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The Plight of the Subaltern in Joothan



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Abstract :

Literature is the source to understand and evaluate society in many ways in regard with positive and negative aspects of the society. The power relation always plays a vital role in framing the customs and traditions of the society. The power relation in the form of colonizer and colonized has been reflected in literature particularly postcolonial literature. One of the major issues of the postcolonial literature is to highlight the exploitation of colonized masses on various grounds. The issue of subalternity, marginality and oppression on account of caste, class and gender in literature has a special attention in world academy.

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, used the word 'subaltern' for denoting as subordinate with the connotative meaning as oppressed, marginalized peasants of Italy. G. C. Spivak raises the question to subaltern study group of historians as 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in regards with the oppression of women. However, the term 'subaltern' is an umbrella one that covers the various oppressions in terms of caste, class, and gender. The paper critiques the subaltern life of the downtrodden community in relation to caste, poverty and marginalization. Joothan : A Dalit's Life represents the plight of Chuhra (Bhangi) caste. The

Chuhras (Bhangi) are the broken people; the community has been denied the status of human due to scavenging occupation. Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography accounts the ground realities of the community in day to day lives. It penetrates the history of the Chuhra community in independent India.

Keywords : Colonizer, Colonized, subaltern, Spivak, Dalits, Chuhras (Bhangi)

Research Paper :

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The word 'subaltern' in the title stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that is, 'of inferior rank'. It will be used in these pages as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way. (vii)

G. C. Spivak raises the question to subaltern study group of historians as 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in regards with the oppression of women. However, the term 'subaltern' is an umbrella one that covers the various oppressions in terms of caste, class and gender. The paper critiques the subaltern life of the downtrodden community in relation to caste, poverty and marginalization. *Joothan : A Dalit's Life* represents the plight of *Chuhra (Bhangi)* caste. The Chuhras (Bhangi) are the broken people; the community has been denied the status of human due to scavenging occupation. Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography accounts the ground realities of the community in day to day lives. It penetrates the history of the *Chuhra* community in independent India.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*(1997) is translated from Hindi to English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee as *Joothan: A Dalit's life* (2003). The very first statement of the writer shows the socio-economic oppression of the community as - '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' (I). The title suggests the pain, anguish and poverty of the subaltern. Valmiki describes the untouchability on account of caste and occupation. The settlement of the community is outside margin of the village in filthy atmosphere as the narrator says :

The stench was so overpowering that one would choke within a minute. The pigs wandering in narrow lanes naked children, dogs, daily fights, this was environment of my childhood. (1)

The narrative exposes the basic questions of the subaltern along with the root cause of their sufferings i.e. caste system as the author comments - 'If the people who call the caste system an ideal social arrangement had to live in this environment for a day or two, they would change their mind.' (1) The family members of Valmiki have to do the cleaning, agriculture work but mostly they have not been paid. They are treated as untouchables. The author narrates :

Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one gets 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. (2)

Due to poverty and untouchability, they have to change their identity. It is a comment sight in the narrative that the protagonist is on constant struggle against inhumanity, humiliation and torture. Valmiki portrays humiliation and torture meted out by the teachers and students in the school. The protagonist has to bear the merciless beating by the students without any reason. Even he is not allowed to touch the hand-pump on account of untouchability. The protagonist has to face the no-win situation like -'Abhy, Chure ka, he has come dressed in new cloths ... If he wears old and shabby clothes, they say -Abey chare ke, get away from me, you stink (3). It draws attention to oppress condition of the subaltern that the high caste people try to repress the downtrodden in many ways. For instance, the treatment of school teacher Kaliram to the protagonist is inhuman. When the teacher knows the caste of the author, the protagonist is asked to sweep the whole class and ground of the school. Besides, the stakeholders of the society ruin the life of Dalit students as the protagonist is forced to sow the sugarcane just a day before of his examinations. The writer relates the biased attitude of the teacher to the famous incident of Eklavya and Dronacharya. Even, the protagonist is kept outside of the class many times. The caste hinders the way of progress in education of

Dalit students. However, the hunger is the main theme of the narrative as the author represents the humiliation, pain and anguish to rely on *Joothan*.

During a wedding, when the guests and the baratis, the bridegroom's party, were eating their meals, the Chuhras 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 that was 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 were eaten with a lot of relish.

The pieces of pooris that were collected from the pattals were dried in the sun. A cloth would be spread on charpai to dry them. Often, I would be placed on guard duty because drying poories attracted crows, hens and dogs. Even a movement's lapse and the poories would vanish. Hence, one would have to sit near the cot with a stick in hand.

These dried up pooris were very useful the hard days of the rainy season. They would be soaked in water and then boiled. The boiled pooris were delicious with finely ground red chilli pepper and salt...

When I think about all those things today, thorns begin to prick my heart. 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. (9-10)

It shows the everlasting scarcity of the untouchable community that they have to fight against the hunger. They have been deprived of decent life. What one should have done without work and food to live the life worse than animal?

Valmiki's family serves for Tagis, a dominating group of the village. They are responsible for the plight of the community. The narrator's mother and sister work for Tagis family in return they have to rely on *Joothan*. The family of the narrator has to endure the humiliation despite hard work. The revolt of the mother against the unjust treatment of Sukhdev Sing Tagi is suppressed as - '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' (11). The subalterns fight throughout their lives for two time meal. Every family member has to work for living. The death of the protagonist's brother due to the lack of medical treatment owing to poverty is the grave reality of the subaltern lives. Besides, the rainy season brings the disaster in their colony. Due to consistent rain, they have to spend sleepless nights, repair houses, drink the polluted water, go through the ill health, and lose the opportunity of work. The narrator comments :

Literature can only imagine hell. For use the rainy season was a living hell. This terrible suffering of village life has not even been touched upon by the epic poets of Hindi. What a monstrous truth that is. (24)

The protagonist starts raising the voice against the humiliation, unjust treatment of the upper caste people along with the tradition of his community. For instance, the custom of *Salaam* i.e. going door-to-door of upper caste people for begging, the protagonist and his friend have been humiliated by the upper caste people. Due to logical reasoning of the narrator, he convinces the community that they should break the custom of *Salaam*. As the author comments - 'It is caste pride that behind this centuries-old custom. The deep charm that divides the society is made even deeper by this custom. It is a conspiracy to trap us in the whirlpool of inferiority'(33). It shows that the impact of education.

The narrator depicts the reality of oppression that the community could not raise their voice against exploitation. The community demands the equal wages of their work. The power structure of the society like police, government officers, the masters of the society use the people of the *basti* as slave to get their work done without giving wages. When they raise their voice against the exploitation, the stakeholders of the society suppress their voice of justice with equal force as :

Those who had been captured from the *basti* were being made to stand like a rooster, a very painful crouched up position. Moreover, they were being beaten with batons. The policeman who was beating them was getting tired. The one being beaten would scream after every blow. This festival of valour was being celebrated openly. People watched quietly, without a word. There was no protest from any side...Their scream had made the birds in the trees take off, but paralysis had struck the villagers who could not express their empathy. (38)

It is common sight that the subaltern exploited in many ways. The community is not able to fight back due to poverty. The protagonist turns into as an 'angry hero' after reading Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. He has been inspired by the Marathi Dalit literature. As a result, he becomes active social leader. The protagonist endures the caste conflict among the downtrodden community. The narrative depicts ground reality of the community authentically. The autobiography covers the social issues graphically like the incident of Malkapur, renaming event of Marathwada University. It also unfolds the failure of Dalit organization and caste practice among the subaltern community effectively. Thus, *Joothan* represents the plight of *Chuhra* (*Bhangi*) community. Valmiki successfully arouses the questions of the subaltern on account of oppression on social, political and economic grounds. The main motive of the

author is to awaken the consciousness of Dalits and stakeholders of the society about the plight of the subaltern as - 'We need an ongoing struggle and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts a consciousness that lands the process of social change'(132).

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