

Voice of the Voiceless: Valmiki's *Jhoothan*

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Abstract: The history of *Dalit* literature traces back to centuries but *Dalit* literary expressions were never got the due attention due to its hegemonic nature in the field of literary expressions. *Dalit* literature got its identity in the mid of century. It acquired a distinct identity through its heterogeneous and pluri-vocal character which challenged dominant literary canons. *Dalit* literature is uniquely Indian as it is a by product of an evil caste system that existed even-after Post-Independence era. *Dalit* literature emerged on the literary horizon as an outburst against caste-ism. Om Prakash Valmiki uses his voice in his novel *Jhoothan* to expose the atrocities faced by the *dalits*. Through the present novel he represents the anger that boils within them, as a reaction to the continuous suffering and prejudices faced by *dalit* community.

Keywords: Dalit, Jhoothan, Varna, chuhra

Dalit literature was recognized in the mid of twentieth century in Post-Independent India when Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar tried to protect their basic human rights by making certain provisions for them in Indian constitution. Gandhiji tried to merge them in the mainstream of India by the abolition of 'Untouchability'. Although the constitution of India has abolished the caste system but it is still prevalent in many societies. The term 'Dalit Literature' has been coined by two words i.e. *Dalit* and *Literature*. The word *Dalit* has its origin from the Sanskrit root '*dal*' which means to crack open, split, crush, grind or processing of food grains. However the term was used in 1972 when a group of young Marathi writers founded an organization called '*Dalit Panthers*'. The term was widely accepted by 'Untouchable Communities' all over India. The term expresses them as an oppressed community and represent their status in a better way rather than the demeaning and derogatory terms like *Chuhra Achut*, *Panchamas*, *Atishudras*, *Avarnas*, *Asparshyas*, *Pariahs* and government-assigned status like *Scheduled castes* or the name given by Gandhiji i.e. *Harijan*. Few terms are used by others as jibes or pejoratives. To quote the words of A.C.Lal which he expressed in 'Dalit Solidarity Conference' in 1992:

The word '*Dalit*' is a beautiful word, because it transcends narrow national and sectarian frontiers. It is a beautiful word because it embraces the sufferings, frustrations, expectations and groaning of the entire cosmos. (Lal 1995:xiii)

Further Arjun Dangle, a writer and leader of the *Dalit Panther* movement, explained the term '*Dalit*' thus:

Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of

society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary. (Dangle 1992;264-65)

By identifying himself as '*Dalit Writer*' Omprakash Valmiki tries to represent the atrocities in his writing that he has received due to his birth in a *Chuhra* family. Through his historical writing *Jhoothan* he presented the age-old oppression of *Dalits* by upper-caste and denial of basic human rights by the age-old established social order of '*Varna*' system. *Jhoothan* is a true and realistic story of a boy who suffers mentally, physically and at the helm of emotional breakdown several times due to his lineage in a *chuhra* family. It is a story of a little boy who undergoes incessant humiliation at various social fronts only due to his birth in a lower caste family. He is deprived of basic human rights for survival. He is deprived of basic amenities of life like safe drinking water, two square meals for survival despite being honest and hard-working. Several times his parents get *jhoothan* from *Tyagis* and *Tagas*' families as a compensation for their labor. His family members (including female members) were treated like permanent servants for the *Tagas*,

To compensate us for all this work, we got five seers of grain per two animals...a leftover *roti* at noon every day, specially made by mixing the flour with husk since it was for *Chuhras* sometimes the *jhoothan*, the scraps, would also be put in the basket with the *rotis* for us. (p.9)

During a wedding season when the guests and *baratis* were eating their meals the *Chuhras* would sit outside with huge baskets. After *baratis* had eaten the dirty *pattals* (leaf plates) were put in *chuhras* baskets which they took home to save the *jhoothan* sticking in the plates. The pieces of *pooris* that were collected from the *pattals* were dried in the sun. A cloth would be spread on a *charpai* to dry them. Often I would be placed on guard duty because the drying *pooris* attracted crows, hens and dogs. The novel is a vivid account of oppression and servitude where the members of lower caste gets merciless beating and inhuman subjugation as a compensation /wages for their hard labor as '*chuhras* were not seen as human.' (p.2) During the harvesting season members of *Dalit* community have to work hard in the fields under scorching sun and clothes were for name sake on their bodies. After this hard toil most of the time they do not get their due compensation. They get abuses, reproaches, beating and fistful grains that was not sufficient to suffice their appetite. As a child Omprakash was interested in getting education but what he receives were deep-delved scars given by his alma-mater. To quote his words,

The ideal image of the teachers that I saw in my childhood remained indelibly imprinted on my memory. Whenever someone starts talking about a great guru, teachers used to swear about mothers and sisters (p.4)

One of the incident that is worth mentioning here exposes the stark realities of the writer's life. His name was asked by the teacher and the moment he revealed his identity the immediate reaction was:

Chuhre ka ?...

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 a mirror. It is, after all your family occupation. Go...get to it. (p.4)

The novel reveals the deep-delved pre-conceived notions that the members of 'backward class' are meant for the traditional sweeping only. They think that '*a crow can not become a swan*'(p.6) *Chuhra*'s progeny is meant for sweeping. The novel is a good account of class –struggle between upper caste and lower caste. The society reveals that it will maintain its story of subjugation by oppression, unfair practices and deprivation. Following incident is an apt example:

The epic is still inscribed on my back. Reminding me of those hated days of hunger and hopelessness, this epic composed out of a feudalistic mentality is inscribed not just on my back but on each nerve of my brain. (p.25)

The novel is a valid account of Post-colonial Indian middle class society i.e. poor; full of class conscious people; full of illiterate people who were deprived of equal opportunities for education and social improvement. There are descriptions of calling a *bhagat* for rituals whenever someone becomes sick instead of consulting a doctor or a registered medical professional.

The Whole *Basti* had strange ideas about ghosts and spirits. If anybody fell sick just a bit, a *bhagat* would be called instead of a doctor. (p.26)

Omprakash was a sensitive child. Like other human beings he can not perform animal slaughter. But as described in the novel he has to perform this due to his caste, i.e. *chuhra*. The task like sacrifice of piglet is a horrific act which he has to perform. He recollected this horrifying experience thus,

These moments were no less than a horrifying blast for me. I have never done this work, though I had seen *Pitaji* doing it. Even otherwise, I found these tasks very repulsive. My hands were shaking. (p.45)

Besides all these horrific tasks 'Skinning' of dead animals is another repulsive act. He has to carry the skin of a dead animal on his head to sell it in the market. The pain and agony can be best understood by one who has also undergone such a deep pain. One of the distinctive aspects of *Jhoothan* is its interrogative discourse that creates its place in subaltern literature. The text is full of interrogative discourse that demands an answer, "Why didn't an epic poet ever write a word on our lives? | Why is it a crime to ask for the price of one's labour? | Why are the Hindus so cruel and heartless against *Dalits*?" All such questions that make one speechless remind us the fiery speech of Dr. Ambedkar:

I asked them (our Hindu friends), 'you take the milk from the cows and buffaloes and when they are dead you expect us to remove the dead bodies. Why/If you carry the dead bodies of your mothers to cremate, why do you not carry the dead bodies of your 'mother cows' yourself. (Ambedkar 1996;143)

Jhoothan is full of similar conundrums. They jolt the reader out of the

contrived reality of the high- caste 'value system' that denies the claims of the *Dalit* speaking subject; a subject who has come to voice after centuries of enforced *namelessness* and *voicelessness*. By bearing witness to these routine atrocities and passing judgment on them, Valmiki brings them into a new discourse of human rights and justice. *Jhoothan* stands a 'voice' to the voiceless. Despite the descriptions of poverty, squalor and oppression the novel is full of optimistic note. Through the protagonist's struggle one exemplifies that education can only improve your caste and the living standards of life. In the end he proves that through education he has broken the caste-ridden shackles of society. The novel not only holds a mirror to the society but through several incidents it also projects how the current state of the society can be improved. We find an account of marriage of a widow-woman in the novel. Through the lips of Valmiki's father we come to know the ultimate solution to all the problems related to caste-ridden society, "When I told the whole story to *Pitaji* after I got home, he had been infuriated...He constantly said that I should improve my 'caste' by getting an education." (p.58)

This new literary genre invites new vocabulary to understand its theme in the right context. The Hindi word '*joothan*' literally means food left on eater's plate, usually destined for the garbage pail in a middle class, urban home. However such food would only be characterized as '*jhoothan*' if someone else besides the original eater were to eat it. English equivalents terms such as 'leftovers' or 'leavings' can not substitute for '*jhoothan*'. The word 'leftovers' has no negative connotation and it simply conveys 'food remaining in the pot that can be eaten at the next meal'; the word 'leavings' is no longer in active vocabulary of Indian English. 'Scraps' or 'slaps' are somewhat approximate to *Jhoothan*, but they are associated more with pigs than with humans. The term actually carries a lot of historic baggage. Both Ambedkar and Gandhi advised untouchables to stop accepting *jhooth*.. The title encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of *Valmiki*- community, which not only had to rely on *jhoothan* but also relished it. *Valmiki* gives a detailed description of collecting, preserving and eating *jhoothan*. He cherishes the memories of being assigned to guard the drying *joothan* from crows and chickens, and of his relishing the dried and reprocessed *joothan* burn him with renewed pain and humiliation in the present. From the point of view of 'Artistic Beauty' the present novel is marked for autobiographical notes. It is full of subjective notes. Throughout the novel we find an account of oppression and subjugation of Omprakash's life. The subjective pronoun 'I' has been used throughout the novel. But the vivid description of various inhuman practices like 'merciless beating' of so called low-caste people, detailed descriptions of animal sacrifice, skinning of dead animals all create a pictorial impact on the reader. Through the selective words the writer is quite successful in creating the word-picture. It also refutes the charge that *dalit* literature is lacking in imagination. Valmiki's insistence that all persons and events in *Jhoothan* are true poses a considerable challenge to post-modernist critics who propose that autobiography's truth is

constructed. But Omprakash Valmiki refuted this charge by naming people and places by their exact names. *Jhoothan* invites an apt comparison with Meena Kandasamy's '*Touch*' a poetry collection. She dedicates the part of *Touch* to address *Dalit* issues. She depicts both the subjugation by caste and gender, a double bondage that the *Dalit* woman are forced to face. On reading Meena Kandasamy's poetry, the anger that flashes in her words is very evident. She dedicates second part of poetic collection tells us a new tale of woe and worry of *dalit* woman. One of her poem *Liquid Tragedy: Karanchedu* 1985 is a hieroglyphic poem shaped like a pot.

Buffalo Baths. Urine. Bullshit
 Drinking Water for the Dalits
 The very same Pond.
 Practice for eons.
 A bold Dalit lady,
 dares to question injustice.
 Hits forth with her pot. Her indignation
 is avenged. Fury let loose. Violence. Rapes.
 Killings. Self-seeking politicians shamelessly
 consult History - "If there was a way out then,
 there shall be a way out now." Succor arrives with
 Esteemed Father of our Nation. His Samaadhi speaks:
 If Harijans don't get water in this village, let them
 set on a sojourn elsewhere. The rotten example
 is obeyed. Casting behind cruel memories
 Dalits exit - weary of the persecution
 And wander all over the nation.
 Again, a Dalit Exodus.
 Total Surrender.

The shape of the poem is symbolic of the pot that held the drinking water for the *dalits*, which the woman used to hit. This poem is like the same pot that hits forth at the world for its discrimination. Like Omprakash valmiki she has used poetry to bring to light many such atrocities against *dalits*. As the technique of writing is concerned Valmiki presents the traumatic moments of encounter with his persecutors as dramatized scenes as cinematic moments. The incident is narrated in the present tense, capturing the intensity of his bitter experiences in the past and suggesting that the imprints of all such incidents have not healed yet. Through words we find the entire enactment live before our eyes where we find the child protagonist struggling against the established order of the upper caste in the society. The vividness of the details suggests that how strongly these past events are imprinted in the writer's mind. Valmiki's encounters with his various school teachers show how *Dalit* children are abused verbally, physically and publicly, without anyone coming forward to their rescue. *Dalit* literature is uniquely Indian as it is a byproduct of an evil caste-system that existed for many years in this country. Although the constitution of India has abolished the caste-system it still lingers in many walk of life with its grasp as firm as even on

the minds of its people. It can be compared with outbreak of anger, age-old sufferings and atrocities faced by the *Dalits*. It reminds us atrocities done on Blacks in America and apartheid in Africa. The text can be considered as manifesto for revolutionary transformation of the society. It appeals human consciousness and it can be considered as a whistle blower for the universal project of human liberation.

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