

CHAPTER-4

Masculinity and the Intersection of Caste, Class and Religion

Yeh jaati-paati ki baat sab bakwaas haelba – all this talk of caste is *bakaw* as of course, said *Pagla-baba*, in his hoarse, crackling voice.

- Amitav Ghosh, *Flood of Fire*, 123

4.1 Introduction

This chapter draws inspiration from the discussion on the subaltern figure of Kalua in a previous chapter of this thesis and elaborates the idea of engaging with the discourse as well as the performance of masculinity keeping in mind the intersectional realities of social stratification and social institutions. More specifically, this chapter will read the discursive performance of masculinity contingent upon markers of social stratification like caste and class and social institutions like religion. In Connell's words, "to understand gender ... we must constantly go beyond gender. The same applies in reverse. We cannot understand class, race, or global inequality without constantly moving towards gender. Gender relations are a major component of social structure as a whole, and gender politics are among the main determinants of our collective fate" (2005, 76).

The term "intersectionality" was first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in her essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989). She expanded it subsequently in her 1991 essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color". According to her, intersectionality is a broad analytical framework for understanding an individual's position of discrimination and/or privilege in society vis-à-vis factors like race, class, gender, religion, colour, etc. These overlapping social identities work together to affect her existence in society. In her words, "the failure to embrace the complexities of compoundedness is not simply a matter of political will, but is also due to the influence of a way of thinking about discrimination which structures politics so that struggles are

categorized as singular issues. Moreover, this structure imports a descriptive and normative view of society that reinforces the status quo” (Crenshaw 1989, 166-167).

Crenshaw’s works mainly revolved around the experiences of Black women and rape victims. In her 1989 essay, Crenshaw highlights the status of Black women when it comes to discrimination on various grounds. She suggests “Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men” (149). According to her, “they experience double-discrimination- the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women-not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women” (149). In her 1991 essay titled “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color”, Crenshaw points out three different categories of intersectionality- structural, political and representational. Structural intersectionality refers to the “ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes (their) actual experiences... qualitatively different than that of white women” (1245). Political intersectionality refers to the problem of political participation of women of colour and “how both feminist and antiracist politics have, paradoxically, often helped to marginalize the issue of violence against women of color” (1245). Finally, representational intersectionality refers to “the cultural construction of women of color and how controversies over the representation of women of color in popular culture can also elide the particular location of women of color, and thus become yet another source of intersectional disempowerment” (1245).

Although Crenshaw based her argument chiefly on the experiences of Black women, she “highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity” like class, sexuality, etc, in any critical investigation (1991, 1245). Her theorisation has, since then, been widely applied and critically reformulated by various scholars from humanities and social sciences. In the introduction to *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality* (2010), Taylor et al. consider intersectionality as more than a theoretical framework, rather it is a lived experience requiring particular attention. This highlights “intersectionality” as “more than a benign, descriptive listing, a structural-formulaic ‘weight’ or a purely cultural representation” (4). The different essays incorporated in the volume give a comprehensive idea of the intersectional framework of analysis and also reveal the problems associated with it. While Yvette Taylor discusses the complexities of class and

sexuality in researching intersectionality, Erel et al. examine the mutually constitutive nature of social markers like race, gender, class and sexuality in the depoliticization of intersectionality (Taylor 53, Erel et al. 57). Again, Elizabeth McDermott (2010) investigates the methodological dilemmas of researching intersectionality in terms of LGBTQ community and mental health (235).

Among the Indian critics of intersectionality, the names of Nivedita Menon and Mary John are well-known. In an interesting turn of events, these two theorists engaged in an academic duel regarding the whole concept of intersectionality. Nivedita Menon, in her critical article, “Is Feminism about 'Women'? A Critical View on Intersectionality from India” (2015), wrote about the irrelevance of Crenshaw’s theorisation for the Indian context. According to her, intersectionality adds nothing new to our understanding of feminisms in the Global South as the politics of engaging with multiple, intersectional identities can be traced back to the anti-imperialist struggles and women’s movements long before Crenshaw coined the term. She further suggested that- a). Feminist solidarities as well as disjunctures in solidarity must be seen as conjunctural, fluid and radically negotiable; and b) the easy acceptability of intersectionality for international funding agencies should be stopped.

Menon’s argument was countered by Mary E. John in her article “Intersectionality: Rejection or Critical Dialogue?” (2015). John summarised her points of argument as follows-

First, I believe that much more needs to be said regarding what intersectionality may be about and what gave it some purchase in the first place. Second, I do not think that the prominent examples Menon offers (on the Women's Reservation Bill and the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) demonstrate the absence of single-axis thinking in our context or the redundancy of intersectionality as an idea. Third, the arguments regarding the problems of universality and governmentality are too simply posed. Finally, destabilisation alone is no guarantor of a more genuinely inclusive politics. (73)

It is a matter of individual theorising and personal opinion between Menon and John whether intersectionality needs to be rejected or accepted when it comes to issues specific to South Asia. But, what remains true and indispensable is the fact that intersectionality as a theoretical stance will never lose its relevance in the context of the

pluralistic societies of the Global South, including India. A conscious understanding of it aids not only academic critiquing but also the formulation as well as execution of government policies and socio-cultural activism.

As an academic and feminist historian, Uma Chakravarti wrote extensively on the intersection of gender and caste. Her book *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2018) lucidly engages with the dynamics of caste, class and gender from a historical perspective. Referring to Gerda Lerner and other Western scholars on the intersection of class and gender, Chakravarti highlights the importance of engaging with caste as a specific necessity for the Indian context. She writes-

We have thus had to look at both class and caste, how production was organized in India, who and what castes controlled it, who provided the labour and who did not. In addition, we have also to consider how *reproduction* was organized, who *controlled* the *crucial* resource of *female sexuality* and what *ideologies* sanctioned and legitimated such control. We had to explore not just the links between class and gender, class and caste, and caste and gender in the Indian context, but also the strategies devised to reproduce the entire system. (25)

Citing Gail Omvedt, Chakravarti (2018) further explains-

To understand the relationship between class and caste it is therefore important to recognize that two hierarchies are operative in Indian society: one according to ritual purity with the brahmana on top and the ‘untouchables’ at the bottom, the other according to the political and economic status with the landlords at the top and the landless labourers at the bottom. The first corresponds to the formal representation of society, the second to the reality- together they make for the unique form of inequality that caste represents. (12)

Following the above discussion on the concept of intersectionality, in general, and in the particular context of South Asia, the next paragraphs will engage with an in-depth understanding of the markers of intersectionality, most notably caste, class and religion, which forms the core perspective of analysis in this chapter.

Caste and class are important concepts of sociological discussion. They are forms of social stratification that regulate the behaviour of their respective members. The English word “caste” derives from the Spanish and Portuguese “casta” meaning race, lineage, tribe or breed. According to Herbert Risely, “Caste is a collection of families,

bearing a common name, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same hereditary calling and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community” (as quoted in Singh 2011, 524). In the words of E. A. H. Blunt, “Caste is an endogamous group or collection of endogamous groups bearing a common name, membership of which is hereditary, imposing on its members certain restrictions in the matter of social intercourse either following a common traditional occupation or claiming a common origin and generally regarded as forming a single homogeneous community” (as quoted in Jayapalan 2001, 45). Social class, on the other hand, is a system of social stratification comprising people occupying similar social status and position. Its membership is determined by factors like wealth, income, education, occupation, etc. Eminent sociologist P. Gisbert defined a social class as “a category or group of persons having a definite status in society which permanently determines their relation to other groups” (as quoted in Jayapalan 2001, 55). According to Ogburn and Nimkoff, “A social class is the aggregate of persons having essentially the same social status in a given society” (as quoted in Jayapalan 2001, 55).

The above definitions highlight the basic nature of caste and class. We understand that although they are types of social stratification, they differ in some important ways. A caste is a closed group that does not permit social mobility, while a class is an open group that permits social mobility. Caste is hereditary, while class is not. This makes caste comparatively more rigid in nature than class. However, it is observed that both caste as well as class regulates endogamy, food choices and sexual partners in the members. In certain circumstances, caste and class features overlap, thereby highlighting the fluid nature of both types of social stratification.

Another important social institution that regulates life and actions in society is religion. Different scholars have tried to define religion from various perspectives and schools of thought. Emile Durkheim, in his *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), defined religion as- “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, i.e., things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (47). The Macmillan Encyclopaedia of Religion explains-

[...] almost every known culture [has] a depth dimension in cultural experiences [...] toward some sort of ultimacy and transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest of life. When more or less distinct patterns of behaviour are built around this depth dimension in a culture, this structure constitutes religion in its historically recognizable form. Religion is the organization of life around the depth dimensions of experience—varied in form, completeness, and clarity in accordance with the environing culture. (King 7692)

From the above two definitions, we notice that it is difficult to find a consensus among different schools of sociological thought. While Emile Durkheim emphasises the sacred and profane, the latter definition quoted above places emphasis on the socio-cultural aspect of religion, “the depth dimensions of experience”. However, here we will engage with the historically recognisable form of religion, composed of beliefs and social practices that regulate our everyday lives. We will understand how the discursive performance of gender is regulated by the social institution of religion.

Many contemporary South Asian thinkers analyse the interplay of gender with caste, class and religion. Anupama Rao, in her book, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (2009), provides a historiography of caste and highlights the position and participation of Dalits in modern India. She believes that writing from the standpoint of Dalits facilitates an “alternative history of democratic liberalism” and thereby negates Western hegemonic political forms. In her words- “History from the perspective of the Dalit subaltern reflects a persistent effort to convert the Dalit’s structural negativity within the caste order into positive political content, and to make historic suffering and humiliation—the experience of being “ground down” and “broken”—central to the identity of Dalit as both a non-Hindu minority and an inaugural political-ethical subject” (xii). Padma Velaskar, in her article “Theorising the Interaction of Caste, Class and Gender: A feminist Sociological Approach” (2016), echoes Omvedt (1982) by observing that “it is fruitful to see caste relations as part of the material base of society and these cannot be treated as superstructure” (395). She further explains that “Caste and class both exist as base through an ‘interpenetration’ of economic, social and cultural relations that are expressed in lived reality and ideology” (395). Thus, through her argument, Velaskar highlights the importance of caste and class as the building blocks of society. She stresses on the interplay of economic, social and cultural forces in determining the lived experiences and the discourse surrounding them.

Avishai et al. in their article “A Gender Lens on Religion” (2015) explore the relationship between gender and religion. They observe:

Gender is not only about the family or household, and religion is not only a matter of phenomena in formally religious spaces. A critical sociological gender lens on religion will encourage a better understanding of emerging gendered agencies and religious subjectivities. And it unlocks the door to a sociology that considers transnational connections and local contexts, investigating rather than imposing theoretical narratives. (19)

By highlighting the inter-connectedness of gender and religion, the quoted passage offers a comprehensive understanding of the world around us. Similarly, Sophie Bjork-James’ work *Gender and Religion* (2019) analyses the intersection of gendered practices and religion from a feminist anthropological perspective.

All the above-mentioned critics explore the inter-connectedness of the concepts of caste, class and religion in the discursive as well as performance politics of gender. As Gopinath and Sundar (2020) observes, “In South Asia, discourses of caste, class, sexuality, region, and gender contour ways of being, both authorizing and restricting the range of gender practices, even as they leave gaps for change. Questions of representation become key as we move from a sociological to a discursive heuristic framework” (2). In light of the intersectional approach, the following section investigates the discursive performance of masculinity contingent upon markers of social stratification like caste and class and social institutions like religion in a few selected texts. The primary texts selected for this chapter includes- Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), Manu Joseph’s *Serious Men* (2010), Amitav Ghosh’s *Flood of Fire* (2015), S. Hareesh’s *Moustache* (2020).

4.2 The Uncut Self-Portrait

Nadeem Aslam’s second novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) is a deeply intricate tale of cultural tension and religious bigotry amidst the fracture of Shamas and Kaukab’s family on one hand and Chanda’s family on the other. Set in a nameless British town that the Pakistani immigrants have named Dasht-e-Tanhaii, the novel tells the story of the increasingly estranged family of the orthodox Muslim cleric’s daughter Kaukab and the liberal Director of the Community Relations Council, Shamas. While the devout Kaukab tries to repair the crumbling bonds of her family by bringing her children together,

Shamas is entangled in his attempts to locate the whereabouts of his missing brother, Jugnu and his wife Chanda. As the story progresses, the mystery of Jugnu and Chanda's disappearance is unravelled and the murderers are arrested for the crime.

From the beginning of the novel, we find two varying attitudes towards the relationship between Shamas' brother Jugnu and a girl named, Chanda. While Shamas accepts and is quite accommodating of their relationship, Shamas' wife- Kaukab- rejects it as Chanda is not divorced according to Islamic Law. When she was sixteen, Chanda was sent to Pakistan to marry a first cousin to whom she had been promised in infancy. But, the marriage lasted for only a year and she was quickly married to another cousin. This marriage lasted for only a few months and ended in a second divorce. When she came back from Pakistan, Chanda's parents found her an illegal immigrant who wanted to use the marriage with her as a means of getting British nationality. But, as that person also disappeared from her life after getting his motive fulfilled, Chanda remained the undivorced wife of a missing person. As such, Kaukab considered Chanda and Jugnu to be "living together in sin" which would bring damnation to their entire family (Aslam 249). Kaukab, through her beliefs, represents an orthodox Islamic position bordering on religious fanaticism. She can go to any extent in the name of religion and reserves a perpetual hatred for the white race, most explicit in her attitude towards Charag's white wife. Similarly, when Jugnu caught an STD from his white girlfriend who had returned from a "promiscuous holiday to Tunisia", Kaukab exclaims in disbelief: "She's lying," ... "Tunisia is a Muslim country. She must've gone on holiday somewhere else, a country populated by the whites or non-Muslims. She's trying to malign our faith" (Aslam 62). Kaukab's religious orthodoxy and racial bigotry towards non-Muslims and whites lead her to extreme and often potentially dangerous circumstances. She is here dwelling on the notions of racial purity/impurity dictated by most radical interpretations of religions throughout the world.

When Chanda's brothers are arrested for allegedly murdering their sister and brother-in-law, Jugnu, Kaukab comments: "I know Chanda's brothers are innocent because those who commit crimes of honour give themselves up proudly, their duty done. They never deny or skulk. I am certain they will walk free after the trial in December" (Aslam 58). Kaukab, here, is seen as a staunch supporter of the brothers' actions, even if that amounts to the murder of her brother-in-law and his wife. She feels that they have done the right thing by killing the sinful couple. Their act is an act of

restoring the honour of the two families. She, therefore, becomes an instrument of upholding masculine arrogance veiled under notions of family pride and honour.

In the preface to *Honour: Crimes, Paradigms and Violence against Women* (2005), Radhika Coomaraswamy writes:

Violence against women is closely linked to the regulation of sexuality... In many societies, the ideal of masculinity is underpinned by a notion of ‘honour’ – of an individual man, or a family or a community – and is fundamentally connected to policing female behaviour and sexuality. Honour is generally seen as residing in the bodies of women. Frameworks of ‘honour’, and its corollary ‘shame’, operate to control, direct and regulate women’s sexuality and freedom of movement by male members of the family. Women who fall in love, engage in extramarital relationships, seek a divorce, or choose their own husbands are seen to transgress the boundaries of ‘appropriate’ (that is, socially sanctioned) sexual behaviour. ‘Regulation’ of such behaviour may in extreme cases involve horrific direct violence – including ‘honour killing’, perhaps the most overt example of the brutal control of female sexuality – as well as indirect subtle control exercised through threats of force or the withdrawal of family benefits and security. (xi)

As a Special Rapporteur (1994-2003) to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (Violence against Women), Coomaraswamy wrote extensive case studies of field visits conducted in Asian and Latin American countries where she dealt with women’s rights and honour crimes. Following her words, we can comment that Chanda’s body was an object of honour for her family. Her transgression, in the form of engaging in an un-Islamic union with Jugnu, brought “shame” to her family. As a result, she was brutally murdered by her brothers to regulate her sexuality and “preserve” the honour of the family. In other words, Chanda’s murder is a glaring example of “honour killing” in Aslam’s novel. It also reveals the continuity of tropes of gender violence, such as honour killings in diasporic communities beyond the geographical borders of South Asia.

The following passage, where Shamas’ neighbour, Kiran, recounts the confession of the two brothers at their trial where they were convicted of murder, is striking:

The sons say they didn’t do it but they are certainly said to have boasted of it. One said, “I’ll admit to anyone that I did it while wearing a T-shirt saying I did it with a picture showing me doing it.” And the other that, “They were sinners and

Allah used me as a sword against them.” Chanda’s mother wants to go into their souls with a lighted lamp to look for the truth. People say they admitted to having done it, but people also say a lot of other things. (Aslam 251)

The brothers’ unfazed confession of murdering their own sister is a fearless affirmation of their hypermasculine ego and hegemonic arrogance. Following Coomaraswamy’s words, it is also an overt example of controlling female sexuality. They were even comfortable “wearing a T-shirt saying I did it with a picture showing me doing it”. They held Chanda responsible for maligning their religion and bringing disrepute to their family and so ordered her to wear a burqa. The brothers “felt awkward and ashamed” in front of their friends and said, “We see the looks in their eyes—some pity us, some blame us for not having found you a better life” (Aslam 487). From their words, it is evident that, for Chanda, wearing the burqa was not an individual choice, but sheer compulsion from her family. They wanted to erase her existence from public knowledge by concealing her from the outer world. They believed that her absence from public life would save the remnants of the already fading honour of the family.

Making her wear the burqa was not the only attempt of erasing her from public life. The signboard of their family-owned convenience store named after her was also given a thorough wipe-out-

The shop was named after her— Chanda Food & Convenience Store—but the sign above the entrance was painted over after she came back trailing the stink of failed marriages. The old name, it was felt, would needlessly remind people of the girl, their next thought probably being, “Chanda—the twice-divorced girl.” I feel I am being erased, Chanda wrote in her diary angrily. (Aslam 487)

The wipe-out of Chanda’s name from the signboard is both a public as well as private tactic of erasure. By removing her name from the shop signboard, Chanda’s family first, symbolically, severed all intimate ties of property, wealth and ownership and secondly, made her disappear from the public eye. Such a systematic process of erasure re-affirms masculine privilege and promotes hegemonic masculinity as exemplified in the violence perpetrated by the two brothers. Again, in line with the long tradition of women writing their lives through journals, letters and diaries (Anne Frank, Virginia Wolf, Emily Dickinson and the like), the act of Chanda writing her diary is a conscious and deliberate act of self-assertion and rebellion. The novel here juxtaposes a public

documentation of erasure through the renaming of the signboard vis-à-vis her effort to register herself through her diary.

However, it is only towards the latter part of the novel that we learn the circumstances leading to the brothers', especially Chotta's, murder of their sister Chanda and her husband Jugnu. Shamas comes to know the truth when he, accompanied by his neighbour Kiran, returns from the trial of the murderers. During the return journey, Kiran confesses her knowledge of the identity of the murderers long before the court gave its verdict as she was in a secret relationship with Chanda's brother, Chotta. According to her, Chotta's murder of Chanda and Jugnu was a direct consequence of her adulterous relationship with Kaukab's brother. Chotta walked into the room while Kiran was making love to her lover. She explains apologetically:

‘...You see, that night was the night Chanda and Jugnu are thought to have been murdered. I ran after him when I had put on my clothes but couldn't find him anywhere. He must have been in rage. I don't doubt for a moment that I contributed to the anger he unleashed on Chanda and Jugnu...’ (Aslam 405)

‘The fact that they were happy while he had just been betrayed must've made him resent them, perhaps’ (Aslam 406).

Kiran's confession exposes the immediate cause of Chotta's revenge. While the murder was considered a means of securing lost honour and dignity for the family, it served the purpose of personal vengeance for Chotta. He avenged Kiran's betrayal by mortally punishing his own sister and brother-in-law. But, it is interesting to note that Chotta, here, makes a substitution between two women and sacrifices the one who is in a more disadvantageous position. This can be concurred by looking at the social status of the two women. Kiran is an unmarried Sikh woman who is at the controlling end of her home: she takes care of her ailing father and runs the home almost single-handedly. On the other hand, Chanda is a “twice-divorced girl” “trailing the stink of failed marriages” (Aslam 487). She is a cause of shame and disrepute for the entire family and therefore, needs to be hidden (or rather, erased!) from the world. Hence, Chanda becomes an easy and obvious prey and also the better substitute for the brothers' revenge.

Aslam's novel portrays the conflict between two opposing forces of suppression and assertion of masculinity. While Kaukab discourages any kind of psycho-sexual manifestation in her children, they, in turn, are manifestly lively and free-spirited. She

considers their effervescent sexuality of the adolescent years as a stark opposition to her version of Islam. Therefore, she strives to suppress their sexual virility which is not in accordance with Islamic precepts. The next part of this analysis will pay attention to how Kaukab's attempt of suppressing masculinity is thwarted by attempts of metaphorical assertion in the depiction of Jugnu's character and Charag's self-expression through the medium of art.

From the beginning of the novel, Shamas' brother Jugnu is given a magic realist portrayal. An expert lepidopterist, Jugnu is a widely-travelled man who has experience in various trades and apprentices. His expansive knowledge and wisdom earned him both endearment and admiration from friends, neighbours and family alike. When young, all three children of Shamas and Kaukab loved him dearly and wanted to spend more time with him. However, the most striking part of his personality was his hands which glowed in the dark and attracted numerous moths towards them:

From Tucson to the orange groves of California and then on through Oregon towards Washington, the journey Jugnu made during his first three springs in the United States with migratory beekeepers took him two whole months, stopping along the way to let the bees pollinate the crops. As he drove, the truck hummed with the three-million bees in the back and he reeked of banana oil long into each year. He painted radium dials in a clock factory one winter and it was there that a spillage had left his hands with the ability to glow in the dark, making them irresistible to moths. (Aslam 38)

Not only were his hands, Jugnu's entire life was a source of mystery and rumours for the inhabitants of Dasht-e-Tanhaii. For example, one day a little boy stopped Kaukab in the street and asked "whether it was true that Jugnu's 'place of urine' was also glow-in-the-dark like his hands" (Aslam 86). Again, after Jugnu and Chanda's disappearance from the house, people rumoured that they had turned into peacocks and flown away.

It is interesting to note that while the most obvious marker of Jugnu's masculinity- his glowing penis- is highlighted through the rumours circulated among young and old alike, Kaukab tries to systematically hinder the realisation and consequent expression of her sons' masculinity. In a conversation between Mahjabin and Ujala, Ujala explains his strained relationship with his mother, Kaukab and recounts the reason for his moving out of the house. According to him, the discovery of the fact that his

mother was putting bromide salts in his meals led him to move out of the house. “I did think it was all harmless at first, but then I found the place where she had been hiding that stuff and had it checked out. It was a bromide, the thing they put in prisoners’ meals to lower their libido, to make them compliant. That was when I left” (Aslam 432).

The daughter of a devout Muslim cleric, Kaukab tried every possible way to lower the growing adolescent sexual urge of her sons. Any kind of pre- and extra-marital sexual activity and solitary sexual pleasure was blasphemy for her. Hence, she mixed the bromide salt to tame an “unruly” Ujala. However, it is only at the family dinner many years later that Kaukab faces the heat of Ujala’s anger and witnesses Charag’s subversion of her attempts of suppressing the development of their adolescent sexualities:

Kaukab, smiling proudly, takes the magazine and looks at Charag’s photograph. *The Uncut Self-Portrait* is pictured inside too and she closes the magazine when she sees it. Charag has painted himself without any clothes standing in a pale grove of small immaculate butterflies, fruit-and flower-heavy boughs, birds, hoopoes and parakeets and other insects and animals, the mist rising from a lake in the background- and he has an uncircumcised penis. (Aslam 456)

Fiction in English literature is replete with instances of portraits serving as mirrors of human lives with their desires and expectations. For example, In *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, Dorian’s portrait which substitutes his ageing process becomes a register for his transgressions. Similarly, Aslam, in his *Maps for Lost Lovers*, makes a striking point with Charag’s portrait of his uncircumcised penis. Charag, who is now an acclaimed artist, symbolically responds to his mother’s wrongdoings to her children and Jugnu through “*The Uncut Self-Portrait*”. His response through his art can be interpreted in three different ways. First, through the “pale grove of small immaculate butterflies, fruit-and flower-heavy boughs, birds, hoopoes and parakeets and other insects and animals”, Charag pays a tribute to his dead uncle, Jugnu. As an extremely well-read person on flora and fauna, Jugnu left an unmistakable impact on his nephew. Secondly, Charag’s uncircumcised penis is a fitting reply to Kaukab’s suppression of Ujala’s psycho-sexual development during his adolescence. While Kaukab fed bromide salts to tame an “unruly” Ujala, Charag’s display of nakedness is a bold statement of his adult masculinity that was strictly suppressed (in both him and his brother Ujala) during his teenage years. His act becomes a metaphorical revenge for her wrongdoings towards

Ujala. Finally, on a deeply personal note, Charag avenges himself of his mother's hatred for his white Christian wife, Stella and his liberal views on religion by projecting an uncircumcised penis, which is blasphemous for the version of orthodox Islam practised by Kaukab. Thus, through the display of his male part in "*The Uncut Self-Portrait*", Charag, in a way, symbolically connected with the glow-in-the-dark "place of urine" of Jugnu and stood for not an unbridled, blasphemous sexuality according to Kaukab's Islamic orthodoxy, but an effervescent masculine spirit that could not be suppressed by any kind of external agency.

Towards the end of the novel, we find that there is an intermingling of three ghost stories. The first one is of Chanda and Jugnu, the second of the inter-faith couple and the third of Shamas and Suraya. There are many instances in the novel which recount the appearance and sight of two ghosts in the woods near the lake in Dasht-e-Tanhaii. Two of them are analysed below-

The two ghosts that are said to be roaming the woods near the lake—surely they are he [Shamas] and Suraya, their baby glowing inside her womb, his hands burning, giving out light, from the newspapers he's carrying, the searing pain of the world? (Aslam 383)

This passage refers to Shamas' imagination while he was convalescing after the attack on him. He imagines himself to be dead and his lover Suraya also dead by committing suicide. Therefore, the ghosts wandering near the lake are not Jugnu and Chanda, but, himself and Suraya. Such a replacement of ghost positions (although in his mind) is his attempt at legitimisation. Although not in reality, it is in a daydream that, Shamas and Suraya on one hand, and Chanda and Jugnu on the other, found legitimacy for their relationships.

This legitimacy is further extended to the end of the story when after the trial of Chanda's brothers and the death of the young girl of the inter-faith couple, Shamas meets the young boy, her lover. Shamas realises that the boy has lost his sanity and is now wandering in the woods. He tries to strike up a conversation:

"What are you doing out here at this hour?"

He points into the trees. "Can you see her ghost? I am with her too. Both of us there."

There is of course nothing there. The boy has become unhinged. “Ghosts? People said it was my brother Jugnu and his girlfriend Chanda. Jugnu’s hands glowing as always. Chanda’s stomach glowing brightly because of the baby she’s carrying. Three ghosts. Two adults and an unborn baby.”

The boy shakes his head. “I heard about that. But it’s not them. It’s me and her: her stomach glows because that’s where on her dead body my letter was placed, the letter I wrote to her on the day of the funeral. And my hands glow because of the orchids I am carrying for her.” (Aslam 520)

In the conversation, the boy tries to replace the identity of the two ghosts. They are now neither Chanda and Jugnu, nor Shamas and Suraya, but the boy and his lover. His hands glow because of the glowing orchids, while her stomach glows with the light of the boy’s love letter. Whatever might be the interpretation, the intermingling of the three ghost stories gives a strong legitimacy to pure love, unhindered by any form of religious orthodoxy. Neither Kaukab’s Islamic orthodoxy can touch them, nor can Hindu-Muslim bigotry influence them. “The three ghosts- two adults and an unborn baby” are a lingering reminder of the purity of human connection beyond institutionalised social categories.

Thus, Aslam’s novel is an engrossing tale of passionate love and a challenge to religious orthodoxy in a diasporic setting of a nameless British town. As a British-Pakistani novelist himself, he could well portray the tensions between South Asian masculinity and adolescent sexuality in Shamas and Kaukab’s family. Kaukab upholds an idealised version of sexuality sanctioned by radical Islam which comes in conflict with that of her children and brother-in-law. While Shamas accepts and is quite accommodating of the relationship between Jugnu and Chanda, Shamas’ wife- Kaukab-vehemently rejects it as Chanda is not divorced according to the Islamic law. Kaukab’s religious orthodoxy and racial bigotry towards non-Muslims and whites lead her to extreme and often potentially dangerous circumstances. As a staunch supporter of radical Islam which is also practised by Chanda’s family, Kaukab becomes an instrument of upholding Chanda’s brothers’ masculine arrogance veiled under notions of family pride and honour. Moreover, the brothers’ unfazed confession is a fearless affirmation of their ego and arrogance. By making Chanda wear the burqa, they wanted to conceal her from the public eye. Her absence from public life would save the remnants of the already fading honour of the family. The wipe-out of Chanda’s name from the signboard is both

a public as well as private tactic of erasure. Such a systematic process of erasure reaffirms masculine privilege and promotes hegemonic masculinity as exemplified in the violence perpetrated by the two brothers. Again, while the murder was considered a means of securing lost honour and dignity for the family, it served the purpose of personal vengeance for the younger brother, Chotta. Here, he makes a substitution between two women- Kiran and Chanda- and sacrifices Chanda as the one who is in a more disadvantageous position and hence, the easy and obvious prey for his revenge. Her murder also reveals the continuity of gender violence, such as honour killings, in diasporic communities beyond the geographical borders of South Asia. Finally, Aslam's text is an engrossing portrayal of the conflict between two opposing forces of suppression and assertion of masculinity. Kaukab's attempt of suppressing masculinity is thwarted by attempts of metaphorical assertion in the depiction of Jugnu's character and in the artistic self-expression of Charag through "*The Uncut Self-Portrait*". The novel ends with an intermingling of three ghost stories, thereby giving a strong legitimacy to pure love, unhindered by any form of religious orthodoxy.

4.3 A Dalit Genius

Manu Joseph's debut novel *Serious Men* (2010) is a bitter, comic and realistic tale of caste antagonism. The main character of the novel, Ayyan Mani is a middle-aged Dalit man working as an assistant to Dr. Arvind Acharya, the Brahmin Director of the Institute of Theory and Research in Mumbai. He is dissatisfied with his position in life and therefore hatches a plan for his revengeful amusement. Consequently, he develops a story where his son Adi is a mathematical genius and makes his son enact the story with his aid. Although successful at first, later on, they get trapped in their own story and the situation gets out of control. The main story of the novel revolves around the events concerning Ayyan Mani and his genius son, Adi. However, there is a subplot concerning the power tussle between Dr Acharya and Dr Namboodri within the Institute itself and a love story between Dr Acharya and Oparna. *Serious Men* (2010) won the inaugural The Hindu Literary Prize and the 2011 PEN Open Book Award. It was also shortlisted for Man Asian Literary Prize and Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize. Joseph's novel was adapted into a 2020 Netflix movie which was directed by Sudhir Mishra where Bollywood actor Nawazuddin Siddiqui starred in the lead role.

This section will analyse the novel's portrayal of caste and class stereotypes on one hand and the desire to out-perform one's caste or class on the other. By critically examining Ayyan's performance of masculinity vis-à-vis his class and caste and his attempts to grab the limelight for his son, this section will highlight the limits of fame and greed and the strength and vulnerability of his performance.

Ayyan Mani is "an ordinary clerk stranded in a big daunting world" of a metropolitan city. He "wants to feel the excitement of life" and "liberate his wife from the spell of jaundice-yellow walls" (Joseph 5). The questions- "what must a man do?", "what must he do?" riddle him every single day. From the beginning of the novel, we witness the high aspirations of a lower-middle-class man living in a slum in metropolitan Mumbai.

Compared to the other residents of the *chawl*, Ayyan Mani has a better financial position owing to his job at the Institute of Theory and Research as personal secretary to the Director, Dr Arvind Acharya. This gave him an edge over his neighbours.

Here the frailties of the male folk showed all the time in the tired faces of the newly dead, or in the vacant eyes of drunkards, or the resigned calm of the jobless boys who just sat for hours watching the world go by. In a way, this was the easiest place to be a man. To be alive was enough. To be sober and employed was fantastically impressive. Ayyan Mani was something of a legend. (Joseph 7)

In contrast to the stereotype of the disadvantaged Dalit squandering his life in drinks and suffering from joblessness, Ayyan Mani, who had a job and was not a drunkard, became an out-performer, "a legend" in his locality. He neither came home drunk, nor beat up his wife, nor had the frustrations of a job-less life. Hence, according to the standards of his neighbourhood, he performed a very unconventional performance of his masculinity. This is further elucidated when he goes to drop his son, Adi, at his school. There, the security guard at the gate nudged him to have a look at one of the parents who came to drop her ward. She was of a healthier build and the guard repeatedly tried to draw his attention towards her body.

He gave a friendly nod to Ayyan, almost nudging him with his eyes to pay attention to one very fleshy young mother. Ayyan ignored him. He always did because he wanted the guard to know that they were not equals, that he must

respect him the way he hurriedly saluted the fathers who arrived in cars. But the guard knew that he did not have to concede. (Joseph 20)

This passage is very important to understand Ayyan Mani's performance of his masculinity keeping in mind his caste and class position. Here, the security guard considered Mani as one from his own class and consequently expected him to perform the stereotype of his class by ogling the woman. The act of ogling a female is considered to be a very masculine task- it is the "male gaze" or "scopophilia" in the words of Laura Mulvey. In simple words, the scopophilia or male gaze is the sexual pleasure received in the process of objectifying the woman by the male onlooker. By inviting Mani to participate in the act, the security guard expected him to perform the stereotype of heteronormative masculinity. But, by ignoring him, Mani rose above the stereotype imagined by the guard. Moreover, in the above-cited instances, he is not the disadvantaged Dalit man- an object of sympathy, but a strong-willed, resourceful person gradually making his way among the upper rungs of society.

However, as the novel progresses, we become familiar with the other side of Ayyan Mani's personality. Along with his aspiration to out-perform his identity, we find him taking every opportunity to mock and despise people from castes and classes supposedly superior to him. In the following passage, we find him despising the household chores done by men from the upper classes-

He also saw men scoop the shit of their babies, and once he even saw a man in an apron take the dishes from the dining-table to the kitchen sink. They were *the new men*. In time, their numbers increased and he saw them everywhere now, standing defeated next to their glowing women. Ayyan often told the peons of the Institute, 'These days, men live like men only in the homes of the poor.' (Joseph 83)

Ayyan Mani's understanding of masculinity is in accordance with traditional "brahmanical patriarchy" that defines caste and gender superiority through the control of women. Following Uma Chakravarti (1993), brahmanical patriarchy is an institution unique to Hindu society which emphasised the need for effective sexual control over women to maintain not only patrilineal succession but also caste purity (579). Therefore, "the new man" sharing household chores- like doing dishes, and taking care of babies- is according to Ayyan Mani, a "defeated" man. While Ayyan does not perform the

“normative” Dalit masculinity like his “wife-beating drunkard” neighbours, he definitely reinforces hegemonic masculinity where the subordination of women is the key. He believes that a strict demarcation of household chores is necessary to define a man’s masculinity and can only be found in lower-class homes. Here, a complex dynamic emerges intersecting caste, class and patriarchy. Although Ayyan Mani does not embody hypermasculine arrogance, he does assert Dalit superiority when he concludes- “These days, men live like men only in the homes of the poor” (Joseph 83).

Again, at his workplace, Ayyan did not leave any chance to criticise the upper castes, especially Brahmins. For example, he took it upon himself to write the Thought for the Day every day. “Nobody remembered when exactly Ayyan was assigned the task of writing the Thought for the Day or by whom. But he did it, without fail, every day” (Joseph 24). On most days, he wrote correct quotes. But, sometimes he just invented them to take revenge on authoritarian structures. The following quote is an example of his act:

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

Although there is no reference to Bill Gates saying so, Ayyan added his name to make the criticism of the hegemony of Indian culture and language more scathing. He felt that adding the name of a wealthy and influential person like Bill Gates would have more impact on the reader than writing “anonymous” after the quote. Along with this, he visualised the domination of upper castes (“all of whom he recognised only as the Brahmins”) by Dalits like him. When upper caste people were caught in a traffic jam or their women were ogled and elbowed by boys in the streets, Ayyan Mani felt that the revenge of centuries-old oppression was complete for the Dalits.

And there lay the revenge of the Dalits. They were the nation now, and they oppressed the Brahmins by erecting an incurable commotion on the streets. The Brahmins had nowhere to go now but to suffer in silence or to flee to non-vegetarian lands. Their women could no longer walk on the streets in peace. Pale boys elbowed their breasts. (Joseph 82)

These little, apparently insignificant acts of everyday life were potential sites of impactful revenge for Ayyan Mani. He felt that the time has come to reverse the centuries-old oppression the Brahmins inflicted upon the lower castes and these

crossroads of everyday life presented them with this opportunity. Although not a part of these young boys, he felt complicit in their revenge.

However, Ayyan Mani did plan revenge one last time in the novel. Although apparently playful and humorous, this revenge, if successful, had the potential of cutting at the root of epistemological violence that the upper castes inflicted upon the lower castes.

Ayyan had no exceptional talent, but he was bright enough to see so clearly the futility of hope and the grimness of an unremarkable life ahead. So, what must a man do? Without the sport of his son's genius, Ayyan knew that the routine of his life would eventually suffocate him. The future, otherwise, was all too predictable. (Joseph 122)

Ayyan fabricated a tale where he posited his eleven-year-old son as a mathematical genius who would be allowed to take the toughest entrance test to secure admission to the Institute of Theory and Research headed by Dr Arvind Acharya. To fulfil this impossible task, he blackmailed Dr Acharya into divulging the questions of the entrance question paper. Although Adi qualified for the written test, Ayyan did not allow him to attend the interview, thereby putting an end to the plan that got stretched more than necessary. He, however, took his revenge further by taking advantage of an existing hatred and utilising it to set the two Brahmins- Dr Acharya and Dr Namboodri- against each other by revealing the real findings of the failed Balloon Mission. After Dr Acharya got expelled from the Institute, Ayyan Mani tried to take help from politicians to restore him to his position with the condition that he would guard the secret about Adi. When Dr Namboodri came to know of Adi's truth, Ayyan threatened him and the other astronomers with a mob outside the Institute. The novel ends with a mob vandalising the premises of the Institute of Theory and Research and burning the effigy of Dr Namboodri on one hand, and Adi and Ayyan Mani planning a new trick one last time.

In Ayyan's revenge, we witness the dream of an ordinary slum-dweller aspiring to climb up the caste and class hierarchy. He is not directly violent, but complicit in the structural as well as functional violence perpetrated by the other members of his caste. His complicit masculinity makes him relish the fact that upper-caste women are frequently manhandled by young Dalit boys. He considers this as revenge for the violation of Dalit women by upper-caste men. In Ayyan's desire to climb the ladder of

urban living, to become “the big man”, he found out the remedy to his problem- “All you had to do was to be born in the homes where they were born” (Joseph 81). It is interesting to note that even in his imagination of upper-class masculinity and the specific roles and responsibilities ascribed to it, he reinforces caste stereotyping and privileged birth into a high caste by following brahmanical patriarchy. His gimmick of projecting his son as a mathematical genius which was originally aimed at subverting oppression arising out of social stratification ultimately turned out to be a widely popular reification of caste stereotyping. The following conversation between Dr Namboodri and other astronomers illustrates this point clearly-

‘Something fishy about his son,’ someone said. ‘I have never come across a Dalit genius. It’s odd, you know.’

The astronomers continued in this vein. They spoke of the racial character of intelligence and the unmistakable cerebral limitations of the Dalits, Africans, Eastern Europeans and women.

‘If there are clear morphological characteristics that are defined by the genes, obviously even intellectual traits are decided that way,’ Namboodri said. ‘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 anymore.’ (Joseph 294)

This is a very striking passage from Joseph’s novel. First of all, here we see a very clear reification of caste stereotyping. It is outside Dr Namboodri’s wildest imagination to consider the idea of “a Dalit genius”. Steeped in caste hierarchy, he can never imagine Adi cracking the entrance exam and overcoming the “unmistakable cerebral limitations” characteristic of his caste. Secondly, we find Dr Namboodri very critical of the intellectual capabilities of women. According to him, they cannot achieve anything in the field of science because of their small brains. The quoted passage is, therefore, reflective of his deeply misogynistic and casteist mindset and highlights the ideological hegemony imposed on the basis of caste and gender.

Through the above discussion, we witness the high aspirations of a lower-middle-class man named Ayyan Mani, living in a slum of metropolitan Mumbai who performs a very unconventional performance of his masculinity. He rises above the stereotype of the disadvantaged Dalit man- an object of sympathy, and turns out to be a strong-willed,

resourceful person gradually making his way into the upper class society. Although he does not favour hypermasculine arrogance, he still performs as well as prefers hegemonic masculinity which subordinates women and considers household chores the sole prerogative of women. He feels complicit in the revenge of the young Dalit boys. However, only once in the novel, Ayyan Mani plans revenge and becomes partially successful in it. His gimmick of projecting his son as a mathematical genius ultimately turns out to be a widely popular reification of caste stereotyping. Overall, underlining the limits of fame and greed, the above discussion reveals the strength and vulnerability of Ayyan Mani's performance of his masculinity considering the intersectional dimensions of caste, class and gender.

Thus, in Manu Joseph's creation of an anti-hero, we find a very stark commentary on the social fabric of our parts of the world. In an extraordinary display of razor-sharp wit and archly comic observations, the author incorporates the dynamics of centuries-old caste politics prevalent in the Indian subcontinent largely visualised through the story of a scheming father and a willing partner-in-crime in the form of his eleven-year-old son. The novelist seems to depart from the conventional depiction of a servile and marginalised Dalit in the lines of Arundhati Roy's *Velutha* and instead, creates the scheming and resourceful Ayyan Mani who becomes the centre of the novel. The performance of his masculinity complicates our understanding of the intersections of caste as well as class and opens up avenues for future critical re-readings. But, the question remains whether as a non-Dalit himself Manu Joseph is able to do justice to the portrayal of a Dalit character. In fact, this has often been a serious allegation against non-marginalised writers writing narratives which centres the lives of the marginalised. A straightforward objective answer to the above question is definitely not possible. The fact that Joseph's novel keeps the note of banality and anger intact till the end without attempting to provide easy or didactic solutions to the problems posed makes it very relevant to the times that we are living in.

4.4 The Richest and Most Mysterious Sahib

‘Shall I be a rich sahib?’

‘Yes of course you shall. Between the two of us, we will contrive to make it so. You shall be the richest and most mysterious sahib there ever was.’ (Ghosh 196-197)

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* sets the ball rolling when it comes to Zachary's rise in the social scale. While *Sea of Poppies* narrates Zachary's rise as the second mate of *Ibis*, the last book of the trilogy *Flood of Fire* ends with him becoming the captain of the mighty ship and also becoming a shareholder of Mr Burnham's business. This section critically analyses Zachary's performance of his masculinity as he climbs up the class hierarchy and considers if he is able to dissolve the identities of class as well as race.

The story of "the richest and most mysterious sahib" begins in the first book of the trilogy itself. There, we find him getting employment as the second mate of the mighty ship *Ibis* partly due to his hard work, and partly due to good fortune. However, it's only in the third book that we witness the actual process of him "becoming" "the richest and most mysterious sahib". After Justice Kendalbushe cleared Zachary of the charges levelled against him in the *Ibis* incident following the affidavits of Mr Burnham and Baboo Nob Kissin, he was in search of some work so that he could pay his bills and get back his license which he had surrendered to the Harbourmaster's office in Calcutta.

To abandon the licence would have meant forfeiting all that he had gained since leaving Baltimore, on the *Ibis* – gains that included a rise from ship's carpenter to second mate. And were he indeed to return to America to obtain new papers, it was perfectly possible that his old records would be dug up which would mean that he might once again have the word 'Black' stamped against his name, thereby forever barring his path to a berth as a ship's officer (Ghosh 5).

His fear of getting exposed as a Black man stopped him from returning to America. He instead waited for opportunities in India. To his good fortune, an opportunity materialised in the form of Mr Doughty finding him a job of refurbishing a houseboat that had been awarded to Mr Burnham during the arbitration of the former Raja of Raskhali's estate. To his utter surprise, when he reached Mr Burnham's Calcutta mansion, he found out that the houseboat was none other than the *Ibis* itself! This opportunity marked a new phase in Zachary's life.

In his capacity as the "mystery" of the *Ibis*, Zachary initiated a process of conscious re-fashioning of himself. On the one hand, he adopted the appearance, manners and etiquettes of elites like Mr Doughty and Mr Burnham, on the other, he began an affair with the mistress of the mansion, Mrs Cathy Burnham. This section will

examine Zachary's re-discovery of himself following his education in upper-class mannerisms and conduct owing to the efforts of Mr Doughty.

It was the tradition of the Harbourmaster's Ball- a fancy-dress ball intended to raise money for the Mariners' Mission in Calcutta- to give away a few tickets of participation to "indignant but deserving young sailors" (Ghosh 65). Mr Doughty, who already had an invitation, procured a ticket for Zachary and took the responsibility of getting him ready for the event. He chose a "toga", a loose costume of draped sheets held in place by pins and brooches, for Zachary.

Following his host's lead, Zachary stripped down to his drawers and banyan and then wrapped the sheets around his body.

'Now bunnow that corner into a little flap and lagow it with a pin – yes, just like that. Shahbash!'

It took a good hour of tucking and folding before the toga was properly bunnowed and lagowed. By the time they stepped into the baithak-khana for a pre-dinner brandy-pawnee, Zachary and Mr Doughty were identically dressed, in costumes that were held together with pins and brooches and finished off, a little incongruously, with socks, garters and polished shoes. (Ghosh 84)

This was the first time Zachary shared space in an elite social gathering. He started socialising with the "missy-mems" like Mrs Doughty, Mrs Burnham, etc. Most of them didn't know of his Black identity and he eventually became popular owing to his well-known exploits on the *Ibis*. He became the most preferred partner in the dances. His presence in the ball-room caused a stir among the young and old alike. This is an important marker of his climbing the initial steps of the social hierarchy.

In the process of adapting the appearances, manners and etiquettes of the elites like Mr Doughty and Mr Burnham, Zachary began another process of rewriting his destiny. He became sexually attracted towards Mrs Burnham at one of the dance-parties. When Mrs Burnham came to know of this, she became ashamed by a sense of Victorian prudery. Guided by the spirit of Christian Missionary activities, she took it upon herself to "cure" him of his dreadful disease called "onanism". She began lending him books like Mr Sylvester Graham's *Lecture to Young Man on Chastity*. Decimating his sexual appetite became the prime objective of her life. This is an interesting example where

Ghosh's novel clearly subverts Victorian ideals of sexuality. While "the angel in the house" Mrs Burnham followed all rules of Victorian femininity, she wanted to strip Zachary of the prime signifier of his masculinity. While she enjoyed the "shokes" given by the "cushy-girls" (and also prescribed by the physician) during her shower time, she prevented Zachary from going further with his fantasy. Thus, in an apparently humorous way, Ghosh's work compels the readers to rethink notions of prudery through the relationship between Mrs Burnham and Zachary.

Zachary's journey of adapting to the manners of high society is, however, not easy. It is because the same woman who engages with him romantically and shows him the path to climb the social ladder doesn't recognise him in high society. In one of the parties where the elite section of Calcutta high society is present, Mrs Burnham overlooks the presence of Zachary and dismisses him with a perfunctory gesture.

The snub stunned Zachary: he turned on his heels quickly, to hide his flaming cheeks, and shambled off in the other direction. As he was making his retreat he heard her say, in a piercing whisper: 'I'm sorry I didn't introduce him, Augusta dear, but I can't for the life of me remember his name. Anyway, it doesn't signify – he's a nobody, just one of Mr Burnham's mysteries.' (Ghosh 184-185)

It is a very significant passage in the novel as it threatens Zachary's conscious process of self-fashioning. For Mrs Burnham and her social circle, Zachary is "a nobody", "just one of Mr Burnham's mysteries". A "mistri" in most Indian languages is a humble tools-man, like a mason. In ordinary circumstances, he would never get a chance to socialise with any member of the likes of the Burnham household. Having a romantic/sexual relationship with a woman of high society would be a far-fetched dream for a "mistri". As such, the snub and consequent dismissal by Mrs Burnham is a major setback for him. It felt as if someone had dug into his old records and revealed his Black identity, thereby thwarting the process of his self-fashioning that was painstakingly started with the aid of Baboo Nob Kissin and Mr Doughty.

Despite all the setbacks suffered during the course of the self-fashioning, Zachary manages to retain a permanent place in Mrs Burnham's heart. He continues learning the ways and means of her world, thereby climbing the social hierarchy and erasing his Black identity. During one of the many furtive sexual encounters, Mrs Burnham suddenly stopped in the midst of "one of her shokes":

‘What? What was that you called me?’

‘Cathy.’

‘No, my dear, no!’ she cried, twitching her hips in such a way as to abruptly unbivouack the sepy.

‘I am, and I must remain, Mrs Burnham to you – and you must ever remain Mr Reid to me. If we permit ourselves to lapse into “Zachs” and “Cathies” in private then you may be sure that our tongues will ambush us one day when we are in company...No, dear, no, it just will not hoga. “Mrs Burnham” and “Mr Reid” we are, and so we must remain.’ (Ghosh 208)

Mrs Burnham was aghast at Zachary calling her “Cathy”. According to her, calling each other by name would diminish their respectful status and if this custom is turned into a private habit, it would reveal their secret affair in public. Here, we make two observations- first, Mrs Burnham doesn’t want to be caught in public for her infidelity and yet, she wants to witness her lover achieving a certain social status so that a legitimate status can be accorded (if not in reality, at least in her mind) to their unlawful union. Secondly, Zachary is learning a new language of social identity which is shaping his aspirational masculinity. By placing emphasis on using his salutation and surname and not just the name or the short form of the name, Mrs Burnham is already raising his status from “a nobody, just one of Mr Burnham’s mysteries” to an enterprising young man Mr Reid. In other words, though deliberately hidden from the external world, she exercises her agency to push Zachary up the social ladder, which Zachary makes good use of.

Again, in Zachary’s use of his sexuality to gain Mrs Burnham’s sexual favours and reap the benefits of upper-class society, we observe a subversive trope employed by the author. Conventionally, it is always a disadvantaged and less fortunate woman who uses her sexuality to turn her present fortune in her favour. Becky Sharp from Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848) is one of the best examples of it. However, here we see the novelist making a deliberate departure from that convention by substituting the position of the female with that of a male. Here, it is not a Becky Sharp who is climbing the social ladder, but an octoroon who is using his masculine sexual prowess to secure a place in Mrs Burnham’s life on one hand and Mr Burnham’s business on the other.

The final step in Zachary becoming “the richest and most mysterious sahib” is the event when he becomes a shareholder of Mr Burnham’s opium business after he became the Captain of *Ibis* owing to the illness of the former captain, Mr Chillingworth. One day, Baboo Nob Kissin takes him to an opium auction organised by the East India Company. There, he buys himself a small quantity of opium with the money he received from Mrs Burnham as payment for his sexual favours. He traded his stock along with the huge stock of Mr Burnham. When the East India Company won the Opium War, Zachary was able to make huge profits in exchange for his small investment. It made him the richest and most mysterious sahib in the eyes of the wealthy class. Although the sudden arrival of Mr Burnham stopped the affair of Zachary with Mrs Burnham, it gave him the opportunity of becoming a shareholder of his master’s business. From a “nobody”, a “mistri” to an enterprising young man to a rich and mysterious sahib- the transformation of Zachary became complete. “But as he was wandering off in search of a celebratory glass of wine, it struck him that his victory was still incomplete and would remain so until Mrs Burnham knew of it. Only when word of it had been conveyed to her would his triumph be complete; there would be a sweet, subtle pleasure in stripping her of her illusions about her knight-in-armor” (Ghosh 537).

Thus, as Zachary climbs up the ladder of social hierarchy, he is able to dissolve the identities of class as well as race. From replacing Mr Burnham in bed to becoming a shareholder of his master’s business, he straddles many identities over time and paves his way up the social ladder in a subversive trope of masculinity. However, his ascent is not very smooth as he has to adapt upper-class mannerisms and often endure public humiliation by Mrs Catherine Burnham and her social circle. But, that does not stop him from achieving his goal. He rises from being an insignificant “mistri” to an enterprising young man and finally, to a rich and mysterious sahib, admired by all the members of the elite society. His celebratory glass of wine becomes more flavourful with Mrs Burnham’s knowledge of his success!

4.5 The Moustached Pulayan

A man with facial hair was untamed, aboriginal, allowed to eat raw meat, and chase and subdue his mate. But a man who had surrendered his hair was required to exercise self-control, to chew his food with his mouth closed, to mate only

with those he could persuade to consent, to pull up the unruly hairs of the land and cultivate the soil. (Hareesh 205)

S. Hareesh's debut novel *Moustache* was originally published in Malayalam as *Meesha* in the year 2018. It was translated into English by Jayashree Kalathil and published by Harper Collins in the year 2020. *Moustache* is a novel of epic proportions traversing the temporal as well as the spatial aspect. Deeply rooted in the socio-political and cultural history of the region of Kuttanad, the novel tells the story of Vavachan and his giant moustache as he wanders through villages and towns and covers great distances in the process. Vavachan's superhuman presence gives the narrative a fable-like character, dissolving the differences between myth and reality.

Recollecting the story of Nangeli and the breast-cover tax (the "Mulakkaram") controversy of the kingdom of Travancore in the present-day state of Kerala, this section will explore the caste-dynamics around an individual's assertion of identity through the projection of a "magical moustache". It will follow Vavachan's journey as he displays a virulent Malayali masculinity which is a cause of concern for villagers of the Kuttanad region. Finally, this section will shed light on how Vavachan attains immortality through the glorification of his masculine prowess and charisma as a result of his parallel existence in reality and folklore.

We are introduced to Vavachan (the eponymous Moustache) at the beginning of the novel. Vavachan is a Pulayan converted to Christianity. In the introduction to the novel, the author, S. Hareesh writes, "The Pulayan community formed one of the largest groups in Kuttanad, and were predominantly agricultural workers, especially in paddy fields, although some were engaged in fishing. They usually lived in the paddy fields, in huts put up on embankments. Until the end of the eighteenth century, upper-caste landowners treated Pulayans like property and exchanged them along with the land. Missionary activities in Kerala resulted in many of them converting to Christianity" (xi). It is in such a backdrop that the author narrates the events of the novel which are said to have taken place at a time not very near to our present.

The story of *Moustache* is narrated by a father to his young son. According to him, *Moustache* could simultaneously appear in multiple places and disappear at will. "He had a magical moustache with curved ends that touched the sky, and a spotted eagle had built a nest in it" (Hareesh 22). The introduction itself gives a magical nature to him.

It prepares the readers for a series of such events during his adventurous journey through the region of Kuttanad.

The novel gives a stereotypical depiction of his caste identity:

Like all men of the Pulayan caste, he was coal-black, as though he would turn the water black if he entered a river, as though if, like a dark spirit, he jumped up and touched the sky, black rain would fall. Only the skin on his face had lost some colour but, unlike other Pulayan men, a dense growth of hair covered his cheeks, chin and upper lip. Pulayan men usually did not have this kind of hair growth on their faces, and they regularly went to Pathrose Pulayan to shave off whatever they did have. (Hareesh 33)

According to the above description, it is very natural for Vavachan as a Pulayan to have coal-black skin. But, what marked him apart was dense hair growth on his cheeks, chin and upper lip. As revealed in the conversation between Ezhuthachan and Damodaran, the lower caste Pulayans, usually, did not keep moustaches on their face as the practice was reserved only for the royalty (Hareesh 31). The maharajas of Thiruvithamkur like Marthanda Varma and Rama Varma and their Prime Ministers like Raja Kesavadasan and Velu Thambi grew them. The upper caste Nairs also copied them. Later on, when Maharaja Swathi Thirunal shaved his moustache off, neither the Dalawas, nor the Nairs kept them. He either thought it was inappropriate for an artist like him to keep a moustache or shaved it off out of depression resulting from his failure in dealing with the British. From then on, nobody kept a moustache in the entire region (Hareesh 31). Hence, it was sheer blasphemy on the part of Pulayan Vavachan to keep such a thick moustache. It destabilised his caste identity and gave a jolt to the overall caste hierarchy of the region.

However, there is a story of how Vavachan built his fearsome moustache. Ezhuthachan and Damodaran were in search of a man who could replace Achuthan for the role of a policeman in the mobile drama troupe. Reportedly, Achuthan was unwell and so, declined to play his part. After a considerable search, they found Vavachan with his extraordinarily dense moustache. Ezhuthachan took him to Pathrose Pulayan so that he could trim it into the desired shape. After anointing it with a handful of coconut oil, “the moustache fanned out magically” and “glistened like the oiled back of a black bull” (Hareesh 35). This gave him an almost demon-like appearance which frightened young

and old alike. On the day of the performance, Moustache looked like various mythical creatures of darkness like Rakshas, Makkan, Kaurava prince Dusshasanan, Ravana and the kollikkoravan owl:

Those who sat in the front rows felt that their age-old fear of mythical, discarnate beings of darkness, such as the Rakshas and the Makkan, had finally taken physical form and appeared before them. Their terror was augmented by the enormous shadow that his body cast across the back curtain. The echo of his footfall reminded them of the local deities who wandered in the dark of night. His khaki trousers and shirt and the wide belt around his waist looked as magnificent to them as the Kaurava prince Dusshasanan's attire. His naked shins glistened like ebony wood that had been soaked in water and debarked. No one dared look at his face with its bloodshot eyes. It cast ten shadows in the confused light of the numerous lamps hung around the stage, giving him the appearance of Ravana, the ten-headed king of Lanka. Like the kollikkoravan owl which could predict death, his grunts and grumbles sounded like roars, reaching even those at the back of the audience. (Hareesh 36-37)

Even after the end of the performance, Vavachan decided to retain the moustache and not shave it off completely as was the custom with other Pulayans. This decision to continue living the character played on stage changed his life completely. His physicality, especially his moustache, made him the most sought-after, yet terrifying figure of the region. In the words of the translator, Jayashree Kalathil, "There is no other single marker of a virulent kind of Kerala Malayali masculinity, one that is steeped in caste privilege, than a 'meesha' – a moustache. The novel is an intimate portrayal as much of the land and its people as of this masculine physicality" (xvii). The moustache became the prime signifier of his masculinity and the role of the policeman along with his robust physical features augmented his masculine virulence manifold. Like Zachary from Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*, the performance of Vavachan's body became the medium through which he attempted a re-fashioning of himself from a low-caste Pulayan to an apparently monstrous entity.

However, the process of Vavachan's re-fashioning also invited dangers for him. By becoming the fabled moustache-monster of the region, he invited the wrath of the other caste members. Many charges of defying caste-based traditions and arousing fear with his appearance were levelled against him. For example, a priest carrying a vessel

full of water fainted at his sight and a Mapilla woman, who went out to urinate in the middle of the night, also fainted after seeing him. Consequently, his home and hearth were destroyed during his absence and he was forced to flee his native land. The fictional account of Vavachan being subjugated to caste-based hegemonic oppression echoes similar oppressive structures present even in contemporary times. In the decades-long struggle of Dalit identity politics, there have been numerous instances where attempts at self-assertion (through clothes, appearance, writing, etc) and political participation were thwarted by upper-caste groups. For example, in as recent as the year 2017, a few Dalits in Gujarat were attacked for flaunting moustaches – traditionally worn only by upper-caste Indian men. As a form of protest in response to the attacks, Dalit men across India changed their profile pictures on social media platforms to display an image of a moustache with a crown and the words “Mr Dalit” below it. By weaving a tale around Vavachan’s magical moustache, Hareesh highlights the relevance of caste-based politics and the representation of Dalits in the history of Indian literature.

During his wanderings, Vavachan stumbles upon a woman named Seetha and gets emotionally and physically attracted towards her. But, she too was snatched away from him and gang-raped by a group of men. In almost all extant retellings of the *Ramayana*, the mythical Sita, who was a Savarna, was not even touched by Ravana during the fourteen years of exile and reconciled with Rama after the completion of the period of exile. But, Vavachan’s Seetha, who was nicknamed the “Ulladathi whore”, was gang-raped and made unattainable for him. The author’s choice of the name Seetha which is a homophone of the mythical Sita can be read as his attempt to localise a universal figure of the wronged woman who suffers doubly due to her gender as well as caste. As A.K. Ramanujan in his essay, “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation” (1991) writes, “These various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context” (158). Following Ramanujan’s words, we can comment that through the incident of Seetha’s gang rape, Hareesh foregrounds the trope of purity and pollution in the fictional universe of the novel where rape becomes a tool of power and a mechanism of control over women, especially from the lower castes. Thus, in an alternative

storytelling featuring a homophonous Seetha, Hareesh foregrounds gendered repression in intersection with the politics of caste.

During the rest of the novel, Vavachan wanders in search of Seetha and a place called “Malaya” just like Frankenstein’s monster roams in search of a female companion. While Frankenstein’s monster never gets one, Vavachan loses the one that he managed to get through many difficulties. However, his search for “Malaya” can be read as a search for solace where he would not have to flee from the atrocities of people. He says, “All I want is to be left alone. I’m searching for a woman, and when I find her, I’d like to go somewhere we can live without hunger. This place is no good. All it has is mud and water and horrible people” (Hareesh 202). Again, “Malaya” is related to “Malayalam”. The meaning of the word “Malaya” is mountains and that of “Malayalam” is a mountainous region. As the novel is originally written in the Malayalam language, Vavachan’s search for a place called “Malaya” can be interpreted as the author’s yearning or re-imagination of a land, within the existing geographical region bounded by the mountains, which is free from the prevalent caste and gender-based violence. Thus, in Vavachan’s imagination of a peaceful life with Seetha in Malaya, the author visualises a harmonious heteronormative coexistence which is markedly different from a scenario of hatred and intolerance.

Just like we are left with Frankenstein’s monster floating away to the mercy of destiny on the raft, we are also left with alternate endings for our moustached monster-hero. In one end, we see him being killed by a venomous snake-bite, while, in the other end, we see him disappear after coming to terms with the details about his own life as entered in the God of Death, Kaalan’s ledger. But, even with such uncertainty, we realise that the novel ensures that he gets reunited with Seetha and leads a blissful life at least in oral fables and folk songs. This is reflected in the following conversation between Kuttathi and Moustache:

‘You’re the manliest of all the men I have ever come across,’ Kuttathi told Moustache.

Her fingers moved effortlessly through his moustache.

‘You could have any woman you want. Then how come you’re wandering around looking for this one woman? In all the ploughmen’s songs you two are already together.’ (Hareesh 290)

In addition to Vavachan being immortalised in oral tradition, the novel also brings in the character of Ittichan who had the same life story as that of Vavachan. The readers are confounded again when Vavachan tries to remember whose life story he had read in Kaalan’s ledger- was it his own? Or was it Ittichan’s? The enormous popularity of Ittichan’s stories and the long tradition of Moustache’s stories finally intermingle to provide an ambivalent closure to the novel. By highlighting the mysterious nature of Moustache and his virulent masculinity, the novel transforms him into a piece of art that is way beyond earthly concerns.

Moustache himself was the copy of a copy. If Ezhuthachan was alive today, would he remember the character in his play, the moustached policeman to whom he had not bothered to give even a line of dialogue? ... Even if Ezhuthachan remembered the character that he had created, he might not know that the man who played it had refused to take off the costume, and had run away, creating numerous stories, more famous than his play that had failed to find success. Even if he had come across stories of Moustache, he might not remember the character he had created, or recognise him in the stories. A father and his son were fundamentally strangers, and so were faithful copies of the same thing. (Hareesh 303-304)

In the above passage, Moustache is no longer the monstrous Pulayan both despised and feared by all. He doesn’t have to flee from his home as he rejects caste-based traditions and tries to chart a destiny of his own. His mysterious physicality offers multiple opportunities to re-fashion himself transcending spatial and temporal limitations. Thus, he is immortalised in the world of art through the medium of oral tradition like folk songs and stories.

In Hareesh’s style of telling the story of Vavachan and his moustache, we find many elements of post-modern literature like randomness, playfulness, fragmentation and metafiction. The presence of an unreliable and playful narrator, blurring of the differences between reality and myth, incorporation of the oral tradition in little interspersed fragments throughout the novel and the metafictional nature of the narrative

which transforms the central character into a piece of art- all contribute to the uniqueness of Hareesh's *Moustache*. The choice of the post-modernist form to highlight the caste dynamics around Vavachan's masculinity is indeed a well-planned and efficiently executed strategy on the part of the author to drive home the point quite convincingly.

Thus, by weaving a tale around Vavachan's magical moustache, Hareesh highlights the relevance of caste-based politics and the representation of Dalits in the history of Indian literature. In a display of virulent Malayali masculinity, Vavachan's moustache destabilised his caste identity and gave a jolt to the overall caste hierarchy and power politics of the entire Kuttanad region. Vavachan's transformation from a lowly Pulayan to the fabled moustache-monster could be read as a conscious process of self-fashioning where his moustache became the prime signifier of his masculinity. The role of the policeman with robust physical features augmented his masculine virulence manifold. Forced to abandon his home and hearth because of his blasphemy, he wanders in search of Seetha and "Malaya" only to get united with her and lead a happy life in oral fables and ploughmen's songs. However, Seetha's association with Moustache, combined with her caste and gender identity, makes her a victim of hegemonic violence and masculine domination. It is ironic to note that the utopia imagined by Hareesh where Vavachan would lead a peaceful life with Seetha is an essentially heteronormative one. This reveals the conventional nature of an otherwise progressive text. Finally, in a very postmodernist fashion, while the readers are left uncertain about Vavachan's death with alternate endings and an unfinished closure to the text, the novel dissolves the differences between myth and reality and transforms him into a character of fables and oral stories. Thus, through the story of the mysterious moustache, Hareesh's novel underscores questions of caste and gender-based oppression by re-inventing the oral tradition of folk tales and songs.

4.6 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter undertook an intersectional study of masculinities through the lens of social stratification like caste and class and social institutions like religion. The representative primary texts interpreted for this purpose included- Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2010), Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* (2015), S. Hareesh's *Moustache* (2020). Aslam's novel centred on

the absent, but strong masculine character of Jugnu who had to sacrifice his life and also that of his companion Chanda amidst the religious bigotry and orthodoxy of Kaukab and Chanda's family. Similarly, Hareesh's moustache-monster Vavachan had to flee his village due to the atrocities of his fellow-villagers. But, while the meticulous planning and perfect strategy of Ayyan Mani made his son Adi become "the Dalit genius" of news headlines, timely help and good fortune made Zachary the most mysterious Sahib among Mr Burnham's acquaintances. All the four novels highlighted the process of conscious self-fashioning in their male protagonists. Charag's uncut self-portrait was the most expressive moment of his self-realisation and performance which also served as a medium of revenge for Kaukab's wrongdoings to him and his uncle. Similarly, Ayyan's perfect ploy to project his son as a Dalit genius, Vavachan's decision to retain the moustache groomed for the role of the policeman and Zachary's success in climbing up the social ladder were all conscious processes of self-fashioning which negotiated the dynamics of social hierarchy and institutions.

The generic conventions within which the four novels function provided different ways of negotiating possibilities of social mobility. The social realism of *Serious Men* allowed only a temporary disruption of the caste hierarchy as Ayyan Mani's perfect plan threatened upper caste/ class solidarity and privilege. On the other hand, the postmodern template of the narrative in *Moustache* offered possibilities of fluidity in the imagination of caste hierarchy. The incorporation of the oral tradition into the story of Vavachan's magical moustache allowed the transcendence of rigid caste boundaries. While Ghosh's work of historical fiction, *Flood of Fire* made social hierarchies fluid for Zachary, Aslam's diasporic novel, barring Kaukab and Chanda's family, negotiated religious and societal demarcations for most other characters. On a final note, this chapter resounded pagla-baba's words- "Yeh jaati-paati ki baat sab bakwaas haelba!" through an intersectional analysis of performances of masculinities as portrayed in the selected texts.