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Human Dignity In Hard Times And Night And Day: Personal Freedom, Pride, And Social Pressure

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ABSTRACT

Human dignity in realist fiction is often revealed not through heroic triumph but through the everyday struggle to remain a full person under systems that reduce life to utility, reputation, or obedience. This article offers a comparative reading of Charles Dickens's Hard Times (1854) and Abdulhamid Cho'lpon's Kecha va kunduz (Night and Day, first published in 1936) as two realist responses to dehumanizing social orders in different historical and cultural settings. Dickens constructs Coketown as an industrial-ideological environment shaped by "facts," profit, and disciplinary routine, where personal freedom is narrowed and pride is manipulated into compliance. Cho'lpon depicts early twentieth-century Turkestan as a space of colonial and local power entanglements, where gendered norms, status hierarchies, and coercive institutions pressure the individual, particularly women, into moral and emotional self-erasure. Using close reading and contextual comparison, the study shows that both novels stage dignity as a fragile balance between inner integrity and external survival demands. In Dickens, dignity is threatened by utilitarian education and market logic but defended through compassion, imagination, and moral refusal. In Cho'lpon, dignity is contested through shame, surveillance, and patriarchal control, while freedom appears as an ethical aspiration shaped by modernist reform impulses and intimate suffering. The article argues that pride functions ambivalently in both works: it can be a resource of self-respect or a social instrument that disciplines the powerless. By tracing how narrative voice, characterization, and key moral crises dramatize freedom under pressure, the article demonstrates realism's capacity to become national-cultural heritage precisely through its ethical attention to the person.

Keywords: Comparative realism; Dickens; Cho'lpon; human dignity; freedom; social pressure; pride; utilitarianism; colonial modernity.

INTRODUCTION

Realism, at its most enduring, turns private pain into a public question: what does it mean to be a person when the world insists you are only a worker, a daughter, a wife, a statistic, a rumor, or a function in someone else's plan? This question is central to human dignity, understood here not as ceremonial "honor" but as the minimal moral condition of being treated—and being able to treat oneself—as a full subject with inner life, agency, and worth. In realist prose, dignity rarely appears as a slogan; it emerges from narrative pressure, when characters are pushed to the edge of choice and must decide whether survival requires self-betrayal.

Charles Dickens's Hard Times: For These Times was first serialized in Household Words from April to August 1854 and published in book form later that year. The novel is widely read as a critique of industrialization's dehumanizing effects and of a utilitarian ethos that privileges quantifiable "facts" while starving the moral imagination. Dickens's Coketown is not merely a setting; it is an ethical machine whose rhythms seep into language, education, family life, and self-understanding.

Abdulhamid Cho'lpon's Kecha va kunduz occupies a parallel place in Uzbek literary history as a major realist

novel-dilogy project, with the first part written in 1933–1934 and the work first published in 1936. It has continued to attract scholarship that highlights its portrayal of social environment, inequality, and psychological conflict in late imperial and early modernizing Turkestan. In English, the novel is accessible through Christopher Fort's translation (Night and Day: A Novel, 2019), which situates the work within the broader context of Central Asian literatures and the social problems of late Russian imperial Turkestan.

Bringing these novels into conversation is not an attempt to collapse their differences but to illuminate how realism becomes "national-cultural heritage" by storing ethical memory: it preserves the felt experience of living under pressures that distort dignity. The comparison is especially productive because both novels dramatize a core triangle: personal freedom, pride, and social pressure. Freedom appears not as unlimited choice but as the capacity to keep one's inner truth and moral agency alive. Pride oscillates between self-respect and socially manufactured vanity. Social pressure is not only external coercion; it is the interiorization of norms that makes domination feel "natural."

This study uses qualitative comparative textual analysis grounded in close reading. The primary texts are Dickens's Hard Times (1854) and Cho'lpon's Kecha va kunduz (first published 1936), with reference to the English translation Night and Day for terminological clarity in cross-cultural discussion. The analytic procedure follows three steps. First, key narrative sites where dignity is tested are identified: in Hard Times, scenes of utilitarian schooling, marital negotiation, labor discipline, and moral refusal; in Kecha va kunduz, scenes of gendered constraint, reputational surveillance, and the psychological tightening of social control around women's lives. Second, these sites are interpreted through three conceptual lenses—freedom (agency under constraint), pride (self-respect versus status-performance), and social pressure (institutional, cultural, and interpersonal coercion). Third, the findings are compared at the level of narrative strategy, characterization, and ethical outcome, asking how each novel constructs the reader's moral attention to the person.

Contextualization is used as a supporting, not determining, frame. For Dickens, the analysis draws on established descriptions of the novel as an indictment of industrialization and utilitarian ideology. For Cho'lpon, it draws on scholarship that reads Kecha va kunduz as a critique of colonial conditions and local power entanglements shaping early twentieth-century life. The aim is interpretive precision rather than exhaustive historical reconstruction.

Both novels present a social world that claims legitimacy through "reason" and "order," yet both show that such order often functions by shrinking the person. In Hard Times, the ideology of "facts" becomes an educational technology that trains children to distrust their own feelings and imagination. The Gradgrind system is not only a school method; it is a worldview that measures human worth by utility and predictability. From the standpoint of dignity, the crucial harm is internal: when a child is taught that only what can be counted is real, the child's own inner life becomes suspect. Freedom, in such a system, is reduced to compliant functioning.

Louisa Gradgrind embodies the psychological cost of this reduction. Her inner world is not absent; it is sealed. Dignity in her case becomes the capacity to recognize that her emotional deprivation is not a personal defect but the product of a violent pedagogy. Her marriage to Bounderby further transforms dignity into a commodity exchange, where age, status, and "respectability" overwrite companionship and mutual recognition. The social pressure here is double: it is the public logic of the marketplace and the private logic of family "reason." Louisa's eventual crisis, when she resists Harthouse and confronts her father, dramatizes dignity as truth-telling: she claims her inner suffering as real evidence against the ideology that denied it.

Stephen Blackpool dramatizes dignity at the level of labor and moral refusal. He is positioned among "the Hands," a term that already signals dehumanization through synecdoche: the worker is a body part, a unit of production. Stephen's dignity does not rely on social power; it rests on ethical steadiness. His desire for a lawful exit from an unbearable marriage is treated as "ideas above his station," revealing how social pressure polices not only economic boundaries but moral aspiration. In Stephen's case, pride is not vanity; it is the refusal to accept that suffering is his natural entitlement. Yet the novel shows how dignity can be crushed by institutions that are formally "legal" but ethically indifferent. Stephen becomes the measure of a society that speaks of virtue while designing systems that make humane choices inaccessible.

Sissy Jupe offers a counter-logic of dignity. She lacks the sanctioned "facts," yet she carries moral knowledge that

the Gradgrind worldview cannot manufacture: empathy, relational intelligence, and imaginative understanding. Her dignity is not a rebellion against society so much as a preservation of humanity inside it. She becomes the living argument that a person is not a calculation.

In Kecha va kunduz, dignity is tested through a different matrix of power, one where colonial modernity, local hierarchy, and patriarchal control intersect. The novel's portrayal of women's lives foregrounds the way social pressure becomes psychological fate. Zebi is a central figure whose sincerity and openness are placed under the weight of a degrading social environment. Her vulnerability is not merely individual; it is structured. Social pressure is delivered through family authority, male status competition, and communal surveillance in which a woman's reputation becomes a public possession. Under these conditions, freedom is not simply curtailed; it is redefined as obedience, and dignity is often mistaken for silence.

The Mingbashi/Akbarali figure represents coercive authority embedded in local administrative power. Around such figures, the social world tends to interpret dignity as submission and pride as dangerous "disobedience." The result is that women's inner experiences become arenas of conflict: the self must negotiate between survival and self-respect. In this environment, pride can become a trap. A woman may be compelled to "protect honor" in ways that harm her, because social norms equate dignity with chastity or compliance rather than with personhood. Conversely, the denial of dignity may be normalized as "tradition," turning violence into custom.

Miryoqub complicates the dignity question by revealing how social pressure corrupts agency through opportunism. Where Dickens focuses on industrial and utilitarian mechanisms, Cho'lpon shows how dignity can be traded in networks of patronage, fear, and ambition. In such a world, freedom can appear as mere maneuvering rather than ethical autonomy. Yet the novel's realist force lies in its insistence that this maneuvering has psychic consequences: the inner life is not immune to compromise.

Across both texts, one of the most striking results is that dignity is narrated through thresholds—moments when a character must decide whether to internalize social definitions of worth. Louisa's threshold is her refusal to continue living as a "fact" rather than a person. Stephen's threshold is his insistence that justice and compassion should not be class privileges. Zebi's threshold, in a different register, is the endurance of a self under reputational and institutional pressure that seeks to erase her subjectivity. In each case, freedom appears not as escape but as the attempt to protect an inner core from being rewritten by power.

The comparative results suggest that Dickens and Cho'lpon build dignity through a shared realist strategy: they make social pressure visible as a force that shapes the interior. Yet they differ in the main mechanism of dehumanization. In Hard Times, dehumanization is rationalized; it comes wrapped in the language of progress, efficiency, and "reason." The ethical violence is often slow and institutional, producing emotional starvation and moral numbness. The reader is asked to feel outrage not only at exploitation but at the shrinking of the imaginative and affective life that makes a person fully human.

In Cho'lpon, dehumanization is more directly social and gendered: the body and reputation become sites of control, and coercion is frequently mediated through family and community authority. The novel can be read as a critique of colonialism's entanglement with local structures, producing layered domination rather than a single oppressor. This helps explain why social pressure in Cho'lpon feels omnipresent: it is not only "state" power but the everyday circulation of fear, shame, and status.

Freedom, therefore, has different textures. Dickens's freedom is threatened by ideological discipline that turns people into instruments of production and social order; its antidote is moral imagination, empathy, and the revalidation of feeling as knowledge. Louisa's tragedy is not that she lacks intelligence but that her intelligence has been trained to distrust her humanity. When she finally speaks, dignity becomes articulation: naming what has been done to her interior life.

In Cho'lpon, freedom is threatened by a dense moral economy in which a woman's choices are pre-interpreted by society. The struggle for dignity can become nearly silent, because speech itself may be punished. The novel's realism lies in exposing how "choice" can be socially staged as choice while functioning as coercion. In such conditions, pride is risky. A dignified refusal may be read as shameful rebellion; a quiet compliance may be read as virtuous dignity. The narrative thus reveals a cruel inversion: the more social pressure increases, the more dignity is misnamed.

Pride operates ambivalently in both works, and this ambivalence is one of realism's key insights. In Hard Times, Bounderby's pride is performative; it is a rhetorical weapon that legitimizes cruelty by presenting it as "self-made" virtue. The novel exposes this pride as fraudulent self-mythology, a moral technology used to blame the poor for their suffering. Meanwhile, Stephen's pride is ethical: it is the minimum self-respect required to ask for justice. Dickens therefore differentiates between pride as status-display and pride as moral spine.

In Kecha va kunduz, pride is often entangled with "honor" in a way that can discipline women. Social pride becomes a system of surveillance: the community's gaze substitutes for conscience, and coercion becomes "respectability." Yet the novel's psychological realism suggests that true dignity cannot be reduced to outward honor. It must include inner integrity, the right to feel, and the right to be a subject rather than a symbol. When dignity is reduced to reputation, the person is sacrificed to the sign.

Another crucial difference lies in narrative optics. Dickens often employs satire and emblematic settings, turning Coketown into a moral diagram. This can make dignity visible as a universal problem of modernity: the machine threatens everyone, though not equally. Cho'lpon's narrative, by contrast, leans toward intimate social psychology, where dignity is felt through the micro-violences of daily life—what can be said, who may desire, how a rumor can imprison. The result is that Dickens's social pressure frequently looks like ideology and economy, while Cho'lpon's looks like a total social environment that reaches into private life.

Despite these differences, both novels help explain why realism becomes national-cultural heritage: it preserves the memory of how people were pressured to live below their humanity, and it offers ethical language for recognizing such pressure when it returns in new forms. Dickens's critique of industrial-utilitarian reduction and Cho'lpon's exposure of layered social coercion remain legible because they are anchored in the concrete experience of dignity under threat, not in abstract moralizing.

A comparative reading of Hard Times and Night and Day shows that human dignity in classic realism is neither a decorative "value" nor a purely private feeling. It is a narrative event that occurs when personal freedom confronts social pressure and must decide how to survive without surrendering the self. Dickens dramatizes dignity against the utilitarian and industrial logic that reduces people to functions, defending the human through empathy, imagination, and moral refusal. Cho'lpon dramatizes dignity within a gendered and colonially entangled social field, where reputation, power, and coercion converge to redefine obedience as virtue and silence as "honor." In both works, pride is revealed as double-edged: it can be the mask of domination or the minimum self-respect that keeps a person human. Realism becomes cultural heritage precisely because it stores these ethical distinctions in memorable human lives.

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