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EXPLICIT OF SELF IN VALMIKI'S *JOOHAN* AND LAXMAN GAIKWAD'S *THE BRANDED*

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature finds its voice post independence. Government of India abolished Varna Vyavastha and gives them new lease of life. In the present paper we would like to take up to male autobiographers who confidently raise their voice to present and share their experiences. Valmiki belongs to Haryana and Laxman Gaikwad belongs to Maharashtra. In their autobiographies the pain which they endure because of being Dalit seems to be one. Both autobiographies talks about their community. It discusses about Dalits how they struggle for achieving identity. It focuses how they struggled to acquire position in society. These autobiographies not only talks about class division of India but also indicate the coming out of Varna class, which is a challenge in Indian society. These autobiographies are testimonies for Indian society who is rigid not to accept the Dalit equal to the upper caste. They chose this genre to explicit their self and inspired others with their vigor.

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INTRODUCTION

Etymologically, the word Dalit derived from crushed grained and destroyed which leads to the meaning of depressed. The word *Dalit* comes from Sanskrit language, which means suppressed and broken to pieces. It has been used to include all those vast mass of people among the scheduled castes who have been traditionally subjected to invidious (unpleasant) discriminations on grounds of untouchability and categorized as the untouchables, the down-trodden, the exterior castes, the ex-untouchables depressed classes. Dalits are treated either as marginal people without a history of their own or as objects rather than as subjects. 'Adi Dravides' 'Adi Karnataka' 'Adi Andhra' and Adi Dharmi, these words have been used in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab to identify untouchables respectively.

Uchalya (1987), a Sahitya Akademi Award-Winning is an autobiographical novel written in Marathi by Laxman Gaikwad. It has been translated into English and entitled as *The Branded* by P.A. Kolharkar. The literary means of *Uchalya* is 'pilferer'. In *Uchalya*, Laxman Gaikwad gives an account of the life of a downtrodden that was brought up in Uchalya community. This community was identified as a criminal tribe under the provisions of the criminal tribes' act of 1871. Laxman Gaikwad, born in 1956 at Dhanegaon in Taluka Latur in Uchalya community. He identifies his personal suffering and the sufferings of his community in his work as Baby Kamble does in *The Prisons We Broke* and Balbir Madhopuri in *Changiya Rukh*. Regarding this, Ruchira says:

While the plight of the untouchables is fairly well known in most of the world, the “criminal” caste may come as a surprise to even some Indians. The indignity and danger associated with this peculiar social taxonomy is based not on legal grounds but merely the accident of birth and the ignorant bias of a ling ago foreign occupier-the imperial British rule in India.(Ruchira: 2010)

For thousands of year, in India, *Uchalyas* have been living unknown and unfamiliar to the sophisticated society. They have no permanent place for living. They have been shifting from place to place. Harvesting, cattle-tending, stone-cutting, hunting wild-animals and foraging for wild herbs, roots and fruits were sources for satisfy their hunger. The *Uchalya* community was regarded as outcasts lower than the lowest scheduled caste. The politics, education, religion, economics of the mainstream-society never touched to them. The world in which they have been living is of superstition. There are several names by which people of this community are referred to. Some of these names are: Pathrut, Kamati, Ghantichor, Wadar. (4,5)

In *The Branded*, Laxman Gaikwad retrospects the subhuman condition of *Uchalya* community in the first lines of his autobiography by saying, ‘No native place. No birth date. No house or farm. No caste, either’ (1). Similarly in *Growing up Untouchable in India*, Vasant Moon portrays the Dalits’ livelihood in which they have been living without proper house, water, electricity and sanitation. This book identifies the trials and tribulations of the *Uchalyas* which is known as Santmuchchar all over India which means one who steals from weekly markets or bazaars. They are forced for thieving and pilfering to satisfy their hunger and shelter which are their basic needs. This situation of hunger and poverty left only one option with women, they are trained to steal along with boys. Laxman’s father, Martand and his mother, Dhondabai, could not get any respected work in their life because they were known to belong to a Branded tribe of criminal. His grandfather had been rendered useless; his grandmother began to visit fairs and markets to maintain their household. In 1959, new laws in the form of Habitual Offenders Act were introduced in various states. These Acts retained many of the provisions of the Criminal Tribes Act such as registration, restrictions on movement, and incarceration in ‘corrective settlements’ earmarked for ‘habitual offenders’. Thus the bias against nomads still lingered (*Paul: 2*) to be treated like wild dangerous animals-to be watched; tamed and hunted up (*Krishan: 84*). In crowded fairs, they removed gold lockets, earrings, trinkets and necklaces with her teeth or a blade. Sharan kumar Limbale states that the Denotified tribes (DNT) are the most depressed sections of society and all of them are regarded as Dalits.

If *Uchalya* community wanted to move from one place to another, they have to obtain a permit from the police-patil; otherwise they were arrested by the police immediately. As Baby Kamble in her *The Prison We Broke* states that all people of the Maharwada were illiterate except her father. They were reduced to the level of animals just as permits are allowed to cattle’s to be moved to other places or to be sold in the market. If they ever travelled without a pass they were invariably arrested on trumped-up charges, beaten up and set free only after exorbitant, amounts had been extracted from us. (Pg. 3)

Laxman’s family was passing through a period of acute starvation. During winter, Laxman and his brother used to share one coverlet and slept near the sheep. As Laxman writes, in winter when the lambs ‘pissed’ and the hot water trickled under our bodies. B.R. Ambedkar says that ‘the mother of all our poverty and lowliness is untouchability.’ Laxman Gaikwad narrates that how hunger forced him to go in search of offerings made to evil spirits. As Vasant Moon in *Growing up Untouchable in India* describes that he and his sister Malti took a bowl to upper-caste neighborhood. They begged, “Oh, madam, give us a piece of bread”. An elderly man suddenly sprung at us and said, “Hey, run or I will whip your ass!” (Pg. 22)

I used to kick the coconut thrice and take the food. But I always offered a small piece of the coconut and a little portion of the food to evil spirits to propitiate them lest they haunt me (41).

Laxman and his family members were thieves by profession but Laxman was unwilling to accompany them on these thieving trips. Martand, as a result of his service with Chamle, understood that ‘a child must learn to read and write’ (16). So Martand put in Laxman’s hand “a slate and pencil” instead of a “Bharat blade” and by doing so, he challenged the hierarchies of class and caste because in their class, thieving trip is better than school. Similarly Omprakash Valmiki in his autobiography *Joothan*, that in the Basic Primary School, he was not allowed to sit on the mat and drink water. He was given a place at the last row where he sat helplessly. The

children of the Tyagis would tease him by calling “Chuhre Ka” (3), a pejorative means to state “you son of “Chuhras”.

But after three or four weeks, he started to go, many people like Sheshi Tukya, Panchfuli and other children living nearby their hut were affected by loose motions and vomiting. And they began to quarrel with Laxman’s parents and accused and chided his father. They used to taunt mockingly- “Lachiman Tata khekdyacha curry khata” (Pg. 34).

Because you have admitted your son to school, our children are suffering from loose motion and vomiting. Never had our lane suffered from cholera before. We are not merchants and Brahmins to admit our children to school. (16)

The police often visited those poor people. Like a pack of wolves, they would descend upon them, beat them, search their huts, threaten them with arrest and imprisonment and depart only after taking money from them. Bijender Singh writes in ‘Intervention of Female Identity in Denitrified Communities: A Study of Laxman Gaikwad *The Branded*’, “Accordingly, Police has always forced these tribal to remain in the same position and occupation. Negative behaviour becomes more course and cruel at sight of these tribal” (5). Gaikwad depicts an episode of behaviour as such in his grandmother’s life when police had caught her, ‘Your whore will know,’ cried the police and grabbed our grandmother by the hair and thrashed her all over. (Pg. 2)

The police were beating whomsoever their eyes fell upon—women, children. They squeezed grandmother’s breasts, asking her to show the stolen goods”. (2) This is the reason that police is negative towards the community and has thrashed all irrespective of age and sex. This group’s identity was nothing so police never approached with female constable for arrest and remand but all male for..... as Laxman’s grandmother told, ‘When the police catch me, they hang me upside down by the legs and lash the sole of my feet with a whip, thrust burning cigarette butts into my anus. If I don’t confess to the theft, they bring shit near my mouth and force me to eat it and keep on beating me (8).’ Once the police caught Anna, the elder brother of Laxman, his anus being chilli-powdered by police

‘Here Laxman Gaikwad narrates that ‘even if someone desired to do honest work, nobody would employ them’ (62). They would be beaten up by the police. They always arrested them without any theft. The police themselves were responsible for creating conditions because they were not given any respected work. For giving money to the police, we would borrow money from landlords. (62)

Thus, it can be said that in *The Branded* Laxman Gaikwad has adopted some methods to bring improvement against the atrocities heaped on them by the upper-caste Hindus. He is against the caste and patriarchy and in a peaceful way challenges the evil practice of the dominant order. Education is the only way which conscious Laxman of his rights that leads in the race of socio-economic ladder towards mobility.

The next autobiography under study is by Omprakash Vamiki’s *Joothan* first published in Hindi in 1997. *Joothan* is a milestone in Dalit writing in Hindi literature. In the *Preface* Valmiki condemn the society that it is very rude and heartless, inhuman where he has taken breath. They are insensitive towards Dalits. Initially he published a chapter in a Hindi book titled “Harijan se Dalit”. The response was overwhelming for him. Readers connected with his pain agony. They all pressed him to write these experiences in detail. In this way *Joothan* come into existence.

Sarah Beth writes in ‘Dalit Autobiographies in Hindi: the transformation of pain into resistance’, “It is pain which strings one narrative event to the next, and it is pain that binds individual Dalits together into an ‘imagined community’ of fellow sufferers”(1). It published in 1999 with this book a new genre of Dalit writing come into existence. He belongs to Chuhre caste which lived outside the city. This caste basically works for cleaning and unpaid wages. They had been called not their name but by their caste. “They did not call us by our name. If a person was older than we were, then would call as “Oe Chuhre”(2). “The *Chuhre* were not seen as human (2) It hinted that post independence they had been treated as ‘different’ not ‘same’ or ‘equal’. He writes, “The Chuhra was not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and then throw them away”(2). Arun Prabha Mukherjee writes in Introduction “ On one

level this is an autobiography account of Valmiki's journey from his birth and upbringing as an untouchable in the newly independent India of the 1950's to today and his pride in being a Dalit" (XVII).

Even in school he had to sit from other students and sitting at the back made him illegible to read what is written on blackboard. Beside the upper caste student show their superiority over him and threaten him. They even beat him. Due to this it made him introvert. He had so many hurdles to face in his social life, he could not touch hand pump to get drinking water as it would become impure. Though he was good at studies but due to his caste he had not been appreciated or encouraged by his teachers. Even in one of her schooldays he was ordered by headmaster to clean the school as it was their work.

Education is the only weapon in his hand. It was not at all easy task for him to make a name for himself. "Howsoever much you study, you will still remain a Chuhre" (38) this explicit even the education cannot remove the cobweb of caste from the mind of people. Valmiki once asked his teacher "Why didn't an epic poet ever write a word about our lives?". It show his curiosity that why they don't bother about their suffering. He received lot of beating for this question. He candidly tells that he is the first student from his caste "to appear for the high school exam." (68). He set an example for his community by passing with flying colors. After him many children of his community started going to school. The mission which his father's begin is now bearing fruits. "Pitaji had a different mind-set. He wanted to get an education. He had only one thing for improving the caste". (67)

He shared one more experience which reflected the mentality of people. He wanted to iron his cloth from the washer man. He was denied because it would pollute him. He writes "one can get rid of poverty but get rid of caste is very tough"(28). On the contrary, the upper crust people would love to eat pig's meat secretly. They come in number in their colony in dark to eat it. All this show the hypocrisy of the upper class.

It very fancy to read that how an upper class boy had bullied him on his way back home and snatched his books to remain quite in the class. Valmiki requested him not to throw his books but all remained in vain. 'It seems that reading writing is not in their lot". (50) But above all this, his father advice "Be educate and improve your caste" work as a torch bearer and catalyst for him.

Valmiki opposed the dogmatism prevailed in his caste. Once he went for his friend's wedding. It was his first experience to be a groom's best man. He was thrilled by that. All his happiness vanished when he came to know that they have to go for 'Salaam'. "Is it right to go for Salaam" (39)? Valmiki dared to ask a question to raise a question against the stereotypical costume where they have to exhibit about their miserable status in front of the *suvarnas*. He even said that why they only do this ritual, why not the upper caste people follow it. "The bridegroom of higher caste doesn't have to do that "(39). His father encouraged him in his refusal of this practice in his family. Thereafter in his family they didn't follow it. So he is the one who started the change in his hierarchal system.

He never felt attracted towards the idol worship and animal sacrifice followed ardently in his community. He "would either sit outside or wonder around" (40). He does not understand his religion. "If I really were a Hindu, would the Hindus hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill me up with caste inferiority over the smallest thing?"(48). Many time he faced the hostility of Hindus as soon as they know he is a low caste. The term "Dalit" is a collective identity for the untouchable across India and they accept it. In Introduction he writes "whether Dalits are Hindus remain a burning question to this day "(XXVI) even Omprakash also raise a question that he does not consider himself as Hindu because if he is a Hindu why Hindus hate him and treated him in inhuman way.

Valmiki has raised his voice when the Hindi Literature is dominated by the High Caste people. Nobody would bother to read the agony and painful account of Dalits, their miserable accounts or the injustice on them not a part of literature. In the *Forward* Arun Prabha Mukherjee writes " No untouchable studied with me in my school or later at college"(IX).She further writes , " I believe that here in *Joothan* readers of English Language texts will find another answer to Gayatri Spivak's famous question " Can the Subaltern Speak?"(X).This work by Valmiki seems to be a part of social revolution for equality and justice. Omprakash Valmiki 's *Joothan* is among the pioneer text in Hindi that identifies as a part of Dalit literature.

Omprakash Valmiki has been a torch bearer for his community and other Dalits who have been struggling in the society what he says is very encouraging, "this battle cannot be won in a day we need an ongoing struggle

and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that bring a revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change” (203).

Both these writers Laxman Gaikwad and Omprakash Valmiki have discarded their ascribed status and with their continuous struggle and hard work they have achieved a status and get recognition for their community too. As Valmiki says, “*Identity and recognition* –the two words say a lot ...” (203). Both these writers by writing their experiences documented history. Valmiki writes, “Dalit autobiographies will provide inspiration to our future generations “(20). They have chosen the less taken path and mark a niche for themselves. Robert Frost says, in *The Road Not Taken*

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,

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