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The Agony of Subjugated as Expressed in Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*

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Abstract: Culture, both positive and negative, can be understood and evaluated through literature in a variety of ways. Literature can help us comprehend and evaluate society in both positive and negative ways. Every society's customs and traditions have evolved as a result of the power dynamics that have existed from the beginning of time. Colonial and colonised have both appeared in postcolonial literature as representations of the power relationship between coloniser and colonised, as well as coloniser and colonised. A major subject highlighted by postcolonial literature is the exploitation of colonised populations on a variety of levels and grounds, which is discussed in detail below. International literary communities pay particular attention to the theme of subjugation of Dalit, their marginal existence, and cruelty on the basis of caste and class. In literature, this is a topic that has received a lot of attention recently.

Keywords: Subjugated, Colonization, Marginalized, Oppression



What is Subaltern?

As part of a subaltern research group of historians, G. C. Spivak raised the issue, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in relation to the subjugation of women. Nevertheless, the term 'subaltern' is more of a wider term which refers to those who are subjected to various forms of oppression based on their caste, class, or gender. When it comes to caste, poverty, and marginalisation, the oppressed life of the disadvantaged people is examined in detail in this study. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is a heart-stirring narration of the predicament of *Chuhara* people. This caste has gone through lot of suppression through ages. As a result of scavenging occupation, the group has been denied the right to exist as a human being. Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography depicts the reality of their life in the community. It is not a narration by an outsider but a narration by someone who has first-hand experience of it, a narration from there author who has lived it. Throughout the book, one will learn about the *Chuhara* clan in independent India.

Antonio Gramsci who was an Italian Marxist thinker is considered as the first person to use the term 'subaltern'. It is a word enrooted in Latin and French language which meant 'a junior military officer' once upon a time but its Latin meaning keeps less distance with what it means today, 'inferior one'. Om Prakash Valmiki illustrates how post-colonial historians and thinkers rely on Oxford Concise Dictionary for its interpretation.

"The word 'subaltern' in the title stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that is of inferior rank. It will be used in these pages as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way". (Valmiki vii)

Dalit Oppression in *Joothan*:

Arun Prabha Mukherjee is the translator of *Joothan*. The original work was in Hindi, published in 1997 and he translated it into English in 2003 with the title *Joothan: A Dalit's life*. In the initial part of the book, the author Om Prakash Valmiki illustrates how Dalit community has been subjected to socio-economic oppression.

According to him, life of *Chuhara* specifically and Dalit, generally is very humiliating and painful. He tries to recollect experiences which had not find its place in literature before him. The milieu was so inhumane, brutal and unsympathetic for Dalit people and other side-lined groups. Problems were endless including poverty to be the main villain which crippled them to raise any voice. The ridiculous concept of untouchability brought lots of misery, torment which were not limited to social parameter but it was a physical reality as well. The scavenging work



added to the humiliation and disgrace bestowed upon the community. As Valmiki describes it, the community's settlement is located beyond the village's perimeter in a filthy environment:

“The stench was so overpowering that one would choke within a minute. The pigs wandering in narrow lanes naked children, dogs, daily fights, this was environment of my childhood”. (1)

Author tries to represent the root cause of these sufferings of his own clan. According to him if all those who call the caste system to be something very integral and concrete part of the Indian society cannot live even for a day in the circumstances Valmiki and his fellow clan people endured through years. They had to do all the scavenging work, agricultural work, other hard-work but they were scarcely paid or most times not paid at all. Adding to that, they were treated as impious and treated as untouchables by the most classes of society.

“Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a *Chuhara*, one gets contaminated or polluted. The *Chuharas* were 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)

They are forced to adapt their identities as a result of poverty and invisibility. The protagonist's persistent struggle against inhumanity, humiliation, and pain is seen as a remark in the narrative. Teachers and children in the school are humiliated and tortured, according to Valmiki. The protagonist is subjected to indiscriminate beatings by the students for no apparent cause. Because of untouchability, the author is not even permitted to touch the hand-pump because people believed that mere touch of a Dalit will pollute their water. For the same reason, there were separate well for Dalit people so that they stay away from water-resource of upper class people. They could not even wear new clothes; else others would make fun of them. And if they wear old clothes, people would cuss them ‘stinking’ ‘rustic’ etc. Swear words and such disgraceful language was a daily thing for any *Chuhara* person. People from so called upper caste would always call them not by their name but by some or the other humiliating words.

That the upper caste people endeavour in many ways to suppress the downtrodden is brought to light brings attention to the oppressive position of the subaltern. For example, the protagonist's school instructor Kaliram is deplorably cruel. When the author's caste is discovered by the instructor, the protagonist is assigned the task of sweeping the entire class and the school grounds. Furthermore, the entities of the community upset the lives of Dalit students.



Om Prakash Valmiki is compelled to work right before his examination day at the farm where sugarcane are sowed just because he is from a particular community. Upper class farmers, in such ways, regularly exploited the Dalit people. Writer draws a parallel between the biased approach of the schoolteacher and the well-known episode of Eklavya and Dronacharya in his story. Just like the tribal enthusiast received the unjust treatment, the legacy continued for every bright Dalit student. Valmiki was sent out of the classroom on a number of occasions just because of his caste. The caste system obstructs the advancement of Dalit kids in their schooling. Mentioning another misery, the author, on the other hand, portrays the disgrace, misery, and embarrassment of relying on *Joothan* which means the scrap food, as the central focus of the novel.

“During a wedding, when the guests and the baratis, the bridegroom’s party, were eating their meals, the *Chuharas* would sit outside with huge baskets. After the baratis had eaten, the dirty pattals or leaf- plates were put in the *Chuharas*” baskets, which they took home, to save the *joothan* that was sticking to them. The little pieces of pooris, bits of sweetmeats, and a little bit of vegetable were enough to make them happy. The *Joothan* were eaten with a lot of relish. The pieces of pooris that were collected from the pattals were dried in the sun. A cloth would be spread on charpai to dry them. Often, I would be placed on guard duty because drying poories attracted crows, hens and dogs. Even a movement’s lapse and the poories would vanish. Hence, one would have to sit near the cot with a stick in hand. These dried up pooris were very useful the hard days of the rainy season. They would be soaked in water and then boiled. The boiled *pooris* were delicious with finely ground red chilli pepper and salt... When I think about all those things today, thorns begin to prick my heart. What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just *joothan*. And yet no one had any grudges or shame or repentance”. (9-10)

This demonstrates inexhaustible pain *Chuhara* community, who must always combat hunger. They have really been robbed of a good standard of living. There was no way out for them as they were deprived of any kind of decent job and eatable food and compelled to endure the life of an animal. Valmiki's family works for the Tagis, who are the dominant ethnic group in the village. Valmiki's mother and sister served the Tagis family, and as a result, they must rely on *Joothan* for support. Despite their efforts, the narrator's family is subjected to humiliating circumstances. Valmiki’s mother, when asked for more food for children, she is humiliated by Sukhdev Singh Tagi in a very shameful way:



“You are taking a basketful of *joothan*. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don’t forget your place *Chuhri*, pick up your basket and get going” (11).

Struggle for Basics Needs of Life:

The subjugated have fought for two meals a day for the majority of their life. Every member of the family is required to work in order to make a living. The demise of the protagonist's sibling as a result of a lack of clinical treatment as a result of poverty exemplifies the harsh realities of subaltern existence. Furthermore, the rainy season is a calamity for their colony's inhabitants. They are forced to endure sleepless nights, repair their homes, drink filthy water, suffer from ill health, and miss out on employment opportunities as a result of the constant downpour. Valmiki Comments:

“Literature can only imagine hell. For use the rainy season was a living hell. This terrible suffering of village life has not even been touched upon by the epic poets of Hindi. What a monstrous truth that is”! (24)

Protagonist begins to raise his voice against such disgracing, unjust treatment by the upper strata of the society and also doesn’t forget the mistakes done in past and carried along by his own community. To cite an example, it was customary for *Chuhara* people to go to each home of upper-class people and do *Salaam* i.e. bow down in respect. Where it should come out of respect only and not by force or torture of any sort, Valmiki reasons that they should not perform this custom anymore. He successfully tries to convince his community to break this humiliating tradition. Valmiki opines that no one should feed such shallow pride of any caste at the cost of other people’s self-respect. According to him, such traditions entraps subjugated people in endless tunnel of disgrace and subordination.

On top of such cruelty, their community was so much oppressed that no one was able to raise their voice against such atrocities. They could not even demand for the equal wages. The power centres of the society which were the police, the government officials, amongst others abused the people from the *Chuhara* locality and if they raised their voice against such injustice, they would simply juggernaut it with sheer power and carnages. Om Prakash Valmiki gives a heart-stirring narration of what atrocities were bestowed on his people in following words:

“Those who had been captured from the basti were being made to stand like a rooster, a very painful crouched up position. Moreover, they were being beaten with batons. The policeman who was beating them was getting tired. The one being beaten would scream after every blow. This festival of valour



was being celebrated openly. People watched quietly, without a word. There was no protest from any side...Their scream had made the birds in the trees take off, but paralysis had struck the villagers who could not express their empathy". (38)

The Retaliation by the Protagonist:

Such injustice performed by the upper strata of the society was a thing of routine in *Chuhara* community. It has been a known truth that social dominance is always accompanying the man with wealth. This community could barely feed themselves for twice in a day. Such poverty crippled the already sunken confidence. Education can be the only way to rise above such poverty of mind and one can fight for justice only if they fight for education. It is a proven point that education can liberate human being in so many ways and the same thing helped Valmiki to overcome plights of his and his clan's life.

Anger of the Om Prakash Valmiki bursts out once he came to know about the life and struggle of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, a *dalit* himself who rose above the surrounding poverty, humiliation and become a historical figure with all his hard-work and knowledge. Valmiki reads Marathi dalit literature a lot and finds lot of inspiration and courage from those works. Once the fire is ignited, it cannot be stopped by any subjugation. Om Prakash Valmiki, the narrator of *Joothan* gradually starts to awaken his society and lead them from darkness of injustice and disgrace towards light of justice and humanity. Surprisingly, he had to battle with some of his own people as well as they were not prepared for this new beginning and wanted to cling to the age-old tradition. His life-journey is thoroughly depicted in this autobiographical work. The incidents of Malkapur, renaming event of Marathwada University are really heart-touching and thought-provoking.

The author's primary goal is to raise the awareness in Dalit community and other classes of the society about the predicament of this subjugated communities. He says:

"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 lands the process of social change". (132).

Though situation has changed a lot but one cannot state that these caste-based atrocities have vanished from India. Now and then, such humiliation is faced by lower class people. Some of them finds the day-light in newspaper while the other are only known to the one suffering from it. According to a report, almost 58000 workers are there who clean the scavenges manually and 941 died since 2013. However, death is not just one end of their life. There are many such villages in India where they are not permitted entry. Recently in Gujarat, there were



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couple of incidents where *dalit* groom was beaten up just because he rode the mare for his marriage. There were few other incidents where some dalit boys were beaten up just because they kept moustache! The heinous incident of Una, Gujarat is still a blemish on the civility of the independent India.

Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* in many ways is an eye-opener for all the classes of the society, for all the people who favour equality and justice for everyone without any discrimination of caste, creed and wealth.



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