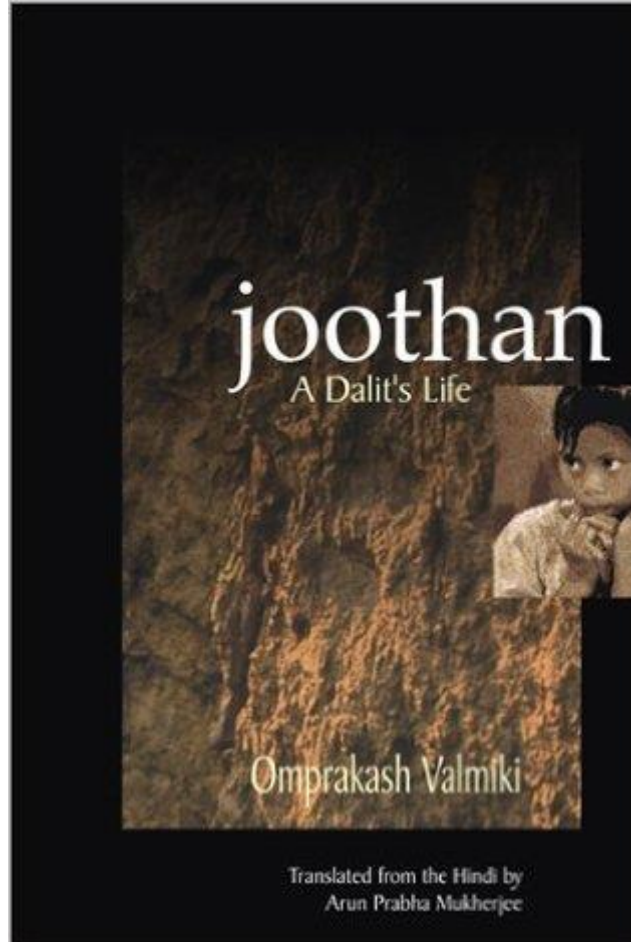


**From Silence to Shriek:
Dalit Writer Valmiki's Work *Joothan***

Shweta Chaudhary, M.A. English, NET



Abstract

In this paper, the argument hovers around the presentation of poignant tales of people who suffer because of their birth in the lower caste communities meant for the service of and for receiving the abuses of the upper caste. Valmiki, a noted Dalit writer, hails Dalit literature as the portrayal of the wishes & aspiration of oppressed and tormented Dalits (Chakraborty 182).

This paper focuses on the development of silence into shrieks with special reference to Valmiki's work *Joothan*, an autobiographical narrative that sketches out the suffering and inhumane treatment meted out to Dalits and all such downtrodden.

Keywords: lower caste, the downtrodden, denigration of Dalits, silent suffering.

Trauma of the Downtrodden

The entire trauma of these downtrodden people, whose erstwhile deafening silence culminated into deafening shrieks, stems from their birth in the lower caste whose profession was to clean and sweep animal dung and human filth or to do jobs involving menial, unpleasant tasks (taking off the skins of dead animals and so on). In practical terms, untouchability is based on this profession.¹

The utmost necessity and urgency to pay attention to the pain and endless tears of these downtrodden people motivated reformists and even victims to register their presence and project their pain.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy established '*Prathana Samaj*' under an Oath of slogan '*Service to the poor (dalits) is service to God*'.(225)

Arya Samaj also thundered against untouchability. Vivekananda also recommended need for 'teaching the untouchable.'

All reformists hold untouchability, sponsored by misinterpretation of religious texts or scriptures, responsible for the plight of these downtrodden.

Victims of untouchability have shed off their and silence, and cry out in deafening shrieks. The literary expression of this shriek is Dalit literature, which offers a detailed

development of silence into shriek, embedded into the sociological, religious, cultural and economic inequity.

The Dalit writers have a humanistic approach as their writings together serve as an institution to register protest and resistance against discrimination.

Role of Autobiography

To spew out pent-up anger & venom, the best genre is autobiography. That's why autobiographical expression forms the major portion of this saga of downtrodden. The quantum and intensity of sufferings narrated are based on experience and suffering.

When we consider textual representation of this pent-up anger and vengeance, Valmiki's *Joothan* is replete with full consciousness of struggle and how that consciousness summarily rejects the hegemony of upper caste. Here the emphasis is on the ordinariness and anonymity;² hardships of lives suffered with resilience. The basic and inherent idea is identity and dignity of entire community as humans.

Dalit Writer Valmiki's Experience: A Memoir

Dalit writer Valmiki declares that the experiences he quotes in his work 'Joothan' find rare place in general literature.

Joothan is a work presented as a memoir of Valmiki's own up-bringing with the label of 'untouchable'. Registered as a chronology of vignettes, it narrates woeful tale of author's 'experienced pain', his silence in suffering developing into shriek in his expression. He paints a realistic and horrific presentation of a faithful chronicle of exploitation and oppression hurled on him abusively and his stoic endurance in particular as a person and, in general, as a member of a stigmatized community being born into *Churha* (sweeper) community whose job is to clean dirt, dung and disposal of dead

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animal and even filth of upper caste. Most painful was to be addressed abusively as “‘O *Chuhre*’ or ‘*Abey Chuhre*’.”(Chakraborty177)³ What can be more shameful and disgraceful that anybody from upper caste if touched by stray dog is not contaminated but the very shadow of ‘*Chuhra*’ instantly contaminates him. Valmiki, the author of *Joothan*, remembers how they received meager wages, not enough to make both ends meet decently and instead got sworn at and abused.

Unforgettable Painful Events

Valmiki recalls an incident when people of his community refused to do unpaid cleanup work and they were arrested disgracefully with handcuffs on, dragged inhumanly to the panchayat office, made to squat in a rooster position and mercilessly thrashed till they fell down listlessly on ground.

Valmiki here flings a question to his sensitive readers:

... keep singing the glories of democracy, use the government machinery to quell the blood flowing in our veins (*Joothan* 39).

No Time for Studying

Valmiki also narrates an incident when right before his mathematics examination, he was forced to work on field of Fauz Singh Tyagi. He, in a microscopic way, probes his own heart, and reflects on the psyche of adolescent caste victim:

... A fire had engulfed my innards that day. The memories of these crimes of the Tyagis continue to smoulder deep inside me, emitting red hot heat (*Jootnan*.57)

In his sincere bid to make us empathize with him, he yells out, unfurling the terrible side of long term, unseen, unfelt silence which dented an indelible impression, rather a scar, on minds of young people who had to shriek with full throat to register and

make feel anger, resentment and agonizing pain. He scoops out his expression which may send chill down the spine:

My mind was filled with deep revulsion. I was then an adolescent & a scratch appeared in my mind like a line scratched on glass. It remains there still (*Joothan*.39).

Teacher's Deliberate Act of Humiliating Dalit Students

This permanent inscription disturbed his peace with unforgettable painful memories, rendering him disturbed throughout life. With a severely, astringent tone, Valmiki takes offence against his teacher who never allowed him to sit, eat and drink with upper caste, pronouncing social ostracism on him at a tender age and that too in an institution supposed to be so pious, sacred and free from such deprave ideas. The teacher who was trusted by pupil to uphold the human dignity allows this sacrilege of education and so classes himself with his tyrants.

Bitterness against the Entire System

Squatting on floor, having separate utensils and other practices of such kinds - a shameless alienation and degradation fills the author with utmost bitterness against the entire system. He hails such society as

... cruel and barbaric civilization. (45)

He questions his community people about what's their fate? nothing but – to feed on Joothan (left over of others) to work unpaid, to be thrashed at slight reluctance, to be addressed abusively, inviting public shame.

From Silence to Shriek – Background of *Joothan*

The writer Valmiki of *Joothan* argues that nobody can observe or maintain silence under such duress. He questions further – who will not shriek when infernal agony engulfs him and patience loses all bounds?

This discrimination forces the writer to write *Joothan*, the very title encapsulates the pain, humiliation, poverty and dog-like status in human form.

Valmiki community and others of like profession worked as scavengers - to clean dung, dirt, leftovers-all fell to their share & credit. Unfortunately, they owned no land, no property or belongings, so for every need and necessity, they had to look up to privileged class who enjoyed the concept of giving them secondary and hand-me down items as gift with obligatory gesture.

Gradually, this secondary and slavish treatment broke off bounds of tolerance. Intolerance grew stronger because identity and destiny of an individual were caste-based. Questioning social order, the writer yells, “why my caste is my only identity?” (134)

Here, Valmiki’s struggle, with graphic description, is symptomatic of the extent to which challenges are involved in the process of reclaiming dignity for his community. His effort is to highlight a univocal account of caste prejudice harboured by upper caste. He also points to internalized prejudice of depressed class against the caste they consider a notch below themselves.⁴

Factual Representations

So, these Dalit autobiographical presentations in general offer factual experiences of terrible grief and oppression, the authentic experience of anguish, pain, deprivation & exclusion. They are unstructured & artless, outpouring of unmediated experience and serve as an attempt to resist against harsh reality.

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In light of all the incidents, condition and compulsion highlighted in entire Dalit literature, it can be said that this piece of art advocates human rights, social acceptance of humans as humans irrespective of caste, gives full throat expression to anger, irritation and revolution against oppression – silently suffered for ages. In effect, it is a quest for identity, a tedious and tormenting struggle for identity, not for an individual only but for entire community also.

Notes:

From Valmiki's *Dalit Sahitya ka Soundryashastra*, Translation is taken from the introduction to *Jhoothan* by Arun Prabha Mukherjee.

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Shweta Chaudhary, M.A. (Eng.), NET
367/18 Civil Lines Near Rajiv Chowk
Gurgaon 122001
Haryana
India
shweeta13@gmail.com