

The Marginal Subjects: Exploring the Relationship Between Space and Identity

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Abstract:

Life narratives often portray the undocumented realities of human experiences interlinked with various socio-cultural identifications. This paper delves into the relationship between space and identity for a lower caste/class Dalit self as represented in Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003). The narrative portrays the plight of a poor untouchable boy from a village in Uttar Pradesh into a successful, educated, professional man living in suburban Mumbai. Regardless of the special shift, his journey notes constant encounters with caste discrimination and marginalization. The narrative highlights the complex relationship between identity and space and how it plays an innate role in the protagonist's phenomenological experiences. Stuart Hall suggests that identity is multilayered and rather than an accomplished fact, identity production is an ongoing process, changing with new cultural practices (Cultural Identity 222). Identity, thus remains closely interconnected with sociocultural ideas; the notions of power; and existing frameworks of real and imagined communities. Hence, the paper attempts to analyze the complex relationship between 'space' and 'identity' in the context of caste experiences portrayed in *Joothan*.

Keywords: Space, Identity, Caste, Dalit, Self

A close reading of Dalit autobiographies puts light on the problematic social system of caste and its organized systemic practice in the Indian society. The centuries-old social practice discriminated against a group of people; denied any human recognition; and was considered untouchable based on the religiously sanctioned concepts of purity. Valmiki's autobiographical narrative became a seminal text in not only Dalit studies but also in Indian literature with its depiction of lived realities of caste in post-independent India. Valmiki belonged to the untouchable Dalit community of Chuhras, who survived by collecting and consuming leftover food (joothan) from upper-caste houses. *Joothan* opens with a clear pictorial representation of the village's setting, noting the specific demarcation of imaginary boundaries drawn and practiced over decades. It also highlights how the social spaces securely keep the othering of Dalits from the rest of the communities. As the text begins, Valmiki describes his home, which is positioned close to the cattle shed of upper caste Tagas. He adds, "Right in front of the cattle shed was a little pond that had created a sort of partition between the Chuhras' dwellings and the village" (1). Upper-caste Tagas and lower-caste Chuhras lived on either side of the pond keeping the practice of untouchability for generations. The imaginary boundaries indicate the connection between space and caste identity in the setting of the village.

This further goes on when Valmiki joins the school as a young boy, he is ordered to sit separately from the upper-caste students in the class. He “was not allowed to sit on a chair or a bench” like other students but “had to sit on a bare floor” (3). Instead of treating all students equally, clear discrimination based on caste identity can be traced from such actions. In addition, until the period of Indian independence, lower castes were not only denied education but prohibited from entering into academic institutions. Even the ancient Hindu religious texts noted that if any lower-caste people happened to hear Vedas, they should be punished by pouring melted metal into their ears. From this socio-historical background, the newly independent India’s lower-castes’ entry into the academic space became unbearable for the upper-caste authorities. Valmiki’s teacher forces him to clean the entire school while others study inside the classroom, frequently punishes Dalit students for wearing good clothes or denying them common drinking water facilities at school can be read as an extension of the historical practice of untouchability. It is usually maintained in confined spaces within the village but as the first-generation learners from lower castes enter the academic space it disturbs the existing order of caste superiority. Foucault’s discourse on the relationship between knowledge and power becomes important here in this context. Besides, identities are constructed in relation to the separation from others. Here, dominance over the other is determined through occupying a particular space and denying it to others.

This demarcation further points to the power position within the society. The upper caste’s superiority is maintained through the relationship between spaces as they possess the power to decide where a lower caste member should be entered. Edward Said on the analysis of the dichotomy between the colonizer and colonized suggests that the identity of the colonized is constantly devalued to maintain the superior space of the colonizer. Echoing a similar notion in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson note, “spaces have always been hierarchically interconnected, instead of naturally disconnected” and fixed identities are created through hierarchical power relations to that of space (35). Cultural identities attributed to communities are deeply interconnected to the social space.

The construction of identity seen as a process of identification [which] is a process of cultural space awareness. This process leads to the creation of symbolic spaces rather than the adoption of an existing one. Identity is not acquired only by identifying with groups of individuals who share the same beliefs, but by use of apparent, expressive and integrated performative repertoires (Constantinescu 81-82).

In *Joothan* Valmiki depicts the spaces unattained by the lower caste communities at various points of the narration. Such experience from childhood impacts the protagonist’s sense of self profoundly. He writes, “When I think about all those things today, thorns begin to prick my heart... I feel nauseated” (11). Identity can be read as an extension of the sense of belonging, an identification of socio-cultural assumptions.

Academic space in the narrative constantly denies the sense of belonging due to the lower caste identity. Valmiki constantly struggles to survive in a place where he is rejected and humiliated. The power structure allowed lower castes to continue menial jobs, cleaning excretions, and removing leftover food or work in the fields. The clear boundaries of where a lower caste should enter and not are evident in the division of labor practiced in society. Thus, when Valmiki and other children started education, it opposed their presence in the academic space and makes un-survivable for them. The collective identity is formed among

the lower and upper caste groups in terms of the social practices and spaces they possess. The collective upper caste community denies lower castes entry into the schools. The teachers' unreasonable punishments, fellow students' torture, and villagers' taunting can be read as their disagreement towards the act of educating lower caste students. Indian academia until then preserved for upper castes and academic achievement opened a path for the lower caste to break the chain of generation's dependence on upper caste land owners. Educated lower castes thus potentially challenged the power and caste hierarchy enjoyed by the upper castes in the village. Analyzing Lefebvre's idea of space, Edward Soga suggests that ideologies are linked to space. He quotes "Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics... Space has been shaped and molded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies" (80). Here, in *Joothan* caste ideology and hierarchy are preserved through the special boundaries possessed by each group. Lower caste's entry to spaces that are not historically allowed to them could violate the ideology of caste and upsurge the power structure altogether. Hence, space plays a fundamental role in the social hierarchy and functioning of society.

The text further notes Valmiki's shift from the space of the village to suburban Mumbai. But even after being an educated financially independent professional, the revelation of caste identity leads him to experiences of humiliation and discrimination similar to the village. However, the city space provides him an opportunity to break the boundaries that existed back at home and live the life of a modern Indian to an extent. The narrative brilliantly portrays the problematic caste identity and its complex relationship with space. In addition, it also highlights the system of caste and ideology of untouchability remains in the Indian social practice irrespective of spatial or temporal changes.

Work Cited

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