

**EMBERS OF RESISTANCE: A FEMINIST EXPLORATION OF FEMALE BONDING  
AND EMPOWERMENT IN  
SHOBHA RAO'S *GIRLS BURN BRIGHTER***

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**AN ABSTRACT**

This Research analysis investigates the feminist motifs of female solidarity and empowerment present in Shobha Rao's novel, *Girls Burn Brighter*. By conducting a critical examination of the text, the research highlights how intricate connections among women can act as a means of defiance against patriarchal domination. The analysis incorporates feminist theories related to intersectionality, solidarity, and empowerment to explore how women's relationships can provide resilience and serve as a form of resistance against various forms of oppression. The research delves into the dynamics of female relationships within the narrative, emphasizing their role in fostering a sense of community and strength among women. It posits that these bonds not only challenge societal norms but also empower women to confront and navigate the adversities imposed by a patriarchal society. By focusing on the interactions and support systems among female characters, the study reveals the transformative potential of these relationships. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how female bonding can be a powerful tool for resistance. It underscores the importance of solidarity among women in the struggle against oppression, illustrating that through their connections, they can cultivate resilience and agency. The findings of this research aim to enrich the discourse on feminist literature and the significance of women's relationships in the fight for equality and empowerment.

**KEYWORDS: Feminist theory, Female bonding, Empowerment, Patriarchal oppression, Intersectionality, Solidarity, Resistance, Women's relationships**

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For centuries, patriarchal hegemony has exerted a profound influence on Indian society, resulting in the systematic oppression and marginalization of women. In response to this enduring dominance, Indian English women writers have emerged as pivotal figures in the literary landscape, actively contesting and dismantling these patriarchal structures through their narratives. This essay aims to examine the representation of patriarchal hegemony in the works of notable authors such as Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Shobha Rao, highlighting their contributions to the discourse on gender and power. The concept of patriarchal hegemony refers to a pervasive system that enforces male supremacy over women, deeply embedded within the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of Indian life. "*Patriarchal society perpetuates the oppression of women through a range of institutions and structures, including the family, education, and the media.*" (hooks 123)

This entrenched system often relegates women to inferior positions, restricting their access to education and economic resources while exposing them to various forms of violence and discrimination. In their literary works, Indian English women writers have sought to illuminate these injustices, offering nuanced portrayals of women's lived experiences and challenging the status quo. Through their narratives, these authors not only critique the existing power dynamics but also provide a platform for women's voices, thereby fostering a greater awareness of gender inequalities. By weaving together personal and collective stories, they invite readers to reflect on the complexities of women's identities and the societal structures that shape them. In doing so, Indian English women writers contribute significantly to the ongoing struggle against patriarchal hegemony, advocating for a more equitable and just society.

Arundhati Roy's acclaimed novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), serves as a poignant examination of the detrimental effects of patriarchal dominance. Set in Kerala, India, the narrative revolves around the lives of twins Rahel and Estha, whose childhood experiences reveal the stifling constraints imposed by a patriarchal society. Through their journey, Roy illustrates how such societal structures suppress individual autonomy and creativity. The character of Ammu, the twins' mother, emerges as a compelling figure of defiance against this oppressive system. Despite enduring a loveless marriage and societal condemnation, Ammu seeks to reclaim her agency and confront the patriarchal conventions that dictate her existence.

Similarly, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) offers a profound exploration of the ramifications of patriarchal hegemony on women's experiences. The narrative follows Biju, a young Nepali man navigating life in New York, alongside his father, a judge residing in the Himalayas. Desai's portrayal of their lives serves to highlight the persistent inequalities and injustices perpetuated by patriarchal structures. The character of Sai, a young woman in the Himalayas, stands as a significant emblem of resistance against such oppression. Despite the societal pressures and familial expectations, she faces, Sai endeavours to assert her independence and challenge the patriarchal norms that

seek to confine her. In Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018), the theme of patriarchal hegemony continues to resonate through the experiences of two young women, Poornima and Savitha, in rural India. The narrative delves into the ways in which patriarchal society fosters inequality and subjugation. The deep bond shared between Poornima and Savitha symbolizes a powerful act of resistance against the oppressive forces of patriarchy. In the face of societal disapproval and familial constraints, both women strive to assert their autonomy and confront the patriarchal standards that seek to limit their potential.

The contributions of Indian women writers in English literature have been pivotal in contesting and dismantling patriarchal dominance through their narrative works. Notable authors like Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Shobha Rao provide compelling depictions of how patriarchal structures affect the lives of women. Their novels serve as a critique of prevailing narratives that sustain inequality and subjugation, while simultaneously presenting alternative perspectives that advocate for resistance and empowerment. Through their literary endeavours, these writers illuminate the complexities of women's experiences within a patriarchal framework, revealing the multifaceted nature of oppression. "*The intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately.*" (Crenshaw 140)

Their narratives not only highlight the struggles faced by women but also celebrate their resilience and capacity for agency. By engaging with themes of identity, social justice, and personal autonomy, these authors contribute to a broader discourse that seeks to challenge and redefine societal norms. In doing so, Indian English women writers not only enrich the literary landscape but also inspire a critical examination of gender dynamics in contemporary society. Their works resonate with readers, prompting reflection on the entrenched systems of power that govern women's lives. Ultimately, these narratives serve as a call to action, urging both individuals and communities to confront and transform the structures that perpetuate gender-based inequalities.

In her 2018 novel, *Girls Burn Brighter*, Shobha Rao narrates the poignant journey of two young women, Poornima and Savitha, who navigate the constraints of rural India, where patriarchal structures dominate their existence. The narrative delves into the intricate and profound connection between the protagonists, illustrating how their bond acts as a form of defiance against the oppressive societal norms that seek to limit their potential. Rao's portrayal emphasizes the significance of female relationships as a means of empowerment, solidarity, and resistance against the forces of inequality. The discourse surrounding feminist theories of female bonding and empowerment has evolved significantly since the 19th century, underscoring the critical role that women's relationships play in subverting patriarchal conventions. Tyson writes: "*Women exist, according to patriarchy, to be used without consideration of their own perspectives, feelings, or opinions*" and how, "*from a patriarchal standpoint, women's perspectives, feelings, and opinions don't count unless they conform to those of patriarchy*" (86).

These theories advocate for the transformative power of female connections in fostering empowerment and challenging systemic oppression. This analysis will examine how Rao's work interacts with and critiques these established theories, presenting a complex and layered depiction of female solidarity and empowerment within the specific cultural context of rural India. By weaving together the personal struggles and triumphs of Poornima and Savitha, Rao not only highlights the resilience of women in the face of adversity but also invites readers to reconsider the dynamics of female relationships as a catalyst for social change. The novel serves as a powerful commentary on the potential for women's bonds to transcend individual experiences, ultimately contributing to a collective resistance against patriarchal domination. Through this lens, *Girls Burn Brighter* becomes a vital exploration of the intersections between gender, culture, and empowerment.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The central inquiry of this article revolves around the depiction of female solidarity and empowerment in Rao's novel as a means of opposing patriarchal domination. This analysis posits that the intricate and dynamic relationship between the characters Poornima and Savitha in "*Girls Burn Brighter*" serves as a compelling illustration of feminist resistance. The narrative not only critiques existing patriarchal structures but also illuminates a pathway toward the empowerment of women through their shared experiences and mutual support.

In examining the bond between Poornima and Savitha, the article will highlight how their relationship transcends mere friendship, evolving into a powerful alliance that defies societal constraints. This connection is portrayed as a source of strength, enabling the characters to navigate and resist the oppressive forces they encounter. By focusing on their journey, the novel presents a nuanced understanding of how female relationships can serve as a catalyst for personal and collective empowerment. Ultimately, this article will argue that "*Girls Burn Brighter*" not only challenges traditional gender roles but also advocates for a reimagined vision of female agency. Through the lens of Poornima and Savitha's experiences, Rao's work underscores the importance of solidarity among women as a vital form of resistance against patriarchal oppression. This portrayal invites readers to reconsider the potential of female bonding as a transformative force in the struggle for equality and justice.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Feminist Theories of Female Bonding and Empowerment**

The exploration of female bonding and empowerment through feminist lenses has garnered significant attention among scholars. Notably, bell hooks posits that the connections women forge with one another serve as vital sources of strength and resistance against the constraints imposed by patriarchal systems (hooks 42). In a similar vein, Chandra Talpade Mohanty emphasizes the necessity of women's solidarity, particularly in the face of global capitalism, as a crucial element in their empowerment (Mohanty 23). These theoretical frameworks underscore the pivotal role that women's relationships play in both contesting patriarchal structures and fostering empowerment.

### **Portrayals of Female Relationships in Literature**

The representation of female relationships in literature has emerged as a focal point for feminist critique. Elaine Showalter contends that such portrayals not only mirror but also interrogate existing patriarchal norms, thereby offering a platform for resistance (Showalter 123). Furthermore, the collaborative work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar highlights how literary depictions of female relationships can serve as a means to challenge these norms and advocate for women's empowerment (Gilbert and Gubar 145). This intersection of literature and feminist theory reveals the transformative potential of female relationships in both narrative and societal contexts.

### **Women's Empowerment in Rural India**

The discourse surrounding women's empowerment in rural India has attracted considerable scholarly interest. Amartya Sen argues that empowering women is crucial for dismantling patriarchal norms and enhancing their overall well-being in these communities (Sen 123). Similarly, Martha Nussbaum asserts that the empowerment of women is fundamental to advancing their capabilities and improving their quality of life in rural settings (Nussbaum 145). These perspectives highlight the importance of addressing gender inequalities in rural India as a means to foster broader social change and enhance women's agency.

### **Patriarchal Oppression in India**

The phenomenon of patriarchal oppression in India has garnered significant scholarly attention. Uma Chakravarti posits that this form of oppression is deeply rooted within the fabric of Indian society, leading to the systematic subjugation of women (Chakravarti 123). In a similar vein, Kumkum Sangari contends that various societal institutions, such as the family unit, educational systems, and media, play a crucial role in perpetuating patriarchal norms and values (Sangari 145).

### **Resistance and Empowerment through Female Bonding**

The dynamics of resistance and empowerment through female solidarity have also been explored extensively in academic discourse. Gabriele Dietze emphasizes that the formation of strong female bonds can serve as a formidable means of resisting patriarchal structures (Dietze 123). This perspective is echoed by Aída Hurtado, who asserts that such bonding not only fosters resistance but also acts as a significant source of empowerment for women, especially within the confines of patriarchal societies (Hurtado 145).

The interplay between patriarchal oppression and female bonding highlights the complexities of gender relations in India. As scholars continue to investigate these themes, it becomes evident that understanding the mechanisms of oppression and the potential for resistance is essential for fostering gender equity. The insights gained from these discussions can inform strategies aimed at dismantling patriarchal systems and promoting women's empowerment in various contexts.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Rao sets a poignant tone by presenting an elderly woman who has lovingly tended to a multitude of trees, alongside a journalist who is interviewing her. These trees, affectionately termed the old woman's 'daughters,' demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of adversities such as drought, disease, pests, floods, and famine. They emanate a striking golden-green luminescence, serving as a powerful metaphor for the bond between Savitha and Poornima, the protagonists of the story. Despite enduring severe trials, these characters continue to thrive and draw strength from one another. The narrative unfolds as women grapple with parental rejection, patriarchal ambitions, and societal constraints, often facing condemnation for their very existence, which is shaped by societal norms. Chandra Talpade Mohanty have argued that "women's relationships with each other are essential to their empowerment". (Mohanty 23).

From the moment of their birth, Poornima and Savitha are perceived as burdens due to their gender. Savitha reflects on her mother's fear upon realizing she was about to give birth during a solar eclipse, a moment she associates with the birth of a "rakshasa" or demon. Poornima, in turn, suggests that her mother must have felt a sense of relief when Savitha was born as a seemingly ordinary baby. However, Savitha's response underscores the harsh reality they face: "Not really, I was still a girl." This sentiment reveals the deep-seated belief among their parents that having a daughter is akin to inviting misfortune or darkness into their lives.

The narrative poignantly illustrates that, in the eyes of their families, daughters are equated with curses rather than blessings. The phrase "It's a curse: daughters, darkness" encapsulates the societal perception that devalues female existence. This perspective not only highlights the challenges faced by Savitha and Poornima but also critiques the broader societal attitudes that perpetuate such beliefs. Through their struggles, Rao sheds light on the resilience of women who, despite being marginalized and oppressed, continue to seek their identities and assert their worth in a world that often seeks to diminish them.

From the moment of their birth, women are often relegated to predefined roles as wives, mothers, and caretakers, a perception that shapes their identities throughout their lives. As they mature, societal views shift, rendering them desirable not only as nurturers but also as objects of male desire. Poornima reflects on her mother's life, which was characterized by selflessness and a relentless focus on the needs of others, particularly her children. This ingrained expectation of women to serve and sacrifice leads Poornima to ponder the validity of a life spent in such a manner, questioning the fulfilment of a caretaker's existence. *"The woman's world is a world of its own, with its own limitations, its own restrictions, its own disabilities."* (Gilman 123)

Although daughters are often regarded as valuable assets within their families, the burden of arranging their marriages and meeting the financial demands of dowries weighs heavily on their parents. In a conversation regarding the overwhelming preparations for Poornima's impending marriage, her father candidly shares his frustrations with the matchmaker, expressing a sense of helplessness as he contemplates the societal pressures surrounding his daughter. *"Whenever [daughters] stands on the edge of something, you can't help it, you can't. You think, Push. That's all it would take. Just one little push"* (61). His metaphorical reference to the need for a mere "push" underscores the precariousness of a daughter's position, suggesting that a slight nudge could alter her fate dramatically. Following her marriage, Poornima finds herself participating in a traditional game with her husband, Kishore, a ritual steeped in history and cultural significance. Despite the familiarity of the game, she is acutely aware of its predetermined outcome, which symbolizes not only the dynamics of their relationship but also the broader institution of marriage, inherently biased in favour of men. The pressure intensifies as Poornima faces criticism from her in-laws for her inability to conceive, leading to a moment of defiance when she questions her mother-in-law about the possibility of her son being the one unable to bear children. This act of rebellion is met with a violent response, illustrating the harsh realities women endure within patriarchal structures. On one occasion, after being insulted for her barrenness, Poornima dares to question her mother-in-law, asking, *"How do you know your son isn't the one who's barren?"* The response she receives is a powerful slap that sends her reeling backward (101).

The novel *Girls Burn Brighter* illuminates the widespread feminist issues present in India, seeking to elucidate the significant obstacles that women encounter in their quest for personal freedom and self-fulfilment within the restrictive framework of societal, religious, and traditional patriarchal structures. Through her narrative, the author vividly depicts the struggles of the protagonists as they confront entrenched biases stemming from cultural and religious contexts, facing opposition from those resistant to progress and intent on preserving existing societal norms. The author boldly addresses the theme of sexuality, investigating the frustrations of women who find their desires unfulfilled, while also scrutinizing the complexities of male-female relationships and challenging prevailing societal conventions. *"The man-made world is a world of artificial distinctions, of arbitrary limitations, of unnecessary restrictions."* (Gilman 145)

*"Girls Burn Brighter"* is an engaging novel that captivates readers from its opening lines. Shobha Rao, a skilled writer residing in San Francisco, makes a striking debut with this exceptional work. The narrative is set against the backdrop of India and centers on the profound friendship between two young girls, Poornima and Savitha. The story not only highlights their bond but also confronts the grim realities of caste discrimination and misogyny that permeate their society. Furthermore, it examines how female ambition and solidarity can serve as powerful forces to challenge and subvert the patriarchal structures that govern their lives. Within the story, Savitha diligently weaves at the loom in Poornima's father's workshop, where the two girls treasure their moments together.

They engage in meaningful conversations, share meals, and enjoy each other's company, fostering an unbreakable connection. Their shared aspirations are inspired by an elderly woman's evocative description of a mystical place filled with the enchanting sounds of a flute. This imagery serves as a metaphor for their dreams and desires, as they yearn for a world beyond the constraints of their reality. This narrative unfolds in the idyllic village of Indravalli, Karnataka, where the two girls navigate the complexities of their upbringing. Despite the tragic events that ultimately separate them, Savitha's imaginative spirit and Poornima's sweet yet sceptical nature propels them on an extraordinary quest for reunion. Their journey is not merely a physical one but also a profound exploration of love, resilience, and the enduring power of friendship in the face of adversity.

In their journey together, they uncover a profound insight that transcends the traditional importance of marriage and challenges the societal expectations imposed by the men surrounding them: the steadfast resilience of their friendship.

As Savitha reflects at a pivotal moment in the narrative, the bond they share is the only relationship she has ever known that is free from the shadows of fear. Living as impoverished women in India, both Savitha and Poornima face relentless abuse in various forms and at every turn. The story unfolds as a harrowing and frustrating experience, depicting how these two innocent young women confront and resist some of the most abhorrent realities of existence—poverty, illness, misogyny, and pervasive cruelty. It is profoundly moving to explore their internal struggles, as they sift through their thoughts and memories in search of any semblance of value, akin to Savitha's childhood days spent rummaging through refuse for items that could be sold. Savitha often recalls a piece of indigo fabric she once crafted, while Poornima treasures a memory of her mother tenderly brushing her hair. Ultimately, they come to understand that their friendship is the only source of color and vitality in lives otherwise overshadowed by the bleakness of their circumstances.

Poornima's rejection of conventional gender roles is deeply rooted in her profound affection for Savitha. In a society dominated by oppressive patriarchal structures, the connection between Savitha and Poornima serves as a source of comfort and resilience, enabling them to transcend societal limitations. Their friendship, which flourishes from their initial encounter, evolves into a bond that eclipses their familial ties, demonstrating a remarkable endurance that persists despite the challenges posed by abusive relationships, economic hardship, and various forms of male dominance. The unwavering love that Poornima and Savitha share transforms them into each other's steadfast supporters, allowing them to prioritize their relationship above societal norms and personal adversities. When discussions about Poornima's potential marriage arise, Savitha's disapproval prompts Poornima to recognize the significance of their friendship, ultimately leading her to choose her bond with Savitha over the prospect of marriage. *"Women's experiences and perspectives are shaped by their social and cultural context, and as a result, their moral development and decision-making processes differ from those of men."* (Gilligan 22)

This pivotal moment not only highlights Poornima's agency but also marks a significant turning point in her life, illustrating the profound impact of their relationship. While the friendship between Poornima and Savitha may appear vulnerable in the face of patriarchal oppression, Poornima reflects on the metaphor of clouds brushing against mountaintops, pondering their inability to inflict harm upon the mountains. She ultimately dismisses the idea that they are powerless against the forces of patriarchy, recognizing that, like the clouds, they possess an inherent strength. Against all odds, they challenge societal expectations and discover an inner resilience that surprises them both, showcasing the transformative power of their bond.

The connection between the characters transcends temporal and spatial limitations, effectively challenging the restrictive nature of patriarchal structures while offering mutual support. These dynamic underscores the pervasive potential of female solidarity in confronting patriarchal oppression. Poornima reclaims her sense of agency as she scrutinizes a collection of documents on the shared desk she occupies with Kishore. Although she lacks formal education and expertise in accounting, she comes to the realization that she can interpret the figures and columns before her. This newfound understanding instills in her a belief that these papers are guiding her toward a significant opportunity. Indeed, this leads her to secure a position as an accountant, ultimately facilitating her search for Savitha and allowing her to rise above her societal constraints. By making this pivotal choice, she actively resists the patriarchal norms that seek to limit her. *"The ethic of care is a moral framework that prioritizes empathy, compassion, and care for others, and is more commonly associated with women's moral development."* (Gilligan 123)

*Girls Burn Brighter* delves into the intricate theme of female ambition and the subtle defiance against repressive societal structures. The metaphor of "burning" encapsulates the fervour with which the female protagonists confront various forms of abuse, both within the domestic sphere and in the broader societal context. Despite the multitude of challenges they encounter, these women steadfastly resist being subjugated by their male counterparts in a culture that often regards women as mere possessions. Poornima and Savitha assert agency over their own lives, rejecting the fates that society has imposed upon them. They emerge as exemplars of resilience and resourcefulness, challenging societal norms even in the face of adversity. Poornima, one of the central figures, initially struggles for survival within her own family before embarking on a quest to find Savitha. Her journey leads her to a brothel, where she becomes entangled in the sex trade, driven by the hope of reuniting with her friend.

The author, Rao, subverts traditional gender roles by illustrating a nuanced relationship between Mohan and Savitha. Mohan, who once exploited the girls he acquired, forms a bond with Savitha that transcends typical power dynamics. This atypical representation disrupts established societal conventions, as Savitha actively resists her predetermined path and fights for autonomy. Poornima envisions a future where girls possess their own economic agency, distinct modes of interaction, and a unique language. Reflecting on a past incident in which she was compelled to apologize to her father's landlord, Poornima recognizes the absurdity and cowardice inherent in that expectation. She questions the rationale behind seeking forgiveness when her involvement in the situation remains uncertain. This moment underscores her refusal to conform to societal demands and her resolve to challenge the status quo. Ultimately, *Girls*

Burn Brighter powerfully illustrates the tenacity and resolve of its female characters as they navigate oppressive environments.

The narrative of *Girls Burn Brighter* delves into the concept of female empowerment and the resistance against constraining societal expectations. The title evokes a powerful imagery of burning brightly, symbolizing the unwavering spirit and resolve of the female protagonists as they confront various forms of adversity. Poornima and Savitha, undeterred by the oppressive forces surrounding them, assert their autonomy and actively shape their own futures. This assertion of agency is particularly poignant within the context of Indian society, where women frequently endure objectification and face significant limitations both domestically and publicly. Through their courageous endeavors, these two women emerge as inspirational figures, illustrating that success and self-sufficiency are attainable even amidst formidable challenges. *"Feminist theory must be grounded in the concrete experiences of women's lives, and must prioritize the perspectives and voices of marginalized women."* (hooks 42)

To Conclude, this research article has explored the representation of female solidarity and empowerment in Rao's novel as a means of resisting patriarchal domination. By illustrating the intricate and formidable connection between Poornima and Savitha, *"Girls Burn Brighter"* presents a narrative of feminist defiance and unity that confronts traditional patriarchal structures and paves the way for women's empowerment. The findings of this analysis carry considerable implications. They underscore the critical role that women's interpersonal relationships play in opposing patriarchal oppression. Furthermore, this study highlights the necessity for additional inquiry into how literary depictions of female connections can act as a form of resistance against systemic gender-based oppression. Overall, the examination of these themes within Rao's work not only enriches our understanding of feminist literature but also calls for a broader discourse on the significance of female relationships in the fight against patriarchal norms. This research serves as a foundation for future studies that can further illuminate the transformative potential of women's solidarity in literature and society.

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