

Swimming against the Tide: A Feminist study of Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*

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Ever since its evolution human beings have always been meditative to seek the truth behind their existence. During this continuous search, they have traveled over the superficial universe and universe of an innermost self. Their quest has prepared them to ponder over certainty behind their existence and their identity. With these studies came the study of individual self and his struggle for place and identity. He began to question some of the fundamental beliefs about selves, and others' perceptions of him, and to form new perceptions. This has given way to diverse fields of studies such as psychology, sociology, political science. The field of Sociology has given further space for gender studies that define different roles in society that shares its space with Feminism. With the emergence of the term Feminism, there emerged a voice to create a balanced society for all living beings. The term has its diverse meaning that specifies gender roles in the social and political scenario.

Although the word *feminism* had been used during the mid-19th century as a synonym for '*faminty*'; it was first used to describe a political movement in 1894, in a British newspaper. Before becoming a social movement it had cast its shadows along time ago in literary creations. According to Peter Berry firstly Mary Wollstonecraft in her work *A Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792) discussed male writers and the portrayal of women in their works. With this, she initiated the study of the role of women in society through literature. Her others successors were Oliver Schreiner in her *Women and Labour* (1911) and Virginia Woolf in *Room of Her Own* (1929). These two feminists have vividly portrayal the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood. Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), described depiction of women characters in novels of D.H. Lawrence. Other male writer's works that have contributed in this field are John Stuart's *The Subjection of women* (1869) and Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of Family* (1884).

Feminism as a movement is a collection of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for women. It mainly focuses on women's issues and behavior. Feminism is generally perceived as a political agenda that developed in the United States after the 1960's. Elaine Showalter, in her book *Sexual Anarchy: Gender at Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1990) outlines a history of the sexes and the crises, themes, and problems associated with the battle for sexual supremacy and identity. In her another work, she has detected gradual advancement of this awareness in literature. She has divided it into three phases. The First phase is named *feminine phase* (1840-80) in which women artists copied dominated male artistic norms and aesthetic standards; then *feminist phase* (1880-1920) in which radical and often separatist

positions are maintained; finally a *female phase* (1920 onwards) which looked particularly at female writing and female experience.

It has steadily gained a number of connotations and also has invited a large number of critical theories variously labelled as *Marxist feminism*, *psycho analytical feminism*, *socialist feminism*, *radical feminism*, *French feminism*, etc. what is relevant at this juncture as far as feminist concepts are concerned is to feel, to know, and to understand the predicament and Dilemma of women within the context of the society and culture to which they belong. This can be defined as feminism because such an ideology creates a conscious awareness of women's problem.

Feminists are forced with the question of identity, the problem of language, the theme of displacement, and the sense of loss. The problem of language is intensified in feminist writing because women in society are always the *other and the second sex*. Most writings dealing with women assumes a universality, a women's group bonded together in their system of oppression and suppression race and society are deemphasized in such writings, and the major assumption is that men are the perpetrators of violence and domination, whereas women are the victim and subjects of these atrocities. *Historian* and *activist Cheris Kramarare* once famously remarked that feminism is the radical notion that women are human beings. In analyzing the implications of femininity, Butler (1999-1929) argues that "the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category woman has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'Women' are constructed". However, Ann Oakley makes it clear that one is either male or female in biological terms but socialization processes may force or pressure one to become masculine or feminine. This is supported by De Beauvoir's (2011) intimation that "one is not born a woman, one becomes one" Though she makes this statement in relation to the oppression and marginalization of the female gender, it nonetheless presupposes that masculinities and femininities are socially and culturally constructed thus there is no fixed state of being male or female. Feminism cannot forever be connected to the establishment of equality between the sexes. In the words of Paolo Palo Freiere feminism is, "One group oppresses another when the first group names and determines the other's existence, allowing the second group no power to define its existence for itself". Each individual's interests may be determined by their social positions and/or cultural identities. With this recognition comes the need for equity in the treatment of individuals with different gender identities. For this to happen, different approaches may be needed depending on the different cultures.

Further development in this interest is Fourth Wave Feminism that began around in 2012. Its main focus is on the representation of woman self on social media. According to feminist scholar Prudence Chamberlain, the focus of the fourth wave is justice for women and also opposition to sexual harassment and violence against women. Fourth-wave feminism is "defined by technology", according to Kira Cochrane, "and is characterized particularly by the use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr, and blogs such as Feministing to challenge misogyny and further gender equality."

One of these feminist writers is Shobha Rao. This 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's quest for self. *Girls Burn Brighter* novel is set in India- America. It's a tale of friendship between two girls named Pornima and Savitha. This story is a depiction of human brutality, rape, prostitution, and human trafficking. While adapting the story of the friendship between two girls, novel shares many aspects of society. It discusses the inability of many institutions like marriage, family, and politics to provide equality and social security to women. The Story also depicts the prevailing corruption in various institutions of society. But it sets an example of courage and tough spirit of its main characters who despite many hurdles flourish out of critical circumstances and survive to reach their destination. They survive the circumstances where others give up and compromise.

The novel in India is set in village Indravalli in Andhra Pradesh. The atmosphere of poverty is evoked with great skills. It is full of details of landscapes and seasons around the village: "Piles of trash also lined the huts, sniffed occasionally by a stray dog or a pig hungry enough to withstand the heat... Beads of sweat dripped down Poornima's back. Clung like mist to her scalp". Language is simple and fluid. The Novel narrated in alternative sections shifts between Pornima and Savitha and the circumstances they were going through. Two girls by surviving rape, oil attacks, forcibly drug consumption, enforced prostitution represents thousands of girls who somewhere don't express themselves and dies in seclusion. The novel shares a feminist concern of courage of two girls who stand for who they are and set an example of true friendship and courage. They sacrifice everything to live the life they had dreamt together.

Girls Burn Brighter starts with an introduction to *Indravalli*, the native place of two of its main characters Pornima and Savitha. The first section explains the mandir Indravalli Kunda situating near the village. The tale of a journalist meeting an old woman is set as a narrative hook. This tale confers the primary concern of discussing the cultural value of a son and a daughter. Where journalist asks an old lady by pointing on trees around her hut if those trees are her sons. The lady denies and replies very gently that those are her daughters.

The first section 'Indravalli' is a platform on which the whole story is set. The author describes its physical landscapes including houses, river, and mandir near the village. The people living in the village belongs to the Weaver community.

The signs of industrialization and modernization are clearly mentioned by depicting weavers hardly managing their business. As its consequence, the village illustrates a landscape of poverty. Poornima's father told her when they were talking about her marriage to a farmer family for her better future. He said: "Weaving is dying. It's death. I heard they have fancy machines now"(17)

The main concern of writer is to depict cultural aspects of community and role of women in it. She places women against stereotype cultural customs and rituals and defines the role of family and society in practicing those customs. The writer puts a woman as individual standing against that culture that nullifies her identity. Writer depicts institutions of marriage, family society, and politics practicing those stereotype where a woman is not treated as a human. The course of the novel depicts two women's attempt to go against usual social traditions to live their own life. The fight to overcome unfavorable conditions to outshine to the world of their dreams ends in the end.

The first chapter begins with an introduction to Poornima and her family. Her mother was on death bed battling against cancer. In the first illustration, the writer has given the treatment of girls in society. In that community of weavers, like all, other communities' birth of a girl was not considered auspicious. When Poornima asked the why she was named after the full moon. Her father said that it was in hope of getting a baby boy. He replied: "Your mother had a dream, a few days after you were born. A sadhu came to her in the dream, and he said if we named you Poornima, we would have a boy next"(P-6). Same was in case of Savitha who didn't know her date of birth because it was not a routine to record the date of birth of a girl in their village. When Poornima asked why she was named after sun. She said that she was born on the day of the solar eclipse. Her mother named her Savitha with a hope that sun would not trouble them during her next pregnancy.

Novelist's next concern is the depiction of the tradition of marriage. The main target is the course of matchmaking and the custom of dowry. It is illustrated that women don't play any role in their match-making. They are not even asked what type of man they want as a husband. In the novel after the death of Poornima's mother, her father started making arrangements for her marriage. Ramayyaa village match-maker was called for this. The way the girls and boys were selected, was very peculiar. At first, when father introduced her daughter for marriage, he related her to an ox. His purpose to relating her an animal was to make clear her value as a hard worker. He said: "... I told Ramayya, I told him, Look at her. Just look at her. Strong as an ox, she is an ox. Forget oxen, she could plow the fields" (P-12). He also said that the family the concerned needed many soon that is why they were marrying their son. Writer depicts that even society doesn't play a fair role in the custom of marriage. Savitha's marriage was fixed with Poornima's father only for the reason that he raped her. Rather than punishing the attempt of rape by a man, village *Panchayat* decides marriage of Savitha with Poornima's father. Another incident that depicts an image of women is when Poornima went to doctor's clinic after oil attack to get treatment. The

doctor said: "Your husband won't leave you. As long as you have proper breasts, a man won't leave you" (138).

Other main concern of novelist is the custom of dowry. In the society, the dowry was the only qualification to be a bride. The girls were supposed to be humble at her husband's house. The people who come to see her make it clear in their first meeting. When they come to their home, they asked Poornima to sing a song. Poornima refused to do so. After some time her aunt takes her to the room and makes it clear: "You fool..... Who will marry someone so wicked? It has nothing to do with whether you can sing, you fool. They just want to make it certain that you will *listen*. That you'll be obedient. And now they know you're wicked"(41). After some days they send a message of rejection because they want extra dowry than that was offered by Poornima's father.

After that Ramayya the village matchmaker brings one more offer for her. The groom, Kishore was working as an accountant in a local firm. The amount of dowry and jewelry was fixed. Poornima had not met groom before marriage, even he didn't try to meet her. Everything went according to plan. Savitha also helped in making arrangements. Somehow Poornima's father couldn't arrange the promised sum of money. Poornima's mother-in-laws started irritating her for not paying promised dowry. Her mother-in-law started torturing her mentally by reminding her that it was dowry that was more important to them, not she. She started taunting her. One day when she was drinking water, she said: "You think it's free? You think the water is free? The pump we installed cost three thousand rupees. So you wouldn't have to go to the well. And where do you think that we got three thousand rupees? Where? Not from your father, not from him. That for sure. The Thief. Both of you. Thieves"(125). When her sister-in-law's marriage was canceled, her mother in law blamed her for being a curse on the family. She said: "Get out of this house. It's you. It's because of you, they canceled the wedding. You are a curse on this family. It's all because of you"(127).

Poornima and Savitha gradually developed a kind of strong relationship, as it were their circumstance that made them work together. After the death of Poornima's mother, she was bound to work on the place of her mother. On the other side, Savitha's family was too poor to continue weaving business. She started working with Poornima's father. As the consequence of living together, within a little time, they developed an intense understanding. They used to do all the household work together. People came to know about their relationship when they were teased by village boys at the village well. While coming back home, some boys encircled them. Savitha defends Poornima when they teased them and asked her to choose anyone of them. She said: "I choose her"(25). They started caring for each other. The thing that was common in them was that they wanted to overcome their circumstances. The proof of their bonding is that even after years of separation Poornima went in search of Savitha and

Savitha always kept a piece of Poornima's sari safe with her till the end.

They always had an urge to live life on their own terms. They wanted to live the kind of life completely different from the life given to them by their current society. Poornima was not liked by others because of her dark complexion. She wanted to be fair to get married in a better home. When boys teased them on their way to well, they called her ugly. Poornima always wanted to improve herself in order to get the life of her dreams. We get the proof of it as the novel develops. Even after getting a permanent burnt mark on the face, she didn't lose her optimism. She had already learned Accounting from Kishore's work papers. She learned Spoken English to become a *shepherd* (the term used in the novel for people who accompany people to another country). Both of her skills helped her to get out of the fatal trap of Guru.

The proof of Savitha's tough spirit is her stubbornness. She always urged to work hard to survive. Firstly she worked extra hours to fulfill *sari* orders. After being raped, she ran away rather than got married and live the life full of shame. At Vijayawada before getting into the trap of Guru the wicked smuggler, she tried her best to find a suitable job. During this, she constantly tried her hard to pursue the luxury of eating a banana with rice and curd. At the brothel, she worked extra hours to earn a banana for her meal. She did not lose hope even after losing one hand. She faced every adverse situation very courageously and flew away from the clutches of Guru.

During living together, Poornima and Savitha had dreamt of an ideal world away from the world they were living at that time. The place of their dreams was considered free from all the problems they were facing as a woman. One day while going back home Savitha told Poornima that she had heard an old woman talking about a magical place near Brahmaputra River. It was an island that seemed to them an ideal place. Savitha explained it as the old man told her. She said, "You know how Krishna plays flute for her Radha, wooing her at twilight, just as the cows are coming home? It is that sound. That is the sound of the island. Flute song. Everywhere you go there is the fruit, and there is a flute song. Following you like a lover." P(27). In America where she met Mohan (her abductor's son) and started spending time with him. While asking about him she came to know about a place exactly like the place of her dreams. She asked him if that place was like a flute song. Mohan said: "Spearfish Canyon. We just drove through, but I remember it was perfect. It was the most perfect place I have ever been" (240). After hearing that she asked again: "Was it like flute song"(241)? Then she started her journey for that place. When Poornima came in her search, she took Mohan in her confidence. At last, when they met they had been heading towards that Spearfish Canyon. The novel ends without any description of that place. It ends with the end of their search for each other.

Works Cited

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