

Dimensions of Resistance: Subversion as a Strategy in *The Serious Men*

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ABSTRACT

Manu Joseph through his debut *Serious Men* has puffed in a new breath to the Indian writing scenario by dealing with the sensitive class issue in a way not previously dealt with by other writers. Subversion is the key with which he unlocks and let flow the long-repressed anguish of a Dalit. Ayyan Mani is central to the novel's satirical power. As a Dalit man working in an elite institution, he is acutely aware of his limitations in upward mobility due to the caste barriers. But, instead of adopting a victimized stance, he opts to fight against the system using deception and wit. The years of suppression undergone by Ayyan have made him furious and revengeful and he wrecks his vengeance upon the Brahmins. His cynicism and dark humor comes as weapons against the deeply ingrained caste hierarchy that seeks to render him invisible.

Keywords: Dalit resistance, subversion, caste hierarchy, dark humor.

Power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge and truth. Foucault analyses the working of a social structure through the differentiation of the 'truth' and 'false' regarding a society. But this Truth is not an absolute one, but those forms which are not false, or to put it differently, the Truth constitutes everything accepted in the society, which is further subjective to a change of ideology. Thus, an existing truth can at any time be altered or challenged. This fluctuating nature of truth can be exploited by any group who intends to bring some existing false as truth. Such subversions of the false/true binary but to gain acceptance must be established through discourses. Literature as a discourse has proved powerful enough to invert any existing binary. This analysis of the functioning of power in a society by Foucault has

been exploited in this paper to attempt a reading of Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* as an inversion of the Dalit/Brahmin binary prevalent in the Indian society.

Dalit resistance in the modern Indian scenario is slowly sliding to prominence owing to the stark, unflinching voices of the writers writing from within the community. Autobiographical portraits have opened up many episodes and experiences from the lives of this under privileged group that has long been excluded from the mainstream literature. It has even succeeded in adding an alternative history by filling up the gaps and clearing the blurs in the existing history. Sharan Kumar Limbale rightly notes that for Dalit writers including himself, writing is a form of rebellion. Their protest is both on the streets and on paper. They consider words are their weapons. Literature is the Parliament for him, where he wants to discuss his rights and demands, which have been neglected for thousands of years.

Dalit writing of the earliest times thoroughly confined to the bitter experiences of the Dalits in the society. Either it was a Dalit speaking of his experience or a Dalit writer penning the miseries of their community. Either way it thoroughly clung to the Dalit circle, and the propaganda had a minimum wavelength. Signs of recognition of this marginalized category in India could be seen in the modern literature when the genre that came into existence through the pen of the Dalits was taken up by non-Dalit writers too. Writers like Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Vikas Swamy, Arundati Roy, Arvind Adiga, Manu Joseph or others have dealt with the issue of marginalization capturing the voice of the unspoken. What is striking about these authors is the thorough realism, and subversion they retort to in order to picture the faultiness of the Indian society and to liberate the group from the bottom of India's social pyramid they have been occupying for about a millennium.

Manu Joseph through his debut *Serious Men* has puffed in a new breath to the Indian writing scenario by dealing with the sensitive class issue in a way not previously dealt with by other writers. Subversion is the key with which he unlocks and let flow the long-repressed anguish of a Dalit. Ayyan Mani, the central figure in the novel through whom Joseph paints the Dalit resistance, is a secretary to the Director of the Institute of Theory and Research in Mumbai. Ayyan Mani is central to the novel's satirical power. As a Dalit man working in an elite institution, he is acutely aware of his limitations in upward mobility due to the caste barriers. But, instead of adopting a victimized stance, he opts to fight against the system using deception and wit. The Brahmin director Arvind Acharya and the Deputy director Jana Namboodiri are the major targets of Ayyan's vengeance. The years of suppression undergone by Ayyan have made him furious and revengeful and he wrecks his vengeance upon the Brahmins through these senior scientists. With astute talent and soft villainy Ayyan plays tricks to tumble off their reputation. His most audacious act is that of convincing the world that his son Aditya is a child prodigy. This forms a subversive attack on the notion that intelligence is the privilege and an inherent trait of the savarnas.

At some point these tricks to which his family too is a part moves out of his hand. But Ayyan tactfully reclaims the reign. The story, in short, is a Dalit's victory over the Brahmins. To accomplish this victory Joseph has implemented various levels of subversion. The realistic portrayal of the incidents in the suburbs of Mumbai surely will stand testimony to the impassivity and worth of these marginalized people and help them reinvent their identity.

Joseph mocks the notion of intelligence as the sole determinant of success in Indian academia. He exemplifies how privilege often masquerades as “merit,” enabling the Savarnas a domination of the scientific discourse, denying the marginal groups access to these spaces. Ayyan Mani, though an employee of a lower rank, succeeds in exposing the absurdity of the supposedly superior minds around him. His cynical observations about the absurd jargon and self-indulgence of the scientists reflect a deep-seated skepticism about the claims of objectivity and rationality that the elite class uses to justify its status.

The Institute of Theory and Research is the meeting point of extraordinary brains from various corners of the country, to materialize much bigger astronomical visions. The novel gains its title from this serious group of men in pursuit of alien microbes intruding the planet from outer space. The importance of this institute and its men in the scientific world is not but what forms the crux of the story. The plot is unraveled before the reader not through these ‘extraordinary’ people but the very ‘ordinary’ Ayyan Mani, the Dalit secretary at the Institute. The big events at the institute comes packed in the comical vision of Ayyan Mani whose philosophy is “Stare long enough at serious people, they will begin to appear comical” (Joseph 4). The highlight on the ordinary than the extraordinary is intentional. Joseph aims at bringing a parallel between the thoughts of the so called ‘high’ and ‘low’. Thus, Mani's intensions, aims and ambitions in life too gain a prominence like the scientific ambitions of Acharya and Namboodiri. Through subversion Joseph aims at presenting the world in the shades, by enabling the reader to get into their boots and share their sensibilities. The author with astute talent delves deep into the mind of this Dalit protagonist, to bring out the ‘everyman’ in him.

The very opening of the novel introduces Ayyan Mani as a “dark tidy man, but somehow inexpensive” (3). The very term ‘inexpensive’ offers a variety of meanings. Outwardly it may mean economic backwardness, but in depth it highlights his marginality owing to his caste and class. He is a Dalit working as a secretary in an institute whose intelligentsia is owned by the caste Brahmins. Being a puny clerk in such an institute can impart to anyone a sense of inferiority. Mani outgrows such sensibilities and makes himself expensive by involving and indulging in the business of the institute to such an extent that it becomes a threat to the high officials. By attaching a sense of comicality to his superiors and involving himself in a secret game against the Brahmins he makes himself feel powerful and important. Thus, by bringing the ordinary to the center and pushing the extra ordinary to periphery, Joseph sets the ground ready for the long-awaited caste war.

The notions regarding the poor and deprived class in India too does not escape the eye of Joseph. The author subverts here the clichéd view regarding the poor in India as leading a vegetable life owing to their financial depravity. In an interview given to *The Guardian* Joseph expresses his view that 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. 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.

Manu Joseph here attempts a modern critique of the Dalit's plight. The progress in the situation of a Dalit and the cultural influence in shaping and reshaping these situations are well narrated by Joseph in this work. Though Mani is an inhabitant of the BDD Chawls, whose residential status is little better than the slums, he is not painted as the speculative ‘father returning home’. He is a man of hope and aspirations. He is highly concerned of his public image and is ready

to take up all possible risks for it. Hence, he steps into a self-invented game, a fraud-play with his ten-year-old son Adi as an accomplice. Through the “our secret” game he succeeds in attaching an aura of brilliance to his son by making him ask pre-planned doubts to his science teacher:

‘He asked one of those questions again in the class, she said.

‘What question?’ Ayyan asked, now chuckling.

‘The science teacher was saying that if you throw anything up it has to come down. Basic things like that. So, I asked her if the acceleration due to gravity of any planet anywhere in the universe can make an object travel faster than light.’ (13).

He even goes to the extent of making his son recite the first thousand prime numbers and publish it through the media and much more. Though he is aware of the risk involved, he is not ready to give it up. He justifies his stand thus, “An ordinary clerk stranded in a big daunting world wants to feel the excitement of life, he wants to liberate his wife from the spell of jaundice-yellow walls. What must he do?” (37). The unending urge of the downtrodden for recognition is brilliantly portrayed here. Even the fraudulence that Mani resorts to can be justified as it can be read as a byproduct of the long-drawn suppression his caste people were undergoing.

If ambition can be read as a mode of self-expression, revenge is revolution. The way Ayyan Mani avenges the Brahmins by posting invented anti-brahmin “Thought for the Day” at the Institute gateway forms an important episode in the novel. Ayyan scribbles:

Reservations for the low castes in colleges is very unfair system. To compensate, let us offer the Brahmins the right to be treated as animals for 3,000 years and at the end of it let's give them a 15 percent reservation — Vallumpuri John (98).

The episode is significant as it expresses the non-submissive nature of this under-privileged sector. Also, it expresses the wrath of the Dalits against the religious, cultural, political, economical institutions that made them deprived and forced them to stay deprived. Joseph here subverts the image of Dalits as a silent, passive bearer of oppression to an aggressive revolutionary, and reminds the world that repression always results in an eruption.

Subversion of the accepted and dominant power structure of the society is another strategy Joseph opts to aid the Dalit liberation. In the class struggle presented in the novel between Brahmins and Dalits, the former is in the vantage. The attempt at the subversion of this age-old power system should be acknowledged as daring. The insignificance of Mani in the matters regarding the institute is overturned as an advantage by him. His regular peep into the letters, files and telephones for Acharya has kept him informed and abreast of the happenings at the institute which he tactfully uses as a blackmail against Acharya. He became powerful enough even to bring back the lost reputation of Acharya, and could turn the Dalit mob against the scientists for their plebian views on the intellectual limitations of Dalits. Though it is fraudulence that takes him to this vantage point, a reader easily gets the fragrance of power in Mani. Joseph here does not attempt to sanctify Mani, but alters the image that Dalits do not think, therefore they are not.

Ayyan's scheme exposes the obsession with genius in Indian society, particularly among the elite. The blind acceptance of Aditya's supposed brilliance by the upper-caste intellectuals highlights the performative nature of intelligence and the ease with which privilege can be manipulated.

Ayyan's character also embodies the subversive tradition of the trickster, a common figure in literature who outwits a corrupt system through cunning rather than brute force. His cynicism and dark humor come as weapons against the deeply ingrained caste hierarchy that seeks to render him invisible. For instance, Ayyan's interactions with his upper-caste colleagues, particularly Dr. Acharya and his junior scientists, reveal the condescending attitudes of the privileged sect towards those they undermine. Since Ayyan lacks the right societal credentials, his intelligence and observational skills are never taken seriously. The upper-caste scientists, on the other hand, are often portrayed as comically self-absorbed, engaging in petty rivalries and grandiose theorizing that leads to little progress. This contrast highlights the novel's central satirical point: caste and class privilege, rather than talent or hard work, dictate who is taken seriously in Indian society.

The aspirational middle class also comes as the target of Joseph's satire. This category is represented by Ayyan's neighbors in the overcrowded chawls of Mumbai. Their obsession with upward mobility, their blind faith in government schemes, and their willingness to believe in Aditya's genius reflect the anxieties of a society that measures success in purely material and superficial terms. The novel suggests that even those who are victims of the caste system often internalize its values, striving for validation from the very structures that oppress them.

While *Serious Men* effectively critiques caste and class through satire, it also raises important questions about the limits of subversion. Ayyan's deception ultimately unravels, and he is left without any real power to change the system. His story, while clever and darkly humorous, ends in a way that suggests that the structures of caste and privilege remain largely intact.

This ending serves as a reminder that while satire can expose injustice, it cannot always dismantle it. The novel's cynicism about the possibility of true social mobility reflects the reality of caste oppression in India, where individual acts of defiance, no matter how ingenious, often fail to bring systemic change. However, by bringing Dalit perspectives into the mainstream literary discourse and forcing readers to laugh at the absurdity of caste, *Serious Men* contributes to the larger conversation on caste resistance in contemporary Indian literature.

Thus, through strategic subversion Manu Joseph offers a critique of the Dalit scenario in modern India. In obvious contrast to Dalit writing, a firsthand experience is not what Joseph had given of the Dalits but the touch of realism added to the events imparts a good amount of authenticity to the characters and their experiences. Though he subverts the existent Brahmin-Dalit binary, he has been careful not to exceed the limits for the Dalit remain an under privileged sector for whose emancipation there is a long way to go. He has tactfully spoken too of the limitations they face owing to the centuries old prejudices inscribed in the Brahmin psyche, but leaves behind a nourished ground, favoring growth.

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