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Exploring Constructions of Masculinities in Contemporary Indian Literature: A Critical Analysis of Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*

Kunal Kardam, Parmod Kumar

First Author: Kunal Kardam, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shaheed Bhagat Singh College, University of Delhi, kunal.kardam@sbs.du.ac.in

Corresponding Author: Parmod Kumar, Professor of English, Indira Gandhi National Open University, Delhi, parmodkumar@ignou.ac.in

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Abstract

This paper examines the construction and negotiation of masculinities in Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*, with particular attention to the intersections of caste, class, sexuality, family, and urban social structures. Through the character of Ayyan Mani, a Dalit assistant working in a predominantly Brahmin scientific institution, the novel presents masculinity not as a fixed or coherent identity but as a shifting performance shaped by material deprivation, social hierarchy, professional marginalization, and familial responsibility. Drawing on theoretical perspectives on masculinity, particularly the works of R. W. Connell, Radhika Chopra, Joseph Gelfer, and Robert Bly, the paper explores Ayyan's attempts to assert authority and masculine self-worth within the chawl, his workplace, and his family. His desire to provide a better life for his wife and son is closely intertwined with his anxieties about caste and class mobility, sexual inadequacy, and social emasculation. The paper also examines the contrasting masculinities represented by the scientists at the Institute, especially Arvind Acharya, revealing how privilege and institutional power shape masculine identity differently from Ayyan's marginalized position. The representation of women and gender relations further exposes the contradictions within these masculine performances.

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R W Connell, in his book *Masculinities*, discussed the problem of defining the very term 'masculinity'. Admittedly, it is not an easy task to define the term, and any scientific process aimed at finding out such a definition can lead to problematic or contradictory ideas. For Connell himself masculinity is "not a coherent object about which a generalizing science can be produced" (67). Earlier, Sigmund Freud had also mentioned the confusing nature of the terms 'masculinity' and 'femininity', although he did go on to differentiate between them by stating that masculinity was associated with activity while femininity was associated with passivity, yet he maintained an inherent bisexuality of humans, that everyone has both masculine and feminine traits present inside them (219-20n1). Radhika Chopra et al. have contextualized such ideas for South Asian society by trying to decipher what it means to be a man in South Asia, trying to create a more nuanced definition that does not limit men to their traditional roles as patriarchs and breadwinners (3). Influenced by such works, I would like to look at Manu Joseph's novel *Serious Men*. The novel focuses on the life of Ayyan Mani, an assistant to Arvind Acharya, the Director of the Institute of Theory and Research. We see most of the action take place from his perspective which is affected by his position in society. Mani is a Dalit living in a small chawl house with his wife Oja and young son Adi. His daily interactions with people include him spending time with his family, his neighbors, scientists and other workers at the Institute, and casual encounters with other men during the day. This has the potential to expose the reader to different aspects of Indian society and how one can negotiate with the term 'masculinity' in these varying situations.

From the beginning of the novel, Ayyan Mani's idea of asserting his masculinity can be seen as primarily being very physical in nature. This is evident especially in his interactions with women. In an early passage from the book, he describes "beautiful women" as similar to "Mercedes, Blackberry phones and sea-view homes" (Joseph 4). This sets the tone for Ayyan Mani's ideas regarding women and class, where he equates beauty with these "unattainable women" of a 'higher' class (5). Ayyan Mani's attack on upper class women also has a dimension of an attack on the hypocrisy that he, or one can say Joseph himself, sees in society. When introducing Oparna Goshmaulik, a new female scientist at the Institute, Mani points out her 'struggles' in life and how they barely compared

to what his wife Oja had faced and still faced, while at the same time pointing out the how “women like Oparna” would consider Oja “downmarket” (29). Ayyan Mani’s anger is partly at the society that keeps him and others in his position stuck to their conditions, while it maintains a moral high ground.

In the novel, the female body is seen as a site for exercising masculine feelings and as Ayyan Mani thinks to himself at a certain point, “the decay of a man... is first conveyed to him by his wife” (15). Even age is not a restriction for who gets involved in the performance of sexual behavior as kids in the chawl would re-enact sexual scenes that they have witnessed from their parents. Joseph describes kids who have internalized certain notions regarding physical intimacy as at one point, after enacting such a scene, the girl and boy are separated by parents and the girl was “pretending to tie her hair, a hint of boredom on her face” (13). Even in the make-believe world of kids of the chawl, the gender roles and expectations are well-defined: post-coitus, the boy moves to a corner while the girl rearranges herself with a sense of disappointment and lack of gratification. This sense of sexual dissatisfaction is carried by Ayyan Mani throughout the story. At one point, he remembers an encounter he had with a prostitute many years prior and how her laughter continues to impact him as “No wail he had heard in his life equaled the melancholy of her psychotic laughter” (31). Symbols of a modern lifestyle exist in stark contrast to what Ayyan Mani associates with his daily existence and this adds to his sexual and masculine frustrations. Ayyan looks at high rise apartments with the same sense of contempt that he holds against upper-class women, calling them “tall unattainable apartment blocks” (82).

High rising apartments in the city seem to taunt Ayyan in two separate ways – first, they represent what he wants to achieve in his life, where he aims to be in a financial and social sense, as a man who is capable of providing his family the safety and comfort of upper-class living; second it also seems to represent a phallic lack of physical intimacy which he is unable to provide his wife due to the lack of personal space in his home. The chawl space is described with a sense of all-pervading desolation that eats into anyone who enters it. Oja Mani herself undergoes a change in personality as Ayyan reminisces how “once, her youthful words used to rush out like a giggle... but eventually the chawl seeped into her”

(9). Ayyan Mani's life is centered on trying to improve the living conditions for himself and his family. He repeatedly acknowledges that "he wants to liberate his wife from the spell of jaundice-yellow walls" or that "Oja was trapped here with him" (5, 9).

Manu Joseph does not create an image of solidarity among men in his novel, rather, he describes a society where men try to outdo each other and are involved in a cutthroat competition for survival and financial ascendancy. In the chawl, this becomes more evident as Joseph claims that this was "the easiest place to be a man", where "to be alive was enough", "to be sober and employed was fantastically impressive" and Ayyan Mani was "something of a legend" (7). For Manu Joseph, the fellowship of men was "a farcical fellowship" because for him "what a man really wanted was to be bigger than his friends" (8). Radhika Chopra has written about the seemingly 'closed' world of men that is not accessible to women (50). This world is both inaccessible due to its exclusionary nature but at the same time, it exists in the public sphere, which is often inaccessible to women, especially in South Asia. Ayyan Mani's position as a man who has access to the inner workings of the world of the chawl and someone who acts as a flamer outside the chawl provide a means to actively negotiate how male spaces, especially in urban areas, function as sites of socio-political deliberations and as spaces where the means for social mobility are actively presented. Ayyan Mani lives in the world of the chawl but he actively tries to show himself to exist above and beyond it. He does not interact with his peers, feeling that they might require something from him or that he wants to show that he does not condone their behavior. He refuses to acknowledge his son's school security guard when he tries to point him lecherously at the mothers dropping their children to school, trying to assert in front of the guard that Ayyan was somewhat better than him even though the guard did not think of Ayyan as superior to himself (Joseph 20). There is a brief moment of a possibility of an emotional response for his fellow chawl members when he finds out that his childhood friend Pandu had supposedly killed himself in police custody, yet this moment is underscored by the helplessness he faces in multiple ways, first as a man in a similar social situation he lacks any kind of resources to make any meaningful change, and second as a married man he feels he has the responsibility towards his family that far outweighs any

emotional outburst he might have for mourning a dead friend. The moment is also mirrored and hindered by the events taking place on the television, where a daily soap showing a woman wailing and mourning is cut off by advertisements for tea, leaving Mani thinking that Pandu, or the poor in general, “deserved the tears of all” but this universal mourning was halted by the capitalistic modes of consumption and advertising (240).

Ayyan Mani's sufferings are exacerbated by his position in the caste system - being a Dalit, he is not just trodden upon by his class superiors, he also faces discrimination from the self-proclaimed upper-caste members of society. Mani's position is very representative of a post-Independence Dalit in metropolitan India - he has been able to secure schooling for his son in a prestigious school but he does not have the capital required to climb up the financial and social ladder. His life moves between the desire to provide for his family as a man and trying to establish a space for himself as a Dalit worker in an Institution full of Brahmin scientists. His fears as a father display this conflict most prominently when he thinks about the treatment his son would face for availing reservations in his college admissions, imagining a life of struggle and loss of all ambition in Adi only for him to be considered a “lucky bastard” (Joseph 235). Ayyan Mani's character at surface seems like a tricky man trying to display his son to be more capable than he actually was in fact a man trying his best to ignore his material reality in a desperate attempt to prevent his wife and son from being overtaken by the same all-encompassing sense of meaninglessness that is at the centre of his own existence. Throughout the novel, Mani is aware that he can only do so much for his family and this inability to move beyond, what Joseph very simply calls as “there is only so far the son of a sweeper can go” (122). Even at the end, for all his lies, the scientists do have to accept that he was smart enough to be accepted into Mensa (321). His game is not a game of deceit; it is a game of desperation - a desperation to protect his family from their reality.

For the last couple of decades, the exploration into masculinities has exploded the inherent multiplicity into the formulation of masculinity itself. Joseph Gelfer, among others, has discussed this multiplicity at length in his works. He acknowledges the ‘shifting of selves’ he experiences in his own writings, the shifting between what he himself calls “Gelfer who agrees with the

feminist critique of patriarchy and Gelfer who agrees with the men's rights advocates who suggest men are in trouble, albeit not agreeing with their reasoning as to why" (59). While Gelder's shift is stylistic and based on his argumentations, in Ayyan Mani we see a similar shift occurring in his personality at different points in the novel. While he embodies the hardened protective, guiding, paternal figure in the novel, he also acts as an emotional man, dealing with his own internal struggles,

The seemingly democratic nature of the public sphere that he engages with at the Institute and at Adi's school seems to show an alternative to the reality of the chawl, yet these spaces also cave into the pressures of existing social norms. The change of Director at the Institute transforms Ayyan's professional life according to the caste and class based stratification that exists outside of the Institute as well. Similarly, Ayyan feels out of place in his son's school when he meets other parents and feels that "in their midst, he was somehow smaller" (201). The possibility that a democratic state provides its citizens are still left out of reach for someone who is very closely and diligently trying to make the best use of these opportunities. Ayyan is constantly reminded of his financial inability to provide a secure lifestyle for his family, while being shown the symbols of comfortable existence at every step of the way. Ayyan Mani lacks the power and the necessary framework for climbing the social ladder nor does he have any kind of leverage over the scientists in the Institute or any other socially and financially secure people, so he resorts to committing small acts of transgression that although are ineffective in causing any kind of change in his world, allow him a certain degree of freedom and provide a sense of escape from his life stuck in the conditions under which he was living. In the Institute, Mani exists as a point of transaction between the scientists and the Director and this provides him with one of the only positions in the Institute where he can exercise some kind of a power over the people who otherwise hold power over him. By delaying their visits to the Director, Mani is able to briefly revert the seemingly master-slave like arrangement of the Institute and is able to enact the role of a master, albeit in a very limited sense. Along with this, Mani's act of changing the 'Thought for the Day' to something that would annoy his superiors is another small act of his rebellion. Towards the end, when both of these responsibilities are taken from

him, first by the free movement of scientists in the Director's room and second by the indignant treatment received by him regarding his mischievous 'Thoughts', it is then that his resolve to overthrow the established hierarchy can be seen to take shape.

Robert Bly, in his book *Iron John*, talks about a transition in American history from the aggressive Fifties male to a soft man of the seventies and later decades (Bly 2-3). Bly tends to look down on the 'soft' man, points out the deficiencies in that character, and promotes a need for a return to the more aggressive forms of masculinity. In some ways, Indian society has seen a similar trend which can be viewed most prominently in popular depictions, especially in cinema. This movement can be seen from the angry, young man of the seventies and eighties being slowly transitioned into the nineties which depicted a man that was affable at times and patriotic at other instances, into a return to the previous aggressive depictions of masculinity in the twenty-first century. At the same time, however, there has been a counter-movement of sorts that aims to display more nuanced, balanced form of masculinity that tends to negotiate the material needs of existence and sustenance in the competitive environment of modern Indian society, while also embracing the emotional side of being that tends to get overridden in popular discourse on masculinity. While accepting of his own emotions, Ayyan still does show a contempt for what Robert Bly would have called 'soft men'. In fact, he reiterates similar ideas as Bly, considering the "new men" to be present in relationships where they stood in inferior positions to their wives, going a step further to claim that "These days, men live like men only in the homes of the poor" (83). Although Ayyan Mani can be seen as a seemingly scheming, contemptuous man who wishes to raise his status in society, almost in a Machiavellian way, Joseph does not create this image completely. Instead we see Mani as a man trying to negotiate the previously mentioned dichotomy of his existence being a result of his material needs and his desire to find an escape from the monotony of his life. His scheme to show Adi as a genius is a ploy to keep his wife and son unaware of the bleak surroundings of their lives. His son starts to believe that "he truly was a genius" (Joseph 121). He acknowledges the impossibility of improvement in their social status but understands the requirement for the 'game' he is playing as a necessary distraction from this

condition. At its core, the novel shows the seemingly Sisyphean task of Ayyan Mani trying to escape his social condition. He even understands the need for the game to end and for his son to understand the fault in perpetuating the lie, asking his son to not enact the ‘game’ when they were alone with each other (125).

If we move away from Ayyan, the scientists at the Institute provide a counter to the personality of Ayyan Mani. Like Ayyan, for the scientists as well women exist as objects of desire, but while we get to see Ayyan’s respect for his wife, the scientists do not provide such a respite for their behaviour. The misogynistic nature of the scientists went to the extent that they had even labelled the washrooms as ‘Ladies’ and ‘Scientists’. Their interactions with Oparna show a continuation of this kind of an attitude, providing her with unsolicited advice and as she herself remembers, one of them, Jana Nambodri, passed unsavory comments reducing her to her physical appearance (40). Ayyan eavesdrops on their comments on women and these attitudes are present in their meetings, showing their perspective of women as being bereft of intellectual capabilities, which can be seen when Nambodri claims that women will “get nowhere in science... their brains are too small” (294).

Of the scientists in the institute, the Director Arvind Acharya at first stands anomalous to his colleagues regarding not just his treatment of women but also in his means of assertion of his masculinity. Acharya is introduced to us as a powerful, domineering man who does not get affected by the comments of others. His demeanor towards Oparna, although friendly, is not entirely that of an equal. His thoughts show his inclination to view the intelligence of women was “subdued and efficient” as compared to the “brilliance of men” shows an inherently biased perception, accompanied by his thoughts that Oparna “knew all she had to know” (35). Acharya and Oparna’s relationship is problematic at multiple levels, not just based on the story but on how it is handled as well. The power dynamics that exist between two professionals, a senior and his subordinate, make the situation uncomfortable. Oparna’s character herself is seemingly a wild woman who had held back her emotions to survive in a primarily male workplace, where she was constantly ogled, talked down to or just treated as an object of fascination by the men. When the two of them do finally end their relationship, Oparna decides to falsify charges that question the

professional integrity of Arvind Acharya, on hearing Ayyan Mani thinks that “Free love... is an enchanting place haunted by demented women” (250-51). The very nature of events, the characterization of Oparna, and the seemingly valorization of a helpless man tormented by a scorned woman make this an uncomfortable situation. Oparna’s contempt for the abusive and manipulative men she has met in her life is used as the reason for her inability to understand Acharya. MacAlester Bell has discussed how the contempt of oppressed communities, especially women, can lead to possibilities of development of new forms of thinking and can lead to social change (89). While Joseph does show the contempt of Ayyan Mani as having such a power, Oparna and her contemptuous thoughts are projected in a very different manner, as almost the result of a vengeful woman who is being unreasonable. Oparna is remembered by Acharya as just “an ancient scar at the center of his huge forehead”, almost like an undesirable physical trait that lies above the intellect that seems to be hidden inside this “massive forehead” (242). The unequal nature of their relationship meant that Arvind Acharya could end it when he pleased and Oparna was just expected to accept the decision. While her decision to fabricate lies against Arvind is by no means a justified response, it feeds into her image as a seemingly wild, independent woman which Joseph’s characters largely support.

The novel ends with a seemingly positive note for both Ayyan Mani and Arvind Acharya, Mani ends his game and is able to enjoy time with his son, Arvind Acharya is reinstated as the Director of the Institute and his wife seemingly forgives him for his infidelity. In some ways, both the men get forgiven for their different kinds of extramarital engagements, Ayyan by continuing to hide the truth from his wife, Acharya by the all-forgiving nature of his wife that can be called problematic in its own right. The novel does negotiate different meanings of what it means to be a man, even if the overarching themes of aggression, infidelity, and manipulation are almost sugar-coated and justified in some cases. In the end, even when Joseph provides the alternate possibility of Dalit men rising up against the derogatory comments of some of the Institute’s scientists towards Dr. Ambedkar and Dalits, this reality is also centered on violence. But this violence has a different dimension to it: this is the violence of an oppressed caste of men whose professional superiors have never treated them

with any respect. While the rest of the novel does not show any sense of solidarity amongst men, as mentioned earlier in this essay, this concluding moment of the novel depicts a rare moment of men fighting together rather than against each other. It is the shared sense of frustration and anger that propels them to attack these scientists in the Institution - the very source of their social and professional emasculation. Formulation of a male identity is a complex task as there is no singular definition of what it means to be a 'man'. Ayyan Mani is a representative of a rebellious, Dalit man trying to find a way through the social and professional maze of urban Mumbai. His sense of self is very strongly connected to the underbelly of metropolitan life that surrounds him, and so is his masculinity.

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Kunal Kardam

Kunal Kardam is an Assistant Professor of English at Shaheed Bhagat Singh College, University of Delhi. He is an engaged teacher and academic with interests in English literature, literary studies, and contemporary critical

discourse. Through his teaching and scholarly engagement, he contributes to enriching students' understanding of literature, language, and cultural contexts.

Pramod Kumar

Pramod Kumar is Professor of English at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi. He specialises in New Literatures, World Literatures in English, Literary Theory and Criticism, Translation Studies, and South Asian literary and cultural studies. With extensive teaching, research, publishing, and academic-administrative experience, he has contributed significantly to higher education, distance learning, and contemporary literary discourse.

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