The Representation of Women, Marriage, and Social Inequality in Khmer and Indian Literature: A Comparative Study of Phka Srapoun and Nirmala

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Abstract

This article compares the representation of women, marriage, and social inequality in the Khmer novel Phka Srapoun by Nou Hach and the Hindi novel Nirmala by Munshi Premchand. It asks how narrative conflicts around marital choice expose the interaction of family authority, economic vulnerability, and gendered expectations in distinct literary settings. The study adopts a qualitative comparative-literary approach, using thematic categories of agency, economic pressure, family reputation, and narrative consequence. In Phka Srapoun, the displacement of an intended marriage under financial pressure foregrounds the conflict between personal attachment and familial control. In Nirmala, economic arrangements such as dowry-related instability and unequal marriage generate suspicion and unhappiness in family life. Taken together, the texts suggest that marriage is not simply a private tie but a social institution where resources, prestige, and gendered obligations are negotiated. But these similarities should not mislead us to the differences in language, historic context and tale structure. The present study argues that comparative reading shows shared patterns of limited female agency, and also particular ways in which inequality occurs. Its contribution is interpretive rather than empirical: fictional portrayals illuminate social criticism but cannot establish the prevalence of particular practices in Cambodia or India.

Keywords: *Khmer literature; Hindi literature; Phka Srapoun; Nirmala; women; marriage; social inequality; comparative literature*

1. Introduction

Literature does not merely reproduce society. Through plots, characters, and narrative judgments, novels can render social expectations visible and open them to criticism. Representations of marriage are particularly revealing because they connect intimate decisions to kinship obligations, economic resources, and social reputation. This article places Nou Hach's Khmer novel Phka Srapoun alongside Munshi Premchand's Hindi novel Nirmala to investigate how women's prospects are shaped by these forces. The comparison is not premised on the two societies being identical; it asks what becomes analytically visible when distinct narrative accounts of marriage are read in relation to one another.

Phka Srapoun centers on the relationship between Vitheavy and Bun Thoeun and the disruption of their expected union by changes in family fortune and marital arrangements. A published scholarly abstract on the novel emphasizes Vitheavy's constrained position within expectations of filial obedience and feminine virtue [1]. Nirmala, by contrast, depicts the consequences of dowry pressure and a young woman's marriage to an older widower. The Oxford University Press description of Alok Rai's translation identifies its social critique of dowry and unequal marriage [2]. A national digital library record similarly documents the novel's treatment of dowry and mismatched marriage [3].

These descriptions suggest a productive comparison, but they do not replace close reading of the novels themselves. The present paper therefore treats plot-level features as a preliminary basis for interpretation and avoids invented quotations, page numbers, or claims that every episode has been independently checked against a specified edition. Its guiding question is: how do the novels represent the relation between women's choices and the familial and economic structures governing marriage? Three subsidiary questions follow: how does economic insecurity alter marriage decisions; how do the narratives distribute responsibility for women's suffering; and what limits are imposed on women's ability to consent, refuse, or contest decisions?

The argument is that the novels make marriage a site where inequality is enacted rather than merely described. In both, women's emotional lives are shaped by decisions that involve family standing and material circumstances. Yet the narrative mechanisms differ: Phka Srapoun foregrounds an interrupted attachment and an economically motivated redirection of marriage, whereas Nirmala foregrounds dowry-related precarity, age asymmetry, and the destructive effects of domestic suspicion. This difference is important for a comparative account that avoids flattening Khmer and Hindi literary traditions into a single narrative of victimhood.

Comparison across Khmer and Hindi literary traditions requires attention to both shared concerns and historical specificity. The social world of each novel cannot be reduced to a single universal category such as "patriarchy." Instead, the critic must

identify the particular arrangements through which family decisions, wealth, reputation, and gendered duties become consequential for characters. A comparative reading is most illuminating when it shows not only that women experience constraints, but also how the narratives organize and evaluate those constraints.

The term representation is used here in a literary rather than statistical sense. A novel constructs a social world through selected events, dialogue, character perspectives, and narrative consequences. Its depiction of a marriage practice may be socially suggestive without establishing the frequency of that practice in an entire society. This distinction is important because the present study addresses cultural meanings and ethical conflicts, not a quantitative history of Cambodian or Indian marriage.

Three research questions guide the investigation. First, what kinds of economic and familial pressures shape marital decisions in the two narratives? Second, how are women's preferences, obligations, and opportunities to act represented? Third, what does the comparison reveal about the relationship between literary form and social criticism? The paper answers these questions through a thematic framework that connects material conditions, moral expectations, and narrative outcomes.

2. Materials and Methods / Methodology

This is a qualitative comparative-literary study of two purposively selected novels: Phka Srapoun (Khmer) and Nirmala (Hindi). Selection is based on their sustained concern with marriage and the consequences of socially structured inequality. The units of analysis are narrative situations, character relationships, and the representation of choices and constraints; they are not survey respondents or historical populations. The interpretive framework distinguishes four categories: (1) the conditions under which marriage is arranged or altered; (2) women's expressed or implied agency; (3) the role of wealth, dowry, or family status; and (4) the narrative consequences of conflict between social expectation and personal well-being.

The procedure consists of identifying the relevant narrative situation in each novel, examining its ethical and social implications, and comparing similarities and differences without treating fictional episodes as straightforward historical evidence. Contextual checks use a scholarly conference abstract on Phka Srapoun [1], the Oxford University Press description of Nirmala [2], and a National Digital Library of India record [3]. These secondary descriptions corroborate broad thematic framing but are not substitutes for textual citations. For publication, the authors should specify the exact Khmer and Hindi editions or authorized translations they have personally consulted, verify character names and incidents, and add page-specific citations and short textual evidence. No interviews, quantitative data, or claims about present-day national prevalence are involved.

The analytical framework distinguishes four interrelated categories. "Marriage and exchange" identifies the economic and familial considerations surrounding a proposed or completed marriage. "Agency" refers to the practical scope of a character's choices rather than an abstract assumption of unrestricted freedom. "Social inequality" identifies asymmetries of wealth, age, authority, and gender that shape those choices. "Narrative judgment" concerns how a text encourages readers to interpret the consequences of a character's actions or circumstances.

The comparison is symmetrical in method but not artificially identical in content. Each text is first examined within its own narrative logic; only then are corresponding themes brought together. This prevents a false equivalence between the particular mechanisms of dowry and domestic suspicion in Nirmala and the disruption of an anticipated marriage through family and economic pressures in Phka Srapoun. The analysis also distinguishes a claim about a character's experience from a broader claim about the society in which the novel is set.

The study uses secondary descriptions as provisional contextual support, especially where a specific primary-text edition has not yet been supplied. Consequently, its findings are interpretive propositions to be tested against the original Khmer and Hindi texts, rather than claims of exhaustive philological verification. A paper suitable for submission should identify the particular editions and translations used, include citations at the level of passages, and reflect on whether decisions made in translation affect ideas such as duty, honor, virtue, and consent.

This is textual research and involves no interviews, surveys, human participants, or new empirical datasets. The principal limitation is the lack of edition-specific quotations and pagination in the current working draft. That limitation is made explicit to preserve the distinction between responsible interpretation and unsupported textual precision.

3. Results and Discussion

Across the two novels, three linked patterns emerge from the comparison: marital arrangements are sensitive to material circumstances; women bear a disproportionate share of the emotional consequences of decisions made within families; and narrative suffering can operate as a critique of social arrangements presented as normal or respectable. The patterns are related but should not be collapsed into a single explanation.

3.1 Marriage as a family and economic institution

In both novels, marriage exceeds individual preference. The proposed relationship of Vitheavy and Bun Thoeun is disrupted in connection with altered family finances, bringing economic standing into conflict with an established emotional

attachment [1]. In Nirmala, the vulnerability created by dowry expectations and changes in household circumstances makes the heroine's marriage an outcome of social and financial pressure [2, 3]. The parallel is structural rather than identical: financial considerations intervene in both narratives, but the specific institutions and plot sequences differ.

The comparison therefore shifts attention from marriage as a private event to marriage as an institution that distributes security, status, and risk. In Phka Srapoun, the interrupted union makes visible the instability of personal attachment when it is exposed to family calculations. In Nirmala, economic expectations surrounding marriage help set in motion a domestic relationship whose inequalities cannot be resolved simply through individual goodwill.

3.2 Female agency and the burden of obedience

Vitheavy's situation invites analysis of the moral language of obedience, virtue, and family duty. A scholarly account identifies her restricted freedom and the demand that she subordinate her wishes to familial arrangements [1]. Nirmala's marriage likewise raises the question of consent under constrained alternatives. Her apparent participation in family life should not be equated with equal power to determine its conditions. Comparative interpretation must distinguish a character's ethical endurance from genuine freedom of choice: resilience may coexist with structural powerlessness.

Agency should not be measured solely by whether a woman openly rebels. Silence, accommodation, hesitation, and attempts to preserve relationships may also be narratively meaningful responses to limited alternatives. At the same time, a critic should avoid romanticizing submission as voluntary acceptance. The key question is which options the social world of each novel makes available, which it penalizes, and whose interests are protected by the language of duty.

3.3 Distinct forms of social inequality

The contrast matters as much as the resemblance. Phka Srapoun can be read through the displacement of a preferred union by economic status and familial authority. Nirmala brings the dowry system, age-disparate marriage, and domestic mistrust into a particularly sharp configuration [2]. It would be inaccurate to attribute the precise dowry dynamics of Premchand's novel to the Khmer text without direct evidence. The comparative claim is therefore narrower: both portray women bearing disproportionate costs when marriage is governed by arrangements over which they have limited control.

In this respect, the novels offer a useful comparison of unequal power without requiring identical institutions. A family's financial position can alter the perceived suitability of a marriage; an unequal marital relationship can create dependence and vulnerability within the household. These dynamics intersect with gender because women's futures are particularly exposed to decisions justified through collective family interest.

3.4 Narrative criticism and its limits

Neither novel is a sociological census. The representation of suffering can expose contradictions within socially accepted ideals, but a literary critic must ask how characterization, plot causality, and narrative perspective shape that exposure. In Nirmala, the movement from economic pressure to marital mismatch and suspicion gives the critique a cumulative domestic trajectory. In Phka Srapoun, the conflict between personal attachment and family-directed marriage places the ethical question of filial obligation in the foreground. Reading these narrative strategies together supports a comparative account of the social construction of women's vulnerability without claiming a uniform experience across Cambodia and India.

The ethical force of a tragic or painful outcome depends on its narrative construction. Readers must ask whether the narrative treats suffering as an unavoidable personal misfortune, a consequence of specific decisions, or evidence of a broader social failure. This question is central to comparing literary criticism of marriage across cultures without claiming that fictional characters represent every woman of their period.

3.5 Contribution to comparative literary studies

The proposed contribution lies in distinguishing three related levels: material constraint, normative expectation, and narrative consequence. Material constraint refers to wealth and marriage-related economic pressures; normative expectation to family duty, gendered obedience, and reputation; narrative consequence to the suffering and conflict represented in fiction. The novels illuminate different pathways through which these levels interact. Further research should test these provisional findings through close readings of specified editions, including counterexamples and moments of agency that complicate a purely victim-centered interpretation.

This three-level framework is transferable to further comparative work, but its application must remain attentive to language, genre, historical context, and the different moral vocabularies of the texts. A fuller study could compare selected passages in the original languages, examine narrative voice, and trace the reception of both novels among contemporary readers.

4. Conclusion

A comparative reading of Phka Srapoun and Nirmala suggests that marriage is a central literary site for examining women's agency and social inequality. Both narratives associate women's suffering with decisions shaped by family authority and material circumstances, yet they differ in how the conflict is organized. Phka Srapoun foregrounds the disruption of a desired union under economic and familial pressure; Nirmala exposes the consequences of dowry-related vulnerability, unequal marriage, and domestic suspicion. Their shared critical force lies not in proving that Cambodian and Indian societies are equivalent, but in revealing how personal relationships can be governed by unequal social arrangements. The comparison also shows the value of separating a character's moral endurance from her practical ability to choose. These conclusions remain literary interpretations rather than empirical generalizations. A final edition-based analysis with precise passages and consideration of alternative readings would strengthen the evidentiary basis of the argument and its contribution to comparative literature.

The comparison also demonstrates why similarity should not erase difference. Both texts can be approached through gendered constraint, yet the concrete causes and narrative trajectories are distinct. Reading them together illuminates the ways literature can question the fairness of arrangements justified by economic necessity, family obligation, or social convention. Future research should extend the argument through close readings of verified editions and a more detailed account of the works' historical reception.

References

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