

Education: A Trajectory Towards Illumination and Identity

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Abstract

Although sooner or later everyone apprehends the significance of education and being educated. However, only some people understand how education upholds in shaping a strong character. Books make a way to meet such people who motivate us and exhibit the importance of education by their own attainments. In the same way, I came across the two authors Om Prakash Valmiki and P. Sivakami. The duo has set examples of the power of education. Both the personalities began with a race against time and nailed it in the field of education. Valmiki's autobiography 'Joothan' has been proved a milestone in Dalit Literature where he overtly keeps his heart out and poses the harsh questions in front of society. By setting an example, Om Prakash Valmiki convincingly recounts the profound importance of education. He successfully rolls out a full canvass of different experiences which life unraveled before him. Among dull and drab colors of life undoubtedly he leaves a beautiful color of education and an indelible mark on readers' psychology that despite an array of hardships in one's life, one must make a sincere endeavor to attain education as education bestows power. P. Sivakami's semi autobiographical novel *The Grip of Change*, is a bildungsroman of Gowri's social and educational journey. Through Gowri, P. Sivakami embarked on the journey of receiving education and set an example that education is an asset, that you earn by your own efforts and none can snatch it from you. Through the novel we see the power of education and how an eleven year old girl developed into a confident and independent lady by sheer power of education. Both authors rouse a passion for education through their own accomplishments.

Keywords: Education, P. Sivakami, Omprakash Valmiki, Power, Character.

Omprakash Valmiki and P. Sivakami, both are prominent figures in literature, especially in Dalit literature. Both authors have carved a niche in society for themselves only after a long struggle. It would not be an exaggeration if we say that education is their identity and they walked on this path with great difficulty. Omprakash Valmiki was born on 30 June 1950 in Barla, Muzzaffarnagar. His autobiography 'Joothan' is a journey from his childhood to end of his life and through that journey we find out how people struggle for getting education and emerge like a phoenix. His autobiography is a testimony of his life and struggle. Valmiki had a yearning for education which was aroused by his parents as well. His father went pillar to post to make him educated. A Christian teacher Sewakram Masihi used to come to basti to teach the students. But after an altercation with him, Valmiki's father refrained from teaching him. And after this, he went to his village

school teacher Rambhool Tyagi and pleaded with him to admit his son in school. Valmiki's father kept going to school, until he was admitted by the teacher.

He authored his autobiography 'Joothan' where he shares his life journey with readers and through that journey the reader discovered how people struggle for education. The book was translated into English by Aruna Prabha Mukherjee. 'Joothan' is a powerful narration of his resilience, indomitable spirit, and unwavering commitment to social justice, equality and dignity. Besides 'Joothan' he has also published three collections of poetry titled 'Sadiyon Ka Santap' (1989), 'Bas! Bahut ho Chuka' (1997), 'Ab Aur Nahi' (2009), and two anthologies of short stories, 'Salaam' (2000) and 'Ghuspaithiye' (2004). He also written a history of Valmiki Community, 'Safai Devata' (2009). His book 'Dalit Sahitya ka Saundarya Shastra' (2001) offers an insightful examination of literary aesthetics in the context of literary criticism on Dalit writings.

'Joothan' is a strong documentation of the journey of a poor, miserable and disgraced life of an untouchable from a shy and embarrassed childhood to a sensible and prudent person, who made his identity as a writer and a social critic. The story accounts for life in independent India, in the borders of Uttar Pradesh. This is the saga of Omprakash Valmiki and people of his community who met the undeserved treatment for eons. He confronts this discrimination in an assertive tone. The struggle faced by Valmiki during his formative years makes him stronger to progress towards better condition in future. The author's discovery of the new vistas of life enables many sufferers to think anew about oppression and education.

Omprakash Valmiki was the youngest child of all the five children of Chhotan Lal and Mukundi. He was the only child who had the privilege to go to school but it did not come easily to his way. Although he got admission at his father's earnest request to the headmaster. But deep down institutions were reluctant to impart the education to a Dalit boy. Not only the teachers, even the minds of upper caste students were full of discrimination. Omprakash Valmiki was a bright student from the outset, but all kinds of dirty traps were laid down to throw him out of school. Despite being a meritorious student, he was given less marks than others and was kept away from extracurricular activities. A place which was meant to give him a better life, made him inferior, introverted and irritable. His caste tag 'Chuhra' was enough to make him a victim of all sorts of brutal acts. Although Valmiki's life was surrounded by all types of discrimination and oppressions, he went on treading the path of his development through education. In Dehradun he used to go to attend an early morning class by cycle. He shared this experience how only a handful of students would attend that first class in college. Valmiki had an intense desire to receive education as he knew that for people like him only education could bring some relief. The importance of education which made him capable to realize his capabilities and combat against unfavorable circumstances. This was the power of education that made him question his teachers. In fact, once a Tyagi teacher was literally teared up while telling the story from the Mahabharata and mentioned how Ashwatthama was given flour by mixing water, instead of milk, because of poverty. Valmiki dared to question that, "what about us who had to drink mar (boiled rice water)? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't an epic poet even write a word on our lives?" So this courage to question the so-called "authority" and voice out the contemporary scenario, to attract their attention came only through education. Education gave him the capabilities to see the Mahabharata from a subaltern view or the incident where Dronacharya tricked his low caste disciple Eklavya into amputating his thumb and presenting it as part of his Guru Dakshina. Although upper caste presents a casteless Eklavya as the exemplar of an obedient disciple but never shows the Brahmin Dronacharya as a perfidious and biased

teacher. Subaltern views this act as an assurance by Dronacharya that Eklavya, the better student of archery, could never compete against Arjuna, the Kshatriya disciple. By showing his father's ability to deconstruct the story as it was his father's temerity to call the teacher 'Dronacharya', when the school teacher made Valmiki to sweep the entire compound of school because of his caste. Valmiki portrays Dalit as articulate subjects who have seen through the cherished myths of their oppressor. Omprakash Valmiki saw all the drab and dirty colours of life as a child and a grown up boy. His community used to reside in a filthy state of surroundings during his childhood. Poverty, hunger, and unhygienic conditions worsened in and around the homes especially during the rainy season. All these circumstances were making him thoughtful about the reason behind this situation of his community. And only the answer of every question led him to the path of education that is rough and thorny for the people like him because when there was no money to tide over for two meals, procurement of fees for study was out of the question. But his determination for getting education made a way for him. Undoubtedly, even an illiterate person understands the significance of education. This is why his parents were always bent on that in any condition Valmiki can complete his education.

Seeing Valmiki's unshakable interest in studies, even his sister-in-law once offered her anklets so that his fees could be given. What happened was that Valmiki could not take admission due to a wretched financial situation in sixth class. But it deeply saddened him. One day when one of his friends asked him the reason, he could not answer. But at home he started to cry bitterly. This made his mother also cry. The pain was unbearable. Seeing all this, Valmiki's sister-in-law took out her anklets to her mother-in-law and said sell these and admit Lala ji (Valmiki) in school. Although everyone in the family tried to dissuade her. But she put the anklets in her mother-in-law's hands. Although this might be a trivial incident. These small incidents which Omprakash Valmiki came across time and again shaped up his character and provided impetus for work harder. This was the sacrifice of his family and hardships of life when the other boys of his basti were busy in playing and pastime, Omprakash Valmiki was delving deep into the books by Saratchandra, Premchand, Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru, Vivekanand and other such personalities. Through their ideas, he was trying to expand the panorama of his thinking. The more he read, the more introverted he became. He sought refuge in the characters of short stories and novels. Through the study of these books, one thing became explicit to him that these books do not represent the character of lower caste people. Their suffering was a far cry which was unheard. This was the key reason that he penned down his autobiography and several other books because he knew that written work leaves a permanent mark.

Albert Einstein said, "Education is not learning of acts, but the training of mind to think." Omprakash Valmiki was following this path. For him education should be an agent of social change and it should allow its citizens to participate equally in the building up of the democracy. It is the education that made him criticize his own community for superstitions and raise questions against the rituals which he found impertinent or illogical. He was upset with the ritual of 'Salaam' (a tradition in which the bride and groom of the Chuhra community used to go to upper caste people to get something as gifts from them). In 'Salaam' or begging ritual, they had to face taunts too, like, the stomachs of these 'Chuhra's are never filled. Omprakash Valmiki finds this ritual as promoting inferiority complex among Dalits and he vents out his anger to his father, "is it necessary to go out for Salaam. The bridegroom goes door to door at his own wedding. It is awful. The bridegrooms of higher caste don't have to do that. This bride will also go door to door after she arrives in Barla." To which his father responds, "Munshiji, sending you to school has been a success. I too have understood your point.

We will now break this custom.” Education made Omprakash question and break this custom at least in his house. His father also supported him and frankly said, “Whoever wants to give anything must come here and give.”

Education made him voice against all kinds of superstitions. He used to stand away from worship. Even he went against his own family against these superstitions. He downright turned down the ritual of sacrificing a pig in his marriage. As he comprehended ‘To bring the change, be the change’ and so he decided not to support such misconception. His rationality towards religion came only through education. Otherwise he might also have blindly followed all rituals and religious activities. Valmiki used to question almost everything which he found irrational. Education gave him a perspective which forced him to distinguish between right and wrong. As in autobiography he asked, “Why one had to be a Hindu in order to be a good human being? Why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak? Why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits?”

However, Valmiki criticised his community for all the superstitions but if he found something worthy of praise he praised. As he appreciated widow remarriage. Omprakash Valmiki tells how their family betrothed his widowed sister-in-law to Jasbir, the brother who was next in the line to Sukhbir. Omprakash’ pain and concern for a prostitute at the young age of twelve exhibits his human side and sensitivity that he could not comment badly upon a female’s body and her profession. But rather he was crestfallen and infuriated over the condition that has led her to choose such a degraded profession and over men of elite class or the saviors of our country. Valmiki’s rage against all of this was the product of education because the illiterate boys of his age were busy in either marriage or playing with a female’s body.

Even after so much struggle, Omprakash was the boy in his community to pass High School. He cleared competitive exams and finally got admitted to Ordnance Factory Training Institute, Bombay. This gave him a lot of exposure to literature, theatre and various cultural activities and culture. His friend, Hemlal introduced him to Dr. Ambedkar’s autobiography and other works. Ambedkar’s rage and resilience against caste oppression resonated deeply with Valmiki, and made him reflect on his own experiences. It was a watershed in his life where he grasped the significance of being politically involved in order to effect systematic change. He commenced writing plays and stories.

Omprakash Valmiki’s life-journey clearly proved the words of Nelson Mandela, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” And not only his own but others lives too he tried to change in his community as some other children also started to go to school. When Valmiki passed his High School with first division a Tyagi, named Chamanlal arrived at his home and congratulated him. It was the first time when a Tyagi came to a Cuhra home. To Valmiki’s astonishment, he took him home and fed him from his own dishes. In those times it was an exceptionally nice gesture that shows people who know the importance of education, regard the knowledge. Education bestowed upon Omprakash Valmiki the blessings of respect. This is the power of education only that today we are reading him and trying to sensitise ourselves and others. Had he not been educated, he could not write and a face of society might be left unseen for us. Education is powerful in all its forms whether silent or spoken.

P. Sivakami, an Indian Dalit Feminist author was born on 30 November 1957 in Tamilnadu. Formerly, she was an IAS officer but it was her education and experience that made her resign in 2009. Sivakami wanted to abound in her own sense. So she chose writing and social media to voice her thoughts and became a full

time author and social activist. Originally she writes in Tamil. However, after a few works she translated them into English herself. Being a prominent Dalit author, she voiced her opinion on contemporary social and political issues. P. Sivakami penned down six novels and more than sixty short stories. On many media platforms she is very active. P. Sivakami is the first Tamil Dalit woman who authored a novel Pazhiyana Kazhiyana in 1989. Later on the novel was translated into English by the author herself in 2006 as The Grip of Change. It is a semi autobiographical novel where the author portrays herself as Gowri, a girl from lower caste and her journey of education and becoming independent. Through the character of Gowri readers can grasp how was the life of the author? She belongs to the so called lower caste Like Omprakash Valmiki and faced discrimination. She depicts likewise conditions of her in the novel The Grip of Change. As in the novel Gowri is the only person in her family who embarks on the path of education. Not only that, Gowri is a very bright student and clearly comprehends the significance of education. Readers notice this from the very beginning. Being a girl she has to struggle is more. Many Times her struggle suddenly reminds us of Omprakash Valmiki.

Gowri apprehends the significance of being educated. From her childhood she deeply understands the significance of studies. Moreover, unfavorable household conditions make her realise that illiteracy gives birth to many other problems which may be avoided. Her father's patriarchal treatment and second wife displays that he has no fear of anything. Gowri's mother has no say in any matter. All this makes Gowri to educate herself. Therefore, she was very anxious when her father laid a condition that if she does not pass high school exams, she would be married to the person of her father's choice. Gowri put all her efforts to pass the exams and became very glad when she passed with flying colours. Her talent and deep interest for study is not hidden from anyone. Even her father who always displayed his anger and annoyance to Gowri, smiles and feels glad about her daughter's talent. Time and again she takes the opportunity to exhibit her talent to her father. Once when her father asked to pen down a letter for the police inspector, she replaced the outdated and local words to more sophisticated and polite words like 'late' with 'deceased'. Kathamuthu smiled at her daughter's intelligence and presence of mind and thought, 'She's smart. She'll survive,' he thought to himself approvingly and felt happy and proud.

Education was giving Gowri the ethics of right and wrong. Although she is young, her grasping power is very strong. Once when Kathamuthu offers alcohol to his two wives and Thangam (woman protagonist, whom Kathamuthu is helping in a court case. Being a childless widow, currently she is staying at Kathamuthu's home). He made his two wives sleep in another room. Thangam was intoxicated and nearly in an unconscious state, was sleeping in the kitchen as she had consumed alcohol for the first time. Kathamuthu bolts Gowri's room from outside as he thinks that she is sleeping. He entered the kitchen and forced himself upon Thangam. Although she resists his effort and says, 'You are like a brother to me ...a brother....' When he left the kitchen, Gowri rattled the door. With an uneasiness Kathamuthu unbolted the door. Silently, Gowri walked into the kitchen. She noticed that Thangam was not sleeping but only under the influence of alcohol. Gowri shouted, "Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs!" Then she went back to her room and started weeping as she knows what is happening in her house and how her father is accountable for all problems that pop up in the family. His treatment with all the women of home made Gowri deeply discontented. Circumstances at home and the treatment women get at home made Gowri mature at a young age and she looks for the solution and consolation in her books. Usually, she is seen with her books. She hardly converse

with anyone at home. Even her behaviour was indifferent as she was under immense burden of her father's threat. Whenever someone visited the home in the evening Kathamuthu repeated his statement to them, "That donkey of ours will go to college if she passes her exams, otherwise let her get married." Even her father found a boy for her on the condition that if Gowri fails the exam he would marry her on the next auspicious date. Despite being a man Omrakash Valmiki was unable to convince his parents to get married late; it is quite comprehensible that being a girl and that too in a poor backward caste, for Gowri tying the knot with a boy of her father's choice was unavoidable. Fear of marriage kept always lingering on her mind. She understood her father married twice and in preparation for the third just because the women of the house are uneducated. All women were under her father's thumb. And Gowri does not want to meet the same fate. But her hard work finally paid off. She passed the exams with flying colours and the day had come to leave for college. Education breached the gap. She blended among the many intelligent and attractive young women in the college. Gowri was poor and from a lower caste. But her hard work brought her to a place where she could shape up her future in a better way. She used to think, "During floods, water from overflowing wells mingle with the waters of huge water bodies.....she had crossed over human made boundaries- her father, her caste and her village - and merged with the ocean of people." Although she could not do away with caste barriers completely. Time and again someone or something reminded her of the status of being a Dalit. Whenever an announcement was made in class to collect scholarship applications for scheduled castes as the money had arrived, Gowri felt as if her body was shrinking in humiliation. One day when a girl from backward caste made a remark upon Gowri of being an SC and said, 'Nonsense! I am a Vanniyakula Kshatriya.' But Gowri confronts the girl with the same fortitude and argues with her, 'If you are not from a Scheduled caste, just say so! Why do you have to prefix 'nonsense'?' But this incident made her realise that unconsciously, she has learnt to argue and she can give a fitting reply. Stature that education gave her none can snatch away. And her knowledge gave her voice to speak against wrong. Her knowledge does not reflect only in her voice, body language but in her appearance also.

In her cousin Chandran's marriage, Gowri dressed herself in a way which enhanced her beauty. Her beauty made people have a second look at her. 'Perhaps a little too attractive and well dressed for Puliur cheri.' This was the outcome of her education which gave her the opportunity to live in a hostel and the girls from diverse places, backgrounds and culture. Her confidence was boosted up which was manifested in her appearance. Even after reaching the age of thirty one, Gowri continued his studying, had done research, received a doctorate and was now teaching. She was bent on and downright turned down to marry. Kathamuthu was like a defanged snake. Whenever he tried to force Gowri, she silenced him with her curt answers. She said, "The sufferings which my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man.....Moreover, I need a father who can respect his son-in-law." This Gowri was no longer the Gowri who would be scared to stand in front of her father and hid her plait filled with flowers and rushed to school lest she wouldn't be caught by her father. Now she was earning her living. In proportion to her independence her self confidence had also grown. She made efforts to make aware her mother Kangavalli and step mother Nagamani with her arguments about women liberation. However, only a slight impact made it on them. As for them it is too late and life has already been shaped up for them. Although both are happy for Gowri, as she makes them feel proud.

The novel is a bildungsroman of Gowri's life where we see her growing not only physically but mentally and intellectually also. In the first section of the novel Gowri almost hates her father. She thinks that only he is the bone of contention and always remains bitter towards him. Sometimes her childish behavior makes her do unwise actions. Like the one when she bit her elder uncle's hand. She gets irritated very easily but one act which is constant is her passion for studies and that manifested in developed character as an IAS. In the second section of the novel she thinks over again her past incidents and steps taken by her. She becomes more objective and recounts some incidents about her father also. Wrong or right she does not decide. Rather, she leaves the decision to the readers. P. Sivakami has carved her own niche and is standing far away from the crowd of common people like a lighthouse.

To conclude, we can say that for us whether it is Omprakash Valmiki or P. Sivakami both are distinguished people in their realm. They could also be lost in the web of poverty, caste and conventions of their community. But once kept forward their feet on the trajectory of education they never saw behind. If Omprakash Valmiki raised the important issues of caste discrimination, oppression of dalits, reasons behind the backwardness of his community and so on; P. Sivakami brought into the focus the issues like gender relations among castes in Tamil Nadu; between the dominant castes and Dalits, as well as amongst the Dalit communities, she played a significant role of extension work among tribal communities and marginalized groups. Moreover, she takes a feminist stand within caste and outside the caste by remaining active on social media and through pen and paper. She set a precedent for the women of her family and community. Theirs is the journey of adversity, discrimination and along with that a journey of inspiration and making way for coming generation.

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