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Testimonies of the Oppressed: Memory, Trauma, and Resistance in Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intertwined themes of memory, trauma, and healing within Indian literary narratives, with a particular focus on Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, a seminal work of Dalit literature in Hindi and later translated into English. *Joothan* recounts Valmiki's memory that is experience of caste-based discrimination, offering a poignant reflection on the collective trauma endured by Dalits in India. This paper examines how the autobiographical novel captures both personal and community memories of caste oppression, shedding light on the profound emotional and psychological scars these experiences leave behind. It also addresses the narrative's exploration of trauma, both at individual level and at communality level, and the slow process of healing through writing and resistance. By placing *Joothan* in context with theories of trauma and memory, this paper highlights how Valmiki uses literature as a medium of healing, offering a voice to the silenced and paving a path toward social justice. The paper will also draw connections between Valmiki's narrative and broader Dalit literary traditions that engage with themes of trauma and resilience, exploring the cultural and socio-political contexts that shape these narratives. Through this analysis, the paper aims to demonstrate the crucial role of memory and storytelling in both documenting trauma and fostering healing within marginalized Dalit communities in India.

Dalit literature, emerging from the lived experiences of the historically oppressed caste communities in India, plays a crucial role in showcasing and challenging caste-based discrimination and highlighting the plight of marginalized communities. The literature has an intention to free and emancipate the depressed classes from the caste clutches. As Shartchandra Muktibodh notes, "Dalit literature is the literature produced by Dalit consciousness. Human freedom is the inspiration behind it" (Dangle 270). This body of literature, which grew in prominence in the 20th century onwards especially 1970s onwards, is not merely a form of creative literary expression but also a tool for social justice, offering a voice to those silenced for centuries in India. Dalit auto-biographies are testimonios of their lived lives. According to Pramod K. Nayar "… testimonio narratives are documents of atrocities and suffering, bringing one into contact with the victimized. The testimonio is the voice of one who witnesses for the sake of another or their community" (Pramod 84). By narrating stories of suffering, victimization, resistance, and survival, Dalit writers have sought to bring attention to the deep-rooted socio-economic and cultural caste hierarchies that continue to dominate Indian society. *Joothan* (2003) by Omprakash Valmiki stands as one of the most significant works within Dalit literature. Valmiki recounts that,

> Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one [a higher-caste person] happened to touch a Chuhra (a Valmiki), one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and then throw them away. … They did not call us by our names. If a person was older than we were, then he would call us "Oe, Chuhre." If the person was

> younger than we were or of the same age, then he would use "Abey, Chuhre." (Valmiki 2).

It is a poignant example of the daily degradation faced by Dalits. His autobiographical account that vividly portrays such harsh realities of caste- based oppressions in India. Through Valmiki's experiences as a member of Valmiki community, the novel uncovers the layers of humiliation and systemic discrimination, ill treatment faced by Dalits. While doing so, Valmiki also asserts his rights or questions, why only Dalits live at the gutters where other use the place for open defecation? "Why is it a crime to ask to be paid for one's labour? Why are fellow Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits? Why can Dalits enter into the schools like anybody? ... You take the milk from the cows and buffaloes and when they are dead you expect us (Dalits) to remove the dead bodies. Why?" (Valmiki XLIV). These rhetorical questioning emphasizes the unjust foundations of caste-based oppression in every spear of Dalit life be it– dwelling, schooling, work or employment, treatment, social relations, etc. This autobiographical novel also deals with the collective trauma of an entire Valmiki community whose dignity has been historically denied. The purpose of this paper is to examine the intricate themes of memory, trauma, and healing in *Joothan*. By engaging with Valmiki's narrative, it aims to explore how memory of caste-based oppression is preserved and passed down, how trauma manifests in both personal and collective forms, and how storytelling through auto-biography becomes a pathway to healing and resistance for marginalized communities.

Context of Caste Oppression and Discrimination

Caste has long been one of the most oppressive social systems in India, dating back over two millennia. The caste system, with its rigid hierarchical divisions, assigns people into social strata based on their birth. Dalits, traditionally known as "untouchables," have historically been at the bottom of this hierarchy, excluded from mainstream society and subjected to various forms of exploitation and violence. They were also given bad names to call them. Discrimination based on caste has led to significant socio-economic inequalities and, more critically, a persistent denial of dignity and human rights to Dalits. In post-colonial India, despite legal and constitutional safeguards, caste-based discrimination continues to persist, both overtly and covertly everywhere and every spear of life, especially in rural areas it is clearly visible and practiced. Valmiki himself reflects that despite constitutional provisions, untouchability persists in most rural areas "I had to sit away from the others in the class, and even that wasn't enough. I was not allowed to sit on a chair or a bench. I had to sit on the bare floor; I was not allowed even to sit on the mat. Sometimes I would have to sit way behind everybody, right near the door (Valmiki 3). Valmiki also shares that the scars of this oppression are not limited to physical violence or economic marginalization; they also extend to deep psychological trauma that has been inherited and internalized over generations. As Pramod K. Nayar explains, Dalit writings are narratives of trauma, pain, resistance, protest and social change. Dalit texts document the sufferings of and atrocities committed upon a large section of the population (Pramod 83). Literature, particularly Dalit literature, has become an important medium through which the experiences of caste-based oppression have been articulated, documented, and shared with the world.

Valmiki's memories of Caste-based Oppression in *Joothan*

In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki recounts his personal journey growing up as a Dalit at Barla, Uttar Pradesh, India. His narrative paints a stark picture of the inhumane treatment he and

others in his Valmiki community experienced on a daily basis. Valmiki's testimony, while deeply personal, also resonates with the collective experiences of other marginalized Dalit communities across India such as the Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the Mahars in Maharashtra, and Parayas in Tamil Nadu etc.—whose histories of exclusion, forced labour, and social degradation in every part of the country parallel those described in *Joothan*. From being denied access to dwelling, education and employment opportunities to being subjected to menial labour and constant humiliation, Valmiki's experiences are emblematic of the widespread discrimination faced by Dalits in Indian society. He writes that Dalits were not seen as human beings; they were treated worse than animals. This treatment captures the dehumanization that is central to caste oppression. One of the most poignant aspects of *Joothan* is its depiction of everyday indignities that are often invisible to those outside the Dalit community. Valmiki recalls being forced to sit on the floor in public school, away from the upper-caste children, and being assigned menial tasks like sweeping, cleaning the school grounds. His teacher commands "Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation. I was made to sweep the entire school and the playground. I felt humiliated but kept silent … The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping." (Valmiki 5). These experiences are not just moments of personal suffering but represent a broader system that normalizes caste-based humiliation even in schooling. According to S Jadhav, D Mosse, N Dostaler (2016) Humiliation profoundly affects mental health, often leading to feelings of despair and worthlessness. In the case of some talented high-achieving Dalit students in elite institutions, this can manifest as suicidal distress, stemming from the experience of social defeat or the inability to overcome systemic barriers. The constant struggle against discrimination and exclusion may erode their sense of self-worth, creating a deep psychological toll that can lead to overwhelming emotional pain and a sense of hopelessness. The same is seen in Valmiki's recounting of these everyday humiliations reflects the systemic nature of caste oppression, where discrimination is ingrained into the very fabric of daily life. Here, Valmiki's narrative serves as both a personal testimony and a broader indictment of the systemic nature of caste oppression in India.

The Collective Trauma of the Dalit Community

The trauma experienced by Valmiki is not just individual but deeply intertwined with the collective memory of the Dalit community. As Shyam Lal Magarati (2023) points out, "Caruth's (1995) Trauma: Explorations in Memory refers to the shocking events which compel people to suffer short and long term as well. Dalits in their community have been suffering both by words and actions" (Shyam 152). Dalits, over generations, have been subjected to systemic violence, exclusion, and dehumanization. This collective trauma has been passed down from one generation to the next, creating a shared history of pain, humiliation, and struggle. The community's experience of trauma is not limited to isolated incidents but is embedded in the very fabric of their daily lives. In *Joothan*, Valmiki not only documents his own experiences but also the experiences of his community. The title itself -*Joothan* (meaning "leftovers") is a reference to the food that Dalits were expected to collect and consume after being discarded by upper-caste families. Valmiki writes, "… the joothan, the half-eaten scraps, would also be put in the basket with the rotis for us." (Valmiki 2). Joothan was not just the food left on their plates; it was the entire Dalit experience, a metaphor for the perpetual state of rejection they lived in. This demeaning practice, representative of the broader caste-based oppression, is a vivid

metaphor for the systemic denial of dignity to Dalits. The trauma of living as "untouchables" in a society that perpetually devalues them has long-lasting psychological and social impacts, affecting how Dalits view themselves and their place in society.

This autobiographical novel also highlights how caste-based trauma is not merely a product of individual experiences but a collective reality that shapes the identity of Dalits. As Pramod K.Nayar notes, that the Dalit narrative is not only an account of personal suffering but also of a community's collective trauma, which continues to haunt its cultural memory. By sharing his story, Valmiki amplifies the voices of countless others who have faced similar atrocities but whose stories remain untold. His narrative becomes a powerful reminder of the deep and pervasive trauma that has historically afflicted the Dalit community. Valmiki narrates, that he is not just telling his story; he is telling the story of lakhs of people like him, whose voices have been suppressed for centuries.

In another instance Omprakash narrates "My hands were trembling as I held the knife. I was trapped in a hard place. Chacha taught me how to ply the knife. That day something broke inside me. I skinned the bullock under Uncle's guidance. I felt like I was drowning in a swamp. I was being drawn into the very quagmire that I had tried to escape from. The wounds from the torment that I suffered with Uncle on that hot afternoon are still fresh on my skin (Valmiki 41). His narrative illustrates that the trauma of caste discrimination is not limited to personal experiences but is deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the Dalit community. While his individual pain manifests in specific moments of exclusion, degradation, and humiliation, the larger trauma stems from the shared history of the Dalit people. Valmiki's narrative constantly oscillates between personal anecdotes and collective experiences, highlighting how individual trauma reflects the broader, intergenerational suffering of the Dalit community. According to Pramod K. Nayar, Valmiki's recollections are not isolated moments of individual suffering; they represent the historical and ongoing trauma of an entire community trapped in a cycle of dehumanization. By documenting these memories, Valmiki underscores that the trauma inflicted by caste-based oppression is not a singular event but a continuous, systemic force that affects the psyche of entire community. The individual trauma of being excluded from education, being forced to perform menial tasks, and enduring daily insults is compounded by the collective trauma of centuries of systemic dehumanization.

Psychological Scars Resulting from Caste-based Discrimination

The psychological scars that result from caste-based discrimination are a recurring theme in *Joothan*. Valmiki vividly portrays how the constant, everyday acts of humiliation such as being forced to sit apart in school or being addressed with derogatory terms leave lasting marks on the psyche of the Dalit individual. Valmiki recalls, "Go sweep the whole playground- otherwise I will shove chilis up your ass and throw you out of the school." (Valmiki 6). These scars are not merely physical or material but emotional and mental, deeply affecting one's sense of identity and self-worth. Valmiki's reflections on his own psychological journey offer insight into how such experiences shape a person's worldview and interactions with society. The relentless discrimination he faced as a child planted seeds of anger, shame, and helplessness, emotions that became ingrained in his consciousness. He writes, that the burden of caste was not something one could shake off easily. It follows you like a shadow, dark and ever-present. With the same fear Valmiki recalls, "We never could tell when his (teacher) hands or legs would begin to move. We were all very scared of him." (Valmiki 55). The childhood traumatic experiences of violence and the inability to escape the stigma of being a Dalit, even after

achieving personal success, reflects the long-term impact of such psychological trauma. The cumulative effect of these traumatic experiences leads to a deep sense of alienation, not only from the larger society but also from one's own self. As Pramod K. Nayar (2017) notes that the psychological toll of caste-based oppression is insidious, affecting Dalits' internal sense of self and their relationship with the world around them. "Dalit texts that document atrocities, violence, denial, repression and outright erasure of Dalit lives are, in effect, documenting the denial of civic dignity even when they speak of individual violations." (Pramod 3).

Exploration of How Valmiki Portrays Trauma Through His Narrative

Valmiki's portrayal of trauma in *Joothan* is deeply rooted in his ability to capture the raw emotions of fear, shame, anger, and resilience. His narrative technique, marked by straightforward language and vivid descriptions, brings to life the emotional intensity of his experiences. He does not attempt to soften or obscure the harsh realities of caste-based oppression; instead, he confronts them head-on, allowing readers to witness the brutality of the caste system through his eyes. Valmiki writes, "I was deeply disturbed for quite some time. The incidents of childhood began knocking at my memory's door again." (Valmiki 11). He moves from memory to memory, showing how his present is deeply scarred by his past despite the great distance that he has travelled to get away from it. The pain of those early years remains etched in his memory, as clear as if it happened yesterday and they keep on hunt him. One of the most striking aspects of Valmiki's portrayal of trauma is the way he uses his personal experiences to highlight the collective trauma of the Dalit community. His narrative does not focus solely on his own suffering but extends to encompass the experiences of other Dalits. As Gopal Guru notes, that Valmiki's story becomes a voice for the entire Dalit community, giving expression to the silenced pain of generations. According to Bharati about Guru "For Dalits, identity reflects a concern for self- image and self-recognition of an individual or a community that have been historically, socially and culturally excluded by the dominant classes of the society." (Bharati 35). A Dalit self, by doing so, Valmiki transforms his personal story into a collective voice of resistance and survival. His narrative becomes a tool through which the trauma of an entire community is articulated, remembered, and, ultimately resisted oppression through writing.

Healing through Writing and Storytelling

In Dalit literature, storytelling plays a pivotal role in the process of healing, not only for individuals but also for the community as a whole. Sharmila Rege also notes, Dalit narratives are not only about pain and suffering but also about the reclamation of voice and the assertion of self. Through the act of writing and sharing their stories, Dalit writers reclaim agency over their narratives, resisting the erasure and silencing that the caste system has historically imposed on them. Storytelling, as seen in *Joothan*, becomes an act of defiance against the dominant caste hierarchy. It allows Dalits to express their pain, validate their experiences, and find a sense of solidarity in the shared trauma of their community. Valmiki's *Joothan* is a prime example of how writing and storytelling serves as a medium of healing. By putting his own life experiences into words, Valmiki is able to confront and process the trauma of his past. As he reflects, the narrative becomes a space where pain can be expressed and acknowledged, where the scars of discrimination are given visibility. This process of articulating trauma is the first step toward healing, as it allows both the author and the readers to grapple with the emotional weight of caste-based oppression. Healing, as portrayed in *Joothan*, is not an immediate or linear process. It is slow, gradual, and often fraught with setbacks. For Valmiki and the Dalit community,

healing comes through the recognition and validation of their experiences. The act of writing and reading *Joothan* is part of that process, as it provides a space for reflection, acknowledgment, and solidarity.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma and Memory

Trauma theory provides a useful framework for analysing *Joothan*, particularly in understanding how past experiences of caste-based oppression are remembered, processed, and articulated. Cathy Caruth (1996), a leading scholar in trauma theory, notes that trauma is never fully experienced in the moment, but only in its belated repetition. This idea resonates with Valmiki's narrative, as the trauma of caste-based discrimination is not only lived but repeatedly relived through memory and storytelling. The novel demonstrates how trauma can be both personal and collective, affecting not only the individual but entire communities. Valmiki reflects, that even after all these years, the pain of those early days continues to haunt him. Trauma theory also helps to explain the cyclical nature of trauma in Dalit communities, where the past continues to haunt the present, and memories of oppression are passed down through generations. Memory studies offer further insight into how the recollection of traumatic events shapes identity and resistance. In *Joothan*, memory serves as a tool for both reflecting on the past and resisting the present hierarchies of the caste. Trauma brings out in a striking way the importance of affect and its impact on memory, pointing both to traumatic memory in the form of post-traumatic effects. The same can be observed from Dominick LaCapra that Memory is not merely a recollection of the past but an active engagement with history that seeks to recover the voices of the oppressed. By remembering and narrative the trauma of caste oppression, Valmiki asserts the validity of Dalit suffering and challenges the dominant narratives that seek to minimize or deny it.

Conclusion

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* offers a poignant reflection on the trauma of caste-based oppression and the transformative power of storytelling. Through his personal experiences, Valmiki illustrates how individual suffering is deeply connected to the collective trauma of the Dalit community. The narrative captures not only the physical and psychological scars inflicted by caste discrimination but also the resilience and resistance of those subjected to this systemic injustice. This paper has explored how *Joothan* serves as both a documentation of historical caste-based oppression and a tool for healing. By recounting his personal and community experiences, Valmiki reclaims his dignity and challenges the structures that perpetuate Dalit marginalization. Storytelling emerges as a vital means of healing, allowing both the individual and the community to process their trauma and advocate for social change. Ultimately, *Joothan* underscores that healing from caste-based trauma is inseparable from the struggle for social justice. Valmiki's narrative emphasizes the importance of addressing structural inequalities to foster true healing, not only for individuals but for entire communities. His work remains a powerful call to confront the ongoing realities of caste discrimination and advocate for a more just and equitable society.

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