

**Shattering The Silence: Resistance, Aesthetics, and Intersectionality in  
Omprakash Valmiki "Joothan"**

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**Abstract**

This paper provides a critical analysis of Omprakash Valmiki's seminal autobiography, *Joothan*, examining the text as a powerful act of "shattering the silence" that has historically been imposed upon Dalit experiences within Indian society. It focuses on three interwoven themes: the text's inherent strategies of resistance, its deliberate aesthetics of articulation, and the complex intersectionality of oppression depicted. Through an analysis grounded in Dalit literary theory and subaltern studies, we argue that *Joothan* fundamentally challenges mainstream literary norms by employing a raw, testimonial aesthetic that rejects sanitized language to document the everyday realities of caste-based humiliation, exploitation, and systemic violence. This "aesthetics of pain" transforms personal suffering into a potent political indictment of the caste system, asserting the validity of the Dalit voice and experience. Furthermore, the paper explores the international dimensions of marginalisation in Valmiki's narrative, illustrating how caste identity intersects with poverty, access to education, and gender dynamics to produce unique forms of vulnerability and resilience. This research demonstrates how Valmiki utilises the autobiographical form as a crucial tool for socio-political liberation, positioning *Joothan* not merely as a memoir but as a foundational text of resistance literature that advocates for the reclamation of Dalit dignity and an authentic, inclusive humanism.

**Keywords:** Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan*, Dalit Literature, Caste Resistance, Untouchability, Aesthetics of Pain, Intersectionality, Autobiography, Subaltern Studies, Social Justice.

## **Introduction**

Omprakash Valmiki stands as one of the most significant voices in modern Dalit literature in Hindi. Through his powerful autobiographical writings, poetry, and short stories, Valmiki gave literary expression to the lived realities of caste oppression, humiliation, resistance, and the struggle for dignity. His works are not merely personal narratives but collective testimonies that expose the deep-rooted structures of caste discrimination in Indian society. Valmiki transformed pain into a powerful tool of social critique, becoming a literary figure who challenged dominant narratives and redefined the contours of Hindi literature. He belonged to the Chuhra caste, traditionally associated with manual scavenging and sweeping, one of the most marginalised and stigmatised Dalit communities. His childhood was marked by severe poverty, social exclusion, and constant humiliation. From an early age, he was made to perform menial tasks that reflected the orthodox caste hierarchy, even while attending school. He was forced to sweep classrooms instead of studying, solely because of his caste identity. Despite such adverse conditions, Valmiki's strong determination and the encouragement of a few progressive teachers enabled him to pursue his education. Education became not only his escape route but also his weapon against the oppressive caste system. The thought of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution and a visionary Dalit leader, had a profound influence on Valmiki's entry into literature.

Ambedkar's ideology of social justice, equality, and human dignity shaped Valmiki's consciousness and writing style. He also drew inspiration from the Dalit Panthers movement in Maharashtra, which emphasised literature as a form of resistance. Valmiki initially wrote poetry but later gained national and international recognition through his autobiographical work. His writing is marked by a raw, honest, and unfiltered portrayal of Dalit life. He rejected romanticised depictions of rural India and instead presented the brutal truth of caste-based exploitation. "I had to sit away from the others in the class, and that too on the floor. The man on which the other children sat was out of bounds for me. (Valmiki 2003:05)". *Joothan* is Valmiki's most celebrated work and a landmark text in Hindi Dalit literature. The term "joothan" refers to leftover food scraps collected from upper-caste households, a humiliating practice imposed on Dalits. The autobiography vividly narrates his childhood experiences, everyday insults, forced labour, and the deep psychological trauma caused by untouchability. The work exposes institutionalised caste discrimination in schools, villages, and workplaces. It also portrays his gradual awakening to Ambedkarite ideology and his journey toward self-respect and resistance. "*Joothan*" is not just an individual story but a collective history of Dalits

whose voices have been historically silenced. In "Salam," Valmiki articulates Dalit consciousness through potent symbolic imagery and sharp political critique. His poems confront social hypocrisy, question traditional literary aesthetics, and demand justice. They echo anger, pain, and a longing for equality while affirming the identity and pride of the marginalised. Ghuspethiye. This collection examines how caste discrimination permeates contemporary social spheres, including urban areas and educational institutions. The stories reveal how prejudice adapts itself within changing social frameworks, proving that caste oppression is not restricted to rural areas. Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundaryashastra is a critical work that discusses the unique aesthetics of Dalit literature. Valmiki argues that Dalit literature cannot be judged by traditional literary standards shaped by upper-caste sensibilities. Instead, its beauty lies in its truth, resistance, and lived experience. He introduces a new framework where realism and social justice become central to literary evaluation.

### **Shattering the Silence: Resistance, Aesthetics and Intersectionality**

Silence has often been used as a powerful tool of oppression. Throughout history, marginalised groups have been systematically silenced, denied the right to speak, to represent themselves, and to define their own identities. "Shattering the silence", therefore, becomes both a metaphor and a political act: it signifies the breaking of imposed muteness and the assertion of voice, presence, and agency. Within this act of breaking silence lie the intertwined forces of resistance, aesthetics, and intersectionality, each contributing to the creation of new narratives that challenge dominant power structures. Together, these dimensions enable individuals and communities to reclaim their histories, assert their identities, and envision more just futures.

Resistance is a response to domination. It arises wherever there is inequality, injustice, and dehumanisation. Resistance does not always take the form of loud protest or violent rebellion; often, it is quiet, persistent, and embedded in everyday acts of survival. For marginalised communities, whether defined by caste, gender, race, class, sexuality, or disability, resistance begins with the refusal to accept the identities imposed upon them. Writing, storytelling, art, music, and performance become vital tools in this process. Through these forms, oppressed individuals rewrite narratives that have traditionally excluded or misrepresented them. For example, Dalit literature in India, African American writing in the United States, feminist texts across the globe, and Indigenous storytelling traditions all function as powerful acts of resistance. They speak truths that dominant societies have either ignored or actively suppressed. In this sense, resistance is deeply tied to voice. To speak or to write is to reject silence; it is to demand that one's lived reality be recognised. This is

particularly significant for those whose lives have been shaped by structures such as patriarchy, caste hierarchy, colonialism, and racism. When a Dalit writer narrates their experience of discrimination, or when a woman writes about her struggles within a patriarchal system, the very act of narration becomes revolutionary. Language, which was once used to humiliate or exclude, is now reclaimed as a tool of empowerment. Thus, “shattering the silence” is not merely about speaking; it is about transforming speech into a form of resistance. Alongside resistance stands aesthetics, the realm of art, beauty, and creative expression. Traditionally, aesthetic standards have been shaped by those in power. What is considered “beautiful,” “worthy,” or “artistic” has often been defined according to dominant cultural values, while the art and expressions of marginalised groups were dismissed as crude, unrefined, or unimportant. However, as silence is shattered, alternative aesthetics begin to emerge. These new aesthetic forms challenge conventional norms and redefine what is considered meaningful art.

The aesthetics of resistance is not concerned with pleasing the dominant gaze; instead, it is rooted in authenticity and lived experience. In Dalit writing, for instance, the language is often raw, direct, and grounded in the harsh realities of social exclusion. This style breaks away from the romanticised or sanitised portrayals common in mainstream literature. Similarly, feminist art may reject idealised images of femininity and instead focus on the body as a site of struggle, trauma, and power. These unconventional aesthetic choices are political. They reject the idea that art must conform to certain standards to be valued. Instead, they propose that truth, experience, and emotional depth are central to artistic expression. In this way, aesthetics becomes a form of resistance in itself. The use of marginalised languages, local dialects, folk traditions, and everyday imagery challenges the dominance of “high” or “elite” culture. Through poetry, music, visual art, and film, oppressed communities construct their own cultural identities. These aesthetic practices help build solidarity among people with shared experiences and also educate others about forms of suffering and resilience that are often hidden. Art becomes a space in which pain is transformed into narrative, and narrative into power.

The idea of intersectionality further deepens the process of shattering silence. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality explains how different forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, casteism, classism, and homophobia, do not operate in isolation, but intersect and overlap in complex ways. “Intersectionality offers a framework to understand how gender, race, and class oppression interlock”. (Crenshaw p.130) A Dalit woman, for example, does not experience caste and gender oppression separately; rather, her lived experience is shaped by their combination.

Similarly, a queer person of a marginalised race faces challenges that are different from those faced by someone who is only oppressed based on sexuality. Understanding intersectionality is essential in fully grasping the significance of resistance and aesthetics. When marginalised individuals begin to speak, they do not speak from a single identity, but from multiple, layered identities. Their voices reflect the complexity of their existence. Shattering the silence, therefore, requires recognising that there is no single narrative of oppression or liberation. Instead, there are many voices, each shaped by unique experiences. This recognition prevents the creation of a new hierarchy in which some marginalised voices are centred while others are pushed to the margins again. Intersectionality also expands the scope of solidarity. It encourages different groups to recognise common struggles while also respecting their differences. When feminist movements acknowledge the experiences of women of colour, Dalit women, transgender individuals, or disabled women, they become more inclusive and more powerful. When anti-caste movements consider issues of gender and sexuality, they move toward a more holistic vision of justice. In this way, shattering the silence becomes a collective act, not just an individual one.

Technology becomes a modern extension of resistance, aesthetics, and intersectionality. “Shattering the Silence: Resistance, Aesthetics, and Intersectionality” represents a powerful framework for understanding how marginalised voices challenge oppression. Resistance provides the courage to speak; aesthetics provides the form through which experience is expressed; and intersectionality provides the lens through which complexity is understood. Together, they transform silence into speech, invisibility into visibility, and suffering into strength. Shattering the silence is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process, one that continues to reshape literature, art, politics, and society. It is through this continuous breaking of silence that new possibilities of freedom, equality, and dignity can emerge.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* stands as one of the most powerful autobiographical narratives in modern Dalit literature, representing a forceful rupture of the silence historically imposed on Dalit communities. The text not only recounts the lived experience of caste oppression but also articulates a distinct Dalit aesthetic grounded in pain, protest, and the assertion of dignity. When we read through the framework of “Shattering the Silence: Resistance, Aesthetics, and Intersectionality,” *Joothan* emerges as a radical text that dismantles hegemonic narratives, reconstitutes the meaning of literary beauty, and reveals how caste discrimination intersects with class, labour, gender, and institutional power. Valmiki's autobiography is not simply a life story; it is an act of resistance, an aesthetic intervention, and a blueprint for understanding the intertwined oppressions shaping Dalit existence. For centuries,

Dalit voices were excluded from mainstream literature, philosophy, and historical documentation. Brahmanical social hierarchies delegitimised Dalit speech, delegating their experiences to the margins. *Joothan* shatters this long-standing silence by foregrounding the “unwritten” and “unspeakable” realities of untouchability.

Valmiki opens the narrative with the humiliation of eating *joothan*, leftover food, outside upper-caste households, an image that becomes an overarching metaphor for Dalit life in caste society. Speaking of such experiences was itself taboo; to narrate them publicly is an act of defiance. By naming the violence, Valmiki challenges the ideological system that depends on Dalit silence for its survival. His autobiography becomes a counter-public space where Dalit truth is articulated without negotiation or apology. This shattering of silence also extends to exposing educational, bureaucratic, and social institutions that perpetuate casteism. The school becomes a site of everyday trauma: the teacher's command that Valmiki sweep the playground for days signifies not only the normalisation of caste labour but also the erasure of Dalit aspirations. By writing these experiences, Valmiki destabilises the narrative of caste-free modernity and forces readers to confront the structural nature of oppression. Resistance in *Joothan* operates at multiple levels: psychological, social, cultural, and political. The autobiography documents both silent endurance and overt protest, constructing a Dalit subject who refuses to internalise caste-defined inferiority. Even as a child, Valmiki questions the legitimacy of the violence inflicted upon him. His refusal to accept caste-based duties, such as cleaning the school-constitutes an early act of rebellion. Although punished, he begins to assert his individuality, marking the emergence of a resistant Dalit consciousness.

Valmiki's struggle to access education exemplifies defiance against a system designed to keep Dalits illiterate. Teachers humiliate him, classmates discriminate against him, and yet he persists, ultimately excelling academically. Education becomes both a tool of liberation and a symbolic weapon against caste structures. By writing *Joothan*, Valmiki transforms personal suffering into collective memory and political testimony. His involvement in the Dalit literary movement situates him within a broader tradition of Ambedkarite activism, where literature becomes a space of ideological struggle. The very act of autobiographical writing by a Dalit challenges the casteist literary canon that historically erased Dalit lives or represented them through upper-caste lenses. Resistance, then, is not merely thematic; it is embedded in the very form, purpose, and voice of the text.

In *Joothan*, Valmiki crafts an aesthetic rooted in raw honesty, emotional intensity, and lived reality. This is the aesthetics of the real, privileging authenticity

over ornamentation. Valmiki's descriptions of labour sweeping, carrying dead animals, and eating leftovers shock readers because they lay bare a world sanitised in mainstream discourse. Pain is not presented for voyeuristic consumption but as a political statement. The aesthetic power of the text lies in its refusal to beautify suffering; instead, it exposes the cruelty of caste society. Valmiki's prose is direct, unembellished, and emotionally charged. This stylistic choice disrupts classical literary taste, foregrounding a Dalit vernacular aesthetic where truth takes precedence over poeticism. The fragmented structure mirrors the fragmented self produced by caste violence, while the conversational tone asserts an accessible, democratic form of literature. In Indian literature, autobiography was traditionally the genre of the privileged leaders, intellectuals, and upper-caste elites. Valmiki reclaims this form to narrate a life considered unworthy of documentation. By doing so, he democratizes the genre and infuses it with a new aesthetic purpose: representing marginalised experience as worthy of literary attention.

#### Dalit Aesthetics: Truth as Literary and Political Force

Valmiki's narrative style breaks from upper-caste literary norms that privilege refinement, subtlety, and detachment. In contrast, *Joothan* embraces an aesthetic rooted in raw honesty. Sharmila Rege argues that "Dalit writing refuses the aesthetic of silence; it articulates the pain of caste as collective memory and political assertion" (*Writing Caste/Writing Gender* 98). The autobiography's descriptive force lies not in poetic ornamentation but in its uncompromising representation of everyday humiliation. One of the most striking aesthetic choices is Valmiki's refusal to soften or sanitise the violence of caste. He speaks openly about eating leftovers *joothan*, performing sanitation labour, and being denied access to public spaces. As Tharu and Lalita explain, "The power of Dalit narratives lies in their uncompromising truthfulness, their refusal to soften the brutality of caste society" (*Women Writing in India* 24). This aesthetic of stark realism is a deliberate challenge to mainstream Indian literature, which often avoids confronting caste directly.

#### Conclusion

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothans* stands as a testament to the transformative power of literature in amplifying the silenced voices of the oppressed and in confronting entrenched injustices. Through the interwoven themes of resistance, aesthetics, and intersectionality, Valmiki not only documents the brutal realities of caste-based discrimination but also reimagines the possibilities of literary form and social critique. His unflinching honesty and raw portrayal of Dalit existence challenge mainstream narratives, compelling readers to reckon with histories and experiences that have long been marginalised. By foregrounding lived experience and embracing

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an aesthetic of truth, Joothan redefines both the purpose and the scope of Indian literature, positioning Dalit narratives at the centre of cultural discourse. Ultimately, Valmiki's work is more than an autobiography; it is a manifesto for social justice, a call to recognise the dignity of every individual, and a reminder that the struggle to shatter silence is ongoing. Joothan's legacy endures in its ability to inspire resistance, foster empathy, and urge collective action toward a more just and inclusive society.

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