



International Journal of Contemporary Research In Multidisciplinary

Review Article


Joothan: A Quest for Identity and Depiction of the Traumatized Mind of a Dalit

Binil Vincent

B.Ed. English Student, Tamil Nadu Teacher Education University, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Corresponding Author: *Binil Vincent

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15585639>

Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>This paper examines how Omprakash Valmiki's <i>Joothan</i> depicts the peril of Dalits in Indian society. How did it become a part of Indian culture? I also tried to focus on how Dalit literature creates a unique status which becomes a response to established literary critics. 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. Valmiki's <i>Joothan</i> portrays the traumatized minds of Dalits and identity crisis in Indian society through his memory.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397 ▪ Received: 27-04-2025 ▪ Accepted: 25-05-2025 ▪ Published: 02-06-2025 ▪ IJCRM: 4(3); 2025:263-265 ▪ ©2025, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes
	<p>How to Cite this Manuscript</p> <p>Vincent B. <i>Joothan</i>: A Quest for Identity and Depiction of the Traumatized Mind of a Dalit. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2025;4(3):263-265.</p> <p>Access this Article Online</p>  <p>www.multiarticlesjournal.com</p>

KEYWORDS: Dalit Literature, Trauma Studies, Identity Crisis, Memories and Memoirs

INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature is propagandistic because it is written to bring about social change" says Sharankumar Limbale. *Joothan*, an autobiography written by Omprakash Valmiki, is considered a milestone work in Dalit literature. *Joothan* describes his life as an untouchable or Dalit in an independent India of the 1950s. It was published in 1997.

Joothan, considered a Dalit autobiography, speaks about an individual's life under the oppressive caste system in independent India. *Joothan* is a collection of "Excruciating memories". It follows a nonlinear narration. Every instance of looking back is traumatic, with his childhood memories that are filled with hardships due to his caste.

Joothan starts with the description of an alienated community of Chuhras, 'the pigs' wandering in a narrow lane, naked children, dogs and daily fights. This was the environment of my childhoods, says Valmiki in the initial part of the memoir. This can also be considered the hellish life that the community had to live. Dalit community had to do a variety of demeaning work to get a decent meal a day. They also had to work without pay. Such discrimination and alienation were evident in Valmiki's life. Dalits were not called by their caste name. "chuhre" "o chuhre" and "abey chuhre" were the words that the upper caste people used to call Valmiki and his people. The identity of a person is being validated only on the basis of caste and their work. Valmiki says "the Chuhras were not seen as a human", this echoes the quest for an identity within the author. The title of the memoir Joothan itself suggests their futile life as being garbage to the upper caste people. Not only in society but also in the classroom, Valmiki had to undergo such oppressive and alienating acts from other Tyagi students and teachers. Valmiki says "I had to sit away from others in the classroom, that too on the floor". The author's struggle to adjust to the educational ambience of the school, primarily marked by the presence of upper caste Tyagis, was burdensome and exhausting. The caste discrimination had expanded from his dwelling to the school. He also pointed out that not only the students but also the upper caste teachers tortured Dalit students. It's being narrated by Valmiki's through Sukham Singhs suffering from Kaliram and this same teacher compelled young Valmiki to sweep the entire school premises instead of allowing him to learn. The hope that education would eradicate such toils for the Dalit community is being submerged through these acts. The quest for education is also a quest for identity. The fact that Omprakash was never called by his name but by his caste-chuhre. The author shifts his thoughts from the school days to the time of harvest. They were barely paid for their dawn to dusk work. Their mother had to work in several cowsheds. "The dung and the urine of animals would spread all over the floor overnight," says Valmiki. This description evokes such a disgusting emotion to the narrator's life. The traumatized recalling is evident through these words. At some point, he remarks it was indeed hard for him to ponder such a miserable life that he had to live. Begging for food at weddings with a basket echoes such an emptiness of their identity and wealth. After class five, he had to join a new school for higher education. He says "How could one think of studies when one didn't even have food?". The helplessness is expressed through these words. Pigs rearing is a repeated symbol in this memoir which undermines the quality of Valmiki's life. Pigs are considered as nasty and unhygienic by upper-class people. Like pigs Omprakash's family (that means the whole chuhra community) had to eat garbage. Such identity which is based on waste is recurring in his work. The Dalit community's identity is solely based on the valuation of upper caste. Chuhras fail to build their own works, their own demands and comments and life style. One's Identity is purely based on ideas values and names. But Dalits are being treated as marginalized section. They are forced to live in miseries. The Indian Democratic system has opened the doors of education to Dalits. But Valmiki portrays the brutal

realities. The word 'Joothan' originates from Hindi, which means 'left over'. The food that is left behind becomes the food for his community. The food they receive becomes a strong metaphor to their reality. The memoir solely portrays the lack of food in their houses. They all work and toil to get a decent meal. But unfortunately, all their attempts end up in vain like the quest for identity. Valmiki was basically from a Hindu background. He didn't show much interest in worshipping any of the Hindu Gods or Goddesses. This can be considered as a deviation from the traditional way of acting for a Dalit person. When his father asked him whether he would become a Christian by giving up a Dalit identity, Valmiki replies that he wanted to be of his own identity and he was not ashamed of revealing his identity as a Dalit. Valmiki says, "It's caste pride that is behind this century's old custom. The deep chasm that divides the society is made even deeper by this custom". The marriages and rituals were also embedded with these discriminations. We should consider the case of Dalit women in this situation. Even boys hardly received an education. The situation for Dalit women is predictable in this juncture. Brides have to endure terrible humiliation. The bride, who is an illiterate girl had to approach each door of the upper caste people for salaams. Here, the portrayal of the double oppression of women has more significance. The Dalit women face double oppression from upper caste people. These women are being portrayed as objects for viewing. Their identity of being a woman and human are thrown away by the upper class people. Other instance is that. It was an imposed responsibility of chuhra community that they had to dispose the dead cattle without any wages. The sad reality is that Omprakash himself had to consent to do this job due to poverty. When they demanded for wages and refused to work without pay. The police came to the basti and taken away ten people with them. It was the usual practice that police used to beat and thrash the Dalit community whenever they raised their demands. Such instances are also incorporated in this memoir. From all these instances, Valmiki is not only trying to express a Dalit's life but he is pointing out the necessity for an identity for a Dalit in this society. Valmiki says, "as though we are not citizens of this country. The weak and the helpless have been suppressed of years". Dalit community had not the courage to speak out. The wounded and suppressed started to migrate. In to cities. The life identity are given up and the quest for a better life without caste prejudices were the expectation of the Dalits community. Drastic changes occurred in Valmiki's life when he was at Jabalpur. He argued with his friends frequently on contemporary issues. He took part in seminars and cultural functions. All these new attempts were for his identity which was away from his childhood days. Valmiki's autobiography ended with an account of an incident that took place in chandraur via Delhi. very soon they became close to the prosperous looking family husband wife and two children Valmiki learned that the copassenger was an officer in some ministry. Suddenly the subject of conversation changed "the officer's wife enquired Valmiki's wife 'what caste they belong to' before Valmiki's wife replied he replied Bhangi' and that was the end. There was no conversation between two families during the rest of the journey. Such mentality and

valuation based on castes are some important elements in Indian society. The protagonist suffers basically in the hands of the upper caste people, especially Tyagis. The caste hierarchy in joothan is not fictitious. The author gives voice to his own community through this memoir. Moreover, the protagonist can be seen as a replicate of the whole Dalit community. The portrayal of the village itself is an elaborate example for segregation and existing feudal structure in the society. Here in this novel, a particular region called Chuhra basti becomes the identity for Valmiki's family. Valmiki's joothan can be read in different level. It's evident that Valmiki is trying to pay his homage to his parents who worked hard for their child's betterment. Father who questions Kalirma's (teacher) injustice towards his child, mother who becomes Durga, the goddess of rage, when she overturns the basketful of joothan after she is humiliated by Sukh dev Singh Tyagi, become acts of boldness and courage. Most of the Dalit texts are written based on true incidents. Here, joothan is an autobiography. The title itself needs a special dictionary for the reader as the words it (Dalit literary texts) uses are new and also the situations too. Valmiki also ridicules the colourful portrayal of villages by the mainstream writers. Village life is being presented through those upper caste people who quarrel and cause trouble to lower caste people. Human rights violations is profound. All these memories are memories of trauma that Valmiki had kept suppressed. The whole narration is in the present tense, capturing the intensity of the memory that the subject has not yet healed from the past traumas. The encounter between the upper caste Tyagis and the Dalit community is another feature for Dalit literary texts. The text is a testimony to crimes suffered and the violation of human rights. Joothan confronts its readers with difficult questions about their own humanity and invites them to join the universal project of human liberation.

REFERENCES

1. Valmiki O. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Kolkata: Samya; 2003. (Original Hindi work published in 1997)
2. Limbale S. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan; 2004.
3. Revathi P, Bindu MR. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*: An Authentic Depiction of Dalit's Communal Space in the Artistic Endeavors of Autobiography. *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities (IJELLH)*. 2018 Jan;6(1):156–164. Available from: <https://ijellh.com/Ompkash-Valmiki-Joothan>

Creative Commons (CC) License

This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.