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'The Three Monkeys of Dalit Literature, Dr. BR Ambedkar's 'Educate, Agitate, Organize' in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to provide insight into the impact of Dalit consciousness on writers like Omprakash Valmiki, which enabled him to transform his pain into a narrative of resistance from the experience of agony and humiliation. While Valmiki is voicing and narrating the atrocities that Dalits have suffered, one can observe Valmiki's assertiveness regarding his caste. Seeing it through Joothan's autobiographical lens makes it much more powerful and impactful, and Valmiki's acceptance of his Dalit heritage ultimately frees Dalits from the ensnarement of the ugly caste system, enabling readers to become aware of Dalit consciousness.

Keywords: Dalit Consciousness, Assertion, Dalit Identity, Rage, Agony, Dalit Panther Movement

Saadat Hasan Manto said, "*If you find my stories dirty, the society you live in is dirty. With my stories, I only expose the truth.*"

Manto's words reflect the nature of literature, which mirrors society's triumphs and flaws. While writers like him struggled to place their stories among the narratives of History and to formulate a space for the accounts of personal histories, there was an entirely different section in the society, which struggled for more than three centuries to find a voice to express their agony and stories of atrocities against them. It was the Dalit clans, the backward, tormented section of the Hindu society, the dominant Hinduism which left no stone unturned to relegate and dehumanize them.

Indian Literature had been monolithic in the past, revolving around the domain of high castes in India, catering to the requirements of Brahmanism and adhering to the rules of Sanskritization. This literature only attempted to glorify the upper caste Hindus, and their ideologies, thus completely ignoring and shutting the experiences of Dalits behind the doors.

To combat this ostracization, Dalit Literature was begotten by Dalit writers and poets.

One of the most revolutionary Dalit writers was Omprakash Valmiki, the author of the autobiography- '*Joothan*', who tried to expose the cruelty of the old caste system in India through his accounts and history.

The Dalit Panthers movement was founded in the year 1972, which led to the emergence of the Dalit literary movement. This movement was the need for Dalit expression, as it gave way to a 'real' representation of Dalit Identity, which was earlier either painted as the weak voiceless subalterns or disregarded as the class that lacked aesthetics.

Sharan Kumar Limbale in his essay states about the deliberate exclusion of Dalit expression from the early literature, by the Savarna clan, legislating Dalits as ‘impure’ and ‘polluted’ and banishing them from learning the language of Gods, and Brahmins- Sanskrit, hence depriving them of the pen to express their agony.

‘Exclusion’ and ‘Ostracization’ were the two key weapons of the Savarnas, through which they continued to oppress the Dalits.

In Valmiki’s personal experience, he expresses his feeling of melancholy and being othered in the school. Schools, which are the place to garner education and enlightenment, become the source of trauma and agony for Omprakash.

He was constantly tormented, humiliated, and dehumanized by his teachers.

Omprakash describes: “*They tried all sorts of strategies so that I would run away from the school and take up the kind of work for which I was born.*”

Even, after the independence of India, and the implication of caste laws, the mentality of people, associating others to the caste of their birth did not falter.

These incidents in school also echo the impact of ‘casteist’ Hindu mythologies, on the oppression of Dalits.

Upper castes Savarnas use religious texts to justify the despotism against Dalits.

For instance, when Valmiki’s teacher defends himself for making Om sweep the school: “*He only got him to sweep; did not ask for his thumb in the guru Dakshina like Dronacharya.*”

With such scriptures (also the infamous Manusmriti), which only dehumanized Dalits, and mostly overlooked Dalits, their representation and inclusion seemed endangered.

Although, one might argue that there had been pieces written on Dalits, and the conditions were changing. But, the Modern and Contemporary periods saw the portrayal of Dalits by upper-class elitists as nothing but a condescending representation of their existence marked by sympathy and compassion. Hence, the inclusion was perceived as just a shift from the ‘erasure’ of Dalit Identity from Literature to the ‘containment’ of the Dalit Identity in Literature.

This can be best elucidated by the miserable portrayal of Dukhi (a Dalit man) in Premchand’s short story- Deliverance.

Arundhati Roy, in the introduction to Annihilation of caste, ‘The Doctor and The Saint’, exposes the hypocrisy of Dalit representation by Savarna writers, she quotes “For a writer to have to use terms like ‘Untouchable’, ‘Scheduled Caste’, ‘Backward Class’ and ‘Other Backward Classes’ to describe fellow human beings is like living in a chamber of horrors.

Such literature in the literary space debunks the literary canon of Dalit representation, and questions the agency and consciousness of Dalits.

Also, the representation of Dalits like these causes anxiety among Dalits, who convey the disappointment they feel at the lack of representation and a role model in the literature. Stories have been written about the pitiable nature of Dalit existence and ignoring Dalit Consciousness.

This concern is not just restricted to the Dalit community, it is an issue raised by almost every oppressed group. Like Virginia Woolf opposes the idea of women not being encouraged to write, by not providing them with financial assistance, and a private space/room of their own. Similarly, Alice Walker in her book “In Search for our Mother’s garden”, opens up about the effect of her motivation because of lack of guidance from a role model, because of the non-inclusive nature of the literature.

Like Alice Walker, Valmiki too talks about the lack of a mentor, who could guide him.

He quotes, “*No one in our basti could answer my questions.... In such an atmosphere searching for answers to philosophical conundrums was asking to bring down the stars from the sky.*”

In the novel, Valmiki expresses his regret of not being aware of Dr. B R Ambedkar, the one who introduced ‘Dalit consciousness’.

The only reason, why Ambedkar was an unknown entity to him, is because the history and the literature were highly infected by ‘Brahmanism’, and disregarded Dalits.

(Marathi) Literature may claim to have constituted literature for Dalits, but the inclusion is a mere oasis of ‘containment’.

This metamorphosis of Dalit representation from ‘erasure’ to ‘containment’ wasn’t enough, and Dalit reformers needed ‘assertion’ in the literature. Hence, here came Dalit consciousness, which became the driving force of Dalit Literature.

Valmiki presents his gratitude to the Dalit movement, which led to his self-fulfillment and awoke him to Dalit consciousness.

In addition to that, when he started reading about Ambedkar, and the vile approaches of Gandhi (of course, curtained in the wrapper of ‘nationalism’), he understood the importance of representing Dalits in literature, the impact it carries forward to the readers belonging to this section.

He adopted his surname ‘Valmiki’, to fully accept and assert his Dalit identity. This is examined by Laetitia Zecchini in her essay ‘No name is yours until you speak it’, where she supports the Dalit writers to assert their names in the literature (inclusive of Dalit literature), otherwise, the future generation will have no one to look up to.

Even though his assertion led to him running into a traumatic experience, his acceptance of his caste is what truly tributes to and adheres to the Dalit consciousness.

He quotes, “*Lying had gotten us wonderful food and respect. My truth-telling had resulted in a beating and insults.*”

Valmiki’s Dalit consciousness later drives him to speak for Dalits, he was highly inspired by the Dalit Panthers movement.

During this time, he was exhilarated by Marathi Dalit Literature and the writings of Dalit writers like Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, and Baburao Bagul, he then chose to write about it in the form of an essay on the problems of Dalits to the Navbharat Times in Bombay.

While, his essay seeks to voice the plight of Dalits and contributes to the literature of Dalits, by idolizing Dalit consciousness, it is not well received by the Savaran clans.

Even political parties like Shiv Sena protests against his essay.

This further proves, how privileged class elitists try to slight Dalit consciousness in writing, in the name of ‘hurting religious sentiments, or ‘not aesthetically beautiful’.

And, in an attempt to disregard and disapprove the writings of the socially ‘inferior’ section in their voices, the elitists have always used ‘elitist aesthetics’ as the meter to judge.

Critics like Kawthekar have strongly favored the idea of assessing Dalit literature based on traditional critical and Brahmanical aesthetics theories. And some critics have even expressed their shock over the fact that Literature provides individual space for Dalit writings, and not adjusts it to rural literature.

But while confining Dalit poetry inside the bars of so-called aesthetic demands, Savarna critics forget the essence and fuel that drives Dalit literature.

As Dalit consciousness is what gives Dalit literature its unique powers.

Valmiki through his work speaks about and for the community. And with comments by critics like N S Phadke, on Dalit writings such as “*The kinds of contexts and events that are needed to add color to a novel are not found in Dalit lives*”, only butchers the purpose and ideology of Dalit writings.

VL Kulkarni, on the other hand, defines Dalit aesthetics as something rare, and unconventional. He argues in favor of this aestheticism, by quoting "If giving 'extraordinary pleasure' is considered an artistic value, why cannot 'giving extraordinary pain' be recognized as an artistic value?"

Also, Prabhakar Mande quotes- "*Dalit Literature should not be viewed only from a literary perspective. Unless this literary chain of events is seen from a sociological perspective against the entire background of the changes happening in society, its significance will not be grasped.*"

In his autobiography, Valmiki attempts to challenge the ideology based on differentialism to demolish a totalitarian dominance of literature and achieve an egalitarian society with the quest for non-elitist knowledge.

The incidents explored by Valmiki aren't necessarily aesthetically beautiful but serve to present the lives of Dalits with utmost reality.

One such incident is the butchering of the pig, where Valmiki is disgusted and loathes the job. His discomfort and the description of the enactment sets the entire premise of understanding Dalit literature, as the literature of the people like Valmiki's parents who are forced to make a living out of butchering pigs.

Also, one could argue that Valmiki's unease is a result of his inferiority complex. As he quotes "*It is not because of a reformist perspective but because of the inferiority complex that they have done so. The educated ones suffer more from this inferiority complex, which is caused by social pressures.*"

Valmiki doesn't evade elucidating the novel's title- 'Joothan', which traces back to his childhood memory, of being given the 'joothan' of the upper caste elitists.

'Joothan' metaphorically means the atrocities towards them by the Brahmins. While the upper caste men would want to believe that Dalits like Valmiki and his mother have internalized the oppression, Valmiki's mother's denial of the Joothan at Chowdhuri Ji's house is a reminder of the assertion, consciousness, and empowerment of Dalits.

And hence, Joothan encapsulates the struggles as well as the assertion of Dalits.

Joothan, the title, and the entire narrative are also a reminder of the fact, that the true spirit of 'Dalit consciousness' is the assertion, not the rejection of Dalit identity.

As Valmiki says: "*Till the day he(we) die is that caste follows one right up to one's death.*"

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