



SUBVERTING SUBJUGATION ON WOMEN OPPRESSION: A POST-MODERN FEMINIST ANALYSIS IN RAO'S *GIRLS BURN BRIGHTER*

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the female resistance towards subjugation in the novel *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018) by Shobha Rao. The main purpose of this study is to analyze the existing patriarchal principles that exploit women. This study offers a postmodern feminist analysis grounded in the theoretical framework of Judith Butler. Researchers have examined the complex web of social and cultural norms that construct and regulate the role of women in the postmodern world. In *Girls Burn Brighter*, Shobha Rao portrays female characters who are caught in a relentless cycle of poverty, marginalization and powerlessness conditions that are socially produced and discursively maintained. In line with Butler's concept of gender as performative rather than innate, the novel illustrates how the identities of women are shaped by external norms that define femininity as passive and subordinate. However, the protagonists challenge these imposed roles through acts of resistance and self-assertion. The only path to freedom, Rao suggests, lies in rebelling against the very structures that seek to confine and erase female agency. Through this lens, the novel becomes powerful narrative of defiance, illustrating how gendered oppression can be disturbed by subversive performances of identity and will.

Keywords: *Subjugation, Oppression, Brutality, Resistance, Gender*

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1. Introduction

This research study deals with the female resistance towards subjugation in the novel *Girls Burn Brighter* by Shobha Rao, a post-modern feminist analysis. This study will describe the works of those writers who are particularly focused on the matter of female subjugation and give comments and reviews on how a man overpowers a woman. Researchers and scholars discuss how women are portrayed in literature. It was suggested that their socio-economic position has affected the image of women in literature. The position of women has never been identified. However, the truth is that the social status of women worldwide has always been low, even in slavery. This article will find out the elements of female resistance towards male brutality, sexually assaulted characters flee towards their individuality and female resist towards the subjugation and oppression.

Rao raises critical questions about the current state of society by portraying female characters who defy traditional norms and actively resist the roles prescribed to them. These characters refuse to internalize societal expectations, instead choosing to reclaim their destinies by rejecting the norms that seek to define them. Through such portrayals, Rao adopts a bold and distinctly postmodern feminist stance. Her work challenges essentialist ideas and the fixed, principled roles traditionally assigned to women, emphasizing instead the agency and resistance embodied by her female characters through both their speech and actions.

Rao's narratives reflect the complexities of power structures within postmodern feminism, illustrating that while women may protect themselves from harm, they are still constrained by a world steeped in systemic abuse. Postmodern feminism regards gender not as a natural or biological given, but as a discursive construct shaped by social and cultural forces that uphold patriarchal dominance and define women as the 'other.' Moreover, this patriarchal system manifests differently across contexts, depending on social, cultural and economic factors, as well as the degree of agency available to women. For instance, white women often occupy a more privileged position compared to marginalized African or lower-caste women, revealing how intersecting forms of inequality compound gendered oppression.

Shobha Rao is an American novelist, having immigrated from India. Rao's debut novel, *Girls Burn Brighter*, has been praised for its "sustained and elegant prose. She won the 2014 Katherine Anne Porter Prize, is a recipient of the Elizabeth George Foundation fellowship, and has been anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories 2015*. A theme throughout Rao's works is oppression, especially of women.

Postmodern feminism also rejects the fixed , universalist principles of Western thought that deny the possibility of change. It views gender inequality through the lens of unequal power relations , emphasizing how such inequality is naturalized through discourse. Post modern feminist theory thus becomes a powerful tool for analyzing the social and cultural practices that normalize the oppression of women, reducing them to objects within patriarchal narratives. By transcending the limits of traditional feminism, postmodern feminists advocate for a liberation that frees women not only from external oppression but also from the internalized ideologies that sustain it.

1.1. Research Objectives

- To find out the social values and taboos of society lead towards women oppression
- To analyze women stand against the patriarchal society and reclaim identity in *Girls Burn Brighter*
- To explore the post-modern feminism critique Poornima and Savitha's Struggle towards male oppression

1.2. Research Questions

- How does social values and taboos of society lead towards women oppression?
- How did women stand against the patriarchal society and reclaim identity in *Girls Burn Brighter*?
- How does post-modern feminism critique Poornima and Savitha's Struggle towards male oppression?

1.3. Significance of this research

The novel *Girls Burn Brighter* deals with the female resistance toward male dominance. This research study is significant because it explores the elements of subjugation through the theory of post-modern feminism. Aims to go through the novel to explore gender discrimination and female inequality. This study leads towards the significance of study that would be helpful in the future for understanding the basic motives of Shobha Rao's novel. It is a postmodern feminist analysis of Judith Butler.

2. Literature Review

This research study deals with the female resistance towards subjugation in the novel *Girls Burn Brighter* by Shobha Rao, a post-modern feminist analysis,

Postmodern feminists are so profoundly feministic that they transcend the boundaries of feminism and offer to women freedom from oppressive thought. (Prabhakar: 19). This literature review proposes to describe the works of those writers and analysts who are particularly focused on the matter of female subjugation and give comments and reviews on how a man overpowers a woman. Researchers and scholars discuss how women are portrayed in literature. It was suggested that their socio-economic position has affected the image of women in literature. The position of women has never been identified. However, the truth is that the social status of women worldwide has always been low, even in slavery. In patriarchal communities, where men still overpower, they handle full responsibility for the circumstances.

Jayakumar, Associate Professor and Head of the English Department stated in his article, *Manifold Multitudes of Women in the Writings of Shobhaa De(2021)*, De is more aware of the difficulties faced by women. She presents the necessary facts and informs the readers about the sufferings of women and the injustices perpetrated by their male counterparts in the patriarchal society. As a result, his books portray women as real human beings. In her stories, She depicts underground modern women seeking their identities and rejecting the institution of marriage. Her novels, written by women around the world, replace mutual fidelity with free sex and call men beasts, exploiters, rapists and murderers of women. The crisis of personal identity is a common theme in women's fiction, and Shobha is no exception. In fact, since they reflect the dividing line between tradition and modernity, their novels must be studied from a social and psychological point of view. Shobha De's novels resent the use of the concept of sex, but there is an in-depth study of women's psychology below the surface that has been described so meticulously. She tried to show that Indian marriages are based on stereotypes.

M.Rodrigue, stated in his article, *The Origins of Women's Subjugation(1987)*, in most established societies around the world particularly in class based systems women have historically faced low social status, exploitation, oppression and lack of autonomy. Moreover, societies that rely on women as warriors often face long term disadvantages. That is, the death of a male warrior is but the loss of one man, but the death of a female is the death not of one woman alone but of the children she might have borne had she lived. Even as women's status and self-determination waned, their position in religion waxed. Society increasingly depended on the fecundity of women, as larger populations were needed to weather skirmishes.

Marianne Ailes, stated in his article, *Desiring the Other :Subjugation and Resistance of the Female(2020)*, The subjugation of women particularly sexual subjugation has long served as a strategic instrument in the pursuit of cultural dominance. The underlying compulsion of men to dominate women , and the historically muted

resistance of women to such oppression , can be traced to deep psychological roots embedded within the human psyche. This branch of feminist theory , particularly psychoanalytic feminism , seeks to understand the formation of psychic life in order to expose and transform the internalized structures that contribute to women's oppression. Patriarchal systems are not only maintained through individual behavior but also woven into the very fabric of society, thereby perpetuating a cycle of inequality and subordination.

Agarwal, Professor of English Department stated in his article, *Shobha Rao's Girls Burn Brighter: A Psycho-Analysis of Women Inner World(2020)* the traditional social order especially regarding women's rights has historically been shaped by humiliation and injustice. While Rao's 2018 novel can be categorized as realistic feminist fiction, it distinguishes itself through its raw and introspective portrayal of emotional suffering and resilience The narrative centers on two friends, Poornima and Savitha, whose lives are marked by poverty, deprivation and patriarchal control. Poornima, having lost her mother to cancer, suffers at the hands of her cruel and indifferent father, who views her marriage as a burden to be quickly resolved. When Savitha is hired to work at their loom, she assumes the role of caretaker and provider, becoming the emotional and practical support Poornima desperately needs.

Dhaliwal, Assistant Professor in English revealed in his research article, Partition, and Treatment of Women: *The Lost Ribbon -A story by Shobha Rao(2018)* focus is on the individual roles of women who were not independent despite belonging to independent countries. How they were sacrificed for the honor. Thousands were raped and brutally murdered. Those who survived were expelled. In the work, the female character chooses to go through a traumatic experience and endure mental and physical pain. They do not lose hope until the end. They were raped, tortured, and separated, resulting in the loss of their identities. His incompetence in overcoming this situation is evident in his dialogues and speeches. Language is used to describe their suffering and their quest to believe in themselves and accept who they are.

Shweta Tiwari, Assistant Professor in English expressed this in her article,, *Partition and the Human Body: A Critical Perusal of Shobha Rao's An Restored Woman and Other Stories(2020)*, Women were abducted from refugee camps and raped and marry their victims. The kidnappers, who were not inclined to marry, first beat her, then cut off her breasts and genitals. It can be said that the women's body became the place where the game of division took place. Despite being the most affected, the women's experiences have been pushed into a long period of silence. The male narrative has been retained for archival purposes, while the female narratives that were reduced for fear of notoriety.

Nimra Zafar, in her research article, *Reconceptualization of Gender Relations in Saeeds Amal Unbound and Rao's Girls Burn Brighter (2021)* a brief overview of previous feminist research provides critical insight into gender issues as they are understood across various forms and schools of feminism liberal, radical, Marxist, psychoanalytic, postcolonial and postmodern. These perspectives reveal the complex and context specific ways in which women's oppression is constructed and maintained. Central to feminist thought is the belief that women can transform their roles in society by asserting agency and making autonomous choices.

Rizky, W.A., *The main female characters' oppression in Girls Burn Brighter by Shobha Rao (2023)* explains that society of treats women as inferior, which leads to different types of unfair treatment, or oppression. Rao's novel show these problems and raise awareness. The study looks at how the two main female characters, Poornima and Savitha, suffer from various forms of oppression using a sociological and feminist approach. This research uses Iris's Young theory to explain the different types of oppression, like being pushed out of job opportunities, not having a voice, or being forced into harmful cultural practices like dowry. It also uses Kimberle Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality to show how these issues are made worse by things like gender, poverty, skin color, and lack of political power. This study shows how deeply these women are affected by overlapping systems of injustice.

Qamar, S., Khan, M.A. and Shaheen, A., in their work *Agentic female fraternity of the recovering patriarchal women in Shobha Rao's Girls Burn Brighter(2023)* analysis Rao's novel as a feminist novel that explores how women can gain strength and form supportive bonds, even in the harsh patriarchal environment. This research uses Spivak's theory of Subaltern voices, female agency and women's recovery from patriarchy. This paper presents Poornima and Savitha as examples of deeply oppressed women who slowly begin to gain power and independence. Despite India being shown as one of the hardest places for women to live, the novel highlights how strong relationships between women can help to resist oppression and reclaim their voices and identities.

This study challenges the dominant notions rationality that promote essentialism of gender roles and advocates for a reimagining of gender one that dismantles rigid binaries and embraces fluid, inclusive identities.

3.Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is qualitative in nature, relying on extensive research conducted through the consultation of libraries, books, scholarly journals and magazines. This qualitative approach enables a nuanced and in depth

exploration of the gendered experiences and power dynamics represented in Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*. The analysis centers on the original text of the novel, applying a postmodern feminist theoretical lens to examine the psychological, emotional and socio political dimensions of female subjugation and resistance. Particular focus is given to behavior, choices and evolving agency of the protagonists, with the aim of understanding how gender roles are constructed and resisted within the narrative. This descriptive method supports a comprehensive examination of the characters inner worlds and their responses to patriarchal oppression

3.1. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Judith Butler's theory of postmodern feminism. In the postmodern context, feminism extends beyond the boundaries of Western or first world concerns, encompassing the diverse and complex realities faced by women in the third world as well. Postmodern feminism, as articulated by Butler, critiques the essentialist assumptions of earlier feminist theories and challenges the binary categorization of gender. According to Butler, gender identity is not fixed attribute, but performative act a series of gestures, expressions and behaviors that are socially enacted and historically conditioned. This approach questions the universality of female experience and instead emphasizes the fluidity and multiplicity of identities.

As Prabhakar (2020) notes, "Postmodern feminists are so profoundly feminist that they transcend the boundaries of feminism and offer to women freedom from oppressive thought" (p. 19). This encapsulates the postmodern feminist goal of dismantling not just patriarchal structures, but also rigid frameworks within feminism itself that risk reinforcing exclusion and hierarchy. Postmodern feminism emphasizes the constitutive role of discourse in shaping concepts of gender, sexuality and identity. It distinguishes itself from earlier strands of feminism_ liberal, radical and Marxist _by focusing on the differences within genders rather than solely between them.

In this framework, *Girls Burn Brighter* is analyzed as a text that embodies postmodern feminist concerns, portraying the intersecting oppression faced by women in postcolonial and socioeconomically marginalized settings. This novel provides a compelling representation of how the protagonists navigate and resist the discursive regimes that seek to limit their autonomy, ultimately offering a vision of empowerment rooted in agency, resilience and refusal to conform

Judith Butler (2002) argues that, like the notions of self, subject and gender the body itself is not a natural or fixed entity but is historically constructed and constituted. She challenges the binary categorization of distinct sexes, asserting that bodies are shaped

by historically layered and sediment practices and performances. According to Butler, the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body. This stylization involves repeated bodily gestures, movements and behaviors that , over time, create the illusion of a coherent and stable gendered identity. As she states, “The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 2002, p. 102). This study is based on following assumptions:

- Resistance can occur through acts that disrupt societal norms, such as gender performances and the deconstruction of binary gender roles.
- Rejection of societal expectations regarding appearance, behavior, and roles
- Recognizing that women experience subjugation differently based on race, class, ability, and sexuality, resistance strategies must address these interconnected oppressions.

As Butler argues, gender should not be perceived as a fixed or innate identity, but rather as performative construct, shaped and reshaped through repeated social practices, language and cultural norms. Gender is thus not a stable category, but something continuously produced and reproduced through discourse. In line with this, the study explores how the protagonists resist the discursive forces that attempt to define and confine them, asserting their agency through the acts of subversion and self-determination. The novel is read as a narrative of gender resistance, illustrating how women can reclaim their destinies through resilience and courage.

This insight forms the foundation of Butler’s influential concept of performativity, which shifts the understanding of gender from being something one is to something one does. Central to her theory is the role of language as a constitutive force in the construction of gender identities. Butler treats gender not as stable category rooted in biology, but as a discursively produced script something enacted and rehearsed by performative subjects. Thus, gender is not a reflection of an innate sexed identity but a socially regulated performance, repeated over time, that reinforces and reinscribes the illusion of a natural gender order.

4. Analysis

This research article will analyze the female resistance towards subjugation in *Girls Burn Brighter* by Shobha Rao followed by the theory of post-modern feminism. In the

postmodern scenario, the discussion of feminist rights stimulated the imagination of creative writers to authenticate the psychological suffering of women who endure the exhausting burdens of exploitation, backwardness, social isolation, physical disintegration and the patriarchal system. Women's Oppression and Resistance in *Girls Burn Brighter*:

A Butlerian Perspective Shobha Rao's novel *Girls Burn Brighter* offers a powerful exploration of the oppression and subjugation of women in a patriarchal society, while also presenting nuanced forms of female resistance and individuality. The story, set in the rural village of Indra Valli in India, centers on the lives of two young women, Poornima and Savitha whose experiences expose the harsh realities of gender based violence, poverty and systemic patriarchy. Through the lens of Judith Butler's poststructuralist feminist theory especially her ideas about gender performativity, subjectivity and power analysis reveals how Rao's characters both endure and contest the rigid structures imposed upon them.

4.1. Women's Oppression and Subjugation

The novel begins with Poornima's fraught relationship with her disabled mother and distant father, symbolizing the dual burden many women face: caring for others while being neglected themselves. Rao writes, "But Sunlight and moonlight weren't Poornima's only consciousness" (Rao, 2018, p.7), highlighting Poornima's emerging awareness of her oppressive environment. Poornima's fears about marriage and caretaking responsibilities, such as who will tend to her mother's Charkha (spinning wheel), symbolize the limited options available to women within the traditional family system.

Poornima's marriage is arranged without her consent, making the beginning of a life dominated by male authority and violence. The rituals surrounding her wedding appear to her as hollow security measures : "That's it! That's how we do, that's where safe" (Rao, 2018, p.41). Yet, this safety is a facade that masks intense control and abuse. Her husband scorns her as one of those audacious modern girls whose independence threatens him and his family (p. 43). Poornima's daily life is marked by exhausting labor, humiliation and sexual violence, described vividly as:

"the look of man: undressing her, tearing off her clothes, her innocence...biting at the tender heart of her and then laughing cruelly" (p.99).

This scene captures the intimate violence that patriarchal control exerts on a woman's body and selfhood.

Savittha's story echoes Poornima's suffering, but in a different context. Forced into a brothel like environment and subjected to repeated sexual exploitation, Savitha's life also

highlights the commodification and dehumanization of women in poverty. Rao depicts how these abuses fracture Savitha's psyche and sense of self:

"She was tired of deals. Every moment in women's life was a deal, a deal of her body... for her virginity and then for being and then for widowing" (p.194).

This commodification aligns with Butler's idea that patriarchal power disciplines female bodies and identities, reducing women to objects regulated by social norms and violence.

Moreover, Rao's portrayal of colorism and social status illustrates intersectional oppression, a concept Butler also emphasizes by rejecting a single, unified category of woman. Poornima reflects,

"If I had reasonable fair skin, my father might have found a better match for me: someone who wanted a wife, not an ox" (p.13).

Here Rao shows how racialized beauty standards compound gendered subjugation, reinforcing Butler's assertion that women's experiences are differentiated by race, class and ethnicity and cannot be understood as homogeneous.

Despite these brutal circumstances, *Girls Burn Brighter* is not merely a tale of victimhood. Instead Rao portrays female resistance as complex and multifaceted, deeply embedded in the characters struggles for survival and self-definition. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is particularly useful here: gender is not fixed identity but a repeated performance shaped by power. When Poornima and Savitha refuse to accept their assigned roles passively, they challenge the very norms that constrain them.

Savitha embodies this resistance early on. Her determination to support her family financially defies traditional gender roles: "I could make us more money" (Rao, 2018, p.16). She also asserts her agency against harassment, telling Poornima to "don't look down, look up" (p.25), encouraging pride and resilience in the face of male aggression. Savitha's retelling of the story of an elephant overwhelmed by a small crow "No elephant can be too big, only then no elephant can do you harm" (p.54) _symbolizes the potential power of marginalized women to dismantle patriarchal dominance, echoing Butler's call to disrupt normalized power relations.

The novel's central message about women's strength through solidarity resonates with Butler's views on identity as relational and performative. Poornima's assertion, "All we had to do was stand closer. As if, against fate, against war, two bodies...were greater than one" (p.319), affirms that female empowerment comes not only from individual courage but collective resistance. This echoes Butler's idea that identities are constituted

through social relations and transformative political action arises from challenging hegemonic norms together.

Rao's depiction of women refusing to conform to essentialist and fixed roles reflects Butler's critique of traditional feminism's tendency to universalize woman as a category. Poornima's rebellious question, "What do I? What do I want?" (p.93), signifies a profound interrogation of the prescribed paths women are expected to follow. When her father insists, "Don't be absurd" (p.95), he represents the social forces that deny women autonomy over their desires and futures.

By illustrating women's refusal to accept their oppressive circumstances as natural or inevitable, Rao aligns with Butler's emphasis on the subversive potential of gender performativity. Poornima and Savitha's journeys represent an affirmation of alternative ways of being "affirmation deviating from the tradition of nonconformity" as Rao's notes. Their survival is not passive endurance but active struggle to reclaim agency.

Butlerian Insights Judith Butler's theory critically reframes the discussion of oppression and resistance by emphasizing that gender is performative, produced and sustained through repeated acts within a regulatory matrix of power. In *Girls Burn Brighter*, the forced marriage, sexual violence and social roles imposed on Poornima and Savitha are not simply individual tragedies but manifestations of a pervasive system that governs gendered behavior. Butler also argues that women cannot be treated as a single homogeneous group because differences in race, class and other factors create multiple, intersecting axes of oppression. Rao's narrative confirms this by showing how Poornima's darker skin, rural poverty and caste status intersect to marginalize her in unique ways from Savitha, who faces a different set of hardships in brothel and as a migrant. Moreover, Butler's notion of subversion through performativity explains how the female characters enact forms of resistance even while constrained by their circumstances. The novel's portrayal of female solidarity and self-assertion reveals how women disrupt patriarchal power not only through grand political gestures but everyday acts of courage resisting abuse, seeking education, refusing silence and dreaming of freedom. As Rao puts it, women "take the reins of their destiny into their own hands" (p.319), embodying Butler's vision of gender as a site of contestation and transformation. This resistance refuses the identity imposed by patriarchy and asserts a fluid, evolving subjectivity that challenges the norms.

5. Conclusion

Girls Burn Brighter powerfully dramatizes the entwined realities of women's oppression and resistance in deeply patriarchal society, illustrating how poverty, violence

and social norms restrict female agency. Yet, through the characters of Poornima and Savitha, Shobha Rao also celebrates the resilience, courage and solidarity that women embody as they struggle for selfhood and freedom. Judith Butler's feminist theory help us understand these dynamics by highlighting how gender is a performance shaped by power, how identities are multiple and interesting and how resistance can take many forms, including the subversion of dominant norms. Rao's novel, therefore, is not only poignant story of suffering but a story of suffering but a compelling call to recognize and honor women's ongoing fight to burn brighter despite the forces that seek to extinguish them.

This research reveals that gender is fundamentally a social and cultural construct rather than a natural or inherent identity, shaped and maintained through discourses that uphold patriarchal systems by positioning women as the "other." The study highlights the intersectional nature of gender oppression, demonstrating that experiences of inequality vary significantly depending on cultural, social and racial contexts. For example, white women often occupy relatively privileged positions compared to marginalized groups such as disadvantaged African women. Postmodern feminism's rejection of universal Western feminist narratives is central to understanding gender inequality as embedded within unequal power relations that shift according to specific social contexts. The research further identifies how gender inequality becomes normalized through cultural practices and discourses that naturalize women's oppression and objectification. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is crucial to this analysis, illustrating that gender is not fixed category but a socially enforced performance, sustained through language and cultural expectations. This challenges traditional binary notions of masculinity and femininity, which underpin patriarchal oppression. Importantly, the research finds that women agency plays a pivotal role in resisting and transforming these oppressive structures. Women who actively assert their autonomy and make independent choices can disrupt patriarchal norms, while passive acceptance only perpetuates existing inequalities. The findings emphasize the need for women to consciously exert their rights and energies toward dismantling phallocentric power systems. Overall, this study contributes to feminist theory and praxis by underscoring the importance of critical engagement with gender as mutable discourse and empowering women to reclaim their roles beyond imposed patriarchal limits.

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