

FROM ABJECTION TO ASSERTION: CASTE, BIOPOLITICS, AND SUBALTERN
RESISTANCE IN OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S *JOOOTHAN*

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Abstract

This paper re-examines Joothan: A Dalit's Life by Omprakash Valmiki through an interdisciplinary framework that integrates Ambedkarite thought, Foucauldian biopolitics, and Subaltern Studies. Moving beyond dominant critical approaches that privilege testimonial realism and identity formation, the study proposes that Joothan may be more productively understood as a biopolitical archive of caste. Within this framework, caste power operates through the regulation of bodies, labour, food practices, and spatial organization.

Through qualitative textual analysis, the paper demonstrates that routine practices—such as the circulation of “joothan,” caste-assigned labour, exclusion within educational institutions, and spatial segregation—function as normalized techniques that reproduce hierarchical order. Simultaneously, the narrative foregrounds forms of resistance emerging through refusal, acts of memory, access to education, and self-representation.

By emphasizing the micro-dynamics of caste power, the study reorients critical attention from identity to regulation, and from testimony to embodied governance. It argues that Joothan transforms lived experience into a form of collective counter-history, thereby reimagining literature as a site of epistemic resistance and political intervention.

Keywords: Dalit autobiography; caste oppression; biopolitics; subaltern resistance; memory and marginality; Omprakash Valmiki

Introduction

The emergence of Dalit writing in modern India has profoundly reshaped literary discourse by foregrounding voices historically excluded from dominant cultural and epistemic

frameworks. Within this transformative corpus, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* by Omprakash Valmiki occupies a central position. Rather than merely recounting an individual life, the text reconstructs a social reality structured by caste-based discrimination and sustained through everyday practices of exclusion and marginalization.

What distinguishes *Joothan* from conventional autobiographies is its resistance to a linear or celebratory narrative of selfhood. Instead, the text unfolds through fragmented, episodic recollections that foreground rupture, discontinuity, and struggle rather than coherence or resolution. These fragments collectively reveal the enduring force of caste as a system shaping not only social relations but also subjectivity and self-perception.

The title itself provides a crucial interpretive entry point. The term “joothan,” referring to leftover food, encapsulates both material deprivation and symbolic degradation. It signifies the structural relegation of Dalit communities to conditions of enforced scarcity, where survival is tied to what is discarded by others. Simultaneously, it reflects the internalization of caste hierarchies that assign value through the idioms of purity and pollution.

Critical scholarship on Dalit autobiographies has expanded significantly, emphasizing lived experience as a mode of knowledge production. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege interpret Dalit narratives as “testimonios” that challenge upper-caste epistemic dominance by foregrounding embodied experience and collective memory. Similarly, Gopal Guru underscores the importance of Dalit voice as an articulation of both humiliation and dignity, positioning experience itself as a critical epistemological category. These approaches have been instrumental in recognizing texts like *Joothan* as sites of resistance and assertion.

At the same time, postcolonial interventions—particularly those associated with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—raise important questions regarding the conditions under which subaltern voices can be represented and recognized, highlighting the structural constraints shaping both narration and reception.

Despite these advances, much of the existing scholarship continues to privilege questions of identity, authenticity, and representation. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the ways in which *Joothan* documents caste as a system of everyday regulation. The text reveals how power operates not only ideologically but through the governance of bodies, labour, food, and space—what may be understood as a biopolitical regime of caste.

Addressing this gap, the present study reads *Joothan* through an integrated theoretical framework drawing on B. R. Ambedkar, Michel Foucault, and Subaltern Studies. This approach enables an analysis of caste as simultaneously structural, embodied, and epistemic. It demonstrates that the narrative not only exposes mechanisms of domination but also articulates modes of resistance that unsettle their legitimacy.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework combining the insights of B. R. Ambedkar, Michel Foucault, and the Subaltern Studies Collective to conceptualize caste as a complex system of power operating across structural, embodied, and epistemic dimensions.

Ambedkar's analysis of caste as a system of graded inequality provides a foundational lens for understanding the social world represented in *Joothan*. Caste operates not as a binary but as a layered hierarchy sustained through religious sanction, social custom, and institutional practice, ensuring the reproduction of inequality across generations. His emphasis on dignity, education, and self-respect offers a critical framework for interpreting resistance within the text.

Foucault's concept of biopower complements this perspective by shifting attention to the regulation of everyday life. Biopower refers to the management of bodies, populations, and practices through mechanisms of discipline and normalization. Within caste society, such regulation becomes visible in practices governing food, labour, spatial organization, and social interaction. Institutions such as schools emerge as sites of surveillance and normalization, shaping subjectivity while reproducing hierarchy.

The Subaltern Studies framework introduces a historiographical dimension by emphasizing the recovery of marginalized voices excluded from dominant narratives. By foregrounding subaltern agency and knowledge, it enables a reading of *Joothan* as a form of counter-history grounded in lived experience.

Taken together, these frameworks reconceptualize caste as a biopolitical regime operating through structural hierarchy (Ambedkar), everyday regulation (Foucault), and epistemic marginalization (Subaltern Studies).

Ambedkarite Perspective: Structural Inequality and the Quest for Dignity

Drawing on B. R. Ambedkar, this section examines how hierarchical relations are normalized and reproduced within *Joothan*. The narrative depicts a social landscape structured by deeply embedded inequalities regulating access to resources, mobility, and recognition. Experiences of humiliation within educational institutions—such as segregated seating or enforced menial labour—demonstrate how caste hierarchy is reproduced through routine practices. These are not aberrations but integral mechanisms sustaining systemic inequality.

At the same time, the narrative traces the emergence of critical consciousness. Acts of defiance—questioning authority, resisting humiliation, and pursuing education—mark a transition from passive endurance to active assertion. Education, though constrained by caste hostility, becomes a site of both struggle and transformation, affirming Ambedkar's insight that caste is a division not merely of labour but of labourers.

Biopolitics and the Regulation of Everyday Life

Engaging Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, this section examines how caste operates through the regulation of bodies and everyday practices. Power functions less through overt coercion than through normalization, embedding hierarchy within routine social behaviour. Food practices provide a particularly revealing example. The consumption of leftovers is not simply a marker of poverty but a socially sanctioned practice encoding hierarchy within bodily sustenance itself. Labour similarly operates as a regulatory mechanism, with caste-based occupational roles ensuring the reproduction of inequality.

Institutions such as schools reinforce these dynamics through discipline and surveillance, functioning ambivalently as sites of both mobility and exclusion. Through these mechanisms, caste emerges as a biopolitical regime governing life at the level of the body, shaping not only action but also perception and identity.

Subaltern Historiography and the Politics of Representation

From the perspective of the Subaltern Studies Collective, *Joothan* constitutes an intervention into dominant historiography. By documenting marginalized experiences, it constructs an alternative archive grounded in lived reality. This act of narration challenges the presumed neutrality of official histories, asserting the legitimacy of Dalit knowledge. The autobiographical mode transforms individual memory into collective history, extending the narrative beyond the self.

Writing thus becomes a form of resistance—an epistemic intervention that reclaims authority over representation and challenges structures of silencing. In doing so, the text asserts the legitimacy of Dalit knowledge and repositions lived experience as a critical site of historical production.

Food, Abjection, and the Politics of Consumption

Food in *Joothan* is not simply a marker of poverty; it is a structured site where hierarchy is materialized and internalized. The consumption of leftovers does not occur as an incidental act of deprivation but as a socially organized practice that assigns value to bodies through what they are permitted to eat. The statement "Eating joothan was like eating humiliation" condenses this experience into an embodied form. The act of ingestion becomes inseparable from degradation, producing a condition in which stigma is not external but absorbed. Food, in this sense, operates as a medium through which social hierarchy enters the body, transforming nourishment into a reminder of subordination.

This transformation depends on a system of value grounded in purity and pollution. What is rejected by one group becomes designated as appropriate for another, creating a hierarchy of consumption that mirrors the broader social order. The circulation of leftovers thus functions

as a mechanism that both reflects and sustains inequality. At the same time, moments of refusal interrupt this logic. The rejection of joothan, however limited or precarious, marks a break in the chain of normalization. Such acts do not dismantle the system, but they expose its contingency by refusing to accept its terms as natural. In this way, the politics of consumption becomes a site where domination is both enforced and contested.

Education as Discipline and Awakening

Educational institutions in *Joothan* operate as spaces where hierarchy is reproduced through routine practices rather than formal doctrine. The classroom does not simply transmit knowledge; it organizes bodies and interactions in ways that assign value and position. The recollection “I had to sit separately in a corner of the classroom” illustrates how spatial arrangement within the school encodes hierarchy. Separation is not incidental but systematic, marking the Dalit child as distinct within a shared institutional space. This division produces visibility without inclusion, ensuring that difference is constantly reinforced.

Similarly, the experience that “The headmaster made me sweep the entire school” demonstrates how authority is exercised through seemingly ordinary acts. The imposition of cleaning labour within the educational setting collapses the distinction between learning and servitude, fixing identity within a pre-assigned role even in a space ostensibly dedicated to mobility. The statement “The teachers used to insult me because of my caste” further reveals how pedagogy itself becomes a vehicle for discrimination. Instruction is accompanied by humiliation, transforming the process of education into one that disciplines as much as it informs.

Yet these same institutions also enable the emergence of critical awareness. Exposure to literacy and new forms of knowledge creates the conditions for questioning the structures that govern experience. This transformation is neither immediate nor complete; it unfolds gradually, shaped by contradiction. Education thus appears as a site where subjection and possibility coexist, producing both compliance and critique.

Labour and the Inscription of Identity

Labour in *Joothan* functions as a primary mechanism through which caste identity is fixed and reproduced. Work is not distributed according to skill or choice but assigned in accordance with inherited status, ensuring continuity across generations. The assertion “We were born to do this work” captures the process by which social roles are naturalized. Labour is presented not as an activity that can be altered but as an inherent condition of existence. This framing forecloses the possibility of mobility by embedding occupation within identity itself.

The tasks described in the narrative are marked not only by physical difficulty but by symbolic devaluation. Work associated with impurity carries a stigma that extends beyond the act itself, attaching to the worker and shaping social perception. In this way, labour becomes a site where economic function and social meaning converge. At the same time, the narrative renders this labour visible in ways that challenge its marginalization. By documenting the conditions under which such work is performed, Joothan disrupts its normalization, exposing the structures that sustain it. The act of narration thus reconfigures labour from an unquestioned necessity into an object of critique.

Spatial Segregation and Social Control

Space in *Joothan* is organized to maintain distance and regulate interaction. The division of living areas, restriction of access, and control over movement collectively produce a geography that encodes hierarchy into the physical environment. The statement “We were not allowed to touch the hand pump” illustrates how access to essential resources is mediated through caste. Water, a basic necessity, becomes a controlled substance, distributed according to social position. This restriction transforms everyday survival into a regulated process, structured by exclusion. Spatial arrangements extend beyond resource access to shape patterns of interaction. Segregated settlements and restricted mobility limit contact between groups, reinforcing boundaries while preventing the formation of solidarities that might challenge the existing order.

These spatial configurations do not merely reflect hierarchy; they actively sustain it. By organizing where bodies can exist and how they can move, they embed social distinctions within the environment itself. Space thus operates as a mechanism of control that requires no constant enforcement, as its logic is built into the structure of daily life.

Memory as Counter-Archive

Memory in *Joothan* functions not as passive recollection but as an active process through which experience is preserved and reinterpreted. The narrative’s reliance on remembered episodes reflects a mode of storytelling that resists linear progression, instead assembling meaning through fragments. The statement “Those memories still burn within me” conveys the persistence of past experiences within the present. Memory here is not distant; it remains affectively charged, shaping perception and response. This intensity transforms recollection into a form of ongoing engagement with lived reality.

As a narrative strategy, memory enables the construction of a counter-archive. Experiences that have been excluded from official histories are recorded and organized, asserting their significance against structures of erasure. The personal becomes inseparable from the collective, linking individual experience to broader social conditions. This process is

inherently political. By refusing to allow these experiences to disappear, the narrative challenges the authority of dominant accounts that marginalize or ignore subaltern lives. Memory thus becomes a means of producing knowledge that contests established frameworks of understanding.

Language, Form, and Epistemic Intervention

The formal features of *Joothan* are integral to its critical force. The use of direct, unembellished language reflects a commitment to clarity that prioritizes experiential truth over aesthetic ornamentation. This stylistic choice resists literary conventions that often distance readers from the realities being described. The episodic structure reinforces this approach. Rather than presenting a continuous narrative, the text unfolds through discrete moments that accumulate into a broader representation of caste. This fragmentation mirrors the conditions of the experience it depicts, where continuity is repeatedly disrupted. Each episode functions as a unit of exposure, revealing a specific aspect of social organization. Together, they form a composite account that resists simplification, insisting on the complexity of lived reality.

Through these formal strategies, *Joothan* intervenes in dominant literary norms. It asserts the legitimacy of modes of expression grounded in marginal experience, challenging assumptions about what constitutes literary value. Language, in this context, becomes a tool for articulating perspectives that have been systematically excluded.

Modernity and the Persistence of Caste

One of the central tensions in *Joothan* lies in its engagement with modernity. The narrative unfolds within a context where formal structures of equality coexist with deeply entrenched social hierarchies. This coexistence reveals the limits of institutional change in addressing systemic inequality. Caste does not disappear under modern conditions; it adapts. Practices of exclusion become less overt but remain effective, operating through subtle forms of differentiation that continue to structure interaction. The persistence of discrimination within educational and urban spaces underscores this continuity.

This dynamic complicates narratives of progress that assume a linear movement toward equality. Instead, *Joothan* presents modernity as a contested terrain where old hierarchies are reconfigured rather than dismantled. By documenting these continuities, the text exposes the inadequacy of reforms that do not address the underlying structures of caste. It points to the need for transformation at a deeper level, one that engages with the processes through which hierarchy is reproduced.

Conclusion

Joothan emerges as a text that documents and theorizes caste as a system embedded in the organization of everyday life. Through its attention to food, labour, education, space, and memory, it reveals how hierarchy is sustained through practices that shape bodies, habits, and environments. At the same time, the narrative registers forms of resistance that arise within these conditions—through refusal, reflection, and the act of writing itself. These moments do not stand outside the system but engage it from within, exposing its operations and limits.

In this reading, caste appears not simply as an ideological formation but as a set of processes that regulate life at its most basic level. Correspondingly, Dalit autobiography becomes more than testimony; it functions as a mode of theoretical production grounded in lived experience. By transforming abjection into articulation, *Joothan* redefines literature as a site where knowledge is contested and reconstituted, making visible the structures that govern existence while opening the possibility of their transformation.

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