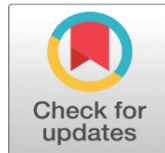
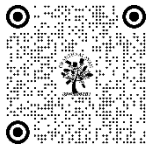


"AN EXPLORATION OF OPPRESSION: JOOTHAN AS A DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHY"

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan as a pivotal text in Dalit literature, focussing on its depiction of caste oppression, resistance, and the transformational influence of education. Joothan, a memoir of Valmiki's existence as a "untouchable" in India, reveals the persistent humiliations and adversities faced by the Dalit group. The title of the narrative, signifying "leftover scraps," functions as a potent metaphor for the dehumanisation of Dalits, highlighting the social and psychological ramifications of caste discrimination. Valmiki utilises a candid and unembellished literary style to emphasise themes of exclusion, resistance, and self-assertion in relaying his personal experiences. This article contextualises Joothan within the socio-historical framework of Dalit literature, examining its alignment with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's principles of empowerment via education and self-respect. Valmiki's narrative is both a chronicle of adversity and a monument to the fortitude and endurance of marginalised populations. Through the reclamation of his voice and identity, Valmiki confronts the established caste hierarchies and asserts the acceptance of the humanity and dignity of the Dalit people.

Keywords: Caste, Untouchable, Marginalized, Dalits, Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Joothan, a memoir by Omprakash Valmiki, serves as both a personal narrative and a potent political declaration. Published in 1997, the text offers insight into the lives of the Dalits, who are positioned at the lowest level of India's caste system. Although caste-based discrimination has been legally eradicated, Joothan reveals the ongoing quotidian violence of caste bias that endures in both rural and urban India. Through the narration of his childhood and scholastic experiences, Valmiki provides readers with an unvarnished view on the life of a Dalit, compelling them to confront the harsh truths of the caste system.

Within the expansive realm of Dalit literature, Joothan occupies a pivotal position as a novel that combines personal narrative with social critique. Dalit literature, originating in the 1960s, represents a literary movement aimed at articulating the struggles and aspirations of marginalised populations. Authors such as Valmiki employ autobiographical narratives to affirm their dignity and contest the stigma linked to Dalit status. This study will examine how Joothan exemplifies a quintessential Dalit book, focussing on the themes of discrimination, resistance, and the transformational potential of education.

2. THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF DALIT LITERATURE

Dalit literature originates from the Ambedkarite movement, which sought to achieve social and economic advancement for Dalits after centuries of persecution. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a pivotal player in the Dalit liberation struggle, advocated for the pursuit of education by Dalits as a means of empowerment. His books and speeches have significantly impacted the Dalit literary movement, motivating authors to chronicle their experiences and expose caste-related atrocities.

Dalit writing diverges from mainstream Indian literature in both structure and substance, frequently utilising regional dialects and idioms to express authenticity. Authors such as Valmiki, Baburao Bagul, and Sharan Kumar Limbale have utilised severe language and vivid imagery to illustrate the realities of untouchability and social isolation. These narratives fulfil two functions: they provide an insider's perspective on the Dalit experience and they contest the literary and social dominance of upper-caste viewpoints. Dalit literature affirms the humanity of marginalised individuals and demands acknowledgement of their experiences by narrating tales of suffering, perseverance, and rebellion.

3. THEMES IN JOOTHAN ILLUSTRATING DALIT IDENTITY AND STRUGGLE

1) Caste-Based Discrimination: Valmiki's Encounters as a "Untouchable"

Caste-based discrimination is a prevalent theme in Joothan, whereby Valmiki narrates the humiliations he endured during his boyhood. He recounts his ostracism in school, compelled to sit separately from his fellow students and enduring mockery and abuse. A notably painful scenario illustrates a teacher compelling him to clean the school courtyard, underscoring the belief that Dalits are fated to undertake menial labour.

"One day, the headmaster called me and asked me to sweep the school premises... I had no choice but to obey, even though the other students watched and laughed."

Valmiki emphasises that inequality is ingrained in the frameworks of daily existence, particularly within education. In this scenario, education, intended as a liberating force, transforms into another domain where caste bias is sustained. Through the elucidation of these events, Valmiki exposes the emotional and psychological burden of maturing as a Dalit, articulating the anguish of incessantly being reminded of his social standing.

Alongside his educational achievements, Valmiki narrates the discrimination his family encountered in their village. They were compelled to reside on the periphery, isolated from the broader community, and were deprived of essential supplies. Valmiki's father, a forced labourer, frequently suffered taunts and physical abuse from the village landlords. Scenes in Joothan starkly illustrate how caste discrimination impacts not only individuals but also entire families and communities. The continuation of these traditions underscores the deeply ingrained nature of caste prejudice in Indian society.

2) Joothan as a Symbol of Dehumanisation

The word Joothan, meaning "leftover scraps," serves as a potent metaphor that embodies the dehumanising treatment of Dalits. Valmiki elucidates that Dalits were anticipated to subsist on the remnants of food dumped by higher-caste families, a behaviour that perpetuated their perceived subordination. By titling his memoir after this derogatory practice, Valmiki encourages readers to reflect on the symbolic significance of joothan: it embodies not merely the physical remnants of food but also the cultural perception that Dalits are relegated to consuming what others discard.

"The leftover food that the upper-caste families threw away... we would collect and eat. They saw us as less than human, fit only to consume what was discarded."

The above statement illustrates the degree to which Dalits are deprived of fundamental dignity rights. Valmiki's employment of joothan as a recurrent motif in his tale emphasises the corporeal and psychological ramifications of caste-based degradation. For the Dalit community, consuming leftovers serves as a constant reminder of their social rank and isolation from mainstream culture. By integrating this metaphor into the title of his memoir, Valmiki highlights the widespread dehumanisation experienced by Dalits.

3) Education as a Means of Empowerment

Education functions as a light of hope for Valmiki, providing him an avenue to transcend the limitations of caste-based prejudice. In Joothan, he contemplates how his quest for education allowed him to overcome the constraints of his caste. Valmiki's pursuit of education, in the face of numerous challenges, exemplifies his tenacity and determination.

"I was determined to study, even if it meant enduring taunts and humiliation. Education was the only way I could escape the fate that had been assigned to me."

Valmiki's experience underscores the transforming potential of education, equipping Dalits with the means to confront and oppose caste discrimination. His achievement in attaining higher education represents a manifestation of social mobility that challenges the entrenched caste system. In Joothan, education is seen as a personal and political endeavour; via acquiring knowledge, Valmiki transforms his own existence while simultaneously confronting the societal frameworks that want to restrict him.

Valmiki's education significantly influenced his decision to pursue writing, a choice that underscores his dedication to highlighting the injustices experienced by Dalits. By chronicling his experiences, he adds to the broader Dalit literary movement, which seeks to empower marginalised populations through narrative. In this regard, Joothan exemplifies the capacity of education to effectuate societal transformation.

4) Resistance Actions and the Reclamation of Dalit Identity

Valmiki's memoir is a narrative of both sorrow and resistance. In Joothan, he narrates moments where he challenged conventional expectations, rejecting the role designated to him by his caste. In a notably impactful passage, he articulates his refusal to engage in manual labour for the upper-caste people, despite facing threats of violence:

"I refused to clean the village landlord's house, and my family faced threats... But I knew I had to stand up for my dignity. I could not let them treat me like dirt."

This act of rebellion embodies a fundamental topic in Dalit literature: the affirmation of dignity amidst oppression. For Valmiki, resistance signifies not just a repudiation of caste-based discrimination but also a reaffirmation of his humanity. By rejecting the demands of the upper castes, he restores his self-esteem and affirms his entitlement to equal treatment. Thus, Joothan emerges as a potent assertion of Dalit pride and resistance.

Valmiki's choice to disclose his narrative to the public further underscores the concept of resistance. Through the composition of Joothan, he not only confronts the silence around caste-based violence but also reinterprets the essence of Dalit identity. His tale functions as a proclamation of self-respect and an affirmation of his entitlement to recount his own life story, unencumbered by the limitations imposed by caste-based discrimination.

5) Language, Imagery, and Literary Technique in Joothan

Valmiki's writing style is distinguished by its transparency and passionate fervour. He employs straightforward, unembellished language to articulate the harsh reality of Dalit existence, ensuring that his message connects with people of diverse backgrounds. The severity of his prose reflects the brutality of the incidents he recounts, establishing a compelling dichotomy between the elegance of language and the repugnance of caste-based prejudice.

The imagery of Joothan is both visceral and emblematic, illustrating the physical and emotional consequences of untouchability. Valmiki frequently depicts the physical environments he occupies—the segregated village, the mud-floored school, the deteriorating Dalit neighborhood—to exemplify the dehumanising circumstances endured by Dalits. These depictions highlight the social and spatial segregation enforced by the caste system, which relegates Dalits to the periphery of society. Valmiki employs visuals to vividly depict his environment while highlighting the psychological effects of caste-based discrimination.

4. CONCLUSION

Joothan is a significant book in Dalit literature, providing readers with a candid examination of the lives of individuals marginalised by the caste system. Valmiki's personal account compels readers to confront the stark reality of caste-based injustice, while simultaneously honouring the endurance and fortitude of the Dalit community. Through the narration of his experience, Valmiki re-establishes his identity and affirms his entitlement to visibility and acknowledgement.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None .

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