

# Identical Crisis in Omprakash Valmiki's

## Joothan

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**Abstract:** The autobiography of Omprakash Valmiki's 'Joothan' throws light on Dalit's life which is full of struggle and humiliation. It is a saga of promoting human dignity and assertion of being a human being like others. Valmiki undergoes psychosocial conflict and he is confused about his social role. He finds his resolution in books. The present paper aims to study the autobiography under the light of identical crisis which Valmiki suffers due to his caste. Valmiki regretting the discrimination based on the caste says "Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one's control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard –bearers of this country' great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into? Albeit they turn to scriptures to justify their position, the scriptures that establish feudal values instead of promoting equality and freedom.(133-134)

**Key words: Dalit autobiography, Identical Crisis, Untouchability.**

Valmiki's autobiography is an enlightening tale of casteism prevailing in our society. The casteism is so much ingrained in our society that it cannot be escaped and Valmiki suffered identical crisis due to that. It was a great task for Valmiki to be in sense with his self from the fractured self. Ambedkar rightly called these people Broken Men. Despite of his intellectual capabilities it is heart rendering that Valmiki was not accepted and even his writings were tagged as Dalit writings. The series of realities he depicts prevailing in the post independent India is really shocking to the readers and is fruitful. Arjun Dangle, a writer and leader of the Dalit Panther movement rightly opines: "Dalit is not a caste but a realization and it is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary."

Valmiki opines that Dalit writers should write autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive but also our true portrayals of wrongdoers. Dalit autobiographies will provide inspiration to our future generations. Joothan literary meaning in Hindi is food left on an eater's plate but Valmiki gives this title to describe the age old humiliation and pain bestowed on Dalits and their eating from the left overs of upper caste people. The title has its significance in the history also. The leaders Ambedkar and Gandhi were against of this method of piling leftovers. When some Dalits denied accepting their Joothan they were subjected to violent treatment. Valmiki writes in his book on Dalit aesthetics that "Dalit literary movement is not a just a literary movement. It is also cultural and social movement.

Dalit society has been imprisoned for a thousand years in the dark mist of ignorance, deprived of knowledge. Dalit literature is the portrayal of the wishes and aspirations of these oppressed and tormented Dalits.”(97)

In the opening pages Valmiki introduces the reader to the unhealthy and filthy atmosphere of his brought up. Their family which lived in Chuhra basti was unable to get a proper meal a day. Even after doing all sorts of work for Tagas like cleaning, agricultural work and general labour it was difficult to fill their tummies. Many a times they had worked without money or grain. Chuhras were identified by their castes, and their names were of no use to Tagas. They used ‘O chuhre for older and ‘AbeyChuhre’ for younger person. The chuhras existence was worse than animals where later touch was acceptable than the prior one. They were used just like a tissue paper. Om Prakash Valmiki’s schooling life was very tormenting and humiliating. He became very introvert as a result of this. His fellow students used to tease him by his caste and commented on his dress. Teachers used to torture them physically and mentally by abusing in bad slang. He remembers the headmaster Kaliram who avoided him going to the class and making him sweep the class rooms and the whole school for three days. Even he was not allowed to drink water but he was determined to go to school and on the third day he was noticed by his father sweeping the school compound. The courage with which his father took and announced that his son and his people would study had a great impact on him. It is by the help of Pradhan Sagwa Sing Tyagi Valmiki was able to continue in that school but with fear stricken.

From his childhood Valmiki has witnessed many injustices and in human practices against his caste people. During the harvest time they had poured their blood in their service without getting proper wages for the hard work. All family members of Valmiki were working hard to fill their tummies. One of his brothers Sukhbir worked for the Tagas like a permanent servant. For cleaning the stinking cowsheds they were given two and a half kilos of grain and left over roti at noon which was made with flour mixed with husk as it was for the chuhras. During wedding chuhras would sit outside with huge baskets to collect the leftovers. The little pieces of pooris, bite of sweetmeats and a little bit of vegetables were a sort of sumptuous meal which was dried and kept for the different times. When Valmiki recalls the worst time of his life says, “What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan. And yet no one had any grudges Or Shame, Or repentance.” (10) After the death of the elder brother Sukhbir there was more poverty and it pushed everyone to earn including Valmiki. There was no money to send him to class sixth. He had to attend the buffalo and grazing the pigs. It was by selling the anklets of his Babhi he continued his studies. The new school and new friends like Shravan Kumar and Chandrapal Valmiki felt better at his position. When he stood first in the half yearly exam he was elated he was promoted from last bench to first bench. It is the library of the school which ignited his literary sensibility and he started reading and narrating stories to his mother when he had joined scouts and got a uniform from the school he was unable to get ironed it by dhobi. Dhobis had denied ironing a chuhra’s clothes since he may lose other

customers. Valmiki had felt very bad and it had crushed his spirit says. ‘My heart was heavy. It had lost faith in God. One can somehow get past poverty and deprivation, but it is impossible to get past caste.’ (18)

Chuhra’s houses were made up of clay and it was risky and dangerous in the rainy season. They used to starve and spend sleepless nights. Omprakash remembers the mar or rice water which was good as milk to them. How young children waited in front of the chulas to have it. Ashwatthama had drunk this and it has been penned by Vyasa so Omprakash had a question in his mind. “How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word on our lives?” He had felt the flames of Ashwatthama’s revenge. It had taken many struggling years to overcome the dark years of his life. His people were encircled by many superstitions inspite of dire poverty. They had great faith in many deities which were taken birth in their basti’s only. If anybody fell sick they used to call bhagat instead of doctor. They had more faith in ghosts and spirits. His mother had not allowed him read a dead man’s book fearing his ghost may trouble her son. Omprakash recalls an encounter by a Taga’s son Brajesh who had provoked him to fight and abused him for studying. Om was in tears when his bag was thrown into a muddy ditch. It was the words of his father, “You have to improve the caste by studying.” (29) Kept him spirited. It is his father who broke the custom of salaaming (bridegroom going around and begging at the places of higher caste people).

In those days it was the duty of chuhras to dispose of dead cattle in the village without any wages for that. It was a hard and tedious work to do but they only received curses and it was known way of keeping chuhras in poverty. The dead animals hide would fetch them fifteen rupees and in the absence of his father Omprakash along with his chacha had once skinned the bullock in his guidance. It was very tormenting to do it first time and even more when he carried the bundle of it. The thought of humiliation he may face if his classmates see him in that position shattered him. The bitterest memory of Omprakash is the time when his basti people were taken by head constable and beaten badly for no crime but refusing to work without wages. There was no reaction from anybody but only tears rolled on. The Basti was choked and muted to this inhuman act. Even the Pradhan of the village had gone to city as it was pre planned to teach the basti people a lesson for denying doing the work. This incident inspired and brought out dalit poet out of Omprakash.

The schooling had made Omprakash to deny the superstitious beliefs his people followed and remained aloof from those practice. His father was afraid that he may convert to Christianity or else he must follow the Hindu culture. The basti people never worshiped Hindu gods or goddesses. They only worshiped other gods and mostly spirits like ‘Paun’, Kalwa and ‘Hari Singh Nalwa’. The gods were not Lord Krishna or Lakshmi but Jaharpir and Mai Madaran etc. Omprakash at his young age he had a question in his mind, “why does one have to be a Hindu in order to be a good human being.... I have sun and suffered the cruelty of Hindus since childhood. Why does caste superiority and caste pride

attack only the weak? Why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits?" (41) Omprakash was deeply hurt by the practices which involved spirits shaking their body and whipping the sick ones. He recalls how his two brothers died without any proper treatment. There were many deaths because of their ignorance even then they opted spirits to medication. They would just please the gods by offering pigs and liquor. When Omprakash was made to sacrifice pig it was just equal for him to sacrifice his self. He had seen his people do all these work but when he was asked to do it. The knife had pierced into the pig but his heart was thwarted apart. His mother took his side and gave a verdict that her son will not do such work.

Omprakash remembers the abuses and thrashings given by teachers for no reason or silly reason. He recalls an incident when he had gone to his Master Brajpal's village to bring wheat. The elders had taken inside their home and had even given them food to eat but after learning about their caste both he and his friend escaped from the wrath of the people. This sort of discrimination was common to him. His science teacher had promised to help his students before their final examination and had asked them to drop into his house without hesitation. Omprakash had gone to the teachers house expecting his help but he made him to get the wheat grounded. Even after coming after the assigned task the teacher was unavailable to him. There was no one who could help him in his studies but still he managed to score good marks. During the board examination when he was preparing for Maths paper the Tyagi had come and dragged him to his field. After doing the work his mother had dropped rotis into his hand from a distance, so that she could not touch his hands. Omprakash managed to throw those rotis and escaped from him. There was much disturbance for studying during exam time even at their bastis. There was no electricity and were forced to study in the light of a lanteen hung at a height, noise of drums, quarrels were common. When Omprakash cleared the board exam it was announced in the paper. He was the first man from his basti to pass high school. It was a festive period in the whole basti to celebrate his success. He elevated the interest among the basti children for studies. He even took them class to encourage (Whenever Omprakash raised questions to his teachers he was beaten up or punished inspite of clearing his doubts. The taunts of his teachers and fellow students pierced him deeply, "hook at this chuhre ka pretending to be a Brahmin."(62) On his result day something unusual happened which he had not expected. Chamanlal Tyagi visited his home to congratulate him on his success. Even he had taken him home and fed lunch. "In all the pervasive atmosphere of untouchability this was, indeed a special gesture." (60) Omprakash had taken science in class eleven Chemsitry teacher Brajpal Singh would keep him out of the lab for some or the other pretext. As a result in the board exam he was unable to conduct any experiments. Even he was given less marks purposefully and he had failed in the lab tests. It had lowered his interest in studies, crushing his self-confidence. He got a chance to continue his studies in Dehradun staying at his mamas home. From Indresh Negar to DAV College was far away but he never missed the 7AM class. He was ragged by senior but got rid of it by Bahadur.

The reading of biography of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar was an eye opening to him. It disturbed him a lot and it had a great impact to emerge as a new person. A new word Dalit had emerged in his vocabulary. He started participating in college activities which created lot of trouble in his relationship with mama. He had a very tough time and spent many houses in college without food. Even he had done some work for money in the evenings. Finally he abandoned his college education as he got admitted to the Ordnance Factory, Dehradun as an apprentice. He had only one thing in his mind that he would not follow his elder's job. Even his father was happy learning this and used to tell him that his son escaped caste. But Omprakash feels that "caste" follows one right up to one's death" (78). The scene of buffalo sacrifice and other animal sacrifices is termed as inhumane and violent act by him.

Omprakash was intelligent enough to clear the competitive examination for further training he went to Jabalpur. His father had always encouraged him and Jabalpur was like a foreign to them. This training institute played a vital role in his life. He learnt chess, read Premchand and Marxist literature and even staged many plays in the Institute's auditorium. Omprakash started writing poetry and one act plays and staged them. Lack of money hindered him from higher education. Later he was selected to Bombay for further training who had cleared the writing and oral exam. He was reluctant to go but his lecturers helped him to buy tickets to Bombay. The hostel life had cleared him from caste barriers. He was always attracted to books and here he read Pasternak, Hemingway, Stevenson, Tolstoy, Oscar Wilds, Romain Rolland, Emily Zola, Tagore and Kalidasa. Influenced by the activities of Dalit Panthus Omprakash had written an essay and published in Navbharat Times, Bombay. This had created controversy and the principal of the Institute had warned him not to continue as he is in a government institution. He saw many Marathi plays written by Vijay Tendulkar.

The new world of literature brought new consciousness in him. The Marathi literature and theatre personality like Kulkarni changed his life gave a chance to work with several well-known directors. He had defriended Mr.Kulkarni who was a Brahmin and loved to eat meat on every Sundays in their mess. His younger daughter Savitha was attracted towards Omprakash and Mrs.Kulkarni had given him an oil bath thinking that he is a Brahmin. They got confirmed he is a Brahmin by his surname Valmiki. But one day when he saw their discrimination in giving different dishes for SC he told straight away to Savita that he belonged to SC community. She had cried badly and told not to reveal the truth about his caste to her father. After this incident he avoided going to Kulkarnis and he was appointed to the Ordnance factory Chanda. Omprakash had finally become a known poet by his poems like Navbharat, Yugharm, NaiDunia and had become columnist in Chandrapur weekly called Janapratidinidhi. Buddha's philosophy on human freedom had attracted him. His interest in literature and theatre had evolved him as a new person. He had taken a stand in his marriage. He had denied their custom of marrying according to his elder's choice. Finally he married his Swarnalata Bhabhi's younger sister Chanda on 27<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1973. He had faced many bitter experiences due to his decision but he was adamant and not allowed any blood shed during his marriage ceremony. When he had taken his

wife with him he had no room or home to settle down. They had spent a night in his friend Ajay's home. Later found a two roomed flat close to his friend's room. He had even tried a magazine named Him Jhana.

He had even witnessed the riot caused due to the demand to name a University as Dr.Ambedkar University. It lead to the torture of Dalits and hundreds of people had died. Anti-reservation protests had created terror and harassment of Dalits in the working place had increased. Omprakash was disheartened due to his absence both of the parent's funeral. There was a delay of reaching letter to him. The condition of rural Dalits was not good and women did not wear any cloth on the upper portion of their bodies. There was so much superstitions prevailing at that time there was a record of sacrifice offering of a child to increase the yield. In 1984 there was an incident where the students ripped out the lesson on Dr.Ambedkar by the orders of a Brahmin teacher. This can be seen as a symbol of Dalit oppression. Omprakash Valmiki was fortunate to meet many writers, intellectuals and artists in his life time. He never missed any opportunities and had participated in the AnandMela held at Baba Amte's ashram where leprosy patients were treated and made self-reliant.

In the last pages of his autobiography Omprakash throws light on his caste tag which excluded him from his relatives and friends. Even his wife was against his usage of sur name Valmiki and had asked him to avoid it or use. He narrates about his friendship with Kureishi which had crossed caste barrier and had become very intimate. Kureishi had coaxed and taken Valmiki to his commandant Saheb to meet him as he was from his own district. After learning Valmiki's caste these was uneasy and the conversation ended soon. Even the commandant Saheb had asked Kureishi how he socializes with Valmiki and even dines with him whereas in his district because of his low born caste he was not allowed to cross the threshold. Kureishi's friendship with Valmiki never suffered from these sorts of remarks. Valmiki had been awarded the best actor and best director prize several times. Even his wife Chanda had won the best actress prize in Ballarpur Paper Mills drama competitions. Along with poetry and drama Valmiki had written short stories based on real life incidents. His surname had created many problems to him and was treated badly by some people. Many officers and scholars maintained distance with him. There were instances where his surname was confused by some and taken it as Brahmin but he would clear their confusion after learning the truth the friendship was surely ended. His relatives had even avoided to print his name on the invitation card because of his surname which would bombard their caste. He never left his surname whatever trouble it threw him into. Even he recalls befriending a couple in their Rajasthan trip where his caste was asked he never lied so told the truth and got spoilt the trip. He says educated Dalit face terrible crisis because of their caste identity and they have found an easy way to get out of this by altering their surnames. For example chinalige has become chandril or 'Chanchal' and 'Saude' has been changed to 'Saudai' or 'Sood' etc. He says "behind all such acts is the anguish of identical crisis, which has come about as a reaction to the blatant inhumanity of casteism." (127) Dalits after getting exposed to education wanted to blend with the society but others have

oppressed them time now and then discriminated and doubted their intelligence, ability and their performance. Even Valmiki had faced trouble in getting home for rent because of his surname. Some had even called him as a well-educated fool to affix with his surname. Even his surname was changed to “khairwal” so that his review of the book could be published. When Valmkiki had been called to give a lecture on Buddhist Literature and Philosophy at a conference and was about to speak before the mike a question was raised by an audience. “how can a ‘Valmiki’ be allowed to speak on Buddhist literature and Philosophy? Aren’t you ashamed?” (131) Valmiki was never disheartened by these sorts of questions he took it as an educational experience and spoken well. In his initial days he used to get angry by his fellow officers and subordinates who undervalued his performance due to his surname. There were instances of getting into heated argument with them but with the passage of time he had changed. He had faced it with different approach. He took it with a different attitude he terms it as ‘social disease. The battle of equality cannot be fought when caste is the basis of respect and merit and for social superiority. According to Valmkiki “We need an ongoing struggle and a conscious struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change.” (132)

Valmiki through his life had tried to understand and question the caste system through his writings. But he was constantly criticized as loud and arrogant which critics thought was inherited due to his background. He says “depriving human beings of human rights on account of their birth is not justifiable on any grounds”. (133) Though caste crushes Valmiki emerges as a ‘new man’ by his creative narration and writing. He has set a new milestone for the other dalit writers thus successfully creating identity for himself. The Dalits struggle for identity is not yet over as the casteism is now internalized in our society. Even today they are treated as outsiders and are invisible in the society. But some are emerging strongly and creating their own identity. The caste which had hunched and tortured them in their society is now allowed to look at in new perspective because of their creativity. Valmiki optimistically says “We need an ongoing struggle and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that bring revolutionary change both in the outside world in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change.”

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