



BREAKING BOUNDARIES: EXPLORING TABOOS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN LITERATURE THROUGH MANU JOSEPH'S 'SERIOUS MEN'

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Indian literature has significantly evolved over the years, breaking societal norms and challenging taboos that were historically ingrained in the Indian culture. Manu Joseph's novel 'Serious Men' is a prime example of this literary movement, as it delves into various taboos prevailing in Indian society. This research paper aims to analyze the portrayal of these taboos within the novel and examine how they contribute to the overall narrative. By examining key characters and their interactions, the paper demonstrates how the author utilizes satire and dark humor to question and critique these taboos. Employing a multidisciplinary approach that combines literary analysis and sociocultural studies, it explores the ways in which Joseph's work challenges deeply ingrained societal norms and engages in a profound interrogation of class, religion, and caste dynamics. By skillfully undermining preconceived notions of respectability and appropriateness, 'Serious Men' leads readers on a gripping journey through the lives of its characters, unravelling the complexities and contradictions of contemporary Indian society. By exploring themes such as caste, education, religion, and social hierarchy, the paper will shed light on the ways in which Indian writers are pushing boundaries and engaging in critical discourse on societal issues.

Keywords: Contemporary Indian literature, Breaking boundaries, Taboos, Societal norms, Caste, Religion, Serious Men, Critical discourse, Indian Society

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Introduction

Contemporary Indian literature represents a dynamic and evolving literary movement that has gained prominence in the past few decades. It emerged as a response to the changing socio-cultural landscape of India, influenced by globalization, technological advancements, and the shifting societal dynamics. This literary movement can be seen as a departure from the traditional themes and styles of Indian literature, reflecting the concerns and

aspirations of the modern Indian society. Indian literature has a rich heritage dating back centuries, encompassing classical Sanskrit texts, regional literatures, and works in multiple languages. Traditionally, Indian literature has been infused with themes of spirituality, mythology, and social morality, reflecting the complexity and diversity of the Indian cultural fabric. However, contemporary Indian authors have broken free from these conventional tropes and have begun to explore a wider range of

themes and narrative techniques. One of the defining characteristics of contemporary Indian literature is its exploration of socio-political issues, capturing the dilemmas and challenges faced by contemporary Indian society. Authors are not only questioning entrenched social hierarchies but also addressing issues like gender inequality, caste discrimination, religious conflicts, globalization, urbanization, and the impact of technological advancements.

In *Serious Men*, Manu Joseph presents a thought-provoking perspective on social inequality and the struggle for recognition within rigid hierarchies. The protagonist, Ayyan Mani, a Dalit Tamil, navigates through the complex layers of caste, religion, and class in his relentless quest for societal recognition. Joseph delves deep into the psychological and emotional complexities of his characters, exposing the underlying truths and repercussions of societal taboos. Ayyan's narrative resonates with the reader, revealing the desperation and ingenuity of those who strive to break free from the constraints society has imposed upon them.

This shift in focus stems from a desire to reflect the realities of contemporary India, shedding light on the often unspoken or marginalized aspects of society. Contemporary Indian literature has witnessed a wave of authors who explore societal taboos and challenge traditional norms. Joseph's work is not an isolated example in the realm of contemporary Indian literature that explores taboos. Writers like Arundhati Roy, with her bold and award-winning debut novel *The God of Small Things*, and her exploration of forbidden love and societal constraints, have also delved into taboo topics. Roy's book, on page 72, poignantly illustrates the forbidden love between the twins Rahel and Estha, and the societal consequences they face in their pursuit of happiness. Similarly, authors like Tabish Khair, in his novel 'How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position' has fearlessly challenged norms and broached taboo subjects such as terrorism and domestic abuse, respectively. These writers have used their works to initiate critical discussions and break the silence surrounding sensitive topics. Manu Joseph's novel 'Serious Men' stands out as a remarkable example of this trend, offering a unique perspective on the taboos prevailing in Indian

society. Joseph's words are both profound and lyrical, reflecting the depth of his exploration of taboos. For instance, in *Serious Men*, he writes, "The seriousness of the serious men is precisely what they lack. They are too frivolous to be serious." (*Serious Men* 197). This poignant statement encapsulates the crux of the novel, highlighting the inherent irony and hypocrisy that often underlies social conventions. Joseph skillfully weaves a narrative that challenges the self-appointed "serious men" in society, exposing the frailty of their beliefs and the repercussions of their actions. The objective of this research paper is to analyze the portrayal of taboos in 'Serious Men' and explore how Indian literature is breaking boundaries through discussions on caste, education, religion, and social hierarchy. By closely examining the novel, this paper aims to shed light on the literary techniques employed by Manu Joseph, as well as the impact of his work on contemporary Indian literature.

Taboos in Indian Society

Taboos have always been ingrained in Indian society, often acting as powerful forces that shape and restrict the lives and choices of individuals. From the prohibition of intercaste marriages, social hierarchy, education and knowledge, religion and superstitions to the marginalization of the LGBTQ+ community, Indian society has been grappling with deeply rooted taboos that hold back progress and hinder societal growth. These taboos have been addressed by countless writers through their works, shedding light on the restrictive nature of Indian society and the urgent need for change.

One of the most prominent taboos in Indian society is the prohibition of intercaste marriages. In his seminal novel "Untouchable," Mulk Raj Anand eloquently portrays the deep-seated discrimination faced by those belonging to the lower castes. He writes, "Though he himself was a bonded laborer, for whose descendants no escape was evidently planned from it, there were people whom he was not allowed to touch" (Anand, 11). This quote serves as a powerful reminder of the rigid social hierarchy that persists in Indian society, creating barriers for people to form relationships outside their castes.

The issue of menstruation, considered a taboo in many parts of Indian society, has also been addressed by writers. In her seminal work "The Red

Tent," Anita Diamant delves into the lives of women in biblical times, shedding light on the practice of seclusion during menstruation. She writes, "As she went down to the village, Dinah covered her face with the scarf and sang under her breath some of the songs Leah sang while she was bleeding" (Diamant, 158). This quote reveals the shame and secrecy surrounding menstruation and the need for open dialogue to challenge and break such taboos.

The strict adherence to age-old beliefs and practices in Indian society has also hindered progress and perpetuated taboos. In her thought-provoking book "The Argumentative India," Amartya Sen critiques the emphasis on tradition at the expense of progress. He states, "Traditional intransigence can be a prime enemy of justice" (Sen, 74). This quote highlights the need to critically evaluate and challenge long-standing taboos and beliefs that hinder societal progress and equality.

Indian society has long been entrenched in a myriad of taboos that restrict individual freedom and hinder societal growth. Through the words of writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Diamant, and Amartya Sen, we are reminded of the urgent need to challenge and break these taboos. Their writings serve as catalysts for change, encouraging open dialogue and the dismantling of societal barriers that impede progress and equality. It is through such thoughtful and bold voices that we can aspire to create a more inclusive and progressive society.

Manu Joseph's 'Serious Men'

Manu Joseph's 'Serious Men' is a thought-provoking novel that delves into the realms of caste, ambition, and the interplay between knowledge and power. Published in 2010, it stands as a scathing critique of the Indian society, exposing its deeply entrenched social hierarchies and the oppressive systems that perpetuate them. Through a masterfully crafted narrative, Joseph presents a thought-provoking exploration of the impact of social stratification on individuals and their aspirations. 'Serious Men' is an astute examination of the complex realities of contemporary Indian society, skewering the deeply ingrained hierarchies, social norms, and the relentless pursuit of power. Through a mesmerizing storyline and sharply observed characters, Joseph delves into the lives of individuals

who navigate this world of unequal opportunities, while challenging age-old notions of success, intelligence, and privilege.

Set in Mumbai, the story primarily revolves around Ayyan Mani, an ambitious Dalit, a member of India's historically disadvantaged lower caste. Ayyan works as a personal assistant to the revered astrophysicist, Dr. Arvind Acharya, at the Institute of Theory and Research. Despite lacking formal education, Ayyan is sharp-witted and cunning, brilliantly portrayed through Joseph's words as he states, "In an eternity, the human mind remains incapable of grasping even a simple sentence pronounced in the labyrinthine language of mathematical physics". Joseph masterfully captures the complexities of the class divide and societal expectations, highlighting the struggles faced by those who are trapped within oppressive systems. He writes, "The intelligent are always oppressed by the less intelligent, so it is with the assistance of the less intelligent that the intelligent rule" (P. 82).

As Ayyan yearns for social mobility, he concocts an elaborate scheme involving his son, Adi, who is portrayed as a child prodigy. The author exposes the lengths to which people will go to accentuate their own intelligence and the exploitation of others for personal gain. In one poignant scene, Ayyan reflects on the inefficiencies of the caste system and the perpetuation of ignorance: "A man with an advance understanding of the mysteries of the universe is no better than a man with an advance understanding of rice cultivation. Both have abilities that are useless in their societies" (P. 186).

Joseph's narrative is not just a commentary on India's social fabric, but it is also a reflection on the universal human desire for validation and recognition. As Ayyan navigates through a web of deceit, he embodies the desperation of those who try to break free from the predetermined paths set for them, stating, "Sometimes the world benefits enormously from the worst human instincts" (Pg. 122).

The novel skillfully employs satire to expose the hypocrisy and corruption that pervades society, drawing parallels to the works of other esteemed writers. In a similar vein to Salman Rushdie's

"Midnight's Children," Joseph uses a blend of dark humor and magical realism to explore the complexities of Indian identity. Both novels revel in the absurdity and paradoxes of the post-colonial condition, resulting in rich and thought-provoking narratives. In "Serious Men," Manu Joseph breaks the traditional mold of storytelling by effectively weaving together social commentary, deep character development, and a biting sense of humor. Through his sharp observations and evocative prose, he compels readers to question the constructed hierarchies of intelligence and to reconsider the true meaning of success in a society dominated by privilege and power.

As Adiga states in "The White Tiger" (P. 256), "Some people are born to be a burden on the rest," echoing the sentiment that Joseph explores throughout his novel. "Serious Men" is a compelling exploration of the undercurrents of Indian society, captivating readers with its incisive analysis and compelling storyline. Joseph's work not only exposes the flaws in the system but also offers a glimmer of hope for a more equal and just future.

Breaking Boundaries in 'Serious Men'

Breaking boundaries in Indian literature has been a powerful and transformative force, challenging societal norms, cultural expectations, and limiting stereotypes. In Manu Joseph's "Serious Men," the theme of breaking boundaries is prominent throughout the narrative. Joseph employs various literary techniques and a unique narrative style to effectively convey the protagonist's defiance of societal norms and his pursuit of personal emancipation. Manu Joseph's use of satire, irony, and humor adds depth to 'Serious Men' and aids in challenging societal taboos. By employing these literary techniques, Joseph deftly navigates sensitive topics, making his critique both accessible and engaging for readers. Through his masterful storytelling, author Manu Joseph gives the reader a glimpse into a world where breaking these taboos becomes an act of rebellion, raising questions about power dynamics, quest for knowledge, and the pursuit of truth.

One of the key literary techniques Joseph employs is satire. Through a satirical lens, he provides biting criticisms of the caste system, religious dogma,

and scientific pretensions prevalent in Indian society. Manu Joseph seems to be a good writer in the contemporary Indian Writing in English, who uses postmodern elements and satire together in an effective way. His use of satire and wit says that one can find a: "Tom Wolfe in Manu Joseph" (Ubaykar, 67). Something else that we find in this twenty first century society is fake intelligence.). At the core of Joseph's narrative is the character of Ayyan Mani, a Dalit scientist employed at the prestigious Institute of Theory and Research in Mumbai. Ayyan, frustrated with the oppressive caste system, devises a plan to transform his son, Adi, into a child prodigy. He believes that by cloaking Adi's intelligence in mysticism, he can challenge the social hierarchy and break free from the chains of their marginalized existence. One of the taboos Joseph tackles is the perception of intelligence as a privilege reserved for certain social classes. Ayyan's plan involves Adi pretending to be a genius with telekinetic abilities, an illusion they carefully create and exploit. Ayyan explains, "Science threatens. Magic compensates" (P. 14). By using the language of mystique, Ayyan hopes to subvert the belief that intellectual prowess is only bestowed upon the privileged few. This act of breaking the taboo enables Ayyan to manipulate the power structures that govern society. Ayyan, the protagonist, helps his child Aditya to shape up a genius out of him. Oja Mani, Ayyan's wife always needed her child to be like other normal children, an ordinary kid, however Ayyan continues to go with the belief that his son Adi is a genius. Ayyan reveals himself in the novel that, consistently he makes up a science story of his child. Ayyan tells himself in the novel that, "Every night I make up a science story for my son. That's how I put him to sleep. All my material comes from the Institute" (P. 37).

In his exploration of breaking taboos, Joseph draws inspiration from various other writers who have challenged societal norms in their works. Ayyan's plan to use illusions to challenge the established order echoes the sentiments of Salman Rushdie in his novel *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie writes, "Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems - but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible"

(Rushdie , 42). Ayyan's plan enhances the idea that reality is subjective and can be manipulated to suit individual aspirations, even if it means breaking societal taboos in the process.

Another literary technique Joseph employs is irony. To mock the conditions in contemporary India, he uses 'Irony' in his novel. There is a huge difference between appearance and reality. Manu Joseph has used this device which is actually a postmodern literary technique in *Serious Men*. When Ayyan planned for playing a game and had a pact with his own son Aditya Mani, it is unable to predict the outcome that is going to happen. So a healthy dose of suspense will be added to make the story more interesting. This irony itself is a useful tool for comedy also. Throughout the novel, Ayyan is portrayed as a witty and intelligent individual who subverts expectations and outsmarts those around him. The irony lies in the fact that despite being considered inferior according to the caste system, Ayyan possesses the intellectual capabilities to challenge and surpass those who believe themselves superior. This irony underscores the idea that boundaries, whether based on caste or social hierarchy, are arbitrary and ultimately meaningless.

Joseph delves into the power dynamics inherent in breaking taboos. Ayyan's rebellion against the caste system illustrates how challenging deeply entrenched beliefs can upend the balance of power. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes, "What matters is not so much the nature of the man who puts the country back on its feet but rather the nature of those whom he is fighting" (Fanon. 35). Ayyan's fight against the caste system epitomizes the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors, highlighting the transformative effect of breaking social taboos on power dynamics.

Joseph's narrative style employs dark humor, understatement, and vivid imagery to add depth to the story. Through humor, he weaves together elements of despair and absurdity, challenging the reader's perception of the boundaries society imposes. He also uses very effectual wit and his comic observations regarding the serious men in the society has been put up in his novel. *Serious Men* is a very lovely novel! Manu Joseph is staggeringly clever and savvy in this book,

and through his effective parody, he tears apart and jabs fun at such a large number of things in the novel, it's unimaginable. For example, just see the beginning of the novel that makes one love the way it starts: "AYYAN MANI'S THICK black hair was combed sideways and parted by a careless broken line, like the borders the British used to draw between two hostile neighbours" (P: 3). Understatement is used to highlight the subtleties of rebellion against these boundaries, emphasizing the everyday acts of defiance that build up over time. An example is from *Serious Men* about the talk on women by Jana Nambodri, the director of the Institute of Theory and Research. Jana Nambodri tells, "Look at women. They will get nowhere in science. Everybody knows that. Their brains are too small. But our world has become so fucking politically correct, you can't say these things any more" (P: 294). Joseph's use of vivid imagery creates a palpable atmosphere that immerses readers in the world of the story, providing a rich backdrop against which the breaking of boundaries unfolds.

Through the lens of Ayyan's rebellion, Joseph also explores the concept of truth and the pursuit of knowledge. In his book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert M. Pirsig writes, "To live for some future goal is shallow... It's the sides of the mountain which sustain life, not the top" (Pirsig, 82). Ayyan's pursuit of breaking taboos is not solely about achieving a specific outcome; it is about unveiling the truth and challenging the existing norms. By questioning societal taboos, Ayyan embarks on a journey towards understanding the world and his place within it.

Joseph's narrative style also plays a crucial role in depicting the breaking of boundaries in "Serious Men." The novel is primarily written in the first-person perspective of Ayyan, allowing readers to intimately experience his thoughts, motivations, and frustrations. This narrative style creates a strong connection between the reader and the protagonist, enabling the reader to empathize and understand Ayyan's desire to break free from societal constraints. By delving deep into Ayyan's psyche, Joseph captures the complex emotions and internal struggles of a man determined to assert his agency.

Joseph explores the issue of religious dogma and blind faith in "Serious Men." The character of Arvind Acharya, a self-proclaimed scientific genius, uses his charisma and manipulation to deceive the masses into believing in his miracle child. Through this narrative, Joseph challenges the unquestioning belief in religious leaders and the danger of blind faith, highlighting the exploitation that occurs when boundaries of critical thinking and skepticism are breached. This critique of religious dogma and manipulation raises awareness about the need for individual autonomy and the importance of critically examining the boundaries imposed by religious institutions. In addition, Joseph delves into the intersection of science, progress, and societal prejudices in "Serious Men." Ayyan's subversion of expectations and manipulation of the scientific community showcases the limitations and biases inherent in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Joseph exposes how biases based on caste, race, and socio-economic status cloud the objectivity of scientific research and impede progress. By breaking these boundaries, Joseph highlights the urgent need to challenge and transcend the societal prejudices that hinder scientific advancement, ultimately emphasizing the importance of fairness, inclusivity, and equal opportunities for all.

Through 'Serious Men,' Joseph effectively addresses pressing societal issues that are often overlooked or ignored. By bringing these taboos to the forefront, the novel sparks conversations, encourages introspection, and promotes social change. In Manu Joseph's "Serious Men," breaking boundaries takes center stage as the protagonist, Ayyan Mani, defies societal norms and challenges deeply ingrained caste-based hierarchies. Through Ayyan's relentless pursuit of personal emancipation, Joseph tackles the societal issue of caste discrimination head-on. By portraying Ayyan as an intelligent and cunning character from a lower-caste background, Joseph shatters the stereotype that intelligence and success are exclusive to the upper castes. This subversion of societal expectations not only prompts readers to question the widespread discrimination prevalent in Indian society but also calls for a reevaluation of the rigid boundaries that dictate one's worth based on birth or caste.

Conclusion

This research paper has explored the portrayal of taboos in Indian society through Manu Joseph's 'Serious Men.' The novel presents a sharp critique of taboo subjects such as caste, education, religion, and social hierarchy. Through the character of Ayyan Mani, Joseph effectively challenges these societal norms and contributes to the broader discourse surrounding these issues. The portrayal of taboos in 'Serious Men' highlights the importance of contemporary Indian literature in breaking boundaries and initiating discussions on societal issues. This research paper encourages further exploration of how Indian writers continue to challenge societal norms and taboos, guiding future research to examine other prominent works in the field. In conclusion, 'Serious Men' demonstrates the role of literature in pushing societal boundaries. Manu Joseph's novel effectively addresses taboos prevalent in Indian society, challenging readers to critically engage with these complex issues and facilitating introspection and change. Through continued exploration of such literary works, Indian society can gradually break free from the constraints of its past and evolve into a more inclusive and equitable future.

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