

## 'Minority Discourse in Manu Joseph's Serious Men

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*Serious Men* by Manu Joseph (1974-), a debut book in the dalit writing in English tradition that includes Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), Babaji Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides the Tiger* (1960), Sankarakutti Menon Marath's *The Wound of Spring* (1960), and Padmini L. Sengupta's *Red Hib*, is a contribution because it has a dalit as its main protagonist. *Serious Men* won the Hindu Literary

The author received praise from both critics and other authors for choosing a dalit as the protagonist. For instance, Shashi Deshpande writes: "We haven't yet approached the novel in the manner that this man has in Indian English writing... He has discussed caste. We're avoiding reality, yet he skillfully and elegantly entered the Dalit man's head by doing it directly. Manu Joseph has made it quite simple to hear a Dalit man speak English while maintaining its authenticity without sounding ugly" (Deshpande). The author is commended for having "fearlessness in confronting caste concerns head on." He claims to have written about slum life, and it is credited to him.

However, two issues regarding the portrayal of dalits must be addressed: first, does the way the dalits are portrayed in the novel contribute to the understanding of the dalits' subordination and their struggle for freedom? second, does the novelist, like other novelists, portray caste to outsiders as exotica? This essay makes an effort to address these issues. *Serious Men's* portrayal of the dalit needs to be critically scrutinised, despite the fact that the book was produced in a postcolonial context that questions hegemony. A cursory reading of the book can give the idea that the author chose a progressive dalit theme. However, when analysed critically, the dalit topic in Indian English literature is found wanting in terms of self-respect, authenticity, resistance, and recovering identity:

It's crucial to start by pointing out how physically the dalit protagonist is depicted. Ayyan Mani has thick, black hair that he separates in the middle with a crooked line and combs sideways. A robust monstrosity broke a never-ending smile. A dark, neat man who seemed cheap (3). Mani is described as "somewhat of a legend" despite having grown up in an extremely orthodox environment (7). Mani is extremely self-assured and is against caste-based prejudice. *Manu*, which is set in Mumbai's Worli Seaface, depicts the appalling living conditions in the slums as "a hive of ten thousand one-room homes" (6). The Worli chawls, which were previously used as prisons during the British era, have been transformed into shelters for the homeless: "

What does Mani do to express his disapproval? He becomes a Buddhist, declaring, "Buddha is our god. The other deities were made by the Brahmins. These gods battled demons that were humans in their bizarre tales. Our ancestors were those black monsters (50-51). Mani's behaviour, both within and outside the home, does not reflect any of the characteristics of Buddhism. The principles of Buddhism were not what led to his conversion to Buddhism. Mani, despite his grandiose claims to be progressive, is motivated by the conventional worldview in both his thoughts and actions.

Mani works in Mumbai as an assistant to brahmin astronomer Arvind Acharya. He shares Acharya's sense of social superiority when it comes to feeling self-conscious about his subordinate position.

Because of his social elitism, Acharya believes he is intellectually superior and hence commands respect from others. Mani is vastly beneath him in his eyes. Mani speaks Tamil whereas Acharya speaks English, in keeping with their respective socioeconomic statuses. His achievement is attributed to his free will, extreme diligence, and intelligence. Out of baseless irritation, Mani makes up the story that his ten-year-old kid is a mathematical prodigy. Later, the deception deviates from Mani's control and places him in a situation he can never recover from. Mani and Acharya's connection contrasts the novelist's portrayal of the dalits.

Mani is able to get an article on the little genius and a picture of the boy published in *The Times*. The brahmins call Mani after reading the story to find out if the young dalit youngster is actually a genius. The brahmins' stance implies that the dalits lack the capacity for meritocracy. Mani's portrayal by the novelist as a liar and manipulator, particularly with regard to having merit, is an illustration of the dalit stereotype, which the upper castes use to undermine the dalits' ability to have merit. The author had to blame infidelity on the dalits in order to contrast a dalit's yearning for success. Acharya's scientific attempt is successful because of his merit and sheer hard work.

The way Mani treats his wife is another indication that he is not a Dalit. Like every other tyrannical husband in the patriarchal system, he brutally rules his wife. His wife, Oja, endures stifling treatment like an ordinary housewife. Oja's freedom and liberty are questioned: "a crude kitchen that led into a small stained-glass bathroom where one would fit and two would be in a relationship" (9). Mani has complete influence over Oja's life. Oja is nothing more than a source of passion and pleasure for Mani. She uses television dramas as a way of release, identifying with the characters as a form of liberation. A dalit lady should not be portrayed in this way as a victim of patriarchy.

Sister Chastity is another figure that the novelist uses to show dalits in comparison to the upper castes. A missionary institution is managed by Sister Chastity. The narrator claims that the goal of missionary education is to bring about religious conversions. Mani is seduced by Sister Chastity's promises of pecuniary advantages. The Brahmins, the kinds of things they did and still do, according to Sister Chastity. Do you realise that they still refer to you as the Untouchables in private? They refer to you as "Dalits" in public, yet they call you such nasty names in private (21). Hindus and other members of the upper caste prevent members of lower castes from achieving success in life. Mani seemed to think that society hasn't altered all that much.

Mani's persona is romanticised by the author. Despite the social backwardness of a dalit, which limits his capacity for awareness, Mani skillfully expresses the dalit indignation at the oppressive social structure. Acharya and Mani are juxtaposed as the social polar opposites in a very false way because the former, who first devoted himself to an experiment, gradually becomes attracted to Oparna, an attractive scientist. His dedication to long-term studies is compromised by sensual pleasure, which ultimately leads to his demise. Mani gains control by fabricating his son's talent. Mani, however, has no idea how to portray his son as a genius. Regarding the incident involving the caste system and media culture, the novelist himself is confused. In addition to the author's confusion of the theme, the book's

*Serious Men* portrays the dalit experience in light of the state's failure to solve the dalit issues. Yet *Serious Men* succeeds in depicting the truth of dalit experiences without defining the identity of its protagonist, according to the author, who utilises sarcasm to show realism (Gupta). Mani engages in subversive behaviour by including a few anti-brahminical comments in the "Thought of the Day." Oja, Mani's wife, is characterised as innocent and naive. Mani is given a bad reputation by being

characterised as cunning, manipulative, and devious with never-ending schemes. His caste is blamed for his rage and other undesirable traits. It's noteworthy to note that the unfavourable portrayal received both praise from the critics and accolades. The author's method is to first construct a character, attribute, or setting.

Mani was exactly the same when he originally appeared in my brain, but he wasn't a Dalit. He viewed the contemporary world, modern ladies, modern science, and everything else around him with a comedic perspective. He wasn't a Dalit, though. Then I questioned, "Why is he so angry? Can I explain it to him?" And the thought of a Dalit man trying to conjure up the first smart Dalit son really captivated me. (Joseph)

Consider the social reality that led Joseph to conclude that Mani Mani should be a Dalit since he is "so furious," Anand suggests. Mani's particular brand of imagined "Dalitness" is unmistakably a byproduct of the post-Mandal anti-reservation wrath of India's upper classes, which was sympathetically portrayed by the Brahmin-run media. It may not have been possible to depict a cunning Dalit in the past, especially one who is only used as a prop in the story. (Anand)

The son of Mani, Adi, is another dalit figure that Joseph creates using the same process. He presents him as being not only poor by birth but also as a student who struggles in class, has a hearing impairment, and consequently cheats on exams. In essence, this implies that dalits are unworthy. As if that weren't enough, Joseph invents a scene where a dalit mob loots the Institute of Theory and Research as a result of a brahmin's anti-dalit remarks. The crowd is shown to be ravaging without the ability to reason or use logic. What's intriguing is that Manu Joseph requires dalit characters as "props," but he rejects their ethnicity: But I must admit that I'm astonished that everyone is talking.

As a result, the stereotyped attributes of inefficiency, lying, romanticism, docility, malleability, and lack of talent are depicted in the dalit characters of the story. The dalit characters are portrayed by the author as having no agency. The portrayals are out of step with historical knowledge of the realities of dalit life as they have changed, particularly the assertion of dalit identity and the growing awareness of their social subjugation. Because his dalit characters lack distinct subjecthood before they interact with high-caste characters, Manu Joseph, like other authors in the genre, exhibits empathy without agency.

Serious Men does not depict a dalit's ability to voice disagreement, protest against subjugation, or fight for identity. The novel lacks the dalit's ability to take liberation-related action. The narrative portrays Mani, Ojha, and their son as victims of their own doing. Unmistakably, the novelist depicts the oppression of the dalit characters as a result of or a legacy of either inherited or environmental circumstances. The oppressive system is depicted as being insurmountable for all three of the dalit protagonists. It isn't implied that the characters can get past their constraints. Therefore, it can be said that Manu Joseph exploits the dalit issue to exoticize India because he plays up the dalitness' centrality in the portrayal.

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