community members. They used to eat that and also saved some amount of it to feed themselves during hard times. The writer says:

"What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan" (10).

Caste, injustice and discriminations faced by the Dalit community continue to distort the realistic impression of Caste in post-independence literary scenario. As Valmiki himself claims "The scars that I have received in the name of caste--even eons won't suffice to heal them" (61). On the whole it can be concluded that that literature evoked the marginal to get up and fight for their rights. In this respect education is the way to revive their miserable condition in the society.

Dalit autobiographies give a record of the people who are socially neglected, physically and mentally tortured. They have given a new life to Dalit community, which were at the margins in the traditional Indian society and facing discrimination, humiliation and isolation since a number of decades. This literature has blossomed to provide expression and meaning to the

life of the people of the Dalit community. The literature started questioning the atrocities, trauma, discrimination and injustice inflicted upon a whole community through the portrayal of Dalit individuals. These autobiographies have realistic depictions of the life of torment, agony, pain and anguish experienced by the marginalised and socially, psychologically, and economically suppressed people. *Joothan* also works in the same manner it interrogates the upper caste people and evokes the Dalit community to fight for their rights through an individual's life.

## References

- Valmiki, Om prakash. '*Joothan. A Dalit's Life*'. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukerjee, New York: Columbia University Press. 2003. Print.
- Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. Methuen and Co.: London. 1987. Print.
- Beth, Sarah. '*Dalit Autobiographies in Hindi: the transformation of pain into resistance*' Swedish South Asian Studies Network. 2007. Print.
- Kargi, Veerpa. "*Dalit Literature in Karnataka: Depiction of Dalit in the Autobiography of Aravind Malagatti.*" *Dalit Literature: Our Response*. Ed. N. Shanthi Naik. New Delhi: Sarup Book, 2012. Print.