



Empowering Process of Marginalized Masculinity Toward Self-Reliance in Chugong's *Solo Leveling* Novel

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-06-09 Revised: 2026-06-27 Accepted: 2026-06-29 Keywords: Empowerment; Marginalized masculinity; Self-reliance; <i>Solo Leveling</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.11159 Corresponding Author: Mohammad Raihan Daffa Fadlillah daffaraihan878@gmail.com English Literature Study Program, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang, Jawa Tengah	<i>Systemic discrimination in modern meritocratic societies often traps individuals at the bottom of the social hierarchy, resulting in a state of marginalized masculinity. Despite the immense popularity of Solo Leveling, academic discussions addressing the intersection of masculinity and empowerment within modern fantasy literature remain limited. Thus, this study aims to examine the process of empowerment of the marginalized male protagonist, Jinwoo Sung, toward absolute independence in Chugong's novel Solo Leveling. Using a qualitative research design and a character analysis approach, textual data were analyzed using the concept of marginalized masculinity by Connell and Messerschmidt, Kabeer's three-dimensional framework of empowerment (resources, agency, and achievement), and Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance. The findings indicate that the protagonist begins with severe physical and economic marginalization within the rigid hunter ranking system. Subsequently, the empowerment process is systematically triggered through the acquisition of the anomalous "System" as an initial resource, followed by a psychological shift to mobilize strategic agency during life-threatening encounters. Ultimately, the protagonist achieves radical autonomy, manifested through the formation of his own independent force and his active resistance to elite institutions. This study concludes that Solo Leveling serves as a critique of the meritocracy system, while also demonstrating that modern fantasy literature can redefine empowerment not as integration into an oppressive hierarchy, but as the attainment of sovereign defiance.</i>

1. Introduction

In modern days, discrimination no longer always takes the form of clear physical oppression, but has shifted to systemic oppression within the social structure. As noted by Hebl, Cheng, and Ng (2020), this modern form of discrimination is deeply embedded, blocking access for marginalized groups, and keeping them at the bottom of the hierarchy with no alternative means of improving their circumstances. One consequence of this system is the creation of a society that judges social status based on success and power. However, as demonstrated by Mijs and Savage (2020) regarding trends in developed nations, this system is, in fact, an elitist project that perpetuates systemic discrimination against the lower classes.

Masculinity defined by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) is a set of practices evident in social interactions, not merely a fixed trait inherent in a person's physical appearance or character. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) also noted that masculinity has structural characteristics which means it is centered on a hierarchy. This hierarchy is often reinforced by a paternalistic sense of superiority on the part of the dominant group, which is used as a justification for oppressing those considered inferior (Adi & Istiani, 2024). Consequently, people who are inside the upper side of the masculine hierarchy are classified as the hegemonic, while people who don't have power of their lives are classified as marginalized.

Limiting the concept of empowerment to the context of women would ignore its broader and more universal definition. In fact, the basic understanding of the term empowerment is explained in a gender-neutral way. As stated by Mandal (2013), empowerment aims to enable someone who is powerless to gain control or power over their lives. This statement is consistent with further research indicating that empowerment is defined as a process of increasing awareness, self-capacity, the ability to make effective decisions, self-control, and the promotion of transformative action (Masviken et al., 2021).

Emerson (1907) once said in his essay that self-reliance means trusting in oneself and letting go of dependence on external support. This point of view is further supported through research conducted by Utami and Istiani (2025), who argue that self-reliance requires an individual to reject external systems that constrain them and then reclaim their sense of agency through the process of independently shaping their identity.

The various social phenomena and philosophical discussions outlined above are not limited to academic papers and textbooks. From systemic discrimination and marginalization to empowerment efforts aimed at achieving self-reliance, these realities and debates are actually reflected very strongly in modern literature. Though people are more likely to recognize *Solo Leveling* through its manhwa or anime adaptations, but none of that would exist without the novel. Chugong's novel *Solo Leveling* (2021) depicts the harshness of the meritocratic system faced by low-ranking hunters.

From the perspective of the main character, Jinwoo Sung, the harsh reality that the hunter ranking system can be a major factor in the marginalization experienced by Jinwoo Sung and other low-ranking hunters is explicitly depicted by Chugong. Not only that, Chugong also depicts the main character's struggle against this discriminatory system and his rise to the top of the social hierarchy. With consideration of this, *Solo Leveling* can be analyzed using Naila Kabeer's (1999) framework of the empowerment process.

Consequently, this study presents the following questions: How is marginalized masculinity depicted through the character of Jinwoo Sung in Chugong's novel *Solo Leveling*, and how is the process of empowerment through the acquisition of resources, the exercise of agency, and obtaining radical self-reliance as the achievements portrayed in Jinwoo Sung's transformation.

In theory, empowerment is a long process through which a person can take control of their own life (Mandal, 2013). This process is divided into three stages: acquiring resources, having the courage to make decisions, and experiencing the results (Kabeer, 1999). In this study, the final outcome of empowerment will be measured using Emerson's (1907) philosophy of self-reliance, which is the moment when an individual has the courage and the power to stand on their own.

Despite its immense popularity, academic research analyzing *Solo Leveling* remains limited. Dzakir & Persada (2023) and Qiu & Han (2026) focused on the visual design of the comic version of *Solo Leveling*. Meanwhile, Kausar (2024) examined intrinsic elements in general. Furthermore, a study aimed at comparing the comic version with the anime version has also been published (Ramanda, 2024). Studies focusing on the analysis of character roles and functions using structuralist theory by Loval et al. (2024), and research by Kusuma et al. (2023) who examined how game systems such as ranking systems can influence the plot of the *Solo Leveling* novel are also worth noting. These studies have examined various fields, but none have yet explored the areas of masculinity and empowerment. This is the gap that this study addresses.

Shifting the focus into marginalization in literature, several researchers have successfully applied the theory of marginalized communities to analyze oppressed male protagonist. For instance, Jamalullail and Ahzani (2025) examined the systemic marginalization and social exclusion that oppress the male protagonist in the film *Joker* and its impact on the protagonist's mental health. Furthermore, recent studies show that men could be the victims of patriarchy exploitation (Azhar et al., 2025; Kumar & Mallya, 2026).

The studies above conclude with the male protagonist's mental breakdown, or portray the male protagonist as the perpetrator of violence. On the other hand, this study examines a gap in the existing research, namely how male figures can rise from marginalization through a systematic empowerment process.

From the lens of empowerment, study conducted by Liru, Doi, & Tusaidah (2025) applied Mandal's empowerment framework to analyze the empowerment of marginalized woman. On the same topic, Cakrawati, Aisyah, & Sandy (2024) argue that empowerment is not simply about material success, but rather about taking control of one's own life. Other recent research has also examined the development of moral character and empathy in children in the novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Suryadi & Dariyana, 2022).

Most literary studies merely show that oppressed men inevitably end up going mad or turning to a life of crime. On the other hand, empowerment theory has been used almost exclusively to study female characters. This study offers a different perspective, as it demonstrates that even the most marginalized male characters can rise and undergo the same process of empowerment until they achieve complete independence.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative research design with a character analysis approach. This method is considered most appropriate because this study relies on in-depth interpretation of textual data to understand the development of fictional characters. The character analysis approach provides the analytical freedom necessary to explore how the protagonist, Jinwoo Sung, navigates and ultimately transcends the social hierarchy by becoming self-reliant.

The primary data source of this research is the English translation of Chugong's *Solo Leveling* novel, specifically the one translated by Hye Young Im and J. Torres, published by Yen Press in 2021. The data was collected using close reading techniques. The researcher collected data in the form of narrative text and character dialogue. To ensure a clear analytical procedure, text excerpts were specifically selected based on events that represent Jinwoo's inferior position, as well as his acts of resistance, such as surviving, devising strategies, and refusing to submit to authority.

The data was then divided into two main segments: marginalized masculinity data, which was interpreted using the theory of marginalized masculinity by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), and empowerment process data, which was interpreted using the empowerment process framework by Kabeer (1999) and the philosophy of self-reliance by Emerson (1907). Finally, to validate the accuracy of these interpretations, the analysis results were cross-checked by comparing them with findings from previous literary studies. The results of this study are presented descriptively.

3. Result and Discussion

This study demonstrates that Chugong's novel *Solo Leveling* portrays how an individual belonging to the category of marginalized masculinity can overcome his adversity. The study is divided into two parts: the first analyzes how Jinwoo Sung

falls into the category of marginalized masculinity, while the second examines the process by which Jinwoo Sung breaks free from that category to become a self-reliant individual. To further analyze this, the study combines the perspective on marginalized masculinity from Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), Kabeer's (1999) framework, and Emerson's (1907) philosophy of self-reliance, which demonstrates that true empowerment grants an individual the strength to transcend the world system that constrains them.

In the world of *Solo Leveling*, a person who awakens magical power is called a hunter. Not everyone awakens this magical power, and its awakening is also random. Once awakened, this magical power is permanent, which in other words, it cannot be increased. The amount of magical power within a hunter determines that hunter's social status and life. As hunters, having little magical power places them at the lowest rung of the hierarchy and subjects them to systemic discrimination and economic hardship.

In this context, the protagonist, Jinwoo Sung, possesses the lowest level of magical power. However, the emergence of a 'system' within him opens a new path that can help him climb out of that position, and through this multi-theoretical analysis, Jinwoo Sung's journey can be mapped into two main parts. Therefore, this section will discuss the textual evidence descriptively, starting from the initial depiction of his marginalized condition, through to the systematic process that leads him to the pinnacle of self-reliance.

Depiction of Marginalized Masculinity

Blatant discrimination is no longer common in today's world; instead, it is concealed within a system known as meritocracy. In a study conducted by Mijs and Savage (2025), it was found that this meritocracy system is merely a cover for the elite to suppress the lower classes, disguised as rewards based on an individual's strength and hard work. This is also reflected in the world of *Solo Leveling* through the Hunter Association, where they determine a person's worth based on their magical power.

The hierarchy in *Solo Leveling* is strictly determined by the Hunter's Association upon an individual's initial awakening, creating a rigid divide between the absolute power of S-Rank and the sheer helplessness of E-Rank. The harsh reality of this extreme meritocracy is immediately evident in how society perceives Jinwoo, as shown in the conversation between his fellow hunters:

"... The weakest? Not the Ultimate Hunter? ... C'mon! That's Jongin Choi, the S-rank hunter. Sung's nickname is the Weakest Hunter. He's probably the worst hunter in all of Korea." (Chugong, 2021).

This brief conversation explicitly demonstrates that the top of Rank S represents the pinnacle of a hunter's power, and indirectly shows that those in Rank S occupy the top of the social hierarchy, given the strong reputation and influence they hold in society.

In sharp contrast to the popularity and charisma experienced by those at the top of hierarchy, individuals at the bottom, such as Rank E hunter Jinwoo Sung, are effectively belittled and mocked by hunters of higher ranks. This is evident from how his teammates responded to his condition:

"A hunter got hurt in an E-rank gate?" "Apparently! And the association didn't think anyone would, so they hadn't even bothered sending along a healer." "So he was hospitalized for a week? Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Kim shot Park a warning glance for laughing too loudly. "Shhh! might hear us." "Oops. Didn't think about that." (Chugong, 2021).

This dialogue, in which Jinwoo Sung becomes the subject of ridicule, underscores his position at the bottom of the male hierarchy. The association didn't bother sending a healer because, under normal circumstances, no one gets injured in an E-rank gate; the fact that Jinwoo Sung was still injured in an E-rank gate serves as proof that he fails to meet the standards of masculinity, specifically in terms of physical strength. Furthermore, his failure, which is mocked by other hunters, effectively places Jinwoo Sung in a state of marginalized masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Further evidence suggests that Jinwoo Sung is at the bottom of the hierarchy not only because of his inability to meet physical and social standards, but also because of his economic circumstances.

"Unfortunately, as a man in his midtwenties without any employable skills, working as a hunter was the only viable way to pay for his mother's hospital bills, which cost him several hundred thousand won every month." (Chugong, 2021).

The dialogue above highlights Jinwoo Sung's inability to meet the standards of masculinity in economic terms. Unfortunately, in hunter society, this failure is viewed purely as a result of his personal weakness. This aligns with the findings of Mijs and Savage (2020) regarding meritocracy. They argue that in highly unequal societies, structural forces create gaps and barriers between the rich and the poor. Individuals deemed poor, such as Jinwoo Sung, are made to believe they must blame themselves for their inability to succeed. This is further evidenced in the dialogue when Joohee Lee is healing the injured Jinwoo Sung.

"Why do you insist on working as a hunter?" "I'm sorry." ... Joohee Lee, the beauty performing a healing spell on him, made her disapproval clear by sulking." (Chugong, 2021).

This passage above accurately depicts how marginalized individuals internalize their sense of powerlessness in an elitist society. The evidence presented above shows that Jinwoo Sung fails to meet standards of masculinity in physical, social, and economic terms. His failure to meet those standards had real consequences for him, as depicted in a passage from the novel.

"He'd have had to live the rest of his life without a leg... He was a high school graduate with no special skills, so making ends meet wouldn't be easy." (Chugong, 2021).

This is the narration for the scene where Jinwoo Sung is trapped in a double dungeon, specifically when he sacrifices himself so his teammates can escape. Here, Jinwoo Sung imagines that even if he were to escape, he would have to live with a lifelong disability, which would only make him even more useless and further plunge him into financial ruin.

"Was it 300,000,000 won or 400,000,000 won in insurance money for the family of a hunter who dies in a raid organized by the association?... The money was more than enough compensation for the life of a worthless E-rank hunter." (Chugong, 2021).

This monologue continues Jinwoo Sung's inner thoughts as he is sacrificed inside the double dungeon. It serves as further evidence of just how low Jinwoo Sung's position is within the hierarchy. At this point, Jinwoo Sung feels that he is nothing more than a commodity that can be traded for money.

Based on Connell and Messerschmidt (2025), Jinwoo Sung's fear underscores the fact that he is indeed at the bottom of the hierarchy. He is fully aware that the Hunter Association's meritocratic system offers no safety net for those with disabilities. As a result, death is a better option than life.

One of the key characteristics of marginalized masculinity is the absence of institutional authority. Which is, a privilege, a protection, or a power that a person possesses by virtue of their status as an integral part of an institution (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

This lack of authority is reflected in Jinwoo Sung as he finds himself in the double dungeon, particularly when he realizes that he must sacrifice one life so that another may be saved. The condition in which he prioritizes others' lives over his own due to believing himself to be worthless is what validates his position within marginalized masculinity.

Process of Empowerment towards Self-Reliance

This section discusses how an individual can break free from their marginalized status, which, as we know, can only be achieved through empowerment. We must understand that empowerment is not an instant process, but rather a journey in which an individual must first acquire resources, and then

use those resources to exercise agency. Only after these two dimensions are achieved will the individual reach an empowered state, meaning they have attained the dimension of achievement (Kabeer, 1999).

Acquiring Resources

For a hunter, it is virtually impossible to obtain the resources needed to become stronger. This is because, in the world of *Solo Leveling*, a hunter's magical power level is permanently locked from the moment they awaken. Consequently, the chance to rise to a higher social stratum or to have the same opportunities as high-ranking hunters such as A-Rank or S-Rank is also impossible. However, the emergence of the System within Jinwoo Sung serves as an exception, as it acts as a resource that opens up opportunities for him to advance to higher levels.

"[You have acquired the qualifications to be a Player. Will you accept?]" (Chugong, 2021).

The dialogue excerpt above is the first notification from the System when it appeared before Jinwoo Sung, asking him if he wanted to become a Player. Jinwoo Sung's decision to accept the offer was the right one, because becoming a Player means having room for growth, unlike being a Hunter. This proves that the System is Jinwoo Sung's primary resource for becoming stronger.

"[DAILY QUEST: STRENGTH TRAINING] Push-ups 100 times: Incomplete (0/100) ... Running 10 km: Incomplete (0/100). Warning: Failure to complete the daily quest will result in an appropriate penalty." (Chugong, 2021)

The system notification excerpt above reflects the resources available to Jinwoo Sung and demonstrates that the system allocates resources to alter his fate. The excerpt also reveals that Chugong (2021) describes this system's operation as a process that compels Jinwoo Sung to act by binding him with the threat of a fatal penalty. From the narrative excerpt, when Jinwoo Sung is performing one of his daily quests, "He finished one hundred push-ups, but to his disappointment, nothing changed..." (Chugong, 2021) can be concluded that empowerment cannot occur based on resources alone (Kabeer, 1999). This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that even though Jinwoo Sung has completed the task of doing a hundred push-ups, there has still been no positive change in his physique.

This study found that resources as initial capital are crucial to possess, as they are what can give a marginalized person the opportunity to change their fate. A clear example of an oppressed individual lacking resources is found in the study by Azhar et al. (2025), which examined the character of Gabriel in the novel *In the Kitchen*, where they argue that Gabriel suffers from mental distress due to a lack of resources to provide him with options amidst the systemic marginalization he faces.

Exercising Agency

An individual cannot be said to have been empowered merely by possessing resources, because, according to Kabeer's (1999) framework of empowerment, once an individual has resources, what they must do is set personal goals and take action to achieve them. This is what is referred to as agency, the second dimension of empowerment.

In the world of *Solo Leveling*, a hunter's resources are the magical energy they awaken during their awakening. Agency, on the other hand, refers to their freedom to achieve their life goals using that magical power. Just like resources, E-Rank hunters' agency is also very limited. The freedom of choice they have is not the same as hunters of higher ranks. For instance, E-Rank hunters cannot choose safe dungeons or dungeons that yield a lot of money.

Trapped in this systemic marginalization, Jinwoo Sung initially responded to the System not with agency, but with the same resignation he had shown toward his E-Rank status. Jinwoo Sung's disappointment at completing a daily quest and gaining nothing in return ultimately led to a penalty.

"[PENALTY QUEST: SURVIVAL] ... Objective: Survive the required time. Required time: 4 hours... The centipede rushed straight at him through the sand as soon as the timer changed to 03:59:59, as if it had just been waiting." (Chugong, 2021).

The dialogue excerpt above is a notification from the System indicating that Jinwoo Sung has been placed in the penalty zone for failing to complete his daily quest. The penalty imposed by the System was particularly harsh, considering that Jinwoo was still an E-Rank hunter at the time, and the System sent him to the desert to face a giant centipede, a challenge clearly beyond his capabilities.

"Exactly four hours later, Jinwoo reappeared in his hospital room." (Chugong, 2021)

The narrative above demonstrates that Jinwoo Sung managed to survive that absurd penalty zone. The penalty zone can be viewed as a form of extreme pressure for marginalized individuals like Jinwoo Sung. The fact that Jinwoo Sung survived the penalty zone can be seen as an act of agency, because while under extreme pressure, Jinwoo Sung managed to achieve a goal: staying alive. Setting goals and striving to achieve them is one of the essential aspects of agency within Kabeer's (1999) framework. This analysis is based on previous research conducted by Yuzadarman and Istiani (2025), who found that extreme pressure can prompt an individual to stop being passive.

Jinwoo Sung further demonstrates his determination as the story unfolds. He starts with a simpler approach: daily quests. Daily quests typically only require players to do 100 push-ups, sit-ups, etc., per day, and run 10 km per day, but Jinwoo Sung pushes himself beyond that to achieve his goal of getting stronger faster.

"[Push-ups 100 times: Completed (200/100)]" (Chugong, 2021)

That excerpt of the system's notification proves Jinwoo Sung is no longer doing the bare minimum to dodge penalties. By deliberately pushing past the 100-rep mark, he takes control of his own growth. Setting a new personal goal to test the system's hidden potential perfectly captures the active agency Kabeer (1999) describes.

Jinwoo's agency is further realized through strategic execution and creative adaptation in actual combat. Rather than reacting blindly to stronger opponents, he maximizes his limited tools to take control of the battle.

"He was then struck with an idea as he recalled a terrifying attack that had almost killed him once. He decided Igris should get a taste... 'Dash!' ... He would crush Igris!" (Chugong, 2021)

This study found that an individual's success in empowerment is not determined by the extent of their resources, but rather by the individual's active role in setting their own goals and determining how to achieve them. Cakrawati et al. (2024) make a similar point in their analysis of the film *The Devil Wears Prada*, in which they argue that true empowerment stems from making important life decisions, not merely from the acquisition of structural power.

Acquiring Self-Reliance as Achievements

Empowerment is only considered successful once the individual who has been empowered gets what they want or achieves their goals. In Kabeer's (1999) concept, 'achievements' is not merely a success in obtaining money or material goods, but rather a change in that individual's well-being. In the narrative of *Solo Leveling*, the highest form of 'achievements' is beautifully represented by Emerson's (1907) philosophy of self-reliance. Emerson (1907) asserts that an individual can be said to have succeeded when they let go of all external support and become a nonconformist.

The first clear sign of progress in terms of mental well-being and independence began to emerge when Jinwoo broke free from his role as a marginalized man. This happened when he decided to seek justice for himself against the group that had betrayed him.

"After Jinwoo had survived the underground temple, he'd resolved to give as good as he got... An eye for an eye... Crack! He couldn't continue, because his neck was broken... [Number of enemies defeated: 8]" (Chugong, 2021)

Jinwoo Sung's decision to execute Dongsuk Hwang and his group aligns with Emerson's (1907) principle that an autonomous individual must stand up to opposition and refuse to submit to other powers. At this moment, Jinwoo Sung takes control of his own safety as a strategic move. He refuses to give in and rely on

the Hunter Association's laws to seek justice. This marks the point at which Jinwoo Sung's reliance on the society's protective structures has been completely severed.

Jinwoo Sung's achievement in self-reliance is evident not only in his battles and quest for revenge. His self-reliance is also evident in one of his skills.

*"'Arise.' ... One by one, knights covered in pitch-black armor rose from the shadows."
(Chugong, 2021)*

It is this ability to create a shadow army that is the ultimate manifestation of self-reliance. Instead of relying on outside support, such as seeking a party from the Hunter Association, Jinwoo Sung created his own support system. The word "arise," which serves as the trigger for the shadow army's emergence, underscores his position as the sole authority over his forces, making him a one-man army.

Now that he had become an entity on par with the Association itself, Jinwoo Sung's view of the social hierarchy had changed. He no longer needed the existing system.

"Jongin clutched the welcome news close... 'I'd like to discuss that matter. Do you have a minute—?' 'I don't. Sorry.' Jinwoo cut him off and promptly exited the association building..." (Chugong, 2021)

This brief dialogue illustrates Jinwoo Sung's rejection of the hegemonic hierarchy. Here, Jongin Choi represents the elite institutions. Jinwoo Sung's refusal to submit reflects the principle of nonconformity articulated by Emerson (1907). Furthermore, Jinwoo Sung's refusal here reflects the concept of the "true man" from Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance (1907), where the "true man" means not following others and centering the world on oneself.

"Norma pressed down on her heaving chest... 'He's a king. And a very powerful king, too...' 'The endless darkness inside him was staring back at me!... limitless.'" (Chugong, 2021)

The moment when Norma diagnoses Jinwoo Sung as a king with limitless potential captures the deeper essence of Emerson's (1907) concept of the "true man," namely the refusal to be measured. In that exchange, it is evident that the power within Jinwoo Sung refuses to be positioned as a subject of Norma's judgment. When Jinwoo Sung's power, which is described as endless darkness, is attempted to be measured by Norma, he stares back at her. This aligns perfectly with the essence of the "true man" from Emerson (1907), which states that the true man is the standard by which all things are measured, meaning he is the one who will measure everything.

This finding makes an important contribution to the debate on masculinity in contemporary fantasy literature. The surge in popularity of *Solo Leveling* as a work of pop culture is closely tied to how the novel reflects the anxieties of modern readers. Many readers today feel trapped in highly competitive and meritocratic social systems or workplaces, much like the hierarchy of the Hunter Association. Therefore, Jinwoo's journey from the lowest caste to absolute independence offers a powerful emotional resonance. This story not only provides a form of escapism but also redefines the concept of male empowerment as a form of resistance against exploitative systems in real life.

4. Conclusion

This study found that Jinwoo Sung, a character in Chugong's novel *Solo Leveling*, is an individual who embodies marginalized masculinity. Jinwoo Sung fails to meet the standards of a hunter both physically and economically; he is an E-Rank Hunter, the lowest rank, and he is also poor and lacks skills. Looking deeper, psychological factors also contribute to his marginalization, as he views himself as a commodity that can be exchanged for money through insurance if he dies, which he believes is more valuable than his life.

This study also found that empowerment is clearly depicted in Chugong's novel *Solo Leveling* through Jinwoo Sung's transformation as the story unfolds. The process begins with Jinwoo activating the System and becoming a player, requiring him to complete daily quests every day. Then, leveraging the System, Jinwoo Sung sets his sights on becoming stronger. To achieve his goal, Jinwoo Sung goes beyond the limits of the daily quests and uses his skills creatively, demonstrating that he has full control over the resources at his disposal. In the final stage of empowerment, Jinwoo Sung achieves self-reliance as a result. His nonconformity is reflected in his bold stance against Dongsuk Hwang and his refusal of a guild offer from Jongin Choi, an S-Rank hunter nicknamed the Ultimate Hunter. Furthermore, Jinwoo Sung embodies the concept of a "true man" by forming his own army, the Shadow Army, and when his strength is measured by Norma.

Nevertheless, this study is still limited to how individuals are drawn into marginalized masculinity and how they escape from that condition. Further research will expand on the topic of meritocracy within the social order, whether in this novel or in others. It is hoped that researchers will continue this study in the future with more in-depth analysis and a better understanding.

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