मेरी कलम - मेरे अलफाज़

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All was right
And all was quiet
As long as we ate your leftovers.
But all hell broke loose
The moment we wrote “Leftovers”.

They often say to me
That I have degraded literature
To a travesty, a mockery
“Can literature ever be Dalit?”
I snapped back:
In this country, if nature’s most beautiful creations, human beings
Can be “lower”, “outcaste, “shudra” and “untouchable”
Then why the big fuss about literature?

The truth is, the golden hour of literature
Has been shining in your courtyard for centuries
While my lot is a fearful, shivering, long, dark night.
But now
I am proud, I am happy
For now I have a pen and I have words.
And you
Seated in your plush chair
In your air-conditioned room
Sipping your coffee
Are afraid
Because the poverty, helplessness, and exploitation
That you transformed into beautiful prose
Falls flat in front of even a small incident from my life.

You, having drunk the milk of the cow
That you say manifests purity
Have produced only meaningless rituals in your conceit
Once dead, the same cow becomes untouchable for you
We bring it to our graveyard (Murdahiya)
Saving it from the vultures’ claws
That are sharper than a knife
In its stench of rotten meat

3“Murdahiya,” the autobiography of Professor Tulsi Ram, was hailed as a masterpiece of Dalit literature when it was published in 2010.
Our *Murdahiya*, the home of animal carcasses
Have sprouted innumerable *Tulsis* and *Valmikis*.

Now, you fear that
My pen
Tearing through the pages of your history
Will weigh your deeds on the scales of humanity.
My words have rhythm, edge and the sharpness
Of Eklavya’s arrows

My pen rips the veil of sanctity
And rejects your vacuous teaching
And now, you say, furiously
That my pen talks far too much!

This poem is a tribute to the esteemed Om Prakash Valmiki, the author of the first Dalit autobiography in Hindi, *"Joothan"* (Leftovers), published in 1997. Originally penned in 2009, it was recited during an event presided over by Mr. Valmiki. In 2011, it underwent revision to incorporate *"Murdahiya,"* another Dalit autobiography authored by Professor Tulsi Ram.

The poem is originally written in Hindi. The English translation is by Richa Dube (a Seattle based writer); Anurag (popularly known for his podcast *Anurag Minus Verma*); and Annika Taneja (a Delhi-based editor and translator).

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4Here *Tulsi and Valmiki* symbolize Dalit writers whose literary works unequivocally denounce the caste system and the inhumanity it fosters.

5Eklavya (a character in Hindu epic, *The Mahabharata*) was said to be the greatest archer in the world. Rejected as a student by Dronacharya (revered as one of the greatest gurus in Hindu mythology), the guru to the Pandava royal princes because Eklavya was an Adivasi (tribal) and considered outcaste, Eklavya learned archery through self-study by practicing in front of a clay idol of Dronacharya. After he came to the attention of the Pandavas and Dronacharya through his skill, Dronacharya, who had promised the Pandava prince, Arjuna, that he would make him the greatest archer in the world, demanded Eklavya’s right thumb as his *guru-dakshina*, the traditional payment to a teacher by a student. Eklavya cut off his thumb to oblige his guru. This act made the royal prince Arjuna the greatest archer in Indian mythology.