



Understanding the Dalit Hero/Anti-hero: A Comparative Analysis of Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* and Ajay Navaria's "Scream"

Maitrayee Sarma *

Abstract

Through a comparative study of two texts, this paper seeks to analyse the significance of a Dalit anti-hero as a protagonist in contemporary Indian English fiction. Besides an in-depth study of the two texts, the paper will also look at the larger question of defining an anti-hero, as well as the development of the concept of hero and anti-hero in literary fiction from India, and try to uncover any deviations from Western models, if any.

Keywords: Indian writing in English, Dalit literature, modernism, anti-caste

Hero/Anti-Hero: Contexts and Conditions

The figure of the hero in Western literature is one of its most discernible features. The narrative function of the figure of a tragic hero was explored in great detail by Aristotle in his seminal text *Poetics*, which was also one of the oldest works of literary criticism, and the model that he described became a mould for building characters in Western literature for several centuries. However, there was a conscious effort to break away from the standards of heroism set by classical literature, and simultaneously develop a new, more relevant kind of character that would come to be known as the "anti-hero" that stands in opposition to the "hero" in many ways but still performs similar narrative functions. Unlike the hero, the anti-hero does not come from a privileged background and neither is he viewed as a symbol of moral values that bind the social fabric of his community. Despite that, the anti-hero manages to inspire pathos in its readers, a quality that Aristotle deemed crucial to the

* Research Scholar, Department of English, Gauhati University.

characterisation of the hero and has emerged as a vehicle for the elaboration of the many anxieties of modern life.

The history of the anti-hero is multitudinous. In different texts, the anti-hero takes different forms, but its most defining characteristic is the criticism of traditional heroic values that is intrinsic to it. In *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Northrop Frye describes what he calls the hero of “low mimetic mode” that has several similarities with the conceptualisation of the “anti-hero”. Frye describes this character as:

...superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience. This gives us the hero of the low mimetic mode of most comedy and realistic fiction. (34)

Frye traces the emergence of this character type in the sentimental fiction of Daniel Defoe, who wrote several novels where the protagonists came from the lowest rungs of English society and whose struggles captured the realities of living in eighteenth-century England and the means to survive such realities. Like Frye’s hero of the “low mimetic mode”, George Steiner, in his book *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism*, analyses the figure of the “underground hero” in the works of the two canonical Russian authors, especially in the writings of Dostoevsky and the morally dubious actions of his protagonists. Steiner locates the emergence of this hero in what he calls the “anti-heroic” philosophy espoused by Denis Diderot in *Rameau’s Nephew* (1714), which was later also referenced by Hegel in his criticism of the Enlightenment in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Patterson, in her essay *Imagining Anti-Administration’s Anti-Hero (Antagonist? Protagonist? Agonist?)*, has suggested that the origin of the anti-hero protagonist can be traced even further back, most notably in the figure of the trickster in medieval literature. She writes, “trickster is a 'shape shifter' who alters and disguises himself to enter forbidden spaces and signify impermanence; ... At the same time, however, trickster has an anti-

fascist energy; by pure contrariety, s/he articulates the limits of discipline.” (532)

The anti-hero, as I am going to analyse it in this paper, as a figure in Indian writing bears much resemblance to this characterisation as a trickster. It must be noted that even though the origin of the anti-hero is not concrete, its emergence seems to be diffused throughout literary history. It is only in the modernist writings of the early twentieth century that the anti-hero emerged as not only a possible alternative for the traditional hero but as the defining model of characterisation that could accurately represent the essence of the fragmented reality of contemporary times. All traditional models of heroism were interrogated under the shadow of World War I, and the West woke up to the possibility that what it had enshrined as honourable and heroic comes at insurmountable costs and must either be discarded or reinterrogated. Shadi Neimneh, in his essay *The Anti-Hero in Modernist Fiction: From Irony to Cultural Renewal* describes this development as “Existential alienation and angst made modernist writers represent social misfits, brooding men, and suffering victims of incomprehensible forces in a hostile world since man felt lost and despairing.” (77). The idea of one man with the capability to single-handedly change the course of history was gradually disregarded, and what emerged in its stead was a new kind of “anti-hero” which is defined by passivity and failure but somehow still manages to redeem himself in the eyes of the reader with an almost comical likeability. Eliot's Prufrock and Joyce's Leopold Bloom are important examples of this new kind of character study in literature.

Defining an Indian Hero/Anti-Hero

Indian writing in English did not have a conscious break from the heroic mould like Western literature did, its journey being governed by different concerns. Classical Indian mythology and literature have an abundance of heroic figures, who fit Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero, figures like Arjuna and Rama, who were of high birth, gallant and brave and whose fates changed the course of history itself. But Indian writing in English, as it matured in the early twentieth century, had already abandoned the idea of a heroic protagonist that

the West had held on to up till that point. Under the shadow of colonialism, early Indian English fiction had a clear nationalist and nation-building agenda that did not have much room for experimenting that was being done by the modernist writers in the West around the same time. The widespread use of social realism as a mode of representation meant that Indian writing in English did not indulge in making heroes and was involved instead in representing settings and situations that conveyed Indianness as well as an anti-colonial spirit. Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 novel *Untouchable*, for instance, told the story of the young Dalit boy Bakha and his experience of casteism and the many ways in which it affected him until he found solace in the words of Gandhi. The text is dedicated completely to Bakha's perspective, and the reader is bound to feel impacted by his experiences of injustice, even though the story establishes clearly that Bakha's personal fate will not have any impact on the fate of the nation. Bakha's life is used as a representative model of what could be done to help emancipate large sections of the population, thereby putting the focus on community building instead of individual development.

One of the many ways in which Anand's novel left a lasting impact on Indian English writing was its portrayal of the Dalit experience. The text never uses the term "Dalit" or makes any reference to the Ambedkarite movement that was underway at the time it was written in 1935, finding its resolution in homogenous ideas of Gandhian reformism instead. Even though the novel left much to be desired in terms of its anti-caste politics, what it managed to establish was the importance of understanding caste and its role in shaping the future of Indian society. Indian English fiction, in its early stages, was absorbed in imagining a future for the nation, a future that was anti-colonial, secular and modern. In interrogating Indian modernity, Dalit identity raises several important questions to counter the narratives that were being built in the twentieth century, the most crucial of which is the legitimacy of this so-called modernity itself which has allowed feudal structures like caste to exist. Dalit characters in contemporary Indian English fiction have very little in common with Anand's Bakha. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Indian fiction has been involved in exploring the different ways in which globalisation and the liberalisation of the Indian

economy have transformed life in the country. As the rich-poor divide broadened, the experiences of Dalit characters emerged as key leitmotifs in understanding what this new progress and development of the Indian state actually looked like. Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008) set the precedent for a new kind of modern hero with its protagonist Balram Halwai. Although not explicitly anti-caste, Balram clearly identifies his caste identity as a thorn on his way to success, which he defines in purely economic terms, and also reveals in his humorous tone the upper caste-upper class hegemonic control over resources, the one that he tried breaking through in the course of the novel. In her essay titled *Fables of the Tiger Economy: Species and Subalternity in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger*, Sundhya Walther provides an apt description of what Balram Halwai signifies in the following way and this new way of imagining subalternity, "For all the uniqueness of his voice, Balram is not a real subaltern at all: he is, in fact, an animal figure, an embodiment of the predatory power of contemporary Indian and global capitalism." (579).

Like Anand, Adiga's engagement with anti-caste politics was far from adequate and mostly woven into the narrative through Balram's hilarious quips and problematic comments. The reason why Adiga and other contemporaries use humour and shock as tools for engaging with anti-caste politics seems to be their own upper caste-upper class positions, which allows them the distance to mock and satirise without critical engagement. The model of characterisation set by the likes of Adiga did not hearken towards any social reform politics like in Anand's novel and instead conveyed a cynicism and misanthropy that was unmindful of the importance of community building and held material success as the only measure of success. It must be said that cynicism and misanthropy are qualities that the anti-hero of modernist fiction in the West often displayed, Joyce's Leopold Bloom being an early example of it. But in the Indian context, is this cynicism an accurate portrayal of the Dalit experience, and by extension, of Indian modernity? Or does the Dalit anti-hero created by a Dalit writer provide any different insights? In the following sections, I am going to try to inspect these questions through a comparative study of Manu Joseph's novel *Serious Men* (2010) and Ajay Navaria's story "Scream" (2013), which was translated from

Hindi by Laura Brueck. As already discussed, the circumstances of the anti-hero are far from heroic, so while Ayyan Mani of Joseph's novel is a peon, Ajay Navaria's unnamed protagonist in *Scream* is a male prostitute. What binds them together is not just a spirit of anti-Brahminism but also a desire for revenge, which leads them to dabble in crime and questionable morality in general, although they take different routes in exacting this revenge.

A Comparative Analysis of *Serious Men* and *Scream*

In *Serious Men*, Joseph uses the form of satire to a point where all criticisms become indistinguishable from each other, echoing in many ways the words of Balram Halwai in Adiga's novel. The dominant voice is of Ayyan, whose vindictive nature is established right at the outset of the novel. The novel begins with a look inside Ayyan's hypersexual gaze as he watches rich women going on their evening walks on the Worli Seaface. Joseph writes: "Their tired high caste faces, so fair and glistening with sweat, bore the grimace of exercise. He imagined they were all in the ecstasy of being seduced by him." (6).

Ayyan works as a peon at the Institute of Theory and Research, and even though his coworkers seem unaware of it, the reader is repeatedly made aware of his disdain for his upper-caste bosses, revealed through his humorous narration. Even before his dubious scheme of "War of Brahmins" is revealed, the reader finds him constantly plotting, spying and eavesdropping on his bosses, revealing his trickster nature, which through Joseph's use of dark humour, is extremely entertaining. Joseph is not the only upper-caste writer, Aravind Adiga is another notable name who has been subjected to criticism for his formulaic use of Dalitism, for ignoring the structural inequalities and highlighting the "shock value" of such stories, reducing them to pulp-fictionalised revenge thrillers, catering mostly to Western audiences and their conceptions of Indian subalternity. It is this "shock value" that ultimately Ayyan hopes to manipulate for his use when he chooses to create a media frenzy by leaking footage of senior scientists at the institute speaking in casteist slurs. Joseph's conception of Mani's psyche is revealed through the kind of imagery that he uses, for example:

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 that this was him. Lowly, but formidable and beyond torment. (81)

Although to give Joseph due credit, such an oversimplified representation of social structures was a part of his project of mocking “seriousness”, which he established in the very beginning when he writes: “If you stare long enough at serious people they will begin to appear comical” (4). The result is an intriguing plot with almost no enduring takeaways. One of the main reasons why I think the narrative fails in representing the Dalit experience is the use of the third-person omniscient narrator that is effective in communicating satire but fails to invoke empathy. However, as a non-Dalit it might seem that Joseph made the right choice in establishing his distance. In contrast, Ajay Navaria’s “Scream” reads almost like an autobiographical account than a short story. The opening scene almost mirrors Mani’s sexual fantasy as we find the narrator in the throes of passion with a woman with a distinct upper-caste surname. He even echoes the violence laced in Mani’s vision. Navaria writes: “I wanted suddenly to give her a powerful kick, but instead I only prodded her lightly with my foot.” (93).

It is only halfway through the story that we realise that the apparent moment of passion for Navaria’s unnamed protagonist was more of an economic transaction, part of his job as a male prostitute. As we progress with his tale, it becomes abundantly clear that the more accurate parallel would be the “lustful hatred” which the protagonist of “Scream” notes in the sexualised gaze of the upper caste girl who ogles him rather than Mani’s hypersexualised gaze. Moreover, the sexual fantasy of the opening paragraph also comes with a memory of a warning from the protagonist’s father, which says: “Crime is very seductive. And revenge is a trickster.” 93). While Mani concocts his plan around debunking the upper caste assertion of meritocracy, Navaria’s hero translates his Dalit body from a site of oppression to one of perverse pleasure for the upper

caste. They both take up a criminal route and relish the power that they enjoy, albeit. Navaria writes: “No one eats poison because they are hungry. But I had begun to understand indisputably that the road to power was not straight. It is winding, rugged, and full of ravines. I had to conquer it by my own firm resolve.” (104). It is this consciousness which is glaringly absent in Joseph's book. There is no development as to why and how Mani ended up concocting his plan of using his son to exact revenge on his bosses besides an oblique reference to him being a member of MENSA and thus being of superior intelligence and merit, and eligible to replace any member of the research institute that he ends up serving because of his caste. Moreover, Mani carries no sense of community affiliation, looking down on the other Dalits whom he does not consider his equal. He uses Dalit politicians to add to the media frenzy, and there is a mutual understanding between the two parties that it is ultimately a mutually beneficial agreement.

Instead of satire, “Scream” uses the form of autobiographical writing, which has been crucial to the formation of Dalit literature from the very beginning, and which creates for the reader to develop empathy for the character instead of just revelling in the plot. In order to pay for his studies, he accepts work in a massage parlour, tapping into the “lustful hatred” that the upper caste feels towards his own kind. He thereby shows complicity with a specifically colonial form of desire toward the racialised Other. As the narrator himself understands, “the beauty they [my parents] had both endowed me with was ugliness and that ugliness was both my beauty and my strength. Ugliness too is beauty; I had seen such a transformation. Differently beautiful” (Navaria 97). This realisation is especially liberating for the character because of his childhood experience of sexual violence. More than accepting his body, his work as a prostitute also allows him to appreciate the value of labour and skill in a capitalist system, which is liberating for him initially, but soon turns into an entrapment when he falls in love with one of his clients and still has to serve the other. Both of these are sexually unfulfilled women that he manipulates in many ways without repentance. In fact, he says: “I didn’t think of this as sin, though not because I questioned the idea of sin. In truth, virtue had died for me, or it had irrevocably

changed. This is why repentance never entered my vocabulary.” (Navaria 111).

The vocabulary of repentance is completely absent in Mani, who is defined by ruthlessness that he carries with himself till the end. Nevertheless, it raises a very important question “the largely destructive, destabilising forces of global capital can also prepare the ground for forms of collective resistance based on the newfound labour value of Dalits.” In *Serious Men*, the character that truly invokes some kind of sympathy of any kind is, in fact, his Savarna boss, Acharya, who, with a series of bad decisions, even manages to invoke Mani's sympathy, and acts as his ally and protects him. Acharya, in spite of his caste status, is always held in high regard by Ayyan because of his good treatment of him and consciousness about his caste status. Again, the structural inequality is treated at a personal level with a logic that reminds us that not all upper castes men are bad, and thereby devalues the angst of the Dalit individual. It has already been mentioned that Joseph does not allow his protagonist to have any community supporting him and in fact, ridicules the very notion of a Dalit community through the characters of the corrupt politician Waman and the rioters who show up at the Institute. The only character with whom he displays real camaraderie is, in fact, Acharya. While Mani emerges as an individualist trailblazer, Navaria's hero is constantly seeing parts of himself in others in equally oppressed positions, which he traces with the idea of the “scream”, which in different times represents sexual violence, sexual ecstasy and even a latent desire to get out of the circumstances of one's life. Noting a conversation with the bar dancers whom he lived with, Navaria's protagonist says: “Behind Sharda's, Padmini's and Revati's smiles and heavily made up faces was a stifled shriek I was only just beginning to hear. It was just like someone who tries to scream while she is being strangled” (100). It is in this stifled scream that he locates a sense of camaraderie, a kind of subaltern consciousness, united in the face of the forces that drives the modern metropolitan and which pushes its inhabitants to adopt skewed moral codes. As Giffard- Foret writes, “Navaria heralds the crisis of identity that befalls middle-class Dalits who have achieved a relative level of professional and material status in the modern Indian city.” (7).

One way in which this complexity is established is by tracing a movement from the rural to the urban spaces, tracing their journey from nameless proletariats to aspiring capitalists. This also highlights the ethical and moral stakes of every decision, which are echoed in the voice of his father that he constantly keeps hearing. In contrast, Joseph tells us very little about his hero's past circumstances and experiences. The emphasis is on him being an outlier, an exception, a fact which is recognised by the other Dalit characters who appear at the scene of the riot. The manifestation of the riot in itself is curious and happens almost comically. Kanak Yadav, in her essay “‘Another high-caste woman beyond his reach’: Cast(e)ing the sexual politics of Manu Joseph’s *Serious Men*” describes it in the following way, “By neither holding Ayyan Mani responsible for his conduct nor providing a glimpse of progressive politics, Joseph's novel does not suggest any enabling alternative for the reader.” (318). By extension, one might even say that Joseph fails to differentiate between resistance and revenge. Even though both characters are morally dubious, the fact that Navaria does not allow his hero's revenge to succeed is an important reminder of the need for organised effort, hearkening back to the starting point of the story that establishes revenge as a “trickster.” Ayyan Mani's revenge, in contrast, goes almost unchecked, and by establishing his son as his accomplice Joseph traces a persistence in this spirit, which is detrimental to the Dalit cause. One way in which Joseph can be defended is by noting that he did not intend *Serious Men* to be analysed as a work that deals with Dalit emancipation but as an Indian English novel that could perhaps represent a different side of the realities of the Indian nation-state for the caste-blind upper classes, and also perhaps to the Western audiences. However, as a Dalit scholar writing in Hindi, Navaria's position is very different, and his engagement with Dalit politics is thus more evident. However, no matter one's political affiliation, the power of representation cannot be ignored, and thus non-Dalit writers must be held accountable for their representations.

Conclusion

In 2020, *Serious Men* was adapted into a film by the same name with a screenplay written by Manu Joseph, and released worldwide on a popular streaming site Netflix. A year later, on the same streaming

site, a cinematic adaptation of *The White Tiger* was released with a star-studded cast. These adaptations show that there is a demand for anti-hero, trickster, stories in popular culture; people identify with these characters and they reflect an interesting side of the reality of India. But their reckless use of anti-caste politics, as discussed earlier, ultimately makes these stories formulaic and forgettable. As briefly discussed earlier, they paint a picture of Indian subalternity that is homogenous and where caste is a symptom of a problem and not a source of the problem itself. These anti-heroes, with their hypersexual gaze and their dubious morality, represent a cynical worldview where the world is corrupt and the one thing worth fighting for is money. “Scream,” on the other hand, creates room for community engagement and provides a slight glimpse of progressive politics. Dalit literature is always inevitably read as an extension of Dalit politics and is more conscious of its role in social critique and reform, unlike Indian English fiction which is not bound to any political commitments, as witnessed in Joseph's writing. The violent sexual undertones in both texts are also a reminder of gendered heroism, its conception and how it gets deconstructed through anti-hero characters—the way they view sex and women becoming a reflection of their immorality. The emasculation of the anti-hero, however, has the potential of decontextualising the problem of sexual violence and projecting it as an unintended consequence of the general corruption and immorality of the world, as evidenced by the lack of any female agency in both these texts. Gender, besides caste, is an important intersection to understanding Indian subalternity, and thus needs to be adequately addressed.

Works Cited

- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton UP, 1957.
- Giffard-Foret, Paul. “(Re)casting Caste: Dalit Literary Consciousness in Ajay Navaria’s *Unclaimed Terrain* and Goyu Shyamala’s *Father may be an elephant and mother only a small basket but...*” *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1-18.
- Joseph, Manu. *Serious Men*. Harper Collins, 2010.
- Navaria, Ajay. *Unclaimed Terrain*. Translated by Laura Brueck, Giramodo Publishing, 2015.
- Neimneh, Shadi. “The Anti-Hero in Modernist Fiction: From Irony to Cultural Renewal.” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2013, pp. 75-90.

- Patterson, Patricia M. "Imagining Anti-Administration's Anti-Hero (Antagonist? Protagonist? Agonist?)." *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2001, pp. 529-540.
- Walther, Sundhya. "Fables of the Tiger Economy: Species and Subalternity in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2014, pp. 579-588.
- Yadav, Kanak. "'Another high-caste woman beyond his reach': Cast(e)ing the sexual politics of Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*". *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2022, pp. 304–318.