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An Identity Undetermined: Manu Joseph's Serious Men from a Dalit Perspective

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Abstract

The novel *Serious Men* narrates the life of a Dalit character in the metropolis city of Mumbai. Concerning the purpose of the novel and the reason behind the characterization of a Dalit protagonist, the writer states that the rage, anger and cynicism of the protagonist made the writer to attribute the tag of Dalit to that character. The negative approach of the novelist towards Dalits leads to the negative portrayal of the Dalit protagonist in the novel. The protagonist is portrayed as a man with no values and as the one who hates upper castes to the extreme. The character stands as an example of how Dalits and Dalit Identity are being misrepresented in the writings of non-Dalit writers. The novel does not represent the Dalit culture either.

Keywords: Dalit, Dalit Identity, Dalit Culture, Caste Discrimination, Sanskritization)

Introduction:

The novel *The Serious Men*(2010) written by Manu Joseph(1974-) very effectively presents the upper castes' antipathy towards Dalits and it captures the nature of caste discrimination that is down rooted in Indian society. Considering the fact that the novel had been in wide success for mirroring a dalit life, a deep critical study of the Dalit protagonist of the novel brings on to surface the neglected reality that the novel fails in defining Dalit identity properly vis-a-vis the portrayal of Dalit protagonist in it. Hence a question arises that Ayyan Mani, the 'Dalit' protagonist as per se in the novel measures to be a true dalit figure as claimed by the novelist? And Can the character in any way truly represent the entire Dalit community? The novelist himself declares the motive behind assigning the tag of Dalit to Ayyan Mani in an interview:

When Mani first formed in my head he was just the same but he was not a Dalit. He had this anger and a comical interpretation of the modern world and modern women and science and everything around him. But he was not a Dalit. Then I asked myself, why is he so angry, can I give him a justification? And

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the idea of a Dalit male who is trying to create from thin air the first Dalit boy genius just fascinated me. But yes I am surprised that everybody seems to be talking about the fact that Ayyan is a Dalit while I think that is the least important detail of the novel (Joseph, web).

While the fact that Ayyan's being a Dalit is the least important detail for the novelist, he, on the other hand is accoladed in the name of narrating a Dalits life from a Dalit's point of view. Shashi Deshpande, One of the judges of The Hindu Literary Prize praises 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 (Deshpande, web).

Dalit literature celebrates the power of self representation. It aims for preserving and protecting the self formation and identity. But contrastingly Serious Men –doesn't allow Ayyan to realize his own identity. Ayyan Mani's struggle for

betterment, his desire for upward mobility dominates his struggle for self identity as a Dalit. In fact Ayyan never tries to assert his own identity as a Dalit. The identity he tries to build is influenced by his desire of socio-economic upward mobility. He is more concerned with the better economic status that is available with the status of upper castes than caste related issues. He could not appreciate the rights and awareness which questioned the oppression of centuries. He opines, "The Untouchables in modern times had won the useless right of being touched by the high caste, but remained the poorest in the city" (Joseph 280).

The novel doesn't recognize the struggle of Dalits for political emancipation too. More over it criticizes the upsurge of Dalits in political stream. Dalit politician Waman, in the novel is portrayed as a thug. Dalit masses who protest against the maltreatment of their community and Ambedkar are shown as just tools for creation of unrest. The novel negates protest or movement as a solution for the problems that exist in the contemporary society. It is a note worthy point that even Ayyan, who is also a Dalit, disapproves their protest. Further he makes fun of Dalit mob by saying, "They go in rage and return with Adidas" (Joseph 280). Ayyan in the novel doesn't share the collective identity of Dalits. If he protests against caste discrimination, his protest is too self

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centered and it ultimately aims at betterment regarding his Class or economic position. Moreover Ayyan's way of protest doesn't offer any solution to his caste discrimination and other related problems.

Serious Men portrays Dalit experience too. Ayyan experiences few situations in which he is humiliated by upper castes for being a Dalit. Jana Nambodri makes fun of Ayyan when he said that he entered MENSA at the age of 18 and his IQ is 148. Attributing Ayyan's merit to reservations Nambodri asks, "Was there a 15 per cent reservation for Dalits?" (Joseph 293). This shows the upper castes' opinion that Dalits could reach to better positions only with the policy of reservations and they don't possess any merit. Even Acharya, who is compassionate to Ayyan allows him irritatingly to sit on the couch in his cabin for the first time only when Adi comes to the institute. But the Dalit experience portrayed in Serious Men dwells more into psychological trauma than a Dalit consciousness. Sharankumar Limbale in Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit literature says, "If pleasure is the basis of aesthetics in Marathi savarna literature, pain or suffering is the basis of aesthetics of Dalit literature" (Limbale 13). But, in Manu Joseph's Serious Men, pain which is the result of Dalit experience doesn't transform into assertion of Dalit identity, it doesn't create any Dalit consciousness even. The novel shows the Dalit experience, its

resultant degeneration of personal identity and the consequent attempts of socio-economic upliftment as a resistance to caste hegemony.

The novel is a good example of how modernization and urbanization can adversely affect on one's own culture and identity. The setting of the novel is one of the most advanced cities of the country and the Dalit protagonist is an educated white collar job holder. The setting of the novel and the profession of the protagonist in the novel might have contributed to negligible presentation of any Dalit culture in the novel. The novel clashes with the works of Dalit writers in this aspect.

The novelist's lack of any authentic experience towards Dalit culture due to his upper caste background may also another reason behind this. Though, less effort is made from the part of the novelist to present Dalit culture, if we analyze Ayyan Mani, the Dalit protagonist of the novel, we can observe the phases of Sanskritization and cultural transition in his life and life style. The likes and dislikes of Ayyan Mani, the Dalit protagonist of the novel, are determined and shaped more by societal convictions than his native culture and identity. His work place, his ambition of higher socio-economic level, his imitation of the world of upper castes have influenced Ayyan's mind too deeply to an

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extent that Ayyan is completely estranged from his roots.

The duplicity of Ayyan's nature can be understood through the fact that on one hand he hates the upper castes so much and on the other he always tries to be like them. Owning up the original culture and traditions proudly, keeping up the true identity and countering the other culture imposed on them is the true essence of Dalitness. But the Dalit characters in the novel mutely accept the life style and culture of upper castes without showing any resistance. Ayyan is the symbol of most of the educated Dalits who never respect their own culture in the fear of humiliation. For instance he decides what Oja should wear when they go to their son's school. He tries to make their attire look like upper castes. When Oja asks him to wear a coat he simply rejects. "You should wear that coat you have. You look like a hero in it." "No, no," he replies. "You are not supposed to wear a coat for something like this. You are supposed to look like you don't care much." (Joseph 199).

The Dalit characters in the novel are the products of Sanskritization. M.N. Srinivas, the famous Indian Sociologist, who coined the term Sanskritization, defines it as a process by which "a low or middle Hindu caste or tribal or other group, changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently 'twice-born' caste. Generally

such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally connected to the claimant class" (Jayapalan 428). This Sanskritization leads to loss of the indigenous culture, identity and history. This process of cultural and social change among them and their acceptance of the high caste values force Dalits to forget their collective past and culture.

This Sanskritization leads to loss of the indigenous culture, identity and history. This is reflective in the characters of Dalits in the novel. The clash over religion between Ayyan Mani and Oja shows how much they are under the influence of Sanskritization. Oja accepts Hinduism as her own religion. Ayyan embraces Buddhism. Ayyan threatens of throwing away all the idols of Hindu Gods out of their home. Oja could not tolerate that. She pleads, "I don't care what the Brahmins did. Their gods are now mine'...'I am a Hindu. We are all Hindus. Why do we pretend?'...'I can live with nothing,' she mumbled. I don't even want dreams. All I am asking is to let me have some gods." (Joseph 51).

Authentic Dalit culture is not seen in the lives of Ayyan and Oja. The novel doesn't show the real culture of Dalits through these characters and their lives. Oja gives the highest hierarchy to her ancestral ornaments in her steel cupboard placing

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them in the upper most rung. She remembers her mother's words when these ornaments are given to her, "It does not matter if it's with me or if it's with you my child, it will be his when he threatens to burn you with kerosene" (Joseph 198). These words show unlike Dalit community's authentic practice of 'bride price', the above lines suggest dowry which is a practice among upper castes. Bama, the well known Dalit woman writer in her autobiographical work Sangati says in relation to dowry as, "But among the more educated nowadays all this is changing. These people, for some reason, want to copy the upper castes. It's becoming a real problem having to make so many jewels for the bride and giving a lump sum on top of that" (Bama 119).

Ayyan dominates his wife Oja. Oja's subordination to her husband is also an example of Sanskritization. M N Srinivas in his paper on The Changing Position of Women in Today's Society mentions, "While total subordination of the wife to her husband was one aspect of Sanskritic Hinduism, the religious and moral partnership of the conjugal pair was another aspect" (Srinivas, web). Oja is made a little exception at least on few instances in the novel regarding the traditions of Dalits. She is a bit superstitious in the novel and this makes an important aspect of culture and norms of Dalit community. She attributes the

deafness of his son to her husband's refusal to pray to Hindu Gods. "His ear, she said, and wept, pressing her wrists on her eyes, this might not have happened if we had had gods" (Joseph 52).

After witnessing the live performance of Adi in his School Quiz competition, Oja feels that Adi is seen as a 'genius' and is envied by all other mothers. In order to make Adi unaffected by their evil looks she insists on Adi to go to school there afterwards only with a 'black mark' on his cheek. "I don't know. All I know is that my boy is going to get a black dot on his cheek every morning he goes to school" (Joseph 208). In another instance also, after the felicitation ceremony of Adi, Oja enters her home with lemons in her hands and squeeze them on her son's head, "Ayyan noticed that she was holding a wedge of lemon. She went straight to Adi and squeezed it on his head. He tried to run but she held him tight and said a quick prayer. And she ran her palms over his cheeks and cracked her knuckles on her ears. 'Evil eyes, all around,' she said" (Joseph 283). These instances represent the beliefs harboured by the Dalit community.

It is no wonder that alienation from one's own culture and futile attempt of getting accepted to the new culture inevitably leaves one in a dilemma. This is clearly seen in Aditya Mani, the son of Ayyan Mani and Oja who is caught amidst

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this cultural transition. As Ayyan himself feels, “In a way, Adi was growing up like an animal, without any influence of culture” (Joseph 51). Though Ayyan prepared Oja and himself to fit amidst the group of parents who belong to higher socio-economic level, he could not feel comfortable in the gathering. The thoughts that occur in Ayyan’s mind reflect Ayyan’s internal conflict which results due to his cultural transition. The novelist describes Ayyan’s internal thoughts and conflict:

Ayyan studied the fathers. His own shirt, he knew was good. It had cost him five hundred rupees, but there was something about the shirts of these men and their trousers and the way they stood, that made him feel that he looked like their driver. In the morning, when he had inspected himself in the mirror, he was certain that he measured up to them, but now, in their midst, he was somehow smaller. And Oja looked like their cook (Joseph 201).

Conclusion:

In the novel *Serious Men*, Manu Joseph does not attempt to provide authenticity in the portrayal of Dalit character. The novelists fail to portray consciousness, culture and traditions which altogether play an essential part of Dalit life. There is no attention paid to the community’s sufferings, identity, protest

the aspects which give authenticity to the Dalit character and the portrayal of the Dalit protagonist of the novel stands an example of misrepresentation of Dalit Identity.

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