

Burning Bright: Resilience, Friendship, and the Fight against Oppression in Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*

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Abstract

Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018) is a mesmerizing exploration of gender oppression, resilience, and human trafficking, following the harrowing journeys of two young women, Poornima and Savitha. It is set in India and the United States; the novel exposes the systemic exploitation of women in patriarchal societies and the socio-economic structures that perpetuate their suffering. Shobha Rao analyses the cultural constraints that devalue women, particularly those from impoverished backgrounds, limiting their autonomy and subjecting them to violence. The novel also examines the institution of marriage as a site of oppression, where women are expected to endure abuse in silence. Despite these hardships, Poornima and Savitha's unconditioned friendship emerges as a powerful force of resistance. The author presents female solidarity as a transformative element that challenges narratives of victimhood. The novel further assesses transnational human trafficking, illustrating how economic vulnerability rather than geography determines women's freedom. By dismantling the myth of Western exceptionalism, Rao highlights the global nature of gender-based violence and socio-economic exploitation. Through dual perspectives, vivid symbolism, and evocative prose, *Girls Burn Brighter* underscores the endurance of the human spirit. Fire and light serve as recurring motifs which symbolize hope and transformation. This paper situates Shobha Rao's novel within contemporary feminist and postcolonial discourse, demonstrating how it serves as a poignant analysis of systemic oppression while celebrating the resilience of marginalized women.

Keywords: gender oppression, resilience, human trafficking, female friendship, feminist literature, postcolonial, socio-economic exploitation

Introduction

Charlie Jane Anders, author of *All the Birds in the Sky* (2016), captures the emotional intensity of Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter* with her statement: "*Girls Burn Brighter* blew my heart up. Heart shards everywhere. I am in awe." This striking remark underscores the profound impact, evoking feelings of heartbreak, admiration, and astonishment in the novel.

Shobha Rao is an American novelist of Indian origin known for her evocative storytelling and lyrical prose. Her debut novel, *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018), received

critical acclaim for its elegant writing, though some critics noted an occasional tendency toward melodrama. Rao's ability to craft catchy narratives has earned her praise as a natural storyteller. In addition to her novel, she has written *An Unrestored Woman* (2016), a short story collection described as both breathless and fascinating. Shobha Rao is a recipient of the Katherine Anne Porter Prize and recognition in *The Best American Short Stories 2015*; she continues to establish herself as a formidable voice in contemporary literature.

Story-line

Girls Burn Brighter, published in 2018, is a novel by Indian-American author Shobha Rao. The story follows two inseparable friends, Poornima and Savitha, exploring hardship in India and the United States. The separation forces them onto different, painful paths, yet their unwavering bond drives them to seek each other across continents. Poornima and Savitha live in the small Indian town of Indravalli. A job at Poornima's family loom brings Savitha into her life, sparking a deep friendship. The dreams of a brighter future keep them hopeful despite their struggles. Poornima's arranged marriage preparations halt when her groom unexpectedly withdraws, adding uncertainty to her future. Poornima's father rapes Savitha, forcing her to flee Indravalli. A marriage to Kishore follows for Poornima, placing her in a household that resents her for an inadequate dowry. Abuse from her husband and hatred from her mother-in-law define her days. The infertility enrages Kishore's family, leading to a horrific punishment: hot oil burns her face. Poornima's longing for Savitha fuels her determination to escape. A search for her friend brings her to a brothel run by Guru, where she learns about Savitha's ordeal of repeated sexual abuse, forced drug addiction, and a gruesome amputation before being trafficked to Seattle. Poornima works as an accountant for Guru, saving money and learning English in hopes of reaching America. Despite degrading tasks, including her assistance in human trafficking, it becomes necessary for survival. Savitha's arrival in the United States leads to another cycle of exploitation. A false promise of employment as a maid places her in another trafficking ring. Mohan becomes her only ally and is responsible for bringing her to Seattle. A daring escape attempt takes her

across the country with no money and no knowledge of English. A brutal attack by two men at a gas station leaves her stranded once more. Poornima reaches Seattle and is determined to find Savitha. A meeting with Mohan offers a clue to Spearfish Canyon, a place Savitha once heard about. A desperate journey begins, with hope guiding them toward a long-awaited reunion.

Gender Oppression and Socio-Economic Disparities

One of the central themes of *Girls Burn Brighter* is the intersection of gender and socio-economic disadvantage, which significantly shapes the lives of Poornima and Savitha. Rao presents a detailed evaluation of how patriarchal societies, particularly in India, limit women's opportunities by enforcing restrictive cultural norms. Both protagonists come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and their gender further reduces their autonomy. From the outset, Poornima is seen as a financial burden by her father, who believes that a daughter's primary value lies in securing a favourable marriage alliance. This reflects a deeply ingrained cultural perception that women are not individuals with agency but rather commodities to be exchanged in the marriage market. Similarly, Savitha, despite her intelligence and exceptional weaving skills, finds her prospects limited by the gender norms of her society. She works hard to support her family, but her labour is undervalued and overlooked. Rao highlights how economic disadvantage increases gender oppression, as women in lower socio-economic strata have even fewer opportunities for education and financial independence. The novel powerfully illustrates how poverty and patriarchal constraints combine to restrict

women's choices, making them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Marriage is depicted as another institution that perpetuates gender oppression. Poornima's marriage is arranged at a young age, and instead of bringing stability or security, it exposes her to further subjugation. Her husband and his family subjected her to domestic violence, which is normalized within the social fabric. Rao evaluates how women are expected to endure suffering in silence, reinforcing the idea that marriage is an inevitable and unchangeable fate for women. The novel makes a strong statement about the cultural acceptance of marital abuse, where the silence of victims is mistaken for resilience rather than a sign of systemic failure. Savitha's experiences also expose the brutal reality of gender-based violence. After being sexually assaulted by her employer's son, she is forced to flee, setting off a chain of events that leads to her being trafficked. This harrowing trajectory highlights how men in positions of power exploit women with impunity, particularly those from lower socio-economic classes. The novel thus analyses how patriarchal structures enable the continued victimization of women, especially those who lack financial or social power.

Women Solidarity

Despite their immense hardships, Poornima and Savitha demonstrate remarkable resilience, which becomes their primary means of resistance. Their friendship, formed during their youth, is an emotional anchor that sustains them throughout their struggles. Rao presents a refreshing departure from conventional narratives that often pit women against each other; instead, *Girls Burn Brighter* celebrates female solidarity as a powerful

force for survival and resistance. Poornima and Savitha's friendship is portrayed as an unbreakable bond that transcends physical separation. When Savitha is forced to flee after the sexual assault, Poornima refuses to accept her disappearance as the end of their relationship. Her relentless determination to find Savitha, despite the numerous obstacles in her path, underscores the depth of their connection. Unlike many stories where romantic love is depicted as the ultimate driving force, Rao emphasizes platonic love between women, showing how such relationships can be just as powerful, if not more so, in fostering resilience.

Savitha's endurance in the face of trafficking and forced labour further highlights the novel's theme of resilience. Instead of succumbing to despair, she clings to hope, often finding strength in her memories of Poornima. Rao presents resilience not as a passive trait but as a conscious act of survival. This goes with contemporary feminist perspectives, which emphasize that victims of oppression are not powerless but actively seek ways to navigate and resist their circumstances. Another significant aspect of the novel is its assessment of the notion that resilience should be equated with silent endurance. While Poornima and Savitha persist despite their suffering, their resilience is also characterized by their refusal to accept oppression as their fate. Their actions, Poornima's quest to reunite with Savitha and Savitha's constant efforts to survive and escape show that resilience is not just about bearing hardships but also about actively seeking change.

Exploitation and Human Trafficking

Rao extends her analysis of systemic oppression beyond India, illustrating that gender-based violence and

economic exploitation are global issues. Savitha's journey to the United States, where she is trafficked and forced into exploitative labour, reveals the dangers faced by economically vulnerable women who seek better opportunities. While migration is often portrayed as a means of escape from oppressive conditions, *Girls Burn Brighter* subverts this notion by showing how global economic structures merely perpetuate new forms of subjugation. Savitha's experiences in the United States expose the fallacy of the American Dream, particularly for women of colour from impoverished backgrounds. She finds herself trapped in an abusive labour environment, where her rights are stripped away, much like they were in India. Rao challenges the idea that Western nations offer liberation to women from the Global South, instead demonstrating how patriarchal and capitalist structures operate transnationally to sustain cycles of exploitation.

This criticism goes with postcolonial feminist perspectives, particularly those of scholars like Chandra Mohanty, who argue against the notion that Western societies are inherently more progressive or egalitarian for women. Rao dismantles the myth of Western exceptionalism by portraying the United States as another space of oppression rather than a refuge. Savitha's suffering in the U.S. mirrors her struggles in India, reinforcing the idea that economic vulnerability, rather than geography, determines a woman's level of freedom and security.

Feminism in *Girls Burn Brighter*

Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018) presents a harrowing narrative of gendered oppression through the intermingled lives of Poornima and

Savitha, two young women from rural India. Their struggles elevate the intersectionality of gender, caste, and class, making the novel an important text for feminist literary analysis.

1. Intersectionality and the Layered Oppression of Women

Intersectional feminism, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), argues that gender-based oppression does not exist in isolation but is compounded by other forms of discrimination, such as caste and socio-economic status. Poornima and Savitha, both belonging to a marginalized caste, experience not only patriarchal subjugation but also caste-based and economic exploitation. Rao's novel illustrates how these forces intersect to deny them agency. For example, Poornima's father, a poor sari weaver, sees her as an economic burden, reinforcing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) concept of the "subaltern", wherein marginalized women are denied their voice. Poornima's fate is tied to marriage, which, within the hegemonic structures of caste and patriarchy, serves as a form of commodification. Savitha, on the other hand, is forced into the exploitative garment industry and later becomes a victim of human trafficking, demonstrating how capitalist structures prey on the most vulnerable.

2. Patriarchy and the Control of Women's Bodies

Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) have argued that women's oppression stems from their reduction to the "Other" in a male-dominated society. This notion is evident in Rao's depiction of Poornima's marriage, where she is subjected to domestic violence and reproductive coercion, reinforcing her role as a submissive wife. The systematic

violence against her reflects Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of compulsory heterosexuality, where men control women's sexuality to uphold patriarchal power structures. Savitha's fate takes a different turn, yet she faces similar control over her body. Her forced entry into sex trafficking mirrors Judith Butler's (1990) argument that gender is performative and enforced through societal structures. The traffickers dehumanize her, stripping her of identity and agency highlighting the global commodification of women's bodies.

3. Women's Solidarity as Resistance

Despite their suffering, Poornima and Savitha's relationship embodies the feminist ethic of care, as discussed by Carol Gilligan (1982). Their bond represents a form of resistance against patriarchal and capitalist oppression, showing that female solidarity can be a source of strength. Rao's novel aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003) assessment of Western feminism, which often overlooks the specific struggles of women from the Global South. Unlike mainstream feminist narratives focusing on individual empowerment, *Girls Burn Brighter* emphasizes collective resilience and survival.

Conclusion

Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter* is a powerful exploration of gender

oppression, resilience, and global systems of exploitation. Through the lives of Poornima and Savitha, the novel examines patriarchal structures that limit women's autonomy, both in India and beyond. Rao's portrayal of female friendship as a source of empowerment challenges traditional narratives that isolate women, instead emphasizing solidarity as a means of survival. By addressing themes of poverty, human trafficking, and transnational exploitation, *Girls Burn Brighter* contributes significantly to contemporary feminist and postcolonial discourse. The novel's dual narratives and symbolic imagery further enhance its impact, making it a literary and social criticism. Shobha Rao's work serves as a testament to the resilience of marginalized women, highlighting the urgent need for systemic change in the fight against gender-based violence and economic oppression. Through an intersectional feminist lens, *Girls Burn Brighter* exposes the interwoven forces of gender, caste, and class oppression that shape Poornima and Savitha's lives. Rao's novel underscores Spivak's critique of the voiceless subaltern, showing how lower-caste women navigate systemic violence while finding strength in solidarity. Ultimately, the novel analyses established patriarchal structures and is a testament to female resilience.

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