



Communication
Volume 3, Issue 1, Feb-Jul 2026, pp. 42-47

Beyond Silences: Reclaiming Dalit Identity Through Counter-Media In Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*

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Received on: March 16, 2026 | Accepted on: April 7, 2026 | Published on: July 15, 2026

Abstract:

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is a powerful autobiography that breaks the silence around caste- based marginalization in India. It challenges the omnipresent structures of power and knowledge reinforced by dominant discourses that show the marginalized communities invisible and deny them agency and representation. The title "Joothan" ie, leftover food itself reflects the dehumanization of marginal identities and the broader social mechanisms of control and exclusion of some groups symbolically. As an autobiographical tale of resistance, *Joothan* serves as a counter- media site where the unseen and marginalized Dalit subject contests social power, challenging the historical erasure and misinterpretation of Dalit lives in mainstream Indian media and literature. From news outlets, films to books, Dalit voices are either- silenced, stereotyped, misinterpreted, falsely presented or entirely excluded from the mainstream narratives. The work tries to define what it means 'to see' and 'to be seen', which outlines Spivak's idea of "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Visisbility itself is a function of control in accordance to Foucault's theory of power - those who dominate the discourse decide what must be seen and what must remain confined. Thus, the act of self narration by Om Prakash Valmiki becomes a form of defiance that tries to destabilize the structures that are embedded in caste hierarchies and dominant media coverage.

Keywords: #MichelFoucault #PowerKnowledge #MainstreamLiterature #MarginalLiterature #Resistance #IdentityPolitics #SubjugatedKnowledges

Introduction:

Narratives according the Oxford English Dictionary are defined as "a telling of some true or fictitious event or connected sequence of events, recounted by a narrator". A narrative may be factual where the authors recount real life events and can be fictional narratives where authors carve stories based on fictional events and experiences using their imagination and creative abilities. On the other hand, the concept of a counter- narrative can be seen as alternative or contradictory narrative which tries to set it apart from the usual established hegemony of the dominant narrative. Counter- narration is a narrative technique used to bring out the experiences, narratives and realities of those in margins. It aims to give

voice to the voiceless who through their works try to establish a place in mainstream society that has always neglected their views, silenced their expressions and experiences as an individual. They deconstruct the established position of the existing dominant narratives by addressing to the social evils they inflict or by counteracting to them. It is similar to the concept of 'self' and 'other', 'east' and 'west' where the west establish their dominance over the third-world countries. The 'West' equates to knowledge, wisdom, power, progress, civilization whereas they look down upon the marginals as savages, uncivilized and barbaric people.

Tuck and Silverman in the 'The Counter-Narrative Handbook', define counter narrative as "a message that offers a positive alternative to extremist propaganda, or alternatively aims to deconstruct or delegitimize extremist narratives" (6). According to them, counter narratives include writings:

- Focus on authenticity of representation by offering positive stories about freedom, democracy, shared cultural values.
- Highlight how the extremist groups or the hegemonic groups negatively hurt people through their activities, even those which they consider to be beneficial for the communities.
- Demonstrating the hypocritical nature of the dominant groups and how their actions always differ from they propose to do.
- They mock and satirize the dominant agendas and try to break the chain set up by them which doesn't allow people in the margins to assert their individuality.

Joothan: A Dalit's Life published first in Hindi in 1997 and later translated to English by Prabha Mukherjee in 2003 is an autobiographical account of Valmiki's birth and upbringing as a Dalit in the newly independent state of India and accounts the hardships that his community had to face. Untouchability was legally abolished on Nov 26, 1949 when India adopted the constitution. Dalits had always been under-represented. They form about 16 percent of India's population, yet fail to make their place in the social pyramid. Literary representations ignored them stating them to be "untouchables" or portrayed them as weak and voiceless. They were denied the most basic human right and were treated as low and inferior in all walks of life. In the introduction to the translation of *Joothan* into English, Prabha Mukherjee has listed ancient other names for the dalits which include; "Achut, Panchamas, Atishudras, Avarnas, Antyajas, Asparshyas, or Pariahs" (*Joothan*, 20).

The quest of Dalits from having no say of their own to form a reputed place for themselves in the society is presented through the window of counter- narration. Dalit writers try to make their place among the dominant narratives of literary analysis and dalit theory, which otherwise never gave them a platform to showcase their thoughts and realities. In his preface Valmiki writes that *Joothan* presents "experiences that did not find room in literary creations". Literary canon solely focused on the society that was privileged both in the east and west and the experiences of those in margins were neglected and repressed. The title "*Joothan*" tries to encapsulate the pain and angst that a Dalit has to undergo everyday by feeding upon the leftovers of the rich and privileged to an extent that they accept it as their fate and start associating it with their identities and start relishing the food.

Research methodology:

The paper sticks to the detailed textual analysis of *Joothan: A Dalit's life* and the use of counter- narration in the autobiography, which delineates the themes of resistance and counter resistance for a community

that was long silenced by the dogmatic rules of a dominating class of society. The study is qualitative in nature and uses the text as the primary source of data collection. Other articles, books, research papers, journals have also been read as cited which function as a secondary theoretical base to the study.

Subject analysis:

In her paper “*Joothan: A Dalit's Life: The Magical Transformation of Muteness into Voice*”, Anjali Mohan writes that Valmiki's autobiography is a medium of showing his outrage to all that he had to endure as a lower caste human being. She says, “*Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is an autobiography of the untouchable by the untouchable and yet not merely for the untouchable but for everyone's reading”. Banerjee in her paper titled “Resistance and Counter-Resistance in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life: A case Study*” writes that Omprakash writes to show his resistance against the ‘deprive and exploit’ policy the dominant groups of the society. According to Marx, ‘Educational Institutions’ function as ideological state apparatus, where the institutes convince the people to accept whatever is being preached by them. Just as in Omprakash's school, the institution tries to keep the Dalits away from getting education and tries to make it the accepted ideology among all the people by presenting it as a desirable idea or a good cause. Therefore, people do not question such institutions and start accepting the reality and live within that constructed reality willingly. The children are seen fighting against prejudices such as:

- Beating on slightest occasion.
- Condemning the Dalit students by putting false allegations on them, like stealing or littering in the campus.
- Forcing them to perform physical works like sweeping, cleaning the latrines etc; all such works which were since birth giving to them only because they were born into lower caste families.
- They were given less marks even though they performed good in the examinations only because of the belief that how can they outweigh any Brahmin mind
- Criticize any government reservation policy in public to make them feel inferior. (Banerjee, 5)

Joothan: A Dalit's Life begins with the description of the surroundings of the ‘Chuhra’ community. The people had to live with poor sanitation facilities and least supplies. They worked for the Tagas (abbreviation for Tyagi) in every sphere such as agricultural work, home, general labour but still were exploited badly at their hands and failed to fetch even two meals a day. Even if they were underpaid or not paid at all, nobody could refuse any work given by the Tagas. Such was the plight of the chuhra community that people considered touching stray dogs and others animals purer than touching any chuhra. They were not treated as humans but simply objects that could be traded, sold and used by the powerful people until they were thrown when they became useless.

Valmiki's school education was full of torment and struggle. Even though the education policy changed with Independence, the svarana system of keeping the lower caste children from getting educated still persisted (Banerjee, 5). While all the other children sat on benches or chairs, he had to sit on the bare floor far away from everyone in class. The children would tease him calling him “chuhre ka”, and also beat him for no reason. Not only the boys but the teachers also punished him unnecessarily. There were many other instances where children from his community had to face humiliation as Valmiki writes:

“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, 55)

India is clutched by the social evil of casteism since the time of Gods. Caste hierarchy assigns occupations and social-status based on an individual's birth rather on their interest or ability to perform in life. This leads to the formation of a bridge between the higher caste born children and the lower caste born children, as the upper castes enjoy unearned privileges just by being born to dignified families, whereas the lower casts have to undergo exploitation and discrimination all through their lives. In *A Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, Valmiki had to face caste discrimination in school where the teachers gave him the work of sweeping the floors, as according to the stereotype education was the sore privilege of a Brahmin boy and not a Dalit.

“Chuhre ka?” the headmaster threw his second question at me.

“Ji.”

“All right . See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation.” (Joothan, 56)

There is another instance where a lady astonishes over a Chuhra boy getting education when she retorts in public:

“The Chuhras’ progeny also study in the school?” She said in surprise. “Howsoever much you study, you will still remain a Chuhra.” (Joothan, 89)

So while all the students sat in class and took lessons, Valmiki had to sweep floors, playgrounds and the entire school. There were days when he was asked by the headmaster to seep for the entire day. This would exhaust but nobody cared as sweeping was considered to be work of a Dalit. Due to the constraints that the lower caste communities have in regard to their profession, they are forced to accept whatever work is provided to them at extremely low wages and otherwise unacceptable working conditions. Some are even unpaid or overworked by the dominating class. Similar conditions constitute the lives of the chuhra community in *Joothan*, who worked at the fields of Tagas at the time of harvesting. Even though they worked in the scorching heat of the sun for long hours in the field, they were paid poorly. For wages “they got one sheaf for cutting twenty one sheaves. One sheaf was less than a kilo of grain”. (Joothan, 60) Moreover, they were served leftover rotis (Joothan) at the houses of the rich Tagas they worked for.

The plight of hunger and the sight of relishing the leftover food by the Dalits has been described by Valmiki in the text. Whenever there was a wedding, the chuhras would sit outside with their baskets and after the guests in the wedding would leave, the dirty “pattals”/ leaf plates with some leftovers was put into the basket of the chuhras who readily accepted them as they could not fetch one meal a day. They would also save leftover *pooris* and dried them so that they could preserve them for rainy season. They were later soaked in water and boiled for eating.

“The little remnants of *pooris*, puffed bread; bits of sweetmeats; and a little bit of vegetable were enough to make them happy. They ate the *joothan* with a lot of relish. They denounced as gluttons the bridegroom’s guests who didn’t leave enough scraps on their leaf plates. Poor things, they had never enjoyed a wedding feast. So they had licked it all up”. (Joothan, 61)

They had to live without food for days in conditions of bad weather. They survived by having “*mar*” and “*bagar*”. A little rice was cooked with water filled upto the brim of the container and that water given to the children who relished it more than milk. *Bagar* was the final flouring of mixed that was added over to the pot containing rice water. So, the Dalits and their basti had to face so many problems. Even though

their houses collapsed in heavy pouring rains, they got no help or subsidy from the government and had to build and re-build on their own with the very least of the resources they had at their hands.

Omprakash Valmiki also exposed the hollowness of the Hindu beliefs. As long as people were unaware of the caste, everything was the same. Just as in Birajpal's house, Valmiki and his friend Bhikuram were treated in a very hospitable manner only until they found out about their caste that they threw them out of the house. Also, in Maharashtra, Valmiki was invited to the house of Kulkarni's and was surprised to see the clutches of caste division bounding a big metropolitan city too. He learnt that they don't let Mahars touch their dishes and hence served them in different utensils as whatever they touched became impure for a Brahmin. He writes:

"I find it difficult to survive in such stifling environments, where everything seems false. I did not hide my inner torment from Patil, who tried to talk me out of it. "The entire value system of the Brahmins is based on lies and deception".

Conclusion:

Dalit literary movement emerged to voice the suppressed voices of the Dalits, whose histories were not known to world. In his own book in Hindi on Dalit aesthetics Valmiki writes: "The Dalit literary movement is not just a literary movement. It is also a cultural and social movement. Dalit society has been imprisoned for a thousand years in the dark mist of ignorance, deprived of knowledge. Dalit literature is the portrayal of the wishes and aspirations of these oppressed and tormented Dalits". The Dalit experiences in Dalit literature try to subvert the narratives that dominate the mainstream literature. They show the ominous effects of caste discrimination, social ostracism, economic disparity, untouchability and how they are often neglected and silenced from the hegemonic caste narratives. Their writings seek to establish Dalit identity and celebrate Dalit culture, folklore and customs. Inspired by B. R Ambedkar's call to – "educate, agitate, organize", Dalit literature reclaims Dalit identity, dignity and humanity against caste- imposed inferiority. (Pote, 2)

Writing an autobiography serves as an act of defiance that challenges the dominant narratives in literature which otherwise mock away the marginal literature. Dalit autobiographies are not simply "atma- vita" (self- reporting), but they capture the pain and angst that the Dalits had to encounter in their day to day lives and which in turn through a personal narration reaches the hearts of the reader and arouse a passion for change and resistance. Dalit writings demand equal rights for the downtrodden people who are pushed away from seeking individual representation, voicing exclusion and respect in society and at the same time urges the non- Dalits to liberalize their opinions and support systemic change for equality in society. *Joothan* can be seen as a narrative of resistance, where Valmiki and all the others that he represents as a society question the rigidity of the caste inequality. He makes a vehement protest against the hegemony of the orthodox Hindus and urges the Dalits to make their own histories filled with pride and awe in their birth. He writes:

"change won't come about through running away. It will come about through struggle and engagement" (Joothan, 197).

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