

# **Representations of Life on the Margins: An Analysis of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life* and Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian***

**OPEN ACCESS**

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 1

Month: May

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Kusum, and Daisy Verma. "Representations of Life on the Margins: An Analysis of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life* and Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. S1, 2025, pp. 52–57.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15550608>

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## **Abstract**

*Dalit and Native American writings have emerged as new fields of study in the contemporary era. They are a projection of these people's anguish, and anger against the oppression and exploitation meted out to them for centuries. Dalits have faced inhuman treatment at the hands of the upper caste people in India for so many centuries that it is a Herculean task to revive their spirits. They have lived their lives on the margins of society for a long time. The Native Americans have also faced oppression at the hands of their colonizers from the first interaction. They were displaced and relegated to the margins of modern civilization and history. The present paper purports to study and analyze two texts by Dalit and Native American writers respectively. It is an effort to understand the common human experience shared by these people in spite of their physical distance. These people have been treated wrongly on the basis of their caste, race, and colour. For this purpose, cultural theory will be applied to the paper. Both authors have honestly represented their lives as a Dalit and as a Native American.*

**Keywords:** Dalit, Native American, discrimination, Caste, Race.

'Dalit' is a term used in India to describe the existence of nearly 180 million people who are forced to live on the margins of society thanks to the caste system in India. For centuries, they had to live outside the boundaries of a village or city as untouchables bearing unhygienic and inhuman conditions until the constitution of India provided them equal status as citizens. In spite of the constitution, education, and monetary progress, they face discrimination on a daily basis even in the present era. The term 'Native American' or 'American Indian' is used to describe the millions of Native people in America. Since their colonization, they have been living a marginalized life with displacement from their ancestral lands and relegation to reservations. There has been an upsurge in the Natives'

migration outside reservations in the current century with an increased interaction with white society. Still, they face discrimination and prejudiced attitudes of the whites in their daily lives.

In recent years, writings from both the marginalized groups, Dalits from India and the Natives from America have flourished in the academic spheres of these countries and in the international academic sphere. Dalit writers from different areas have expressed themselves in their native languages, which to a certain extent has made their reach to a limited people. Most of their writings, however, are now available in translation in English, expanding their horizon and outreach to a larger public. Native American writings are mainly in English, imbibing traditional ways of storytelling with modern narrative techniques. They created a niche for themselves in mainstream literature in the 1960s with Momaday's Pulitzer Prize in 1969. Writers from both communities have mastered the art of writing in different genres but interestingly, many of them convey a first-hand experience of the prejudice and contempt of the upper castes and white people in India and America respectively. The autobiographies of Dalit writers have made readers aware of the realities of Dalits' life in independent India. Asaduddin asserts, "These works have been translated into other Indian languages and English to spread awareness across the country, and sometimes, build solidarities across languages and regions." (networks.org)

The present paper purports to compare and analyze two writings- from India and America, respectively by a Dalit writer, Omprakash Valmiki, and an American Indian writer, Sherman Alexie. Both writers were raised in surroundings, thousands of miles away from each other. The social, political, historical, and cultural contexts of these writers are different from each other, yet, there is a common thread in their writings based on common human experience. Dalits in India have faced discrimination within the folds of their religion while the Native Americans have suffered racism from their white counterparts in America. The paper purports to compare and analyze the conditions framing particular identities of these people, if there are any, and bring out the common experiences of the people belonging to these groups. It also focuses on how in spite of differences in place and culture, they have similar experiences of hatred and neglect. For discussion purposes, two texts mentioned in the title are selected.

Written in the form of autobiographies, the texts deal with the discrimination, inhuman treatment, humiliation, and lived experiences of the authors on the margins of the civilized society in India and America. In the context of the Dalits, this treatment is a result of the notion of superiority of some castes, who believe that lower castes were born to serve them. In spite of constitutional provisions and other measures against caste discrimination after independence, it is still there, "The upper caste people have developed an extraordinary repertoire of idioms, symbols, and gestures of verbal and physical denigration of the Dalits over centuries." (Asaduddin) The Dalits were considered untouchables and were forced to live on the margins of the cities. Upper caste people avoided even their shadow and their touch was polluting. While, in the context of the Native Americans, this treatment was a result of the colonization, and notion of racial superiority of the whites. The Natives were marginalized in reservation centers, and not supposed to come into contact with the whites. In a way, they were also untouchables like the Dalits since they were not allowed to come near the civilized world.

Therefore, the need is to critically analyze and deconstruct the presentation of the Dalits and the Natives in their texts. Dalit autobiographies such as Bama's *Karukku* (2000), Suraj Paul Chauhan's *Tiraskrit* (2002), etc. brought the existence of the Dalits in the consciousness of the upper caste people to some extent. Asaduddin says, "Before this body of literature came out, the Dalits were proverbial invisible men and women of India who were compelled to live on the margins of society, never entering the vision of high caste Hindus, the arbiters of art, literature, and good taste, in any significant or positive way." (network.org) Native American writings were also unnoticed

for a long time in mainstream literature. Many whites were not even aware of the existence of the Natives. They were myths for the whites visible only as mascots or toys. It was only after Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969, that the plight of the Indians came to the notice of the people. An analysis of the texts reveals that though the conditions were different, yet, the experiences were the same for both.

### **Experiences of Omprakash Valmiki**

Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* chronologically describes his journey from birth in an untouchable caste named Chuhra in a village in India, sufficient to seal his fate from a normal and happy childhood, a privilege of the upper caste children only. Valmiki asserts, "Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered quite right to touch dogs and cats, or cows and buffaloes, if one (a higher caste person) happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human." (Valmiki 2) The Tyagis, an upper caste, dominated the village and the Chuhras lived on the fringes of society. The Dalits were forced to do unpaid labour for these people as refusal would end up in brutality on the Dalits. Valmiki narrates one such incident, "As usual a government employee came to the Bhangi basti. As always, it would be unpaid labour." (44) The anger against this injustice and cruelty is visible in Valmiki's autobiography, "Those who keep singing the glories of democracy use the government machinery to quell the blood flowing in our veins." (46) Valmiki gives vent to his anger at this injustice thus: "My mind was filled with a deep revulsion. I was then an adolescent and a scratch appeared on my mind like a line scratched on glass. It remains there still." (45) These incidents reflect the attitude of upper-caste people, who don't even heed the law and the constitution.

He had to face discrimination at all stages of his life – in school, college, and even workplace. These people never believed in equality of all castes, since many of them belonged to upper castes and perpetrators of prejudice and hatred for Dalits. *Joothan* is replete with such incidents from the author's life. After independence, the constitution gave the right to education to all children, irrespective of their castes, class, creed, gender, and religion but it was of no consequence to the untouchables. The author faced great difficulty in getting admission to the school and even after that had to face humiliation from all. The protocol of untouchability was followed ardently as the untouchables were forced to sit separately. Teachers made him sweep the school; the task suited to his low birth. Valmiki is frustrated with his teachers, "Such were the role model teachers I had to deal with. Moving from childhood to adolescence when my personality was being shaped, I had to live in this terror-filled environment.... At times I feel like I grew up in a cruel and barbaric civilization." (57) He can never forget the courage and defiance of his father to fight for his education, which changed the course of his life.

Valmiki gives a scathing criticism of the people, who were earlier impressed with his education but all would be lost after the knowledge of his caste. He had to face dejection in his love life when his beloved Savita left him after learning of his caste. "Suddenly, the distance between us had increased. The hatred of thousands of years had entered our hearts. What a lie culture and civilization." (113) These incidents also throw light on the ingrained nature of caste hierarchy which cannot be removed with laws, good education, manners, and even money. The humiliation faced by the author made him averse to people for many years. Dalit literature was in forming years at that time, which influenced him. Valmiki's experiences and readings of these writings made him write about his experiences, "The words of Daya Pawar, Namdev Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Gangadhar Pantavane, Baburao Bagul, ... were igniting sparks in my veins.... My reading of Dalit literature was beginning to change my notions about what is literature." (105)

These texts are replete with activism against caste discrimination, and their own experiences of casteism. Their revolutionary ideas inspired Valmiki to express his suppressed feelings against the caste system through his writings. He was aware though, of the difficulty, “Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman. And compassionless towards Dalits.” (xiii) His writings have emerged from the historical and social conditions of his community. The autobiography is a representation of the domination of the upper castes, subordination of the low castes and hegemony imposed upon these people. Valmiki’s point of view is that it is difficult to get past one’s caste in India. Douglas Bom writes, “Instead of following a linear pattern, the author moves from memory to memory demonstrating how his present is deeply scarred by his past in spite of the distances he has traversed to become one of the prominent authors in Dalit literature.” (e-library) Valmiki raises certain questions on the discrimination, and humiliation of the untouchables and the infusion of identity with caste. His text underlines the idea that only a Dalit can understand the pain, and suffering which can be imagined only by an upper-caste writer. Limbale asserts, “how will non-Dalits write about the experience of Dalits with the power of their imagination? How will they feel the angry ideas rising in the hearts of untouchables on the basis of their helpless imagination.” (Limbale xxxiv) Aboriginal Australian writers, Black African American writers, and Native American writers have also declared that their sufferings are their very own and no outsider can speak for them.

### **Experiences of Sherman Alexie**

Alexie’s semi-autobiographical novel is well known for his representations of the lived experiences of Native Americans on reservations and how they negotiate their identity in modern America. Reservations were a result of government policies to keep the Natives away from the white civilization. The experiences of the Native Americans on the reservations are reminiscences of depression, alienation, oppression, violence, alcoholism, and suicide. The novel portrays life on the Spokane Indian reservation as experienced by the author, which is full of dejection and inaction. His childhood experiences are shared by the protagonist Arnold Spirit Jr. as well. He portrays the reservation as a place far from being of any importance and happiness in a humorous way. The modern American dream has not yet reached Wellpinit with Natives still living in utter poverty, relying on government supplies for survival. The realistic representations of life can be seen from the description of the poverty of the protagonist’s family, the hopelessness of his parents, brawls, and violent deaths. He describes his poverty thus, “I am really just a poor- ass reservation kid living with his poor-ass family on the poor-ass Spokane Indian Reservation.” (Alexie 7) They have always been poor “... My parents came from poor people who came from poor people who came from people, all the way back to the very first poor people.” (11)

Poverty, inept education, and unemployment have shattered their dreams. The school system on the reservation is outdated as Arnold ponders, “My school and my tribe are so poor and sad that we have to study from the same dang books our parents studied from. This is the saddest thing in the world.” (31) This situation kindled an ambition in Arnold to leave the rez and join Reardon school. His teacher encourages him to leave it to save himself from despair, believing that Arnold will not “give up. You threw that book in my face because somewhere inside you refuse to give up.” (43) This incident also discloses the intention of the government of killing the Indian culture and traditions by making them forcefully learn the ways of the whites. He is trying to find a place for himself in a complex situation between two cultures and two worlds with his identity under scrutiny.

His struggle for a new identity is rattled by hatred from fellow Natives who consider leaving their place a treachery. This reality of the reservation has made his resolution of leaving it stronger, “Reservations were meant to be prisons, you know? Indians were supposed to move onto reservations and die. We were supposed to disappear.” (Alexie 216) In the process of assimilation, the Natives were supposed to forget their culture. Mr. P points out white men were not, “trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture.” (35) Arnold describes the persistent problem of alcoholism, violence, and suicide among the Natives. All the incidents reflect that the government is equally responsible for their plight.

### **A Comparative Analysis**

The texts under analysis, with huge differences in their backgrounds, provide certain traits common in both communities. Their social, cultural, historical, and political backgrounds are dissimilar but human suffering, oppression, dejection, and loss are common threads in both texts as is clear from an analysis of both the texts. Valmiki and Alexie are successful in giving an insider's account of the lives of the Dalits and Natives. Dalits were forced to work as bonded labour for the upper castes for centuries, whereas many Natives were also sold as slaves to work in fields and households of the whites. Valmiki's education, job, and even money are not sufficient to remove the tag of untouchable from him. The idea of inferiority of some castes is indelible in the minds of upper-caste Indians. At present, many Dalit communities have achieved great heights, excelling in all spheres of life but with little success in removing caste as a criteria of excellence. Through his autobiography, Valmiki has streamlined his experiences and struggles of his community honestly, giving vent to his feelings of anger, and dejection, an inseparable part of Dalits' psyche. He comments on the despondency in Dalits and accepts the situation without any protest by urging them to raise their voice against the oppression. Valmiki condemns the system that perpetuates such discrimination and is responsible for the inhuman treatment of people. There is, no doubt, anger and frustration in his narrative but at the same time, he asserts the need to write about their experiences, to be recognized by their work rather than their birth.

Through his novel, Alexie has dealt with the issues of living on a reservation honestly, “It accurately reflects the way a teenage boy would talk about his family, friends and the tragedy that enters his life throughout the course of the novel.” (Abigail Bouwma) His representations of life on the reservation have blossomed from his own harrowing experiences there. The description of family life, poverty, dejection, broken health and education system, and their dependency on government subsidies, is all not just imagination of the author but his lived experiences. He has seen all those brawls, drinking sprees, suicides, and despair that has become a part of most of the Native Americans with no identity in the modern world. He resonates with the idea of many Native people that modern white American people still have prejudices against them, which need to be addressed. In his text, however, he gives some hope to the Natives in the success of Arnold Spirit Jr. at Reardon High School. Alexie claims that Natives need to maintain a balance between the two worlds in order to create an identity for themselves.

The term ‘reservation’ is used in the contexts of both communities with different meanings. In the context of the Dalits, reservation is “an ordinance through which a fixed number of seats in educational institutions, government jobs, legislatures, etc. are reserved for the less privileged members of society.” (Unacademy.com) In the context of the Native Americans, the term “reservation comes from the early days of Indian contact with the white people. The Indians gave large portions of their land through treaties “reserving” a portion of the land for their own use with the condition of never moving out of these reservations. The reservation system in India is supposed to be inclusive, giving an equal opportunity to the Dalits in all spheres of their lives while

the American reservation system is an exclusive system excluding the Natives from the mainstream society.

The literature of both the Dalits and the Native Americans negotiate with prejudice, oppression, humiliation, and exploitation of these people. Both of them want human treatment for their people and an acceptance of their existence on equal terms. Valmiki and Alexie use their writings as weapons of social change and protest against discrimination, and exploitation of their respective communities on the basis of caste and race. The successful careers of both writers advocate that other people can also overcome their stricken conditions through relentless efforts. The world has to accept them even if they belong to an untouchable community or a Native American tribe. In spite of their success, these communities have to go a long way before they can achieve complete equality. The present situation of both the communities still stares at poverty, alcoholism, violence, lack of proper facilities, and unemployment. Dalits still do not frame a major part of employed people in India and the Natives also have to go a long way before they can call themselves equal to the whites. As described in both the texts, there are still prejudices against them.

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