



DISTINCTIVE VOICES OF DISTRESS:

A Study of Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* as a masterpiece of Dalit Consciousness

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Abstract

It has been the nature of human beings that if they face any tyranny and atrocity from the other human beings or prevailing government, they candidly opposes it for their survival sake and maintenance of identity. There is a limit to resist the oppression and when the humiliation reaches at its zenith, the resistance diminishes and evolves in the form of protest or disapproval against the barbarism. The above lines express the same slogans and intensions of revolt and protest against the prevailing hegemony. The lower class people fed up with this dehumanization have thus decided to generate a dispute for the restoration of their real identity which they used to have. Reconstruction of identity means snatching of freedom, rights and justice from the hands of upper classes. It became a dream for the subalterns to upgrade their identity that has been trampled by dominant class. Dalits claim themselves to be the aboriginals of India and their real identity has been ossified to another category named 'Dalits' by the dominant classes. Thus for the resurrection of their real and authentic identity, they bluntly engaged themselves in revolts and protests. The present paper throws light upon the innumerable endeavors taken by Dalits for the recreation of their identity in the society of barbarians.

Keywords: Caste, Deception, Revolt, Satire, Realism, Interdependence and Identity Upliftment

Introduction

Our civil society wholly and solely lacks the homogeneity. The problems of racism, sex and other forms of expulsion are predominant in our society. The so-called untouchables are expelled from the society on the basis of religious principles in India. They are treated as filthy and cruddy. Due to excess exploitation, the untouchables engaged themselves in protestation against the prevailing caste system and their grade at the bottom of hierarchical order. Finding Hinduism as the pivot of the caste system, the anti-caste activists indulge in separating untouchables from the Hindu religion and Hindu community. The untouchables were ramified in to Jatis. Their status was given below the four varnas and was forced to live outside. Social interactions were neglected with them and were considered as most polluted. This is the reason why Dalits began to revolt against the hegemonic order. The brutality and the deprivation of Dalits in India by the emergence of caste is expressed by Satyanarayana as: From the mid of first half of 20th century onward, under the influence of Dr. Ambedkar the Dalit movement had created a light of consciousness among the untouchables. They preferred to identify Dalits among other castes. And as a result, a good number of Dalits writers came forward with a mission to expose the Hindus' cruelties and atrocities committed on Dalits. The Dalits journalistic writings, particularly in regional languages, performed an essential role in exposing the exploitations and atrocities committed on Dalits. The writers



of the journals had made it crystal clear that 'the implementation of the Gandhian programme by the obstinate upper caste leaders was slow, reluctant and half-hearted (Satyanarayana, *Dalit Identity and Consciousness* 111).

Manu Joseph's novel *Serious Men* (2010) is a potent and vehement representation of Dalit identity in modern Indian society. Manu Joseph, the editor of Indian newsweekly, received high fame by his novel. His first novel *Serious Men* brought him *The Hindu Literary Prize* and *The New York PEN/ OPEN Book Award*. The novel depicts the milieu of Indian society in 2008. As a journalist, he was also the deputy editor and Mumbai Bureau chief of OPEN Magazine. Manu Joseph in his novel *Serious Men* portrays the fortification and restoration of Dalits from the compulsions imposed upon them by the Indian culture and traditions. The protagonist of the novel Ayyan Mani, a Dalit works as a personal assistant of a great Brahmin astronomer, Arvind Acharya at the institute of Theory and Research in Mumbai. He lives with his wife, Oja and son, Adi in a small flat. Ayyan is highly fearful about his sons' future because he knows that his past blot given by the caste system will not allow him to uplift. Thus to attract media towards his son, he misrepresented his son as a genius. The irony in the novel is that both Arvind 'a Brahmin' and Ayyan 'a Dalit' are dependent on one another. Arvind needs Ayyan to secure his career in Institute and Ayyan needs Arvind to conceal his deception; without any impediment in his sons' future. The novel is embedded with the tone of sarcasm. The satire is that Arvind wholly rely on Ayyan. Ayyan seems to be an uneducated person, but his proceedings in the office declare his intelligence. Besides that Ayyan's son, Adi is treated as genius, but is just an average student. Joseph in this novel poses new opportunities and hopes for Dalits in the form of satirical realism. The injustices and prejudices against Dalits are portrayed by Joseph in a satirical way. Ayyan Mani is black

haired person and his hair combed to sideways and there is a line between. This line indicates a harsh reality of partition not only at the national level but the partition of religions in the name of castes. And the division inside the religion is not the division of people only, it turned a national problem. Had not the Hinduism divided intrinsically, the British could not have imperialised India. Joseph says:

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 neighbours. His eyes were keen and knowing. A healthy moustache sheltered a perpetual smile. A dark tidy man, but somehow expensive (*Serious Men* 3).

It is noteworthy here to mention that the setting of the novel *Serious Men* has its own perspective which has seriously been justified by Joseph. He has chosen a place in Mumbai Worli Seaface, which is almost fully populated by Dalits. Joseph in this regard states: "the crowd of Worli Seaface was swelling: it was now a giant colourless swarm. Pale boys with defeat in their eyes walked in horizontal gangs" (*Serious Men* 5). Joseph in turn predicts the miserable life style of Dalits, who live in filthy, congested and poky area of Mumbai. The novelist expresses that the worst condition of Dalits in their cacophonous residence are no way responsible for it, it is only the political leaders and government that ignored them deliberately. Perhaps it was their crime that they were Dalits; hence targeted to left them undeveloped. Their chawls in which they live never met any modification rather than they were getting more dilapidated, which is an open testimonial of their marginalization. Joseph explores the predicament of Dalits even in Modern India who are living in the baking and tumble-down Chawls. There is no one in this country who could take heed of their miseries and problems. The novelist discloses the exact milieu of the Worli Seaface where Dalits are living in small chawls as:

It was the hive of ten thousand one-room homes carved inside a hundred and twenty



identical three-storeyed buildings that stood like grey ruins, their paint long removed by old rains... The chawls were built by the British more than eight decades ago in a belated attack of conscience to house the homeless. But the tenements turned out to be so badly constructed that the street dwellers refused to move in, seeing no point in forsaking the whole world and the blue sky in exchange for a small dark room on an endless corridor of gloom (*Serious Men 6*).

Joseph has successfully employed his satire to figure out the social fowls of India which are rooted in caste system. There is no way any subjective approach of Joseph even after being an author himself. He let his characters to work as agents to present the realistic picture of Indian society particularly the prosaic life of Dalits. Ayyan in the narrative makes a humorous pretension that his son is a genius boy. It is not humorous in actual sense because somewhere it is ironical by which the indication acquire the Ayyan basically was hungry about his identity of his son. Ayyan tried to train his son to get noticed in his class by proposing those queries which will make others sure that Adi is a genius student. It was all for the purpose to gain the identity among the society of upper castes. Ayyan trained his son Adi in such a way that whenever he poses any question to any teacher; all gets stunned and surprised. That is why the principal of his school, Sister Chastity called up Ayyan and said: "he wants to know about the speed of light and the acceleration due to gravity and things like that. Obviously, he is some sort of genius and we have to nurture him. He is very special" (*Serious Men 20*).

After all Ayyan is father, who is very much conscious about the future of his son, Adi. He can do anything because his fatherly love wishes his son's future equivalent to others in the society. That is why he crossed the boundaries of values and virtues in order attain socio- economic equality. Ayyan is necessarily antagonist in nature because he never differentiates between right and wrong. He

took unfair measures for the identity or familiarity of his son. A quiz programme was organised by the school and Adi was also participating in it. For the sake of his son, Ayyan enter the principal's office in order to steal the quiz papers but failed. Then he went near the principal's room and eavesdrop the whole conversation on quiz programme. He listen all the questions that are to be asked in the quiz competition. Ayyan's anxiety is fair and general because he is beyond options to acquire some hope of future for his family. His treatment to the happenings is necessary for him because he feels that his family may get a chance to live not with haunch but with a permanent rise in society.

Ayyan's selection of revolt and vehement opposition against the prevailing system resembles him with Arvind Adiga's character Balram Halwai in the novel *The White Tiger* (2008). The novel is the description of Balram's life who is living with acute pains and humiliation in the rural village of Laxmangarh. Despite of hardships faced by Balram, could not really upgrade his status because of his lower caste and class. He thought that the only way to achieve status in the caste ridden society is to do something dreadful or venturous. For the sake of his identity, he killed his boss Mr. Ashok. Adiga explores the forceful nature of caste system in modern India that forced Balram to commit the crime. Adiga highlights the corruption of India through Balram, who finally became a successful entrepreneur. Balram says: "I am Tomorrow" (Adiga, *The White Tiger 5*). Balram was aware of the fact that he could not achieve his dignity in the society in the virtuous ways, and thought that he will light his tomorrow by going to any limits. Joseph's Ayyan like Adiga's Balram adopted the un- fear means to restore their long last identities in the caste dominated society.

Joseph by his sagacious intellect mingled realism and satire in order to express the identity of Dalits in a different way. Ayyan is working in the milieu where his boss Arvind is



a Brahmin. A Brahmin, whose life is well prosperous and successful and his fame would have often tempted Ayyan to give his family a better future with luxury and complete identity. Ayyan's heart is blisssed when he saw the news regarding the greatness of his son in the newspaper, Marathi daily. Ayyan once thought to capture the attention of media towards his son, Adi regarding his brilliance because he was familiar that for the acquisition of identity the media plays a pivotal role. So it was also a reason that Ayyan tricks to present his son's genius. After doing this, a large number of media organised. Adi after standing to prove as his greatness in front of the gathering of Brahmins filled Ayyan with some sense of dominance over Brahmins at the moment. Ayyan after got succeeded in achieving the target with cheat and lie, which reflects the Indian modern society to a great extent, where a media- focus figure achieves praise and admiration, but not sympathise about his struggle through which the figure has reached to media attention. Adi also became a public figure and got admired by media but his identity of being a Dalit remained still farther from his existence. Though his life style changed but he is still a Dalit which never spares him. Ayyan was familiar that if his son, Adi will be considered as genius in summon, this will puzzle the upper castes because a Dalit genius is not heard before. The Brahmins had already stereotyped them by declaring that the Dalits whose life is poor in heights, and fully down in mentality; how can they be genius? Though by doing this the Dalits will never get recognition for equality but somehow this will be an initiation to make way fertile. And this has justified by Ayyan in the narrative by driving his son to action.

Serious Men is a narrative that focuses upon the rectification of Dalit identity in India, which is evident from the Ayyan's son's secret being exposed to public. Once in the office Ayyan eavesdrop the conversation of new appointed director, Nambodri and his colleagues. They

were talking against the reservation and development of Dalits in India:

They spoke about the debilitating influence of reservation in education and the dangerous political resurgence of the Dalits. There was a pause in the conversation and Ayyan was about to turn of the speaker mode. He thought the men were about to walk out. Then Nambodri made a comment about Ambedkar which stunned even Ayyan. What Nambodri had said about the liberator of Dalits was so damning that the silver dictaphone in Ayyan's hand was a weapon that could consign to flames not just the institute but also the whole country (Joseph, *Serious Men* 295).

Though Nambodri and the other colleagues were belonging to the intellectual class, but their ideology depicts their ignorance. Ayyan through their conversation analysed that the Dalits will never be accepted by the society. The conversation between Nambodri and other scientists made the Dalit masses vociferous and violent. The rebellious act of Dalits is depicted by Joseph as:

The glass of the huge square window had cracked. The astronomers fell on the floor and lay on their stomachs. There was another sound and this time the window crashed. They could hear the roar of the mob down below. Five more stones landed in the room. They could hear other windows break and the sound of things being beaten to pulp, and the shrieks of women. Then they heard riots come closer. Things were exploding, men were screaming. The astronomers crawled closer to each other and stared at the door as the sound of death grew louder and louder (Joseph, *Serious Men* 323).

This exhortation of Dalits exposes their political identity. The Dalit community could not resist the assault of themselves and their leader Ambedkar, and thus they revolted. They have passed a wrong comment against the Messiah or liberator of Dalits and thus could no longer bear this insult. In this sense of revolt, Joseph infuses a dynamic thrust in the ideologies of Dalits as:



Across the city there were protests, but they were less violent. Later in the evening, outside the Bombay hospital, mobs paraded an effigy that was named after Nambodri. They beat it with slippers and finally burnt it. There were reports of the stray violence in other parts of the country but after two days the riots receded (Joseph, *Serious Men* 324).

In other ways Joseph inspired the Dalit community to engage themselves in riots and violence, which is the only way to achieve a dignified status and identity in Indian society. Humble proclamations will only lead to the destruction of self of Dalits. Manu Joseph's novel *Serious Men* possesses a different perspective than Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable*. Anand's novel *Untouchable* focuses upon the nationalistic movement of Gandhi but Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* insists upon the rights of Dalits. Joseph tried to evaluate the means of empowerment of Dalit community. Anand's primary concern was on nationalism rather than on Dalits. While as, Joseph primary concern is the upliftment of Dalit identity and the nationalism. He lets the Dalits to raise their slogans for the fortification of their status and identity in Indian society.

Serious Men presents the determinant characters, which have the intimacy to stand by their legs in order to acquire their equivalence to other castes in the society. They do not need to lean upon any political leader like Gandhi, who could emancipate Dalits from the shackles of caste system. In *Serious Men*, Dalits want to do whatever they want, conditionally upon their own guts. Joseph's Ayyan is completely different from Anand's Bakha, because as a Dalit, he wants to be an independent figure without anyone's pity. While as, Bakha is a timid one, who is ready to tolerate whatever odds are imposed upon him by the society. On the other hand, Ayyan is somehow a brave hearted one because he is able to raise voice against his oppression and exploitation and Bakha is a dumb Dalit, who can only dream about his future of liberation from the chains of

discrimination. Dalits of *Serious Men* although talk about the prevalent politics of Indian society and side by side they actively participate on the occasions whenever they feel that they have the chance to revolutionise their Dalit community. Their efforts let the world to know about their marginalization, which is frequently prevalent in modern India yet. Thus the novel *Serious Men* incorporate a new zest in the lives of Dalits to revolt and fight for their rights and identity.

Conclusion

Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* is the most confirm representation of Dalits of India, who are subjected to humiliation and exploitation. He has fully employed his narrative in favour of Dalit identity and liberation. Joseph's perspective is utterly communal, which is the root of nationality. Joseph has successfully incorporated his satire to explore the social fowls of India which are rooted in caste system. Joseph's writing is defiant in nature because he treats riots and revolts as an ultimate weapon of achieving proper identity and resurrection in Indian society.

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