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## JOOOTHAN: PRESENTATION OF A DALIT'S SELF AND FORMATION OF A COUNTER NARRATIVE

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### **Abstract:**

One of the major problems the post-independent India encountered is the issue of Dalit people and untouchability; till today it is a highly relevant topic to talk about. "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful" (Valmiki, 2003). Dalit people have lived in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhumane. Though untouchability was legally abolished in India, it was carried out for a long time by the upper caste people. It is evident in the writings of Dalit writers like Omprakash Valmiki, Sharankumar Limbale and Arjun Dangle that they have been kept in silence and treated as slaves who are supposed to serve the upper caste people forever. In response to the barbarism of the upper caste men and women, Dalit people raised their united voice and tried to subvert the notion of untouchability. 'Can the subaltern speak?' (Cain, Finke, Johnson, McGowan, & Williams, 2001) is critically received in the self-history (autobiography) writings of the Dalit writers who questioned the mainstream culture and its narratives. It is to be understood that their autobiographies are not the representations of one single person but of the whole community. In this paper I would primarily deal with Omprakash Valmiki's 'Joothan' to point out some findings as follows : (a) Transformation of a Dalit from an object of negligence to a dignitary. (b) Introduction of the myth and epic to question their biasness. (c) The use of autobiography mode to narrate a Dalit's life and its authenticity. (d) Hegel's theory of master-slave dialect.

**Keywords:** Dalit Autobiography, Marginalisation, Transformation, Emancipation, Community-Narrative.

"Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of 'untouchability' shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law." (Article 17, 1949)

The practice of 'Untouchability' in any form is outlawed in India since the Constitution in its action. But even today it can be found in many parts of the country. The inhumane and unjustified action from a dominant group over another group is also known as marginalisation of the latter group. With the changing scenario, voices from these marginal groups are coming out as 'resistant mechanism' against the long time oppression.

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It is like the 'Empire Writes Back', making of a new history which is solely based on the responses of the oppressed people. Here, Dalit writers are compared to the post colonial writers as they have penned their 'community history' in the forms of fiction and non-fiction. The transformation from the voiceless observer of the injustices to an active voice against the exploitation is the outline of the writings of the Dalits. It is also believed that the writing itself suggests the metamorphosis of the writer who is no longer a passive recipient of the dominant ideologies. Instead they engage in the framing of a new arena to break the established norms. Sometimes, they are found to involve in the hand to hand clash that secure their lost dignity. To refer the moment when a Dalit refutes to follow the instruction of a non-Dalit is the moment of emancipation; it is also no exception that the refusal could result into physical as well as mental torture. But these are the instances that help them to emancipate from the red eyes of the dominant group.

Some of the Dalit writers understood that the 'biased myths' are responsible for their present status in the society. Therefore they presented the re-reading of the myths and challenged the errors and flaws that are supposed to be withdrawn or replaced with. The incident of Eklavya which is unjustified and meaningless but it is believed as a norm which validates the 'exploitative mechanism'. Throughout the paper I shall try to bring forth all such crucial points.

### **Re-writing History**

In 'Joothan: A Dalit's Life', Valmiki presents his life as well as of his 'Chuhra' community from the early childhood to adulthood. He said that how he was treated in school and in his village; there he was nothing but a 'Chuhra' for the upper caste people. At the end we, therefore, witness the gained subjectivity of Valmiki when he finished his academic life and entered into a professional life. He even lamented over this issue and ended his narrative with a remarkable enquiry, "Why is my caste my only identity?" (Valmiki, 2003)

That is why he thought it important to write down his painful life story and make it available for a large audience. With the images of injustices audience would be closer to the experiences and traumas of a Dalit who is no longer a single one but a representative of his or her community.

Most importantly, the word history has a lot of things to say in this context; history which is prepared by the upper caste people and the history which is presented by the lower class or Dalit community and both are contradictory to each other. The former preparation of history is intended to dominate a group of people; therefore, it is oppressive and biased in its nature. On the other hand the history which is supposed to interrogate and to debunk the hegemonic approach of the former preparation of history is laid down by the oppressed group. Omprakash Valmiki in his preface exposed,

"We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman and compassionless toward Dalits." (Valmiki, 2003)

This kind of environment is not suitable for a healthy upbringing for a child. Later on Valmiki devaluates the entire system of Caste-ism and introduces a new social order. In this regard, Valmiki's interest behind writing an autobiography is to overcome these troubles by publicizing his community life. Moreover, writing as a tool gives him a resistant mechanism against the exploitative mechanism of the upper caste Hindu men and women.

### **Autobiography as an Authentic Mode of Narrative**

Autobiography and authenticity is a very debatable issue due to its validity or originality about the writer and content itself. The long historical journey of this genre brings forth the question of its authenticity. So, authors primarily opt to talk about the real places, events and names. In case of oppressed voices who actually want to display their painful lives, it is not a self fashioning and the question of authenticity is ridiculous. Kancha Ilaiah once says that narrative of

“Personal experience brings out reality in a striking way ... Ambedkar and Periyar spoke and wrote on the day to day experiences of the Dalitbahujan castes. I would argue that this is the only possible and indeed the most authentic way in which the deconstruction and reconstruction of history can take place.”(Ilaiah, 1996)

This statement clearly highlights the authenticity of the autobiography which is also very useful genre to deconstruct and reconstruct the history. Valmiki in his narrative gives us the A to Z details of his village and its surroundings. This realistic mode of narrative is very significant to lead the readers to the events which remain unnoticed for a long time. The visual effect would leave a strong impact upon the readers and it would make crystal clear that how Dalits were treated as the cattle. That is why Valmiki in his Preface adds,

“Why should one feel awkward in telling the truth? To those who say that these things do not happen here, to those who want to claim a superior status for Indian civilization, I say that only those who have suffered this anguish know its sting. (Valmiki, 2003)

Myth an exploitative mechanism

“Why didn't an epic poet ever write a word about our lives?” (Valmiki, 2003)

Omprakash had a strong temerity from early childhood which enabled him to question Master Sahib on such issue. When the other students were crying for Dronacharya's poverty, he highlighted their own painful life that they live on 'Joothan' or leftover. This is the counter narrative established by Omprakash himself. In reply Master Sahib said, “Darker Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back” (Valmiki, 2003)

Here the word 'Kaliyug' is important that marks the godlessness, strife and chaos and ends with the destruction of the world. First, why is it godless? Or the chair of the god is replaced by a handful Bramhins or upper caste Hindus who consider themselves as the inheritor of that chair. They also chalk out 'savarna' to divide everyone as if nobody could

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eliminate the system. So, the simple question from a Dalit student made a non Dalit Master Sahib enraged, instead of giving him a proper answer. It implies that the Master Sahib himself draws the lines of 'savarna' and naturally he fails to answer.

Similarly the close study of 'Dronacharya and Eklavya story' of the 'Mahabharata' would reveal that it is based on the Caste-ism. Unlike Eklavya, who being a Shudra paid his right thumb as 'gurudakshina', Valmiki learnt to question the mythical flaws or dominant ideology. The power of questioning suggests the power of agency and it is a threat to the dominant group; that is why Valmiki is punished with a long stick on his back. Finally the agency has been achieved through the writing of this narrative itself that indicates that he could write an alternative myth. In comparison to the myth or the belief system made up of the dominant ideologies, Valmiki's myth proposes equal right, honour and respect for all.

### **Master-slave Dialectic**

In her famous essay 'Fredrick Douglass's Master-Slave Dialectic', Margaret Kohn has dealt with Hegel's idea of 'master-slave' and pointed out the dialectic. Kohn further analysed it and referred Hegel that is,

"Each 'self-consciousness' can attain certainty of himself only when another human being recognizes his reality as authoritative."(Kohn, 2005)

My argument is therefore based on the master-slave dialectic and its relevance to the Indian caste system. Unlike Kohn's analysis where coloured people are found to choose submission and life over death, Dalits would strongly disagree as they have chosen self-respect and even death but not the submission. Once they preferred the submission but in the present scenario they have developed the resistant mechanism. For instance the day when Valmiki's mother asked for some fresh food which is left at the end of the marriage party but in return she is rebuked,

"You are taking a basketful of 'joothan' (leftover). And top of that you want food for your children? Don't forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going."(Valmiki, 2003)

It is referred in the footnote of the text that the word 'Chuhri' is a derogatory way of addressing a woman of the Chuhra caste. Then Valmiki adds,

"That night the mother goddess Durga entered my mother's eyes. It was the first time that I saw my mother get so angry. She emptied the basket right there. She said to Sukhdev Singh, "Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the bridegroom's guests tomorrow morning."(Valmiki, 2003)

It is the first encounter between a Dalit woman and a non Dalit man where the former overpowers the latter by words. After this incident she also stopped taking their joothan. It could easily take her to a brutal torture but she dares to speak. That is why the event is critically acclaimed in this autobiography and marks the shift from a passive woman to a woman with active agency.

Conclusion

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Before conclusion it is to be said that the counter narratives which are foregrounded by the Dalit writers are noteworthy. The sections like 'Rewriting history', 'Myth as an exploitative mechanism', 'Master-slave Dialectic' are the highlighted areas that unfold how the 'resistant mechanism' works against the 'exploitative mechanism'. In this era the writing itself suggests the liberation of the Dalit self that obtains an active voice instead of being an object of humiliation for upper caste people. The mastery over language is highly needed to actualize the selfhood or subjectivity. Throughout the narrative the presence of pronoun 'I' is prominent and it marks the shift.

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