

Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter* : A Saga of Woman's Suffering

URWASHI KUMARI

Abstract : Patriarchy is social system wherein males dominate not only in the family or society but in the whole world. In this system, males are considered to be superior to women. Besides, men have more control on economic, social and political resources. The writer here has made authentic and emotional representation of the annals of exploitations, physical mutilation and psychological suffering of woman. She has tried to highlight lot of struggles of women in order to survive in the invisible space. Moreover, Shobha Rao's present novel *Girls Burn Brighter* that came out in 2018, it can be placed in the category of realistic feminist fiction. The story is focused on the struggle of two friends Poornima and Savitha who survive under the dark clouds of poverty and deprivation. It follows a harrowing cross-continental journey of two poor heroines who never lose the hope that burns within them. The protagonist follows the mechanism of affirmation deviating from the tradition of non-conformity. Shobha Rao establishes that woman surviving in poverty essentially share the psyche of suppression. The present paper intends to present the tortured psyche of women in general and that of Poornima and Savitha in particular.

Keywords: Feminism; patriarchy; poverty; suffering; deprivation.

A number of women writers and novelists have taken and are taking keen interest and have also presented new theories in relation to the improvement of the status of women in society and the different aspects of their lives and problems that they have been facing today. The purpose behind writing on women by women novelists is only to raise a voice against violence done by male to female. But with the rise of feminism, they came to know that their inferiority is not ordained in heaven and gender is not natural more immutable, because it is a creation of patriarchy and patriarchy is not given because it is a deconstructed construct. Now the women have realized that the system of patriarchy which exists since a long time, no longer can serve the needs of the rapidly changing society where women were and are trying to emancipate themselves and define their potential. That is why they have started questioning the sexual politics and gender arrangement. The women are reconciled to a life of humiliation

in the form of gender bias while performing like the roles of wives, mothers, sisters and daughters in a rigidly custom found milieu they live in. They have to think of preserving their identity as wives, mothers, sisters and above all a human being. The world cannot go ahead until the gender discriminate between the sexes will be respected. Ruth Praver Jhabvala , Kamala Markandaya, Attia Hosain, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Rama Mehta are some of the names of the fiction writers who have unveiled the subtle process of oppression in the family and in the male oriented society. Shashi Deshpande comments through one of her heroine, Indu in the novel *Roots and Shadows*, “Women, women, Women... I got sick of it, there was nothing else. It was a kind of narcissism. And if we had looked on ourselves in a cage and thrown away the key”. (78)

Shobha Rao is an Indo-American novelist known for her debut novel *Girls Burn Brighter* and *The Unrestored Women and Other Stories*. Both of her works intensify issues related to women. Her novel *Girls Burn Brighter* came out in 2018, it can be placed in the category of realistic feminist fiction but it is a novel with a difference. The writer focuses on the struggle for two friends Poornima, named after the moon and Savitha, named after the sun, who survive under the dark clouds of poverty and deprivation. Poornima’s mother faces unfortunate death of cancer. And she has to bear infliction of her cruel father. She suddenly finds a strange lady in her household brown as Savitha. She develops emotional bonding with her. Poornima shares her pain of settled marriage which was fixed in her impoverished position and the marriage is only a safe remedy. Savitha admits, “Don’t look at death, don’t look at poverty, don’t look at how they crawled through life”. (*Girls Burn Brighter*, 31)

Poornima gets married and her insecurity increases with the cult of self-adjustment in undesirable marriage. She asserts her resistance against the demands of dowry in marriage because she is worried about security in marriage for her younger sister. She knows her marriage brings domination and humiliation because of dowry. The greatest despair in Poornima was the possibility of separation from Savitha in her trapped married life. Gradually she starts naked tedious menial labour from morning till night to keep the body and soul together but always seeks Savitha’s consolation for emotional supports. With the commencement of matrimonial ceremony she finds herself stupefied with the horrors of existence. She thinks that agony and suffering seem to be the culmination of her desires. The novelist comments, “Poornima wake that morning

and realized there was a breath. Not a cool, not a cool breath but she rejoiced. Her mother must be watching. She must be speaking. She must be saying, Poornima I'm happy". (61)

However, cruel reality behind this illusion proves hostile and weak. Poornima remains in dismay for her poverty expresses in the form of dirty smells and thatched house. She and her friend bear the crisis of poverty several times in their lives. The novelist presents psyche of woman and ultimate effect on their consciousness. Poornima and Savitha both are the identical set of memories divert in the different direction:

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Publisher Volume 13 (2024) go on and on like the murmuring of wind, the fall of rain. And she hears her say don't forget a thing. Not one thing. If you forget a thing, it's like you have joined the storm at the bottom of the sea. (73)

The novel *Girls Burn Brighter* moves in two distinctive directions separately operating on the consciousness of Poornima and Savitha. After Poornima's forced marriage she has to live in the filthy hut in inhuman conditions and there she was subjected to sexual colonialism expressed in the form of the humiliation of her self-respect and mutilation of her body. The novelist comments:

It was the look of man: undressing her, tearing off her clothes her innocence, ripping it with his teeth, biting at the tender heart of her and then laughing and cruel and savoring the completeness of his inquisition. Its terror and its desire...(99)

In her marital relationship fills with horror and spoils the inner reservoir of her fortified. Kishan, her husband abuses her imposing his wild passion and laughs with regular intervals to increase the intensity of his treacherous act. In the family no one cares her sentiments and ailment including that of Kishan. She feels isolated in her mental relationship and comes to a painful realization, "I can't help it. I can't help it if my father doesn't have money". (113)

The frustrations of life dictate to realize the rational understanding of the complexity of life. In her marital life she did not recall the single day of contentment and self-respect. Under disgust she starts withdrawing herself from Kishan's life. Instead of going to Kishan's

bedroom she prefers to move on the terrace. She realizes instead of oppressive mechanism she starts constructing her voice against ill treatment. For her independent thinking, the conspiracy of the family left her to burn with oil to crush the sparks of life within her. Withdrawal from Kishan's life makes her restless to search out Savitha. She comes in contact of Rishi, one stranger and seeks his help to search for Savitha and he reveals burden of her wounded psyche and admits:

She was tired. She was tired of deals.
Every moment in women's life was a
deal, a deal of her body; first for its
blooming and then for her wilting, first
in her bleeding then for her virginity
and then for her being and then for her
widowing. (194)

Savitha's suffering is not different from her friend, Poornima. Her life also begins in poverty and uncertainty. She did not have any money not a single paisa to get access to the main stream of life. She has horrible experience in Vijaywada where she has to get shelter in brothel. Guru is a leader of the brothel; he leads the girls to undesirable and forced sexual relations. Savitha comes in contact with various absurd customers and each deal intensifies her weariness and she realizes the awkward burden of her own existence. The novelist records the oppressive mechanism ruining of the peace of her mind as Ira in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, who is also joined the profession of selling the body in order to save herself from starvation. Being disgusted with these oppressive job she decides to move to America to get rid of her heinous life in India. In America she meets Mohan, for a while in the company of him she diverts in the world of beauty and happiness but it was only a temporary respite in her life.

Girl Burn Brighter holds up a mirror to rural India, to small minds, suffocating expectations and perfectly delineates how a woman's worth is measured in the society. It follows an unconventional trend where Savitha and Poornima move in unconventional directions and draw a conclusion of pervasive burden on feminine psyche of oppressive mechanism of patriarchy. The novel is constructed in the backdrop of realistic ground beyond the sentimental and radical canons of patriarchy. The protagonist follows the mechanism of affirmation deviating from the tradition of non-conformity. Shobha Rao establishes that women surviving in poverty essentially share the psyche of suppression.

Urwash Kumari
Research Scholar
Department of English

