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## **LIBERATING EVIL AND IMPRISONING GOOD: THE BEGGING CARTELS IN *THE ABYSS* BY BAHULEYAN JEYAMOCHAN**

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### **Abstract**

*In the Indian context and consciousness, beggars and begging evoke pity and piety both. While dispensing our moral duties by feeding the beggars, we simultaneously contemptuously disregard beggars and the failure of the government in eradicating the practice of begging, as for most of us, beggars remain unwanted and disturbing. Bahuleyan Jeyamohan, in his novel *The Abyss* (2023), constructs a unique world of beggars and begging beyond moral judgment and socio-cultural templates. He perceives harsh realities of beggars' lives from the metamodern frame of reference implanted in post-irony and new sincerity. This research paper reads *The Abyss* as a revelation not only of the life of the beggars but also of how it shocks the readers about their way of looking at the beggars. The grotesque situations of the beggars become the tool of their existential transcendence, and the self-complacent righteousness behind the acts of sympathizing with beggars endangers the probity of the pity itself are the main argument of this research endeavor. Additionally, a careful perusal of human suffering and tenderness in the dark world of beggars and begging is carried out beyond charity and social cause.*

### **Keywords**

*Grotesque, Humour, Metamodern, New sincerity, Post-irony, etc.*

### **Full Article**

#### **Introduction:**

Jeyamohan's words that, "to be beggar is no ordinary thing," (Jeyamohan, 287) demand a multidimensional analysis of his own life being a beggar and the difference between empathy and sympathy showed towards beggars in our society. The grotesque life of the beggars in this novel turns into a universal human predicament in which, on the line of self-conscious metamodern understanding oscillating across the poles of what is good and what is evil, there remains a possibility of libration of the evil associated with beggars by raising the question that why do humans suffer? From this question emerges the next question; is the freedom of charity sufficient to resolve this problem? The modernist idea of begging as a social paradox negating human dignity and self-worth jeopardizes the required sincerity to deal with the concept of begging by lending the beggars an otherness in society. Similarly, postmodernism engages itself so ruthlessly in socio-cultural performative phenomena behind begging that it forgets to incorporate the necessary element of empathy while dealing with the menace of begging. Jeyamohan's contention that "fiction is the art of approaching the unapproachable" (Jeyamohan, 276) envisions a third perspective of the cruelty and inhumanity of the begging world with the point of departure that modern liberation and postmodern abjection can coexist in defining and understanding the beggars and their gruesome world while also mirroring our mainstream society and people. He says: "Beggars may live in the abyss of our society, but they are still human beings. They show



magnanimity, forge friendships, have a social consciousness, and are spiritual” (Jeyamohan qtd. in Radhika Shantharam).

The next point of departure in this vision of the beggars’ world beyond modern metaphorical alienation of the evil and postmodern mechanical sympathy towards beggars rests on the self-criticizing sympathy rooted in irony with a sincere and objective understanding of beggar’s world neither challenging nor acknowledging this paradox in our society. Theoretically, this approach coincides with the metamodern post-irony (irony with sincere ends), leading to yet another metamodern praxis, new sincerity, highly aware of the complexities of the begging world, oscillating across cynicism and optimism with equal intensity. The insistence on humor amidst most grotesque situations of the beggars in the novel, a constant self-conscious vigil on the detached sympathy shown by the mainstream people on these beggars, and the penchant to liberate these downtrodden from this evil through their natural humanism while interrogating the democratic or religious humanism shown for beggars by the mainstream society are the main discussions in this paper.

### **Post Irony and the Evil of Begging:**

The compassionate and socio-culturally occupied narratives on the menace of begging, with the excessive use of irony and sarcasm, lead the reader's experience to a dead end, where, except for a few moments of sympathy towards beggars and criticism of social apathy, the writing-reading process of a text on beggars and begging concludes in expected unresolved territories. But this “novel is narrated without approaching the subject through the lens of social commentary; there’s an unmistakable layer of philosophy that’s laced with dark humor. And it’s not just about the wrapped fate that’s handed to the beggars, either. It goes beyond the simplistic notions of birth and death, pain and misery, love and loss” (Karthik).

Pandaram’s ambiguous character, who is so ruthless in treating the beggars, calling them mere ‘items’, and also so God-fearing and compassionate towards his three daughters, keeps the intrinsic cruelty of those behind the cartels of begging in check. As readers, we find it difficult to hate Pandaram out rightly as he evokes honesty and love as a dutiful husband and loving father. Similarly, the ‘items’ (beggars) in Pandaram’s cartel, despite living in grotesque conditions, through the aestheticization of their sufferings by developing friendship, generating humor in most gruesome situations, keep the most empathetic emotions of the readers under constraints. We, as readers, are unable to evoke pity towards these beggars despite their inhuman condition. Neither the perpetrators of begging emerge as despicable as believed in popular notions, nor do the beggars become the source of pity because of their resolute humor and spiritualism.

By debunking the otherness associated with beggars in modernist perspectives through the very use of postmodern skepticism of any good done to uproot the menace of begging, Jeyamohan elevates irony to a sincere plane to understand both the evil and good in beggars’ lives. He claims:

All the values of this world can be found there. It is not an ‘other’ society. It is another version of ‘our’ society. They are not others. They are another version of us. They share all our greatness, all our follies. They can be very humane (Jeyamohan, 283).

Muthammai, one of the items of Pandaram, embodies the grotesque realities of the beggars. She has given birth to eighteen children, commodifying the human life in a begging world. “She looked like a strange life form, a surreal giant of a creature. She has one good arm and leg - big, strong, and hefty. The other arm and leg were shrunken and deformed ... her giant, hairless head was flat on one side. She had only one eye; a ball of puckered flesh pulsed in the other socket. There was no nose, only two little hollows. A great big mouth gaped below, with long, yellow, misshapen teeth growing in all directions. Her ballooned-up belly was shiny, hanging low” (Jeyamohan, 6). She gives birth to an uncanny creature, “drenched in blood. One leg is not even



the size of a little finger. A piece of flesh hanging where an arm should have been. A big, misshapen head, twice as big as the body. One eye” (Jeyamohan, 9). Despite giving birth to a child in most grotesque and inhuman conditions, the moment Muthammai starts caring her infant, “my king, my emperor, emperor of my heaven, she crooned, parting the baby gently, her head bobbles blissfully” (Jeyamohan, 22), the irony of her being a helpless beggar mother turns into a genuine motherly emotion even in profound suffering.

The juxtaposition of humanity and suffering reverses the use of irony in evoking pity only, and the gruesome realities of the beggars and the begging world grow beyond sentimentality. Jeyamohan attaches sincere emotions to an absurd suffering and seems to unburden the irony from its traditional role of criticism in general and to liberate the evil of begging in the context of this text. Jeyamohan seems to be disinterested in patronizing pity in the beggars’ world as seen in traditional narratives because for him dignity and humanity emerge in the most inhuman conditions as naturally as pity emerges without a judgmental or sentimental lens.

Pothivelu Pandaram, the man who runs this begging cartel, is an apt caricature of the irony of his brutal enterprise and simultaneously a devoted and religious family man who is always concerned for his family and regularly praises the Lord Murugan. His moral ambiguity, depicted through the use of irony, neither elevates his role as a father and husband nor dehumanizes him for running a begging cartel with absolute cruelty. Pandaram’s moment of epiphany comes when he visits Ramanujan, owner of another begging cartel, to buy ‘items’ where he seems to be perturbed by the condition of little children who are, “mutilated by acid, the features all melted and twisted beyond shape. Burned, peeling shoulders. Their own mothers wouldn’t recognize them ... tongues chopped off ... eyes put out,” and by seeing them, “Pandaram’ heart froze. His legs began quivering uncontrollably” (Jeyamohan, 122).

What would be the result of this moral revelation for Pandaram becomes the question with skeptical and ironical insights for readers. In case Pandaram mends his ways, even then, his inherent monstrosity seems to be unyielding in further readerly experience. Unsurprisingly, when it’s revealed that Pandaram overcomes this moral revelation instantly, the ironical aspects of his situation delineate not only the sharp criticism of his practices but also extend the role of irony as a tool of sincere possibilities of investigating the evil in Pandaram. Here, irony liberates itself from the purpose of scathing criticism and helps in understanding the nature of evil with a sincere and authentic point of view. Irony not only liberates the readers from seeing evil only from the constructed narrative of the story but also enables them to see the moralities and immoralities of the character without any satirical intention. Pandaram is also the dweller of a true abyss, like his ‘items’, and the use of irony is not to evoke hate, but to analyze Pandaram’s nature from a different and sincere point of view, where irony turns into sincerity. The coexistence of evil and good in Pandaram symbolizes the metamodern refrain of oscillation across two poles with deep socio-cultural implications. The roots of evil are not detached from morality, and the intrinsic good of humans cannot be fathomed without the help of one’s evil. Ironic treatment of Pandaram’s character asserts the perpetrating cruelty despite the innate goodness because the author’s aim is not to classify evil or good in Pandaram but to clarify it.

Mangandi Swami, another beggar in Pandaram’s begging cartel who “was only a stump, with only one arm, no legs and a little head on top” (Jeyamohan, 31) and sings songs, is yet another fine example of elevated irony that is post-irony in a metamodern refrain, humanizing the evil of the beggars’ world and simultaneously challenging the notion of good. In most inhuman and ironical conditions, this beggar unburdened the begging from the baggage of moral judgments, “as if rejoicing in some great cosmic joke” (Jeyamohan, 32). Pandaram sells him to another owner of beggars’ cartel to bear the expense of his daughter’s marriage. Ironically, after realizing that what fear and pity deformity evokes in popular conscious and Swami’s knack of



singing, this new owner presents Swami as Sampanguzhi Samy who, “heals any disease ... stripes away any sin. All your troubles fly away when Samy sings. Samy is a vedenta kesari” (Jeyamohan, 158).

Unexpectedly a beggar’s elevation to the status of a saint, thanks to the fear and superstitions of Indian masses, intensifies the authorial vision of liberating evil of begging from the clutches of sympathy with the help of irony itself which is meant not to mock or criticize but to humanize a beggars’ world who even after this sort of elevation and liberation from suffering chooses to be a beggar in real sense. As it is revealed at the end that Swamy doesn’t accept this role and he is reintroduced to Pandaram’s cartel again. The authorial vision here functions at two levels, first as the practice of begging in India as the highest form of devotion and detachment as Jeyamohan himself raises concerns over the nature of mass sympathy, lacking empathy, in helping the beggars and forgetting that, “in India, traditionally begging has never been looked upon negatively,” (Jeyamohan, 286) and to lay bare the reality that, “they beg because they are infirm,” is a half-truth because, “our tradition identifies the state of being a beggar as a liberated state, the highest state ... and the highest possibility for a man is to become a bhikshu and seek nirvana,” (Jeyamohan, 286).

Secondly, the fact that, “Samy’s songs come out only when he starves. They gave him milk and ghee, only farts came out of him. They sent him back,” (Jeyamohan, 269) is deeply ironic and too unbelievable in the ordinary beggars’ world; after all, what kind of beggar will not accept this liberation from suffering? Jeyamohan with the use of post-irony (irony with sincerity) and through Swami, draws our attention towards the humanism in the beggars’ world which is otherwise least expected among beggars but, “this is not a humanism imposed from the outside. It is not a revolutionary humanism or a liberal, democratic humanism. It is the natural humanism of that human being,” (Jeyamohan, 284). The political and philanthropic, behind popular sympathy for beggars, breaks with Swami’s rejection of the life of a saint, and what remains to be understood is that beggars need empathy since they are not different from the common people, for there prospers spirituality and humanism among beggars too.

Further, the use of irony is not restricted to the beggars only, other characters, along with Pandaram, like Perriya Pothi, the priest, are also under the radar of irony and satire. Jeyamohan lays bare the idiosyncrasies and whims of the priest of the temple in Pazhani with the use of irony to diminish the difference between the beggars and the mainstream society dwellers. However, this is not a mere balancing act as far as the novel’s thematic and narrative schemes embedded in the ironic treatment are concerned. This is a strategy to explore the possibilities of placing beggars and common people horizontally. In a real sense, who is a real beggar becomes the main discussion of the text when the characters like Pandaram and Pothi, who are at the highest rung of the socio-cultural ladder, become the targets of satire and irony. However, once again, Jeyamohan uses the tool of irony not to criticize the evil of running begging cartels but to bridge the existential gap between the beggars and their owners and eventually to establish the fact that “they (the beggars) are better than us; I wouldn’t say they are lower than us in any way either” (Jeyamohan, 290).

Pothi’s revelation that he spits in the shrine, “where else would I spit? I stay all day long. How long do I go without chewing betel? And when I’m chewing I can’t come out once in ten minutes to spit, can I?” (Jeyamohan, 176) is not a mere ironical tool to expose the dark realities of the temples and priests. Further, his attraction for Muthammai, “I want to ask you something, Pandaram. A favor ...? What is it? That woman, I want to see her the way she was born. Just once. Who? Pothi’s breath caught in his throat. Then, with a sly smile, he said, “This Muthammai of yours...” (Jeyamohan, 179, places the grotesque in beggars (the physical) and in these people in mainstream society (psychological) at par. Similarly Pandaram, the more he becomes helpless in



dealing with the marriage of his daughters, the more ruthless and cruel he grows towards his 'items'. Despite all his efforts, his daughter elopes with a dubious man and takes away all the money and gold he has earned by exerting all sorts of cruelties on his 'items'. When, out of fatherly affection, he visits her, the irony and grotesque in his life emerge resolutely when it is revealed that she has become a prostitute and, "having a good time now. A real jolly time! Do you know how many men come every day" (Jeyamohan, 235).

Does there remain any difference between Pandaram, Pothi, and the beggars? The only difference is that, in spite of living in gruesome conditions, these beggars are more humanizing in comparison to Pandaram and Pothi. However, Jeyamohan seems to be less interested in highlighting this ironic contrast between these two types of people in our society. Through the artful use of irony, the author neither evokes pity nor hate for these characters but diminishes the difference between them because "the novel doesn't say, look at these people, feel bad for them, do something for them. It makes the reader feel that they are the same and lets him understand them" (Jeyamohan, 296).

### **New Sincerity and the Good behind Evil:**

It's all about the easiness of the mind. For me, the humorous moments in human interactions are very important. It is only through humour that the best potential of a human being is revealed (Jeyamohan, 305). Post-irony, liberating the evil (begging), traverses further for the search of good in the grotesque. Jeyamohan with the use of irony rejects irony itself and establishes a sincere overview of beggar's world and accepts the risk of creating a humanistic version of dark world of the beggars. The self-conscious and self-ironical world of beggars seems to be an antidote to the deadening end of the cynical socio-cultural perception about the menace of begging. The humor, camaraderie and empathy amidst the gruesome and grotesque situation of these beggars highlight the inherent dignity of this dark world with the interlocking of stark reality with tenderness, a metamodern penchant for authentic and emphatic narrative without any judgment. By placing the beggars and the people of mainstream society at par, Jeyamohan seems to be on a mission of proving that; "the author and reader really do exist, which is to say they are not simply implied, not primarily to be understood as rhetorical constructions ... New sincerity writing demands that we take this insight on board as an urgent matter ... Rather, these texts are ultimately defined by their undecidability and the affective response they invite and provoke in their readers, with questions of sincerity embedded" (Kelly, 206).

Jeyamohan incorporates this sincerity in the most stereotyped reality of our society that is begging. He deals with activism and satire simultaneously by generating empathy, humor, and friendship in the face of the grotesque. As he himself reveals that, "the cruelty, morbidity, terribleness, pain all become art. Once something becomes art, the underlying emotion and pain change color. Art is bliss. Art transforms pain into bliss" (Jeyamohan, 307). Pain, suffering, and humiliation have been the basic components of traditional narrative underlining the predicament of beggars, but there is none to ask or to fathom the effect of this brutality on beggars, or what this cruelty does to them? If these questions of cruelty towards beggars are answered in some of these narratives, then again, the resilience, humanity, and humor of grotesque life are rarely discussed. When a devotee, "kicked hard at Kuyyan, sending him flying," cursing and abusing him, "the whole place is filled with such trash" (Jeyamohan, 59), it invites an unexpected response from Ramappan, whose words, "they are going begging to the lord on the hill. They need to prove their faith, throw themselves at his feet. That's why they do all this. We beg these folks for money. And they beg the beggar God who sits on the hill up there," (Jeyamohan, 60), reinforce the authorial depiction of what happens to beggars in the



face of cruelty, a reversed perception about the beggars. Kuyyan's humor in response to this cruelty, "sir, good sir, generous master, goddess, lady, spare a coin ... He drew deep on his beedi, and in the same monotone, in the same garbled voice, drawled, 'Sir, good sir, motherfucker, son of a whore, goddess, spare a coin'" (Jeyamohan, 60), dilutes the pity generated towards beggars when humiliated. This focus on unseen reality with self-ironical conviction discarding thematic sentimentality and political undertone of the dark world of beggars evokes a deep sense of blatant truth wrapped in new sincerity, unsettling and unburdening our experience of understanding the evil of begging. The interplay of funny and frightening, of grotesque and humorous, consolidates the metamodern oscillation between good and bad, the belief that these are complementary. These humorous responses of the beggars in the utmost inhumane situations corroborate the belief that "metamodernist narrative utilized quite actively not to mystify or befuddle the reader but to involve them in the fictional game of make-believe, inducing intense empathy through perspective-taking without the ubiquitous ironic stance" (Chemodurova, 91).

What it takes to realize the pain and sufferings of these beggars from their own responses demands to reverse the role of intentions behind any text evoking only pity and helplessness for these downtrodden in our society. Kuyyan's comment on the devotees that, "they are in a frenzy. Religion bores into their asses like a worm," (Jeyamohan, 47) unsettles the general image of a helpless beggar, and his sharp humour shows that these beggars also possess the criticality and imagination like that of mainstream people. Ramappan's trick of hiding the coins in his wound is yet another example of humorous treatment to a grotesque situation and when he had to eat something secretly, he, "opened his legs and dug into an old wound on his thigh, fingering under the dry, fissured scab to fish out three five-rupee coins. He wiped the coins dry on his dirty waistcloth," (Jeyamohan, 36). When Vandimalai asked him about these coins, his reply, "Eh? In the money purse of my girlfriend. Want to see? The money purse?" (Jeyamohan, 37), jeopardizes the grotesque in his wound with the mirth of his humour to reinforce the refrain: what it takes to realize a beggar's pain? A narrative evoking their pain and suffering as seen by the people, or a narrative documenting their own perception of pain, full of resilience and humour?

Muthammai, the mother of eighteen children, is in the truest sense merely an 'item' for Pandaram. Her desperate efforts to protect her newly born deformed son, whom she calls Rajhnikant, highlight the tropes of compassion and resistance amidst the gruesome cruelty. Jeyamohan explores hope in the darkest corner of our society through her motherly affection. She blurs the difference between a beggar and a normal person, which shows that humanity remains eternal in everyone, irrespective of the different circumstances we all live in. There is room for love and care even in the abyss, which challenges any notion of dissimilarities between the intrinsic goodness among all human beings; which is generally debilitated while talking about cruelties done by human beings to fellow human beings, as we see in this story. Muthammai's love for her children is itself the example of the highest kind of motherly care which survives in the lowest human surroundings. "I was only sixteen then. Till my tummy was all swollen up, I did not believe. My feet were off the ground, and I floated for ten months. And then, when the baby was born, my heart stopped in my throat. At least I have an eye. An arm. I don't need anyone else to find my food and scoop it into my mouth. This one had no eyes. Just one finger and toe on each arm and leg it had. And a hump on its back" (Jeyamohan, 97).

On the question of killing such a deformed baby by herself, she answers, "You can't hate your baby. Well, you could. But after it places its mouth on your breast, you wouldn't want to ... after that, you can't hate the child" (Jeyamohan, 97). Kuyyan's ignorance of the taste of good food is a symbolic representation of the difficult life of these beggars, but his desperation, "upperi! I want upperi! Cried Kuyyan vehemently. I want Puliserri and Erisseri, both! But the rasam should



not mix with the pulliserri. All the dishes should stay separate on the plate. I don't want buttermilk. They can give me extra payasam instead to make up for the buttermilk," (Jeyamohan, 255) subsides with the humanism shown by fellow beggars who collect fifty rupees to let him enjoy the special meal. Further, when Kuyyan starts eating this special meal, the warning from Ramappan that, "our tummies will rebel if we stuff it with the rice and lentils and ghee that the rich folks feast on ... the stomach should get used to it slowly. Just wait, Kuyyan is going to toss and turn all night, clutching his stomach, yelling for his mother," (Jeyamohan, 257) dissipates the burden of living in the abyss by self-critical humour, which is least envisioned in such gruesome conditions where beggars can't be imagined to be fed to their heart's content.

Contemporary socio-cultural dynamics that are explained in the beggar's world by the beggars themselves are yet another authorial strategy that diminishes the differences between the exploited and exploiting with the aim of revealing the unseen reality of the beggars' world. What we want to know and what we understand about this dark world is immediately destabilized when a beggar Ahmedkutty opines on environmental degradation and political apathy, "the government has fixed a thousand crore-rupee contracts ... to rob the Malayali lands. For that price they will hollow out our soil. Harvest all our coconuts. Tap all our trees for rubber," and with the trademark dose of little humour adds that, "if we are not careful, they will make off with our women too," (Jeyamohan, 139-140). Ahmedkutty can talk at length about the intellectualism behind reading the newspaper, "everything is there in the paper. Agriculture, medicine, sports, astrology, government, and administration, you can learn about everything from the papers. The three rupees they set a price for the paper is for all the words printed in it. If I don't read it, it's my loss, not theirs" (Jeyamohan, 250). He even advises Pandaram to choose a groom for his daughter wisely and raises questions about the job of the prospective groom who works in a cooperative bank, "this is a cooperative bank. They employ and dismiss people depending on their needs, that's how it is," (Jeyamohan, 160). The inherent humour runs constantly in these conversations with Erukku concluding that, "the boy has all four of his limbs intact, hasn't he? ... He can give her a child in ten months, can he not? Then why make a fuss about some stupid job?" (Jeyamohan, 162) and doing the humorous justice to the grotesque rape of Muthammai by the hunchbacked boy to make her pregnant to bear one more deformed child, ideal for adding to the begging cartel. The definition of a beggar breaks here and the abyss devours everyone because, "the seven worlds exist right here. All around us. We are standing on them; we live off them. The water we drink, the grain we eat, all come from the abyss," (Jeyamohan, 179) and, "the ratio is just like it is here, some great men, some ordinary men. I wouldn't, say they are better than us; I wouldn't say they are lower than us in any way either," (Jeyamohan, 290).

### Conclusion:

Jeyamohan doesn't provide the bliss and distance of negative capability in *The Abyss*. Farcical epiphanies and juxtaposition of maximalist with minimalism never let the readers feel the beggars in the story as from the other world of our society. Their humour, resistance, sincerity, and above all, self-critical awareness of their plight, corroborated with authorial narrative and thematic nuances of mitigating the space between the beggars and the mainstream people, make this novel a true metamodern text, which, with the use of postmodern techniques like irony and satire, constructs sincere and optimistic ends of the begging world.

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