

Course: MA English, Sem II

Paper code: CC208

Paper Title: Indian Literature in English Translation

Topic: 'Joothan, A Dalit's Life' by Omprakash Valmiki

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1. Basic Information

Title of the book: Joothan, A Dalit's Life

Author: Omprakash Valmiki

Year of publication: 1997 (Hindi), 2003 (translated into English)

Genre: Autobiography

2. Background

Dalit: On a literal level the term 'dalit' refers to the crushed or the broken one.

With reference to identity, the term is used for the low caste people who were also treated as the untouchables.

Dalit Literature: Literature written by the dalits about their lives is called Dalit Literature. In a country practicing caste system for a long time, there has been very little representation of the low caste people. Even if they have been represented, they have either been reduced or romanticised. Dalit literature,

therefore, is considered more authentic representation of the caste by many scholars.

Dalit Aesthetics: Aesthetics refers to the study of beauty. Conventional understanding of beauty in literature is characterised by the use of special language, metre, rhyme and rhythm. Very often romanticisation is appreciated as beauty. This classical concept of beauty is not acceptable with reference to Dalit literature. It, rather, appreciates realism, unromantic details of filth and crisis in their lives and surroundings.

Autobiography: Whereas biography is an account of someone's life, autobiography is an account of one's own life. With reference to Dalit literature, this genre holds a great deal of importance as they become the first hand account of the oppressed which enables us to know the less told stories of Indian society.

- 3. Introduction to the text:** 'Joothan, A Dalit's Life' is an autobiography of Om Prakash Valmiki. It is an account of his life that opens up a filthy side of an unequal society. This is a pioneer work in the genre of Dalit Literature. Autobiographies are often regarded as an edited edition of one's life yet this book is important not only as an account of a dalit's life but also as a mirror to those high caste individuals who never lets a person forget his/her dalit identity. This book provides a vivid picture of many levels and layers of discrimination against the Dalits. It opens with a description of a village which shows a segregated social structure based on caste hierarchies and locates the Chuhra caste amid that hierarchical framework. Filth, shit, staleness are the recurring tropes in the book. The readers witness women shitting together in 'a round table conference'; a student sweeping the ground of his school where he should be sitting in the classroom with other students; a student being ruthlessly beaten up by

the teacher; people waiting to collect the leftover in marriage and many such scenes are to be witnessed. The point is that these experiences cannot be glamorously put and also cannot be ignored.

Valmiki's story is a story of sorrow, oppression, unimaginable grief, oppression and also a constant strategy of survival leading toward a hard earned success.

4. Important points:

- a. Realism: The realism represented in this autobiography is in its crude form uninterrupted by any exaggeration or glorification. It simply narrates the incidents of school, home, college, hostel, workplace and streets. All these commonplace incidents become a narrative of constant struggle and pain. It reminds the readers that mere existential realities can be traumatic for many people.
- b. Hierarchies: The unjust power relation has been vividly represented in this autobiography. The power relation between a teacher and a student, a master and a slave are certainly evident but the main reason remains caste hierarchies that gives an unwritten license of oppression.
- c. Poverty: it is not a co-incidence that these Dalits are poor people as well. The narrative is a post -independence account of caste system when equality was on constitutional paper yet it was far away in practice. Most of the people belonging to this caste are unpaid or paid very less for their work. This autobiography draws our attention to the caste and class equation.

5. Important questions

- a. Justify the significance of the title 'Joothan, A Dalit's Life'.
- b. Comment on the relevance of descriptions in the opening section of Valmiki's Joothan.
- c. 'Joothan' is a narrative of pain, resistance and hard earned success. Discuss.

- d.** How does 'Joothan' deconstruct the narratives of respect for elders, teachers and colleagues? Elaborate.