

Looking through the continents: Parallel narratives of oppression in Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

Cultural and religious oppression has tainted the history of human progression since antiquity. While Dalit literature highlights the narratives of untouchables, interrogating the unheard narratives of religious oppression and violence, African American literature proceeds to encounter a similar kind of oppression in terms of race and colour, the trauma of which however is the same. Marked primarily as the 'voiceless', 'marginalised' or 'ostracized' social groups, it is only with the advent of modern interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches that these alternative literature is brought into the surface along with the mainstream literature. While these new attempts bring forward certain authorial voices echoing from the past, a few new generation writers are also focused on who successfully bring forth the issues related to the world not acknowledged by the majority of mankind even today. This paper attempts to analyse two separate texts by Valmiki and Toni Morrison and lay threadbare their similarities and dissimilarities in their attempts of being recognized beyond their marginal existences.

Keywords- Dalit, Autobiography, Violence, Margins

Dalit literature essentially involves the narratives of untouchables, questioning various forms of oppressions inflicted upon them in different forms and faces such as caste, class and race. Primarily dalit texts can be considered to be social documents emphasizing upon people who

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have been subjected to socio-economical exploitations in India for a very long period of time. Identified usually as the “voiceless” marginalized people for a considerable period, recent interdisciplinary approaches have explored a range of analytical studies of certain dalit texts which reveals the submerged voices of dalit characters as well as newly awakened voices of a few through literatures.

The position of the dalits in India at times echoes the positional plight of the African Americans in USA to a large extent. The African American voice of protest that manifested itself in the twentieth century had the question of identity above everything else. While the pivotal movement of the blacks had been Harlem Renaissance, for the dalits it was the Dalit panther movement. The essential problem with both the groups was the usual belief that they were “mute”, and it was impossible for them to give voices to their own experiences. But writers like Toni Morrison in the African American context and Omprakash Valmiki, the much acclaimed dalit writer have tremendously challenged such notions in their texts such as *Beloved* and *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* respectively. The texts are intriguing partly because they deal with dense socio-political aesthetics, and also because the writers belong to the communities that they are representing in their works.

Kafka articulates that in an autobiography one cannot avoid writing “often” where truth would require that “once” be written. The veracity that an autobiography claims for makes it more deeply conniving but ironically it is the laden subjectivity that becomes more responsible towards its essence. Valmiki's work *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, published in 1997 and translated in 2003 by Arun Prabha Mukherjee speaks about the lives of the ‘chuhra’ community, the lowest existing caste in Indian society. From Valmiki's personal experiences he speaks for his own people who have no other way but to live with their status of illiterate untouchables all along. They are not only deprived of education or the other basic amenities, but other than sweeping, cleaning the toilets, removing the carcass of dead animals and many other lowly works for the upper classes they have no other occupations to look for their subsistence. Valmiki very powerfully portrays the real picture of the ‘dalit’ community from within which amounts to such severe accuracy of presentation. The author describes the living conditions of the ‘chuhra’ community in minute details speaking of their horrible living conditions often to be shared with animals, lack of proper drinking water and sanitation facilities, and the sheer hopelessness that hovered around their existence. The autobiography of Valmiki narrates the inhuman treatment that was inflicted upon the chuhras by the Tyagi Brahmins. As the author finds his escapade through education, he manages to speak for his community. But mostly even among the dalits, the idea of education had been “what is the point of sending him to school? When has a crow become a swan?” and it is obviously the result of the age old oppressive social order that has deformed their perspectives. The immense pressure under which the author continues his education proves the tyrannical social structure of which even educated people are actively involved. Valmiki had to face regular

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humiliation not only by his peers but also by certain teachers. He writes, “During the examinations we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up, lest our hands touch the glass”.

It is with this psychological trauma that Valmiki continued with his education and managed to get admission in DAV College, Dehradun. He abandoned his studies in the college, when he got a job in Ordance Factory as an apprentice and could at last manage to “escape the ‘caste’” as told by his father. But throughout his autobiography, Valmiki repeatedly interrogates that if one can really escape the labyrinths of caste in one life. The author ends his narrative by acknowledging that it is impossible to separate caste from their lives because it is an intrinsic part of their existence. While for the upper classes it amounts to positive values and honour, for the untouchable dalits it is something of an inevitable mark that works behind their continuing agony. It takes a lot of strength and courage to escape the shackles of the caste system for an individual and even if that is managed, the oppressive society with all its systems and rules attempts to thwart such aspirations. Dalit autobiographies are widely different from other forms of autobiographies in approach as well as purpose. They not only represent dalit diminutions, but create remarkable socio-political awareness. Such texts should be analysed in reference to contemporary social history for it speaks for the rights of the dalit community motivating people to fight for their legitimate rights. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, writes in her introduction to *Joothan*, “Autobiography has been a favourite genre of Dalit writers” perhaps because she realizes that it is through such autobiographies that the best of dalit voices are born deeply merged with the narratives itself. What connect the autobiographies is the shared memories of various dalit communities all over India, as Dalit writer Aravind Malagatti writes in introduction to his autobiography *Government-Brahmana*: “We are choosing memories that create social change”. Therefore one might dare to apprehend that the politics of dalit autobiography does not merely contributes towards representing the oppressive sufferings of the dalit sects, but it essentially targets at ensuring a social change at a larger scale.

African American history faithfully depicts a similar chronicle of oppression. While the differences of context, culture and values are obvious, but the negation of “voices” does echo in the same way in the generalized perception of ‘white’ America. Harlem renaissance as well as the Black Power movement created visible opportunities for the black writers to speak out in the voice of their own, their own narratives nurtured in their own language, form and style. Their work of literature was a resistance in itself, for various black authors such as Morrison strongly refused to follow the white narrative as well as the representational style in their works of fiction. Morrison’s *Beloved* is a manifestation of such prevalent claims which powerfully negates the white fictional frame and style, raising intensely complicated questions associated with racial as well as gender identity and position. The first hand

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narrative of the black slaves records their miserable situation in the south, harping upon their inhuman treatment sans identity.

The first hand narrative of the fugitive black slaves is generally known as black narrative or slave narrative. In slave narrative, the nonwhite slaves records their past slave life in the South America. Morrison's *Beloved* explores various aspects of black culture, continuously playing with notions of time and space throughout the novel. It is quite different from an autobiography but the novel at various levels exploits autobiographical elements in order to reveal multiplicity of characters as well as incidents. Sethe, a run-away slave stands for the whole historical background of the blacks. The other characters too are seen to be working hard to run away primarily and then trying to settle down in order to escape their earlier days of suffering, anxiety and horror. Traumatized by the memories of slavery and to secure a future different from that of enslavement, Sethe kills her infant daughter Beloved only to be recognised as a murderer even within the black community unless one day there is a supernatural return of the child. The protagonist becomes a criminal in order to ensure a comparatively better existence of her child, even if it is death. The narrative of Sethe had been inspired by the story of an African American slave, Margaret Garner who had escaped slavery in Kentucky in the year of 1856 by fleeing to a free state, Ohio. However, she was soon chased by her former masters and in order to save her own child from the miseries of slavery, she had killed her brutally and was eventually prosecuted. Sadly, as a black by birth the woman was not only accepted in the mainstream society, but her crime had ostracized her from the African American community as well. Therefore it can be asserted that murder, which here acts as a form of resistance also has a chance of being criticized by one's own people who shares the identical history of oppression. The argument can be stretched further by acknowledging not only the issues of caste or class identity, but also the gender factor which adds to the degree of one's oppression.

It is almost the same agony that Valmiki depict in his autobiography. Despite the generic differences of the narratives, they echo an identical voice of agony and pain. While Morrison's narration potentially involves the physical, mental, spiritual, socio-political and cultural aspects of African American existence, Valmiki also speaks of the socio-cultural, political, economic as well as physical and psychological plight of the dalits. While slave narrative emerged as a protest challenging the atrocities of slavery, dalit narratives also embarked on a similar project. It is through such powerful records that the brutality of casteism and racism are being exposed. The slave narratives were usually written by former slaves who were the only one to carry their own histories acutely critiquing the horrendous institution of slavery. The dalit writers too could write of their own community and their unspeakable conditions with such veracity because they were writing from a position where they could depict their own community from within and faithfully reveal the external treatments inflicted upon them by the upper castes.

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Despite certain degrees of similarities, there exists a considerable range of differences between Morrison's black narrative and Valmiki's autobiography. Morrison's text falls back on memory, oral culture and shared history following a design to remember slavery through real incidents at the same time permitting the author to question slavery from various angles. Valmiki, however does not play much with the narrative like Morrison. In a realistic manner, he writes his history interweaving the history of his community. The generic difference can be realised at its best if we consider the two different texts with all their essential differences yet echoing the voices of the oppressed in between the lines.

It has been acknowledged that dalit autobiography has played significant role in redefining Dalit socio-political history through shared memories of caste discrimination and social oppression. It also analyses how differently it posits itself from much acclaimed mainstream autobiography in order to establish that as their history is brutally different, so they require an altogether alternative way of representing themselves even within the generic sphere of autobiography. Similarly, AfricanAmerican literary works are essentially different from the mainstream white literature because neither in its content, form or style it is negotiable within a white society. They must write their own narrative, to let their history continue with its survival.

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