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Legal Awareness in Dalit Literature: A Study of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste*

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Abstract

Literature has always reflected the conditions in which people live. It records not only personal emotions and cultural traditions but also the unequal structures that shape society. In India, few literary movements have challenged social inequality as powerfully as Dalit literature. Emerging from the lived experiences of communities that endured centuries of caste discrimination, Dalit writing rejects romantic portrayals of society and instead presents an unfiltered account of exclusion, humiliation, and resistance. Its purpose is not merely to narrate suffering but to question the social order that normalized injustice for generations.

Keywords: *Dalit Literature, Legal Awareness, Legal Consciousness, Social Justice, Constitutional Values*

Introduction

The present paper records the fact that Dalit literature is a product of the lived experience. Thus, the writers themselves are very present in their works, which are emotionally true and politically significant. Their stories show how caste manifests in everyday places like schools, workplaces, neighborhoods and public institutions. These experiences are a way of seeing the gap between the ideals of equality enshrined in the Constitution and the lives lived by many Dalits. It is found that the awareness of law has been a significant aspect of the works of the dalit writers and their efforts to comprehend oppressive social practices. Dalit writers do not see the law as a system of rules, but as a tool for social change.

The following paper attempts to answer these questions by comparing Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste*. While the two texts vary in form and setting, both make the complex interplay between caste identity and legal consciousness and symbolically great. Valmiki speaks about the public practice of untouchability and institutional discrimination in the rural context while Bagul's is a story of psychological violence of a educated Dalit who hides his caste to survive in an urban context.

The present work attempts to establish a dialogue between literary analysis and legal consciousness and Ambedkarite philosophy in order to assert a role for Dalit literature in education. It not only evokes the history of the oppression of the lower castes, but also reminds the reader of the significance of constitutional morality, social justice and human rights. Through this process so, these texts become significant personal reflections on law, citizenship and the ongoing fight for equality in modern India. Bagul 'The feeling of humiliation can never be comprehended by those who have never experienced it.' Educating communities who have been marginalized from full citizenship is a crucial first step in regaining dignity and combating harmful social norms. Law thus is not considered simply as a set of rules, but rather a tool for social change.

In Dalit stories, the relationship between literature and law comes into significance since the law has not been realised in practice. The Constitution has eliminated untouchability and ensured equality in the eyes of the law, but the caste discrimination has manifested in various ways in the social fabric. Dalit writers unveil this contradiction by revealing the common conflict between constitutional promises and reality. They thus invite their readers to consider not just personal experiences, but also the utility of legal institutions in fostering justice.

In this paper, the questions are discussed by comparing two books, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste*. Both texts depict the complex intersection of caste identity and legal consciousness, but they have different forms and setting. Valmiki is a rural Dalit whose life is a stark reminder of the open state of untouchability and institutional discrimination, while Bagul is an educated Dalit who hides his caste identity to make it through in an urban society. These works together show that the oppression of the caste changes its form depending on the social situation, and it is still denying equality and human dignity.

It is an autobiographical description of the life of Omprakash Valmiki as a Dalit boy growing up in rural India in the 1950s. The protagonist of Joothan is the author himself, Omprakash Valmiki, a Dalit born into the marginalised Chuhra (sweeper) caste in the 1950s, rural India. The title means something like "scraps of food left on a plate," and represents the centuries-old humiliation, poverty, and degradation that his community had suffered. He is subject to untouchability, caste discrimination, ridicule in school, hardship and social isolation. He continues his education despite all these difficulties and rebels against the caste system and eventually becomes a writer and a social activist. His journey is the struggle for equality, dignity and justice. This study attempts to bring literature into the sphere of legal consciousness and Ambedkarite philosophy so that it may be used as a kind of educational effort. Not only does it serve as a reminder of the historical memory of the caste oppression but it also brings to the fore the need of constitutional morality, social justice and human rights for readers. In so doing, these texts make personal narratives into compelling pronouncements on law, citizenship, and the ongoing fight for equality in contemporary India.

Baburao Bagul is one of the early pioneers of Marathi Dalit literature. His book *When I Hid My Caste* is a depiction of the brutal conditions of caste discrimination, poverty and violence in the cities. It was translated to English by the renowned author and translator Jerry Pinto. This English version is published by Speaking Tiger Books in July, 2018. Bagul's tales are about the people who are fighting to defy the color of their caste. The title a paradoxical, rebellious in nature and the story illustrates the psychological and social consequences of caste-based discrimination. The title story stands out from the rest and remains an issue that is still uppermost today. The protagonist is only unwilling to reveal the caste he belonged to and so insists that he is a 'Mumbaikar' but is mercilessly beaten when his caste is discovered, and is ultimately saved by a knife-bearing Dalit. The protagonist tries to hide his caste to fit in with society, demonstrating the widespread existence of caste prejudice. The act of hiding is one of the failure of society to uphold the values of equality and dignity as enshrined in the constitution. Bagul's stories showcase the impact of caste on employment, housing, education and social relations. They illustrate that without change, equality before the law is not enough. Bagul shows in vivid detail the suffering and resistance, and speaks out for effective implementation of legal protections.

Comparative Reading of *Joothan* and *When I Hid My Caste* brings a light on two different but related aspects of caste identity, namely, public humiliation and hidden identity. In Joothan, Omprakash Valmiki, as both narrator and protagonist, recounts his own life experiences of growing up in a Dalit family in rural North India. This journeyvfrom his childhood, so, he is subjected to untouchability, social segregation and institutional discrimination. He is also denied equal treatment and is required to do degrading jobs rather than being recognised as a student at school. Stigma for caste based occupations is something he has come to know; his family are also economically deprived and socially excluded, showing how caste is influencing every aspect of his life. Despite these challenges, Valmiki's education is a form of resistance to the oppressed caste system. Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste*, on the other hand, offers an educated Dalit protagonist in a more urban context, where caste discrimination may not be as noticeable, but is always equally devastating. Valmiki's protagonist is publicly known as of a particular caste while Bagul's protagonist does not disclose his caste to get a job, social acceptance and personal dignity. But this suppression does cause a constant fear of exposure. Many factors such as conversations, job application and social interaction become a source of psychological stress as he may be rejected, humiliated or denied opportunities after being revealed as a casted individual. The protagonist's struggle is thus social and personal; he fights not only against the caste prejudice but also the emotional burden of repressing his own identity. Hence, the present paper highlights various concerns issue which reveals dilemmas of the protagonist who is not able to cop in this social structure.

Thus, the sufferings of the protagonists of both works are different and are examples of oppressions which change according to the different social realities. Omprakash Valmiki is experiencing overt discrimination, which includes untouchability, denial of education, forced labour, poverty, and human dignity. Bagul's main character faces violence in the form of identity concealment, alienation, insecurity and pressure to conform to the upper-caste. One man is suffering because his caste is made known to the outside world, and the other man is suffering because he has to conceal his caste. These stories show that the oppression of castes is not limited to physical discrimination but also reaches into the realm of psychological trauma and an identity crisis. A freedom without prejudice to caste and a equality, dignity and social justice described in the Indian Constitution, is a freedom which can only be achieved by breaking the caste prejudice and recognizing the equality in everybody. It shows that how the legal awareness makes them conscious about their own identity or recognized as human being.

The comparative study of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* demonstrates that legal consciousness in Dalit literature emerges through the lived experiences of caste oppression. While Omprakash Valmiki confronts open untouchability and institutional discrimination, Bagul's protagonist experiences the psychological burden of concealing his caste identity. Despite these different forms of oppression, both characters expose the gap between constitutional guarantees of equality and the realities of caste-based exclusion. Their struggles affirm that education, awareness of legal rights, and resistance are essential for achieving dignity and justice. Thus, these texts placed Dalit literature not only as a testimony of suffering but also as a powerful instrument for promoting constitutional morality, legal awareness, and social transformation.

In *Joothan*, Valmiki exposes the overt forms of untouchability, social segregation, educational discrimination, poverty, and humiliation experienced by Dalits. In contrast, Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* highlights the psychological and social consequences of concealing caste identity in an urban setting. Together, these works demonstrate that caste oppression can operate through both visible discrimination and hidden forms of exclusion, affecting education, employment, social relationships, dignity, and identity.

The study further establishes that education and awareness of legal rights are essential instruments in challenging oppressive social practices. The experiences represented in these texts encourage readers to understand the importance of constitutional morality, equality, human dignity, social justice, and human rights. Law therefore emerges not merely as a system of rules but as an instrument capable of empowering marginalized communities and contributing to social change.

Thus, Dalit literature provides an important space for connecting lived experience with legal awareness and Ambedkarite thought. *Joothan* and *When I Hid My Caste* transform individual experiences of humiliation and resistance into broader reflections on citizenship, justice, and equality. Their continuing relevance lies in their ability to encourage critical awareness of caste discrimination and to reaffirm the need for effective implementation of constitutional values and legal protections. The study concludes that meaningful social equality requires not only legal provisions but also education, legal consciousness, dignity, and sustained resistance to caste-based prejudice.

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Conflicts of interest
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