

Bridging the Divide: An SDG 5 Analysis of Gender Inequality in "Mahalakshmi's Bridge"

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Abstract

Krishan Chander is considered one of the prominent Urdu short story writers of the 20th century. His short stories not only describe the psychology of the characters but also reflect the contemporary situation very well. Mahalakshmi's Bridge is one of his representative short stories. This story highlights how society treats people differently on a gender basis and calls for more equality and understanding. Through the life of its central female characters, the story explores the emotional, social, and psychological struggles faced by women, especially in terms of societal expectations surrounding marriage, fidelity, motherhood, and widowhood. The story highlights the double standards that define the lives of men and women, especially about love, family roles, and moral judgments. The story critiques patriarchal norms and calls for a reevaluation of how society defines womanhood.

Keywords: Krishan Chander, Mahalakshmi's Bridge, Gender Equality, Urdu

Objective:

The aim of this paper is to analyze the gender inequality in the Urdu short story "Mahalakshmi's Bridge" written by the well-known Urdu short story writer Krishan Chander through the lens of SDG 5 and feminist literary criticism.

Research Question:



How to critically interpret the gender inequality in the short story “Mahalakshmi’s Bridge” by applying SDG 5 and feminist literary criticism?

Theoretical framework:

Feminist Literary Criticism (with emphasis on Socialist/Marxist Feminism and Intersectionality) is an interpretive approach that intends to unfold the deeper and underlying meanings of the text and provides a lens to analyze how the women in the story are oppressed not only by patriarchy but also by their economic conditions. It highlights the intertwining of gender and class oppression, examining how poverty, uncompensated domestic labor, exploitative work, and economic dependence contribute to their marginalized status. Intersectionality allows for a nuanced understanding of how multiple axes of oppression, especially gender and class, converge to create unique and compounded disadvantages for the women in “Mahalakshmi’s Bridge.” This approach explains why these women face amplified vulnerabilities, such as limited access to education and legal aid, increased susceptibility to violence. By using this combine framework, the analysis will thoroughly dissect the systemic nature of gender inequality as depicted in the story, aligning closely with the aims of SDG 5.

Introduction:

Krishan Chander, a prominent 20th-century fiction writer, wielded his pen as a powerful instrument for social justice and human equality, meticulously depicting the lives and struggles of ordinary people. His fiction describes the problems, emotions, and social contradictions faced by the common person. The basic principles of the progressive movement, raising a voice against poverty, exploitation, and standing for the oppressed, were extensively incorporated into his work. In his fiction, one hears not just a story, but the pulse of an era, as characters such as laborers, peasants, disadvantaged classes, women, and victims of partition appear as sensitive and conscious individuals. His language is simple, and his sympathetic narrative style leaves a deep impression on the reader.

Krishan Chander's literary philosophy was deeply rooted in humanism and socialist ideas. He passionately advocated for the rights of the oppressed and

marginalized women, whose struggles and deprivations often formed the core of his narratives. As noted by one critic,

"Krishan Chander has described social themes as well as political themes in his fiction. He visited the backward and decrepit hamlets of Mumbai (Bombay) to observe poverty closely and saw the breathing life on the footpath. He played a key role in highlighting the problems of this backward class in the grind of poverty."¹

His short story, "Mahalakshmi Ka Pul" (Mahalakshmi's Bridge), is a symbolic and layered short story that reflects human apathy, social contradiction, and the harsh realities of modern urban life. The story revolves around a bridge in Mumbai's famous Mahalakshmi area, with the impoverished and helpless living on one side, while the elite class enjoys a life of carelessness on the other. The narrative centers on six sarees hanging over the bridge, each symbolizing not merely a garment, but a distinct life intertwined with myriad stories and experiences. In a nation grappling with poverty, the story implicitly critiques the exploitation of the poor by political figures through empty promises and tactics. For the narrator, the prime minister's expected arrival on the bridge signifies the hope that the poor will finally be heard. The six distinct colors of the sarees, each bearing a hint of brown, symbolize that even amidst life's harsh realities, a semblance of hope or the "romance of life" endures.

The author portrays the tattered state of the sarees and their faded colors as powerful symbols of poverty and deprivation. For the women who wear these sarees, simply covering their bodies is the paramount concern, their condition cannot improve unless they are made financially independent. The old and fading state of these sarees at once signifies economic deprivation. These women are forced into hard, low-wage jobs to survive, highlighting how poverty places a disproportionate burden on women, limiting their access to education, healthcare, and development opportunities. These women stand for a collective gender unit whose struggles are often ignored, and whose voices are not heard in the dominant social narrative. Such characters are more subject to social conditions than they are in control of their life decisions. The act of washing and hanging sarees reflects the constant struggle for survival despite adversity.

This paper studies "Mahalakshmi Ka Bridge" in the context of gender inequality, a cornerstone of the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 5, which

aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. SDG 5 also calls for ending all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls worldwide, ensuring their equal rights in leadership and decision-making, and recognizing the importance of unpaid domestic work, early marriage, and the elimination of harmful practices. The United Nations has set the following targets for SDG 5:

1. End discrimination against women and girls.
2. End all violence against and exploitation of women and girls.
3. Eliminate forced marriages and genital mutilation.
4. Value unpaid care and promote shared domestic responsibilities.
5. Ensure full participation in leadership and decision-making.
6. Universal Access to reproductive health and rights.
7. Equal rights to economic resources, property ownership and financial services.
8. Promote empowerment of women through technology
9. Adopt and strengthen policies and enforceable legislation for gender equality

Discussion and Analysis:

The bridge itself appears as a multifaceted symbol. It stands for construction and development yet simultaneously highlights the connectivity between two disparate classes. Its elevation above the ground suggests a perspective that often conceals the harsh realities hidden beneath, making it a shelter for the homeless even as its true significance stays obscured by those who pass over it. The world on one side of the bridge symbolizes light, fragrance, luxury, and busy life, while the other side describes darkness, stench, poverty, and loneliness.

The bridge powerfully symbolizes the profound chasm of gender inequality that segregates women's lives based on class and socio-economic status. While physically connecting two points, it metaphorically underscores a vast, unbridgeable disparity in opportunities, resources, and experiences. On the one hand, it stands for poverty, struggle, and weakness, while on the other, wealth, comfort, and relative security. The bridge stands as a silent witness to the everyday realities of women's lives unfolding on both sides. Since sustainable

development is not possible without gender equality, empowering women not only protects their rights but also plays a key role in the overall development of society.

In "Mahalakshmi's Bridge," the writer paints a multi-faceted portrayal of female characters, depicting the lives of women who are helpless, vulnerable, and prone to poverty. The story criticizes patriarchal society and the system, which confines women's rights and opportunities for autonomy within a limited scope. The tragedy of developing countries is that women face gender-based discrimination. Poor women in these countries often find it difficult to obtain legal aid or justice, especially if they are in rural areas or do not understand the legal system. As Mahnoor Zamani Begum observes regarding the historical trajectory of women's societal standing:

"The fact is that in every previously non-civilized society, women enjoyed superiority and respect over men because of their distinctive qualities such as compassion, love, service, and generosity. As man became more advanced on the strength of his increasing physical powers compared to woman, he realized that woman was inferior to him and capable of being subdued rather than ruler."²

The focus of all the characters in this story is the stark dichotomy of wealth and poverty. All the characters live below the poverty line, with poverty being the main reason for their compulsion, helplessness, and unfulfilled desires. This poverty is not solely a lack of financial resources; it also engenders social, educational, and emotional deprivation, profoundly affecting these women's lives. Poverty deprives these women of their right to education, making it difficult for them to be empowered.

Lacking independent sources of employment or income, most women in the story are forced to rely on men for survival, a dependence that often leads to exploitation and violence. All the female characters in the story are socially weak, but economic helplessness is their biggest compulsion. Since they are not financially independent, they cannot make their own decisions, whether personal or domestic. Even when these women aspire to economic autonomy, they are systematically confronted with traditional social restrictions, relational pressures, and pervasive male supremacy. The story points out the obstacles that hinder a

woman's progress. Shantabai, the first feminine character in the text, works tirelessly for economic independence but does not achieve it.

The story also explicitly addresses the issue of child labor, highlighting how, particularly in developing countries, a disproportionate burden falls on girls, often leading them into domestic work where they may also be victims of violence. Shantabai, the first female character introduced, works as a domestic laborer, often taking her young daughter along. This child, representative of millions, is tragically exposed to harsh punishments for even minor infractions, losing her childhood to poverty, social injustice, and an exploitative system.

The issue of women's education is presented indirectly. Since female characters are compelled, deprived, and marginalized, they are unaware of their rights and fall victim to social exploitation. Poverty and class disparity have kept them away from education, confining them to household chores or exploitative labor. The narrative underscores that without access to education and awareness, these women are deprived of the concept of autonomy, limiting their ability to take part fully in social development.

"Mahalakshmi's Bridge" depicts women facing physical, psychological, and social violence. Domestic violence and the exploitation of wives are commonplace. The women on the one side of the bridge are portrayed as weak, vulnerable, and helpless creatures. Their poverty exposes them to situations where their dignity is disregarded. Despite the abuse and neglect from men, these women stay silent due to a lack of education, authority, or protection. The brutal reality of domestic violence is starkly portrayed:

"What if one day in a fit of rage, he removed Jivana Bai's eyes? Thirty years of married life could not be sacrificed for a moment, and her anger was justified. If the mill owner had not separated Dhondu from the innocent job like this, could Jivana's eye have come out?"³

In society, women are often idealized as symbols of love and loyalty. A widow, for example, is expected to spend the rest of her life in memory of her husband, adhering to the idea of a faithful wife. Men, on the other hand, are exempt from these emotional and social demands, with second marriages or new relationships considered perfectly normal and acceptable for them. This double standard causes

severe psychological and social stress for women. They sacrifice their happiness, life decisions, and even personal feelings in the name of social honor, while men receive social appreciation or sympathy for similar actions. These attitudes are tantamount to limiting a woman's personality and suppressing her freedom, making awareness and the promotion of equal thinking an urgent need.

"Women do everything for love. She herself did not leave her parents' house to search 30 years ago."⁴

Another poignant manifestation of gender inequality highlighted in the story is the prevalent societal tendency to blame women for infertility or childlessness, despite medical research showing that causes are often equally distributed between men and women. In society, a woman's full status is decided by linking her to the ability to become a mother, and if she cannot, she faces taunts, psychological pressures, and sometimes social problems such as divorce or second marriage. Conversely, even if the problem stems from a man, it is considered a difficult topic to discuss, and most men do not even acknowledge it. This deeply ingrained societal bias is explicitly articulated by the narrator himself when describing the community's judgment of Jabhu Bhaiya's wife:

"Even my wife does not talk to this woman because she has no children and a woman who has no children is very dirty. She kills the children of others by doing witchcraft and invites evil spirits and settles them in her house."⁵

The impression in the fiction is clear: women are unaware of their fundamental rights. As a result, they tolerate violence but cannot resist because they lack legal protection. Poverty, ignorance, and social oppression have stripped them of the power to resist. For them, living means enduring oppression and drifting with the flow of time. The lack of education, awareness, and self-confidence has made them so helpless that they do not even dare to question their condition. Thus, the title "Mahalakshmi's Bridge" emerges as a metaphor for women who journey through life quietly, hiding their sorrows and deprivations in their hearts.

The story chillingly reveals the horrific practice of buying and selling women driven by extreme poverty and hunger. Jabhu Bhaiya's wife, a victim of this brutal trade, was acquired for a meager sum, highlighting a practice even more egregious than human trafficking, where a woman's fundamental dignity and very

existence are utterly devalued. Here, a woman is stripped of her roles as mother, wife, or sister, reduced solely to a body with a fixed price. The writer presents this grim reality with a bitter yet unflinching realism, proving that when basic human needs are unmet, fundamental concepts such as honor and dignity lose all meaning.

It is also clear in the story that women do not have equal rights in the workplace. They are abused and deprived of dignity. Shanta Bai's daughter faces physical violence at the workplace. Thus, these women not only endure the burdens of physical labor but are also vulnerable to sexual harassment. For them, the workplace transcends a mere economic struggle; it becomes a constant battle to preserve their dignity. The writer compassionately highlights this economic and social helplessness of women, showing that in a cruel society, women are reduced to a means of cheap labor. Although there are different government policies and institutions on harassment and violence, there is a need for effective implementation of these policies and raising public awareness.

In the story, women are neither given adequate employment nor adequately compensated for their hard work. They perform physical labor but do not receive wages that could improve their quality of life. Poverty, unemployment, and exploitation have brought their lives to a standstill. Women are deprived of basic human needs despite working day and night in a ruthless society. The writer has shown that economic inequality and exploitative systems have thrown women out of the race for development, which is why there is no improvement in their lives.

The story portrays women primarily as uncompensated laborers in household chores. Despite their tireless work—keeping homes, raising children, and cooking day and night—their contributions are undervalued by society. The labor of these women is ignored, and they have no chance of becoming financially independent or autonomous. This societal indifference to domestic work brings women's lives to a standstill. In this story, Krishan Chander has shown that when women's household chores are not valued and compensated, there is no meaningful change in their lives. They are constantly stuck in one place, while their hard work and struggle are never acknowledged.

"Shantabai cooks the second day's lunch for her husband at night. Because in the morning she must go to other people's homes to clean the dishes herself and carry water. And now she takes her

six-year-old daughter with her and comes back to the chawl around noon... then wears a very dirty and old dhoti and starts cooking."6

Women are conventionally expected to embody love and sacrifice. Should they deviate from this societal norm and become perpetrators of atrocities, society's condemnation would be even harsher, perceiving such actions as a transgression against their "mother nature." In such a context, women would be portrayed as crueler and more unnatural, because traditionally women are symbols of kindness and love. Women who oppress would be subjected to harsher moral judgments, even worse than male oppressors. In such a case, the impression of the story would be against the oppressor, but at the same time, it would also be said that the natural character of women has deteriorated. The societal narrative might not depict the victimhood of men as strongly as it portrays the suffering of women, because in patriarchal tradition, it is common to think of men as powerful and women as weak. If the women had committed atrocities, the narrative of "Mahalakshmi's Bridge" would not only be against oppression but also question the nature, social character, and morality of women. That is, while there would be condemnation of the oppression, any prior sympathy for women would be supplanted by surprise, disappointment, and severe criticism.

Conversely, if the short story's context were altered to portray women in strong, conscious, and leadership roles—rather than as oppressors—the narrative's impact would be fundamentally different. Had characters like Shantabai, Jivanabai, and Savitri chosen to raise their voices, resist, or actively strive to improve their conditions rather than remaining silent in the face of patriarchal society, the story would transcend a mere tale of despair and victimhood, transforming into a powerful symbol of hope, awakening, and revolution. In this case, the metaphor of the "bridge" would also have changed. It would not have been just a bridge of burden or pain, but a path to change and struggle. By focusing on women's awareness of the injustices of society, a new narrative appears that the oppressed are now becoming their own saviors. Women would not only try to change their fortunes with their regular skills but also become a beacon of hope for other backward classes. Thus, while this story reflects helplessness and cruelty, it would have become a revolutionary story highlighting the regular capabilities of women—a story that evokes a desire for change in society and presents women as an active, living, and powerful force.

In conclusion, Krishan Chander 's "Mahalakshmi's Bridge " masterfully exposes the intricate layers of gender inequality. The symbolic interplay of women's implicit roles, their sarees, and the bridge itself coalesces to paint a profound picture of how economic disparities, entrenched social structures, and patriarchal norms forge vastly different realities for women. By illuminating these critical issues, the story stands as an enduring critique, urging readers to recognize the systemic nature of gender inequality and to actively work towards bridging the metaphorical and semantic divides that prevent women from achieving dignity, equality, and empowerment.

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