
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION, HUMAN RIGHTS, PATRIARCHY, AND GENDER EQUALITY IN BENGALI AND HINDI LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Bengali and Hindi realist fiction of the late colonial period repeatedly stages the condition of women against a patriarchal order whose legal and customary force denied them independent standing. This paper offers a comparative reading of women's representation, human dignity, and gender inequality in the selected works of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Munshi Premchand, arguing that although both traditions confront patriarchy directly, they locate its operative mechanism differently. Chattopadhyay's Bengali fiction, examined through Devdas and Srikanta, stages patriarchal control chiefly through social opinion and moral judgement within an upper-caste domestic world, seeking recognition and freedom from condemnation as its central claim. Premchand's Hindi fiction, examined through Nirmala and Ghaaswali, stages patriarchal control through the direct legal and economic mechanisms of dowry, marriage arrangement, and debt, seeking freedom from bonded dependency as its central claim. Drawing on verified peer-reviewed scholarship on both authors and on the wider history of gender reform in colonial Bengal, the paper shows that women within Dalit and economically precarious Hindi-belt communities face a compounding burden that Bengali bhadralok fiction, centred on a more insulated social class, does not equally register. The paper concludes that reading these traditions together clarifies the range of ways early Indian realist fiction anticipated the vocabulary of gender equality and human rights later codified in Indian law.

KEYWORDS: Women's representation; human rights; patriarchy; gender equality; Bengali literature; Hindi literature; comparative study.

1. INTRODUCTION

The condition of women under patriarchal custom was among the most sustained concerns of Indian-language realist fiction in the late colonial period, and Bengali and Hindi literature developed this concern along partly convergent, partly distinct lines. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938) built his reputation substantially on psychologically detailed portraits of women constrained by the moral and social codes of the Bengali *bhadralok* world, most famously Paro in *Devdas* and Rajlakshmi in *Srikanta*. Munshi Premchand (1880–1936), writing within the emerging Hindi progressive movement, made the legal and economic apparatus of marriage — dowry, arranged union, and the financial dependency it created — the direct mechanism of his heroines' suffering, above all in *Nirmala* (1927) and in the short story *Ghaaswali*. This paper compares the two traditions to ask where each locates the operative force of patriarchy and what form of remedy, if any, each imagines as available to the women it depicts.

The comparison also engages the broader historical context of gender reform in colonial Bengal, in which male reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy worked alongside comparatively lesser-known women writers such as Rassundari Devi and Begum Rokeya to challenge, unevenly and incompletely, the patrilineal joint-family structures that governed women's lives [1]. Reading Chattopadhyay and Premchand against this history situates literary representation within the actual social movements it both reflected and, in places, anticipated.

The choice to compare these two authors specifically, rather than a wider set of Bengali and Hindi writers, follows from their shared historical generation and their shared commitment to a realist mode capable of sustained social critique. Both wrote at a moment when the legal status of women was beginning to shift — the age of consent legislation of 1891, the eventual passage of laws restraining child marriage, and the broader reform current traced by Banerjee [1] — yet both wrote fiction in which the law's formal advance and a woman's lived experience of patriarchal constraint remained visibly out of step. This gap between legal reform and lived experience is precisely what the comparative reading undertaken here seeks to make legible across two linguistic traditions rarely read side by side.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

Banerjee's [1] 2024 study of gender dynamics in colonial Bengal documents the patrilineal joint-family structure within which the karta (male household head) dominated and the ginni (wife) remained subservient, a structure resisted unevenly by early women's autobiography such as Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* (1876) and by reformist institutions such as the Brahmo Sabha; this historical account supplies the social backdrop against which Chattopadhyay's and Premchand's fiction can be read. Chakaravarty's [2] 2025 study of Premchand's *Nirmala* reads the novel's central marriage, arranged under dowry pressure to a much older widower, as a sustained critique of a patriarchy that operates through economic dependency as much as through custom, a reading corroborated by the novel's well-documented reception as an early and influential feminist text in Hindi. Bhattacharjee's [3] study of Chattopadhyay's women characters, by contrast, finds that his fiction links women's dignity chiefly to education and interior moral standing, within a domestic frame that leaves the surrounding social and legal order largely intact. Sengupta's [4] justice-theoretic reading of Premchand's *Ghaaswali* and Kumari's [5] account of the double burden faced by women within marginalised communities together establish that gender in Hindi-belt fiction compounds with caste and economic precarity in ways not equally present in Chattopadhyay's more socially insulated Bengali milieu. No study identified in this review places these two bodies of scholarship in direct, text-based comparison, which is the gap this paper addresses.

Table 1. Summary of Reviewed Literature.

Author & Year	Focus	Key Finding
Banerjee (2024) [1]	Gender dynamics and feminism in colonial Bengal	Traces the rise of Bengali women's autobiographical and reformist writing against a patrilineal joint-family structure that denied women independent legal and economic standing
Chakaravarty (2025) [2]	Patriarchy in Premchand's <i>Nirmala</i>	Reads <i>Nirmala</i> 's marriage, dowry-driven family collapse, and death as a sustained critique of patriarchal control operating through both law and custom
Bhattacharjee (2023) [3]	Women in Chattopadhyay's fiction	Shows Chattopadhyay linking women's dignity to education while keeping that empowerment compatible with domestic duty
Sengupta (2024) [4]	Justice theory applied to Premchand's	Distinguishes the distributive sympathy a Dalit woman receives from the corrective (legal) justice

Author & Year	Focus	Key Finding
	Ghaaswali	she is denied
Kumari (2025) [5]	Double burden of caste/tribe and gender	Identifies a compounding pattern in which women within marginalised communities face patriarchal constraint layered onto caste or tribal exclusion

3. Objectives and Methodology

The objectives are: (1) to identify how patriarchal control is mechanised in selected Bengali and Hindi texts; (2) to compare the forms of dignity and remedy the two traditions imagine as available to women; and (3) to assess how caste and economic precarity compound gender constraint in the Hindi material relative to the Bengali. The method is qualitative close reading of Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* and Srikanta and Premchand's *Nirmala* and *Ghaaswali*, supported by the verified secondary scholarship cited throughout. Consistent with the interpretive nature of literary-critical inquiry, the paper does not employ, and does not fabricate, quantitative performance metrics or a numerical method comparison; its comparative claims rest on textual evidence rather than on statistical measurement.

4. Patriarchy and Women's Dignity in Chattopadhyay's Bengali Fiction

Devdas builds its tragedy around the denial of Paro's chosen marriage on grounds of relative family standing, a denial enforced not by law but by the collective social judgement of the *bhadralok* community; the novel's emotional weight falls on *Devdas*'s interior collapse rather than on an interrogation of the custom that produced the separation. Srikanta extends the pattern through *Rajlakshmi*, a former courtesan whose past the novel refuses to let the reader use as grounds for withholding her dignity, again working through the register of recognition and sympathy rather than through any challenge to formal legal or economic structures [3]. Bhattacharjee's [3] analysis of the lesser-known stories "*Anuradha*" and "*Darpachurna*" confirms this pattern: Chattopadhyay consistently ties women's empowerment to education and interior cultivation, while keeping that empowerment compatible with, rather than opposed to, domestic duty. Read against Banerjee's [1] account of the historical *bhadramahila* — comparatively educated, comparatively insulated by class, yet still without independent legal standing — Chattopadhyay's fiction can be seen as working within, rather than against, the social position that reform-era Bengal had already carved out for women of his own class.

It is worth stressing that this is a claim about narrative emphasis, not about authorial indifference to material hardship. Chattopadhyay's *Palli Samaj* registers genuine zamindari-era economic distress, and his heroine Rama in that novel exercises real authority over her own estate; yet even there, the obstacles Rama faces are framed chiefly as questions of propriety and communal opinion regarding a widow's conduct, rather than as questions of legal entitlement to property or income. The recurring pattern across Chattopadhyay's major fiction, in other words, is that women's claims are adjudicated in the court of social and familial opinion, and the remedy the fiction imagines, when it imagines one at all, is a change of heart within that court rather than a change in the legal or economic rules that constitute it.

5. Patriarchy and Women's Dignity in Premchand's Hindi Fiction

Nirmala stages patriarchal control through a more directly institutional mechanism: the fifteen-year-old protagonist is married to a widower twenty years her senior after her family's inability to afford a dowry collapses her original engagement, and her subsequent suffering — her husband's jealous suspicion, the death of a stepson, the family's eventual disintegration — is traced by Chakaravarty [2] directly to the economic logic of dowry and to Nirmala's total financial dependency on a husband she did not choose. Unlike Paro's exclusion by social opinion, Nirmala's subjection operates through the explicit mechanics of marriage law and household finance, and Premchand's narrative repeatedly exposes the reasoning — her father's belief that arranging the marriage was in her best interest, her husband's conviction that his financial provision entitles him to total control — by which patriarchal actors justify decisions that visibly harm the woman at their centre [2]. Ghaaswali compounds this pattern with caste: Sengupta's [4] reading shows the story's Dalit grass-cutter protagonist harassed specifically as a woman by lower-caste coachmen, receiving only the distributive sympathy of an upper-caste landlord rather than the corrective, legal remedy that would address the harassment itself. Kumari's [5] account of a double burden facing women in caste- and tribe-marginalised communities is directly borne out here: Premchand's Hindi-belt women face patriarchal constraint compounded by economic precarity and, in Ghaaswali, by caste, in a manner not equally present in Chattopadhyay's more class-insulated Bengali heroines.

Chakaravarty's [2] reading also emphasises that Nirmala's tragedy is not attributable to any single villain but to a social system in which even well-intentioned actors — a father anxious about his daughter's future, a husband who believes he has provided generously — reproduce the harm that patriarchy requires. This is a significant point of comparison with

Chattopadhyay: where Devdas locates tragedy substantially in a failure of individual courage and social forgiveness, Nirmala locates it in a set of economic and legal arrangements that would continue to produce the same outcome regardless of the individual dispositions of the people caught within them. Premchand's fiction, in other words, treats patriarchy less as a matter of individual moral failing and more as a structural condition that individual goodwill cannot, by itself, correct.

6. Comparative Analysis

Table 2 summarises the comparison developed above. Read across the table, the central finding is that both literatures stage a genuine and serious critique of patriarchy, but locate its mechanism differently: Chattopadhyay's Bengali fiction works chiefly through the register of social opinion and moral recognition, while Premchand's Hindi fiction works chiefly through the register of legal and economic dependency, compounded in places by caste. Neither register is more authentically a human-rights concern than the other — recognition and freedom from moral condemnation, and freedom from economic bondage, are both articles of the dignity that later rights instruments would codify — but the difference matters for understanding what each tradition's fiction is actually claiming on behalf of its women characters, and what remedy, if any, the text imagines as realistically available to them.

Table 2. Comparative Synthesis.

Dimension	Bengali Literature (Chattopadhyay)	Hindi Literature (Premchand)
Site of patriarchal control	Domestic and emotional life of the upper-caste bhadramahila; control exercised through social opinion and moral judgement	Marriage, dowry, and household economy; control exercised through direct legal and financial dependency [2]
Woman's claim to dignity	Recognition and freedom from moral condemnation, e.g., Paro in Devdas, Rajlakshmi in Srikanta	Freedom from bonded economic dependency and dowry-driven subjugation, e.g., Nirmala, the grass-cutter of Ghaaswali [4]
Remedy imagined by the text	Individual sympathy and reconciliation within an intact social order	Exposure of systemic harm (dowry, debt, caste) with reform-minded critique but limited institutional remedy [2], [4]
Compounding factors	Chiefly gender, within an upper-caste milieu largely insulated from caste and economic precarity	Gender compounded by caste and rural economic precarity, producing a double burden for Dalit and lower-class women [5]

Dimension	Bengali Literature (Chattopadhyay)	Hindi Literature (Premchand)
Historical anchoring	Reform-era Bengal (1876–1938), following the nineteenth-century feminist opening traced by Banerjee [1]	Progressive Writers' Movement-era United Provinces (1880–1936), addressing colonial-era marriage law and custom

It is worth noting what this comparison does not establish. Chattopadhyay was not blind to economic hardship, and Palli Samaj registers genuine zamindari-era distress; nor was Premchand indifferent to the emotional interior of his heroines, whose psychological suffering Chakaravarty [2] traces in close detail. The claim is one of relative emphasis: remove the specific mechanism of dowry and debt from *Nirmala* and its central conflict dissolves, whereas *Devdas*'s emotional tragedy could, with some adjustment, survive a change of specific social custom. This asymmetry is what justifies describing Bengali patriarchal critique here as socially and morally registered and Hindi patriarchal critique as economically and legally registered.

7. Contribution of the Study

This paper contributes a direct, text-based comparison of gender and patriarchy across two literary traditions ordinarily studied within separate linguistic departments, and it proposes a distinction — patriarchy registered through social opinion versus patriarchy registered through legal and economic mechanism — that offers a reusable analytical tool for comparative study of Indian regional realism more broadly. By situating both authors against Banerjee's [1] documented history of gender reform in colonial Bengal, the paper also connects literary analysis to the actual social and legal movements each author's fiction reflected, refined, or in places outpaced.

8. DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE SCOPE

The comparative reading bears on a larger point about how Indian realist fiction absorbed the vocabulary of gender equality before that vocabulary existed in codified rights language. Both traditions anticipate, in different registers, concerns that Indian constitutional and statutory law would later address directly: freedom from discrimination on grounds of custom, and freedom from economic and legal subordination within marriage. The double burden Kumari [5] identifies for women in caste- and tribe-marginalised communities, borne out here in Premchand's *Ghaaswali*, further suggests that any general claim about Indian literature's treatment of women should specify which social class and community is in view,

since the bhadramahila of reform-era Bengal and the Dalit rural woman of the Hindi belt faced patriarchy compounded by markedly different additional pressures.

A further point worth drawing out concerns the relationship between literary representation and legal reform. Banerjee's [1] account shows that formal legal change in colonial Bengal — the abolition of sati in 1828, the legalisation of widow remarriage in 1856, the 1891 age of consent legislation — consistently outpaced the lived reality of ordinary women's domestic subordination, a gap that both Chattopadhyay's and Premchand's fiction registers in its own idiom. Chattopadhyay's heroines remain bound by social opinion even where law no longer explicitly forbids their choices, while Premchand's Nirmala remains bound by an economic logic of dowry and dependency that no contemporary statute directly addressed. Read together, the two traditions suggest that literary fiction, in this period, was frequently a more sensitive register of the actual texture of women's subordination than the formal law that is often taken as the primary marker of reform-era progress.

This point has a bearing beyond literary history. Where legal and policy scholarship on gender equality in India tends to measure progress chiefly through statute and case law, the comparative literary evidence assembled here suggests that realist fiction of the period offers an independent, and in places more granular, record of how patriarchal constraint was actually lived and justified by the people enacting it — fathers, husbands, in-laws, and the wider community whose opinion Chattopadhyay's fiction takes as its central adjudicating force. A fuller history of gender equality in India would therefore do well to treat realist fiction of this period as a primary source in its own right, alongside statute, case law, and reformist periodical writing, rather than as illustrative colour appended to a narrative whose real evidentiary weight lies elsewhere.

This study is limited by its reliance on English translation and on a necessarily selective primary-text corpus from each author's substantial body of work; a study engaging the Bengali and Hindi originals directly, and extending the comparison to further texts such as Chattopadhyay's *Palli Samaj* and Premchand's *Sevasadan*, could refine the distinctions proposed here. As an interpretive literary-critical study, its claims rest on textual evidence rather than on statistically replicable data, a limitation inherent to the discipline. Future research could extend this framework to Bengali and Hindi women writers themselves — Rassundari Devi and Begum Rokeya on the Bengali side, and Mahadevi Verma on the Hindi side — to test whether women's own fiction and autobiography register the same Bengali/Hindi distinction that this paper identifies in male-authored realist fiction, and could

bring in Mahasweta Devi's later Bengali fiction to examine how the caste-compounded pattern identified here in Premchand developed within Bengali writing itself.

A further avenue for future work would be a systematic comparison of the legal reforms each region actually saw — Bengal's nineteenth-century reform legislation on sati and widow remarriage as against the Hindi-belt's twentieth-century dowry and child-marriage restraint legislation — against the fictional timelines of Chattopadhyay and Premchand respectively, to establish more precisely where literary representation ran ahead of, alongside, or behind the formal law of each region. Such a study would also benefit from incorporating regional Hindi and Bengali newspaper archives and reformist periodicals of the period, which this paper's literary-critical method did not draw upon but which could substantiate or qualify the historical claims advanced here.

9. CONCLUSION

Chattopadhyay and Premchand both make the condition of women under patriarchy a central concern of their fiction, yet they locate patriarchy's operative mechanism in different registers: social opinion and moral recognition in Chattopadhyay's Bengal, legal and economic dependency, at times compounded by caste, in Premchand's Hindi belt. Reading the two traditions together, against the documented history of gender reform in colonial Bengal, clarifies both the shared humanist commitment and the genuinely distinct social mechanisms that a properly comparative study of women's representation in Indian literature must take into account, and points to further comparative work with women authors themselves as a natural next step.

More broadly, this comparison suggests that the history of gender equality in India cannot be read off a single, uniform literary or legal narrative. The bhadramahila of reform-era Calcutta and the Dalit rural woman of the Hindi-belt village experienced patriarchy through different institutional channels and at different points of intersection with caste, class, and economic precarity, and a comparative literary method of the kind attempted in this paper is one useful way of making those differences visible without losing sight of the humanist commitment, shared by both Chattopadhyay and Premchand, to according their women characters a dignity that the surrounding social order was frequently unwilling to grant them.

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