

Tribhuvan University

Recovering the Subject: Valmiki's *Joothan* as the Chronicle of Dalit Life

A Thesis Submitted to the Central Department of English, T.U.

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

By

Uendra Gaudel

Central Department of English

Kirtipur, Kathmandu

August 2012

Tribhuvan University
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Central Department of English

Letter of Recommendation

This thesis entitled “Recovering the Subject: Valmiki's *Joothan* as the Chronicle of Dalit Life” has been prepared under my supervision by Upendra Gaudel. He carried out the research from September 2011 to August 2012. I recommend this thesis for evaluation to the research committee.

Mr. Saroj Sharma Ghimire

Supervisor

Tribhuvan University

Date:

Tribhuvan University
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Central Department of English

Approval Letter

This thesis entitled “Recovering the Subject: Valmiki's *Joothan* as the chronicle of Dalit Life” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Mr. Unpendra Gaudel has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

Members of Research Committee:

Internal Examiner

External Examiner

Head

Central Department of English

Date: _____

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Mr. Saroj Sharma Ghimire, Lecturer, Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University for present thesis. It was his scholarly guidance and valuable suggestions and introduction that made this project a reality. I am deeply indebted to him.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Amma Raj Joshi, Head Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, who always focuses on quality preparation of the research. I acknowledge the intellectual endeavors of my teachers at the Central Department of English for their continuous assistance throughout the study period. I am indebted to them for their valuable suggestions and genuine insights to bring the best of me.

With due respect, I would like to express my sincere gratitude towards my family members especially I am indebted to my mother and sister without whose continuous support and encouragement my dream to be a research student would have been unrealized. My special thanks go to Pabitra Gaudel, Gita Gaudel, Suman Subedi, Bishwabijay Sharma, Bishnu Sapkota and Sita Rijal.

Lastly I would like to thank the Central Department of English and its staff who directly and indirectly helped me to conduct this research.

August 2012

Upendra Gaudel

Abstract

This research examines Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* as a tale of domination, subordination and hegemony imposed upon the lower caste and class in Indian society. The Hindi word *Joothan* literally means food left on plate, usually destined for the garbage pail in a middle class urban home. However, such food would be characterized as *Joothan* only if someone else were to eat it. The word carries the connotation of ritual purity and pollution, because *Joothan* means polluted.

In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki deals with the issue of humiliation meted out of the Dalits by Indian society, no matter where they lived. This humiliation stems from the fact that Dalit inferiority has gotten embedded in the psyche of the upper caste, the members of which have developed an extraordinary repertoire of idioms, symbols and gestures of verbal and physical denigration of the Dalit over centuries. It is embedded in the literary and artistic imagination and sensibility of the upper caste.

Joothan stridently asks for the promissory note, joining a chorus of Dalit voice that are demanding their rightful place under the sun. A manifesto for revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness, *Joothan* confronts its readers with difficult questions about their own humanity and invites them to join the universal project of human liberation.

Contents

	Page No.
Acknowledgements	
Abstract	
I. Omprakash Valmiki's <i>Joothan</i> and the Dalit Movement in India	1-12
II. Recovering the subject: <i>Joothan</i> as Dalit Chronicle	13-39
<i>Joothan</i> as Dalit Chronicle	13
<i>Joothan</i> : Dalit Life and Everyday Violence	18
<i>Joothan</i> : Metaphor of Poverty, Pollution and Humiliation	27
<i>Joothan</i> as Autobiography: From Pain to Resistance	34
III. <i>Joothan</i> as Chronicle of Pain and Resistance	40-43
Works Cited	

I. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and the Dalit Movement in India

The acclaimed Indian writer, Omprakash Valmiki, has shown how the people are dominated and suppressed by so called 'upper caste' in India. This research focuses on how upper caste dominates the scheduled caste by using different apparatus like custom, law, religion, civilization, language of the dominant group of people, actually who are in power. The writer in his novel *Joothan* brings such a character from the group of minorities, labours and peasants. The protagonist, Omprakash who is compelled to sow sugarcane in Fauz Sing's field though his examination was approaching. There are lots of evidences to forward his muteness that multiply his state of subalternity. Misbehaviour in school by head teacher, Kaliram, working in Tyagi's family without wage, keeping him out of extra-curricular activities at school are the examples. In these all condition, he is illtreated. The title also encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki's community, which not only had to rely on *Joothan* but also relished. Valmiki gives a detail description of collecting, preserving and eating *Joothan*. His memories of being assigned to guard and drying *Joothan* from crows to chicken and of his realizing the dried and reprocessed *Joothan* burn his with renewed pain and humiliation many years later. On one level, this is an autobiographical account of Valmiki's journey from his birth and upbringing as a untouchable in the newly independent India of the 1950s to today and his pride in being a Dalit. On another level, *Joothan* is also a record on the condition of people who are now routinely called "erstwhile untouchable" or "exuntouchable."

Douglas Bom's observation on *Joothan* perlocates the theme of domination in Indian society. In his review of *Joothan* Boom argues that by saying "One can somehow get past poverty and deprivation but it is impossible to get past caste" with this statement, Valmiki highlights the rigidity of the caste system in India that has

resulted in the socio-economic oppression of thousands across India over centuries merely because of the lesser caste to which they belong. This novel expresses the pain, poverty of the untouchable Chuhra community of Uttar Pradesh to which the author belongs. The treatment done upon scheduled caste was worse than to animals.

Bom further writes:

Instead of following a linear pattern, the author moves from memory to memory demonstrating how his present is deeply scarred by his past in spite of the distances he has traversed to become one of the prominent authors in Dalit literature. Valmiki describes his childhood in the village Barla district of Uttar Pradesh. He writes about the ill treatment meted out to him when he was at school because he was an untouchable. He describes the trauma he went through when he asked to spend three days sweeping the school courtyard instead of accompanying his classmates belonging to the higher caste, in the study class. (13)

The author's objective doesn't stop at evoking compassion towards the oppressed Dalit in the mind of the reader but questions "Why is my caste my only identity?" This one query leads the reader into introspection. In India caste has always defined the socio-political scenario of the country. Whether it is the debate on the reservation policy for government job and education to aid the socially and economically backward classes or political gimmickry. Everything has an undertone of caste and religion. Thus, the text *Joothan* reveals to the reader the rigidity and narrow mindedness of casteist India, which as relevant today as it was in the early part of the last century.

Valmiki finds similar problem of caste and class bias in contemporary Hindi literature and says that upper-caste writers don't know the miseries of Dalit, what they

write remains superficial, born out of sympathy but not out of a desire for change or repentance Dalit writers and critics have contested attempts by mainstream critics to include these high caste portrayals of Dalit under the rubric of Dalit literature. They claim that Dalit literature can be written only by Dalits "Dragging and cutting dead animals - how will non Dalits write about the experience of Dalits with the power of their imagination ? How will they feel the angry ideas rising in the hearts of untouchables on the basis of their helpless imagination" (Limbale xxxiv). In a similar vein, Valmiki ridicules the Hindi writers Kashinath Singh who said that "One doesn't have to be a horse in order to write about one . . . only the horse tethered to it's stall after a whole days exhausting labour, knows how it feels and not it's owner" (xxxv). In making such claims, Dalit writers are not alone, aboriginal writers in the United States and Canada have made similar declarations.

Arunprabha Mukharjee in her criticism "*Joothan, A Dalit Literary Text*" says that Joothan presents "Experiences that didn't find room in literary creation." Experience like Valmiki's - his birth and growing up in the untouchable caste of Chuhra, the bottom slot preassigned to him because of this accident of birth, the heroic struggle that he waged to survive this preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution, his coming to unconscious under the influences of Amberkarite thought and his transformation into a speaking subject and recorder of the oppression and exploitation that he endured not only as an individual but as a member of stigmatized and oppressed community had never been in the annals of Hindi literature. He, therefore has broken new ground, mapped a new territory. Besides a few stray poems and short stories by canonical Hindi writers, which portrays Dalit characters as tragic figures and object of pathos. Dalit representations

are conspicuously absent from contemporary Hindi - literature (42-48). Arun

Kukharjee Prabha further writes:

How far removed Valmiki's subject matter is evident from the very title, *Joothan*. It proves the truth of Dangle's claim that Dalit writing demands a new dictionary, for the words that it uses are as new as the objects, situations, and activities that they describe. The Hindi word *Joothan* literally means food left on a plate, usually destined for the garbage pail in a middle-class urban home. However, such food would be characterized *Joothan* only if someone else were to eat it. The word carries the connotations of ritual purity and pollution, because *Jootha* mean polluted. (xxv)

The elite culture refers to the customs, law, religion, civilization, language of the dominant group of people, actually who are in power and whose voice is heard and history is recorded. Such elitism is depicted as pervasive Valmiki writes:

In Sukhdev Singh Tyayi's daughter marriage, my mother used to clean their place. When all the people had left after the feast, my mother said to Sukhdev Singh Tyagi as he was crossing the courtyard to come to the front door Chdhurji "all of your guest have eaten and gone ... please put on a leaf plate for my children. They too have waited for this day." Pointing at the basket full of dirty leaf plate he said "you are taking a basketful of *Joothan* don't forget your place, Chuhri, pick up your basket and get go in it. (10)

This act clearly exposes that through cultural practice, elite people always try to subordinate the marginal people.

Valmiki in *Joothan* presents the traumatic moments of encounter with his persecutors as dramatized scenes, as cinematic moments. His narration of the event captures the intensity of the memory and suggests that he has not yet healed from these traumas of the past. We see a full-dress reenactment of the event from the perspective of the child or the adolescent Valmiki. Many Dalit texts share this strategy of staging encounters between the Dalit narrator and people of upper castes. Often these encounters are between a Dalit child at his or her most vulnerable and an upper-caste adult in apposition of authority. The fullness of detail with which they are inscribed suggests how strongly these past events are imprinted in the narrator's mind.

Indeed *Joothan* demands a radical shift from the upper-caste and upper class reader by insisting that such readers not forget their caste or class privilege. Unlike canonical Hindi or English writing, where the reader's or the writer's caste and class are often considered irrelevant, *Joothan's* dual approach problematizes the reader's caste and class. While Valmiki directs his irony, satire, harangue and anger at non-Dalit readers, he sees Dalit readers as fellow sufferers.

While the indictment of an unjust social system and its benefactors is one thrust of the text, its other important preoccupation is a substantive examination of Dalit lives. *Joothan* combines representations of struggle with the external enemy and the enemy within the internalization by Dalit people of upper-caste brahminic values the superstitions of Dalit villagers, the patriarchal oppression of Dalit women by their men, the attempts by Dalits who have attained a middle class economic status to "pass" as high caste and attendant denial of their inferiority complex, which makes them criticize the practice of rural Dalits of rearing pig—all these aspects of Dalit struggle are an equally important aspect of *Joothan*. This self-critique has earned him brickbats from many Dalits who find the frank portrayal of Dalit Society to be

humiliating for them, it is tantamount to washing dirty linen in public. Valmiki accuses these Dalits of succumbing to brahminism. His frank critique of his own family members who hide their caste and therefore deny their relationship to Valmiki in public must have been painful for the people involved, particularly because he named them.

Joothan, is a multivalent, polyvocal text, healing the fractured self through narrating, contributing to the archive of Dalit history, opening a dialogue with the silencing oppressors, and providing solace as well as frank criticism to his own people. Thus, on the one hand, Valmiki's becoming a speaking subject shows that Indian democracy has opened some escape hatches through which a critical mass of articulate, educated Dalit has emerged. On the other hand, the harsh realities that he portrays so powerfully underscore the failure to fully meet the promises made in the constitution of independent India. *Joothan* stridently asks for the promissory note, joining a chorus of Dalit voices that are demanding their rightful place under the sun. A manifesto for revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness, *Joothan* confronts its readers with difficult questions about their own humanity and invites them to join the universal project of human liberation.

The idea of the liberation of Dalits in India began with Mahatma Gandhi: Gandhi's, is clearly grounded in a vision of local empowerment. Gandhi emphasized de-centralization, the traditional village as a self-contained republic, social harmony, and anti-secularism, sentiments that many new social movements in India share. While Gandhi's ideas underwrite the activities of most social movements in India the Dalit Movement today rejects Gandhism in favour of another towering figure in Indian history, the Dalit, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). For Dalits Ambedkar is a source of immense pride and respect, not for only his remarkable

educational achievements – two doctorates, one from the London School of Economics, the other from Columbia University – but also for his leadership against untouchability, Hinduism, and his role as a founder of the modern Indian state. Today, Ambedkar serves not only as an inspiration for the Dalit movement but also as a source of legitimacy for actions including fighting casteism not only internally but externally.

In comparison with Gandhi Ambedkar is a study in contrast. Whereas Gandhi dressed in the simple garb of the peasant Ambedkar's portrait – projected everywhere in India where Dalits reside – is of a modern man, an important man, with glasses, suit and tie and, in some portraits, with a copy of a book in his hand which represents the Constitution of India and Ambedkar as a contributor to the nation. It is an image according to Zelliott, that says “education to the literate and the illiterate alike.” (136) In philosophical terms whereas Gandhi saw the world in terms of harmony, Ambedkar saw it in terms of contradictions, the most pre-eminent being the caste system although those of capitalism and class were also critical. Ambedkar felt that culture and ideology must be seen as sources of oppression and that caste trumped class as a source of oppression. Ambedkar was a committed socio-economic egalitarian and an internationalist whereas Gandhi was oriented to the traditional village.

Ambedkar's hostility to caste is exemplified in a historic quarrel with Gandhi in the 1930s in this regard. In terms of caste Gandhi was an opponent of untouchability but he did not want to abolish the varna system, only reform it. According to Gandhi the untouchables could be added to the four fold varna system of Hinduism. These four varnas were the Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (servants). Outside of the varna system, and,

therefore, polluted, were the untouchables. Gandhi felt the untouchables, who he called “Harijans” – men of God – could be incorporated within the varna system (Hardtmann 54). In effect, Gandhi saw untouchability as an aberration within Hinduism and through a change of heart and mind by the “higher” (dominant) castes it could be rooted out. Ambedkar, on the other hand, felt untouchability was not an aberration of Hinduism but was inextricably bound up with it and could not be rooted out as simply as Gandhi implied, a judgement that has proven historically accurate. Whereas Gandhi was willing to accept the hierarchical varna system for Ambedkar caste was a “monster.” Caste was everywhere, blocking the path of Dalit advancement at every turn, and, according to Ambedkar “you cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill the monster [of caste]”. At the end of his life he demonstrated his contempt for Hinduism by converting to Buddhism interpreting Buddhism as a rational, “modernistic, ‘liberation theology.’” (Omvedt 147)

While most Dalits have not followed Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism, it is true that Dalits “have been extraordinarily hostile to Gandhi” and today, “anti-Gandhism is one theme that permeates the Dalit discourse in various contexts”. Gelliot asks the question of why Gandhi should be so disliked when for most non-Dalits Gandhi is the one leader most responsible for bringing the plight of the untouchables to the consciousness of India. Gandhi’s ‘Harijan’ is an object of pity. Compassion also, but also pity. Ambedkar’s ‘Dalit’ is a man or woman filled with pride and self-respect. Social movements thrive on pride. The multifaceted Dr. Ambedkar stands for both qualities, pride and self-respect.

It is this pride and respect and desire for socio-economic equality and recognition, that drive the disparate elements of the Dalit movement and their self-

identification with the term Dalits (oppressed.) Whatever their differences “all Dalits, irrespective of creed, caste, and political affiliation consider Ambedkar their leader” (Shah 24).

Ambedkar casts a huge shadow not only over the Dalit movement but India itself. He is, with Nehru, considered a “co-inventor of India” although it is Ambedkar who has been described “as the principal author of the Constitution”. Ambedkar’s imprint on the Indian constitution is clear in its many clauses intended to protect the human rights of the Dalits and improve their social welfare and education. Article 17 abolishes “Untouchability” and forbids its practice in any form. Article 335 provides for “reservations”, i.e. affirmative action for “scheduled castes” (Dalits) in terms of government employment.

Ambedkar was fully cognizant that formal constitutional and political rights could not be realized without social and economic equality. On the occasion of the adoption of the Indian constitution he warned:

On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value.... How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. (24)

Ambedkar’s observation is *apropos* to contemporary India. According to Oommen a prime source of discontent in India today is the “inculcation of values of equality and

social justice into an extremely hierarchical society through the agency of Indian constitution.” (244)

Today, more than ever Dalit activists are demanding socio-economic equality and the destruction of the caste system. Increasingly frustrated in the arena of representative politics by limited progress the Dalit movement in the 1990s reorganized on a network basis. They widened the basis of their struggle against caste beyond the nation-state, a struggle very much based on the ideas of Ambedkar. In so doing they chose as their primary venues the United Nations and the WCAR.

The move to international advocacy in recent years has been most forcefully spearheaded by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) founded in 1998. However, this was not the first foray of the Dalits in the international arena not would be it accurate to portray the NCDHR as the first, or only, flag bearer in the international arena fighting casteism. Dalit literature outlines different phases of the emergence of caste discrimination as an international issue. The first phase, not surprisingly, are Ambedkar’s interventions before the British Round Table Conferences in London, 1930-31. In the lead up to independence India leaders met in London in an attempt to find agreement on the key elements of a constitution for an independent India. Ambedkar was adamant that the future constitution had to abolish the practice of untouchability and guarantee the “Depressed Classes” (untouchables) equal citizenship and fundamental rights. For his stance Ambedkar was attacked by many dominant caste leaders for dividing the Independence movement. Not unlike today he was told this was an internal matter, one to be settled after Independence. Today, Ambedkar’s intervention is credited for ensuring the formal rights and freedoms to the untouchables in the Indian Constitution. For contemporary Dalit activists Ambedkar’s external advocacy of an internal problem set an important

precedent, one that provided legitimacy to the internationalization of the Dalit human right's struggle. According to two leading activists in the NCDHR:

Ambedkar showed that boundaries for solutions to the problem of caste discrimination are not to be drawn around the village, district, state or nation. What is an internal solution or an external solution should not be determined by geographic borders or national borders. (Divakar and Ajai M., 18)

The second phase of the internationalizing of the Dalit issue was one of invisibility and transition. In terms of invisibility, one of the leading statements on human rights in the twentieth century, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, to which the Indian government is a signatory, is silent on the issue of caste despite Ambedkar's representation of the case of the untouchables to the UN (Thorat and Umakant, xxviii, xxix). The UDHR makes no reference to caste as a basis for discrimination focussing as it did on questions of race and colour. This is largely a result of North American and European dominance at the UN. The emphasis on questions of race and colour as norms became heavily institutionalized at UN institutions becoming significant limitations and constraints within which Dalit activists have had to work.

During the second phase, internationalizing of the Dalit issue was not done so much by Dalits in India but by a transnationally linked Dalit diaspora. During the 1950s and 1960s Dalits began to emigrate, to the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and a number of other countries. Their numbers are fewer than the much larger numbers of the dominant castes who were able to emigrate and they were often scattered. They kept in touch where they could and during the 1990s the series of networks among themselves and the Dalit movement in India became more extensive

“not least due to their communication via the Internet” (Hardtmann, 150). It is in this context of the Dalit movement in India, the researcher has analyzed *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki as an integral part of Dalit movement. In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki deals with the issue of humiliation meted out to the Dalits by Indian society, no matter where they lived. This humiliation stems from the fact that Dalit inferiority has gotten embedded in the psyche of the upper caste, the members of which have developed an extraordinary repertoire of idioms, symbols and gestures of verbal and physical lenigration of the Dalit over centuries. It is embedded in the literary and artistic imagination and sensibility of the upper caste.

The present research work is divided into three parts. The first part presents an introductory outline of Dalit movement in India and Valmiki's contribution to it. The second part analyzes the text in the context of Dalit social movement in India and his final part is the conclusion where the thesis concludes that *Joothan* is a representative Dalit literary text that not only exposes the pain and humiliation one suffers from in a caste ridden society but also by maintaining solidarity with Dalit movement, it proposes to resist against discrimination and liberate the otherwise suppressed castes and classes.

II. Recovering the Subject: *Joothan* as Dalit Chronicle

“Dalit” is the term used to describe the nearly 180 million Indians who were placed at the bottom of the traditional caste system. In recent years, a vibrant field of Dalit literature has appeared in India, and some works are beginning to be translated into English. Autobiographical writings constitute a significant subgenre of Dalit literature, conveying the firsthand, raw experience of the writers who were, themselves, subjected to the scorn and contempt of the people who had no other qualities or distinctions in life except that they were born into upper-caste families. It is through the autobiographical writings of the first-generation Dalit writers that readers in Marathi, Tamil, and Hindi have become aware of what a Dalit’s life was/is really like in independent India. These works have been translated into other Indian languages and English to spread awareness across the country, and sometimes, build solidarities across languages and regions.

In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki deals with the issue of humiliation meted out to the Dalits by Indian society, no matter where they lived. This humiliation stems from the fact that Dalit inferiority has gotten embedded in the psyche of the upper caste, the members of which have developed an extraordinary repertoire of idioms, symbols, and gestures of verbal and physical denigration of the Dalits over centuries. It is embedded in the literary and artistic imagination and sensibility of the upper caste. Even the Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, are replete with examples of this denigration where the *shudras* and the *chandalas* are shown to be treated as less than human. Dalit writers feel that the mainstream literature in Sanskrit and many other Indian languages foster these built-in assumptions of Dalit inferiority and thus they need be critiqued, subverted, and deconstructed. In this context, one is reminded of other autobiographical works by Dalit writers, like Bama’s *Karukku*

(2000) in Tamil and in Hindi *Tiraskrit* (vol. 1, 2002) by Suraj Paul Chauhan and *Meri Safar aur Meri Manzi* (2000) by B. R. Jataav. These books shocked the readers of mainstream literature into the realization of the inhuman and morally repugnant ways in which Indian people continued to treat segments of society. Before this body of literature came out, the Dalits were the proverbial invisible men and women of India who were compelled to live on the margins of society, never entering the vision of high-caste Hindus, the arbiters of art, literature, and good taste, in any significant or positive way.

Valmiki begins his chronicle from his childhood. He grew up in a village near Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh, in an untouchable caste named Chuhra (sweepers and cleaners), much before the self-assertive term “Dalit” was coined. With unmistakable directness untrammelled by any anxiety of literary embellishment, which is the usual style one finds in Dalit autobiographies, Valmiki says right in the second page:

“Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered quite all right to touch dogs and cats, or cows and buffaloes if one [a higher-caste person] happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human.”

(2) The tenement clusters where they lived stood on the periphery of the village inhabited by the upper-caste Tyagis who felt that they had absolute power over them and their labor. If the Dalits dared to refuse unpaid labor, severe retribution would follow. Valmiki narrates one such incident where the Chuhras had refused to work without wages when a high official was visiting the village: “As usual a government employee came to the Bhangi *basti* [settlement]. The surveyors needed some people for clean up work, for which they would not be paid. As always, it would be unpaid labor. For days on end hungry and thirsty people would work to clean the *kothi* [big house]. In return they would be sworn at.” (44) When they refused this unpaid work,

they were severely punished. Fifteen days after their refusal, two policemen came and arrested whoever they could lay their hands on and took them to the office of the village *panchayat* (council) where they were made to squat in a rooster position and beaten mercilessly. “The women and children of the *basti* were standing in the lane and crying loudly. They could not think of what else they could do but cry.” (45) The writer reflects, “Why is it a crime to ask to be paid for one’s labor? Those who keep singing the glories of democracy use the government machinery to quell the blood flowing in our veins.” (46) In another similar incident, the boy Valmiki himself was forcibly dragged to work by Fauza Singh Tyagi in the field while he was preparing to appear in the math exam the following day, as though he was a bonded laborer. *Joothan* is filled with such incidents, each one of which left a deep scar in the writer’s mind. After witnessing the beating of his people in public for refusing unpaid labor, the writer reflects: “My mind was filled with a deep revulsion. I was then an adolescent and a scratch appeared on my mind like a line scratched on glass. It remains there still.” (45) Being humiliated by everybody, including his teachers, he says, “The scars that I have received in the name of caste--even eons won’t suffice to heal them.” (61) And being forced to work by Fauza in the field when he would have liked to study for his exams, he writes, “My mind was set aflame by his swearing. A fire engulfed my innards that day. The memories of these crimes of Tyagis continue to smolder deep inside me, emitting red-hot heat.” (66)

Probably the most painful aspect of this humiliation is the fact that his teachers were not only a party to it but also often aggravated it. These fellows who were sold to the idea of caste hierarchy were a blot to the fair name of teachers. Valmiki was admitted to the school with great difficulty, he was made to sit apart from Tyagi boys, he was made to squat on the floor while other students sat on the benches, he was not

allowed to participate in extracurricular activities, and he was made to sweep and clean the school and adjoining field. During examinations he could not drink water from the glass when he was thirsty. Each day brought new torture and humiliation from his teachers. More than once, he was beaten mercilessly. Despite being one of the few good students in the class, he was given such low marks in the chemistry practical test that he failed the Board exam, which spelled doom for his promising career. With a pen dipped in acid, Valmiki writes: “Such were the model teachers I had to deal with. Moving from childhood to adolescence when my personality was being shaped, I had to live in this terror-filled environment. I feel like I grew up in a cruel and barbaric civilization.” (57)

The latter part of the book describes Valmiki’s experiences as he moved from his native village to Dehra Dun, Roorkee, Jabalpur, Bombay, and Chandrapur. Caste followed him like an albatross around his neck. He was taken as a decent, educated, and respectable human being as long as people did not know about his caste. The moment they got to know about it they recoiled from him as though he were a lump of shit. The same happened with Savita who fell in love with him but dropped him shamelessly when Valmiki told her about his caste: “Suddenly, the distance between us has increased. The hatred of thousands of years had entered our hearts. What a lie culture and civilization are.” (113) These instances underline the fact that the sense of caste hierarchy is so ingrained in the Hindu mind that it cannot be erased overnight simply by formulating laws of affirmative action, but that a revolutionary change of mind and heart is required. Being repulsed thus, time and again, he developed an antipathy toward people who, he knew, had only contempt for him despite the masks they wore of outward decency. The fire smoldering within him found no outlet: “I too have felt inside me the flame of Ashwatthama’s revenge. They keep on burning inside

me to this day. I have struggled for years on end to come out of the dark vaults of my life.” (27)

Valmiki recreates the period when Dalit literature was emerging as a radical and subversive, if controversial, genre that would gradually shape what is known today as Dalit aesthetics. The Dalit literary movement started in Maharashtra, the home state of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, and then spread from Marathi to Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, and other Indian languages. Valmiki’s own life experiences propelled him toward the writings and activism of these first-generation pioneers whose lives had followed similar trajectories as his own: “During that period I was introduced to Marathi Dalit literature. The words of Daya Pawar, Namdev Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Gangadhar Pantavane, Baburao Bagul, Keshav Meshram, Narayan Surve, Vaman Nimbalkar, and Yashwant Manohar were igniting sparks in my veins. Their voices exhilarated me, filled me with new energy. My reading of Dalit literature was beginning to change my notions about what is literature.” (105) These writer-activists waged a valiant struggle against the deeply entrenched caste prejudices and oppression by creating awareness through art and literature. Reading their work reignited the literary spark in him that was already there. He began writing short plays and staging them. He also began to write poetry and fiction. However, even his considerable literary reputation did not change things much for him as far as his caste was concerned. With hindsight he seems to declare his final judgment in the opening lines of the preface to *Joothan*: “Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman and compassionless towards Dalits.” (xiii)

Mohammad Asaduddin in his review "chronicle of outcast(e) from India" says that:

Valmiki's struggle described so graphically is symptomatic of the extent of challenges involved in the process of reclaiming dignity for himself and his community. It goes to his credit that he does not simply give a univocal account of the caste prejudices harbored by members of the upper caste, but also deals with the internal divisions within the depressed classes that point to the fault lines within the movement and draws attention to the ways in which the depressed classes themselves have internalized these prejudices against the castes they consider a notch below themselves. The movement must address this urgently.

(56)

It is undeniable that the rough and raw feelings/experiences narrated in the text with liberal sprinkling of the author's animus against the high caste will raise the hackles of traditional critics who have their eyes glued on the so-called universals, and who, for that reason, will find it sensational and gross, lacking in objectivity. However, we should keep in mind the fact that Dalit literature has emerged out of specific historical and social circumstances, that protest and testimony are inalienable parts of it, and that it has to be judged by a different yardstick or literary aesthetics than we do in case of mainstream literature. Valmiki himself grapples with this question adequately in his nonfictional and critical writings.

Joothan: Dalit Life and Everyday Violence

Degraded and stigmatized at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy, Dalits are the largest group among the fifth of India's population living in poverty and destruction. Their low status is emphasized by forced, unpaid labor, either

vulnerability for atrocities such as savage mass acres and gang rapes, and pervasive discrimination on the basis of associations of impurity, pollution, and untouchability in a society that is organized by caste and kin networks. Dalit studies, reveals extreme cases of the essentialization of meaulity in modernity. Moreover as sociologist-activist Gail omvedt observes, Dalit struggle for equality today are exacerbated by high castes power for institutionalize the separation of "pure" learning from the performance of "impure" tasks, specifically, Indias going from information technology industries are shallow and dependent on education al and technological opportunities than remain the preserve of high caste monopolies contemporary review, may 2004.

Maggie Roonkin in his review "*Joothan : A Dalit Life*" says although such discrimination thwarts the Dalits entry into prestigious professions, their growing consciousness politicization has been accompanied by a surged of intellectual activity. *Joothan*, A Dalit's life, originally written in Hindi by Omprakash Valmiki, exemplifies this activities by tracing one writer's struggle to transform the stigma of his untouchability into pride in his Dalit identity. Furthermore, "Balmiki aims to merge his memoir with the collective voice of Dalit literary movement propelled by an ideology, an agenda and aesthetic and part of a broader 'movement for equality and justice" which was founded in solidarity with African American struggle. The very title *Joothan* evokes such a reflexive consciousness, one especially attend to poverty and humiliation in that it refers to impure scraps of food left by others, which Dalits Scavenge for their subsistence. (21)

Valmiki, whose surname signifies his untouchable Chuhra (Sweeper) Status, sets his life story in north India in the 1950s just after the constitution out lawed untouchability . After describing the Saulor of an open air village latrine , he breaks

ground by depicting incessant harassment that he overcomes to become his village's first educated Dalit. His adolescent experiences include both of skepticism towards religious legitimization of inequality and poverty and travels to high school, where he repeatedly suffers indignities for revealing his caste. Later, Valmiki trains for a vocation (Producing ordance) discovers Dalit activism, including works of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the Dalit movement founder: and starts to participate enthusiastically in Dalit political, cultural, and literary activities. Quite prominent throughout *Joothan* is Valmiki's documentation of how his struggle gets from effort to claim an achieved rather than an ascribed identity. Using the system of values that ascribe his status, elevates himself above oppressors and finally embraces a collective agenda for achieving Dalit empowerment and social change through outreach activities such as producing and opening schools.

In her introduction, translator Arun Prabha Mukharjee elucidates Valmiki's choice of rhetorical reframing strategies that create special textual effects double exposure, interrogative discourse, irony and the interweaving of characterizations of the fractured self with indictment of an unjust society. With double exposure, Valmiki first represents events from a traumatized child's perspective and then comments on them from an adult narrator's perspective which allows for authoritative assignments of blame. His uses of interrogative discourse serve a similar function by posing questions that point out contradictions and invite reader responses such as why is it a crime to be paid for one's labor? (xliv) Irony infuses Valmiki's work as a whole, which mocks the village patrol while developing articulate subjects to interrogate caste bound myths and other modes of oppression. The interweaving of characterization of the fractured self and indictment of society is exemplified by portrayals of interaction avoidance rituals and by Dalits' attempts to pass by hiding their caste origins. In

addition, the strategy bears witness to life's harsh realities and a testimonials confronts both elite and postmodernist claims that representations of truths are constructed.

Related to omvedt's observation on the information technology sector is Mukharjee's here that Valmiki's autobiography highlights an important paradox of modern Indian life. On the one hand, *Joothan* shows how an expansion of post independence opportunities has enabled the emergence of articulate Dalits and the florescence of their achievements. On the other hand, *Joothan's* witnessing of life's harsh realities and persistently degrading stigmatization expose serious imperfections in India's practice of grassroots democracy. In sum, Mukharjees offers English language readers an accessible translation of Valmiki's engaging memoir that will prove invaluable to critical teaching on south Asia and on comparative injustices and human rights.

Mukherjee's introduction to *Joothan* is valuable for situation the text in its historical context and of the issue of the social organization in India. Furthermore, the introduction sheds light on the issue of caste, a topic that is only beginning to garner the level of complex analysis that it demands. Instead of detouring through extensive footnotes and the resulting academicism, the 'introduction' provides in a clear and concise fashion a brief overview of the emergence of the caste system and it's "untouchable" outsiders. It also gives us a sense of Valmiki's own politics and explains his references and allusions to various oppressive aspects of high caste Hindu social and political systems. We see the emergence of Dalit political trajectories with a detailed discussion on Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the political development among untouchables during the era of Gandhian nationalism and after Indian independence in 1947. It also relives Dalit voices and politics ranging from derivatives of Ambedkar's

politics and the participation of Dalits in Indian mainstream politics to the militancy of the Dalit with its extra parliamentary stance nuance with issues of cultural identity and community or even separatism . This introduction could independently serves an entry into teaching south Asian society and politics.

The two themes that pervade Joothan has an echo for politics in both the west and the East are those of identity and community. They are expressed as ground work for politics of domination and resistance, as well as foundational aspects of Valmiki's own life story. Of course, on another note the theme of identity is always the core in any autobiography as a way of mapping the trajectory of their self development through social and historical experiences. These experiences which shape the self, providing it with content, and which always happen in relation to others, speak to the notion of community. But it is important to note that the way the notion of identity is posed here is not static in any way essentialized. It is shown always in formation in a dialectical manner an identity that emerges in a constant tension between stereotypical and negative ascriptions of a caste. Hindu society and an evolved, achieved sense of subjectivity that constantly challenges and contradicts them. This process of self making reflects experiences of power relation from below, the lowest reaches of society in which every bit of self assertion is also marked by constant questioning for this reason, very frequently, sentences start with the questioning phase, why is it that...? Valmiki is making himself by posing against what Sartre and others have called 'the look,' the dominant gaze, through his own looking back. These core issues of Joothan their treatment through depiction, debates and discussions, have a profound relevance for readers in the west. in countries such as Canada, the united states and the united kingdom, genocide, slavery and Immigration from formerly

colonized countries, the same process and struggle of identity and community for motion are in progress.

Indigenous black and non white writers and activist have written equally eloquently about the struggle between the self as an object of others and the subject of its own experiences and knowledge, making the question of ' being ' divided at its base. For Valmiki, and his counterparts elsewhere any ' becoming ' is about fracture and making whole . From this point of view Joothan has situated universality and shows why and how the issue of identity is also able to produce progressive politics rather than only one of regression, reaction and solipsism. This point deserves to be specially noted since the academic and activist world in Canada or the United States is divided into a schizophrenic formulation of identity vs society some have rendered the question of identity into a single issue of culturalism at the cost of broader social issues and politics, while others, especially Marxists, have offered a blanket rejection. They have denounced any concern with identity as rank particularism quite divorced from the politics of solidarity and social justice. As I have pointed out in a piece called " The passion of Naming " both these stances are confused and shortsighted . 'Identity,' in the context of anti-colonial imperialist or antislavery and class struggles is a topic with revolutionary potential. It is only those whose selves, cultures and histories have not been robbed, violated, erased and criminalized who can take such a complacent stance on identity. Most of the workers can not take this stand.

Omprakash Valmiki and other Dalits authors preoccupation with identity and community, ' in the sense of a group marginalized oppressed through dominant social relation of power, can't be dismissed as a limited and sectarian solely culturalist approach . Marxism and humanism can't be handed out as an alibi for neglecting the social relation and cultural forms which erase subjectivities and agencies of our

world's majority .In *Joothan* i.e. see how the humanity of these inferiorized others, both collectively and individually, is defined out of existence, the human finding its face in a patriarchal, propertied, white and western prototype it is for this reason that the passion for self naming is as evidents in Omprakash Valmiki as in the self - liberated African -American slave women Sojourner truth. That is why Valmiki will take a last name, which doubly signifies his Dalit origin as well as a claimed lineage to the mythic poet of the epic Ramayana . It is in fact this element of struggle to be and to become which connects on individuals and a community's identity to the struggle of Indian Dalits, Tribal and lower castes for rights and social justice this struggle is simultaneously cultural, political and economic because in our actual social existence these moments come into being in and through each other we need only to read the collection of Dallit short stories in *poisoned Bread, Joothan* thus becomes a text of negation and Dalit not just passive recipients of all injustices of Indian caste/ class society but also creates of a politics and culture of resistance. This is an aesthetic of opposition of which Mukherjee has spoken earlier. These texts of resistance are not only expressive of a determination to survive and persist against all odds, but to prevail. This makes *Joothan* and other Dalit autobiographies comparable to Afro-American slave narratives, such as that by Frederick Douglass Echoes of a worldview. The soul of black folk are also present in *Joothan's* social understanding. Also the present day relevance of Dalit politics for India as a whole grows stronger every year. Thy provide a substantial part of the political education in such Indian States as Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Maharastra. Himani Bannerji in her article "The violence of the Everyday" says:

One must remark on autobiography as a chosen of oppressed people in these text, the story of an individual becomes the life stories of entire

peoples, speaking to pervasive social relation of power and hegemonic common sense and politics making of the self and remaking of society become transparently connected. Staves, women, Dalits people from the lowest social class produce narratives which are historic in remembering the past figures other than the narrator, the present relations and connections, as well as desires pointing to the future. Thus these text are at once individual and collective projects, where subjective recapitulations are testimonies to others oppression and struggle. This is why in speaking of the self in autobiographies, short stories or poem, we are not allowed to loose sight of father-son, mother - children and sibling relations . Valmiks, in *Joothan* paves a moving tribal to his parents, telling us how they stand in foundation of his urge to go beyond the negative ascriptions of high caste stereotypes and brutal domination of Dalits. (23)

In the current Indian political conjuncture of high caste/ class domination steadily expanding into physical and socio cultural genocide, as witnessed by Muslim in Gujarat in 2002, in which both the civil society and the Indian state are implicated to a text like *Joothan* is compulsory reading it is a narration from below, from the margin of Indian society. In valmiki's telling the great high caste Hindu epics, Ramayana or Mahabharat stand shorn of their glory and are revealed as vision of legitimization of caste rule, now as before. *Joothan* throws an unsparing light on it. Hindu right's we of those texts to Hinduize India as a notion and to put in place a process of constant marginalization or elimination of others. This process is experienced by Valmiki as his own life, along with the burning issue of reconversion of Dalits from Islam, Buddhism or Christianity. Using a pseudo-anti-colonial rhetoric, high caste Hindu

politics has declared Dalit and the subject as inauthentic, thus arrogating India to them. For south Asians living in the Diaspora, in which access to Indian reality and History is hard to come by, Jothan provides a way to get access to the reality of India. It questions the aura of non-violence or pacifism that glorifies Hinduism and projects Muslim as the main perpetrators of fundamentalism and terrorism. We can understand why the Hindu right, which is now in state power at the centre in India, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi as a 'Muslim Lover' and why there are now political forces present in India who remember this with pride. Mukharjee has performed a valuable task by translating *Joothan*. Through her meditation readers both in India and the west will understand the politics of violence in the name of god that have been unleashed in India, but also understand other forms of religions and non-religious oppressions happening to minorities and marginalized peoples elsewhere, including in the west. Diasporic south Asians will better their group their own loss of identities and read Mukherjee's 'Introduction'. As for the Indian politics and social changes we need to heed what Irfan Habib says in "Caste in Indian History" :

But if the economic basis of the caste system has been shaken, can the same be said of ideology as long as the conflict of interest between landless labor and landholding class remains there is an incentive for all castes to combine against the untouchables, whom we euphemistically call the scheduled castes. Caste still remains perhaps the single most divisive factor in our country. (179) But the last word on politics should be given to Valmiki's who says:

When caste is the basis of respect and much important for social superiority, this battle can't be won in a day. We need an ongoing struggle and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that brings

revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our heart, a consciousness that leads the process of social change. (132)

Furthermore, Himani Bannerji, says that we have to place Arun Prabha Mukherjee's translation from the Hindi of Valmiki's Joothan "A Dalit life" against the background of politics of language meaning and fundamentals social relations, and within the area of what Walter Benjamin has called the '*Politicization of aesthetics*.' (24)

Joothan: Metaphor of Poverty, Pollution and Humiliation

During a wedding, when the guests and the bariats, the bride-groom's party were eating their meals the chuhrus (the caste that the author belong to) would sit outside with huge baskets. After the baratis had eaten, the dirty pattals or leaf plates were put in the chuhras baskets, which they took home, to save the Joothan 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 was eaten with a lot of relish. The bridegroom's guests who didn't leave enough scrap on their palttals were denounced as gluttons. Poor things, they had never enjoyed a wedding feast. So they had licked it all up. During the marriage season, our elder narrated in thrilled voices, stones of the baratis that had leaf several months of *Joothan*. (9)

Trough this extract, valmiki goes on to give a detailed deception and eating the joothan after reprocessing it, during the hard days of the rainy season. The memories of his childhood associated with Joothan, often come back to haunt him and cause him renewed point and humiliation. At the first blush, the passage seems to be giving a glimpse of the scale of poverty and suffering due to hunger in valmiki's community. However on closer reading, another aspect of this deprivation comes to the fore the

passage highlights the association of the Dalits with the notion of 'pollution' let's consider the following lines from Limbale's book *Akkarmashi*.

The teacher asked the high caste boys and girls to collect the leftovers on a piece of paper and give it to us. I and parshy arrived the bundle of the left over food on the way back the high caste boys and girls were laughing and joking, but our whole attention was on the bundle.

Mallya carried a bundle of Bhakari on his head and we, the Mahar (the author's caste) boys, followed him excitedly like hungry vultures. At last we gathered in Girmalya's farm and opened the bundle. It contained crumbs of different kinds of food and their spicy smell filled the air. We stuffed in a circle and stuffed ourselves greedily. We had never tasted food like that before . We were all really gluttonous. Our stomachs were greedily as a beggar's stack . When I got home I told my mother all about this like the time of famine she said" why didn't you get at least a small portion of it for me ? Leftover food is nectar.

(10)

The similarity in themes in the two excerpts is striking. The more striking and critical of these comparison is the naturalness of the teacher's asking 'height caste' student to collect the leftover food and give them to the Mahar students. Once again, along with suggesting poverty and hunger, the passage signifies the Mahars as deemed polluted. Although the class identify of the authors and their communities come up in all these texts, especially *Akkarmashi* which could also be read as a testimony of rural poverty. It is the caste identity and the resulting cultural implications that is fore grounded in the context of accepting left over food. As mentioned earlier *Joothan* or leftover food carries the connotation of ritual pollution when used in relation to anyone other than

the stigma and discrimination resulting there of, that sets apart the Dalits from the other deprived groups of 'have-nots' in the Indian society. And it is this association with ritual pollution that is invoked to explain and justify the infra human status assigned to the Dalits by the caste system.

Another aspect of this association with pollution is the Dalit's engagement with the so-called 'unclean' occupation. Certain occupations mostly associated therefore assigned to those considered to be outside the pale of humanity. In fact, the link between the Dalit as embodying pollution and the polluting occupation follows a circular logic. Why is the job pollution? Because they are performed by Dalits. Why are the Dalits polluting? Because they perform polluting jobs.

What needs to be stressed is that the idea of pollution here doesn't refer to lack of hygiene. Tasks such as announcing the news of death or epidemic, or beating of drums of wedding, funerals and festivals are also considered polluting as these involve inauspicious events like death and contact with animal hide. One confronts this irony in the logic of pollution, along with Limbale in the following lines:

I used to clean clothes , bathed every day and washed myself clean with soap and brushed my teeth with tooth paste. There was nothing unclean about me . Then in what sense was I untouchable? A high caste who is dirty was still considered touchable. (11)

One comes across a host of themes and emotion in these lines. One, there is a sense of anguish in being subjected to a set of rules, that defy any reason or logic. To the sarcasm at the one level entails a critique of religion, rituals and caste, however at another level, it also captures a sense of helplessness in realizing one's inability to break the vicious circle of pollution and caste despite badly cleanliness. The following epigraph portrays the some sentiment:

All I knew was that I didn't want to go into the line of work that my ancestors had been doing for thousands of years. I had written to pitaji informing him of my decision to leave college and learn this technical work in a government factory . He was delighted. He kept saying repeatedly. At least you have escaped "caste". But what he didn't know till the date he died is that ' caste' follows one right up to one's death.

(12)

And, as Pawde muses poignantly: "The result is that although I try to forget my caste. It is impossible to forget. And then remember an expression I heard somewhere. What comes by birth, but can't be east off by dying that is caste." (13)

What is it about caste that makes it difficult to cast off? The answer is that caste is justified by the logic of pollution and hidden within the ideology of pollution is the issue of power. The manner in which caste is articulated in the public sphere, it is packaged in neutral, innocuous terms like ' rituals' and 'tradition'. This sanitized description has the effect of masking the power relations that caste embodies. And this is where the Dalit life narratives become important in posing a counter discourse. Valmiki's life narrative reveals this aspect successfully. In the very act of giving Joothan or leftover food to the Dalits lies an exercise of power by they upper castes. On the occasion of the landlord's daughter's wedding, when all the guests have eaten.

Young Valmiki's mother asks the landlord for some fresh food for the children. The landlord remarks '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 . Thus, giving of Joothan is a process which ensures that Chuhras don't forget their 'place' and the caste hierarchy and the corresponding power structure is maintained. Giving of Joothan is not only an act of charity towards the

impoverished and hungry, but given, it's cultural/ symbolic meaning. It is also a means of robbing the Dalit of her humanity, dignity and sense of worth, and binding her into perpetual subordination.

Saptarishi Mandal in his book *Three studies on Law and the Shifting Social space of Justice*. Says that 'the human meaning of caste for those who live it, is power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honor and degradation, plenty and want, reward and deprivation security and anxiety. Although Berreman looks at this formulation in opposition to that of the pure/ polluted dichotomy. I would like to suggest that the two frame works of understanding castes in fact complement each other. Any attempt geared towards security justice through law or otherwise for the Dalits must address this matrix of pollution and power. (21)

Valmiki Further writes:

I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendants of the gods can't understand the anguish of standing outside the door.
(16)

In the above excerpt, Omprakash Valmiki, the author of one of the life narratives, I am looking at talks about his experience of exclusion in school, where all the teachers and the majority of the students were from the upper-caste, Tyagi community. Even though expressed in plain and simple language, the passage generates a sense of disturbance in the reader, what I want to pose here is a question of method and understanding. Why is it that the representation of injustice and exclusion in the mainstream literature on justice remain confined to figures and statistical

enumeration? And why is it, that I feel a greater sense of revulsion by reading this passage than what I feel by reading the specialized reports produced by the National commission on scheduled caste and scheduled Tribes? In the words, are we as researcher equipped to understand and respond to "the anguish of standing outside the door" that Valmiki talks about? in an insightful discussion on finding. Bishnu Mohapatra argues that experiences of humiliation, fractured a shared world. When someone listen to the experiences of indignities of others, a connection is established between the listener and the sufferer, which in turn enables the shared world to re-emerge. There is a tendency in the academic community to privilege neutral, impersonal, third person accounts of injustice over first person ones. In this pursuit of objectivity, the quandaries of everyday lives and the experimental dimension of caste based marginality are lost on the researcher. Making a case for the appreciation of emotion in social science methodologies, Mohapatra further notes "emotional experiences not only process information pertaining to a concrete setting but also provides coherence to them. It makes visible certain relationship and helps several morally important features of a situation to emerge." (45) It is a part of the argument in this paper that it is much more grip of a slippery and unwieldy ideas like justice.

The contemporary programmes both national and international for the emancipation of Dalit are marked by the absence of a Dalit vision or a Dalit voice. This paper is an attempt to reclaim that vision and voice, through the medium of life narratives. The authors of the text speak for themselves, and are thereby transformed who create alternative modes of knowledge and knowing.

There are some text that are tantamount to Joothan in terms of expressing pathos and pain are Akkarmashi by Shrankumar Limbale and Antasphot by Kumud Pawde. Joothan, originally written in Hindi, was published in 1997. The word

'Joothan' refers to the leaving on the plate of a person, after she has finished eating. The word has connotation of 'pollution' attached to it. Akkarmashi, a land mark in Morathi and was published in 1984. Akkarmashi means one who is an outcaste or one of an illegitimate birth and is used only as an abuse. The third text, Antasphot is also written in Morathi and was published in 1981. It is credited to be the first published narrative by a Dalit woman. The word Antasphot literally means outburst. But the author (Pawde) understand the concept of 'thoughtful outburst' rather than an emotional one. For this paper. This makes one see the three text as one see the three texts as one single narrative with a polyphony of voices.

While it is relatively simpler to point out the acts that constitute 'injustice', the idea of justice defies easy definition. The precision of definition notwithstanding, the life narratives explored here, do give us a brood framework within which one can think about justice for the 'Dalits. They themes of pollution, exclusion, and thoughtful outburst offer such a frame work in which one can locate the justive concerns that mark the lived reality of the Dalits. While the themes of pollution, exclusion and illegitimacy capture the Dalits situation of marginality, the trap of thoughtful outburst helps to understand the strategies employed by them in the quest for justice.

The Dalit life narrative constitute a significant rejoinder to the communication views on justice. Essentially the narrative construct the Dalit as an individual endowed with reason, inherent dignity and Human Rights. And in that the narratives display a modernist and universal orientation by invoking the imagery of the 'human being' as conceived by modern Human Rights Paradigm. However, even while speaking in the language of universalism, the subject introduce new cultural meaning to the ideas of deprivation, exclusion and rights. The success of both national and

international programs for Dalit Human Rights lies, in the proper appreciation of these cultural meanings.

Finally this text can be taken as an intervention in a broader discussion regarding justice for the Dalit in modern India. The primary mode, in which the state in India conceives of justice for the Dalits is that of reservation or distributive justice. As the life narratives suggest, the justice concern of the /dalits go much beyond the narrow confines of distributive justice and touch upon the so-called 'non-cognitive' issues like fear, powerlessness, violence and humiliation. The narratives confirm what Irish Young points out that is a mistake to reduce the idea of justice to distribution of resources alone. For young while thinking about justice, the concept of distribution should be explicitly limited to materials goods, like things, natural resources or money.

***Joothan* as Autobiography: From Pain to Resistance**

Om Prakash Valmiki begins his autobiography *Joothan*, by asserting "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that didn't manage to find room in literary creation. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman and compassionless towards Dalits." (xiii) Again and again both critics as well as Dalit writers themselves describes Dalit autobiographies as narrate of pain. It is pain which string one narrative event together into an 'imagined community' of fellow sufferers. Yet the experiences of oppression doesn't imprison Dalits in eternal victimhood. But rather is then used by the Dalits community as a tool mobilized against this 'cruel and in human social order which supports cast based discrimination. As this paper will show Dalit autobiography transforms and experience of pain into a narrative of resistance. This is especially important because, as a marginalized community, Dalits have previously been excluded from participating in mainstream public debate. However, being in the late 1980s, Dalit

literary expression has shown a dramatic increase through out the Hindi Belt. The publication of Dalit books has increased, new Dalit journals have a growing readership and even mainstream Hindi newspapers have begun to include articles by Dalit writers. Within this larger trend of literary assertion, autobiography in particular has been one of the most important genres since many Dalit writers of Hindi have launched their literary careers by first narrating their life story, making autobiography an institutional space through which Dalit writers can first enter the literary public sphere. This paper attempts to understand how Dalits have used autobiography as a means of assertion against untouchability by looking at two well known autobiographies of Hindi *Joothan* (1997) by Omprakash Valmiki and *Tiraskrit* (2002) by Surajpal Chauhan. This paper will first elucidate the powerful narrative agenda of Dalit autobiographies which contest both the basis of caste discrimination as well as the institutional claim that caste no longer functions as a social force in modern India. Delving straight into *Joothan* and *Tiraskrit*, the paper looks at the way this agenda of contesting untouchability is expressed within the narrative, specifically regarding the construction of Dalit subjectivity and the follow of narrative events. Then Dalit Hindi autobiographies are contextualized within certain larger socio-historical processes, including as well the influence of the Dalit autobiographer's own status as an urban dwelling member of the middle class. This will aid in understanding why autobiography has arisen as such an important genre of Dalit assertion, and why this specific narrative agenda is articulated by Dalit writers through these autobiographical narratives coming back to Dalit autobiography as a means of assertion. This paper concludes that autobiographical narratives have been used by Dalit writers as a form of political assertion by providing entrance the public sphere and reassertion of control over the construction of Dalit selfhood. Finally it has given Dalit writers a way of uniting with a larger "Dalit community" to create a powerful group which can be used to fight against caste discrimination.

The power of Dalit autobiography's agenda is its use of author's life experiences of pain as a means of political assertion. By writing about their own experiences as a Dalit Omprakash Valmiki and Surajpal Chauhan reveal two objectives in their autobiographies. One is to contest the basis of caste discrimination. For example, in *Joothan* Valmiki asserts, "Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one's control, then why would I have been in a Bhangi household ? Those who call themselves the standard bearers of this country's great cultural heritage. Did they decide which homes they would be born into ? Albeit they turn to scriptures to justify their position, the scripture's that establish feudal values instead of promoting equality and freedom. (133-134) The other clear narrative agenda of these Dalit autobiographies is to expose the reality behind the institutional narrative that caste no longer functions as a significant force in the public sphere of modern India. In other words, the untouchability was abolished by the constitution of India in 1950; and consequently, there is no longer caste based discrimination in government jobs, public transportation etc. Chauhan, in this regard, say that in his country, the pain and insult or being born as a Dalit can only be known a by a person who has experienced it. Today, everyone is carrying out in the whole country that there is no racism and that things have changed in the towns and villagers in these thirty five years. The author goes on to describe how he and his wife had asked Zamindar for some water on a visit to the village during the summer vacation. The zamindar immediately agreed but when he discovered the caste identity of Chuhra, he became enraged and began insulting them "The Bhangis and Son of Bhang is and chamar wear new clothes in the cities and not one can tell whether he's a Bhangi or not." (87) Thus Dalit autobiographies constitute a challenge to this institutional narrative by presenting what they claim are 'factual' experiences of untouchability from the writer's own life.

Valmiki for instance does this by repeatedly narrating his experiences of pain as exclusion due to the continued practice of untouchability. He writes "I was kept out of extracurricular activities, on such occasion I stood on the margins like a specter. During the annual function of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so called descent of the gods can't understand the anguish of standing outside the door." In another stance, Valmiki relates how he was continually kept out of the chemistry lab. On some pretext of the other, and despite protesting to the head master of the school, nothing was done to enforce the equality of every student regardless of caste to use the lab. He writes "Not only did I do poorly in the lab tests in the board exam, I also got low marks in the oral, even enough I had answered the examiner's question correctly". (65)

Sarah Beth in her review entitled "Dalit Autobiographies: The Transformation of Pain into Resistance" argues:

There is a tension between the institutional ideology of meritocracy (that students are graded according to performance rather than caste identity) and Valmiki's own experiences as a Dalit student. Thus, pain whether experienced as humiliation as exclusion or as actual physical violence, all serve a similar purpose in the narrative, that is to expose the contemporary occurrence of untouchability. Which is otherwise ignored into the public discourse. Exposing the continuation of untouchability through this pain does several things for the audience of Dalit autobiographies. For it's Dalit readers, pain is a uniting phenomenon. Dalit readers had seen their own pain in those pages and Chauhan comments, "I realized that only those who have also felt the again of Dalits can understand". For the non Dalit reader, this pain and

the social reality it exposes means something different all together
 shame, accusation, and hopefully on invitation for change. (77)

Corresponding to the narrative agenda of contesting untouchability, the narrative of autobiography focuses on events that highlight the pain of experiencing caste discrimination and exposes its continued practice in modern India. Thus, the autobiographer values events that reinforce the 'reality' of the continuation of untouchability, and consequently, most of the narrative time focuses on these events. This creates what at first seems to be an unstable, interrupted narrative, However, underlying this interrupted narrative, which jumps back and forth in time from the painful experience to the next, is a stable narrative agenda, which guides the narrative by skillfully weaving one 'factual' experience caste discrimination and pain to another. Both *Joothan* and *Tiraskrit* begin in the village during the autobiographies respective childhoods and both narratives follow the protagonist's gradual move to the city seen at first as a pace of modernity, anonymity, and thus new freedom from untouchability. This is originally reflected in the protagonist's experience of pain. In the village, where caste identity is openly known and acknowledged, pain is experienced bluntly, as forced exclusion or even as physical violence getting beaten by poorer on the way to school or getting hit with a stick for coming up to the shop counter instead of remaining on the street are common examples. However, in the city, pain is subtler, and its first experiences within the context of anonymity and the fear of being 'caught' so to speak.

When the experience of 'passing' ends in the revelation of the protagonist's untouchable identity, pain is often experienced as humiliation. Again the narrative itself is driven through consecutive experiences of caste discrimination as well as by the protagonist's struggle to gain an education and increase in political consciousness

a process which leads to the realization of his Dalit identity. Time for example, is often marked in the narrative by noting which class the protagonist was in at the time of such event. A sense of progress through education and to the city, however. It is not interpreted as a foundational move away from the community, despite the sense of alienation expressed in the narrative. Instead it is understood by the autobiographer as a process realization of one's communal 'Dalit' identity, which incites him to fight to regain the right and self respect for him and his community. Life events not related to experiences of caste discrimination or to education and the development of the protagonist's political consciousness, events such as marriage or the death of parents, are quickly, passed over with a few paragraphs. However, the idea of 'progress' from the superstitious village to the 'enlightened' city bursts apart towards the end of the narrative. As this happens, the experience of pain is expressed in ways similar to that in the village. Thus, meaning previously given to the village now transposes onto the urban. Space in the narrative, making 'the village', representing the baseness of caste discrimination practices, The 'metropolis' in the mind of the Dalit autobiographer.

III. *Joothan* as a Chronicle of Pain and Resistance

In the book, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, Omprakash Valmiki writes, "One can somehow get past poverty and deprivation but it is impossible to get past caste." With this statement, Valmiki highlights the rigidity of the caste system in India that has resulted in the socio-economic oppression of thousands across India over centuries merely because of the "lesser caste" to which they belong. The title of this autobiographical account, *Joothan*, encapsulates the pain, the humiliation and the poverty of the "untouchable" Chuhra community of Uttar Pradesh, to which the author belongs. The untouchables or Dalits who were social outcasts not only had to rely on the *joothan* of others but also had to relish it. The treatment meted out to them was worse than that to animals.

Instead of following a linear pattern, the author moves from memory to memory, demonstrating how his present is deeply scarred by his past in spite of the distance he has traversed to become one of the prominent authors in Dalit literature. Valmiki describes his childhood in the village in Barla district of Uttar Pradesh. He writes about the ill treatment meted out to him when he was at school because he was an untouchable. He describes the trauma he went through when he was asked to spend three days sweeping the school courtyard instead of accompanying his classmates belonging to the higher castes, in the study class.

Despite the barriers of caste which proved to be a hindrance at every step throughout his years in school and college, Valmiki persevered to get better education and evolved. Both his parents have been portrayed as heroic figures in the text. They desired something better for their child and fought for his safety and growth. One of the most powerful moments in the text is when his mother overturned a basketful of *joothan* at a wedding after a high-caste Tyagi humiliated her. His father, Chotan Lal,

always stood by Valmiki and told him that he should always do what he desired.

This coming for members of a community that had been socially and economically oppressed for centuries is a symbol of great courage and determination. It is quite apt that Valmiki has dedicated this text to them. While describing the events in Bombay much later in his life, Valmiki highlights the fact that education is not the solution to the ills of the caste system. On having been mistaken for a Brahmin because of his adopted last name, “Valmiki” (used to denote a community of untouchables in Uttar Pradesh) he found out that just the revelation of his real caste to well-educated middle class people was received by shock and a sudden change of attitude towards him.

Even his own relatives were hesitant to invite him for a wedding as he refused to let go of his last name because it would reveal their caste. Omprakash Valmiki constantly stresses on the differences between the Dalits and the caste Hindus, the Savarnas, with respect to their various religious beliefs and customs, he subtly contests the belief that the oppression of the Dalits by the Savarnas is justified as per the Hindu religious laws because the pork-eating Dalits living on the outskirts of villages and towns actually do not belong to the Hindu religion.

Inspired by the work done by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar for the socio-economic development of the Dalits and the abolition of untouchability, Omprakash Valmiki made an immense contribution to Dalit literature by highlighting the plight of Dalits in the post-independence era which isn't quite different from that of the pre-independence era, *Joothan* being one of the first contributions to Dalit literature. Valmiki also participated in plays, being actively supported by wife, Chanda. The text, *Joothan*, reveals to the reader the rigidity and narrow-mindedness of casteist India, which is as relevant today as it was in the early part of the last century.

The author's objective doesn't stop at evoking compassion towards the oppressed Dalits in the mind of the reader but questions, "Why is my caste my only identity?" This one query leads the reader into introspection. In India caste has always defined the socio-political scenario of the country. Whether it is the debate on the reservation policy for government jobs and education to aid the socially and economically backward classes or political gimmickry, everything has an undertone of caste and religion.

Valmiki writes that despite government undertaking for the development of oppressed classes, through reservations, their achievements are hardly noticed and are ridiculed often. Many of us, at some stage of our lives have been discriminated against because we belong to a community and due to our beliefs and practices. The mention of Caste, Community, and Religion on admission forms to school and colleges is one such example. Just being an Indian is rather insufficient to get our basic rights.

In addition to the terminology that the Dalit chose, the government gave them bureaucratic nomenclature. The term *Depresses class*, first used by missionaries in southern India, was later adopted by the British government in its official records. Ambedkar found the term "degrading and contemptuous" and suggested several alternatives for it, such as "noncaste Hindus", "protestant Hindus", 'non conformist Hindus", "Excluded costs", and "Exterior castes." Nevertheless in his own writing and speeches he continued to use depressed classes and untouchables interchangeable.

Omprakash Valmiki records a tale of domination, subordination, power, resistance, riot and social mobility, where protest movement is confined to the ground because it couldn't threaten the political structure, throughout *The Joothan*. Valmiki creates the composite picture of domination, hierarchy, clash of unequal culture, degraded and stigmatized at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy, Dalit are the largest group among the fifth of India's population living in poverty and destruction.

Works Cited

- Ambedkar, B.R. *Democracy in India*. Ed. Donatella Della. New Delhi: Blackbell Publishers, 2004.
- Banarji, Himani. *The Violence of Every Day*. Ed. George Castle. Oxford Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2007.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illumination*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1976.
- Beth, Sarah. *Joothan as Dalit Autobiography: The Transformation of Pain into Resistance*. Ed. James Massey. Delhi: OUP, 2008.
- - -. "The Narrative Pain as Fact and Pain as Identity." *Library Journal* (1993) : 86-103.
- Bom, Douglas. "Harsh Reality." *The Dalit Movement in India*. Ed. Loomba. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005. 1-25.
- Divakar, N. Paul and Ajaj M. *Caste, Race and Discrimination: Discourse in International Context*. Eds. Sukhadeo Thorat and Umakant. New Delhi: Rawat Publication, 2004.
- Habib, Ifran. "Caste in Indian History." *A Essay in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*. Ed. Ricker James. USA: Penguin, 1987. 160-97.
- Hartmann, Eva. Maria. *Our Fury is Burning*. Ed. Ruxonn Prazniak. New York: Columbia UP, 2003.
- Limbale, Shrankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Consideration*. Trans. Alok Mukherjee. Ed. Bhawan Das. Hyderabad, Orient Longman, 1997.
- Mandal, Saptarishi. *Three Studies on Law, the Shifting Social Space or Justice*. Ed. Cynthia Sugar. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.

- Mohd, Asadudin. *Joothan as Dalit Chronicle*. Ed. Arjun Dangle. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992. 40-57.
- Mukharjee, Arunprapha. *A Dalit Literary Text*. Trans. Arun Prapha Mukharjee. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Omvedt, Gail. "Ámbedkar and After: The Dalit Movement in India." *Dalit Identity and Politics*. Ed. Ghana Shyam Shah, New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2001. 143-59.
- Oomen, T.K. *Nation Civil Society and Social Movement*. Ed. Sidney Tarrow. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2004.
- Pawde, Kumud. *The Story of My Sanskrit in Dangle Arsun*. Ed. Poisoned Bread. Trans. from Marathi to English Literature. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1981.
- Roonkin, Maggie. "Joothan" A Dalit's Life *The Journal of Asian Studie*. 64.2 (May 2005): 504-05.
- Shah, Ghanshyam. "Introduction: Dalit Politics." *Dalit Identity and Politics*. Ed. Ghanshyam Shah. New Dehi: Rawat Publication, 2001. 1-40.
- Thorat, Sukhadaeo and Umakanta. *Caste, Race and Discrimination: Discourse in Internal Context*. Eds. Sukhadeo and Umakanta. New Delhi: Rawat Publication, 2004.
- Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit Life*. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukhurjee. New York : Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Young, I.M. *Defining Injustice as Domination and Oppression*. London: Sweet and Maxwell's Ltd., 2001.
- Zelliot, Eleanor. "The Meaning of Ambedkar." *Dalit Identity and Politics*. Ed. Ghanshyam Shah. New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2001. 120-93.