

CRITIQUING OM PRAKASH VALMIKI'S *JOOOTHAN* THROUGH THE PRISM OF LOGOTHERAPEUTIC TECHNIQUES

DR. ANAND B. BODHALE

Assistant Professor,
Department of Science and Humanities (SAH),
K. J. Somaiya College of Engineering,
Somaiya Vidyavihar University, Mumbai.

ABSTRACT:

*Although the answer to the most profound question of human existence- “Who am I?” is determined by a set of hegemonic norms of the Caste system in India. Today, in all their struggle, Dalits can now choose the answer to “What should they do?” or “How shall they thrive?” in post-independent India. However, in the past, even the freedom of deciding “What should they do?” or “How shall they thrive?” was not available to them due to the hegemonic laws of the Caste system. Similarly, considering the tragic exterminations of Jews in Germany during the Holocaust, Dr. Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), a Jew psychiatrist, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor propounded his Logotherapeutic techniques in his personal narrative- “Man's Search for Meaning” which soon became a classic of existentialist literature. This presents the premise of his revolutionary idea that man's primary motivational force is the striving to find meaning in his life. The study attempts to apply Dr. Frankl's therapeutic ideas to Om Prakash Valmiki's personal writing, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (*Joothan* in Hindi and translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003) and unravel how Valmiki used his capacity to cope up with unavoidable suffering to rise above his circumstances in a meaningful way. Dalit writers' personal writings present their 'life-affirming' and 'realistic' issues of lived experiences covering themes of humanitarianism, pain, suffering, and social transformation based on the modern egalitarian values - 'Equality', 'Liberty', 'Fraternity' and 'Justice'. Despite personal adversities, their demand for an inclusive society could be an empowering factor for all. Logotherapy has positive implications in human life, which stresses one's ability to tolerate adversity, to build resilience and hope in the wake of stressful and traumatic experiences. The study aims at indicating how a therapeutic reading of Dalit personal writing inspires readers to be more humane by being considerate towards the oppressed class and their oppressors. It presents a critical account of how Valmiki strives to find a meaningful identity in his life, engaging himself in different anti-caste movements and, finally, taking respite in the Ambedkarite ideals.*

Keywords: Logotherapy, Holocaust, The Caste System, Jews, Dalit, Racial Purity, etc.

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**Introduction:**

In the hierarchical structure of Indian society, the upper caste Hindus enjoy extensive powers to exercise their control over the oppressed subalterns using various identity markers, such as caste, gender, class, religion, and so on. The caste Hindus use religious dogma to bring others under their control and suppress them to do all the traditional menial jobs. They have tried to maintain their dominance over the oppressed class, often through force, coercion, or manipulation. This is systematically done to perpetuate their influence over the oppressed, often by controlling access to resources, limiting opportunities, and suppressing dissent of the oppressed. This results in significant inequalities and injustices, as these subalterns are subjugated and are often denied their basic rights and freedoms. It is important to recognize the role of hegemonic social structures and subjugation in perpetuating inequalities.

The common thread of oppression of Dalits or other Subalterns in India and Jews in the Nazi regime in Germany could be found in a monolithic belief of racial purity. The Nazi regime in Germany did the worst of everything to evoke the idea of purging or cleansing the “Aryan” race or blood by killing Jews. Whereas, in India, Dalits were kept outside of the boundaries of villages just to avoid the defilement of society from their inauspicious touch and presence. Calling them “untouchables”, Dalits were placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. They were subjected to all sorts of violence and exclusion from mainstream society. While renouncing Hinduism, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar mentioned that Hinduism was not in the best interest of Dalits:

To the Untouchables, Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. The sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, Smritis and Shastras, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of karma and the senseless law of status by birth are to the Untouchables veritable instruments of torture which Hinduism has forged against the Untouchables. (Ambedkar 296)

Racial purity, on the other hand, is a belief that a particular race is inherently superior to others and should be preserved. This belief was held by the Nazi regime in Germany, which implemented policies aimed at removing "inferior" races, such as Jews and Romani people from society. Jews have faced centuries of persecution in Europe, culminating in the Holocaust during World War II, in which six million Jews were systematically executed by the Nazi regime in Germany. Jews faced discrimination and violence in other parts of the world. Victor Frankl's heart-wrenching account of Jew prisoners' psychological reaction at the Nazi concentration camp shows how inhumanly they were treated :

We were still in the first phase of our psychological reactions. The thought of suicide was entertained by nearly everyone, if only for a brief time. It was born of the hopelessness of the situation, the constant danger of death looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the others. (Frankl 37)

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Similarly, Dalits, also known as "untouchables," is a large group in India that have faced centuries of discrimination based on their birth in the low caste community. Historically, in pre-independent India, Dalits were often excluded from many aspects of society, including education, employment, and religious institutions. Despite constitutional safeguards, they continue to face significant atrocities, violence, and harassment at the hands of upper-caste Hindus.

From the above statements, the situation of Dalits and Jews, by and large, is similar. Dalits and Jews have faced historical discrimination, oppression, forced expulsions and exclusion. Both Jews and Dalits have faced significant barriers to their social mobility and have been subjected to violence and exclusion based on their ancestry. However, it is important to note that each group has its unique history and context concerning their experiences of different levels of marginalization. Interestingly, today, both Dalits and Jews have a strong sense of community or collective consciousness and culture, which has helped them to resist oppression and maintain their distinct identities in unique ways. Dalits and Jews or the leaders from their communities never responded to their torture violently. Instead, it is important to recognize here that they addressed discrimination in all its forms peacefully to create a more just and equitable society. Vitor Frankl observes it as a matter of individual responsibility towards themselves:

They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. (Frankl 86)

According to Frankl, "the last of human freedoms" is the ability to "choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances." This ultimate freedom is recognized and exercised by the oppressed and oppressor differently. The Jew prisoners and marginalized Dalits, who were subjected to numerous atrocities, were only average people, but most of them, at least, by choosing to be "worthy of their suffering" proved man's capacity to rise above his outward fate. These average oppressed people are nobler in their response to their suffering than their oppressors or extremists who used the language of "racial cleansing" and inflicted pain and suffering in the lives of the oppressed. Inspired by the Ambedkarite ideal, Dalits from India charted their life journey following Buddha's non-violent teachings and giving more value to humanity. For them, their response to torture and oppression has been a long struggle for social and political rights. Their involvement in the various forms of resistance, including protests, civil disobedience, and legal action has been channelized towards taking affirmative actions, such as reservations in education, equal rights, fair treatment, and access to employment to address historical injustices. Whereas, for Jews, the response to their suffering, the Holocaust, and other instances of anti-Semitic violence has been a way of advocating for the equality and civil rights of all people and a means of protecting themselves from persecution and promoting interfaith dialogue and fostering greater understanding between different social and cultural groups. Overall, the response of Dalits and Jews to their torture and oppression has been one of resilience and resistance. Both communities have worked to

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promote social change and address historical injustices, fostering a sense of community and cultural identity.

The paper attempts to apply Dr. Frankl's logotherapeutic ideas to Om Prakash Valmiki's personal writing, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (*Joothan* in Hindi and translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003) and unravel how Valmiki used his capacity to cope up with unavoidable suffering to rise above his circumstances in a meaningful way. Om Prakash Valmiki's life story is a representative case for the readers to understand how the innate power of a human being, who faces all sorts of indignations and adversities, could channelize his energy into constructive activities and produce empowering effects on others. In *Joothan*, Om Prakash Valmiki shares his painful social history of the Bhangi community. The writer belongs to the Bhangi caste, which is also known as Valmiki. It is a marginalized and stigmatized community within the Hindu society of India. Bhangi people are considered to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy and are often referred as "untouchables." The family members of Om Prakash Valmiki traditionally worked in jobs that were considered to be "unclean," such as cleaning streets, disposing of waste, and handling dead animals. As a result, they have faced centuries of discrimination, social exclusion, and violence from higher cast members. They have also been denied access to education, healthcare, and other basic human rights.

The writer shares how, despite having constitutional safeguards on caste-based discrimination in India, the Bhangi community continues to face social and economic marginalization in post-independent India. They are often denied access to public spaces and are subject to violence and discrimination by members of upper-caste Hindus. He gives a firsthand account of the humiliations and sufferings of Dalits at the hands of upper-caste Hindus for whom Bhangis are nothing but "filth and impure dirt" in society. However, Dalits found their voice in the early 20th century, with the emergence of Dalit leaders, such as Mahatma Phule, Chatrapati Shau Maharaj, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who were instrumental in fighting for the rights of the Dalit community. Since then, the movement has grown and evolved, with a focus on promoting greater social and economic equality, challenging caste-based discrimination, and promoting Dalit cultural identity.

Discussion :

The application of logotherapeutic techniques to Om Prakash Valmiki's personal writing could be analyzed within the rubric of basic logotherapeutic ideas of Victor Frankl, mentioned in his auto-narrative- *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946). Dr. Frankl's psychotherapeutic ideas are based on the belief that human beings are driven by a desire to find meaning and that this search for meaning is the primary motivation in life. Like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, this is very much true with Valmiki's life as his lifelong goal was to find his voice and identity using education as a tool of self and social transformation. This primary assumption of his psychotherapy could be understood by applying some logotherapeutic ideas to Valmiki's personal writing. The following textual analysis could be presented with reference to some of the major logotherapeutic techniques :

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199

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1) Identifying one's purpose:

Logotherapy emphasizes the importance of having a purpose in life. By identifying one's purpose, individuals can find meaning in their lives and gain a sense of direction and fulfillment. The purpose of his personal writing is to voice the issues of lived experiences of Dalits covering themes of humanitarianism, pain, suffering, and the need for social transformation based on the modern egalitarian values - 'Equality', 'Liberty', 'Fraternity' and 'Justice' challenging the dominant narrative that perpetuates caste-based discrimination and inequality. One of the prominent Dalit writers, Dr. Y. B. Satyanarayana mentions his purpose in writing his life narrative, *My Father Balaih* :

It has been my lasting desire to show the present Dalit generation- and more so the future generation –how Dalits struggled. In the early twentieth century, Dalits were outcasts and lived in wretched conditions. I have myself been witness to the practice of untouchability and hope that future generations of Dalits will be free from this evil custom (Preface xxii).

Dr. Satyanarayana's above statement aims to break down the stereotypes and stigmas associated with his Dalit community and to create a more inclusive and egalitarian society. In Valmiki's personal account in *Joothan*, he and his father were very clear that they would not follow their traditional duties of Bhangi Caste. One of his childhood incidents of Valmiki is indicative of his determination to choose education as a tool for life transformation. During his pre-schooling days, Valmiki is forced to sweep by the newly appointed upper caste headmaster, Kaliram. After finding his son sweeping the schoolyard, Valmiki's father, instead of introducing his son into his occupational work like other Dalit fathers, confronts the headmaster and registers his displeasure for the inhuman treatment, meted out to his son using strong words: "Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep?" Kaliram is a representative of an oppressive social system of the upper caste Hindus. After being threatened by Kaliram, Valmiki's father challenges: "You are a teacher...So I'm leaving now. But remember this Master...This Chuhre ka will study right here. In this school. And not just him, but there will be more coming after him" (Valmiki 06). The firmness of Valmiki's father shows a sign of protest against the hegemonic establishment. It indicates that Dalits are now coming forward to take their rightful place in society (Valmiki 6). Like other Dalits, Valmiki's father keeps pushing his son for better education in order to cross the caste line: "You have to improve the caste by studying" (Valmiki 29). In the past, Dalits were not allowed to take education, but, with the great efforts of Mahatma Phule and the glorious legacy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, they found their purpose. They used their writing to depict their lived experiences, including their struggles, hopes, and aspirations, in a way that resonates with a wider audience. Through their writing, Dalit writers aim to raise awareness about the injustices faced by the Dalit community and to create a more equitable and just society.

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2) Reframing negative experiences:

Logotherapy teaches individuals to reframe negative experiences in a more positive light. By finding meaning in difficult situations, individuals can develop a greater sense of resilience and strength. Finding his caste rituals as exploitative traps, Valmiki refuses to follow the humiliating traditional rituals of Hinduism. Valmiki participated in anti-caste agitations since his college days. Before he comes in contact with his friend, Hemlal, his social sensitivity has already been shaped by his parents' upfront and assertive behavior, which makes him self-conscious about the humiliating traditions prevalent in his caste. In the Bhangi community, one such tradition is going for "Salaam" by the bride and bridegroom in the upper caste Hindu area. In his friend's marriage, he expresses his wish of breaking this humiliating tradition to his father. His father, instead of dissuading him, encourages him to bring this change, and promises him: "Munshiji, sending you to school has been a success ...I, too, have understood your point... We will now break this custom" (Valmiki 32). During his college days, he gets introduced to Dr. Ambedkar's emancipatory literature through his friend, Hemlal. After reading the writings and speeches of Dr. Ambedkar, Valmiki's Dalit consciousness is awakened fully and he gets a "voice to his muteness" (Valmiki 72). With this newly acquired courage in his life, he, as a college student, participates in debates and different protests. So, Dalits, despite facing systemic discrimination and oppression, have shown remarkable resilience and have made significant positive contributions to society in various fields. In the face of adversity, Dalits have displayed immense strength and perseverance, overcoming obstacles and breaking down barriers to achieve their goals. They have also created strong support networks within their communities, providing each other with the emotional and social support needed to cope with the challenges they face. Like Dalit leaders such as Mahatma Phule, Dr. Ambedkar, and others, Valmiki has played a crucial role in challenging the dominant caste discourses and promoting social justice. Dalit leaders have fought for the rights of the marginalized and have advocated for policies that aim to address the issues faced by Dalits and other oppressed groups.

3) Cultivating gratitude:

Gratitude is an essential component of logotherapy. By cultivating gratitude, individuals can focus on the positive aspects of their lives and develop a greater sense of appreciation for the world around them. Gratitude is a recurring theme in the personal writings of many Dalit writers. They often express gratitude towards those who have supported and stood with them in their struggle for social justice and equality. This includes individuals from the Dalit community and allies from other communities who have shown solidarity and support. Valmiki shares one of the most troubled experiences of his life when he and his mother wait outside the venue with the baskets to collect "joothan" (leftover food) on the occasion of the wedding of Sukhadev Singh Tyagi's daughter. His mother pleads with him to give something to her children on their patta. But, he humiliates her by pointing at her basket and reminds the writer's mother of her caste. Sukhadev Singh's words hurt the writer's mother. After being told to leave the place, Valmiki's mother becomes so furious that she empties the basket of joothan right in front of him and confronts him like a lioness: - "Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the baratis tomorrow morning" (Valmiki 11). A Dalit woman is

not expected to retaliate against the upper caste person in this manner. She immediately takes Valmiki and his sister and leaves the place like an arrow. After this incident, she stops going to his door to take joothan. His mother's strong protest against Sukhadev Singh Tyagi's humiliating treatment of his mother makes a lasting impact on Valmiki. Later, Sukhadev Singh's grandson, Surendra visits Valmiki's house in connection with an interview and appreciates the culinary skills of the writer's wife after his dinner at the writer's place. This does not alleviate the pain and suffering that Surendra's grandfather has given to Valmiki's family for their low caste. This also indicates a more human approach of Dalits who have never thought of taking revenge, but they have helped even their oppressors on humanitarian grounds. This is something one cannot expect of upper-caste Hindus who always look down upon Dalits.

Dalit writers often acknowledge the sacrifices and struggles of their ancestors and forefathers who fought for their rights and paved the way for their current opportunities. They express gratitude towards those who have inspired and motivated them to strive for excellence and overcome challenges. In one such incident, Valmiki writes an article to reinforce the impact of the activism of Dalit Panthers, initiated to support the victimized Dalits wherein he criticizes the lynching of the Ganwali Brothers in Maharashtra. Valmiki's article, which appeared in the Bombay edition of *Navbharat Times*, attracted the wrath of Shiv sena supporters. As a result, Valmiki receives a warning from his principal owing to the complaint, from the Shiv Sainiks (Shiv Sena supporters). During his stay at Chandrapur, Valmiki closely watches the Panthers' movements and absorbs "the strongest currents of the Dalit movement" (Valmiki 100). He feels a deeper involvement with the ongoing movements and the Dalit writers, who are associated with anti-caste activism. Such a sense of gratitude and a feeling of oneness in Dalit writing also inspires a sense of hope and determination to continue the fight for justice and equality.

4) Embracing personal responsibility:

Logotherapy emphasizes the importance of taking personal responsibility for one's life. Dalit writers often have a strong sense of personal responsibility because they write from the perspective of a historically marginalized and oppressed community in India. They see their writing as a means to challenge and subvert the dominant narratives that have perpetuated caste-based discrimination and inequality in Indian society. Like other Dalit writers, in *Joothan*, Om Prakash Valmiki displays a deep sense of responsibility towards his community and uses his personal account as a means to highlight the injustices and discrimination faced by other Dalits from his Bhangi Community. During his college days in Dehradun, one of his best friends, Hemlal, gifts Valmiki a book, entitled, *Dr. Ambedkar: A Biography* by Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu helping the writer to create awareness and sensitizing him towards the problems and struggles of Dalits in India. Valmiki admits how he feels more responsible for his Dalit community with his newly awakened consciousness after reading Dr. Ambedkar's writings:

Dr. Ambedkar's life-long struggle had shaken me up. I spent many days and nights in great turmoil. The restlessness inside me had increased. My stone-like-silence had suddenly begun to melt. I proceeded to read all of Ambedkar's books that I found in the library.[...] He had truly shown me a new path. My reading of these books had awakened my consciousness. These books had given voice to my muteness. It was during this time in my life when an anti-establishment consciousness became strong in me (Valmiki 72).

Valmiki displays a sense of personal responsibility that is rooted in his commitment to social justice, equality, and human rights. He sees his writing as a powerful tool for social transformation and uses it to challenge the status quo and advocate for a more equitable and inclusive society. In Dehradun, considering his sense of responsibility, Valmiki, as a student, participates in one of the huge processions firmly asserting to his family members that his participation in the social protests is- “an essential part of his education” (Valmiki 73). Valmiki opines once that Dalit literary writing is a part of the anti-caste social movement: “Dalit literary movement is not just a literary movement. It is also a cultural and social movement” (Valmiki “Introduction” xxv). So, through their writing, Dalit writers often seek to assert their identity and dignity. They feel a deep sense of responsibility towards their community and use their literary work as a means to highlight the injustices and discrimination faced by Dalits. They also aim to create awareness and sensitize the wider society to the experiences and struggles of Dalits.

5) Finding meaning in suffering:

In logotherapy, individuals are guided to find meaning in their suffering. By reframing suffering as an opportunity for growth and learning, individuals can develop a greater sense of purpose and resilience. Finding meaning in suffering is a common theme in Dalit writing. Dalit writers often write about the experiences of caste-based discrimination, oppression, and violence, which they and their communities have faced for generations. Through their writing, they seek to give voice to the pain and suffering of Dalits. Dr. Ambedkar's writings influenced the prominent Dalit writers in shaping their social consciousness, which eventually reflected in their creative writings. Valmiki's writing is an attempt to represent the caste-centric oppression and suffering of Dalits. Valmiki and his father refused to follow the humiliating practices of their caste and find a positive meaning in treating education as a powerful tool to end their suffering. Most of the prominent Dalit writers, including Omprakash Valmiki, follow Buddha's humanitarian teachings instead of preferring revengeful options against their oppressors. Dr. Beena Agrawal sums up Valmiki's approach in her paper, titled as-“Valmiki's *Joothan*: A voice against Oppression and the Vision of the Reaffirmation of Human Dignity”:

In *Joothan*, Valmiki has narrated his life story, full of agony and pain caused by the hegemony of the upper class. Through it, he has made an attempt to lay bare the hollowness of the outdated social system in which individual is discriminated on the basis of his caste so much as his individuality gets

crushed time and again all through his life. In a way he has raised the voice for human right of equality. (25)

The oppressive ideology of the caste system shatters Valmiki's self-esteem as his surname- "Valmiki " announces his low caste identity to the world whenever he moves around. But, Valmiki, being inspired by his mother who refuses to take "Joothan", and his father who stands by Valmiki's side as a rock to support his education and activism, understands the pain of being Bhangi. Despite facing all painful moments in his life, Valmiki displays his optimistic attitude to seek solutions to problematic situations in his personal, professional, and social life. Influenced by the rational, progressive, and egalitarian ideas of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Valmiki develops a heightened Dalit consciousness which gradually results in his firm assertion of his Dalit identity and his faith in egalitarian values.

Conclusion:

Like the Jewish people, Dalits suffered in the past due to the caste system. Their suffering made them more resilient towards their adversities. Their struggle helped them find meaning and purpose in their lives, especially in the face of all adversities. Despite his difficulties, Omprakash Valmiki brings forth the collective pain of the entire Dalit community in his writing. It indicates how Valmiki, instead of being vindictive in his approach toward his oppressors, tries to be more sympathetic and accommodative. He has also shared his painful experiences of oppression, discrimination and resistance. In his narrative, Omprakash Valmiki writes about his lived experiences to explore the brighter side of his life. It can be found that Valmiki strives hard to find ways to live a meaningful life despite being destined to face all sorts of challenges and adversities in his life.

For Valmiki, writing about his painful memories is a means of expressing Dalits' personal and social concerns. He takes full responsibility for his life and encourages others to take collective action to achieve social change without becoming overpowered by oppressive forces. Omprakash Valmiki's personal writing has been analyzed using logotherapy principles to explore the deeper significance of his lived experiences in bringing about positive social change. A clear understanding could be drawn that the writer preferred a meaningful and purposeful life despite suffering and adversity. In the end, applying logotherapy techniques to Valmiki's *Joothan* would help readers relate to the protagonist's experiences and find meaning in their own lives.

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