

Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* – An Indian Postmodern Bizarre of Juxtapositions and Playfulness

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Abstract

21st Century Indian Postmodern era consists of fast life, fast food, dead-end-job, obesity, vulgarity, etc. Manu Joseph's debut novel *The Serious Men* (2010) presents caste conflict with politically incorrect statements. It is a deprived man's angst and vengeance. It is the story of vindictiveness of a Dalit (supposedly lower caste within the Hindu caste hierarchy) over Brahmins (supposedly upper caste within the Hindu caste hierarchy). Undeniably this is one part of the multifaceted Indian reality. This novel is an original byproduct of a land of controversies, and it registers the contemporary crisis in the universal language.

Ayyan Mani, the antagonist, perceives that "The Brahmins had nowhere to go now but to suffer in silence or to flee to non-vegetarian lands" (SM 82). Throughout the novel Manu Joseph has juxtaposed the extremities of characters, their thoughts and attitudes. For instance, when Ayyan Mani thinks of his wife, when she first walked into his house with a newly married bridal fear, she was so beautiful "on the first night, when he sat beside her on the conjugal mattress that was filled with funeral roses left by neighbours and friends" (SM

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16). And frequently he gets in to the mind – voice (stream of conscious technique) to escape from the humdrum of reality. Then he builds small plots around his ten year old son Adi to create a myth, which finally overtakes him.

The novel is a satire on “class, love, relationships and our veneration of science” (SM) that is aimed at the reformation of contemporary absurdity of human life. This paper is an attempt to explain the features of a postmodern Indian novel which is a “metafiction” that carries Indian reality up to the horizon.

Beginnings of Indian Postmodern Fiction

Indian Postmodern novels started evolving after the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980), which is an amalgam of fantasy and reality. *Longman’s Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines it: “a style of Building, painting, writing, etc., developed in the late 20th century that uses a mixture of old and new styles as a reaction against MODERNISM”. It is mainly a reflection of contemporary life in art, literature etc. with all its naivety. It is neither the acceptance nor the denial of modernism. Fragmentation, Paradox, Questionable narrators, Playfulness, Juxtapositions, Black-Humour, Irony, Non-linear presentations of time as well as characters, and Promotion of ethics are some qualities that are attributed to a postmodern novel. In India the backdrop is complicated with multi-lingual and multi-religious features.

Some Focus of Indian Postmodern Writers

Indian Postmodern writers like Aravind Adiga and Manu Joseph depict Corruption as a main theme in their novels. It is noticeable that reality and fiction are the same in postmodern writing. Colonial oppression followed by post-colonial impact of foreign Governments as well as Private Investors on Indian Economy has led to a drastic change on all classes of people in India. These are the darker sides of the Indian life presented in a comic way.

Manu Joseph, Author of *Serious Men*



Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manu_Joseph

Manu Joseph is the editor of the Indian newsweekly, OPEN, and a columnist with the *International Herald Tribune*, the global edition of *The New York Times*. *Serious Men* (2010) is his debut novel that won *The Hindu Literary Prize* and *The American PEN/OPEN Book Award*. It is also shortlisted for *The Man Asian Literary Prize* and *The PG Wodehouse Literary Prize* for the best comic novel. *Serious Men* is an acute representation of India in 2008. It is notable that Twan Eng, a contemporary Chinese writer who is shortlisted for 2012 *Man Booker Prize* considers,

Moments in time when the world is changing bring out the best and worst in people. A character who doesn't have hard choices to make doesn't appeal to me as a writer and a reader....I am interested in exploring realistic and flawed characters. I don't set out to judge or preach morality but to convey what all of us have to confront daily-our own flaws, weaknesses and strengths. (Hindu 2)

Manu Joseph also holds a similar position. Joseph explains, while

Indian writers in English usually take a very sympathetic and compassionate view of the poor, and I find that fake and condescending. (Joseph)

The Antagonist

In the contemporary Indian novels in English including Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, an Antagonist presents the story to the reader. There is a shift from protagonist's point of view to that of Antagonist. Ayyan Mani is the Antagonist of this novel. He is a highly

cynical and deprived man of the Dalit Community in 21st Century India. Manu Joseph's scrutinizing eyes points out that in India everywhere there is caste system including the roads,

The cars their faces frowning in a superior way through the bonnet grilles, were the Brahmins. They were the 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 has to be something in this structure, and Ayyan decided it was him. Lowly, but formidable and beyond torment. (SM 82)

Ayyan Mani's cynicism and filthy mind can be best understood by his mind voice while observing the women and girls in Worli Seashore in Mumbai,

Solitary young women in good shoes walked hastily, as if they were fleeing from the fate of looking like their mothers....He imagined they were all in the ecstasy of being seduced by him....there were girls who had never exercised before. They had arrived after a sudden engagement to a suitable boy, and they walked with very long strides as though they were measuring the coastline. They had to shed fat quickly before the bridal night when they might yield on the pollen of a floral bed to a stranger. (SM 3)

Ayyan Mani is a practical philosopher, who doesn't know how to show a cultured indifference. He says to Oja, his wife, "If you stare long enough at serious people they will begin to appear comical" (SM 4). He is a womanizer as beautiful women always depressed him. He knew well that he is like stray dogs that look at good stock.

Manu Joseph satirizes all the human relationships; among the lovers that were found in the seashore some of them were even married to each other and it is the acute reality. Ayyan is 39 years old and he is living in BDD Chawl, a slum built by the colonial rulers as housing for textile workers in which each family is consigned a room of fifteen feet in length and ten feet in width. The buildings were converted into prison to shove in the freedom-fighters. Now over eighty thousand people live in the Chawl.

An ordinary middle class man's craving is very clear in the following lines,

Because what a man really wanted was to be bigger than his friends... Ayyan saw a young couple come down the steps. 'All well?' he asked. The boy smiled shyly. He was holding a travel bag. Ayyan knew that the bag was empty. It was a sign of love. In some rooms here, over a dozen lived. So the newly-weds slept on the illegal wooden lofts with the unspoken assurance that the rest of the family down below would not look up. Every now and then, incontinent couples went to cheap lodges in Parel or Worli...some carried their wedding albums too, in case the cops raided. They spent a day in a whole bed that was entirely their own and returned with fond memories of room-service and love. (SM 8)

Ayyan's three brothers died of bleeding livers and his father died of tuberculosis, the most common disease in lower strata of Indian life. Ayyan's wife Oja is a typical Indian house wife who sacrifices everything for the sake of her son Adi's future. She delves into Tamil soap operas. She is like the other women of BDD Chawl who yield to their men without any protest. They never had any quest, and they never knew what fulfillment is.

Ayyan's most dangerous mannerism is that he always watches others. He is fascinated by the rich people and their mannerism. He has observed well that rich people have a name for everything including the time that they spend with their family. They call it 'Quality Time'. He is the one who always compares himself with the rich and educated men. This quality induces him to create all the evil.

When Ayyan received the intimation from Adi's school that he must meet his teachers the next day, Ayyan gauged it well that it should be because of his son's mischief. Ayyan used to train his son Adi to pose extraordinary questions like, 'what is gravity made of miss?', 'why are leaves green?' Adi puts his teachers in happy delirium, by asking these at the age of ten. He weaves a plot around his son that he is extraordinary. Ayyan is partly a psycho who finds relaxation in dreaming about seducing the weaker sex. He is quite convinced that he can't accomplish anything more than the ordinary survival, so he achieves his autocracy in his imagination. His impotency makes him to escape from reality. He wants to become a 'Free Man'. His life's purpose is very trivial that he married to have sex anytime of the day or night.

Ayyan met Adi's Principal Sister Chastity. As Ayyan expected she complained about his extraordinary questions. Sister Chastity always insists on him to get converted to Christianity as there are more monetary benefits. But he is a Hindu-turned, Buddhist-turned avenger of Dalits. Somehow at one stage he gathered courage to answer her back that it is against the Indian Constitution to say "Christ is the true Lord" (SM 95).

All through his past thirty-nine years either he has travelled into his escapist dream world or and he never ever failed to cause the even the minimum inconvenience to the Brahmins. He is working as a personal assistant to Arvind Acharya, astronomer in the Institute of Theory and Research.

Acharya's character is juxtaposed with Ayyan's. If somebody asks how your nose looks like, according to his wife Lavanya he didn't know even that. He is the head of the Institute. Ayyan's observation didn't let the professors free, because, even after spending crores of public money, 'man knows nothing yet. Nothing' (SM 24).

Acharya is the head of the Institute. He is trying to prove his own theory that the microscopic aliens are falling from the sky. He is going to send a hot air balloon at the height of forty-one kilometers with four sterilized metal containers to capture the falling microbes. At such altitude no living thing can survive. So if there is any microbe found, it is undeniably from the sky.

The Protagonist

For the first part of the novel the author highlights Ayyan Mani, and for the second Part, Acharya is the protagonist, who is sincere, genuine, who cannot stop himself from falling in love with Oparna Goushmoulik, the head of Astrobiology department, and the head of the Balloon Mission project. The only solace to the reader is that after all he is linear in his character. He is highly intelligent but less tactful, the one who couldn't identify that one of his phones is slightly askew and he is overheard by his assistant constantly.

Ayyan and Acharya are entirely contrastive characters. Acharya's over-indulgence in his research made him not to notice Ayyan's own writings in the notice board as quotes. Ayyan elucidates the research process thus:

‘What is this Mani?’ the peon asked with sudden curiosity. ‘Do you ever understand these things that land on your table?’

‘I do, my friend, I do, Ayyan said, and tried to think of a way to explain, ‘The chap who has written this is trying to say that an object far, far away in space is a type of star’.

‘That’s it?’ the peon said almost angrily.

Yes, that’s it. ‘And this type of star has a name’, Ayyan said. ‘White Dwarf’

That made the peon giggle.

‘One year later, Ayyan whispered, another man will say, “No.no, it is not a White Dwarf, it is a Brown Dwarf”. A year later, someone else will say, “No, no it is not a Brown Dwarf, It is not a star at all, it is a planet”. Then they will argue over whether it is a rocky planet or a gaseous planet and whether there is water out there. That’s the game, my friend, that’s exactly the game’. (SM 26)

The Convivial Deputy Director

Jana Nambodri is the convivial deputy Director of the Institute. He wants to scan the skies with Radio Telescopes and search for alien signals. There is only minimal difference between theory of aliens in the form of small microbes and searching for alien signals, but these two highly learned men keep on quarrelling to carry out their own projects. This trivializes the importance of a research work. And it is an attack on our veneration of science. Manu Joseph narrates the relationship between a student and professor (Jana) in a more sardonic way thus,

His (Jana) only recourse was the parties thrown by his unscientific friends where young girls gathered around him when they heard he was a radio astronomer. He loved it when their delicate bodies, so slight stood close to him, their legs so naked, their vodka eyes asking him what exactly he did, and their intelligent nods of incomprehension. He began with astronomy and told them what jazz was and in a naughty way made fun of Bryan Adams. He would search their pretty faces for one-minute crushes. He loved the young and spoke to them in their language. (SM 76)

Oparna, the Balloon Mission Project Head

On the other hand Oparna Goshmoulik, the head of the Balloon Mission project, is always a feast for these men. Apart from being highly learned there is no other symptom of stature. She was a 'commotion', 'Aged scientists always veered towards her, 'in the overtures of mentoring; they tried to smell her breath'(SM 29). Manu Joseph raises his queries against feminism through Ayyan Mani,

But what great subjugations did these women suffer, what were they denied by their fathers, what opportunities didn't they get, what weren't they fed, why were they so obsessed with their own womanhood?

Juxtapositions of Indian Womanhood

These educated and posh women are more dangerous kind than the uneducated typical Indian house wives like Oja. They (Oparna and Oja) are the juxtapositions of Indian womanhood. Ten years back Ayyan worked as a sales person in Eureka Forbes. He loved typists, secretaries, and shop attendants, and dragged them by his general knowledge and his jokes about Brahmins.

They would let him squeeze their breasts on the Worli Seaface. Then misled by decency they would ask for marriage....infatuation fondled and love cried.... He left them in the knowledge that they could cash their virginity somewhere else (SM 30)

And he has also met the

Hungry house wives, whose saris sometimes slipped off their blouses as they innocently enquired in how many colours the vacuum cleaners came, whose nightgowns rose in the tempest of a table fan, or who answered the door in a wet towel that they flung away upon the incandescent sight of the Eureka Forbes salesman. (SM 83)

They are the insatiable housewives of the postmodern India. There are evidences through the eyes of Ayyan Mani that in India the women are liberated at least in half rate. Because,

He also saw men scoop the shit of their babies, and once he even saw a man in an apron take the dishes from the dining table to the kitchen sink. They were the new men. In time their numbers increased and he saw them anywhere now, standing defeated next to their women. (SM 83)

As a well exposed man to women, Ayyan rightly assessed Oparna's cunningness and always disliked her. Still Ayyan is a typical bourgeois womanizer, who didn't leave even Oparna to be seduced in his daydreaming. It is his world of escapism where he could attain the pleasure that he couldn't accomplish in his reality.

Men and Women Weeping Together

Manu Joseph empathizes with the saddest sights of the world. It strikes noticeable contrast with his punching satire,

A couple weeping together. At their failed love, or at the ruins of their home demolished by the municipality or at the funeral of their child. There is something about a man and a woman weeping together. Nothing is more heart-breaking. (SM 31)

The author can take everything to its extremity. Though the author empathizes the novel doesn't raise emotions. It makes the reader stunned. Positive as well as the negative sides of life and its contents are presented throughout the novel, it forebodes futility. Manu Joseph writes:

Especially the widowhood of her (Lavanya) friends and cousins. These women began to grow healthier after the departure of their men. Their lugubrious eyes filled with life and their skin began to glow. (SM 67)

These postmodern characters, in one way or the other, were afflicted by some mental disease. They create their own world of escapism. Topolov's *Superman* is where Arvind Acharya escapes frequently, as far as he has understood that it is the superman who puts the people in misery, and it is the KGB agents who save the world. Ayyan Mani's fulfillment is in creating plots around his ten year old son Aditya Mani. By bribing *Yug* daily's reporter he got the snippet in the newspaper titled 'A Special Boy' telling that Adi is selected by the Department for Scientific Education and Excellence of Switzerland to go to Geneva on

scholarship. He will spend one month with top scientists in Geneva. By showing the newspaper to the other residents of BDD Chawl, Ayyan felt so haughty. This is what he wanted to accomplish in reality, but he couldn't.

Second Plot of Ayyan Mani for His Son

Ayyan Mani's second plot on his son is that he got an opportunity through Sister Chastity to be a participant of honour in inter-school quiz competition. As usual in the headmistress room the phone was on the table. Sister Charity went out leaving Ayyan and his son in the room. Ayyan Mani made a call to his mobile. After coming out of the room he overheard a few quiz questions that were discussed, and he wrote down everything. He made Adi to master the answers. On the day of quiz finals, even better than what he expected, Adi cracked all the answers even before the question was raised. This made Ayyan to feel proud that he is the father of the 'Genius'.

Contrasts

Ayyan Mani's tactful character is juxtaposed along with Acharya's innocence. One is self-educated and another is highly educated. According to his wife, Acharya doesn't know anything except his studies and research. But Ayyan is an exhaustive elucidator of everything. His innocence is proved when he couldn't hide his intercourse with Oparna. As he expected, he lost his wife. But Ayyan is not linear like Arvind to disclose all his ex-affairs to his wife. He knew how to put the receiver askew in his professor's room and eaves drop everything. And he knew well how to read all the letters that come to Acharya without his knowledge, and repair an opened envelope. He knew how to keep everything as a secret and to look like sincere, genuine, dutiful, and loveable. Acharya regrets his flaws, but Ayyan doesn't know what it is.

India's rich and poverty are juxtaposed. And it is the story of how the poor overtake the rich.

Some made faces in front of a camera. This is more or less what big people did, the beneficiaries of the millenniums, at the end of the tunnel of time.... They could have lived in a building that had a lift, and when they entered the kind of restaurants where emaciated man parked the cars of the fat men they would not be so frightened by the calm of the cold air inside and the smell of

mild spices and the difficult names of fish. It was so easy to be the big people. All you had to be born in the homes where they were born. (SM 81)

While this is the condition of rich people in India, its impoverishment could be understood by another incident. Soon after his studies Acharya joined the Indian Space program that had been done secretly in a small town in Kerala.

But he soon realized how impoverished the Indian Government was, and how the whole space ambition was just a pathetic attempt of a miserable nation to find respect in a world that had moved ahead. (SM 153)

Living in Delusion

This juxtaposed world is full of people who want to live in delusion. Acharya and Lavanya live in the delusion of their daughter Shruthi's presence in the form of 7.45 am alarm. They don't want to disable it. She married an engineer, and lives in California now. Indians prefer everything American except being left alone in their old age. Ayyan and Oja live in the delusion of myth that their son is a genius. Temporarily Oparna and Acharya lived in love paranoia that their affair may be revealed at any time. In fact, Oparna was only as old as Shruthi. Second World War and the Post-Colonial pressures have filled the human minds with despair. It seems that there is no such thing called innate goodness.

The pinnacle of irony happens in the narration when Lavanya leaves Acharya with tears in her eyes (mourning the death of her cousin Anju's death) in the airport terminal. A young couple took it as she is crying due to the romantic distress of separation. "They gave the seniors an exaggerated look of approval. 'So cute, the girl said' (SM 157)"

A Third Plot of Ayyan Mani

The next plot Ayyan weaved around his son is the recitation of First Thousand Prime Numbers. By birth Adi is deaf by his left ear. He used to wear a hearing aid. But he used it in the right ear during his recitation (It was a *walkman* earpiece), Ayyan also requested the reporter not to photograph him when he is wearing hearing aid since they don't want their son to be known a physically challenged person. Though the photographer magnanimously accepted it, unfortunately it is the photo with the hearing aid that came out in print. Again there came a story of genius in print.

Oparna avenged Acharya as a return to her failed conjugal love. She contaminated one of the four samplers sent above. Acharya was unaware of this. When finally the project failed she wrote a resignation letter to the Ministry informing that she was compelled by Acharya to do so. There came an enquiry committee, Acharya was demeaned. Jana was raised to the level of Director. But Jana committed a major blunder that he slighted the Dalits. Now Ayyan was the only solace to Acharya. Ayyan arranged the basement lab for Acharya without the permission of the management. Somehow he got two hundred questions that would be asked in the entrance exam. Adi passed the exam.

Ayyan keeps on adding plots because he wants to give the impression to his wife that they are heading towards a spectacular future. This craze makes him steal the entrance exam question paper from the institute. Only graduates are eligible to sit for this exam. Ayyan revealed the recorded conversation between Acharya and Oparna. It was Oparna's confession. And Jana's assault too. So Acharya regained his position in the institute. But now "Ayyan felt the impoverishment of serving a lesser regime" (SM 287).

To Conclude

Jana's assault created a communal riot in the Institute. All the peons went on strike. The Institute was completely damaged by the rioters. Though Ayyan has said that there is no more play, he couldn't cease. His plots are his unfulfilled aspirations in reality. At least temporarily he wants to achieve fake success to create the myth that he is bigger than his neighbours. The stress of the contemporary life makes the individuals to accomplish their aspiration by going beyond the ethical means. It is not that they are unaware of the danger, but it becomes inevitable.

The title *Serious Men* clearly states that the men who are supposed to be serious in their aspiration are very trivially running after their mortal pleasures. It denotes the opposite of what it is. Unless men resolve themselves to strictly adhere to the social practice with ethical codes, peacefulness will sway somewhere in the clouds, not reachable. A Postmodern escapist fails to survive mentally. Despair, Paranoia and Delusion fill their world. All these juxtapositions show the upcoming change in the Indian Human attitude. And there is a radical shift in the handling of theme from personal to social in Indian novel in English. And Manu Joseph has daringly fictionalized the Indian Communal clash, which is threatening as far as the social life is concerned.

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