
**Postmodernist Indian Sensibilities: Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*
as a Socio-Cultural Document.**

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ABSTRACT:

*The contemporary world is marked by cataclysmic changes unprecedented in the history of mankind. The process of globalization has contributed towards introducing revolutionary transformations across the globe in all levels of human life. Most of the countries in the contemporary world have become multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious, and India too is no exception to this phenomenon. The question, therefore, arises as to the status and position of the poor and marginalized sections against the rich dominant mainstream society, and the casteist, religious and class discriminations practiced by the latter to subordinate the former. In the paper titled **Post modernist Indian Sensibilities: Manu Joseph's Serious Men as a Socio-Cultural Document** proposes to examine Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* as a representative tale of an ordinary man – the status and position of a Dalit within the socio-cultural framework of contemporary India.*

Key words: *globalization, casteist discrimination.*

The contemporary world is marked by cataclysmic changes unprecedented in the history of mankind. The process of globalization has contributed towards introducing revolutionary transformations across the globe in all levels of human life. Most of the countries in the contemporary world have become multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious, and India too is no exception to this phenomenon. The question, therefore, arises as to the status and position of the poor and marginalized sections against the rich dominant mainstream society, and the casteist, religious and class discriminations practiced by the latter to subordinate the former. In the paper titled **Post modernist Indian Sensibilities: Manu Joseph's Serious Men as a Socio-Cultural Document** proposes to examine Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* as a

representative tale of an ordinary man – the status and position of a Dalit within the socio-cultural framework of contemporary India.

Prior to his entry in the literary arena, Manu Joseph made his mark in the journalistic world where he served for fourteen years, and which includes his service as the Deputy Editor and Mumbai Bureau Chief of the *Open Magazine*. He also served as the National Feature Editor of *The Times of India*. His literary career was inaugurated with the publication of his debut novel *Serious Men*. Published in 2010, it has been short-listed for the 2010 Man Asian Literary Prize, the Society Magazine's Young Achiever Award, besides being nominated for the Hindu Best Fiction Award 2010. Soon after its publication in 2010, the novel was also translated into Dutch, German, French and Siberian languages. The novel also holds the distinction of being listed among the top new novelists of 2010 by the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*.

The narrative structure of *Serious Men* revolves round its protagonist Ayyan Mani, a low-class character, who is a Dalit. At the outset of the novel itself, we are introduced to its thematic implications through a subtle and detailed description of Ayyan Mani:

Ayyan Mani's thick black hair was combed sideways and parted by a careless broken line, like the borders the British used to draw between two hostile neighbors. His eyes were keen and knowing. A healthy monstrosity shattered a perpetual smile. A dark tidy man, but somehow inexpensive (*SM* 3).

Just as Mani's hair is parted, so also the chasm between the haves and the have-nots continues to remain wide, and it has its repercussions on the socio-economic realities of the contemporary Indian situation.

Ayyan Mani, brought up in strict conservative set up, is presented as "something of a legend" (*SM* 7). He is thoroughly critical of the discrimination practiced in the name of caste, colour and creed, and it needs to be reiterated that the evolving reality of Dalit politics is precisely the struggle to articulate the 'other.' Ayyan Mani's assertion of his identity can be read as an attempt to make the individual and communal voices heard over a cacophony of hegemonic expectations. In this context, it is relevant to note that a Dalit's peripheral status

is reinforced in the hierarchical order propagated by the Hindu religion, and despite his marginalized position, there exists a reciprocal relationship between a Dalit and an upper caste man. As a socially responsible citizen, Ayyan Mani realizes the hard truth that the Dalits like him should take the initiative to fight for their very existence, rather than be merely dependant on the upper castes. Mani's life in the BDD chawls built by the British more than eight decades ago throws light on the desperate and impoverished conditions in which they live. *Serious Men* raises certain pertinent questions related to the dismal existence of the Dalits in India. The BDD chawls where the assembly of families take place under a single roof in the one-room houses serve as a symbol of the conscious physical and psychic distancing of the mainstream society from the poor sections of the society. These over-populated chawls located along the suburbs are in stark contrast with the cozy apartments and palatial mansions in the cities. The life of the poor continue forever with no change in the buildings "that stood like grey ruins"(SM 6). The physical space occupied by Mani reminds one of the cringed attitude and narrow outlook that he has towards life, making his way "down the broken, cobbled ways which ran between the stout buildings" (SM 7). Here, we find that Joseph uses Ayyan Mani to air his views on the discriminatory politics at work in a seemingly secular India.

As the action of the novel takes place in Worli Seaface, Mumbai characterized by the presence of BDD chawls, the novelist points out the social limitations experienced by the poor people identified as dalits in "a hive of ten thousand one-room homes" (SM 6). The British Development Department chawls in Worli served as prison in earlier times, and in due course they were converted into buildings for the homeless where "now lived over eighty thousand people who heaved and sighed with the burdens of new unions and the relief of death" (SM 6-7). These chawls continue to remain the same with no progress and development, despite the tall claims of modernization and industrialization in Mumbai. The pathetic and dilapidated condition of these one-room apartments, in fact, exemplifies the failure of the government machinery to fulfil the promises of the poor. Further, the congested physical space offered by these one-room homes becomes symbolic of the marginalized status of the poor and the downtrodden.

Ayyan Mani's comprehension of this low position in the hierarchical social order dominated by the Hindus causes him to become a convert to Buddhism. According to the dictates of the Chaturvarna, the Brahmins are the superior, and the non-Brahmins are treated as inferior. Even though these high-born men have risen to power while actually treading on the lives of the poor, they have never respected them as human beings, but looked down upon them as mere slaves. Having come under the influence of Ambedkarist ideologies, Ayyan Mani embraces Buddhism as a dissent to Hinduism. His conversion is effected on the realization that the upper castes have never respected the poor downtrodden Dalits as human beings, for they have bent the religion for the sake of their benefit and to maintain their own falsehood. But it is strange to note the fact that having come under the influence of Hinduism, there exists an internal hierarchy among the Dalits themselves. Gender based hierarchy is seen at work in the Dalit societies as among the upper castes. Ayyan is a Buddhist, but his wife Oja is a Hindu. Joseph present Oja as a typical Indian wife whose likes and dislikes are determined in a traditional manner by Ayyan Mani who acts as a patriarchal figure controlling the life of his wife. Again it is Ayyan who decides the religion to be followed in the household, and on one instance, he shows his dissent towards Hindu gods and goddesses by pointing out that "Buddha is our god. The other gods are gods the Brahmins created. In their deviant stories, those gods fought against demons which were us. Those black demons were our forefathers (SM 50-51) To Ayyan Mani, Buddhism turns out to be a source of moral support and empowerment and therefore finds Ambedkar's vision to liberate the Dalits from being treated like pigs to be of great import. Ayyan Mani's decision to be a Buddhist shows his self-conscious positioning at the centre of power relations in a society that runs on the tenets of the Hindu religion. His conversion to Buddhism is a clear manifestation of his inherent desire to remain powerful and to determine the trajectories of his own life and family.

Though Ayyan Mani knows about the pitiable condition of the Dalits which continues unchanged, he attributes their backwardness to the lack of educational opportunities and awareness among them which greatly effect of quality of their lives. However much he may claim to be progressive, Ayyan Mani is really a narrow- minded individual driven forward by traditional attitude and orthodox beliefs. It is clear from the treatment he metes out to his wife Oja, for he has the slightest regard for her sense of individuality. Joseph presents Oja as a

typical housewife circumscribed by her duties at home. Apparently, she is denied a voice though Mani considers her presence as necessary to put the household in order. Constrained by her domestic obligations, Oja, like any other ordinary Indian housewife, is forced to spend her life within the stifling fifteen feet long and ten feet wide room. Her physical and emotional freedom is curtailed as she is doomed within the little private space of “a rudimentary kitchen that ran into a tiny stained-glass bathroom where one would fit and two would be in a relationship (SM 9). As part of her routine daily affairs, she finds delight in the hypnotizing effect of the Tamil soap operas. Though on an emotional plane, she tries to identify herself with the ‘voices’ in the operas. Oja enjoys an air of freedom when she watches those operas alone. Ayyan Mani’s domineering attitude is imposed on Oja as it is he who holds the upper hand in deciding the kind of dress she should wear. Dress is a marker of one’s identity in the social world and Oja is deprived of her individual freedom when she is not allowed to wear the dress of her choice, as she is caught in the complicated maze of the dominant patriarchal tradition. Oja passes off as an image of a traditional woman, the Sita-Savitri type. In the hegemonic societal setup, Oja is stripped off of her individual identity when Ayyan Mani imposes restriction on the kind of clothes she should wear especially when she goes outside. As a traditional husband, Ayyan Mani cannot think of a deviant image of his wife for he sees her wife’s body as a site of attraction and a source of pleasure. He has an ingrained belief in the traditional representation of female body perceived in terms of its sexuality and therefore, seen as an object of lust. Her identity as a woman gets sacrificed in order to satisfy the patriarchal codes and modes of representation.

Serious Men offers an excellent critique of the contemporary society which is hypocritical in their approach to the poor people like Ayyan Mani. Joseph introduces the character of Sister Chastity to expose the long-standing differences between the dominant population and the Dalits. The scene of the meeting between the Principal and Ayyan Mani brings out in a humorous vein the lack of religious vision and moral values among the so-called religiously privileged like Sister Chastity. Given the harsh realities of social discrimination, the poor easily fall as victims of the mechanizations of the rich. Sister Chastity runs an educational institution, but not with a noble aim in mind. Under the pretext of imparting education to the poor, schools run by Christian missionaries keep their eyes on the possibilities of religious

conversion. Towards the end of the formal meeting between Ayyan Mani and Sister Chastity, the latter talks at length about the immense opportunities awaiting non-christians like Mani. She even taunts him by pointing out the capricious behaviour of the Dalits like Ayyan Mani who have no pricks of conscience in forgiving people who were the erstwhile instigators of violence. As Sister Chastity observes:

The Brahmins, the kind of things they did the things they do even now. In private, they still call you the Untouchables, do you know that? In public they call you “Dalits”, but in private they call you such horrible things (*SM 21*).

The upper caste people like the Hindus do not allow the low castes to prosper in life and Ayyan Mani acknowledges the fact that nothing has changed in society. Though Mani converts himself into a Buddhist, he feels that it did not make any difference for “Hinduism, Buddhism -- all the same thing” (*SM 22*). Despite the claim that the Brahmins are smarter than the Dalits (*SM 22*), Mani works as a personal assistant to a Brahmin named Arvind Acharya, the astronomer Head of the Institute of Theory and Research.

In the hierarchical relations of power and resistance, man is deprived of his fellow feelings, as everyone is guided by a competitive spirit. Casteism has created a wide rift among people in the society. In keeping with the Hindu myths and beliefs, the Brahmins alone had the privilege to enjoy intellectual powers, and this is illustrated in the character of Arvind Acharya. Joseph also succeeds in exposing the complexities and ambiguities in the relationship existing between Ayyan Mani, a low caste and Aravind Acharya, his Brahmin superior. As a Brahmin, Aravind has enjoyed the benefits of a comfortable social life and was at the height of his intellectual power at the Institute. Working on his Balloon Mission, Acharya considers himself to be a genius. In fact, Acharya acts as a foil to Ayyan Mani, and it is through a process of contrast that the novelist is able to bring out the continuing effects of the caste system. Being a member of the upper caste, Acharya maintains of self-conscious alienation from Ayyan for he considers his cerebral capacity unparalleled. Unlike Ayyan Mani, Acharya attributes his success in life to his intellectual capacity, which is characteristic of the upper-caste Brahmins.

It is interesting to note that despite making strides in various fields, India still continues to cling on to traditional practices and beliefs that have been followed since ages. That is to say, though modern and progressive in outlook, India remains traditional and orthodox in its attitude and approach towards the lowest sections of the society. The country's tall claims of educational advancement mismatch with the realities of the social context. Untouchability prevails and in the field of education, it manifests itself in the way the educated men prefer to speak in the English language. In *Serious Men*, Ayyan Mani's decision to speak Tamil shows how his identity is inextricably linked with language. Lack of basic education is what prompts Ayyan Mani in to weaving plots around his son Adi. Ayyan desires to show the world that his son is a genius, and is able to trick the media by giving the impression that his son is a genius. When the article featuring the striking photograph of the Boy Genius it evoked the desired effect:

The Brahmins had summoned him. They had read the article in *The Times* and they had called Ayyan on his mobile. They wanted to see for themselves a Dalit genius, though they had put it differently. Ayyan could not resist the entertainment of watching those great minds mill around his boy, expressing their grand acknowledgement of his infant brilliance. Genius to genius, they would make it all seem (*SM* 216).

Ayyan Mani's repressed desires is exposed when he wants Dalits like him to be viewed not as illiterate but instead be placed on equal footing with the Brahmins. The internalized state of subservience of the poor Dalits is maintained through denial of education and reluctance to share knowledge by the upper caste people.

Arvind Acharya's life as a scientist at the Institute provides room for issues that emanate out of professional jealousy and hatred. Acharya's public image is challenged through Ayyan's deeds. Though Ayyan Mani is poor and uneducated, he is able to outwit the brilliant scientist. By presenting these two characters Joseph demonstrates the need to have a genuine assessment of the ground realities of the contemporary Indian society. Acharya's overindulgence is contrasted with Ayyan Mani's crooked intelligence. Despite the

differences between the two, Arvind and Ayyan Mani come from the same ethnic background for

He always spoke in Tamil to the director because he knew it annoyed him. It linked them intimately in their common past, although their fates were vastly different. Ayyan's dialect particularly almost always distracted Acharya. It reminded him of the miserable landless labourers, and their sad eyes that used to haunt him in his childhood when he watched the world go by from the back seat of black Morris Oxford (*SM* 41).

The linguistic sameness between Acharya and Mani is brought out when Mani chooses to speak to the former in Tamil. Low-class ordinary men like Mani relish their status, and are willing to assert their sociolinguistic identity wherever they are. Mani's decision to speak in his mother tongue shows his desire to stick on to his roots. Here Joseph makes use of their shared heritage to reflect on the modern society at large.

Towards the end of the novel, anti-Dalit remarks invite bitter reaction and instill anger among the Dalit community and the general public. Though the upper caste people construct their identity through the stereotype of the 'other,' it can be seen that the identity of the 'other' remains intact. The Dalits form the 'other' against their relationship with the oppositional social forces. The active participation and energetic involvement of the Dalits in the making of the nation show how they become agents of their own identity reclamation. Through their unified efforts, the Dalits seek to empower themselves. As Abedi aptly puts it:

All have a grievance against the highest and would like to bring about their downfall. But they will not combine. The higher is anxious to get rid of the highest but does not wish to combine with the high, the low and the lower lest they should reach his level and be his equal. [...] The low is anxious to pull down the highest, the higher and the high but he would not make a common cause with the lower for fear of the lower gaining a higher status and becoming his equal(205-6).

Serious Men truly strikes the reader as a social document mapping the experiences of Dalits like Ayyan Mani who are caught in the vicious circle of power relationships determined by caste, money and religion. By presenting the varied shades of human relationships along with identity politics, *Serious Men* has successfully registered the nuances of contemporary life.

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