
Conflict of Dalits as depicted in Omprakash Balmiki's *Joothan*

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Abstract

This paper examines the multifaceted conflicts faced by Dalits as portrayed in Omprakash Valmiki's autobiographical novel *Joothan*. Conflict is treated as a crucial narrative force that exposes the lived realities of caste-based oppression in Indian society. The study analyses four major forms of conflict—conflict with the self, with others, with society, and with the environment—as experienced by the Dalit protagonist. Valmiki's narrative reveals the psychological trauma, social humiliation, and economic exploitation inflicted upon Dalits through entrenched caste hierarchies. The paper situates *Joothan* within the broader framework of social conflict theory and Dalit consciousness. It highlights how institutionalized caste practices deny Dalits dignity, education, and basic human rights. The text also foregrounds the role of religion and traditional codes in sustaining social inequality. By documenting everyday experiences of discrimination, *Joothan* becomes a powerful testimony of resistance. The study underscores literature's role in articulating marginalized voices. Ultimately, the paper argues that Valmiki's *Joothan* exposes caste conflict as a continuing social reality rather than a historical relic.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Caste Conflict, Social Exclusion, Autobiographical Narrative, Omprakash Valmiki

A Conflict is a clash between two opposite forces and develops a narrative thread for the story. A Conflict occurs in the story, novel or play when main character struggles either in external conflict or in internal conflict. In Story, or Novel Conflict may come in the following categories:

- (i) **Conflict with the Self:** Conflict with the self is internal battle within the leading character. When a character struggles something within himself. It is a battle inside a character. The character feels clash between competing desires. Conflict with Self occurs due to conflict in religion, Caste, Sexual conflict, moral conflict, conflict in self image, and conflict in love.
- (ii) **Conflict with Others:** Conflict with others occurs when there is fundamental disagreement on fundamental values. Such Conflicts may be Resource Conflicts, Ego Conflicts, Personal History Conflict, Personality Conflicts, and Conflict over Facts. This

kind of Conflict occurs when values and perspectives and opinions are contradictory, when values and perspectives are threatened.

(iii) Conflict with the Environment: An Environmental Conflict is a subset of the larger category of public conflicts involving the issues like health, ethnicity, economic development and governance. Environmental Conflict involves power and unpredictability of nature. It is a conflict within one's surroundings. In Environmental Conflict, it is unsure what will happen next. All environmental Conflicts are not apocalyptic and involving catastrophic events.

(iv) Conflict with Supernatural: A Supernatural Conflict occurs when a character faces resistance from a supernatural forces like fate, magical forces, deities, ghosts, and other worldly beings. Supernatural Conflict occurs when the protagonist comes in term with vengeful gods or powerful supernatural forces.

(v) Conflict with Society: Conflict with Society is also known as Social Conflict. Social Conflict occurs when two or more people oppose each other in social interaction. Social Conflict is an external Conflict that occurs when protagonist is placed in opposition with the society, culture, tradition, societal norms, government. Characters are inspired to take action against society to survive.

Without conflict, readers do not take any interest in the story, novel, drama and film. Conflict is an essential part for every literary genre. Great writers, dramatists, story writers try to create serious conflict within the work so that readers can take much and more interest in the story.

Valmiki's 'Joothan' involves four kind Conflicts: (i) Conflict with Self, (ii) Conflict with others,(iii) Conflict with Society, and (iv) Conflict with Environment. Protagonist of Valmiki's 'Joothan' is Omprakash Valmiki himself who belongs to sweeper community. He describes his conflict in his Autobiographical Novel 'Joothan'. The novel reflects true picture of Indian society how Dalits were humiliated by upper caste people.

India is a vast country, has diverse cultures, creeds, religions, and traditions of different people living in. The country has failed in getting equality among the people in spite of flowing same blood in their veins. Caste has been never ending issues in India as it is wide spread and deep rooted in each and every nook and corner. Wide spread and deep rooted casteism has been 'Conflicts for dalits' for centuries. Dalits have been made puppets on the hands of people higher in hierarchical order following Chaturvarnya System. India's great thinkers have been spoken time to time over this wide spread social trauma. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda and famous novelist, and Mulkrab Anand are the key figures who tried to spoke openly on Caste System. "It is evident that cast idea is not creative, it is merely institutional. It adjusts human beings according to some mechanical arrangement. It emphasizes negative side of the individual, his separateness. It hurts the complete truth in man" (Tagore, 96).

To exploit Dalits, there came in existence human made Chaturvarnya System that declares hierarchical division of the people: Brahmins on the top, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras at the bottom. Their professions were also declared: Brahmins as performer of rituals and keepers of the sacred texts: the Vedas, the Smriti and Puranas, and Kshatriyas as

rulers and warriors, patronized the Brahmins for rituals like 'Yajana' and gifts; Vaishya as cultivators and traders and the Shudras as the slaves of all the three. They were denied from the 'Rituals' of 'Upanayana', and the 'Sacred Thread Ceremony' performed by the above three. Dalits were devoids of hearing and reading Vedas in the ancient time. Manu Smriti prescribes, "Cutting off the tongue or pouring of mottled lead in the ears of the Shudra who recites or hears the Vedas" (Ambedkar, 49).

Manu Smriti was prepared by the people of hierarchical order so call scholars among the Brahmins or Pandits to dominate for ever on all the three blow the hierarchy; "To serve Brahmins is the duty of Shudras and it is their religion , besides it whatever he does is useless "(Smriti 124, lesson-10, 454).

In Indian villages, humiliation of Shudras were continued for a long time by all the three, superior in hierarchy and it is common even today. While working in offices, standing on roundabouts (Chaurahas), travelling in buses or railways, sitting or dining at restaurants, if two unknown persons happen to meet, the person superior in hierarchy introduces the other, 'What is your caste?' it is to demoralize the Sudra and to dominate him. If the other is found inferior according to him, conversation between the two takes last step instantly. Caste! Caste!, so heinous, rotten, stinking and hell like word. This is the word kept carefully in the knot by the people of higher in hierarchy (like an asthma patient keeps inhaler always with him) to make the other introduce first time.

We live in a society that is made of human beings, but the person who pricks consciences of others cannot be called a human as Britannica.com defines, "human beings are the persons distinguished by more highly developed brain and resultant capacity for abstract reasoning and possess a variety of advanced cognitive abilities." If two people flowing same blood in their veins, how can one be an object of haltered to the other without any logic or reason? If a person possesses abstract reasoning and developed cognitive abilities, he is to be said excellent human and should be considered at the top of hierarchical order, but in India, the condition is otherwise. Dalit scholar Bhagwan Das maintains how untouchability is rampant in Hindu society even to this very day as given in 'The introduction to Joothan' by English translator Arun Prabha Mukherjee , "Land holding upper class people in villages don't allow Dalits to wear decent clothes, cast vote freely, ride on a horse in marriage procession, draw water from a public well, sit on a cot while the upper caste man is standing.... A professor, a lawyer, a doctor, an architect, born in an untouchable family is considered inefficient and inferior without even seeing his or her performance. A patient refuses to be treated by a scheduled caste doctor.... A superior gives bad report to Dalit subordinate in order to obstruct his promotion" (Joothan, xxv). Same is the condition of Hotels, guest houses or restaurants run by a person of higher caste. The person of higher caste refuses to eat, stay in the hotel and he denies the other higher class person to fail his profession. That is the reason, the person higher in hierarchical order thinks deeper to start his profession. Such kind things create many kind conflicts in the mind of a Dalit. He suffers mentally. Instead of thinking the ideas to take his business high, many negative ideas creep

in the mind of a Dalit. So original ideas hide and negative ideas take place and so he stops thinking to run his business.

Incident of Panwari Kand, Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India does not let the conflicts of Dalits heal up, as ‘indiatimes.com’ reminds an incident happened to Dalits, “A Marriage Procession on June 21, 1990 in Panwari Village turned violent when a group of armed men belonging to Jaat community got into an altercation with people participating in Chokhelal Jatav’s daughter’s marriage’. It further added that inspite of 26 years having matter in the court, no Justice had been made to Dalits till 21 June, 1990. Houses of Dalits were burnt to ashes. Hundred of Dalits were killed brutally and hundred were made homeless. That was heart thundering incident happened to Dalits. This is not a single incident, such kind incidents in the marriage procession of Dalits often happen. There have been paltering stones incidents on Dalits in the great men procession like Bhim Rao Ambedkar, Jyotiba Fule.

In India, if a person happens to meet the other whosoever he is, there is no question before him to say the other to reveal his or her caste identity if the first introductory belongs to higher Cast. If we considered with a deep point of view on the definition of society given in Dictionary.com, “Society is an organized group of persons associated together for religious, benevolent, cultural, scientific, political, patriotic or other purposes.” We find most people in Indian society higher in hierarchy who instead of following the definition given in Dictionary.com follow ‘Codes and Conducts’ prescribed by Smritis and Puranas, are neither organized and benevolent, nor scientific and patriotic for the purpose. They still need to go through the true definition of human beings, and society given above. If we considered with a religious point of view, as ‘caste is also an inseparable part of society’, but there is diversity among diverse religions. If the people of high caste are made aware of true definition of society as repeatedly as religious ceremonies in Hindu religion. The idea of Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru about ‘Unity in Diversity’ in India seems an imagination or dream, but the situation is totally different even today. Only a wearer knows where a shoe punches. People are divided on the basis of caste in the same Hindu religion. There is conflict at every nook and corner with the Dalits. About the question of unity in India among different classes can be seen if someone asks the people who are from down trodden or from minorities, they will pour out all the sufferings and pains harbored for a long past given by the people higher in hierarchy to the lower one. People belong to minorities have been head complaining that we are also ill-treated, humiliated and disagreed by the people who are made sit on the top by the Simiritis Codes in Hindu Society. There are many incidents in the History of India that is the proof of Diversity with the people of Dalits and Muslims. ‘Godhara incident in Gujarat, India (Feb-March, 2002) is evidence of religious discrimination’. Religion according to Dictionary.com is “a set of belief concerning to the cause, nature, and the purpose of the universe, involving devotional and ritual observations, and often containing a moral Code governing the conduct of human affairs.” If people of certain religion are in human to the other ones, it means there is diversity among diverse cultures or religions.

If the people of certain category harass the people of another ones, the sufferers pour out all agony on religion and caste. Valmiki, the chief protagonist of ‘Joothan’ also feels

Hindu Religion, a source of exploitation by the hand of upper caste to lower one. Depiction of Valmiki about caste incidents also reveals that untouchables were forced to do work without any demand of wages. If they did not follow what high caste people demanded from them, they were physically tortured. Such were the circumstances that compelled the sufferers to change their religion too. “ But sometime came to a boil inside me, and I want to say, ‘ Neither am I Hindu, if I were really Hindu, would the Hindu hate me so much or discriminate against me ?... Why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak? Why are the Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits?’” (Joothan, 41). Seeing this miserable condition of Dalits in India, many social workers commented over Hindu religion. Even the founder of constitution Ambedkar was compelled to think about evils in Hindu religion. “I may be born as a Hindu but I will not die a Hindu” (Rege,156).

Again, Dictionary.com defines Caste as “a group of society sharing common cultural features.” If a particular group of people at a particular time follows the same customs and beliefs, how they can be separate in caste. Hence, division of caste according to Smiriti is the most vicious system. There has been criticism on the system of Hindu Religion by the great men. “Status of a person should be based upon the worth of the person. If they are to be classified according to their worth, their classification is real” (Ambedkar, 50).

The term ‘Dalit’ describes that a group of persons who have been humiliated, marginalized for centuries due to imposing strict Codes of Smrits in Indian Hindu Society. This group was devoid of their rights. castes in Hindu Society is decided by birth and parentage, not by quality of work. “Dalit is not a Caste, but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those lowest stratum of society”(Joothan, xiii).

Great thinkers like Tagore, Ambedkar, Vivekanand had seen with their own eyes how a lower section in the society was being humiliated. They raised voices against caste system time to time. Soami Vivakanand, a great thinker and social reformer says, “There is a danger of our religion getting into the kitchen, we are neither Vedantist, most of us now, nor Puranics, nor Frantrics. We are just ‘don’t touchiest’. Our religion is in the Kitchen. Our God is in our cooking pot, and our religion is ‘don’t touch me’. I’m holy. If this goes on for another centaury, every one of us will be in lunatic asylum” (Pruthi, and others, 258). Despite the warnings coming from as sagacious minds, it has worsen further, consequently, we Indians are really in a short of lunatic asylum. The only thing is that the asylum is open and does not have boundary walls. A new thing is emerged in Hindu Religion. Some persons are remarking to take political benefits on the great men like B.R. Ambedkar. “Varnyavayvastha is like a leaky pot or like a man running at the nose. It is incapable of sustaining itself by its on virtue”(Ambedkar, 83).

The term Dalit has been this time political identity. It has travelled a long way changing its dimensions like Achut, Panchamas, Atishudras, Avarnas, Antyjas, Asparshyas, Pariahs, Depressed, Down trodden, scheduled Caste. Gandhi Ji bestowed a named to this term ‘Harijan’ means ‘man of Hari or God’. It evoked pain, conflict to many critical thinkers. Dada Sahab, Gaikward said, “As Gandhi Ji thinks ‘Harijan’ is name of God. I think

differently. I think Harijan means the tail of a sheep which helps her neither to hide honour nor to keep the flies away"(Rege, 148). As Gandhi Ji said on the term 'Harijan', people of all class should give regard to Harijan, but the thing is otherwise as it is seen in Indian society in Hindu Religion.

These are the dalits who have been humiliated, harassed, emotionally black-mailed, physically tortured and what not for centuries. They have harboured a gust of suffering uncontrollable for a long time.

Dalits face conflict (A physically damage, emotionally wound of shock caused by violence after having long lasting effect) for centuries. The texts prescribed in Omprakash Balmiki's Joothan narrates the incidents of villages lie in Uttar Pradesh state in India. 'Untouchable' involves the painful and suffocated experience of Balmiki's life living in Bulandshahar district, Uttar Pradesh, India and 'Joothan' is of Birla Village at Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh, India. 'Joothan' involves heart rendering and thundering narration of painful feelings of people of Dalits called sweeper by caste due to imposing strict Hindu Codes and Conducts of Puranas and Smritis.

Balmiki's house was on the edge of pond where human excreta was common, stinking of muck strewn unbearable and suffocated. The poor sweepers were hardly to meet both end's meet as no wages was paid to these down trodden people on those days. They were provided left over food called 'Joothan'. Some time, at the occasion of marriages in upper caste families, all the lower caste people had to work for months without any wages as the Hindu society was under the tight grip of codes prescribed by Smritis. " Sudras working as slaves should be provided left over food (Joothan), worn out clothes, old and unused clothing, tattered bed sheets)" (Smritis 124, lesson 11, 454). Providing left over food (Joothan) to sweepers is continue even to this day. Touching with Untouchables was considered bad omen and the person of high class was consider to be polluted or contaminated.

These Dalits were not called by their names by the people higher in hierarchy. If someone was consider to be born in Chamar caste, he was called , 'Oe Chamara, Oe Dhera, Idhar aa(come here)', a Kumhar (now Prajapati) caste person was called, 'Oe Kumhara, idhar aa (come here)', a person Khatik caste (now Surya Vanshi) was called, ' Oe Khatikera, idhar aa'. Sweepers were also not left with these ways of greetings as depicted in 'Joothan'. " They did not call us by names. If a person was older, he was called ' Oe Chuhre'. If the person was younger, or of the same age, ' Abey Chuhre', was used" (Joothan,12).

How the Untouchables were exploited! Their month's hard labour was only left over food (Joothan). If there were wedding programmes those days in the family of upper caste, sweepers were rewarded for their hard labour of ten or fifteen days : only left over food 'Jootahn'. " After the baratis had entered, the dirty pattals or leaf-plats were put in Chauhara's baskets which they took home to save the Joothan sticken to them" (Joothan, 9). Sweepers were not entitled to eat fresh sweets. Balmiki's mother in 'Joothan' is humiliated by Sukhdev

Singh Tyagi when she says, “ Choudharyji, all of your gets have eaten and gone.... Please put something on the pattal of my children. They too have waited for this days! Sukhdev Singh pointed at the basket full of dirty pattals and said, ‘You are taking a basket full of Joothan and on the top of that you want food for your children. Don’t forget your place, Chuhari. Pick up your basket and get away” (Joothan 11).

This is all happening to Dalits women even to this day. Dalits are helpless living in so heinous society of Hindu where caste and religion are on the top. “ Our women are raped. Raped not only because they are women, but also for revenge... our caste also is the reason why we suffer why we are exploited” (Rege, 316).

In ‘Joothan’, when Balmiki was in eighth class, he was ill-treated on the way to school by the son of Surajbhan Tyagi, Brajesh. “ Chuhre ke, stop... ‘Chuhre ke, you really have sprouted horns.... You will remain a Chuhra, however much you study’ (Joothan, 28-29). They were not safe on ways not to be humiliated. Caste was infection then like a fatal diseased.

Dalits were not allowed that time to study in schools. There was still eagerness in Dalit children to go to schools and to study. Bakha in ‘Joothan’ expresses his heart feeling, “ but the masters would not teach the out castes, lest their fingers which guided the students across the text should touch leaves of the out castes’s book and they be polluted. These Hindus were cruel....” (Untouchable, 31). Valmiki was hardly permitted to school. “My father begged Master Phool Singh; ‘Masterji, I will be forever in your debt, if you teach this child of mine a letter or two” (Joothan, 2). Balmiki was tormented and humiliated in school so that he might leave school and his study . “ The children of Tyagi would tease me by calling me ‘Chuhre ka’, sometime they would beat me without any reason... all sorts of stratagems were tried so that I would away from school and take up the kind of work I was born” (Joothan, 3). Children of Untouchables were made fun of if they put on clean clothes but instead on wearing old clothes they were also humiliated. “If we went to the school in neat and clean clothes, our class fellows said, ‘Abe Chuhre Ka, he has come dressed in new clothes’. If we went wearing old and shabby clothes, they said, ‘Abey Chuhre ke, get away from me, you stink. This was our non-win situation. We were humiliated whichever way we dressed” (Joothan, 3). Bakha in ‘Untouchable’ also felt this sense of humiliation when he was in fine clothes. “ You are becoming gentlemen, Ohe, Bakhya!... There appeared before him the vague form of Bakha, clad in superior military uniform” (Untouchable, 69). In schools, ‘Dalits’ students were not allowed to raise any question before teachers as Hindu Society was under the tight grip of ‘Smritis Codes’. Even the head masters did not want untouchables to study in schools because they were also from high caste Hindus. “Abey, Chuhre ke, mother fucker, where are you hiding.... You mother...” (Joothan, 5). On Bakha’s school days, the head master did not let him study in the class for three days instead he made him sweep the rooms of school and play ground. Even on the third day, he was put to sweep again the play ground, mean while, his father happened to come and screamed, “Who is the teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep” (Joothan, 6).

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