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THE METAMORPHOSIS OF DALIT AGONY INTO REVOLT IN OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S JOOTHAN: AN UNTOUCHABLE LIFE

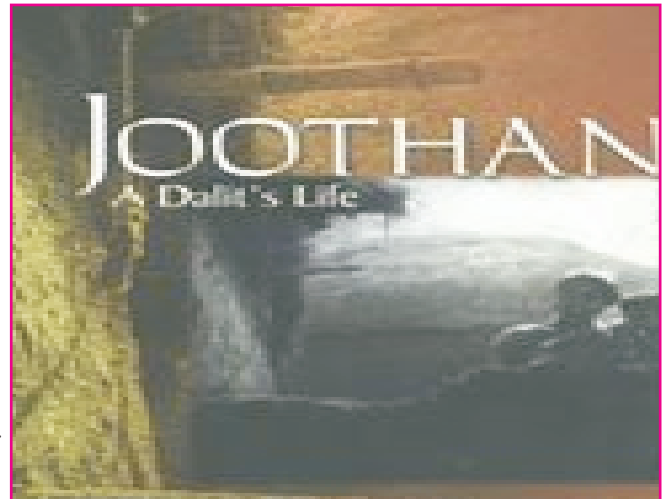
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ABSTRACT

The authentic expressions of Dalit experiences or Dalit life, we find in Dalit autobiographies. The core of this experience is the pain, grief, and humiliation of Dalit people. The Dalit autobiographies are always been criticized as narratives of pain and grief. Resistance of Dalit against caste system is neglected. The transformation of pain into resistance is a notable aspect of Dalit autobiography. Dalit writers' journey is a journey from oppression to optimism. The exploitation of the weaker section of the society by dominant class is an important phenomenon that we can see in the world. But now we can see the volcano of revolt from the marginalized community. The weaker

section of the society is now raising its voice against the marginalization and otherness. Dalit autobiographies record the process of Rejection to Revolt, from Silence to Sound and from Marginalization to Central. Dalit literature is as perfect chemistry of pain, suffering, resistance and revolt.



KEYWORDS: Metamorphosis, Agony, Humiliation, Pain, Discrimination, Untouchability, Rejection, Dalit Consciousness, Revolt.

INTRODUCTION :-

In the form Dalit literature, new trend is emerged as a powerful literature of the oppressed. It strengthened Marathi literature specially and now becomes an important trend in Indian literature. Respect for human being is the main motto of Dalit literature. It is a revolutionary literature and this revolutionary aspect comes from the grief and pain of thousands of years that Dalit community went through. People who suppressed from thousands of years are now ready to prove themselves as human being and they got this strength because of the battle of Dr. Ambedkar against unjust social order. This literature began to evaluate man made Hindu social and religious structure which treats Dalit even inferior than animals. Dalit literature takes a stand against caste system and Varna system. Dalit writers realized that their grief, pain are not depicted in any genre of literature. If literature is the mirror of life, their life should have been portrayed in literature. They realized the falseness of the statement that literature mirrors life. Dalit writers think that literature can change the society. So they decided to express new kinds of feelings and experiences which had never been expressed in any literature before.

Although untouchability was legally abolished by the Constitution of India, nothing is changed in the lives of Dalit. Untouchability still remained in the minds of the people. Joothan is a story of Independent India of the

1950 to today. This story focuses on wretched life of untouchable now called 'erstwhile untouchables or ex-untouchables or Dalit. Joothanis considered the first Hindi Dalit text, published in Hindi in 1997 and translated into English in 2003 by ArunPrabha Mukherjee, Professor of English, York University, Toronto. It was originally published as an essay 'Ek Dalit Ki Atmakatha' in a book called "Harijan se Dalit".

The word 'Agony' has its root in ancient Greek word 'agonia' which means a mental struggle for victory. The Cambridge Dictionary defines the word 'agony' as extreme physical or mental pain or suffering. The basic reason of rebel or revolt is oppression. The age-old oppression of Dalit from upper caste society leads Dalit towards anger and restlessness. The reaction against all hatred, insult, pain and miseries gave birth to a great tempest in the heart of Dalit people. This discrimination at large scale breeds contempt naturally in the minds of Dalit people. To bear such kind of atrocities for a longer time became intolerable for Dalit community. Revolt can bring change in their lives and they knew it very well. Tolerance at all times is not possible for them. Revolt became the need of the time. Dalit consciousness played a very important part in leading Dalit masses towards Revolt. SharankumarLimbale says, "By Dalit literature I mean writing about Dalits, by Dalit writers with Dalit consciousness".¹ Dalit consciousness made Dalit writers fired against castism. The core of Dalit consciousness came from DrAmbedkar's life and thoughts.

'Joothan' is a Hindi word which means a leftover food, not to be eaten by others. ArunPrabha Mukherjee explains, "Joothan literally means food left on an eater's plate, usually destined for the garbage pail in a middle class urban home".² This book does not only portray the life of an author but the history of entire Chuhra or Chamar community of Uttar Pradesh. So the agony of the narrator is collective, it is the agony of his entire community. Valmiki or Bhangis are the most oppressed of all Dalits in Uttar Pradesh and in India also.

Although this community gives an important service to the society, they have been rejected and put into extreme poverty by the society. The title of the book Joothan is quite suggestive as it carries the connotations of the rituals, purity and pollution as jootha means polluted. Dalit community was forced to accept and eat Joothan for their subsistence for centuries. This title also denotes pain, poverty, helplessness and humiliation of entire Chuhra community of the Northern part of India. This community has to rely totally on the upper caste. Valmiki gives us the detail description of how they collect, preserve and eat 'Joothan'. 'Joothan' the word is historic because Dr. BabasahebAmbedkar, who is the inspiration of Dalit literature, advised untouchables to stop accepting 'Joothan'. Moreover he shows how Dalits are threatened when they refused to accept 'Joothan'.

Valmiki has articulated the agonies of being Dalit through many painful incidents. From his childhood Valmiki has been treated badly, he has been called 'AbeyChuhre or Chuhreka'. In our society calling someone by his caste is considered as an atrocity. It is against rule of our Constitution. His caste became his identity and stigma for him. It is derogatory way of addressing somebody. Chuhra is a pejorative word here which means, 'You offspring of the Chuhras'. So the agony of being borned in Dalit community starts with birth and it continued till the end of life.

Valmiki intertextualizes his own experience with upper caste Brahmin teacher with the character of Mahabharata, Dronacharya. When people of the high caste tell this popular story, they present a casteless Eklavya as an exemplar of an obedient disciple rather than Brahmin Dronacharya as a perfidious and biased teacher. The moral of this story is not virtue of Guru- Bhakti. But the intension behind this is that the power of archery should remain in the hands of high caste and outcaste should remain lowly as illiterate and untouchable.

The outcaste should only do the work assigned to him. He should not dare to question it. Whoever questioned, he/she would be found guilty. Valmiki's father believed that one should improve one's caste by education. But Valmiki does not agree with him. He said, "He did not know that 'caste' cannot be improved by education. It can only be improved by taking birth in the right caste". (P.67) Further when he got job after completing his education, his father responded in a positive way. He says, "At last you have escaped caste". But what he didn't know till the day he died is that caste follows one right to one's death". (P.89)

In another incident, Valmiki witnesses the humiliation of his mother at the hands of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi, a high caste person of his village. Chuhra community always looks forward for marriage ceremonies. If there is such marriage feast they would gather outside with their big baskets. At the wedding of Tyagi's daughter, Valmiki's mother worked hard as a cleaner. When she pleaded for some leftover food for her children, she was insulted and humiliated. Sukhdev Singh's humiliating reaction went like the knife in Valmiki's heart. He said, "You are taking a basket full of 'Joothan' and on the top of that you want food for your children. Don't you forget your place Chuhri,

pick up your basket and get going". (P.12) The 'Joothan' or left over food for his community is the most delicious food of the world. They relish the leftover food from the wedding and other feasts. They used to eat them and also saved pieces of it to feed them during the hard times.

Being a Dalit was a crime. Dalit is economically deprived, socially penalized and religiously demoralized. Valmiki says, "What sort of life was that? After working hard day and night the price of our sweat was just 'Joothan'. And yet no one had any grudge or shame or repentance". (P.11) Dalit are most degraded, exploited, humiliated and least educated people in our society.

Dalit autobiographies are considered as an epics of the Dalit suffering and pain. Dalit author narrated these experiences through various incidents of their life. Valmiki says, "Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats and cows and buffaloes, if one (a higher caste person) happened to touch a Chuhra, one gets contaminated or polluted. The Chuhra were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and throw them away". (P.2) Animals can touch upper caste, they can drink water from the lakes, they can enter into upper caste houses but human being cannot. What kind of society and culture is this which differentiates person from other person.

Why is it so difficult to cast off the caste? The answer to this question is that the notion of caste is justified by the logic of pollution. There is the issue of power hidden in the ideology of pollution. To maintain the power structure of caste hierarchy, upper caste people robs the identity, dignity, humanity from Dalit people so that they must always remain slaves to them. Giving 'Joothan' to Chuhra community is not the act of humanity but to ensure that Chuhra community should not forget their place. They should remain outcaste forever.

Dalit writers' journey is a journey from oppression to optimism. The exploitation of the weaker section of the society by dominant class is an important phenomenon we can see in the world. But now we can see the volcano of revolt from the marginalized community. The weaker section of the society is now raising its voice against the marginalization and otherness. These autobiographies record the process of Rejection to Revolt, from Silence to Sound and from Marginalization to Central. Dalit literature is as perfect chemistry of pain, suffering, resistance and revolt.

Dalit writers are asserting their identity through their writings. The act of writing or emergence or Dalit autobiography is itself a revolt against caste discrimination. Political freedom is not important for Dalit people, social freedom is important for them. They have given importance to self-respect movement. Though India got freedom in 1947, the millions of Dalit are still waiting for social freedom. Dalit autobiographies are nothing but a voice of the voiceless. It voiced the ongoing injustice done to Dalit and at the same time it challenges the hegemony of Brahminism.

Dalit writers like Valmiki have tried to build consciousness among Dalit through their writings. The reason behind this is the poor picture of Dalit in the upper caste writings. They simply marginalize the voice of Dalits. The questions asked by Valmiki in this autobiography demand answers from the dominated class of society.

Throwing away humiliating identity and asserting identity as Dalit have been the main thrust of Dalit autobiographies. Valmiki's 'Joothan' is one of them. In spite of many obstacles, Valmiki got admission in the school. Dalits were not allowed to educate themselves. But Indian Constitution gives the right of education to all. Though he has been ill-treated by his school mates and teachers, he did not only continue his school but completed his education and got a job.

Valmiki entered into the college at Dehradun. And there he encountered with the books of Dr. Ambedkar. He read them which transformed him totally. He did not sleep at night and remained in great turmoil for some days. He became restless. Ambedkar's thought awakened him; he became conscious of his rights and became ready to fight against exploitation. He got his voice through these books and with self-confidence and self-respect he would like to challenge the present caste system. He became quite active in college and participated in many college activities with success. In his school days, he never heard the name of Dr. Ambedkar. His teacher also never mentioned Dr. Ambedkar's name in their teaching and speeches. This is quite an important phase of his life which turned and changed his goal of life. Anti-establishment consciousness became strong in him. He also began to write. He was more attracted to social subjects. He became very keen to read the books on social realities. He also read Marx, Chekov, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Hemingway, Zola and other Western writers. He joined a local theatre group and saw Vijay Tendulkar's plays. He read complete works of Tagore and Kalidas. He began to take very much interest in the teaching of Buddha. The works of these writers made a deep impact on his mind. Throwing away the

Hinduism and going towards Buddhism is a revolt. Rejecting Hindu traditional culture and accepting Buddhist culture is a revolt. He read Dalit literature of Maharashtra which energized him and created in him the literary consciousness. Literally conscious made him a writer. He began to write poems and plays and started writing a column in a local weekly.

After joining his duties, when he came to the Mumbai for his training, he came into contact with Marathi Dalit literature. He came to know Dalit atrocities near Mumbai and Pune which shocked him. He wrote an article on Dalit issues and it published in Navbharat Times Mumbai. This article became quite famous and aroused controversy. Upper caste people and the employer of the company enraged a lot and they complained against Valmiki to the Principle of the institute. Though he has been threatened for disciplinary action, he got a lot of fame as well as sympathy of local Dalit people. Marathi Dalit literature ignites spark in his veins.

Valmiki faced many humiliating experiences in his school and outside in society also. But he never moved by such incidents and continued with his study. He did hard work and became the first to complete SSC and graduate from his entire community. His self-confidence and determination made him a successful writer. He advised many people of his community to educate their children. He began to change the mindset of Dalit community and awakened them for the slavery of caste system.

All these incidents convey us that Valmiki rejected untouchability in a true sense. Denying the traditional task and throwing away 'Joothan' by his family nothing but a revolt against untouchability. Valmiki's friends, who connected with Dalit movement like Dalit Panther sharpened his consciousness. Dalit movement gives rise to his burning thoughts and he became creative and started raising his voice through the medium of writing. He realized that mental slavery of Hinduism is quite danger than physical slavery. Realization of human slavery is related to Dalit consciousness. Dalit consciousness is the awareness of social pain and sorrow and also social relationship with the society. Dalit literature also played an important role in developing Dalit consciousness in him. Dalit consciousness made him understood Dalits' agony and exploitation. His pain does not remain individual but became social.

Though this autobiography is a documentation of pain, grief of Dalit community, Valmiki has broken the wall of silence. Even narrating such kind of experiences through writing is a rebellious act. Valmiki relieves his agonies of being Dalit in this caste based society. He does not only share his bitter experience but also commented on it. Documenting or narrating the bitter experience of life does not mean he expect sympathy or empathy from readers, but by narrating these incidents, he aims to change the mindset of upper caste people. He wanted to tell them about the life, they endured from the centuries and the same time it is the main intension of Valmiki to inform his own community and Dalit people about their slavery. Once the Dalits are awakened, they will demand for their rights. To awaken people from the deep slumber was a big task for Valmiki and he did it through this book.

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