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REPRESENTATION OF MALE BODY AND MALENESS IN MANU JOSEPH'S
SERIOUS MEN

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ABSTRACT

Is there any link between the materiality of the body and the performativity of gender, as questioned by Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter*. Thinking of body as constructed, demands a rethinking of the meaning of construction itself. Bodies only appear, only endure, and only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas. The notion of gender performativity relate to the concept of materialization that constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours and its movements, and is a cultural norm which govern the materialization of bodies. The idea that gender is a construct and thus masculinity is also a construct is taken for study in this paper. It tries to analyse the representation of gender and the materialization of body in Manu Joseph's debut novel *Serious Men* (2010). Its protagonist Ayyan Mani, an educated employed Dalit believes that all a man really wants is to be greater than his friends, which is the main theme of the novel. The paper proposes a detailed survey of the male world and male representations thorough the constructs of sex, gender performativity and materialization of body in the novel.

Key Words: Gender, Caste, Performativity

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Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate act, but rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. Sexual difference is invoked as an issue of material differences. Sexual difference is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices. Sex not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce –demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls. What constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its

movements will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect power. Gender is a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter, understood either as 'the body' or its given sex. The materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm.

Masculinity is always interpolated by cultural, historical and geographical location and in our time the combined influence of feminism and the gay movement has exploded the conception of a uniform masculinity and even sexuality is no longer held to be fixed or innate. If maleness is biological, then masculinity is cultural. Men are not born with masculinity as part of their genetic make-up, rather

it is something into which they are acculturated and which is composed of social codes of behaviour which they learn to reproduce in culturally appropriate ways.

George Mosse, in *The Image of Man* presents a broad brush survey that charts the rise and gradual erosion of what he variously calls 'the dominant masculine stereotype', normative masculinity a highly charged bundle of ideas. At the centre of this ideal lay a renewed emphasis upon the perfectibility of the male body, this became an outward sign of a man's moral superiority and inner strength of character. The body was to be a locus of self-discipline and restraint able so to concentrate its energies that any obstacle could be surmounted, any hint of emotional weakness could be held in check.

There are several factors that construct and pattern masculinity – culture, age and physique, education, social status, lifestyle, class, religion so on. These clearly overlap and depending on the individual, some will be more influential than the others. Masculinity is never set in concrete; rather it always has the capacity for rapid modification. 'Masculinity-on-the move' would be a man who changes class, status, culture and geographical location and becomes upwardly or downwardly mobile and in the process modifies his sense, experience and enactment of the masculine.

Manu Joseph was born in Kottayam, Kerala, and grew up in Chennai. He is a graduate of Loyola College, Chennai, and dropped out of Madras Christian College to become a staff writer at Society magazine. He is a former editor of OPEN magazine, and a columnist for The International New York Times and The Hindustan Times. In 2007, he was a Chevening Scholar. He currently lives in Delhi. His debut novel *Serious Men* (2010) won The Hindu Literary Prize and the PEN/Open Book Award. The PEN jury described him as "...that rare bird who can wildly entertain the reader as forcefully as he moves them." His second novel, *The Illicit Happiness of Other People*, was published in September 2012. The semi-autobiographical novel was described by The Wall Street Journal as a work that "injects dark, rueful laughter into an immensely touching story of loss".

Serious Men's protagonist, Ayyan Mani, one of the thousands of dalit (untouchable caste) men trapped in Mumbai's slums, works in the Institute of Theory and Research as the lowly assistant to the director, a brilliant self-assured astronomer. Ever wily and ambitious, Ayyan weaves two plots, one involving his knowledge of an illicit romance between his married boss and the institute's first female researcher, and another concerning his young son and his soap-opera-addicted wife. Ayyan quickly finds his deceptions growing intertwined, even as the Brahmin scientists wage war over the question of aliens in outer space. In his debut novel, Manu Joseph expertly picks apart the dynamics of this complex world, offering humorous takes on proselytizing nuns and chronicling the vanquished director serving as guru to his former colleagues. This is at once a moving portrait of love and its strange workings and a hilarious portrayal of men's runaway egos and ambitions.

'All a man really wants is to be greater than his friends'. Such is the belief of Ayyan Mani, who spends his time dreaming up ways to elevate himself above the banality of everyday life in the Mumbai slums. But this time he's hit the jackpot with a ruse so brilliant it can't possibly fail. All he needs is a little subterfuge and a willing partner-in-crime in the form of his eleven-year-old son, who is a genius. At least that's what his teachers think.

In the novel Manu Joseph tries to explore the dynamics of power, gender and sexuality. Workplace is a setting in which gender roles, sexuality and job-based power dynamics are all being constructed and reconstructed through interaction of various staff.

The moment Oparna Goshmaulik had walked into the institute, three months ago, she was a commotion.....Another high-caste woman beyond his reach. She went to the Cathedral School in the back seat of her father's car. Then on to Stanford. Now she was here: the Head of Astrobiology, the solitary queen of the basement lab. So easy it was for these women.... Oja Mani did not even know that there was something called womanhood. 'Downmarket' was what women like Oparna would call her, even discreetly laugh at her

perhaps if they met her: at the powder in the nape of her neck, the oil in her hair and the yellow glow of turmeric on her face. (Joseph, 29)

The ideal of masculinity, on the other hand requires intense effort: a man must struggle against himself, even conceiving of his own body as a sort of enemy, and also against others. The differences between men and women had to be sharply emphasized and feminine traits had to be kept firmly in their proper place: in men they were a sign of weakness. The manly ideal was partly defined by what it excluded those unsightly features and pathological behaviours that indicated everything an authentic masculinity was not supposed to.

Junger, Remarque, Boswell and Carlyle were all engaged in an attempt to imagine a form of manhood that was worthy of the name, to construct a version of the male self that could command moral and cultural respect, sometimes in the face of the most appalling conditions. In the novel, Joseph presents the cultural clash between the classes and castes in Indian society - Dalits and Brahmins, the former represented by the protagonist Ayyan Mani and the latter Acharya and Nambodiri. On one occasion, Ayyan record in his mobile phone their disgusting talk about the untouchables.

Ayyan went down the corridor trying to calm the tumult within. Midway down the corridor, he veered left towards the small pantry. A peon was washing the cutlery in the sink. Two others were making coffee. Ayyan played the recorder and put it on the kitchen platform. The peons did not understand the voices at first, but soon their faces began to change. They stopped what they were doing and listened. As the voices spoke, Ayyan translated some difficult portions to Marathi.... One of the peons filled a jug. He stared at the other peon and at Ayyan in the fellowship of the moment. He opened the lid of the jug and spat into it. (Joseph, 295)

Thus in the novel Manu Joseph shows the dominant, subordinated and marginalised masculinities are in constant interaction, changing the conditions for each other's' existence and transforming themselves as they do. Working class men

experience little formal power in the workplace and as a consequence of this, will frequently adopt macho identities to mask this powerlessness and compensate by dominating in some other contexts. Thus the novel effectively paratyrps what is called 'Masculinity-on the move'.

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