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## Dalit Consciousness: A Critique Of Omprakash Valmiki's Short Stories

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**Abstract:** In this age of globalisation, people have migrated from traditional community setups to metro-centres, urban locations, university/college campuses or work places and, consequent thereupon they find huge freedom to act against caste discrimination, and, yet psychologically succumbing to the scars of oppression or the said dalit experience of pre-movement. The new emerging identity with the change of location not only assimilates, with its ameliorated status, into a larger social setup, but simultaneously provides a space for encountering the age old historic oppression. Om Prakash Valmiki is one of such people. He has carved out a niche for himself as a leading dalit writer from North India. The present paper focuses on his short stories in which he has, with authenticity and conviction, presented before us not only the bitter experience of life faced by individuals from dalit community, but also the condition of women in patriarchy. The present paper seeks to present a critique of these stories to understand dalit consciousness, its experiences and directions.

**Keywords:** Dalit, caste discrimination, oppression, psychology, patriarchy.

"Those who eat goats, foul tiny fish:

Such, they call caste people.

Those who eat the sacred Cow

That showers frothing milk for Shiva

Such, they call out-castes" (Kalavve, the 12th century Dalit saint)

Dalit Consciousness is the hallmark of dalit literature, which is written by oppressed people. Importantly, it challenges the unjustified mindset of Swarna society through a realistic point of view. The hegemonic control over literary aesthetics gets rejected and dalit writers present a critique of traditions of existing mainstream literature and society. Dalit consciousness emerges as a reactionary measure against exploitative traditions.

As is rightly observed that "... Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of the country. He does not believe in God, Rebirth, Soul, Holy Books, Teaching Separatism, Fate and Heaven because they have made him a slave." (Zillion, 268)

Om Prakash Valmiki wrote his autobiography *Jhoothan* (1997) for personal inner urge and purgatory need. However, the book is no less than a fine literary piece that registers bitter experiences of a boy growing up in an oppressed caste and marginalized section of society. Reading this therapeutic kind of writing not only evokes sympathy but also gives direction to comprehensive understanding of his short stories. Valmiki originally conceived the title 'Abe Chuhre Ke' for his autobiography, which was replaced by 'Jhoothan' at the suggestion of renowned short-story writer and editor Rajendra Yadav. The former abandoned title appears sensitive rendition of *swanubhooti*, the three words got engraved on his psyche as the schoolteacher put hindrance on his path to education; his father successfully rescues him from the progeny of Dronacharya and, thus, plays the role of a primary socializer, but the latter adopted one is intellectual and aesthetic expression, which the author artistically incorporated. His family/community collects jhoothan or leftovers of upper castes; his mother refuses to continue doing this and revolts against *zamindar*. That is how Valmiki happens to learn lessons to articulate and rebel against suppression. In fact, there is another dimension to such subhuman practices that the root cause lies in extreme penury and untouchability. Poverty and financial constraints are more denigrating than the social structures and systems. Herein emerges Valmiki's dalit consciousness, the understanding of which is crucial to map ramifications of his stories. Hence, his writing is essentially didactic. His yearning for equality gets expressed as follows.

"Why is caste my identity? My friends point out my loudness and arrogance in my creations. They suggest that I am a prisoner of my own narrow-minded shackles. For them, creative expressions should have broad meanings. One should not confine oneself to narrow dimensions. It means my being Dalit and to have my own individual point-of-view about my environment, social-economic situation makes me arrogant. That is because I am still an S.C. in their view -- a mere outsider." (Valmiki, 160)

The social discrimination and sagrivation deny underprivileged people human dignity. Valmiki tells the stories of untouchables/dalits who have suffered repressing shame, deep wounded self, unexpressed ire and inarticulated sorrow. Rajshekher emphasizes,

"Dalits have suffered a lot in India; their forefathers were exploited and destroyed. Their growth was stunted. Dalitism is the answer for all this." (Rajshekhar, 1-15)

Through his characters, Valmiki registers not only protest but also reacts sharply against humiliation discrimination, exploitation, and oppression.

Dalit consciousness begins at the climatic scene in "Biram ki Bahu" outside the dark corners of her house. Ramesar, the dalit lover, happens to wait for her near the Shiva temple, where she visits along with other women to worship. She betrays his trust, as she shows neither a sign of recognition nor gesture nor glance nor a sentence aside. He was defeated, depressed and ploded his weary way towards hamlet. The story has been concluded that that is how the upper cast have exploited the untouchables and thrown them away for centuries. Is it justified that the saviour has to be ditched? Isn't it too much a cost paid for being an untouchable? Or, the romantic celebration / fornication of "Graham" results in tragic heart break of Ramesar in "Birum ki Bahu" because the writer invokes masochistic melancholy in readers and simultaneously anger also born out of caste discrimination.

However, the truth of the matter is that such an accidental lover belonging to whatever caste, upper, lower or lowest, has neither been socially recognised by a married woman nor accepted by society, because adultery has never been accepted as the way of life, for it being against social norms and values. Hence there is always lurking behind the dangers of honour killings. Sometimes such passionate involvements have been

noticed to end in criminal cases. But there is no denying the fact that nothing goes wrong as far as appearances are saved, otherwise the question of ill-repute and khap panchayat's notorious interventions are not far away. A woman knows social systems, norms and values better under the oppressive structures of patriarchal society. In reality Biram ki Bahu becomes the saviour of Ramesar by divulging no shred of acquaintance because the social discovery of their fornication may lead to social disapproval, anger, provocation and inevitable tragedy. However, the author seems to suggest that caste discrimination and patriarchal suppression of women caused the lover's emotional breakdown. Thus the story happens that way because of social / patriarchal exigency. The author seems to give a message from dalit consciousness that it should have happened the other way around such like the lovers be united at the cost and risk of honour.

Another significant aspect is that the motherhood is a certified fact while fatherhood is a doubtful certainty. That is why man desires multiplication of his own self through procreation and to ensure that he has designed laws and oppressive confinement for women in patriarchy. Importantly, these laws and moral norms are prevalent in almost all patriarchal societies irrespective of caste, creed, and religious faith. It is in Ten Commandments that thou shall not commit adultery. The issue of fornication is offensive. In present story, obviously woman's state is in double jeopardy: first, she is wife of a seedless husband, second, it is her fault not to give birth to a son. Biram ki Bahu has not only saved herself from the stigma of barren woman but also saved the lineage of her husband's family. For her, the sexual transgression is not a matter of sexual gratification as has been the case of Lady Chatterley in Lady Chatterley's Lover. It is for her rather an attempt to have an heir to family for happy and meaningful survival and existential quest for identity wherein the medium is not important but the end result is. It is certain that the desire of the woman, Biram ki Bahu, to have a son amounts to adultery because of the social environment which teasingly chide her for the lack or harassingly blames her for barrenness. Her situation can be compared with Yerma, the protagonist of the eponymous titled Spanish tragic play by Fredrick Garcia Lorca. But the fate of Yerma is not the lot of Biram ki Bahu, because the latter pragmatically chooses to become pregnant via adultery, whereas the former cannot.

Literature penned from sympathy is different from literature of self experience. The latter pinpoints the painful spot that pinches severely, while the former surveys around it. Valmiki happens to write from sensitivity of his self experiential realism. He belongs to the oppressed section of society and he has gone through the struggle of upper social mobility. His objective seems not to invite sympathy from mainstream but to crave for equality and acceptance. The dichotomy between sympathy and compassionate understanding of fellow beings in dalit consciousness cannot be comprehensively understood through concepts and politics. Dalit consciousness considers it a prerequisite that the social structures and systems be undergone a change to eradicate inequality and distancing, which, as the writers of his creed have learnt, is a marathon task.

In this line of thought, "Salaam" informs dalitism seeking self-respect, equality, and humanity. On surface level the story is about the custom of 'salaam' which establishes the upper caste (Raanghad's) elitism, snobbery, and oppressive tactics to impose inferiority and injustice on low caste (Chuhra). But on deeper level this manifests writer's creative intelligence in delineating the difference between sympathy/empathy and self-experience in practical terms. As is the revelation to Kamal (an upper caste Brahman, suggestive of lotus blooming out of sludge water) when he attends the marriage of his friend, Harish (a low-caste, suggestive of Lord of Hari). When Kamal approached a tea shop early in the morning and asked for a cup of tea, the vendor not only denied for assuming him a low-caste but also, on knowing his caste, publicly shamed him saying that he, a Brahmin, has come in chuhron's wedding ceremony to drink urine. All the uppercaste community made fun of him and rebuked with abusive slang. Having experienced harrowing insult and hatred, Kamal undergoes an excruciating pain and realizes what it means to be a dalit. Thereafter he understood Harish's sensitivity and helplessness on adverse news of crimes against dalits despite constitutional rights. As a

masterpiece 'Salaam' shows subhuman behaviour of Swarna society. Also, it strongly appeals to eradicate inequality, and abolish untouchability.

Hence, the dominant or mainstream way of life is perpetually denigrated. For instance, Biram derives from Brahma, the lord of creation; but ironically he lacks virility in the story. Ramesar derives from Lord Shiva, but ironically he is jilted and despondent. The eclipse (Graham Kaal), an inauspicious time, feeds low caste people, as they receive alms, wheat, etc. during this period; but it is deliberately made to happen in the story that the inauspicious time feeds the uterus of an upper caste woman, ironically, from a dalit. It is sensational representation of events. Does woman stoops so low to ignore ill effects of grahan despite having sanskaras of Hindu religiosity? That the writer intentionally seems to juxtapose two events of eclipse (grahan) and the woman's existential need informs his revolutionary approach against tradition and custom in order to establish the immediacy of present.

Dalit literature is essentially influenced by Marxist thought and Dalit politics which began in 1930 when Dr. Ambedkar advocated for the human rights and political representation of socially oppressed castes. However, it was Savitribai Phule who first introduced the term dalit in 1869 for Maharashtrian caste Mahar. Importantly, Ambedkar preferred terms like Untouchables, depressed classes, and boycotted communities to dalit. In fact, Dalit politics was committed to inspiring untouchables to struggle against social injustice and uniting all oppressed castes in an organized group. Creative literature was not far away from this movement. In mid twentieth century, Tukaram Bhaurao Sathe alias Annabhau Sathe was one of the leading voices of dalit literature, and he was a prolific, versatile and visionary genius. At first he was a communist and activist but later on became a staunch follower of Ambedkar and his writings contained themes of human values, pangs and pains, anguish and tinguish of downtrodden people, and resistance and protest against caste discrimination. Om Prakash Valmiki belongs to this creed of writers.

With the passage of time, Dalit politics drifted from its agenda; consequently, Dalit literature happens to record disagreement and disillusionment with its leadership and pragmatics. Valmiki's short story "Shava Yatra" is a case in point, as is about caste discrimination, suppression, oppression, and subhuman practices. It was the village of Chamar caste and only family of Balhara caste lived across the pond as out-caste of society; and Chamars treat them (Surja, his daughter, Santo, his son, Kallan, a Railway employee, his grand daughter and daughter-in-law) as untouchables. They are not allowed to get constructed a concrete house, and grand daughter, Saloni was denied treatment for being untouchable by a (Chamar) doctor, and when she dies of fever, no one from village attends the pathetic funeral rites. It was social hierarchy and practice of untouchability within schedule castes community, that even Ravidas Association and Ambedkar Youth Association do not come forward to help for cremation. As a result, thoughtful Kallan recollects eloquent lectures delivered on the occasion of Ambedkar Jayanti and becomes contemptuous and infuriated at the shallow and hollow words.

"Shava Yatra" is a controversial story because it highlights the oppression inflicted by lower caste on the lowest one. Critics like Kanwal Bharti strongly opposed Valmiki's express objective in this story, meaning thereby such themes weaken Dalit movement. Yet it is de facto present and undermines the Dalit politics and its ideals of equality, freedom and brotherhood. The critics have found the story unpalatable and have raised questions on Valmiki's creative process. But unfortunately they have not addressed the problem squarely. Valmiki still stands stalwart in pinpointing the issue of caste discrimination with in schedule castes group. The only hope lies in education and thereafter employability which leads to financial freedom and one can get rid of social injustices.

“Pachchis Chauka Dedso” i.e. Twenty Five fours One Hundred Fifty is around this theme that Chaudhary, the local money lender charges high interest rate with wrong multiplication table from uneducated and innocent clients, irrespective of caste, who believe in him. Sudeep memorizes the right table as taught by his school teacher but cannot make his illiterate father accept 'twenty five fours One hundred'; however, he succeeds later on by making four heaps of Rs. twenty five each of his salary amounting to one hundred and not one hundred fifty. His father curses Chaudhary. Importantly, it is rampant evil of charging high interest from illiterate borrowers who are poor in mathematics. That the only education is the solution of problems as such seems to be suggested by the author.

“Khanabadosh” is another rare feat depicting economic exploitation and sexploitation of proletariats by bourgeois. The poor laborers, despite being victimized, are still divided due to deeply ingrained caste prejudices. However, the noteworthy point is when Jasdev, an uppercaste Brahmin labour, like Kamal in "Salaam", tries to save the honour of Mano; he gets beaten by Sube Singh, the son of Mukhtaar Singh, owner of the brick kiln. Jasdev eventually fails to uphold his moral stance and scumbs to his owner's tactics of oppressing the helpless and dependent dalit Sukia and Mano. Their personal dream to construct a red brick house is shattered. Mano had to survive with dignity only after leaving the menial job and go elsewhere, a directionless path like homeless vagabonds. Valmiki apparently suggests that poverty overrides even caste discrimination, and dalits like Sukia and Mano are dragged out of even marginalized space. The contractor Asgar and Sube Singh oppress Mahesh by making him a drug addict and convert his wife Kisani into a sort of keep. Valmiki shows how the powerful owner turns into evil, immoral and inhuman, making life of downtrodden people hellish.

“Ghuspethiye” centers around dalit students who have got admission to a medical college under reservation quota because of which they are considered culprit and guilty by sawarna students. Consequent upon being intruder they get bullied, thrashed, and beaten. Unable to handle the stress, Subhash Sonkar commits suicide. Ramesh Chaudhary revolts that this cannot be called a case of suicide, rather it is a murder committed by the oppressing upper caste. Rakesh, a dalit officer, sheds his cowardice, gets finally convinced and decides to attend Sonkar's funeral cremation to be done at college gate.

However, the world in these stories, especially ending of the stories simply remains masochistic in outlook which is pitiable condition. In fact, there should be counter active steps to ameliorate the dalit plight through literature. As has ever been the purpose of reactionary or propagandist literature.

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