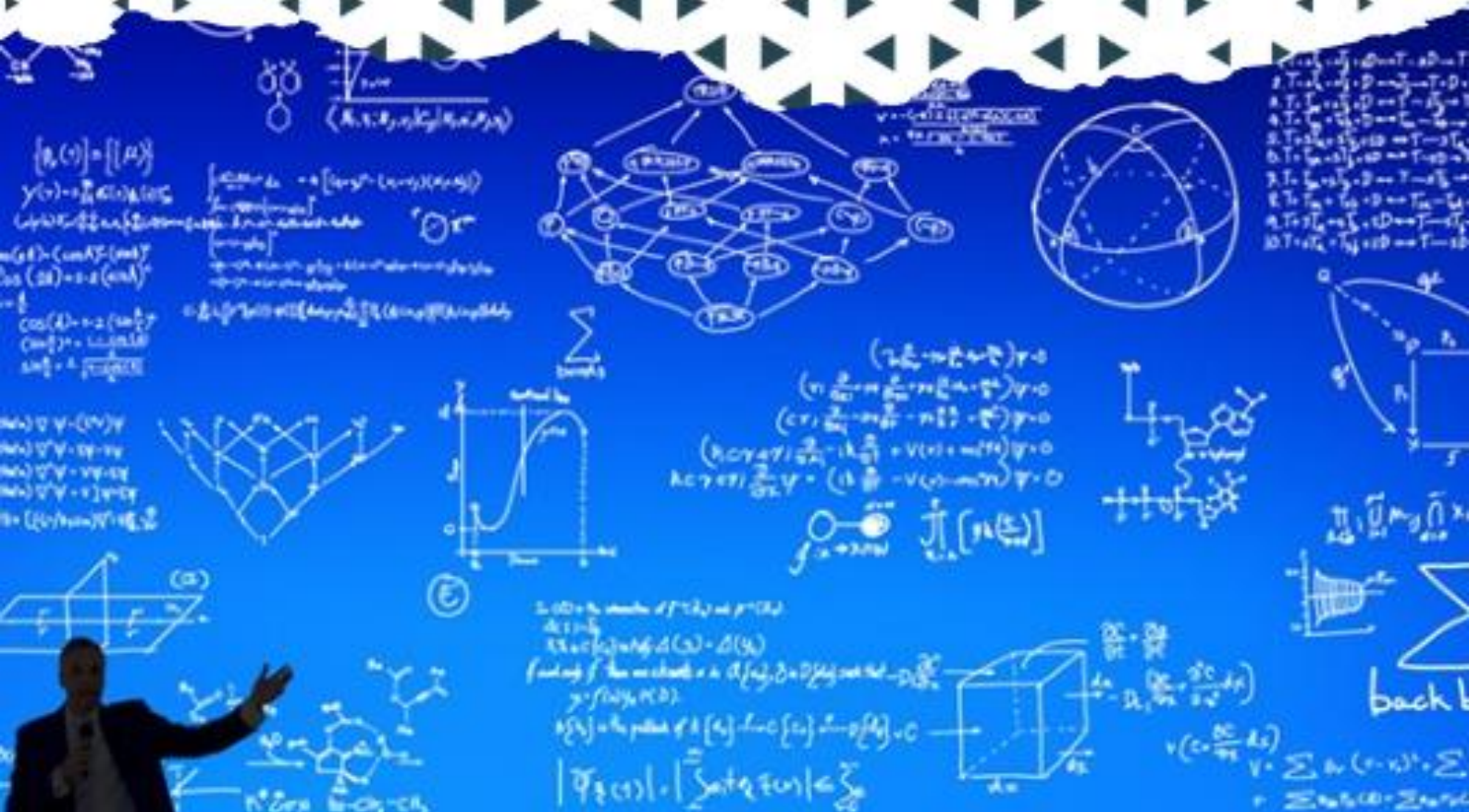




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«ZAMONAVIY ILM-FAN VA TADQIQOTLAR: MUAMMO VA
YECHIMLAR» NOMLI 2026-YIL № 4-SONLI ILMIY, MASOFAVIY,
ONLAYN KONFERENSIYASI**

**ILMIY-ONLAYN KONFERENSIYA TO'PLAMI
СБОРНИК НАУЧНЫХ-ОНЛАЙН КОНФЕРЕНЦИЙ
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Page | 2

THE EVOLUTION OF THE FEMALE IMAGE IN CHO'LPON'S PROSE:

THE CASE OF KECHA VA KUNDUZ

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Abstract. This article undertakes a comprehensive literary and socio-historical analysis of Cho'lpon's seminal novel *Kecha va Kunduz* (Night and Day), written in 1935 and widely regarded as one of the foundational texts of modern Uzbek prose. Situating the work within the broader context of Jadidist intellectual reform and Soviet-era cultural transformation, this study examines the novel's representation of women as a lens through which the author critiques the patriarchal structures, institutional ignorance, and moral hypocrisies endemic to early twentieth-century Uzbek society. Through close textual analysis and engagement with relevant secondary scholarship in Uzbek literary history, the article demonstrates that Cho'lpon's female characters — most notably Zebi and Kumush — function not merely as victims of social circumstance but as emblems of a society in profound ethical and epistemological crisis. The findings suggest that the novel anticipates many of the concerns of later feminist literary criticism and constitutes a foundational contribution to the discourse on gender, modernity, and national identity in Central Asian literature.

Key words: Cho'lpon, *Kecha va Kunduz*, Uzbek literature, female image, Jadidism, social criticism, gender, modernity, patriarchal society, women's fate, Central Asian prose

Introduction. Abdulhamid Sulaymon o'g'li Cho'lpon (1897–1938) occupies a singular position in the canon of Uzbek literature. Writing during a period of acute social and political upheaval — marked simultaneously by the reformist aspirations of the Jadid movement and the authoritarian consolidation of Soviet power in Central Asia — Cho'lpon produced a body of work that is remarkable for its psychological depth, linguistic innovation, and moral courage. His novel *Kecha va Kunduz*, the first volume of which was published in 1935, is universally acknowledged as his masterpiece and as one of the most important works in the modern Uzbek literary tradition.

The novel's title, meaning 'Night and Day,' encapsulates its central thematic preoccupation: the coexistence of and tension between darkness (ignorance, oppression, stagnation) and light (knowledge, freedom, moral awakening). This binary organizes the novel's narrative and symbolic architecture and provides the interpretive framework through which its characters' experiences acquire meaning. The novel is set in the early twentieth century and dramatizes the lives of individuals caught between the dying structures of traditional Uzbek



patriarchal society and the emerging — though not yet coherent — possibilities of a more enlightened social order.

This article focuses specifically on the representation of female characters in *Kecha va Kunduz*, arguing that Cho'lpon's construction of the female image constitutes one of the most sophisticated and politically consequential dimensions of the novel. Cho'lpon's women are not passive ornaments or incidental figures; they are the primary vehicles through which the author diagnoses the pathologies of his society and articulates his vision of human dignity and social justice. By tracing the fates of figures such as Zebi, Kumush, and the novel's other female characters, this article aims to demonstrate the ways in which gender functions as the central axis of Cho'lpon's social critique.

The article proceeds in four stages. It first contextualizes the novel within the socio-historical milieu of early twentieth-century Uzbekistan and the intellectual climate of Jadidism. It then analyzes the principal thematic concerns of the novel as they relate to gender and social inequality. The third section offers a close reading of specific female characters and narrative episodes. The conclusion situates Cho'lpon's achievement within broader discussions of gender in Central Asian literary history and reflects on the novel's enduring relevance.

To understand Cho'lpon's representation of women in *Kecha va Kunduz*, it is essential to situate the novel within its historical and intellectual context. The early twentieth century in Uzbekistan — then part of Russian Turkestan — was a period of profound crisis and transformation. The Russian imperial presence, consolidated in the late nineteenth century, had introduced new administrative structures, educational institutions, and ideological frameworks that challenged the existing social order without fundamentally dismantling it. Traditional religious and patriarchal authority remained largely intact in urban mahallas (neighborhoods) and rural communities, governing marriage, inheritance, gender roles, and access to education.

It was in response to this crisis that the Jadid movement emerged. The Jadids — a term derived from the Arabic 'usul-i jadid,' meaning 'new method' — were a loose coalition of Muslim reformists, educators, and intellectuals who argued that Islamic civilization could only survive and flourish through the adoption of modern educational methods, rational inquiry, and social reform. Figures such as Mahmudxo'ja Behbudiy, Munawwar Qori, and Fitrat articulated a reformist vision that was simultaneously nationalist, Islamic, and modernist in character. One of the central concerns of the Jadid movement was the position of women in society. Jadid intellectuals recognized that the subjugation of women — their exclusion from education, their confinement behind the purdah, their reduction to property through practices such as polygamy and forced early marriage — was both a symptom and a cause of social backwardness.

Cho'lpon was deeply embedded in this intellectual milieu. As a poet, playwright, translator, and novelist, he was committed to the Jadid vision of



cultural renewal and social transformation. However, writing in the 1930s under Soviet power — which had officially emancipated women through legislation while simultaneously suppressing independent intellectual activity — Cho'lpon faced a more complicated and dangerous situation than his Jadid predecessors. The Soviet Hujum campaign of 1927, which forcibly unveiled women across Central Asia, had introduced new contradictions into the discourse on women's liberation, reducing it from a question of genuine social transformation to an instrument of Soviet ideological control. Cho'lpon's novel engages with these contradictions, neither simply endorsing the Soviet narrative of liberation nor retreating into an uncritical defense of tradition.

One of the most pervasive themes in *Kecha va Kunduz* is the representation of ignorance not as an individual failing but as a structural condition — a systematic feature of social organization that reproduces itself across generations and institutions. Cho'lpon depicts a world in which the absence of genuine education and critical thought is not merely lamented but shown to be actively maintained by those who benefit from it. Religious authorities, wealthy merchants, and patriarchal family heads all have material and psychological investments in the perpetuation of ignorance, since critical thinking among subordinate populations — and especially among women — would threaten the foundations of their power.

This structural analysis of ignorance is one of the most sophisticated aspects of Cho'lpon's social critique. Rather than portraying ignorance as a simple absence — something that would be remedied merely by the provision of schools and literacy — the novel shows ignorance to be an active, enforced condition. Women are kept ignorant not because society has forgotten to educate them, but because their ignorance is functional: it ensures their compliance, their dependence, and their silence. Characters who begin to question their circumstances — who exhibit the first signs of independent thought — are rapidly suppressed through social pressure, emotional manipulation, or outright coercion.

Central to the novel's feminist dimension is Cho'lpon's unflinching depiction of the commodification of women within the institution of marriage. In the social world of *Kecha va Kunduz*, marriage is not primarily an emotional or spiritual bond but a transactional arrangement governed by considerations of wealth, social status, and familial interest. Women are given — and taken — with minimal regard for their own preferences, desires, or wellbeing. The practice of polygamy, the institution of bride price (*qalin*), and the expectation of absolute wifely submission are portrayed not as isolated customs but as interrelated components of a comprehensive system of female subjugation.

The character of Zebi — the novel's most fully realized female protagonist — embodies the devastating consequences of this system. Zebi is intelligent, sensitive, and possessed of a moral clarity that sets her apart from many of the



novel's male characters. Yet her intelligence and sensitivity afford her no protection against the social forces arrayed against her. She is married against her will to a man she does not respect, her emotional and intellectual needs systematically ignored by a world that values her only as a reproductive and domestic resource. Cho'lpon's portrayal of Zebi's interior life — her anguish, her suppressed resistance, her occasional flashes of defiance — is among the most psychologically nuanced achievements of early Uzbek prose fiction.

Crucially, Cho'lpon shows that wealth does not serve as a remedy for women's oppression but often deepens it. Rich men in the novel use their financial power to acquire multiple wives, to silence complaints, and to buy social respectability even as they commit profound moral violations. The equation of wealth with virtue — a pervasive ideological mystification that the novel works to expose — is presented as one of the deepest forms of social delusion. Money, Cho'lpon insists, cannot substitute for moral integrity, genuine care, or respect for human dignity.

While Cho'lpon is unsparing in his depiction of female suffering, it would be a misreading of the novel to characterize it as simply pessimistic or as reducing women to passive victims. On the contrary, one of the most striking aspects of *Kecha va Kunduz* is the degree to which its female characters are endowed with genuine moral and intellectual authority. It is the women of the novel — not its men — who most clearly perceive the gap between social pretension and social reality, between stated values and actual practice. Their suffering, far from being presented as natural or inevitable, is shown to be the product of unjust and mutable social arrangements.

This attribution of moral clarity to female characters has significant implications for Cho'lpon's broader social argument. By positioning women as the primary bearers of truth within the novel's moral economy, he implicitly argues that a society that silences women is a society that silences its own conscience. The oppression of women is thus not merely a women's issue but a measure of a society's overall moral health. The inability of the novel's patriarchal figures to perceive the injustice of their own behavior is presented not as a personal failing but as the inevitable consequence of a social system that insulates the powerful from accountability.

The novel's episodic structure — moving between different characters and social contexts — allows Cho'lpon to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this pattern across different classes and communities. Whether in the household of a prosperous merchant or in the compound of a provincial notable, the same dynamics of female subjugation and male self-deception repeat themselves with depressing regularity. This repetitive structure is itself a formal argument: the suffering of women is not an aberration but a systemic feature.

A central tension in *Kecha va Kunduz* concerns the relationship between enlightenment — the Jadid ideal of education, rational thought, and social reform — and the actual conditions of possibility for such enlightenment within a society



deeply resistant to change. Cho'lpon is neither naively optimistic about the transformative power of education nor dismissive of its importance. Rather, he traces with great precision the way in which reformist aspirations are frustrated, co-opted, or simply overwhelmed by the inertia of established social structures.

The novel's male reformist characters — those who have received some degree of modern education and who articulate, however imperfectly, the values of the Jadid movement — are presented with considerable ambivalence. Their intellectual commitments are genuine, but they are frequently unable to apply their reformist principles to their own domestic arrangements and personal relationships. The gap between articulated belief and actual practice — between professed enlightenment and lived behavior — is one of the most mordant aspects of Cho'lpon's social critique. The tragedy of Uzbek modernism, the novel suggests, was not simply the power of tradition but the failure of would-be reformers to embody the values they espoused.

This analysis has particular relevance to the question of women's liberation. Male reformists in the novel may advocate in the abstract for women's education and social equality, but they continue to participate in and benefit from patriarchal domestic arrangements. Their advocacy is thus more ideological performance than genuine commitment to social change. Cho'lpon's willingness to extend his critique even to figures sympathetic to reform is one of the marks of his intellectual honesty and literary courage.

Beyond its thematic concerns, *Kecha va Kunduz* represents a significant formal achievement in the history of Uzbek prose. Cho'lpon's narrative technique draws on both the classical traditions of Uzbek and Persian literature and the innovations of European realist fiction — a synthesis that reflects both his eclectic reading and his commitment to developing a distinctively modern Uzbek literary language. His prose style is characterized by a lyricism inherited from his poetry, a psychological density unusual in Uzbek fiction of the period, and a capacity for precise social observation that has led some critics to compare him to Turgenev and Chekhov.

The novel's representation of female interiority is particularly notable from a formal perspective. Cho'lpon devotes considerable narrative attention to the inner lives of his female characters — their thoughts, emotions, desires, and moral perceptions — in a way that was genuinely innovative in the context of early twentieth-century Uzbek prose. This focus on female subjectivity is not merely a thematic choice but a formal one: by granting women the status of full psychological subjects within the narrative, Cho'lpon implicitly challenges the social arrangements that deny them that status in the world the novel depicts.

The novel's use of symbolic imagery — particularly the motifs of night and day, darkness and light, confinement and openness — reinforces its thematic concerns at a formal level. Women are consistently associated with the possibility of light — with clarity, truth, and moral awareness — even as they are materially



confined within the structures of darkness. This symbolic alignment of femininity with enlightenment and masculinity with the forces of obscurantism and oppression represents a significant inversion of conventional literary and cultural hierarchies.

Conclusion. *Kecha va Kunduz* by Cho'lpon stands as one of the most ambitious and socially consequential works in the Uzbek literary tradition. Through its unflinching representation of female suffering and its sophisticated analysis of the structural conditions that produce that suffering, the novel constitutes a sustained critique of patriarchal social organization and a passionate argument for the values of enlightenment, justice, and human dignity. Cho'lpon's female characters — most importantly Zebi — are not simply victims of circumstance but bearers of a moral vision that the novel as a whole endorses and to which it calls its readers.

The novel's representation of the female image is inseparable from its broader social critique. By positioning women's oppression as the central symptom of a sick society — a society organized around the systematic suppression of truth, the conflation of wealth with virtue, and the silencing of those whose voices most clearly express genuine moral values — Cho'lpon transforms the woman question from a subsidiary social issue into the fundamental measure of social health and moral legitimacy.

Cho'lpon's literary achievement in *Kecha va Kunduz* deserves continued scholarly attention, both for its intrinsic merits and for the light it sheds on the social and intellectual history of early twentieth-century Uzbekistan. In an era when questions of gender, modernity, and national identity continue to resonate across Central Asia and the wider Muslim world, Cho'lpon's diagnosis of the pathologies of patriarchal society — and his vision of the enlightened, just, and dignified society that might take its place — retain considerable relevance and urgency. The author's tragic fate — he was arrested in 1937 and executed in 1938, a victim of Stalin's purges — lends his work an additional layer of historical significance, reminding us that the commitment to truth and social justice expressed in his fiction was not merely literary but existential.

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