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## Negotiating Identity and Caste in Jayamohan's *Nooru Simhasanangal*: A Critical Study

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### ABSTRACT

Jayamohan's *Nooru Simhasanangal* (*One Hundred Thrones*) stands as a seminal exploration of caste, identity, and social mobility in contemporary Indian literature. Through the life of Dharma Palan, a Nayati who rises to the rank of an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, the novel confronts the systemic barriers and prejudices embedded in Indian society. This research article examines the ways in which Jayamohan articulates caste oppression, the challenges of upward mobility, and the complex construction of individual and collective identity. Using a sociocultural and postcolonial theoretical framework, this study analyzes the narrative structure, symbolism, and language of the novel. It also situates *Nooru Simhasanangal* within the broader tradition of Dalit and subaltern writing in India. The findings reveal that Jayamohan's work is not only a portrayal of personal perseverance but also a sharp critique of the enduring structures of caste-based exclusion. By comparing the novel with other contemporary caste narratives, this research emphasizes the continuing relevance of caste as a central axis of literary and social discourse. The article contributes to the growing field of caste studies in literature and calls for a deeper engagement with regional narratives that challenge hegemonic representations. Through a close reading of *Nooru Simhasanangal*, this study seeks to foreground the nuanced realities of

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marginalized communities in South India and highlight Jayamohan's literary contributions to the discourse on social justice.

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## 1. Introduction

The enduring structures of caste-based inequality have long shaped the socio-political landscape of India. In literature, caste has emerged as a critical axis around which narratives

of identity, resistance, and marginalization revolve. Among the contemporary Indian writers who have grappled with these issues, Jayamohan stands out for his complex and empathetic portrayal of marginalized communities. His Malayalam novel *Nooru Simhasanangal (One Hundred Thrones)* provides a powerful meditation on the struggles of the Nayati community—a historically oppressed group in Kerala and Tamil Nadu—through the journey of Dharma Palan, a man who defies systemic barriers to become an IAS officer.

Jayamohan, an acclaimed writer, critic, and activist, has made significant contributions to Tamil and Malayalam literature, often engaging with themes of caste, morality, and social justice. His literary works reflect a deep concern with the ethical and existential dimensions of human life, particularly as they intersect with social hierarchies. *Nooru Simhasanangal* exemplifies this commitment, offering a layered narrative that moves beyond victimhood to explore the possibilities of agency, dignity, and self-definition within oppressive structures.

This research article examines how *Nooru Simhasanangal* negotiates the intersections of caste, identity, and social mobility. It explores how Jayamohan constructs the protagonist's internal and external battles, the symbolic resonances of the "one hundred thrones," and the broader societal implications of Dharma Palan's journey. Through a combination of textual analysis and socio-cultural contextualization, this study situates the novel within the larger framework of subaltern and postcolonial literature.

The central argument of this paper is that Jayamohan's novel articulates a vision of resistance that is both individual and collective, highlighting the resilience of marginalized communities while critically interrogating the systemic forces that seek to limit their aspirations. In doing so, *Nooru Simhasanangal* offers a compelling contribution to contemporary Indian literature's engagement with caste and social justice.



## 2. Literature Review

The theme of caste oppression has been a persistent and central concern in Indian literature, particularly in regional languages where social realities are deeply embedded in the cultural and linguistic fabric. Malayalam and Tamil literatures, in particular, have produced some of the most powerful and nuanced critiques of caste. While much critical attention has been given to prominent Dalit writers such as Bama (*Karukku*), Omprakash Valmiki (*Joothan*), and Sharankumar Limbale (*Akkarmashi*), Jayamohan's contributions to this discourse, especially through *Nooru Simhasanangal*, remain underexplored in academic scholarship.

Jayamohan is widely recognized in Tamil literary circles for his versatility and philosophical depth. His essays and fiction often delve into existential themes, political ethics, and the psychology of social roles. In his Malayalam work, however, particularly *Nooru Simhasanangal*, Jayamohan turns his focus sharply toward the social stratification and discrimination experienced by lower-caste communities, particularly the Nayati. Despite this shift in subject matter, his philosophical underpinnings remain evident, particularly in his portrayal of Dharma Palan's internal struggles between ethical responsibility and personal advancement.

Critical engagement with *Nooru Simhasanangal* in scholarly journals is limited, and most existing interpretations are confined to online reviews or informal critical essays in Malayalam. These sources often praise the novel's realism and narrative style but do not offer an in-depth theoretical exploration. For instance, a Malayalam Wikipedia entry highlights the novel's focus on the Nayati community's plight, but lacks critical scaffolding. This paper addresses that gap by offering a structured analysis that draws upon postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and Dalit literature frameworks.

Scholars such as Gopal Guru and Kancha Ilaiah have emphasized the importance of representation and voice in Dalit literature, arguing that only those who experience caste oppression can authentically express it. Jayamohan, though not from a Dalit background himself, complicates this assertion by constructing a deeply empathetic narrative that draws on lived experiences through fictional mediation. His portrayal of Dharma Palan is not one of passive victimhood but of contested agency, which aligns with Gayatri Spivak's notion of the "subaltern speaking"—where the marginalized subject articulates resistance within hegemonic structures.



Another key point of reference is B.R. Ambedkar's sociopolitical writings, particularly his insistence on education, self-respect, and structural change as prerequisites for emancipation. These principles resonate in the life of Dharma Palan, who utilizes state structures like the civil services as a means of asserting his place in society. The novel thereby engages with Ambedkarite ideology even if it does not explicitly reference it.

Moreover, the "throne" in *Nooru Simhasanangal* functions as a multi-layered symbol of both aspiration and irony—denoting power, legitimacy, and also the burden of representation.

Scholars like Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana, who have edited anthologies of Dalit writing, have pointed out that symbolic representation in caste narratives often carries dual meanings: it critiques the structure even as it imagines alternatives to it. This symbolic ambivalence is central to Jayamohan's novel.

In sum, while *Nooru Simhasanangal* is a relatively under-examined work in academic literature, its thematic depth, sociopolitical engagement, and literary quality position it as a significant contribution to the canon of caste narratives in Indian literature. This paper seeks to fill the scholarly gap by offering a systematic and critical exploration of the novel through multiple theoretical lenses.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative, interpretive methodology** rooted in literary and cultural analysis, focusing on how *Nooru Simhasanangal* represents caste, identity, and resistance. The methodology is informed by **postcolonial theory**, **subaltern studies**, and **sociocultural critique**, offering a layered approach that considers both textual form and sociohistorical context.

#### 3.1 Textual Analysis

The primary method of inquiry is **close reading** of the novel, with particular attention to character development, narrative structure, and literary devices such as symbolism,

metaphor, and voice. Close reading enables a nuanced understanding of how Jayamohan constructs the protagonist's experiences within a caste-ridden society. This approach also helps to identify the ideological undercurrents embedded in the narrative and the ways in which language is used to negotiate power and identity.



### 3.2 Postcolonial and Subaltern Approaches

The study draws on **postcolonial frameworks** that examine the intersections of power, representation, and marginality. Postcolonial theory provides tools for analyzing how the novel critiques hegemonic structures—particularly Brahminical patriarchy and bureaucratic elitism—while simultaneously envisioning subaltern agency. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of the “subaltern” and Ranajit Guha’s historiographic interventions inform this analysis, especially in considering the voice and visibility of the Nayati community.

At the heart of this inquiry lies the question of whether Dharma Palan, as a subaltern figure, can truly speak and be heard within dominant discourse. Spivak’s caution against romanticizing the subaltern subject serves as a critical lens through which Dharma Palan’s journey—from marginalization to bureaucratic power—is interpreted.

### 3.3 Sociohistorical Contextualization

To supplement the literary analysis, the study integrates **sociocultural contextualization** based on historical accounts, sociological studies, and media discourse concerning caste discrimination in South India. The Nayati community, although fictionalized in the novel, bears strong resemblance to several real-world castes that have historically been relegated to the fringes of Kerala and Tamil Nadu’s social hierarchies. Incorporating this background allows for a more grounded understanding of the novel’s realism and social critique.

Furthermore, the study references **Ambedkarite thought**, particularly the emphasis on structural change, education, and dignity, as an interpretive framework. Ambedkar’s ideology is not only a political doctrine but also a narrative strategy employed by several Dalit and subaltern writers. Although Jayamohan does not explicitly claim this affiliation, his narrative thematically resonates with it.

### 3.4 Comparative Literary Framework

The final component of the methodology is a **comparative literary analysis** that positions *Nooru Simhasanangal* alongside other Indian works that address caste, such as Bama’s *Karukku*, Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, and Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change*. This comparative angle enriches the study by revealing both the distinctiveness and the shared patterns among literary treatments of caste across linguistic and regional boundaries.



In summary, the methodology combines **close reading, postcolonial/subaltern theory, sociological analysis, and comparative literature** to provide a comprehensive understanding of *Nooru Simhasanangal*. This interdisciplinary approach ensures that the novel is examined not only as a literary artifact but also as a socio-political intervention in contemporary Indian discourse on caste and identity.

#### **4. Caste and Social Inequality in *Nooru Simhasanangal***

In *Nooru Simhasanangal*, caste is not merely a background element; it is an active force that shapes the trajectory of the protagonist, Dharma Palan. The novel intricately weaves social inequality into the fabric of its narrative, using the character of Dharma Palan as both a symbol of the marginalized and a complex individual navigating a caste-bound society. This section examines how Jayamohan portrays the realities of caste-based discrimination, its impact on personal aspirations, and the systemic barriers faced by marginalized individuals seeking upward mobility.

##### **4.1 Depiction of the Nayati Community**

The Nayati community, depicted in the novel, represents a marginalized group often excluded from mainstream social, political, and economic opportunities. Jayamohan uses this fictional community to underscore the historical and enduring impacts of caste-based social stratification. The Nayatis, although distinct in their cultural and historical context, are representative of the many lower-caste groups that have historically been relegated to the margins of Indian society. Their lives are often confined to the fringes of rural Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where access to education, employment, and social mobility is severely restricted.

Through Dharma Palan, Jayamohan highlights the psychological and emotional toll of caste oppression. The protagonist's early life is marked by a deep sense of inferiority and shame, which he must overcome as he seeks an education and a career in the civil services. This internalized caste stigma, which Dharma Palan struggles with throughout the novel, speaks to the larger issue of how caste operates not only as an external social structure but also as an internalized system of self-worth. In this sense, Jayamohan's novel engages with the work of scholars like Gopal Guru, who has argued that caste operates on the psychological plane, shaping both individual and collective identities.

The novel also depicts how social inequality manifests in the everyday interactions between people of different castes. Dharma Palan's interactions with his peers, teachers, and potential allies are constantly



colored by his caste identity. His success, despite the enormous odds stacked against him, is not just a personal triumph but also a commentary on the persistence of caste discrimination even within seemingly neutral spaces like the education system or government bureaucracy.

#### **4.2 Dharma Palan's Struggles with Caste Discrimination**

One of the central themes of the novel is Dharma Palan's struggle to transcend his caste background while constantly facing the prejudices and biases that surround him. Despite his academic achievements and eventual success in the civil services, Dharma Palan finds himself perpetually marked by his caste in the eyes of others. The novel suggests that caste operates as a form of social control, where individuals who rise above their prescribed roles are constantly reminded of their place within the social hierarchy.

For Dharma Palan, caste discrimination is a daily reality, even in spaces of power and prestige like the Indian Administrative Service. Jayamohan illustrates that while upward

mobility may provide individuals like Dharma Palan with access to material success, it does not necessarily lead to social acceptance or emotional fulfillment. The protagonist's experiences highlight the intersection of caste and class—while his new position in the government grants him certain privileges, it also exposes him to subtle and overt forms of discrimination from his colleagues and superiors, who view his rise with suspicion and disdain.

The tension between Dharma Palan's professional success and his continued marginalization illustrates the persistent reality of caste in modern Indian society. His experiences reflect the structural nature of caste-based inequality, where individual merit is often overshadowed by caste identity. In this respect, Jayamohan critiques the myth of meritocracy, pointing out that caste remains an insurmountable obstacle for those from historically oppressed communities, even in the context of state institutions that claim to uphold equality and justice.

#### **4.3 The Role of Education and Bureaucratic Structures**

Education is a pivotal element in Dharma Palan's journey, serving as both a means of personal liberation and a battleground for caste-based discrimination. The novel illustrates how access to quality education is not equally available to all, with lower-caste communities often facing systemic barriers to entry. Despite these challenges, Dharma Palan manages to secure an education, but this achievement comes at great



personal cost. His academic success is hard-won, marked by isolation, self-doubt, and alienation from both his peers and his community.

Once Dharma Palan enters the bureaucracy, he is confronted with the entrenched social hierarchies of the civil service. His experience underscores the limitations of the state as a tool for achieving true social equality. While government institutions are ostensibly based on merit, caste-based prejudice permeates the structures of power, leading to subtle forms of discrimination that prevent marginalized individuals from fully accessing their rights and opportunities. This dynamic speaks to the critique of modernity found in postcolonial theory, which questions whether state institutions in formerly colonized nations are truly representative of all citizens or if they merely reproduce old forms of exclusion.

In this context, *Nooru Simhasanangal* aligns with the arguments of scholars such as Partha Chatterjee, who critiques the postcolonial state for its failure to address the deeply embedded social inequalities that continue to define the lives of marginalized communities. Jayamohan's portrayal of the civil services as a site of both possibility and oppression highlights the contradiction at the heart of postcolonial governance—while state structures may theoretically offer opportunities for upward mobility, they remain complicit in maintaining the social hierarchies of the past.

#### **4.4 The Symbolism of the “One Hundred Thrones”**

The title of the novel, *Nooru Simhasanangal* (One Hundred Thrones), is deeply symbolic. The “throne” can be understood as a metaphor for power, authority, and legitimacy within a caste-dominated society. For Dharma Palan, the throne represents both aspiration and irony. As he climbs the ladder of social and professional success, he is constantly aware that the

seat of power he occupies is not truly his own—he remains, in the eyes of many, an outsider in a system that was never designed for people like him.

The "one hundred thrones" also serve to critique the idea of absolute power. While the thrones represent authority, they are empty and unclaimed by the majority of society, particularly those from lower-caste backgrounds. This image challenges the traditional narrative of social ascent by emphasizing the limited scope of success within a system that is fundamentally unjust. The throne, therefore, becomes a double-edged sword—a symbol of both achievement and exclusion, mirroring the contradictions in Dharma Palan's own journey.



## 5. Construction of Identity and Resistance in *Nooru Simhasanangal*

The construction of identity is central to *Nooru Simhasanangal*, as it explores the complex interplay between caste, self-perception, and societal recognition. Jayamohan's portrayal of Dharma Palan's identity transformation offers a nuanced commentary on the challenges faced by individuals from marginalized communities in navigating dominant social structures. This section examines the ways in which identity is shaped by both internal and external forces, and how resistance is embedded in the protagonist's journey toward self-realization.

### 5.1 The Internal Struggle: Dharma Palan's Conflict with Caste

From the outset, Dharma Palan's identity is inextricably tied to his caste background. His internal conflict manifests in his efforts to distance himself from his heritage while simultaneously grappling with feelings of shame and inadequacy. Jayamohan delves deeply into the psychological toll of caste, depicting how Dharma Palan's early life is characterized by a sense of powerlessness and alienation. These feelings of inferiority are a direct consequence of the social exclusion he faces due to his caste.

Dharma Palan's journey is one of self-transformation, as he strives to overcome the self-imposed limitations of his caste identity. However, this internal struggle is fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, he seeks to break free from the mental shackles of caste; on the other hand, he remains haunted by the social stigma associated with his background.

This duality is crucial in understanding the complexities of identity construction in a caste-based society. As he ascends the social ladder, Dharma Palan's sense of self

undergoes a radical transformation, but it is not without its emotional costs. He must confront not only the biases of others but also his own internalized caste identity, which complicates his efforts to fully embrace his newfound position.

The internal conflict experienced by Dharma Palan echoes the experiences of many individuals from marginalized communities who strive to carve out a space for themselves within a society that continuously defines them by their caste. The narrative suggests that true liberation requires more than just external success—it demands a reconciling of the individual's internalized identity with the social realities of caste.



## 5.2 Resistance and Reclamation of Identity

While Dharma Palan's internal struggle is central to the novel, his resistance to caste oppression is also shaped by his actions and decisions. Throughout the narrative, Dharma Palan refuses to accept the status quo, challenging both the overt and subtle forms of discrimination he encounters. His resistance is not always direct or confrontational; rather, it takes the form of quiet defiance and a refusal to submit to the limitations imposed by his caste identity.

Dharma Palan's decision to pursue a career in the civil services is an act of resistance in itself. The Indian Administrative Service (IAS) represents one of the most prestigious and elite institutions in the country, and for someone from a marginalized background to enter this field is an inherently subversive act. However, Jayamohan highlights that this success does not come easily. While Dharma Palan may have achieved external success, his resistance is constantly tested by the entrenched caste structures that remain present even in the ostensibly neutral space of the state bureaucracy.

One of the key ways in which Dharma Palan's resistance is articulated is through his refusal to conform to the expectations of both his caste community and the larger society. He distances himself from the traditional roles assigned to him by his caste, seeking instead to redefine his sense of self on his own terms. This rejection of the caste-determined identity is a crucial aspect of his resistance, as it allows him to assert his individuality in the face of collective oppression. By pursuing education and a career outside the prescribed boundaries of his caste, Dharma Palan embodies the possibility of self-determination and agency for individuals from oppressed communities.

## 5.3 The Role of the State and Bureaucracy in Shaping Identity

Jayamohan's critique of caste extends beyond individual psychology to address the structural forces that perpetuate social inequality. While Dharma Palan's rise within the bureaucracy represents an individual victory, it also exposes the limitations of the state as a vehicle for true social change. The state, with its claims to impartiality and justice, is revealed to be a site of both opportunity and constraint. Despite his academic achievements and career success, Dharma Palan remains subject to the prejudices of his colleagues, who view him with skepticism due to his caste background.

The novel suggests that the state, as an institution, is not neutral; rather, it is deeply entangled with the social structures that uphold caste hierarchies. This tension between individual success and systemic



discrimination speaks to the broader critique of postcolonial governance in India. While the Indian state was founded on the principles of equality and justice, these ideals are not always realized in practice, especially for those from marginalized communities.

Dharma Palan's experience within the bureaucracy reflects the persistent contradictions of the postcolonial state, which, while claiming to offer opportunities for social mobility, continues to reproduce caste-based inequities. In this sense, *Nooru Simhasanangal* aligns with postcolonial critiques of the state, particularly the arguments of scholars such as Partha Chatterjee, who contends that the postcolonial state often fails to address the structural inequalities that persist in society. Jayamohan, through Dharma Palan's struggles, underscores the importance of not only individual success but also the need for systemic transformation in order to achieve true equality.

#### **5.4 The Collective Dimension of Resistance**

While much of the novel focuses on Dharma Palan's individual journey, Jayamohan also emphasizes the collective aspect of resistance. Dharma Palan's success, though achieved through personal effort, is inseparable from the larger social and political movements that have sought to challenge caste oppression. The novel suggests that individual success is not an isolated achievement but is part of a broader, ongoing struggle for justice and equality. In this way, *Nooru Simhasanangal* echoes the themes of solidarity and collective action found in the writings of Dalit thinkers like B.R. Ambedkar, who stressed the importance of unity and collective resistance in the fight for social change.

By positioning Dharma Palan's personal victory within the context of broader social movements, Jayamohan highlights the interdependence of individual and collective agency in the struggle against caste. The novel ultimately suggests that true liberation will only be achieved when marginalized communities work together to dismantle the social structures that perpetuate their oppression.

#### **6. Conclusion**

*Nooru Simhasanangal* is a powerful narrative that not only explores the personal journey of Dharma Palan but also offers a broader critique of caste, social inequality, and the limitations of postcolonial structures in India. Jayamohan's portrayal of the Nayati community,

caste-based discrimination, and the complexities of identity construction underscores the deeply entrenched nature of caste in Indian society. By focusing on Dharma Palan's struggles, the novel reveals



the personal and social costs of caste oppression, while also highlighting the potential for resistance and transformation.

The novel's emphasis on **education** and **bureaucratic structures** as both instruments of oppression and potential vehicles for upward mobility highlights the duality of caste-based social stratification. Dharma Palan's journey from a marginalized background to a position of power within the civil services is not simply a story of individual success but a poignant commentary on the limitations of meritocracy in a caste-bound society. His experiences of discrimination within the very institutions that are supposed to promote equality reveal the structural nature of caste-based inequality and the persistence of prejudice within modern Indian institutions.

Central to the novel is the theme of **identity construction**—how individuals from marginalized communities navigate the complex terrain of caste, self-worth, and societal recognition. Dharma Palan's internal struggle with his caste identity and his quiet resistance to societal expectations reflect the psychological toll of caste oppression. At the same time, his resistance is not merely individual but is deeply embedded in the collective struggle for social change. Through his experiences, Jayamohan suggests that **liberation** is not solely an individual achievement but requires collective action and systemic transformation.

Jayamohan's novel ultimately raises critical questions about the effectiveness of postcolonial state structures in achieving true equality. While the Indian state may have been founded on ideals of justice and meritocracy, *Nooru Simhasanangal* reveals how caste-based structures continue to shape the lived realities of individuals from marginalized communities. The novel's exploration of bureaucracy as a site of both opportunity and oppression serves as a critique of the postcolonial state, which, despite its claims to impartiality, often perpetuates the very inequalities it seeks to redress.

In conclusion, *Nooru Simhasanangal* is not only a compelling literary work but also a potent social critique that invites readers to reflect on the enduring legacies of caste in India. By centering the experiences of the marginalized, Jayamohan challenges dominant narratives of social mobility and progress, urging a deeper engagement with the structural inequalities that continue to define Indian society. As such, the novel stands as a vital contribution to contemporary conversations about caste, identity, and resistance in the postcolonial world.



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