

**REVISITING CHATURVARNA NARRATIVE:  
JOOOTHAN AS NEW HISTORICIST TEXT**

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***Abstract***

*Chaturvarna has been a menace in Indian society since the times immemorial. As its very name suggests Chatur stands for four and varna implies class. Thus, the system of society that categorizes all castes, according to four major divisions, which are arranged hierarchically in a descending order of purity. Arun Prabha Mukherjee suggests that to the apex of this power structure were the Brahmins, who were the performers of rituals and keepers of sacred texts, the Kshatriyas, who, as rulers and warriors, patronized the Brahmins and commissioned the rituals, including the yagna, or fire ritual of animal sacrifices. These two varnas considered themselves superior to Vaisyas- the cultivators and traders- and the Sudras, the servants and performers of menial tasks. This hierarchy, therefore, has been the instrument of oppression in the hands of two apex classes. To the bottom this structure the duo classes been marginalised from every human right in the society such as education, life of dignity, freedom, right to work, etc.*

*This paper, thus, is an endeavour to revisit vicious Chaturvarna narrative from new historicist perspective with special reference to Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan.*

***Keywords: chaturvarna, adivasi, new historicism, asprishya, gotra, jati, narrative, deconstruction***

## REVISITING CHATURVARNA NARRATIVE: *JOOOTHAN* AS NEW HISTORICIST TEXT

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Chaturvarna has been a menace in Indian society since the times immemorial. As its very name suggests Chatur stands for four and varna implies class. Thus, the system of society that categorizes all castes according to four major divisions, which are arranged hierarchically in a descending order of purity. Arun Prabha Mukherjee suggests that to the apex of this power structure were the Brahmins, who were the performers of rituals and keepers of sacred texts, the Kshatriyas, who, as rulers and warriors, patronized the Brahmins and commissioned the rituals, including the yagna, or fire ritual of animal sacrifices. These two varnas considered themselves superior to Vaisyas- the cultivators and traders- and the Sudras, the servants and performers of menial tasks. This hierarchy, therefore, been the instrument of oppression in the hands of two apex classes. To the bottom this structure the duo classes been marginalised from every human right in the society such as education, life of dignity, freedom, right to work, etc

Om Prakash Valmiki(1950-2013), sound signature of Dalit literature revisited exploitative vicious chaturvarna metanarrative in his seminal memoir text *Joothan*. He was born at the village of Barla in Muzzafarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh. After his superannuation from Government Ordinary Factory he lived in Dehradun where he died of complications arising out of stomach cancer. Being a Dalit child, he was tortured and abused everywhere in the society. He was fortunate enough to be born in a household where everyone loved and cared for him. The support and encouragement he gained from the family enabled him to face the dangers of being a Dalit. Right from early phases of his life, Valmiki was conscious of the significance of studies and hence he was always a bright student. Reading and writing made him an enlightened human being. Apart from *Joothan*, Valmiki published three collections of

poetry as well viz. *Sadiyon Ka Santaap*(1989), *Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka*(1997), and *Ab Aur Nahi*(2009).

*Joothan* is an awful description of dalit's life. The Hindi word 'joothan' refers to scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or animals. However, such food would be characterised joothan only if someone else were to eat it. The word carries with itself the connotations of ritual impurity and pollution because 'jootha' means polluted. India's untouchables have been forced to accept and eat joothan for centuries, and the word encapsulates the pain, humiliation, and poverty of a community forced to live at the bottom of India's social pyramid. Although untouchability was abolished in 1949, Dalits continued to face discrimination, economic deprivation, violence, and ridicule. Valmiki shares his heroic struggle to survive a preordained life of perpetual physical and psychological torture and his transformation into a speaking subject under the influence of the great dalit political leader, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. A document of the long-silenced and long-denied sufferings of the dalits, *Joothan* is a significant credit to the archives of dalit history and a manifesto for the revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness.

New Historicism is a literary theory based on the idea that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and that of the critic as well. Based on the theory of Stephen Greenblatt and influenced by the philosophical tenants of Michel Foucault, New Historicism acknowledges not only that a work of literature is influenced by its author's times and circumstances, but that the critic's response to the work is also influenced by his environment, beliefs, and prejudices. New Historicists are interested in recovering lost histories and in exploring mechanisms of repression and subjugation.

Michel Foucault is quite possibly the most influential New Historicist critic of the last quarter-century. His interests in issues of power, epistemology, subjectivity, and ideology have influenced critics not only in literary studies but also political science, history, and anthropology. His willingness to analyze and discuss disparate disciplines (medicine, criminal science, philosophy, the history of sexuality,

government, literature, etc.) as well as his questioning of the very principle of disciplinarity and specialization have inspired a host of subsequent critics to explore interdisciplinary connections between areas that had rarely been examined together. Foucault also had the ability to pick up common terms and give them new meaning, thus changing the way critics addressed such pervasive issues as 'power', 'discourse', 'discipline,' 'subjectivity', 'sexuality', and 'government.'

Stephen Greenblatt's brilliant studies of the Renaissance have established him as the major figure commonly associated with New Historicism. Indeed, his influence meant that New Historicism first gained popularity among Renaissance scholars, many of whom were directly inspired by Greenblatt's ideas and anecdotal approach. This fascination with history and the minute details of culture soon caught on among scholars working in other historical periods, leading to the increasing popularity of culturally- and historically-minded studies.

The most significant credo of Dalit writing, of which Balmiki is essentially its member, is the rejection of Hindu mythology as it is anti-Dalit and brahminist. According to Arjun Dangle, 'The traditional culture of ancient India do not contain anything which a Dalit can own with Pride.' (Dangle 264) Dalit's place in ancient Indian so-called sacerdotal texts has been irreverent and insulting, turning the heroes into villains and vice versa. Ilaiyah retells the mythological stories about gods and goddesses like Ram and Sita, Shiva and Parvati. Vishnu, Lakshmi, and others from a Dalit point of view are rehabilitating the traditionally demonized characters in them. He says, "All gods and goddesses are institutionalised, modified and contextualized in a most brazen anti-Dalitbahujan mode. Hinduism has been claiming that the same time their very Gods are openly against them." (Ilaiyah 72)

Valmiki observes that Dalit literature has recuperated such stigmatized characters as Eklavya, Karna, and Shambuk from ancient epics and established them as heroes.

Writer gives a elaborate description of collecting, preserving, and eating joothan. His memories of being assigned to guard the drying joothan, burn him with renewed pain and humiliation many years later. The most powerful moments of the text

comes when Valmiki's mother overturns a basketful of joothan after Sukhdev Singh Tyagi humiliates her. Her act of defiance is an instance of rebellion to the child Valmiki. Arun Prabha Mukherjee observes that he has dedicated the book to her and his father and portrays both as heroic figures who desired something better for their child and fought for his safety and growth with tremendous courage.

Valmiki chronicled the humiliation of a dalit in almost every sphere and with the minutest possible detail. The agony and anguish in the words he employed to describe his life, can be easily observed provided one is ready to read Hindi version.

### **What it is to be a Chuhra (low caste) in Childhood**

Valmiki's birth took place in Chuhra caste, whose pre-ordained task is sweeping roads, cleaning the cattle barns, disposing off dead animals, working the fields during harvests and performing other physical unpaid labour for upper caste people, including the Tyagi Brahmins. The Tyagis didn't use to address them by name, only called out, 'oye chuhre', or 'abey chuhre'. It was alright to touch cows, and stray dogs but touching chuhra inflicted instant pollution on the Tyagis. During his boyhood, his entire family worked hard for upper caste but could not manage to have two because they often did not get paid for their labour, instead, got sworn at and abused.

The Chuhras were forced to live outside the village as it is meant for golden castes. A high wall and a pond segregated their brick houses in the countryside from the Chuhra basti. Upper caste men and women of all ages used to come out and used the edge of the pond as an open-air lavatory, squatting across from the Chuhra homes in broad daylight with their private parts exposed.

In the rainy season, the narrow lanes of the basti filled up with muddy water mixed-in pigs' excrement; flies, mosquitoes and various sorts of insects thrived. Everybody's arms and legs became mangy and developed itchy sores. There was only one drinking water well in their basti for about thirty families, and despite a guard wall around it, it became full of long worms during the rainy season. They were left with no other option than to drink it, as they were not allowed to use the well of so called



golden classes people. Their homes are made of clay thereby having more chances of being collapsed down in the rainy season.

Valmiki was fortunate enough to have headstrong parents always behind him in every respect such as psychologically, financially supporting him so that champ could continue his studies. His parents had a strong character and this left a great impression on the psyche of boy Valmiki who went on to assert his position strongly by creating this manifesto of Dalit literature.

### **Environment in school and Dronacharya type teachers**

Dronacharya, a famous character in *Mahabharata*, one of Hindu scriptures, representative brahminist figure, holds the bottom place in Dalit literature because he was the one who had done more harm to them than anyone else. As the system of Chaturvarna advocates low caste children do not qualify the caste to get education. Dronacharya not only denied to guide low caste interested candidate Eklavya but also outplayed him into amputating his thumb so that he can discharge traditional noble gesture of gurudakshina (sort of present to teacher by disciple after completing one's education). By doing this, Dronacharya ensured that Eklavya, the better student of archery, could never compete against his favourite high caste Kashtriya disciple Arjun. Indeed, after losing his thumb, Eklavya could no longer perform archery. Thus, Dronacharya been a real shame on the noblest profession of 'guru', turning out to be a perfidious and biased. But the high caste folks present this unjust act as Eklavya being low caste is the exemplar of an obedient disciple. In the landmark turnaround in the memoir, Valmiki's father thrusts on the earlier version and, thus, declaring to assert right to education.

When the boy finally got in the school, he was not allowed to sit on the benches but on the floor, away from the upper caste boys, at the back of the door, from where he could not see the blackboard. Other kids hurled casteist humiliating epithets and beat him casually, turning him into a cowering introverted kind. Even the teachers looked for excuses to punish him, he writes, "so that I would run away from the

school and take up the kind of work for which I was born.”(Mukherjee 3) In fourth grade, a new headmaster arrived, who thrashed him almost daily and one day asked him to take a broom and sweep all the rooms and the playground in school. The helpless boy spent two full days sweeping, hoping it would soon be over.

The third day I went to the class and sat down quietly. After a few minutes the headmaster’s loud thundering was heard: ‘Abey Chuhre ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding your mother?’ I began to shake uncontrollably. A Tyagi boy shouted, ‘Master Saheb, there he is, sitting in the corner.’

The headmaster had pounced on my neck. The pressure of his fingers was increasing. As a wolf grabs a lamb by the neck, he dragged me out of the class and threw me on the ground. He screamed: ‘Go sweep the whole playground -Otherwise I will shove chillies up your arse and throw you out of school.’

Frightened, I picked up the three-day-old broom. Just like me it was shedding its dried up leaves. All that remained were the thin sticks. Tears were falling from my eyes. I started to sweep the compound while my tears fell. From the doors and windows of the schoolrooms, the eyes of the teachers and the boys saw this spectacle. Each pore of my body was submerged in an abyss of anguish. (Mukherjee 5-6)

As it all was going, his father was passing by that day and saw him sweeping the grounds. Sobbing and overcome by hiccups, the boy told him the story. Father snatched the broom and with eyes blazing, began to scream, ‘Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep?’ (Mukherjee 6) All the teachers stepped out, including the headmaster, who called his father names and roared back, “Take him away from here. The Chuhra wants him educated. Go, go-Otherwise I will have your bones broken.” (Mukherjee 7)

On his way out, his father declared in a loud voice, “...I am leaving now. ...but this Chuhre ka will study right here, in this school. And not just him, but there will be more coming after him.” (Mukherjee 7) His father’s courage and fortitude left a deep and decisive mark on the boy’s personality. It is what the highlighting and asserting

statement made by Valmiki's father which is going to determine the contours of Dalit way of life hereafter.

### **Valmiki's mother's rejection of 'joothan'**

Valmiki describes one such incident, among the most powerful in the text. His community looked forward to marriage feasts in the village in the family of one of upper castes when they would gather outside with big baskets. After the guests had eaten, "...the dirty *pattals*, or leaf plates, were put in the Chuhra's baskets, which they took home, to save the joothan sticking to them." (Mukherjee 10) At the end of one such marriage feast, Valmiki's mother requested the Brahmin host for additional food for her children, only to be humiliated and told to mind her place, be satisfied with what she already had collected, and to get going. Valmiki writes:

It was the first time I saw my mother so angry. She emptied the basket right there. She said to Sukhdev Singh, 'Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the bridegroom's guests tomorrow morning.' She gathered me and my sister and left like an arrow. Sukhdev Singh had pounced on her to hit her, but my mother had confronted him like a lioness. Without being afraid. (Mukherjee 12)

I think this point has two-fold significance, one is from New Historicist angle that it is the pronounced declaration that the times are gone when they would be begging for 'joothan' and secondly couple of gutsy acts performed by his parents before him to counter further oppression of high caste folks. This duo stances have led an indelible impression on the mind of boy Valmiki to how to assert yourself and create a space where can have a 'say'.

### **Deconstructing the high classes' literary cannon**

Many Hindi writers and poets like as Bihari, Bhushan, Gananand, Maethlisharan Gupta, Suryakant tripathi Nirala, Hariodh, etc had written about the charms of village life, observes Valmiki, but its 'real truth,' depicting the 'terrible suffering of village life



has not even been touched upon by the romantic poets of Hindi Literature. He also recounts other changes that were beginning to take place. The young men of his community had begun to refuse to work without wages. This soon escalated into an open confrontation with the upper caste men who couldn't tolerate their nerve, and even got the local police to beat them up. Valmiki calls this a turning point of sorts; young men began departing from their *basti* to nearby towns and cities.

### **Interrogative discourse in the text**

The text is loaded with straight, stark and pungent questions targeted on Hindu scriptures and the culture it has spread. "How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't an epic poet ever write a word about our lives?" (Mukherjee 26) Valmiki awfully laments the unpaid labour to dalits. Had it not been so, their plight would have been better. "Why is it a crime to ask to be paid for one's labour?" (Mukherjee 46). And again "Why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits?" (Mukherjee 48) Arun Prabha Mukherjee in an exhaustive and scholarly introduction to the translated edition of *Joothan* advocates that such interrogatory rhetoric brings out the contradictions in the dominant society's ideology and behaviour. All these questions speak for the exploitative, suppressed and unjust past of past of low castes in India. They ask for answer from that culture in modern era.

*Joothan*, to conclude, not only marks at the very sensitive points of Dalit exploitation and suppression by upper castes but also vigorously questions the tenants of Hindu religion and culture which definitely qualifies it as the Dalit seminal text. It is going to be what Ambedkar's speeches have done well to Dalits.

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