

**Resistance and Counter-Resistance in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*:
A Dalit's Life: A case Study**

Jayanta Banerjee, M.A., M.Phil.

Ph.D Scholar, Department of English;

West Bengal State University, Barasat

Guest-Lecturer, Sri Ramkrishna Sarada Vidya Mahapitha Hooghly, West Bengal, India

Abstract: *A Dalit is always 'afraid' in public space and full of 'anger' in private space. A Dalit (wo)man is thus always polarized between two extreme feelings – 'to be vanished in shame in the presence of upper caste people' or 'to burst into anger and destroy everything when that shame is 'recollected in tranquility.' This 'terrorized syndrome' is the natural outcome of the atmosphere of violence that always surrounds a Dalit. Material violence as well as psychological violence. Frantz Fanon in his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) deeply concentrates on the forms of resistance towards these violences. Frantz Fanon and B.R. Ambedkar have tremendous similarities in their insights and concepts of liberty, selfhood, humanism, equality and nationalism. Both of them voiced for the empowerment of the marginals. Both believed that revolutionary resistance is ultimately a humanistic project encompassing all people. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2007) is a personal narrative vis-à-vis a community writing registering the Dalit resistance towards the exclusionary culture of savarna hegemony as well as Sanskritization. The narrative also shows how savarna people have organized counter-resistance to Dalit Resistance and forcing the ongoing Dalitization to subsidence.*

Key words: *Human rights, Violence, Mandal Commission, resistance, counter resistance and*

1. Introduction to Resistance:

Jasbir Jain in the first chapter—"Theorising Resistance and creativity", of her seminal book— *Theorising Resistance: Narratives in History and Politics* (2012) says:-

Resistance in art forms is an indication that society is not dying, that there has to be a constant struggle to keep alive. It acts like a fresh infusion of blood and like a constant reminder that in this sea of change, the one constant force has to be the human and all the abstractions we have pursued since our conscious register their value – the value of freedom, of emotion, of beauty, of love. That leads us to consider the creative and the aesthetic aspects. (*Theorising Resistance*:08)

She has also opined-

Resistance is not necessarily about ‘newness’ but about cleaning up of the cobwebs which prevent us from understanding the nature of reality Resistance is not a search for demi-gods; it addresses the blindness of power. Men and women resist when it is no longer possible to endure, or to breathe pure air. And art in its attempt at understanding the environment, arises out of it, resists its claustrophobic structure. It is integral to the value of art as much to the value of life as it brings together the individual and the social, the emotional and the intellectual, as feeling and thought are woven together.(*ibid*:09)

Resistance may also mean the dislike of or opposition to a plan, an idea. It also means the act of using force to oppose someone or something. Resistance can be a force that stops something moving or makes it move more slow. Then it is the quality of not yielding to force or external pressure; that power of a body/community/society which acts in opposition to the impulse or pressure of another or which prevents the effects of another power. Lastly, the word is included in the lexicography, with its first letter as upper case (‘Resistance’) as a secret organization that resists the authorities. Then far from being anything definite and final the process of resistance is a complex phenomenon constantly evolving and unfolding many layers of its development-latent or evident.

According to *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory (2010)*, resistance is-

[A] general term in critical and cultural theory for any non-violent act of cultural or social defiance of hegemonic power. The term is most widely used in cultural studies, which – somewhat over-optimistically, it has to be said – in some cases is prepared to see even so simple an act as wearing jeans to work or school as resistive because it defies certain social conventions (now largely outmoded as a consequence). But this view of what resistance means is also criticized within cultural studies for being naive about the ease with which such acts of resistance are recuperated from by power-in this case, it simply created a much larger market for jeans than previously existed. Consequently, resistance is probably better treated as a problematic than a social fact... (*Buchanan* :407-08).

Stephen Slemon, in his seminal essay “*Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World*” published in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A reader* edited by Padmini Mongia, possesses a question regarding the nature of literary resistance which is very pertinent in this context. He asks-

Is literary resistance something that simply issue forth, through narrative, against a clearly definable set of power relations? Is it something actually there in the text, or is it produced and reproduced in and through the mediating structures of their own culturally specific histories? (Mongia: 72-83)

Slemon's question can be simplified thus, are forms of resistance *embedded* in the text? Or readers or target readers are to *decode* the forms of resistance through their cultural experiences. These are rhetorical questions if applied to the sphere of *Dalit* literary resistance. Because, the subordination, marginalization and oppression a Dalit text witnesses is the legacy of a whole community. The cultural matrix which forge the radical individual identity to produce the text is the same where the readers live and belong. Dalit the writer and Dalit the reader are complementary to each other in their conception of resistance. Omprakash metonymically stands for his whole community. His creative resistance towards oppression is the accumulated through the suffering of many.

Pradeep K.Sharma in his book *Dalit Politics and Literature* (2011) opines regarding the nature of resistance that, one of the most important terms synonymous to movement is collective action that may be of two kinds: a) Institutionalized collective action b) Non-Institutionalized collective action. To illustrate his points he quotes Ghanshyam Shah from the latter's book *Social Movements in India* (1990):

The action that is legally permitted and 'widely accepted as binding in society or part of society' at a given point of time is institutionalized action. Such action include petitioning, voting in elections and fighting legal battles in courts of law... Non-institutionalised collective action takes several forms, such as, protest agitation, strike, Satyagraha, Hartal, Gherao and riot. Agitations or protests are not strictly speaking social movement, though a social movement develops in course of time and it begins with protest or agitation which may not have the 'organization' or 'ideology' for change. (Shah:1990)

2. Analysis: Resistance in *Joothan*

What for a Dalit write? What aches a Dalit to be free from his/her life and living? What afflictions does a Dalit hide from its life? Every grown up Dalit fights with its shadow to disremember the indignity s/he suffers from and the poverty s/he survived with. Omprakash Valmiki in *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2007) unleashes the darkest childhood days down the memory lane. The Valmikis are the ex-untouchable 'Churah' communities dispersed in villages or Uttar Pradesh. They live as usually, far from the centre village, in '*basti*'. That the Dalits live far from the caste hindu habitat has been exemplified in other Dalit narratives also, such as Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh: Against The Night: An Autobiography* (2010), Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akarmashi: The Outcast*(2003) and bama's *Karukku*(2000)

Their geographical peripherality coupled with historical devaluation make the Valmiki practically fringe elements in our society. This paper has a focus on how resistance against the overall prevalent system has germinated among the Dalits in India and how the upper caste/class people in general are trying to counter-resist the Dalit resistance (movement). The first question that arises is- what is it against which the Dalits are asserting their resistances? What are the operative fields/regulations of the systems that have let the Dalits to resistance? The answer is a straight “all”.

A lucid reading of Joothans would get us to a realization that the Dalits live a life in an inhumanely abominable condition in terms of casteism and shockingly wretched in terms of poverty. Omprakash's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2007) is a journey. A journey that cut across multilayered deprivation of the Dalits to their rights. Right to education, right to land, right to live, right to property and most importantly their right to dignity. An overall (pervasive) claustrophobia in Hindu Caste system makes the Dalits feel lower (not even equal) than the animals. Caste is a one way system which is entered by birth and exit only by death. Omprakash has spanned the journey of *Joothan* from the darkest days of 1950s to the mellowing phase of dalits and dalit literature of 1990s. *Joothan* registers the *en route* socio-politico and religio-cultural complications faced by the Dalits to become a Dalit to the Dalit's' (As we were called Indian's' by the British; an unindividualised, indiscriminating, pluralized form of mass Indian identity marker). Omprakash's Memoir has registered a Dalit life world which was far distant in space and time from the modern day organized movements waged by the Dalits of today. It is an unknown world within our own known world where children are reared up with cattles, women raped, men-used and thrown away. Whatever they do, where ever they go the invisible stigma of 'untouchability' smears each and every Dalit. Omprakash very adeptly described an overall usual situation regarding their 'no-win' situation by quoting the upper caste students' bantering towards the 'dressing' of the Dalits in school.

If we ever went out wearing neat and clean clothes, we had to hear their taunts that pierced deep inside, like poisoned arrows. If we went to school in neat and clean clothes, our classmates said, "Abey, Chuhre ka, he has come dressed in new clothes." If we went wearing old and shabby clothes, then they said, "Abey, Chuhre ke, get away from me, you stink." (*Joothan:04*)

Sometimes, few Muslim Tagas also participated in this open humiliation competition. *Joothan* begins with an open-air-latrine description as well as a general description of living.

They sat on Dabbowali's shores without worrying about decency, exposing their private parts. At this same spot they would have a conference at a round table to discuss all the quarrels of the village. The muck was strewn everywhere. 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 the environment of my childhood.(*Joothan:01*)

This was the description. Omprakash concludes with a prescription. He concludes the ‘description of hell’ by resisting the usual perceptive flow of mere dounbfoundng of the non-Dalit readers and their flummoxed gaze by giving a check point. He describes 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. (01) *Joothans* calls for this change. A change in *their* Dalit community and a change in *our* social system.

The government school did not allow the Dalit children to be enrolled there. Though the education policy changed with Independence, the savarna system of keeping the lower caste/class people out the sphere of education and knowledge bases did not change. Omprakash’s father begged to a savarna teacher for his children’s education.His father with palms together said, “Masterji, I will be forever in your debt if you teach this child of mine a letter or two.”(02) In all Dalit texts, getting the children to school is a matter of tug-of-war between the Dalit guardians of the first generation learners and the existing system. This is the clever trick of the caste Hindus’ adherence to the Foucauldian concept of ‘denial of knowledge is the denial of power.’ Politics of oppression is always backed up by the politics of exclusion.

The autobiography (which is very much a community writing in essence in most part) is replete with examples of deprivation of the basic need of education. By exemplifying it over and over in many pages the hostile condition of education for the Dalit, Omprakash tries to hammer home the issue of resistance against the ‘deprive and exploit’ policy of the caste Hindu people. Academic institutions (As we know,in Marxist ideology, ‘*Institutions*’ always function as ideological state apparatus) always try to keep the Dalit students out of it. Dalit children are seen to fight against the few typical exclusionary strategies of the existng system. Such as-

- i. Beating the Dalit students on slightest occasion.
- ii. Stigmatizing Dalit Students by imposing false allegations,like stealing, wasting school assets and littering in the compound.
- iii. Forcing them to perform physical works, like gardening, sweeping, latrine keeping etc.
- iv. Under marking in the examination and in the viva-voce.
- v. Criticizing govt. reservation policy and other caste related stipend and scholarship in public places.

Omprakash and his fellow Dalit mates must have suffered from any one or the other problems indexed above. The author most pitifully recollects that all three, Omprakash,Ram Singh and Sukkhan Singh of them were very good in their studies, but their extremely lower-caste background dogged them at every step. A hopeful B.Sc. graduate falls into utter desperation when he encounter bad marks in practical, his marks in theory were quite good,though.

Omprakash recounts- “I always got poor marks in practicals—experiments or tests done in the laboratory—whereas my written exams were always graded high.”(65)

Other case where Dalit women are seen as an active part of the general resistive air that began to flow against the humiliation of the Dalits. Omprakash’s mother worked as a maid servant to the Tagas. She used to collect the left out flakes of food (*Joothan* means left out food) from the Tagas. And those half-rotten left out food were almost like nectar to the hunger stricken Dalits. One such occasion was the day after the marriage of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi’s daughter. The bridegroom party finished their dinner and there were a pile of left out food in the dustbin. Omprakash’s mother politely urged the Tyagi for some *jootha*. In return she received poisoned words and a thrash. His mother threw the *joothans* on the very face of Sukhdev Sing Tyagi. She yelled out, Singh, “Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the bridegroom’s guests tomorrow morning.”(13) Omprakash recollects “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. After that day Ma never went back to his door. And after this incident she also stopped taking their *joothan*.”(13)

3. Counter-Resistance

The after effect of Mandal Commission saw a nationwide debates and protests in media, universities and parliament. Few upper caste students attempted self-immolation in public roads and in front of Supreme Court. Since anti-Mandal campaign was in root an anti-reservation movement, the Dalits were forced to counter those movements for their interest. This was the time when modern-India saw a complete transformation in caste politics. It was a sort of reawakening of Ambedkar. The resultant violence against the Dalits increased in havoc. Violence has always been a part of the strategy. Both physical and psychological. In addition to the pre-Mandal group violence, the discrimination and violence against Dalits took a new turn country wide. Few well known massacres of the Dalits were – Kilvenmani (1968) in Tamil Nadu, Belchi in Bihar (1977) and Karamchedu (1985) in Andra Pradesh. Mostly, Dalits answer back to these violences either by mobilizing themselves by increasing their numbers in the sphere of public knowledge-bases i.e. in school, college, university and politics or by circulating more pamphlet, magazines and literary activities. Few cases of striking back were not rare, though. The most telling instance was the recent (May 2009) rough melee carried out by a horde of outraged *Ravidasi* Dalits in a number of city and town in Punjab lasting for few days in protest of the murder of a *Ravidasi sant* in Austria. This sort of sudden eruption is a syndrome of long suppressed simmering against the practice of untouchability based on ‘purity-pollution’ question.

The *savarna* people led the anti Mandal Commission campaign wearing the mask as ‘secular’ and ‘modern’ citizens. They led this counter resistance movement and ferociously attacked the commission for not doing it on the basis of (i) National Interest, (ii) Merit, (iii) Efficiency. And they began to call the reservationists ‘casteist’. And denounced this reservation as a revival of

outmoded policy for the masses. Regarding the ferocity of anti-Commission activities, Omprakash recounts-

Anti-reservation protest had taken a very grim shape in Gujarat where the anti-reservationists had carried out horrendous violence in the rural areas. The *tandav* dance of violence carried in all directions. The anti-reservationists stood under Gandhi's statues in places like Baroda and Gandhinagar and fulminated hatred against Dalits. Their poison began to make inroads in Maharashtra as well. The incidents of harrashments of Dalits in governmental and semi-governmental workplaces had gone up. *Savarnas* or caste Hindus had created fake organizations like *Shoshit workers Union* that were conspiring against Dalits in a concerted manner. (*Joothan:107-8*)

4. Conclusion:

A Dalit had to struggle for everything. Beginning from the three basic *needs* of 'food', 'cloth', and 'shelter' in established society, to the fundamental *rights* (as laid down by the *United Nations' Nine Universal Declaration of Human Rights*)¹ to 'education', 'liberty' and 'due process of law' to name few. Dalits, even in modern India, are still struggling for all the 'seven' point fundamental rights-to equality, to freedom of speech and expression, to freedom of religion, right against exploitation, cultural and educational rights, to constitutional remedies and the lastly implemented one, the right to education (RTE Act,2009).² The more we go down the points serial wise the more irony comes out in letting the rights to the Dalits in the truest assurance of empowerment on behalf the governments. Both Central Government as well as the State Governments of India. This can be said even in keeping in the minds all the progressive measures taken and implemented by governments. *Mahatmas* like Jyotirao Phule, Abedkar, Gandhi, Tagore, Netaji and Vivekananda, none couldn't break down the vertical caste and class structure of brahminic Hinduism and re-formed a single unit of horizontal nonhierarchical social system in modern India. Regarding the pervasive nature of casteism in India, Limbale Speaks in his autobiographical narrative *The Outcaste (2003)* that caste determines everything about his life, including the clothes he will wear, the person he will marry, and the food he will eat. What he says is, actually, the breach of conduct to the left out people for their empowerment on behalf of the Constitution of India. Thus, the Dalits of India started a movement directed towards status-improvement vis-à-vis social mobility among them by shaping their agitational sensitivity and assertion for achieving their rights to equality and equal opportunity, self-respect and a respectful identity. To them, true liberation occurs only when the needs of the people, in particular the illiterate and impoverished masses -are central to nation building. This emphasis on the base of the socio-economic pyramid reflects the central emphasis throughout their resistive project: the need for thinking, planning, and acting from the bottom up.

5. Endnotes:

1. The *United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights* has recognized nine (09) rights as fundamental. They are the –
 - i. Right to self-determination
 - ii. Right to liberty
 - iii. Right to due process of law
 - iv. Right to freedom of movement
 - v. Right to freedom of thought
 - vi. Right to freedom of religion
 - vii. Right to freedom of expression
 - viii. Right to peaceably assemble
 - ix. Right to freedom of association (*Fundamental Rights* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental_rights)

2. The right to education was added in the constitution after the Eighty-Sixth Amendment in 2002 under article 21-A. RTE Act enabled this right in the year 2009 - 2010. The Article 21-A in the Constitution of India promises to provide free and compulsory education of all children in the age group of six to fourteen years as a Fundamental Right in such a manner as the State may, by law, determine. 'The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, which represents the consequential legislation envisaged under Article 21-A, means that every child has a right to full time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school which satisfies certain essential norms and standards.' (Department of School Education and Literacy under the Ministry of Human Resource Development; <http://mhrd.gov.in/rte>)

6. References

- Abedi,Zakir.*Contemporary Dalit Literature: Quest for Dalit Liberation*.New Delhi: Arise Publishers,2010.Print.
- Bama, *Karukku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom, Chennai: Macmillan India Limited, 2000. Print.
- Buchanan,Ian. *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*.New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.Print.
- Dangle, Arjun, ed. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Marathi Dalit Literature*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2009. Print.
- Fanon,Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*.Trans. Cconstance Farrington, London: Penguin Books
- Jain, Jasbir. *Theorising Resistance: Narratives in History and Politics*. Jaipur:Rawat Publications.2012.Print.
- Limbale, Sharankumar. *Akkarmashi:The Outcaste*.Trans. Santosh Bhoomkar, New Delhi:

- Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.
- . *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature, History, Controversies and Considerations*. Trans.Alok Mukherjee, New Delhi: Orient Longman., 2007. Print.
- Madhopuri, Balbir. *Changiya Rukh – Against the Night: An autobiography*. Trans.Tripti Jain, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010.Print.
- Shah, Ghanshyam. *Social Movements in India:A review of Literature*.India: Sage Publications Pvt.Ltd,2004. print.
- Sharma, Pradeep k. *Dalit Politics and Literature*. New Delhi:Shipra Publication,2006.Print.
- Slemon, Stephen “Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World”. *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A reader*.Ed.Padmini Mongia,London:Arnold,1995.Print.
- Valmiki Omprakash. *Joothan*. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee , Kolkata: Samya, 2007. Print.
- Valmiki Omprakash. *Joothan*. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee , Kolkata: Samya, 2007. Web. <ebooksclub.org_joothan.pdf>
- <http://mhrd.gov.in/rte>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental_rights