

Review Article

DECODING OF THE STRUCTURAL CHILDHOOD NARRATIVES IN OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S JOOTHAN

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Abstract

This paper studies the autobiography as deep structural narratives of dalit childhood traumatic and painful experiences in linear mode. Besides this it also examines how the hostile condition of Valmiki's Childhood made him to become as successful human being despite horrible conditions in which he was living that time. Any Dalit text especially autobiography unfolds the truth of this how a Dalit boy or girl undergoes a traumatic experiences in the hands of dominant groups. Likewise, childhood becomes an integral part of Dalit life which nourishes of both pleasant and unpleasant realities of life. Nevertheless, Dalit's childhood is so painful, and it is filled by gloomy experiences. It's been so hard to think of those miserable life lead by Dalit writers in their childhood. There is always a sort of conflict between dalit self and the higher caste society. Dalit child's life moves in and around certain grim realities like poverty, hunger, discrimination, marginalization and exclusion. The reality of poverty, hunger, discrimination and marginalization are part and parcel of dalit child is shown in Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997).

Keywords: Autobiography, Childhood, Narrative, Discrimination, Marginalization

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INTRODUCTION

Dalit autobiographies are very good at documenting the painful experiences of individual life and community life of the most disadvantaged groups of society. But dalit autobiographies are noted for its personal narratives and self narratives. They mostly draw the major events from childhood life instances. Until the narrator attains the adult life, it focuses on the childhood life. Many dalit autobiographies are narrated in a chronological order starting from the writer's childhood to adulthood delving from his/her memories which carry of pleasant and unpleasant events of life. These events teach him/her to become a successful man in the society. So the childhood becomes an essential part in dalit autobiography. The childhood drives him/her forward though it is interspersed with many realities. Therefore, every dalit autobiography shows upward social mobility.

Basically, Dalit writers in their childhood never had and lived a harmonious life with their surrounding people and they are always in a state of difference with their neighbours. Another agonizing event one can find in dalit autobiographies is that dalit children compete with animals around them for their survival, and their mode of living is always on a dunghill. Dalit autobiographies mostly focus on childhood and expose caste as the root cause of the absence of relationship between dalit child and society be it school, village, job place, market, bus stand, railway station and all public places.

"We need an ongoing struggle and a consciousness of struggle a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change" writes Valmiki in his book *Joothan*. The readers will be inspired by his words which talk about the ongoing project of human liberation. Named in the Chahra caste, Omprakash Valmiki grew up in Barla, in North India. He became a poet, a literary critic after a great struggle and he established his reputation as a Dalit writer in Hindi literature. He returned from the factory of ordinance, Dehradun, and was able to concentrate his writing until his early death due to cancer of the stomach. He was a pioneer of Dalit writing in Hindi; in 2003, Arun Prabha Mukherjee translated his

autobiography *Joothan* from original Hindi into English. Dalit's life is appallingly hard, packed with encounters. Society has grown up in such a social order that is profoundly cruel and inhuman to literary creations, society is grown up in such an incredibly cruel and inhuman social order for the Dalits. The human society has no respect for Dalits. While untouchability was abolished in 1949, Dalits continued to face poverty, deprivation, crime, mockery, humiliation, and upper caste discrimination after independence in India. Valmiki reveals his valiant struggle to survive a life of constant physical and mental torment and his transformation into a speaking subject under the influence of B R Ambedkar, the great Dalit leader [1].

Joothan is a major contribution to the accomplishments of Dalit's history and a direct contribution to the radical transformation of human conscience and human society. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is written out of Dalit's personal experiences which rise from his marginalized presence to prominence. Today the voice of the writer has been acknowledged as an empowered voice and he is known as a writer who works on behalf of Dalit community welfare. He was born into a desperately poor North India family (Uttar Pradesh) in the lowest caste in Indian society, an untouchable tribe. Through his personal experiences he explains the sufferings of the Dalits, who have no right to food or education. They couldn't even get basic amenities in society like food and education and how without those two things they could dream of improving their lives. In this book he explains how his people experience an institutionalized slavery. He talks of people who have had countless waves of voicelessness. His autobiography is a half Indian expression. Through way of his men Dalits are still voiceless. Writers like Valmiki have opened an opportunity for people's understanding and knowledge of a society that continued the people who disappeared from the world's consciousness of their cultures ' lifestyles, but today Dalits make up around one-sixth of the population of India. We have become a major political force, spread across the country of entity which speaks many languages and belongs to different

religions. Dalit's literature and books written by such writings as Valmiki enabled them greatly to develop their education [2].

DECODING PAINFUL EXPERIENCES OF CHILDHOOD

The author recalls the traumatic experience in the first chapter itself that reminded his Chahra group when he was told to sweep and clean the entire school premises during class hours without attending his classes. The author meets his different school teachers to illustrate how Dalit kids are socially, openly and physically abused without anyone coming to their rescue. Notwithstanding Gandhi's work on upliftment and the new anti-discrimination law in the books in 1955, Valmiki's father had a very difficult time admitting Valmiki to government-run primary school in Barla village. When the boy finally got inside he was not allowed to sit like the other boys on the benches but on the floor, away from the upper caste boys at the back of the classroom, close to the door where he could not see the blackboard well. His class ' upper caste boys casually beat him without any excuse making him into an introverted cowering child. As his classmates and teachers endured such abuse he reached the height of saying,

"So I'd run away from school and do the kind of job I was born for." He was so fed up by the chaos he endured in his infancy. When his father saw the misery of this boy, he was brave enough to help his son, and he shouted with a loud voice, "I'm leaving now, but this Chahra ka is going to study in this school right here, and not just him, but there will be many following him." The courage and determination of his father left a deep and definitive mark upon the personality of the young author. The father's expectations for Valmiki's son are evident in the name ' Munshji' rather than Omprakash.

Valmiki explains the book's most important event that really hits the readers' heart. His parents looked forward to the village's marriage feasts when they would assemble with large baskets outside. After all the people had eaten the dirty pates or leaf plates in Chahra's arrived baskets were removed. We took food so left over from ' Joothan' home to save the Joothan sticking to the house. In one of those marriage feasts, Valmiki's mother pleaded with a Brahmin to send some food for her children's sake, she was refused to offer the food, and was embarrassed by the host's harsh words. Within Valmiki's book this incident is explained as follows,

"What could go into the eyes of my mother Goddess Durga. I heard my mother's angry for the first time. Straight there, she filled the tub. She told Sukdev Singh, ' Take it and place it inside your room. Place it on top of tomorrow morning's baratis (guests come for marriage). She got me and my sister together, then left like an arrow. Sukdev Singh pounced on her to attack her, but without hesitation, my mother had challenged him as a lioness. They were people with pride and prejudice though they had poor poverty in the household. Omprakash finished fifth grade but their deep poverty caused their misery a lot and they didn't even get enough food and he couldn't continue school. He started to look after the buffaloes in the field, watching his friends visit the school with a heavy heart. His brothers once parodied the only piece of jewel she had (a silver anklet) to pay school fees, and he could pursue his studies. Although he was a very good student his school memories are living in a ' terror-filled' environment of embarrassment and pain, taunts and beatings from schoolmates and teachers. He was not allowed to participate in the caste discrimination's extra-curricular activities. He was not allowed to drink water during interviews, although he felt thirsty. He had to cup his hands and peon would pour water from high up so that the glasses would not touch our side. Facing all these upheavals, he writes' I believe I have grown up in a cruel and barbaric civilization' [3].

He studied in the light of a lantern in the intensely noisy burst colony. Valmiki writes, "I was the first student of my caste, not just from my basti out from all, the surrounding villages of the

area, appearing for the high school exams" and he is really proud of being the first educated child in his caste of the whole village. His graduation had become an opportunity for a feast in his city, despite the challenges he encountered during school days. Valmiki's example inspired other Dalit children to take a keen interest in education, and he took tuitions for the children in his basti during the evening. The author says "the majority of our Barla people suffered in silence. Respect and prestige were meaningless to them. A regular event was threatened and dominated by the higher caste for the Barla dwellers,' such was the plight of Dalits in the village of Barla, and the sear was very compassionate in his childhood due to the trauma faced by the author[4].

Throughout his autobiography, Valmiki writes very simply and honestly how the men of his caste lived outside the village and were forced by the Tyagi Brahmins to do unpaid labour. The Chahra was denied basic conditions such as public land and water access, education and even fellow feeling. The people belonging to his caste washed the stinking straw beds of the higher caste villagers' cattle lands, thrashers were called upon to dispose of the dead animals and their hides. The activities involved in farming and processing included instances of physical labour, and the higher caste people of the village paid the workers nothing for their hard labour.

Valmiki performed most of the above tasks with sincere strain and most of the time he was paid nothing. Dalits were such exploited by the Pages. Valmiki explains in one episode how he dragged to the field to sow sugarcane during his maths board exam by an upper caste fellow.

Ambedkar writes the following lines, "I asked them (Four Hindu friends) You take from the cows and buffaloes and when they are dead you expect us to remove their bodies. Why? You carry the dead bodies of your mothers to the cremate and why didn't you carry the dead bodies of your mother-cows yourself"?

As Ambedkar wrote the author of this book also experiences a bitter task of destroying a dead buffalo with so much difficulty as a tender age person. The feeling of Ambedkar was felt and experienced by Valmiki also. He says "For this very hard work only recompense is curse. What a cruel society we live in where hard labour has no value. There is a conspiracy to keep us in perpetual poverty".

In Valmiki lists various instances in his autobiography when confronted by humiliations due to caste identity. To order to protect cultural homogeneity caste system becomes an important weapon of the society. Valmiki was admitted to inter-college Barla because they experienced extreme poverty and they couldn't even fill their stomach regularly. Only because he was a Dalit was he beaten, humiliated and always given low marks there. He studied with fear and nervousness in that school of becoming subjected to abuse by other students and teachers of the upper caste. He feels that the abolition of untouchability in the legal framework, after that constitutional law of untouchability, was not a change in the educational institutions or did not improve the lives of Dalits. He writes, "We need an ongoing struggle and an ideology of rebellion, a consciousness that is revolutionary both in our hearts and outside worlds."

Valmiki used to read a lot of books and he could read Ambedkar's autobiography too. Dr. Ambedkar's theories made Valmiki focus on his own background and develop an apprehension about the anti-establishment. He was inspired by Ambedkar, and because of his education, he got anger and bravery in battling caste oppression. He describes his encounter with the Brahmin people, whose caste heritage he admired so much. They were the Kulkarnis (Maharashtra Brahmins). Valmiki was treated with great reverence as long as he did not expose his caste; the like-minded, educated people of the upper caste turned their back on him.

He says, "The things are fine as long as people don't know you're a Dalit. The moment they find out everything shifts to your caste.... Poverty, uneducatedness, broken lives, the agony of standing outside the gates, how would the civilized Savarna Hindus know it. His sharp words make the readers aware that a social change is needed in order to treat all people with human heart fairly without discrimination. Joothan Valmiki, through his autobiography, completes two fold tasks of praising and understanding Dalit claims and criticizing Dalit, upper caste people for their crimes against the downtrodden Harijans. Valmiki is not sure his upper caste readers will understand his views and points or acknowledge the truthfulness of his experience [6]. He writes,

Some people think this is all crazy and exaggerated. Those who say 'these things don't happen here,' I would like to remind them that the string of this suffering is known only to the person who suffered it. "His inner experience helps him to write these pages. In fact one of the aspects of Joothan which identifies him as a Dalit text is in the form of the discourse being challenged. The book is full of questions questioning the readers' answers. Ambedkar's ideas for the book are conveyed when he poses so many questions for the readers. His consciousness is mindful of many pungent and uncomfortable questions that no authority can properly address. Throughout caste-dominant society, this challenging idea can only lose out inconsistency. The author focuses on the radical transformation of the human and cultural consciousness. The book provides the readers with difficult questions about their own humanity; Valmiki encourages the readers to join the movement of universe emancipation. The harsh realities which he describes in his autobiography reflect the fact that promises made in the contribution to independent India have yet to be completely fulfilled. Joothan the author asks for a promissory note from society, and he invites people to join the Dalits Chords[7].

In the autobiography, Omprakash Valmiki is very frankly and true and he says a spade and he does not mince any words, he never softens the truth, though the truth was so horrible to hear. Such truths will never come out and they will be buried in one's consciousness. The writer is too bold to share his life experiments with the readers and his autobiography Joothan had remarked the lies and falsehoods of the social order insisting on one's caste comfort and caste privilege. The only question in Valmiki's mind was "why are Dalits treated worse than animals. This was the unanswerable question which was hidden in his conscious till his death [8].

Once asked to define literature, Valmiki says, "Literature is the discourse that stands on the side of the marginalized, the constant, the living, the poor. He should be shaken by literature to teach him to fight, not weaken him, not make him succumb to tyranny, not enslave him. We need to free ourselves towards that liberation from the social order that surrounds us. In 'Joothan' he talks of his literary friends who constantly told him he was enclosing himself in a small circle by concentrating 'only' on Dalits instead of being universal. He thought his writing would inspire an increasing number of readers to reconsider their unexcavated ideas on literature.

Since his childhood to his last days, countless stings have not only stayed in Valmiki's heart but also in his body. He could not get the answer to the question below. "What are the historical reasons behind that upper caste people's hatred and animosity towards Dalits? If he asked a question about the Varna method they either ignored his search or became angry to the people who were asked the questions instead of responding directly. The high authorities of Hindutva talk of knowledge in a complex language, but they will not accept the truth that depriving people of human rights by virtue of birth is not justifiable for any reason. Somehow Savarnas (Upper caste) harbors all kinds of preconceptions that allow for normal relationships with Dalits to be formed at any cost. It will be

smooth and normal within society, unless and until the other relationship does not accept one's caste [9].

"As long as people don't know you are a Dalit things are fine. The moment they find out the caste, everything changes. The whisps slash your veins like knives, poverty, illiteracy broken lives, the pain of standing outside the door, how would the so many incident in his life made him feel ashamed though he reached a height in the society by his education and position in the factory. The reason for this is he is born in the Dalit family".

CONCLUSIONS

The genre of autobiography unfolds the most important events of an individual's life. Dalit autobiographies mostly document the childhood events of a dalit writer narrating in the context of social, economical, cultural and historical in which time he/she lives. Through the lens of Valmiki's childhood we can understand the socio-economical, cultural conditions of the day. Therefore, the life of a dalit child becomes an integral part of dalit autobiography. It revolves in and around a dalit child narrating the successful and unsuccessful events of a dalit writer's childhood. Mostly, highlighting the child's emotional trails and tribulations that he and she undergoes during the time of childhood. So, childhood plays an important role especially in Dalit's life. Childhood decides the fate of a dalit person if he/she born into a dalit community.

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