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# Hope and Determination in Poignant Subaltern Narratives: A Study on Om Prakash Valmiki’s “Joothan: A Dalit’s Life”

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## Abstract

*This theoretical study delves into the history of a group that was marginalized and un documented in colonial and nationalized archives. In the proceedings of the study , it explores the structure of the most significant novel Joothan by Om Prakash Valmiki an autobiography . It accentuate the “Dalit” community which spotlighted the thread of “Subalterns” . It also points how vicious the ruling class were with the subordinates which riles up the emotions of the readers , as it is based on a real-life incident voiced from the lens of the author. “Education” was the key tool to fight against all the odds attacked upon Valmiki to succeed in his goals and the caste oppressions. In surmise of the composition , it completely scrutinizes the stumbling blocks via the novel. Inquisitive of the query of “How is it dealt in the contemporary period?”*

**Keywords:** Oppression, Marginalized, Economic Deprivation, Untouchable, Education, Dalit

## Introduction

Joothan: A Dalit’s Life is a novel penned by Om Prakash Valmiki in the year 1997 originally published in Hindi. It was translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in the year 2003. Om Prakash Valmiki was born in the year 1950 in a place Barla situated in Uttar Pradesh belonging to outcaste, sheds light on the harsh realities of caste discrimination in India. This novel Implores the hurdles faced by the marginalized Dalit community named as “Chuhras” and how they struggle beneath the ruling class termed as “Tyagi.” The caste system prevailed even after eight years of independence of India and still in the contemporary. The hope and deterministic attitude of Om Prakash Valmiki is the key role for his success and achievements in his life. Valmiki chronicles his own struggle to get an education in the village school. His story demonstrates that it is indeed possible for the untouchables , despite the hardships and deprivations to emancipate themselves. The book describes the life of Valmiki as an untouchable in the 1950s, and the societal oppression he faced. Decoding the title “Joothan” The epithet has its origin from Hindi which means “leftover food scraps”. Title of the novel deciphers the glimpse of

the entire plot what is it about. The title holds numerous emotions faced by the systematically excluded groups. Valmiki drenches the readers with the obstacles he grappled during his early childhood due to caste system prevailed in the society.

### **Sufferings And Turmoils Paramounted In “Joothan”**

*“We were not allowed to draw water from the well. If we needed water, we had to stand far away and beg the upper castes to pour some for us.” (2)*

Valmiki and his family faced exclusion in every aspect of life, from being forbidden to enter temples to being denied access to public water sources. Dalits were forced to live on the outskirts of the village in deplorable conditions, separated from the upper-caste community. Valmiki was tormented by his school teachers as they humiliated by throwing swear words on his family .

Dalits were compelled to perform menial and degrading tasks such as cleaning animal carcasses, sweeping roads, and working without proper payment. Upper-caste villagers subjected them to verbal abuse and physical violence if they dared to assert themselves or question the caste hierarchy.

*“The teachers did not touch my notebooks. They made me sit on the floor, away from the desks. Sometimes, I was asked to sweep the school and the playground.” . (5)*

Valmiki’s experience in school was marked by constant humiliation. Teachers forced him to sit separately from other students. Instead of being allowed to study, Valmiki was made to clean the school premises, symbolizing how Dalits were seen as unfit for education. Kali Ram the head master of the school beats him black and blue for no reason , grounds behind is that the aversion towards his community. His upper-caste classmates and teachers subjected him to ridicule and discrimination.

*“Our entire community lived in poverty and subjugation, struggling for our daily bread. We would often be forced to eat joothan, the scraps left behind by the upper-caste families.” (1)*

Valmiki’s family, like other Dalit families, lived in extreme poverty and relied on scraps of food from upper-caste households. Valmiki demonstrates that the economic deprivation of the marginalized is the consequences of the Hindu caste order. Despite their hard labor, Dalits received little to no compensation for their work, further entrenching them in a cycle of poverty. Constant humiliation and exclusion left deep emotional scars on Valmiki. The internalized shame and struggle to assert his self-worth were recurring challenges in his life. Witnessing his family being treated as subhuman was a source of profound pain and anger.

*“Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word about our lives?” (26)*

Om Prakash Valmiki expresses a sense of anguish that no epic poets of Hindi has ever mentioned about the secluded caste in an intricate manner, they never attempted a chance to probe into the hardships faced by the marginalized.

*“I feel amazed when I look back on those days and the things that I learned to tolerate. How much my ability to tolerate hurts flung at me has taken out of me!” (80)*

The author sprinkles his gratitude for leading a miserable life because it shaped him to become a good human today and turned him to encounter the stumbling blocks with courage. The harrows he subjected to was a great deal as it brings out his level of tolerance which is flaunting in and out of his life.

Valmiki accounts all the disparities starting from social discrimination, followed by caste oppressions, economic deprivations, educational discrimination, he has undergone a roller coaster of psychological trauma where he even was questioned on his identity of his community at his work place which brewed a perpetual internal scar.

## Education Spotlighted the Identity of the Untouchables

“I realized that education was the only way to escape the shackles of caste.” (6) The oppressed voices are endeavored hard to achieve their goals while Valmiki enduring persistence to attain education shows his spirit to fight against all the odds. Education became the spotlight to shun the brightness of this caste oppressions. Valmiki became the first person to pass in his board exams belonging to CHEHRA community he feels happy as his famous spread all over through newspaper Chaman Lal Tyagi who belonging to the upper class congratulates him which Valmiki considered as the major success because all these days the people integrated to the upper class always afflicted and humiliated them as they belong to the lower class but when someone from the Ruling class appreciated Valmiki on his success Valmiki reckons as a biggest achievement of his life that is when he understood education is a greater phenomenon where it lifts the people’s Identity despite their caste , race and other intersectionality.

*Why is my caste my only identity? Why can't I simply be a human being?" (5)*

A powerful question that underscores the dehumanization of Dalits and their yearning for dignity and equality. It encapsulates the deep pain and frustration of being reduced to one's caste in a rigidly hierarchical society

Valmiki's perpetual determination and the hope he possessed on himself paved a route for his Zenith, despite undergoing the psychiatric turmoil, he set an Identity for himself in accordance to vindicate the stereotypical notion “ people belonging to marginalized caste are unruly and uneducated, who are destined to do menial toils”. Valmiki's success was a massive breakthrough to all those affiliated to the dominant class especially the teachers of his school who presumed, Students of marginalized wouldn't fit into the framework of education, it was a lash on their thoughts. He recognized that education was the key to breaking the shackles of caste oppression.

His academic success allowed him to transcend societal boundaries and opened doors to opportunities that were previously denied to Dalits.

Reclaiming Identity Through Writing “Joothan” itself is an act of reclaiming dignity. Valmiki shares his story not only to expose injustice but also to assert the humanity and worth of Dalits. Through his words, he transforms the pain of humiliation into a powerful critique of the caste system and a call for equality.

## Conclusion

“Does Dalit community still exist and marginalized in the contemporary world?” which is still an inquisitive question popped up in the 21st century. Yes it still exists especially in India, the practice of witnessing them in a lower stratum is prevailing. Hope and determination were the two factors Valmiki was glued to that ardently assisted him to attain the pinnacle in life. After completing his education, Valmiki secured a government job, which was a significant achievement for a Dalit at the time. His professional success challenged societal stereotypes about Dalits and proved that they were as capable as anyone else when given equal opportunities. The only way to eliminate the system is to “illuminate” the students with the POWER OF EDUCATION.

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