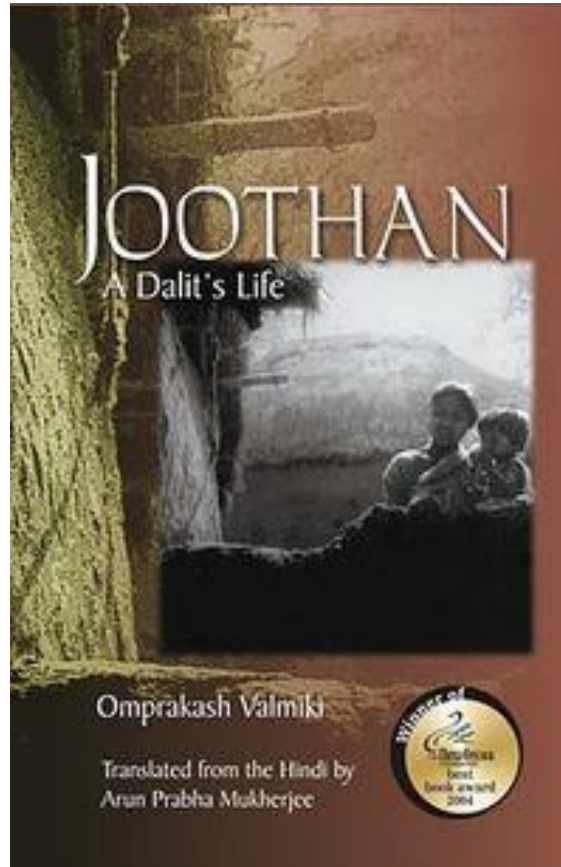


**Angst of the Tyrannized:  
A Reading of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan***

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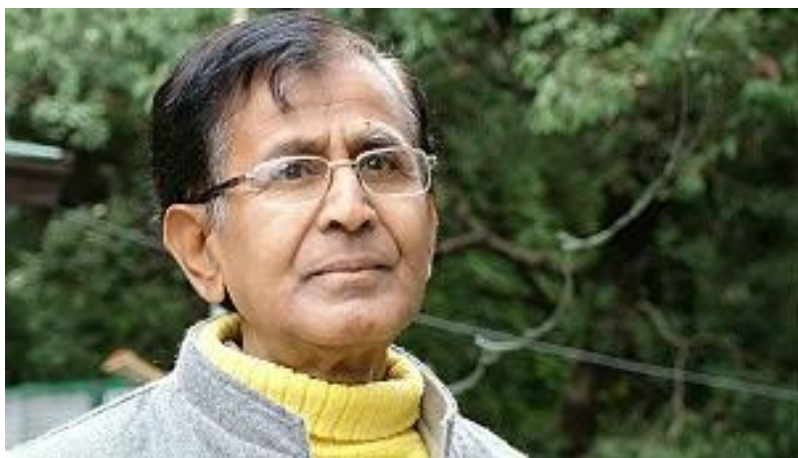
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**Subaltern Literature**

A remarkable feature of Post-colonial Literary Writing is the emergence of the voice of the subalterns who have been marginalized for ages. Due to the hegemony of the elite the downtrodden who remain in the periphery of the social structure could not find due representation either in history or literature. In the post-colonial period there is a rapid rise of the subaltern as they move towards the centre. Gita Vishwanath rightly observes that “studying the post-colonial

identity of individuals who constitute such marginal groups is part of the enterprise of post-colonial studies.” (175) Interestingly, writers from the oppressed social groups bring forth wonderful literary texts which are invariably related to the experiences of subaltern life. The writings of black writers, the natives of Canada and the tribal and Dalit writers of India can be cited as examples.



Omprakash Valmiki (1950-2013)

Courtesy: <http://sfijnuunit.blogspot.com/2013/11/omprakash-valmiki-departs-task-of.html>

### **Dalit Literature**

In the Indian context, Dalit literature has established itself as a distinct genre. In the second part of twentieth century, several Dalit writers from different linguistic backgrounds have brought out poems, novels and autobiographical writings which portray the miseries and misfortunes of Dalits. Commenting on the crux of Dalit literature, G. Dominic Savio claims that “That Dalits who are doubly marginalized on account of caste and colonization try to recognize their voice through literature of their own is truly post-colonial”. (13)

Further Valmiki succinctly observes the major concerns of Dalit writing as follows: “Dalit literature is the portrayal of the wishes and aspirations of these oppressed and tormented Dalits” (97). Among subaltern authors, the genre autobiography is the most common one despite the taunting barb of the mainstream critics who claim that autobiography is not a literary genre. It is interesting to note that authors such as Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison have made maximum use of the autobiographical form of narratives as it provides ample possibilities for outpouring the inner conflicts and dilemma. In Indian Literature also, subaltern writers such as

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 17:11 November 2017

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Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Namdeo Nimgade, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Balbir Madhopuri and Aravind Malagati have written autobiographies which deal with a variety of aspects of Dalit life and the exigent need of Dalit empowerment. Valmiki requests “Dalit writers to write more autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive but also our true portrayals of wrong doers. Dalit autobiographies will provide inspiration to our future generations” (Valmiki: 20).

### **Valmiki’s *Joothan***

Among the Dalit autobiographies Valmiki’s *Joothan* stands out due to its candid presentation of Dalit life. Omprakash Valmiki is an outstanding Dalit writer whose *Joothan* has been read and discussed among the *literati*. This work is a bold attempt to display the subjugation and discrimination of Dalits in the Indian society. The text has served as a powerful vehicle to parade the most excruciating experiences of Dalit life including their abject poverty, wageless labour, sexual exploitation, denial of basic rights and heartless discrimination. The present paper attempts to study and evaluate Valmiki’s depiction of the horrifying aspects of Dalit life.

### **The Narration**

Valmiki wrote *Joothan* in Hindi and later it was translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukerjee. *Joothan* is a painful recollection of miseries and misfortunes of the people of Valmiki’s community. The narration describes how the downtrodden people are oppressed by the so-called upper class, how women are sexually abused, and how through exploitation of labour, denial of basic rights, socially ostracization, Dalits are put into penury. The narration also justifies the Dalits genuine demand for equal rights and the genuineness of their struggle for emancipation.

### **Concerted Effort to Deny Knowledge to Dalits**

As the upper class people are well aware of the mighty impact of knowledge in social development, by all possible means they try to forbid education to the subaltern. In *Joothan*, there are several references to the upper class people’s concerted effort to deny knowledge to Dalits and to discourage them from pursuing studies. Valmiki has undergone all kinds of

tortures, abuses and discrimination in all educational institutions. Likewise, Valmiki's friends as well have undergone similar experiences of torture and pain. In order to keep the Dalit students away from classes, the teachers assigned them menial jobs or physically assaulted them. In order to keep Valmiki out of classroom he was asked to sweep the school premises. He recollects the painful experiences as follows: "I was not even allowed to get a drink of water. I sweep the whole day" (5). As an example of brutal assault on the Dalit students by the upper class teachers, Valmiki makes a reference to the physical education teacher, Phool Singh Tyagi who pounced on one of his classmates. The teacher reminds one of a cold blooded villain.

### **Humiliating Experience**

Valmiki meticulously portrays the most humiliating experiences of the members of his community by the upperclass people at the social milieu. Whether one was old or young, if one is a Dalit, he/she was an object of ridicule and discrimination. Valmiki painfully expresses, "They did not call by our names. If a person were older, then he would be called 'OeChuhre'. If the person were younger or of the same age, then 'AbeyChuhre' was used" (2). In utter dismay Valmiki questions why the upperclass people who love and care even animals, extract the hard labour of the Dalits and consider them as outcasts.

### **Suffering**

Down in memory lane, Valmiki brings forth vignettes of poverty, hunger and starvation which make a reader cry. The continuous downpour of rain put the people of his community in trouble for several days. Valmiki's father went to a landlord seeking some grain for loan. The wicked landlord agreed to grant some grain provided he should indenture one of his sons. To cap it all, when Valmiki's mother brought some rice and started boiling it, the pleasant smell of rice charmed the children of the neighbourhood who "were looking at Maschulla with expectant eyes" (29).

### **Rituals and Beliefs Reinforce Subjugation**

After remarking the bitter experiences of his community, Valmiki brings out certain rituals or boorish beliefs that lead to the subjugation of the Dalits. One such obnoxious age-old

custom is “going for salaam”. As per the tradition, on the wedding day the bride and bridegroom of low class society should go to the houses of upperclass people who may give some gift to them. This system is a constant reminder of class structure and it “creates an inferiority complex in them on the very first day of their marriage” (33). Likewise, the downtrodden people had to satisfy themselves with the leftover food thrown out by the upper class. The Dalit women would collect the scraps of food to feed themselves. “Sometimes, the joothan, the scraps, would also be put in the basket with the rotis for us” (9). On a wedding feast in the house of a landlord, Valmiki’s mother and sister waited outside hoping that they would get some delicacies left by the guests. When one of the landlords came out, Valmiki’s mother implored for some scraps. The angry landlord reminded her of her caste and asked her to be contented with what she got. “Don’t forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going” (11).

### **Voice of Protest**

Along with the painful experiences, Valmiki has effectively exposed the voice of protest raised by the downtrodden despite the threats of the upperclass. When the landlord refused to give the leftover food at the wedding party and abused her, Valmiki’s mother emerged like Goddess Durga and said, “Feed it to the . . . without being afraid” (11). The attitude of Valmiki’s mother is a signal of the gradual empowerment of the Dalits and their protest against the oppressors. On another occasion, a teacher was explaining the poverty of Dhronacharya with emotion. He was mentioning that Dhronacharya fed Ashwatthama with flour dissolved in water instead of milk. At once Valmiki got up and asked a pertinent question “So Ashwatthama was given flour mixed in water instead of milk, but what about us who had to drink mar? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word on our lives?” (23). The wise question of Valmiki irked the teacher who shouted back. “Darkest Kaliyugas descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back”(23). Similarly when the Government officials try to force the Dalits to clean the Government guest house without wages, they refused. The landlords cunningly induced the officials to punish the poor labourers. Consequently the policemen severely attacked the villages.

## **Challenge to the Educated Dalits**

All these incidents reveal the ultimate fact that, though the voices of the Dalits are hushed by the landlords, they have enormous potentialities and ability to fight back. Valmiki, in his autobiographical narration, gives a challenge to the educated Dalits, and he himself set a model. He started an evening school in his domestic hut and taught the Dalit children to read and write. If every Dalit takes a constructive step like this, of course there will be desirable changes in the lives of the Dalits.

## **Caste Discrimination**

Valmiki avers that throughout his life he has witnessed caste discrimination. He expresses the fact that a person is assessed and respected in India not based on his worth but by his caste. There are instances in the text in which houses are not rented to the Dalits. We also read severing of relationship and refusal of opportunities to the author due to the caste identity. Once Valmiki was invited to deliver a lecture on Buddhist Literature and Philosophy at a conference. When Valmiki was about to start his speech, a member of the audience shouted “How can a ‘Valmiki’ be allowed to speak on Buddhist Literature and Philosophy? Aren’t you ashamed?” (131). Though he was abused openly, Valmiki delivered his talk effectively. The person who shouted only reflected the attitude of the main stream society towards Dalits, he felt.

## **A Valid Question**

Towards the close of the narration Valmiki raises a very valid question that what sort of development India will witness if one part of the society is subjugated and discriminated. He implores the fellow Hindus why do they discriminate Dalits whereas they worship trees and plants. “The Hindus who worship trees and plants, beasts and birds, why are they so intolerant of Dalits?” (134). Valmiki is vexed with the highhanded nature of the so-called upper class people who are keen to retain the age-old caste system and exploit the oppressed. In utter dismay, he concludes his narration with the most poignant and powerful statement “Because in their eyes, I am only an SC, the one who stands outside the door” (134).

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