

**Straddling Worlds: Strategies Of Positioning in  
Manu Joseph's *Serious Men***

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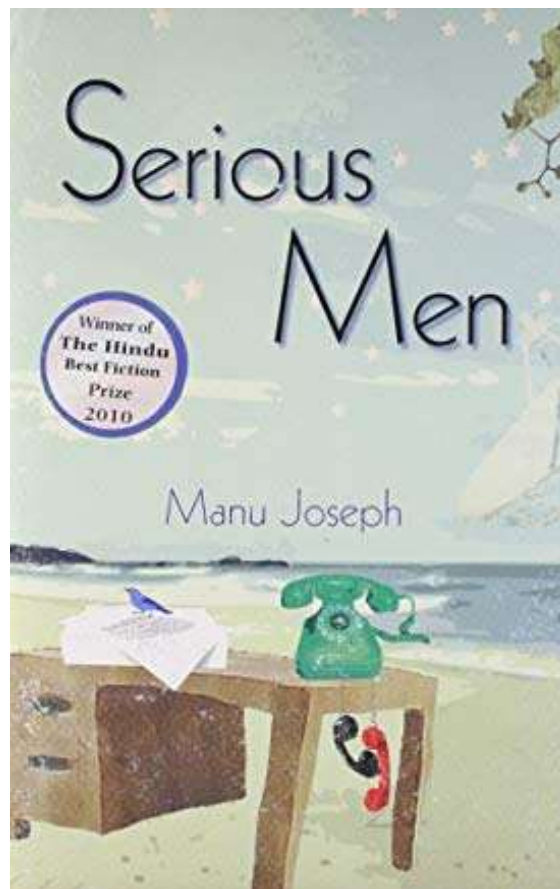
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## Abstract

The two main forms of social division have been class and caste. In India caste plays an important role in the social hierarchy. To some extent it decides the position that a man occupies in society. Independent India abolished caste discrimination but for various reasons and in different forms it continues to exist. Even in the present century, educated Indians who have inherited their caste have found no escape from this cultural construct. Manu Joseph is an Indian writer who has examined casteism in contemporary Indian society in his debut novel, *Serious Men* (2010). It narrates a story of Ayyan Mani, a middle-aged man from a lower caste, working as an assistant to an intelligent upper caste astronomer at a research institute in Mumbai. Mani is frustrated that he is unable to improve the humble conditions of his life. As a strategy to hide his status, he projects his ten year old son as a mathematical genius. The plot revolves around his continuous attempt to straddle across the opposing hierarchies of caste in an attempt to position him in the centre.

The paper aims to examine *Serious Men* against the arguments explicated by Gayatri Spivak on 'Strategic Essentialism' (Spivak, 1988). It denies the ideal notion of 'essence' as discussed in 'Essentialism'. Strategic Essentialism seems inevitable among the subalterns as they use it to present themselves. There are situations as depicted in the novel when the subaltern mimic the dominant caste to try and gain inclusion even as they remain within their own identity as the case demands.

**Keywords:** Manu Joseph, *Serious Men*, social hierarchy, caste divisions, strategic essentialism, straddle across two worlds

The two main forms of social division have been class and caste. In India caste plays an important role in the social hierarchy. To a large extent it decides the position that a man occupies in society. The caste system not only dealt with the religious considerations of an individual but also influenced upon their roles and controlled their choices of occupation. The social hierarchy thus evolved created various dimensions of overlapping problems and denied access to valued resources like wealth, income, prestige and power. Renowned Indian historian and writer, Ramachandra Guha refers to India as an 'unnatural nation' where caste has been one of the three conflicts, other than language and religion, that threatened social security in India (Guha, Prologue).

Independent India abolished caste discrimination but for various reasons and in different forms it continues to exist. With education it was expected that people would become liberal and rational in their thinking. However, the growth of literacy in India did not have any considerable effect on the caste-conscious members of the society. New attempts were made by caste organizations to strengthen loyalty and identity to their respected denominations. From being interdependent, castes became competitive among themselves for vested interests. Noted Indian author and activist, Arundhati Roy in her lecture on "The Doctor and the Saint" observed how caste continued to serve as a brutal hierarchical division in the Indian society and that it has escaped valid scrutiny. Alongside, the caste discrimination also led to class distinction in society. The dominant caste who had better access to land and wealth became the upper class of the society. They thus seem to have the advantages of both caste and class. It may take many generations for the lower caste to reach there. B.R Ambedkar, the architect

of the Indian Constitution, maintains in “Annihilation of Caste” that an economic interpretation of the Indian society based on the western logic that property is the source of power would not be acceptable to oppressed classes (292).

Several novelists in Indian English literature have focused on the ills of casteism and its social consequences in their works. Most of the novelists did not belong to the lower castes but have tried to portray the differences between the oppressor and the oppressed. Novels of Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Jhabvala were efforts in this direction. Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935), R.K Narayan’s *Waiting for Mahatma* (1955), Ruth Praver’s *The Nature of passions* (1956), Nayantara Sahgal’s *A Time to be happy* (1956), Manohar Malgonkar’s *The Princes* (1963) are such examples. Contemporary Indian fiction in English has also witnessed several writers like Aravind Adiga, who have portrayed the impact of casteism in a globalized Indian society. Manu Joseph is one such writer who handles the issue of ‘class’ and ‘caste’ against the backdrop of the twenty first century Indian society which moves around with modern technology and the politics.

Manu Joseph (1974 - ) is an upcoming contemporary Indian novelist whose debut novel, *Serious Men* (2010), is a portrayal of the minds of the modern times upper and lower caste who move around in the same gallery but continue to have their finest invisible margins. This project is an attempt to analyze Manu Joseph’s *Serious Men* (SM) against the arguments explicated by Gayatri Spivak on ‘Strategic Essentialism’ (Spivak, 1988). It denies the ideal notion of ‘essence’ as discussed in ‘Essentialism’. Strategic Essentialism seems inevitable among the subalterns as they use it to present themselves. There are situations as depicted in the novel when the subaltern mimic the dominant caste to try and gain inclusion even as they remain within their own identity as the case demands. Manu Joseph is an Indian journalist and writer who was formerly the editor of the magazine called ‘Open’ and also a columnist for *The International New York Times* and *International Herald Tribune*. He entered his literary scene with his debut novel *Serious Men* (2010). His second novel *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* (2013) is a semi-autobiographical novel. The recent and third novel *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous* (2017) is a political satire on liberal egg heads and pseudo-feminists. Manu Joseph in his novels always interested in creating mysteries and then unwrapping it. His novel’s underlying theme is the discovery of truth. Constant pursuit of truth by the characters in his novel brings out startling realities of human life. In 2011, *Serious Men* was awarded The Hindu Literary Prize and The PEN/OPEN Book Award. In the same year *Serious Men* was shortlisted for Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize and the Huffington Post’s Ten Best Books of the Year included *Serious Men*. *The Independent* reviews Joseph’s and credits him as “The finest comic novelists know the small world can illuminate a culture and an age. With this funny-sad debut, Joseph does that.” (Blurb, Joseph, 2010) Hindustan Times commented on the novel as *Serious Men* goes beyond genre. *The Guardian* credits the novel as “sophisticated entertainment” (Blurb, Joseph, 2010).

The two central characters of the novel are Ayyan Mani and Aravind Acharya. Ayaan Mani was a peon at Bombay’s Institute of Theory and Research, and worked under the dedicated scientist Aravind Acharya, the Big Man of the Institute, and highbrow intellectual who was rumored to be on the list of Nobel Prize Winners.

Ayyan Mani belonged to a lower caste, otherwise called a 'Dalit', while Acharya was a Brahmin. The plot is set in contradictory backgrounds of the hustle and bustle of congested living rooms of the lower class tenements on one side and on the other side the serious intellectuals, starch stiffened Scientists who were engrossed in their various research to which Aravind Acharya belonged. Aravind Acharya was working on his balloon mission to trace the presence of aliens in the atmosphere. Hence, he was always submerged in his passionate scientific experiments. The novel largely revolves around these two characters.

*Serious Men* is divided into seven parts. The first part, 'The Giant Ear Problem' is about what is happening inside the research institute, Nambodri who is one example among the chief scientist of radio astronomy wanted to have his new research which is called as 'The Giant Ear', but Acharya who is the head of the Institute will not agree to the research. Ayyan Mani's descriptions, his chawl, his family, and his son's school are introduced in this part of the novel. The second part is 'Big Bang's Old Foe', the old foe is none other than Acharya, who does not believe in this particular theory. Ayyan's vengeance, the outside world which creates desire in him. The ways in which he created a myth around his son are focused here. The third part is 'Basement Item' where the readers comes to know more about Acharya, his personal life, his feelings for his wife and also his illicit relationship with Oparna Goshmaulik, a fellow Scientist in the research institute. The fourth part is 'The first thousand Prime numbers' where Ayyan and his son's one of the plans to seek attention from media by making Adi to recite first thousand prime numbers at a stretch. The fifth part is 'Aliens use aliens to make curd' where Acharya's success in research, and Oparna's revenge for Acharya and suddenly how there comes a twist in Acharya's life and he is expelled from the Institute for various reasons. The sixth part is 'One last shot' where Ayyan gives a try to make Adi write JET, to seek bigger attention. Nambodri and his team finds Ayyan is a fraud and Adi is a fake genius. The last part is 'The Riot' where Ayyan takes revenge on Nambodri and his team, brings back Acharya to the institute by releasing a recorded news item of the scientists' plebian views on Dalits and Ambedkar. This creates a riot in the city and becomes a great sensational news.

Joseph presents Ayyan Mani as a contemporary low caste Indian who is juxtaposed between two worlds; his lower class home at BDD chawl and his workplace, Bombay's Institute of Theory and Research. His "home was exactly fifteen feet long and ten feet wide" which accommodated his wife and only son, Adi and also a television, a washing machine, a golden Buddha and a towering steel cupboard (Joseph 9). Each time he entered the chawl "an old familiar sorrow rose like vapour inside him" (Joseph 9). For Ayyan Mani, his workplace was an "asylum of great minds" (Joseph 23). It was dominated by the Brahmins and he "had a haunting desire to escape from this madhouse" (Joseph 23). Ayyan Mani even after thirteen years as a peon, never felt at ease at his workplace. The director, Arvind Acharya, and the scientists Nambodri and Oparna Goshmaulik were all working on The Balloon Project Problem. Ayyan Mani was critical of their ways and "could not bear the grandness of their vocation" and their empty arguments (Joseph 24).

Ayyan Mani is a keen observer endowed with extraordinary listening skills. In both these worlds he sharply takes note of every detail and that in turn affects his mind. It creates a desire in him to alter his condition both at home and the workplace. He desires to have a life of material satisfaction through which he could make his presence recognizable in society and also project his son as a great mind among his colleagues at the Institute. Ayyan Mani desires to break the myth that “all peons are Dalits” (Joseph 22).

The strategies that Ayyan Mani evolves to straddle across these two worlds make up for the plot of the novel. Ayyan Mani drawn by the inequalities that overshadowed his life adopted various strategies to gain a winning position in both the worlds. He uses various strategies like creating a myth of his son’s genius, playing pranks, committing forgery, mimicking the upper caste people, seeking attention from media and finally even goes to the extent of instigating a riot.

Among these the strategy he plans with his son is pivotal to analyse his character as that was his master plan to escape the miseries that chained him and his progeny. Ayyan had to escape the trailing realities that chased him every day. “The vigilant mind of Ayyan began to think of a simple plot, to achieve nothing more than some fun and a distraction from the inescapable miseries of BDD” (Joseph 119). He found a new plot that will somehow divert him from the inescapable miseries chaining him, and the dull air surrounding, the morbid social circumstances of his life. He drew a series of plans and political designs to create a myth about his son Adi who was partially deaf. This is the soul string of the novel. All these he plays very well through his perfectly laudable hypocrisy, keeping his wife in a delusion that her son is ‘a genius’. “The myth of child genius was surprisingly simple to create, Ayyan realized, especially around a boy who was innately smart and who wore a hearing-aid” (Joseph 20). “Adi had to simply say something odd in the class once a week to keep the legend alive” (Joseph 120). Ayyan Mani’s wife, Oja was not aware of the secret games that the father and son were playing around. She soon became worried about their son’s super-intelligence which was far bigger than his age. In her attempt to keep him normal, “She had bought a comic book for him to ensure that he read something normal, something far more ordinary than the fat reverential books that his father was encouraging him read. She was worried that her son was becoming abnormal... The fear of raising a strange genius was eating her for some time” (Joseph 48). He even created a fake advertisement in a newspaper column about his son’s genius. This increased the hype of attention that his son received in his family, school and the BDD chawl. Despite his contempt for the dominant caste, he nurtured a desire to at least place his son on a par with them. Ayyan Mani sought a place and identity among them through his son.

Ayyan made Adi to ask irrelevant questions in class to create attention. Those questions were beyond a ten year old boy’s thinking ability. This startled the teachers in the school, and he became the topic of discussion among the schoolteachers. No sooner he became the little star of the school. Adi enjoyed this new attention, rather than being called as a ‘special child’ Adi felt really special when everybody called him a ‘genius’. Adi started questioning in the class; “If plants can eat light, why aren’t there things that eat sound?” (Joseph 119). “How do stars die, Miss?” (Joseph 124), “Why do we learn only the decimal system?”, ‘Why not the binary system?’” (Joseph 97). “Adi’s questions

became more complex: ‘If plants can eat light, why aren’t there things that eat sound?’...’ ‘The average depth of the ocean is 3.7 kilometres, why aren’t lakes so deep?’... But his silence did not surprise the staff. He was, after all, just a little boy. An odd, laconic little boy who was also partially deaf” (Joseph 119). These questions created a special interest about the ten year old boy in the school and also in the chawl. Ayyan enjoyed this attention, and the mere pleasure of being called by others as ‘the father of a genius’.

At the same time, Ayyan Mani, at his workplace, made use of many strategies to express his resentment towards the dominant caste. Although not direct, his ways found him a sense of satisfaction. One such strategy was the manner in which he misused the morning task of writing the ‘Thought for the Day’ on the blackboard in the porch of the Main block in the Institute, each day. On most days Mani wrote genuine quotes but on many other days he either invented quotes that reflected his oppressed caste or he wrongly acknowledged the quotes for fun. He wrote: *It’s a myth that Sanskrit is the best language for writing computer code. Patriotic Indians have spread this lie for many years\_ Bill Gates* (Joseph 24). He was conscious of the power of the written word. Once a week he wrote a phony quote because “that way his subversive abuse of the Brahmins would not attract too much attention” (Joseph 98). Here, Ayyan Mani seems to wish to rewrite history, the history of his caste that was created by the dominant caste.

Ayyan Mani’s use of this prank was an expression of the growing insecurity that the predominantly Brahmin men in the Research Institute created within him. On one side he desired to become like them but on the other he detested their lack of empathy towards the lower castes. He felt all the men were so unreal. Always thinking about mathematical solutions, and problems, “Ayyan found these men more unreal than he could ever have imagined. And they were repulsive” (Joseph 107). They failed to understand the practical difficulties of everyday life of the poor and the insecurities of the lower caste. Ignoring the needs of the terrestrial beings like Ayyan Mani and his community, they were in search of extra-terrestrial intelligence. Their arguments, debate, over science and its development were beyond the realities of the world. They were more serious about discovering whether aliens existed in the stratosphere or the measure of time. Ayyan Mani considered their deliberations insane. He heard them search for a never-ending quest for truth. Ayyan was very sure that there was no such thing called truth.

The Brahmins inside the institute, reminded Ayyan Mani about his history; the pains and sufferings, the unheard cries and the fearful suppressed voices of the subalterns. They made him observe that, “In this delusional heritage of the country, his own ancestors were never included” (Joseph 286). The history that did not include his ancestors, did not probably give them voices either, as they were marginalised. The subalterns were never granted rights of a human being. They were treated as slaves, where their services were enjoyed with no respect given in return. These thoughts that flooded his mind, made Ayyan Mani secretly rejoice whenever the heads of the institute fought among them. “The clash of the Brahmins, an entertainment that even his forefathers enjoyed in different ways in different times and had recounted in jubilant folk songs that they once used to sing beneath the stars, was now coming to the institute” (Joseph 105). The cold war between Acharya and

Nambodri somehow gave him a sadistic pleasure and fulfilment that he never felt when they were united. This also reminded him of his forefathers, who in deep of their hearts enjoyed the clash of the mighty castes.

This rage against the Brahmins grew inside him and he looked at ways to take revenge. He arrived at a strategy to increase his race and thereby overthrow their dominance. He came upon “the insane idea of donating his Dalit semen to the fair childless Brahmin couples” at a fertility clinic’s nascent sperm bank. Having heard that such banks did not reveal the identity of the donor, he imagined his seed could impregnate hundreds of unsuspecting high-caste women. He hoped stout brooding Dalits would spring up everywhere...But doctors there told him that he had a defect and so his contribution could not be accepted” (Joseph 52). Ayyan was so furious at times like these. The novelist sarcastically draws our attention to the fact that Ayyan Mani who was making attempts to escape the predicaments of his caste, was making a foolish plan to increase the number of dalits across India.

Apart from the chawl and the workplace, Ayyan Mani always made note of the division that prevailed between his caste and class and that of the dominant castes and their privileged social position. On the way to his home from the Institute there were many external things that reminded him of his class. It provoked him to question his identity and to scorn at the lower strata of the society into which he was born.

The cars, their faces frowning in a superior way through the bonnet grilles, were the Brahmins. They were higher than the motorcycles who were higher than the pedestrians. The cycles were the lowest of the low. Even the pedestrians pretended that they didn’t see them. The bus had to be something in this structure, and Ayyan decided it was him. Lowly, but formidable and beyond torment. In any given situation in this country, Ayyan thought with a chuckle that did not surface, someone was Brahmin, and someone was the Untouchable (82).

According to Ayyan Mani, if the cars were considered as a class symbol, then he symbolized a bus. The gulf that divided the upper and the lower class, he understood, was because of the generations of suppression that his community had to bear. It created a dichotomy within his mind. He aspired to become like the dominant caste and wanted to escape being identified by his lower caste. At the same time his close encounters with the Brahmins in his workplace made him repulsive towards them. One of the strategies that Ayyan Mani used is ‘mimicking’. He experimented with his knowledge, by trying to learn the Binary system in Mathematics. He found it very difficult for his understanding, “He then read about binary codes, a whole language built on the arrangement of zeros and ones, and he grudgingly conceded that it was so clever that even if he had been born into privilege, he might not have been smart enough to invent it” (Joseph 85).

In *Serious Men*, the novelist shows how the subalterns, try to adopt the ways of the dominant caste, like the colonized tried to do with the colonizers. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, observed that mimicry was at once ‘resemblance’ and ‘menace’. The result is a ‘blurred copy’ which can be quite threatening. It mostly appears to parody whatever it mimics. (Aschcroft 115) Thus Ayyan seems

to agree to the fact that intelligence is inherent, and that it was not necessarily an attribute of a dominant caste.

Ayyan Mani's attempts to mimic, included his efforts to dress himself and his family to appear like the dominant caste. During the inter-school quiz competitions, Ayyan, Oja and Adi, all dressed up well so that they would be readily welcomed like other parents. However, his attempt failed.

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 their midst, he was somehow smaller. And Oja looked like their cook...They stood at the periphery of the group (201).

Ayyan tried as much as he could to hide his social position. The 'elegance' or 'arrogance' that Ayyan identified in the dominant caste, made him feel more conscious about his surroundings, his position in life and his mere existence in society. He bought new shirts, which he could not easily afford, yet he felt he looked like their driver. And his wife looked like their cook. Though he tried to imitate the other upper class men, it almost always became an absolute failure.

Ayyan knew very well, the lies that he was creating was dangerous to both him and his son. But he felt compelled to do it, because he somehow wanted to prove himself to the world. "The bewitching life of creating a whole myth, was dangerous" (Joseph 241). But on the other side looking into the world, "In the world that lay outside his home, there was nothing right or wrong. Every moment was a battle, and the cunning won" (Joseph 121). The World around him appeared like a battlefield, and so he argued to himself that if he had to survive, he had to be cunning; nothing was considered right or wrong until it was questioned. If he managed to win over these situations without being found out, he would succeed in his intentions. Ayyan thought the world that lay before him was cunning, and he had to choose the path of the tricky, crooked and vile. So there was nothing wrong in creating his myth. 'Survival of the Fittest' as Darwin says only the fittest among them will survive. (Darwin 77).

In his attempt to belong, Ayyan started intentionally learning things around him so that he could equip himself. He thought knowledge could help improve his identity, and hence started reading everything possible. "Ayyan had developed the habit of reading anything in front of him, even if it was something he did not really understand, because he believed that one reason why everybody including the sons of municipal sweepers, was to collect as much information as possible before dying with a funny look on the face (Joseph 28). From his boyhood days, he read everything that he found and that was how he learnt English.

Ayyan Mani was curiously intrusive about all that happened in the Institute. He always devised a strategy to get information about everything that happened in the workplace. Ayyan Mani eavesdropped upon the telephonic conversations of his superiors.



Usually, one of the receivers was left off the hook. That was because he almost always arrived before Acharya, called one of the director's landlines from here and left the receivers of both the phones slightly askew. That was Ayyan could just pick up his phones slightly askew. That way Ayyan could just pick up his phone and hear the conversations in Acharya's room, and keep abreast of all the developments in the institute and, as a consequence, in the universe. (Joseph 25).

Through this strategy, Ayyan Mani kept himself abreast of what all the happenings in the Institute. Aravind Acharya, the Institute's Head was busy with his Balloon Mission which was not welcomed by many of his colleagues. Acharya however overlooked the opposition. Jana s, who was supposedly to be the next head after Acharya's exit had developed long term differences with Acharya. Meanwhile, Acharya who was sentimental by nature to the extent of using his wife's name as his e-mail password, at one point falls for the charms of Oparna Goshmaulik, a fellow Scientist and his partner in the Balloon Mission. Acharya's illicit love with Oparna Goshmaulik was temporary. When guilt hits him for being infidel he returns to his wife. But before that, the secret relationship was revealed and Aravind Acharya is expelled from the Institute because Oparna complained against Acharya.

Ayyan in his institute knows very well how to switch into his own group. He gets and bonds with his peer group, whenever the other peons in the institute seemed help, he readily helped them. Through this technique he represented himself a Dalit, and he knew that these men will be of help to him, if not today but in future. This what Spivak calls 'temporary essentialisation' (Spivak 197-221). One such temporary essentialisation in Ayyan happens when a peon asked his help to get a residence proof. "Mani,' he said in a whisper, I need a residence proof. I'm applying for a job in the Gulf. I've to make a passport now.' Ayyan appeared thoughtful. 'I've a friend who can help', he said. 'Give me exactly two days.'" (Joseph 103)

The changed leadership at the Institute brings new challenges to Ayyan Mani. It is in these circumstances that Ayyan Mani and Aravind Acharya have a deal. After Acharya's expulsion Nambodri took charge of the Institute. Ayyan Mani tried to use his strategies with Nambodri for accomplishing his vicious plans but Nambodri refused to oblige. As a result, Ayyan Mani took advantage of a broken Acharya whose wife had deserted him after the scandal. Ayyan Mani in his continued pursuit to establish his son as a genius, was looking for means to help his son clear the Joint Entrance Examination (JET) for his higher studies. He had gathered all the information about the printers of the question papers but wanted to know where it was being stored. When Acharya hesitated, Ayyan Mani played a recorded conversation between Acharya and Oparna. This strategy sealed both their futures. "Let's talk about the future, Sir', Ayyan said... Acharya ate the rest of the banana without uttering word... 'There are three versions of the question-paper'" (Joseph 307). Acharya agreed to reveal the questions of the JET exam, as he was one of the committee members of the Board. Ayyan Mani's son Adi wrote the JET and cleared the exam with high score.

As the novel concludes, Ayyan Mani's sense of identity is shifted more to his own caste. However, much he longed to try and behave and achieve like the dominant caste, when he heard derogatory comments made by Nambodri about the lower castes, he was enraged. Moreover, Nambodri the conversations also included statements about his son's genius. "I have never come across a Dalit genius. It's odd you know." (Joseph 294). Here as a strategy, he had recorded the controversial statements made by the new director of the Institute. He played the recorder to the peons of the institute to instigate riot, to trigger their hidden grievances against the dominant caste. Ayyan instigated them by saying "You are black because your parents were black. They are saying that you are dumb because your parents were dumb. And the Brahmins are smart because their parents were smart. And they are saying about me that I am only fit to be a toilet-cleaner because I am a Dalit." (Joseph 295).

Mani's son, Adi who participated in JET cleared the exam with high score, so Mani strategically devises a plan to bring Acharya back the head to the Institute by playing the recorded tape at the press meeting which was arranged to celebrate the young Dalit genius. During the interview he released the recorded tape of Nambodri and others, who were heard commenting on Dalits to the News media. This angered the city. "What Nambodri had said about 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 29). Ayyan on releasing the recorded remarks to the media seemed to pose himself as a fearless future leader of the Dalits. He deliberately walked bare foot to be noticed for being indifferent. Even in these small actions he is very much strategic.

It was too late for Nambodri and his colleagues to match Ayyan's plan. The institute was attacked by the mob. After the riot the police arrested members of the mob. Nambodri and his peer group of supporters were rescued. Ayyan Mani emerged as a super villain in front of the other scientists. This became the ultimate victory of his life's strategies. Ayyan Mani and his son's game of fooling takes a new spirit at the end of the novel.

The above analysis of Ayyan Mani's strategies may rightly place him a strategic essentialist. Ayyan Mani who is solely driven by circumstances, who is totally straddling in a world of entirely juxtaposed situations. Adi's victory gave him a sense of accomplishment.

We have to notice the very setting of the novel. "The whole country, it seemed, was in the trance of the Dalit genius, the son of a clerk, the grandson of sweeper. 'At the end of the oppressive centuries, at the end of tunnel of time.' Ayyan was quoted by the newspapers, 'my son has finally arrived at the edge of an opportunity.'" (Joseph 317). But this was short lived.

The novel's title 'Serious Men' seems to be deliberately ironic. Ayyan and Arvind are both serious men moving through an increasingly absurd and comic scenario. At the very beginning of the novel the novelist gives a humorous description of 'Serious men', "If you stare enough at serious people, they will begin to appear comical." (Joseph 4).

Manu Joseph has written on serious issue in a lighter vein. The author struggles and straddles to position himself and try not to lean on entirely on the side Dalits. Ayyan, the lower caste protagonist is portrayed as realistic. On the other hand, Aravind Acharya who represented the upper caste is depicted with human frailties like falling for women who much younger to him. He is also character haughty enough to object the Big-bang theory for the only reason that he is not a Christian. “Acharya, universe did not have a beginning, it did not have an end. ‘Because I am a not a Christian,’ he had famously said.” (Joseph 33).

Ayyan Mani and Acharya at one stage become mutually dependent. Arvind needed Ayyan Mani’s craftiness to save his career; Ayyan Mani needed Arvind to make his son, Adi a genius. Mani strategically devises plan to bring Acharya back as head to the institute in which he becomes successful. The novelist here tries to prove that how Acharya from a dominant caste readily agrees to the vicious plans of the lower caste Ayyan. Caste does not play any role here, the dominant and the lower caste join hands to position themselves in the world of competitions.

Manu Joseph’s *Serious Men*, like Arvind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, depicts an India that is divided into haves and have-nots. *The Guardian* reviewed *Serious Men* as “a ground-breaking examination of caste in contemporary India”. The novelist attempts to draw focus on the lasting impact of birth-based caste on the Indian society. “The Untouchables, in modern times, had won the useless right of being touched by the High caste, but they remained the poorest in the city” (Joseph 280). While open oppression by the dominant caste has been almost controlled, the essence of one’s caste continued to be nurtured in each individual.

Social divisions in the past existed within a framework of inequality and it continues to prevail. Contemporary India has witnessed much opposition to caste and gender hierarchies. The Constitution of India entitles equal rights and concern to each individual. Caste is no longer a barrier to gain education or access a job or land. However, this has not ensured a casteless society. “A bisected study into the caste structure of the nation’s social setup reveals how the whole myth sags behind the progression and economic growth by disintegrating people in business and institutional spaces” (Sundaram). A sense of essentialism has perhaps grown among the castes over the years.

“Essentialism is the assumption that groups, categories or classes of objects have one or several defining features exclusive to all members of that category. Some studies for race or gender, for instance, assume the presence of essential characteristics distinguishing one race from the another or the feminine from the masculine” (Hawley 153). Essentialism is the view that all things have a set of particular characteristics, attributes or essence; that which makes them distinct from other entities. This is in contrast to a philosophy called ‘non-essentialism’, which argues that there are no such specific traits to those entities. Essentialism stated that the essence was permanent, unalterable and an eternal substance or ‘form’. Plato was one of the first essentialist who believed in the ‘ideal forms’, an abstract entity of which individual objects are mere facsimiles. In this respect Classical Humanism has an essentialist conception or notion and it firmly believes in unchangeable human nature. ([www.philosophybasics.com](http://www.philosophybasics.com)). At the same time, it has been observed that not all with the sense of

essentialism stay loyal to their castes. Subaltern studies have reviewed this social behaviour and analysed it as an act of survival.

Alternatively, Strategic Essentialism, ‘a term coined by Gayatri Spivak stressed the need for the subaltern or the oppressed to go beyond their essential subjectivity’ (Hawley 157). Spivak explained it as “the ways in which the subordinate or marginalised social groups may temporarily put aside local differences in order to forge a sense of collective identity through which they band together in political movements” (qtd. Stoll). Strategic Essentialism is a political tactic employed by a majority group acting on the basis of shared identity in the public arena in the interests of unity during a struggle for equal rights.

*Serious Men* intertwines Ayyan Mani’s and Arvind Acharya’s stories. They represent the two worlds that Ayyan Mani was straddling across to position himself in the society; his own and that of the dominant caste. The novelist introduces Ayyan Mani as a lower caste who had a fairly good livelihood. “In a way, this (BDD Chawl) was the easiest place to be a man. To be alive was enough. To be the sober and employed was fantastically impressive. Ayyan Mani was something of a legend” (Joseph 7). So, unlike the condition of their caste people in the past, contemporary India had made it possible for individuals like Ayyan Mani to secure a job. However, as a peon, he felt repressed to be placed at the bottom order of the hierarchy “they are saying about me that I’m only fit to be toilet-cleaner because I am a Dalit.” (Joseph 295) Ayyan had to escape the trailing realities that chased him every day and that motivated him to adopt unscrupulous strategies. The Norton Review on *Serious Men*: “a subtly wicked satire of subterfuge and ambition.” (www.publishersweekly.com)

Conversion was adopted by many lower castes to escape the stain of their past. Ayyan Mani called himself a Buddhist although his wife remained loyal to Hinduism. But as noted Indian Historian, Romila Thapar wrote, “Even on conversion, the link with caste was frequently inherent. A multiplicity of identities remained, although their function and need may have changed’ (1005). Sundaram in his analysis of the caste-conflicts in Manu Joseph’s novel, opines that, “sometimes the inner crisis of national integration caused by caste stratification gave way to foreign missionaries to convert the weaker lower caste sections to their religion” (4). Ayyan Mani’s conversation with the catholic sister, at his son’s school, reflects this tendency. She tries to woo him to her religion by reminding him of the oppression that his ancestors faced at the hands of the Brahmins. “That’s why you’re a good Christian, Mr. Mani. You’ve forgiven them, the Brahmins, whose great fiction Hinduism is.” (Joseph 22)

Ayyan Mani’s inner ranting explains his predicament; “But what must a Man do? 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?” (Joseph 5). His social position in life seemed to be preordained with no escape. He could not easily match the pace of the upper caste in fulfilling his ambitions. The caste he was born into was his impediment.

“He could have done any of those jobs. Oja too. And they could have lived in a building that had lift, and when they entered the kind of restaurants where emaciated men parked the cars of fat men...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 do was to be born in the homes where they were born” (Joseph 81).

There were instances that proved Ayyan Mani had his share of intelligence. He was irked when the others in the Institute remarked about it. ‘You are such a clever man, Mani,’ he said. ‘If only you had the fathers that these men had, you would have had a room of your own today with your own secretary’” (Joseph 27). The novel is largely “a depiction of this densely imagined subaltern resentment and gloom” (<http://middlestage.blogspot.in/2010/07/rage-and-love-in-manu-josephs-serious.html>).

Ayyan Mani is limited by caste and position but not by ambition or wit or courage. Driven by a great aspiration to be relieved from the chains of his caste and class, Ayyan Mani evolves to become a strategic essentialist. This tendency agrees to Spivak’s philosophy that “there are in principle no essential identities” in individuals, suggesting that, “in practice people act, and need to act as if there were” (Sage 189). The practical character of social and political life, as in the case of Ayyan Mani, determines the distinction. He had no escape from his caste but his strategies like fabricating a myth around his son’s genius and mimicking the upper caste reveal his strategy to position himself as an upper caste. ““At the end of the oppressive centuries, at the end of the oppressive centuries, at the end of the tunnel of time,’ Ayyan was quoted by newspapers, ‘my son has finally arrived at the edge of an opportunity.’” (Joseph 317). At the same time, the Brahmins in his workplace and their attitude towards his caste provoked him to play pranks with the daily thought that he wrote on the blackboard. As rightly pointed out by Shashi Deshpande, who was one of the jury members that awarded Manu Joseph the Hindu Fiction Award 2010, “Manu Joseph writes about serious matters with a marvellous, light touch, which is wonderful in any writer.”(qtd. *The Hindu*)

Ayyan Mani could not resist displaying solidarity with those from his caste either. He strategically manipulated situations to establish his fellowship with them, as he understood that it was difficult to completely detach himself from associating with them.

Spivak pointed out that “the idea of strategic essentialism always raises the question of where to draw the tactical line” (Sage 189). Ayyan Mani had to draw the line when his prime strategy to make his son appear a genius almost failed. The attitude of Nambodiri, the new Brahmin chief of the institute irked him to draw the strategy of seeking attention of the media to expose Nambodiri’s offending comments against the Dalits and Dr. Ambedkar. “The trick is to try to hold both the plasticity and the practical fixity of identity in mind at the same time thereby enabling one to oscillate between them for particular purposes” (Sage 189). Ayyan Mani, ultimately oscillates strongly towards his own case and strategically instigates a riot. Just as Ayyan Mani’s mixed loyalties draw criticism, the tenets of strategic essentialism drew criticism that Spivak distanced herself from the concept at a later stage.

Ayyan Mani and Acharya are shown to be, in their own ways, serious men, comprehending their fraught positions in great depth. Their disparate worlds and ambitions, and their belated, surprising complicity, are depicted in *Serious Men*. Shaunna Hunter called this satirical novel “a smart and touching addition to the growing group of works by young, Indian-born authors writing in English.” Manu Joseph, as a novelist, seems to also straddle across his positions in support of the predicament of the upper and lower castes in contemporary India. But his suggestion for an ostensibly new India is conveyed in his justification of Ayyan Mani’s strategies: “He had to abolish the world he grew up in to be able to plot new ways of escaping from it” (Joseph 7). “In contemporary times, we not only reconstruct the past but we also use it to give legitimacy to the way in which we order our own society” (Thapar 3). Manu Joseph, in his conversation at the Hindu Literary Festival 2018, stated that it is only “when sons and daughters do not want to be like their fathers and mothers, will society change.” His statement echoes the viewpoint that change should begin in the ‘particular’ to affect the ‘general’, until which point a casteless society in India would remain a mere ideology.

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