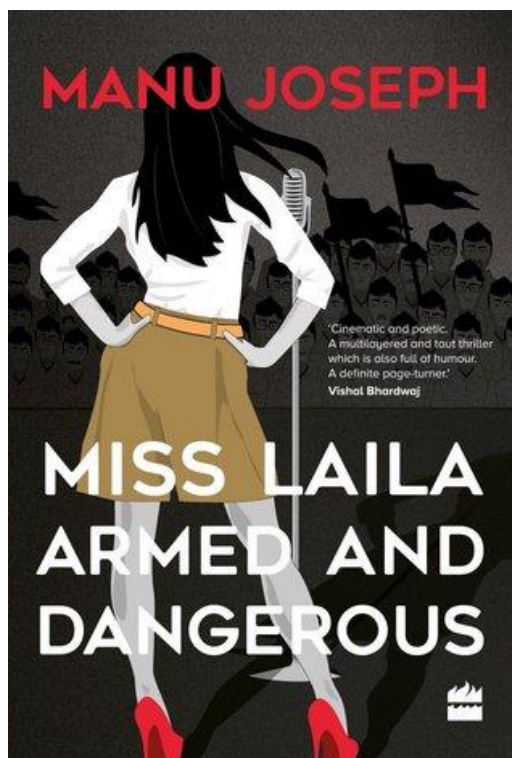


Manu Joseph, *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous*. New Delhi: Fourth Estate, 2017. 224 pp. ISBN: 978-9352770441.



If being politically incorrect is an art, Manu Joseph is an artist sublime. If the mockery of leftist liberals were to become a cult, Manu Joseph would be one of the high priests. Not just the left wing intellectuals; Manu Joseph's third novel is armed against and is dangerous for the right-wing Hindutva flag bearers as well. So much so, that one wonders how this novel did not join the legion of the banned books.

Manu Joseph is a journalist who upholds nuanced and complex positions on various socio-political issues. His opinions sometimes are not only politically incorrect, but also unpopular. His novels espouse the same politics as his journalistic writings. His mission seems to call out the hypocrisy of the bigots of any kind. He is intolerant of the ostensibly malignant, but he seems to fall rather heavily upon the apparent benign ones by ripping off their façades. He is highly suspect of people fighting for social causes. More than one character in Joseph's *Miss Laila* holds the view:

When the elite of a system become the underclass in another system, they search for a moral cause to restore balance of power. This is popularly known as activism. Upon finding the moral cause, the elite co-opt, enlist and employ naïve simpletons to fight the battle. Activism is always a retaliation of the elite, always couched in morals and always a feudal system where the strong employ the weak, the poor, the demented, the suicidal, the semi-literate and other losers of the society. (Chapter 16)

Some of Joseph's characters seem to exist primarily so that the author can vicariously appropriate their social positions to berate the society for its follies. For instance, consider the following lines which appear twice in the book,

... there are faces only an Indian can make. Like that baffled face when he is shocked by the most rational outcome of his own actions. He crosses the road like a cow, and he is startled by a truck. A vehicle on the road? How? He walks across the railway track, and he finds a train hurtling towards him. A train on a railway track? He is stunned. (Chapter 9)

Joseph's first novel *Serious Men* (2010), with a plot which included an institutional heist, was almost flawless. It revolved around a serious man, a Brahmin physicist, heading an esteemed research institute, and his malicious (and mischievous) Dalit PA, Ayyan Mani. His second book, *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* (2014), lived up to the expectation of a thriller with suspense woven in. A father, an alcoholic journalist, tries to investigate the death of his son. The plot didn't rally around "now what," but on "why." His third novel in many ways is a promise of a thriller, if not a thriller. Through a series of deftly crafted flashbacks, Joseph creates an intricate narrative with many parallel plots that ultimately merge into a larger whole.

The novel is difficult to be pegged into a genre. It is quite bold and experimental with the time line. The plot meanders with digressions and countless sardonic and humourous comments about the world and its absurdities. Joseph's flair for humour and mastery over language make his novels veritable masterpieces. It begins with the collapse of an unimportant building in an insignificant locality in Mumbai. This is only ominous, as that very day, the results of the Lok Sabha election are declared and Damodarbai has had a landslide victory. Another parallel plot is that of a CBI officer who is asked by his boss to shadow a terror suspect couple, on their way to Ahmedabad. No prize for guessing who Joseph is writing about. He may not have added any unknown factual details of this high profile case, but his observation makes the characters and the situation chillingly real. His descriptions are spot-on, and even when the names of the actual people are thinly veiled, they seem real in a fictional sense. Any other writer may have faced the danger of creating a novel that reads more

like a journalistic piece. However, Joseph's involvement with each character prevents that from happening.

Joseph's stories are not about outright outsiders. His stories are about the insiders who seem to be gifted with astute, often hapless, power of social observation. They are all tricksters and pranksters, laughing at the face of the society – covertly as well as too directly. Like phone-tapping by Ayyan and cartoons by Unni, Akhila in *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous*, creates Youtube videos in which she pranks elite activists. These characters, just like their author, search for inconsistencies and pettiness in great people.

Laila, the titular character, is largely described through the point of view of her younger sister. The nineteen-year-old fatherless Laila struggles to make ends meet in a family of many sisters, a shy brother and an anxious mother. Miss Laila is altruistic as she is ambitious. Joseph, who was criticised by some for his seemingly anti-Dalit and misogynist writing, has written a novel that has managed to create a complex character in Akhila. She revels in offending, just as the author. Curiously enough, large part of the plot is devised to unfold Akhila's character through Prof Vaid, the man heading the rightist think tank. His stream of consciousness-like voice dwells on Akhila and her antics almost the whole time, which looks a little contrived. The story unfolds through various characters, with different voices and perspectives. One amongst many is that of Akhila. We see her in the role of a good samaritan, helping out a man under the debris of a fallen building. The helpful Akhila and the prankster Akhila could have been two different people, but that is not the case. Mukundan, the poetic CBI officer, a conformist, turns out to be more than what we think. The ending of the novel though unexpected, it very satisfying. Joseph surely knows how to manage his resolutions.

Descriptions of Akhila's pranks that she uploads on Youtube become the mainstay of the novel. It is, as if, this novel positions itself with the relatively uncontrolled and unregulated, newer medium, which centres on parody and challenges the authority. The author's political incorrectness subverts the poetics of the novel as a genre. Furthermore, Joseph is not reluctant to show that there can be consequences for these acts of subversions. But we know that a prankster is, after all, an artist, addicted to her art; a prankster is unstoppable.

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