Veritas: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

Social Realism and Subaltern Voices in the novel *The Abyss*: A Study of Disposable Lives

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Abstract:
The research paper examines the novel *The Abyss* by Jeyamohan through the critical perspectives of social realism and subaltern studies. The novel presents a clear picture of realistic society, focusing on people who lived in the marginalized community, often ignored or exploited, and often considered as 'disposable lives' in modern society. It shows how these individuals are treated as poor and vulnerable resources for profit rather than as human beings with emotion and dignity. The novel mainly exposes how social and medical institutions failed to protect them instead of protecting the marginalized and contributing to their sufferings. The voices of the subaltern are suppressed and represented through social realistic narratives. By combining social realism and subaltern studies, this paper argues that *The Abyss* offers a powerful literary representation of marginalized lives and critically questions the moral foundations of modern society.

Keywords: Social Disposability, Social Realism, Marginalization, Social Inequality, Subaltern Studies

Literature helps the readers to understand society, power, and human experiences. Among various approaches to literature, social realism and subaltern studies deal with poverty, marginalization, and exploitation. The concept of social realism emerged in the twentieth century, especially in the Marxist and realist traditions. George Lukas, a critic, argued that literature must reveal the relationship between individual lives and social forces. According to this view, suffering is not a personal fate but a result of the economic and social system. Subaltern studies developed later, mainly in the context of postcolonial concepts. It is used in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, and literary criticism. Postcolonial writers have been trying to bring enlightenment to the oppressed, marginalized, or so-called subalterns through their writings. Etymologically the word 'subaltern' originated from the late Latin word 'subalternus,' in which 'sub' means 'under' and 'alternus' means 'every other.' In total the word "subaltern" means a person of inferior rank. It is primarily a British military term used for junior officers below the rank of captain, literally meaning 'subordinate.' According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the word "subaltern" means "any officer in the British army who is lower in rank than a captain" (Hornby 1541).

Subaltern theory was coined by Antonio Gramsci and developed in India by Ranajith Guha, who serves as a professor at Sussex University. This theory was expanded by another famous critic in subaltern studies. Gayatri Chakravorthy Spivak. In her work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* She questions whether the subaltern can truly speak. Here the subaltern refers to the oppressed individuals whose voices are silenced: "The subjects of exploitation cannot know and speak the text

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

of their own exploitation" (308). This theory is particularly relevant to Indian society, where caste, poverty, and disability exist. It classifies certain groups as disposable whose lives are seen as less valuable and easily sacrificed for economic or institutional gain. The phrase 'disposable lives' is not a classical term but a modern critical concept used in sociology and cultural studies. These marginalized people are treated as replaceable bodies, not as full human beings.

Language plays a vital role in expressing marginalized experiences. Tamil writer Jeyamohan represents marginalized experiences in his work *The Abyss*. He was inspired by authors such as Tolstoy and Gandhi and got profound ideas about life, nature, and human suffering, which he adapted into his writing. His famous works include *Vishnupuram* and a very long story called *Venmurasu*. The Abyss was originally written in Tamil and was translated into English by Suchitra Ramachandran. It was adapted for the screen as the National Award-winning movie *Naan Kadavul*. Jeyamohan is from Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu. He writes in both Tamil and Malayalam languages. He ran away from home as a young man, travelled a lot, and did small works and even stayed with the beggar's community, which inspired him to write *The Abyss*. Keeping in mind a friend of his who was affected with leprosy, he created the character Thimmapan. The novel is based on what he saw in real life around temples of Tamil Nadu. One of the significant aspects of the novel is its portrayal of disposable lives. Talking about Mahatma Gandhi, he says, "A great soul is great because his Atma is great. Ours, on the other hand, is a smaller soul, a smaller Atma. We must respect other souls like ours. Love them. But there are souls even smaller than ours. Those we must protect" (Jeyamohan 16).

The novel explores the hidden world of beggars and marginalized people living around sacred religious centers. It describes how the disabled are turned into beggars. They are bought, sold, transported, and controlled by people like Pothiveli Pandaram, who is the central character in this novel. During festival times, beggars will be treated as goods, and these beggars are taken into a crowd. They cannot move freely; they suffer from hunger, dirt, and pain. Through this activity the novel puts forth the question, Where does humanity lie? Pandaram always talks about their bodies in terms of profit. He knows when and where to take his group of disabled people, many with severe deformities, to maximize the alms they collect. Temples are associated with purity, devotion, and compassion, but here in the story, they are used for trafficking business by disabled people living around the temple towns of Palani, Tiruvanamalai, and Nagarajar Temple in Nagercoil. The novel introduces the idea of the 'seventh world,' where these beggars can live together happily. In reality they are losing their power over their own lives. They cannot choose where to go and what to do. Traffickers are the ultimate decision-makers for the beggar's community. However, the entire novel allows beggars' conversation, jokes, and shared experiences. Their voices show pain, memory, humor, and emotional strength. Pandaram is a complex character, not shown as purely evil. Pandaram hopes to earn enough money to secure a better future for his family. He easily sells disabled people without thinking of their feelings. The novel depicts this character as a religious person who follows Lord Muruga. At the same time, his actions are cruel and unbearable.

In the 'seventh world' community, a character called Muthammai is one of the most painful characters in the novel. She is physically disabled and is repeatedly forced to give birth because her

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

children increase her value as a beggar. Her body is controlled by others for their profit. Her story shows how disabled women suffer due to both gender and poverty, and she represents disposable lives in the novel. The character Thorappan, who is a blind hunchback, represents emotional suffering in the novel. He is gentle, religious, and kind. He is deeply affectionate of Muthammai's child, but Pandaram decides to sell the child. They both cry and beg them not to sell the child, but no one is ready to listen to them. Sami began to sing a song, "You promised to take me. You have left me and gone away. The whole world burns for me. Everything is bitter. I will come away. Take me with you. Don't you have any compassion for me?" (Jeyamohan, 32). It powerfully shows how human relationships are destroyed for money. Beggars are portrayed as victims throughout the novel. This scene clearly explains how these disabled beggars are used as disposable lives. "Just as he buys and sells items, he sells away his girls" (Jeyamohan 215). Many characters, like Ramappan, Kuyan, Mangandi Saami, and others, will share their memories and tell jokes between them. These moments show that they are not victims who are having thoughts and feelings like normal human beings. Saami sings his own songs; it was something over and over with tears, saying,

Debts of tears
Debts of love
Are great things
To this poor girl
My golden heart – what's the use
Of Talking now? (Jeyamohan 32)

Entering Palani is not that easy because police officers demand bribes and arrest the weak instead of protecting them. Hospitals are also shown as a part of the system that accepts trafficked bodies for profit. Would these people accept this kind of business if their own family members were disabled? Would they be willing to sell them as beggars for money? When profit becomes more important than humanity, human life loses its value. As human beings, we respect one another, especially in times of suffering, regardless of poverty or disability.

The novel ends where it began, with suffering remaining a normal part of life without proving justice or giving resolution. This open ending is deliberate, and it reflects real-world life, where marginalized people rarely experience justice. The novel forces readers to carry the burden of responsibility. The sense of discomfort remains in one's mind after the reading. The subaltern voices are not loud or revolutionary, but they are deeply human and emotionally powerful. The novel stands as a strong moral documentation of contemporary society. Through social realism and subaltern voices, it expresses the dark realities hidden behind everyday life. The novelist declares that true humanity lies in recognizing and respecting others, especially in adverse situations. No human life is disposable, even when society chooses to look away. By powerfully portraying these painful realities, *The Abyss* goes beyond storytelling, and it gives an awareness and social responsibility for the readers.

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

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