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Regulated Representation of the Lower-Caste Characters in Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*

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Abstract:

Manu Joseph's novel *Serious Men* has appeared against the backdrop of the post-Mandal politics and neoliberal economy. The novel as an ideological apparatus through the discourse on merit participates in legitimizing the popular notion that merit is only upper caste property and upper caste virtue. The novel represents the repressed and corrosive rage against the lower caste identity through the discourse on the lower caste merit and efficiency through which caste enters the novel. This one sided discourse represents and stereotypes lower caste identity as *meritless* and *mediocre* as the discourse on merit is systematically upper-casteized in service of the upper caste which devalues the lower caste identity.

Keywords: Representation, Lower-caste, Manu Joseph, Serious Men.

The Constitution of India after independence has made special provisions for the upliftment and empowerment of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes which had been earlier stigmatized as untouchables. The Constitution has adopted the policy of positive discrimination favouring these marginalised groups through the form of reservation quotas by allotting 15% and 7.5% reservations to SCs and STs respectively in educational institutions and for jobs in public sectors (and also in politics for the first ten years from its implementation, which is being renewed from time to time by the Parliament). In 1953, the reservation for SCs and STs was started in higher educational institutions whereas in IITs it was implemented from 1973 onwards.

The reservation policy is one of the important interventions that help to bring the historically underprivileged sections into the mainstream to enhance their standard of living. The reservations if properly understood and seen as an affirmative action certainly make lower caste people forget their atrocious past and look forward towards a better future and thus become a part of more substantive citizens of the nation.

Reservation policy is not anti-democratic as it is popularly perceived by the upper caste anti-reservationists, but is a positive step in the processes of nation-building where all will have equal opportunities. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar while drafting the Constitution, tried to include OBCs for reservation benefits in vain. Therefore he insisted then to have a provision in future to set the commission constitutionally for the other backward castes under the Article 340.

The then Central Government appointed the Kaka Kalelkar Commission for Other Backward Castes in 1953 under the Article 340 without any fruition. Again in 1978, the then Prime Minister Morarji Desai of the Janata Party Government appointed the Commission for Backward Castes headed by the Parliamentarian Bindheshwari Prasad Mandal. The Mandal Commission as it is popularly known, submitted its report in 1980 recommending 27%

reservation quota for the 54% populated OBCs in public sectors and in educational institutions like SCs and STs. In 1989, the V.P. Singh Government accepted and implemented the major recommendation of 27 per cent reservation for OBCs with slight modifications.

When the reservations were allotted to OBCs in the 1990s, questions like merit and efficiency of the lower caste people re-surfaced. There were massive agitations nationwide against the Mandal Commission particularly in higher educational institutions. It does not mean that there was no opposition to the caste-based reservations before the Mandal Commission. The Mandal recommendation just added fuel to the historical form of hatred and contempt of the upper caste community towards caste-based reservations and started re-questioning the *merit* and *efficiency* of the lower caste. The nation witnessed debates, protests, agitations and self-molestations against the Mandal.

The nation in this way was divided into two groups: the protesters and the supporters of the Mandal. The senior and renowned lawyers and jurists like V.V. Venugopal and Nana Palkhiwala argued against the Mandal recommendations whereas Ram Jethmalani, S. Subramanya and P.S. Poti argued in favour of supporting the cause in the Apex Court. Palkhiwala's arguments were popularly upheld by the upper castes agitators to argue against the quota system who argued that if 50% seats are kept reserved, then efficiency will be at stake and the entire nation will be transformed into *backwardness*; and because of backwardness, merit will be at stake.¹

This discourse on merit questions lower caste *ability* of doing a particular work *efficiently* and considers the reservation policy as anti-democratic. Tharu and Satyanarayana observe in this context:

The anti-reservationists raised slogans of 'merit', 'efficiency' and national interest'. They depicted those who had made use of reservations as 'inefficient' and, by implication, 'dangerous' doctors and engineers'.²

Also Uma Chakravarti interestingly points out the gendered role of such anti-reservation agitations:

At the height of the anti-Mandal agitation in Delhi, spearheaded by "upper" caste students and legitimized by prominent sociologists of Delhi University, women students of south Delhi colleges demonstrated in the streets carrying placards that read "We do not want unemployed husbands!"...Women students protested not for themselves but on behalf of their potential husbands. What the placards were saying is that the OBCs and Dalits in the IAS could never be their potential husbands.³

The Mandal politics has coincided with the corrosive bleakness of the liberalization and privatization policies which resulted reducing opportunities of jobs in public sectors. Therefore, the reservation-driven upward mobility of the lower caste people has become a bone of contention for various reasons even in contemporary times. Reservations in education and services have brought stability, security, economic development and higher living-standard for the lower caste which led in reducing the lower caste servility to and dependency on the upper caste.

The year 2006 is particularly important in contemporary times when the Apex Court mandated 27 per cent reservations for OBCs in all government funded institutions including the IITs and IIMs. It was an anxious moment for the upper caste group particularly when OBCs too were included in the existing quota system in “institutions of national importance”⁴ like the IITs which were established to facilitate the need of engineers for massive steel industries that were set up with foreign collaboration after independence. IITs had been dominated by upper caste people for so many years where an admission into it was synonymous to merit and they were “stepping-stones to transnational mobility, at their peak sending approximately two-thirds of every graduating class to the United States.”⁵

The above discussion helps us to establish the point how merit is perceived through lenses of castes as generally some upper caste people feel that merit is their caste property and caste virtue. Subramanian in the article “Recovering Caste Privilege: The Politics of Meritocracy at the Indian Institute of Technology” points out similarly that how Tamil Brahmins think and see Madras IIT as their only destination and *home* when they get admission. For them, the IIT offers an opportunity to leave Tamil Nadu for the United States of America as they feel that merit is their caste privilege which is equated with the admission in the IIT. In this way they legitimize their self-representation through merit and the IIT, and delegitimize the lower mobilization as “a parochial, corrupting expression of ‘vote bank’ politics.”⁶ Also Subramanian notes when in 2006 “the Indian Parliament was debating the extension of backward-caste quotas to the IITs, alumni staged a protest in Silicon Valley against reservations as an ‘attack on meritocracy’ and ‘brand dilution’.”⁷

The novel *Serious Men* by Manu Joseph which appeared against this backdrop in 2010 is an offspring of the post-Mandal politics and neoliberal economy where debates on caste based quotas and reservations are renewed from time to time in mass media, in educational institutions, in literatures and literary meets and so many other forms including day to day general discussions of the common people. The novel, seen as an ideological apparatus participates actively in this debate through the discourse on merit legitimizing the popular notion that merit is only upper caste property and upper caste virtue.

The argument in this paper is that the novel represents the repressed and corrosive rage against the lower caste identity through the discourse on the lower caste merit and efficiency through which caste enters the novel. This one sided discourse represents and stereotypes lower caste identity as *meritless* and *mediocre*. In the novel, the discourse on merit is systematically upper-casteized in service of the upper caste which devalues the lower caste merit and efficiently. This has been done though representing the lower caste character, Ayyan Mani in the elite science and space institution -the Institute of Theory and Research. The argument is substantiated by paying attention to how the upper caste narrative shows deep-seated bias towards the merit of lower caste identity using metonymy where the caste identity is seen in the form of synecdoche - a part is mentioned (the lower caste characters like Ayyan Mani, his son Adi, and the minister S Waman) and the whole lower caste society is indicated.

The novel *Serious Men* won many awards like *The Hindu Literary Prize* (2010), *The American PEN/OPEN Book Award*, and also shortlisted for *The Man Asian Literary Prize* and *The PG Wodehouse Literary Prize* for the best comic novel which tells the divisive story of

Mani, a lower caste who spins lies about his ten year old geeky son Adi as he is a mathematical genius.

One of the prize judges of *The Hindu Literary Prize*, the novelist Shashi Deshpande praises and salutes Manu Joseph for bringing about the *reality* of caste to the surface candidly and directly:

In Indian writing in English we haven't yet approached the novel in the way this man has done... He has spoken about caste. We are ignoring reality, but he has straightforwardly plunged into the mind of a *Dalit* man and has done it with style and panache. To have a *Dalit* man speak in English and make it authentic is very difficult - but Manu Joseph has done it very easily, without making it grotesque.⁸

The novelist Manu Joseph too claims that he represents the caste question *realistically*, distancing himself from the sympathetic and compassionate attitude of his predecessors on the discourse of caste: "Indian writers in English usually take a very sympathetic and compassionate view of the poor, and I find that fake and condescending."⁹ He further opines about the reader and the lower caste character:

Most Indian readers of literary fiction written in English are of a certain class, and one of the recreations of the Indian upper class is compassion for the poor. I think the poor in India are increasingly very empowered, and the time has come when the novel can portray them in a more realistic way. Ayyan is still an underdog but that is due to his circumstances, not due to his *intellect or aspirations* (emphasis added).¹⁰

Here both Deshpande and Joseph underline the realistic depiction of the lower caste identity of Ayyan Mani and his son, and therefore it is imperative to see whether the novel participates in creating the realistic and adequate identity of the lower caste personality or not, and how the narrative sees the lower caste merit and aspirations. In this framework, an attempt has been made to see how both the upper caste narrator who is outside the realm of the represented and the upper caste characters from the novel show the deep-seated bias and hatred towards the lower caste identity by building the discourse on merit and efficiency of the lower caste identity inappropriately.

Let us see how the figure synecdoche works perilously in *Serious Men* where part is mentioned and whole is indicated or implied. Mani (and other lower caste characters too) is (are) represented in a synecdochic manner in all possible negative shades without attributing a single positive trait to his (their) personality and life. Let us see how lower caste characters as parts represent the whole the lower caste society and merit.

The narrative opens with Ayyan Mani's description as a dark, short and shabby man of thirty nine year old new-Buddhist, son of a sweeper, who has transgressed, in the words of Aniket Jaaware, "the birth mark for the action/doing mark".¹¹ He works as personal assistant to an upper caste astronomer - Arvind Acharya at the Institute of Theory and Research, Mumbai. The narrative begins by depicting Mani as sexually perverse, narcissist and male-chauvinist prig whose favourite pass-time is to observe upper caste girls and women who are taking a walk at

the Worli sea-face. His favourite imagination is that these women are “all in ecstasy of being seduced by him.”¹² His sexuality is highlighted with his voyeuristic pleasure - observing their *proud breasts, soft-thighs*. He looks at them with eyes that do not know “how to show a cultured indifference” (04).

The narrative degrades and makes fun of him as he observes these women from behind as he cannot endure their beautiful faces that *depressed him* because for him they are like “Mercedes, BlackBerry phones and sea-view homes” (04). He is one of the “hordes of miserable people all around who spread dengue” who gawk at beautiful women “the way stray dogs look at good stock” (04).

The narrative thus opens with a description of Mani as sexually perverse, narcissist, uncultured and unscrupulous who is waiting at the sea-shore for Mr. Tambe, a reporter of a small-scale Marathi daily *Yug*. The narrative projects his personality in negative shades with relation to his physical appearance too – his body and clothes, and his sexuality and nature who turns out to be fraud, scheming and dishonest throughout the novel. He is a womaniser and cheap, narcissist who dreams to be father of many upper caste boys by “donating his Dalit semen to the fair childless Brahmin couples... and his seed could impregnate hundreds of unsuspecting high-caste women... stout brooding Dalits would spring up everywhere ”(52).

But the narrative very skilfully does not make it happen as Mani discovers that his sperm count is “just half the normal rate” (52) at a fertility clinic’s sperm bank and his dream to be a father of many upper caste children gets *defeated*. This is not an attempt to show that Mani is noble in aim and he advocates the Ambedkarite thesis of mingling of blood which will bring about feelings of kith and kin. This cannot be realised in such petty attempts. But the point here is that it seems an agenda on the side of the narrative to project Mani in all possible *defects*. Mani lives with this defect and does not discover or inform it to his wife Oja until deformed Adi is born after three years of their marriage- *a deformed child by defective sperms!* And for such defects and perversity the lower caste identity seems to become so engaging to judges like Shashi Desphande who informs that they have enjoyed and saluted the projection of Mani’s perverse sexuality and filthy mind while judging for *The Hindu Literary Prize*:

Ayyan is a chauvinist, but the character is so engaging – two of us on the judging panel were women, and neither [was] offended by the book. We were laughing so much in the judging.¹³

Apart from such depiction, Ayyan’s personality is woven around in so many negative shades and attributes throughout the novel. He is depicted as a liar, mischievous, sadist who appears to be a complete foil to his upper caste boss, Arvind Acharya in relation to intellect, manners, nature and so forth.

Mani is so unscrupulous and unethical that he listens to conversations of scientists on the office landline phone, opens and reads the office correspondence and seals these letters back skilfully, and throws some of them into dustbin without delivering to Acharya. He skilfully arranges everything. He also steals office stationeries and toilet rolls from the Institute. He invents fake quotes to abuse and subvert the Brahmin culture in order to avenge the caste exploitation which seems to be very shallow attempts. The narrative seems to describe Mani in

such shades to show how Mani manifests his so called intellect to prove that he has also got talent and skills and to *beat* the upper caste scientists and astronomers of the Institute.

Further, the narrative projects Mani as a careless and irresponsible father who rears his son Adi as uncultured, manner-less spoiled brat like him only by teaching all abuses, and inculcating bad values only. For this, Adi's mother Oja feels that Adi is "like an animal, without any influence of culture" (51). In a nutshell, both the father and the son are shown as devoid of any positive aspects, values and attributes.

The narrative whips all the lower caste characters and does not spare a single person depicted in the novel. The lower caste Minister S. Waman also is projected as corrupt and thug who sees Adi is a true successor for him in future. He comes to congratulate Adi when he takes the JET (Joint Entrance Test) and ends his "speech by hailing Adi as the future liberator of the Dalits" (281).

The minister appears as a corrupt representative of the lower caste political identity. The Minister had run away from his village to Mumbai to escape from caste atrocities who then (s)old vegetables on a wooden cart near the Crawford Market and slowly become a thug, despite his small stout frame. He pelted stones and broke shop windows *to protest against matters he did not understand and to mourn deaths of leaders he did not know*. He grew to become a coordinator of freelance goons and, in time, joined politics. His art lay in raising armies of *angry Dalit youth at short notice who could turn very violent* at times...Every time they felt slighted, as for instance when miscreants once garlanded the statue of their liberator Ambedkar with slippers, men like Waman used to lead a battalion of *angry youth and loot whole lanes*" (emphasis added, 280).

Here the narrative makes an obvious reference to the Dalit Panther politics and lashes perceiving the lower caste leaders as thugs, looters, violent, dumb, corrupt and unscrupulous. Through Waman, the narrative ridicules and humiliates the lower caste politics and their leaders. In this line, the declaration on the side of the Minister that Adi as a representative of the future Dalit community and leadership seems problematic and objectionable from the lower caste view point.

The narrative mediates Mani's odd existence in the society through casteist metaphors of vehicles on streets. Ayyan, *like odd and gigantic bus* without having any grace represents the lower caste presence in public sectors:

There was a caste system even on the roads. The cars, their faces frowning in a superior way through the bonnet grilles, were the Brahmins. They were higher than the motorcycles who were higher than the pedestrians. The cycles were lowest of the low. Even the pedestrians pretended that they didn't see them. The bus had to be something in this structure, and Ayyan decided it was him (81-82).

The narrative not only mediates Mani's existence alone in this way but also that of entire lower caste community in relation to public spaces which points out its deep-seated hatred and contempt towards the lower caste presence in public spaces:

This country had become a circus, and that was fair. What Ayyan's forefathers were once to the Brahmins, the Brahmins were today to the world. They and the other privileged, all of whom he recognized only as the Brahmins, had become miserable backward clowns in the discreet eyes of the white man. And there lay the revenge of the Dalits. They were the nation now, and they oppressed the Brahmins by erecting an incurable commotion on the streets. The Brahmins had nowhere to go now but to suffer in silence or to flee to non-vegetarian lands. Their women could no longer walk on the streets in peace. Pale boys elbowed their breasts (82).

Here an attempt is not made to see how the narrative mediates the lower caste politics or Dalit public space. But a focus is given more on how the narrative perceives the lower caste merit and efficiency in relation to Mani's attempts to project his ten year old geeky son Aditya as *genuinely genius*.

Mani has no exceptional talent, but wants to transcend his present miserable existence through forgery and deceit. He is outside the so-called intellectual world of the Science and Space Research Institute where upper caste scientists, astronomers engage themselves in discovering alien world spending or wasting crores of rupees. He too aspires to create one such world outside with the help of his son. Further he feels that he is exploited, suppressed and victimized because of his lower caste identity. Therefore he embarks upon a secret game in lieu with his *deformed* and one-ear deaf son Aditya/Adi to entertain himself and to give his ordinary and stupid wife, Oja the hope and stimulation that they are heading towards a better and spectacular future!

Once, Mani observes that his wife is overjoyed after Adi's scoring 100 per cent in Mathematics. Then he starts waving many fictional stories and outrageous myths around the handicapped boy's so called intelligence to make his wife happy and to make her feel excitement in the life. He would then prove by fraudulent means and give wide publicity in the newspapers bribing press-reporters like Tambe in order to make his son a public figure.

Actually Adi is so average that even he cannot understand the simple language of newspapers as his father Mani cannot understand Oja's simple proverbs or anything in general—"There was always something that most people, very ordinary people, understand and he didn't" (85). But he makes laconic and dumb Adi memorize some questions like 'What is gravity made of miss?' 'Why are leaves green?' and so forth. He does it so that Adi can ask these questions to his school-teachers. The teachers also encourage Adi initially and start considering him *extraordinary* rather than *special*. Adi too does not like to be called as *special* for his deafness in the school (St Andrew's) but loves to be called *extraordinary* or *genius*. He starts enjoying his new position and game being called extraordinary as he gets special attention and becomes a myth soon. Also he soon forgets that it is merely a *game* and starts conceiving himself as *genuinely genius*:

The myth of a child genius was surprisingly simple to create, Ayyan realized, especially around a boy who was innately smart and who wore a hearing-aid. Adi had simply to say something odd in the class once a week to keep the legend alive. (103)

Mani uses unusual tricks and devices to prove deviously his son is a genius throughout the novel. For example, he would dial his mobile number from the office landline phone, would take the call and then would place the receiver slightly askew on its cradle very carefully as he can listen to the conversation sneakily. He uses this method to listen to the conversation between the Headmistress of St Andrew's school and the quiz committee to listen to the questions to prove Adi's intelligence. With such fraud, Adi answers the questions in the inter-school science quiz contest to prove that he is really a genius. In another instance, he makes Adi to recite first thousand prime numbers to the reporter of *The Times of India* by putting the earpiece in his good right ear. He fixes a walkman earpiece to the shell of the hearing-aid, puts the walkman inside Adi's shirt taped on his stomach deceptively. Adi thus listens to the record and reproduces the prime numbers to the reporter!

Mani knows very well how to play the game skilfully without being exposed fully. He is so manipulative that he wins confidence of the new Director Nambodri by telling him about Acharya's episode of the contaminating samples of the balloon mission which resulted Acharya's sacking from the post of Director. Then he seeks Nambodri's permission to allow Adi now eleven year old to appear for the toughest JET (Joint Entrance Test) of the Institute taken by graduates only to prove that he is *genuinely genius*.

When Nambodri allows Adi to appear for the JET, Mani plays very smartly by manipulating a simple and ambitious Arvind Acharya as he shows him the audio record that he secretly recorded once which proves Acharya is blameless in the matter of contamination of samples. The record is a conversation between Acharya and Oparna, a lady-staff in the institute where Oparna confesses that she had deliberately contaminated the samples in order to seek revenge on Acharya for his betrayal in their love-relationships. In return, Mani asks Acharya to tell all questions that he had set for the JET when he was Director which Acharya helplessly compels to do so. In this way he makes Adi to score the highest by manipulating and using Acharya as a pawn in his game.

Mani then takes a final and decisive step to overthrow Nambodri from his present position of Director who insulted and ridiculed him and the lower caste society by presenting the audio-recording of the Acharya- Oparna conversation in the press conference. This record helps to free Acharya from false allegations and restore as Director leading to the fall of Nambodri and his team. When Nambodri tries to expose Ayyan's game and challenges to expose Adi, Ayyan then uses his caste cards dishonestly and arranges an attack on the Institute by the lower caste mob posing himself as a victim of caste prejudices and politics.

The narrative depicts Mani in such dark shades as he is so crazy, stupid, dishonest and manipulative who always craves to be famous all the time making his son also addicted to it. Mani is so greedy and incorrigible trickster that he does not know when to stop playing his game as the novel ends ridiculously with Mani telling his son Adi that their next game would be how to bend a spoon with mind!

The narrative deliberately does not pay any attentions to the affirmative action affected by reservations that are kept in order to bring about the social justice to the excluded groups for many centuries in every sphere of life. Ambedkar's objective was that lower castes should be part and parcel of the modern nation; therefore he ensured inclusion of these groups through certain legal steps like reservations in the independent Indian caste society. He was quite aware

that Indian society would not become casteless with certain remedies like inter-dinning, inter-caste marriages and so forth in the immediate future; therefore he ensured legally enforced inclusion of the excluded groups like SCs and STs through which people like Mani could get jobs in public sectors. This model of reservation addresses such social exclusion of these groups that they were deprived from membership of society through caste-laws for centuries.

But the narrative sadly upholds the popular and deep-seated caste biases and discrimination against the lower caste merit and efficiency through such discourse. The narrative builds the lower caste identity on the basis of hatred and bias as it portrays Mani and his son with so many negative and unattractive shades. While doing this, the narrative makes their physical appearance too as deformed and horrid. Further like Mani, his son Adi also appears as sexually obsessed as even at the age of ten he takes a *chance* on a girl when they are playing husband-and-wife game.

In this way, Ayyan Mani and his son are shown in the manner of synecdoche who represent mediocrity and inefficiency of lower caste people. Adi is misrepresented as a future of the lower caste people negatively and inappropriately. Such synecdochic processes work here to stereotype the lower caste identities only which inform us that Mani and his son are representatives of his caste and community who are used to accentuate and reaffirm the deep-seated hatred and prejudice against the entire lower caste community. The narrative does not present lower caste characters as empowered with the reservation policy but instead depicts their identities negatively.

To conclude, the narrative openly shows the deep seated bias, contempt, and hatred toward the lower caste identity through the discourse on merit. The lower caste identity is degraded and subjected to humiliation which is disguised in discourse on merit i.e. such degradation and humiliation come in the disguise of discourse on merit.

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