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## Invisible Wounds: Analyzing Women's Trauma in Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*

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**Abstract:** *The current research paper analyses Shobha Rao's Girls Burn Brighter. It examines the novel's portrayal of female trauma, which is frequently misinterpreted and not acknowledged due to systemic bias and societal norms. The researcher uses a feminist perspective, with a focus on understanding how societal norms and views shape the nature of trauma. It examines the societal structures that promote gender-specific trauma and contribute to the lack of comprehension and acceptance of female suffering. The paper explores "insidious trauma", delves into gender differences, and discusses "secret trauma" to highlight the inadequate representation of women's trauma due to the prevailing class often portraying themselves as victims at the expense of marginalized groups. The findings of the research emphasize the importance of viewing traumatic events beyond extreme occurrences and recognizing the impact of familiar and seemingly normal experiences. It aims to enhance the understanding of women's trauma, prompting the necessity to reconsider the established parameters of defining trauma.*

**Key Words:** Women's Trauma, Feminist Perspective, Societal Norms, Systemic Bias, Insidious Trauma, Secret Trauma, Gender Differences

### Introduction

Trauma literature deals with everyday distressing experiences faced by individuals. It shows how these experiences haunt its victims for the rest of their lives and distort their normal mental health. Trauma literature, initially, was primarily concerned with war and holocaust victims and the effects of these catastrophic events on their minds. But, later on, the scope of trauma literature broadened, and commonplace events were also included in trauma studies. These events might be in the form of child abuse, domestic violence, lack of parental care, rape, and so on. Fictional works such as novels deal with these issues in a profoundly emotional way. The novel *Girls Burn Brighter* by Shobha Rao depicts these concerns, focusing on the experiences faced by women in their daily lives at the hands of societal norms. Shobha Rao's debut novel portrays the persistent issues that women encounter in the form of domestic abuse, human trafficking, forced prostitution, physical and sexual violence, and desecration of women's rights. It is the story of two rural girls, Savitha and Poornima, who are physically tortured, mentally excruciated, and emotionally paralyzed. They come across inexorable malice in a cruel and challenging world where women are ignored and considered inferior beings. They live in a world reined by poverty and driven by despair, where individuals compete for survival. They develop a pessimistic perception of the community based on their traumatic encounters. Fathers, husbands, in-laws, strangers, intermediaries, and, more generally, men appear evil to them. In short, the novel *Girls Burn Brighter* vividly expresses the endless troubles faced by the two girls, the trauma they develop because of all their sufferings, and their strong determination to overcome the monstrosity of the system without losing hope.

### Problem Statement

Despite the societal and cultural progress made in recognizing the psychological trauma experienced by individuals, particularly women, there persists a gap in understanding and acknowledging the impacts of

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recurring instances of trauma that are frequently considered normal and ordinary. The problem lies in the existing framework for defining PTSD, which suggests that it arises from extraordinary events and overlooks the traumatic experiences of everyday life. This lack of recognition often causes the concealment and dismissal of these experiences, especially for women, and hinders the development of effective responses to support their mental well-being. The problem, therefore, is to reframe the perspective on trauma to encompass these ignored quotidian (each day) experiences and improve the recognition, understanding, and management of trauma in women.

## Research Objectives

This research intends to examine the nature of trauma endured by Savitha and Poornima in Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter* and investigates how these experiences are repeatedly misunderstood due to prevalent gender biases. It seeks to understand how deep-rooted patriarchal structures contribute to this misunderstanding, simultaneously diminishing female trauma and highlighting male experiences. Moreover, the study explores the underlying causes for the inadequate understanding and acceptance of female trauma as depicted in the novel. Through this analysis, the research aims to reveal the systemic issues that lead to the repetitive dismissal of women's traumatic experiences.

## Research Question

1. Why is the nature of women's trauma unique, and what are the factors contributing to its uniqueness in Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*?

## Significance of the Study

This paper will contribute to the literature on gender inequality by providing an in-depth analysis of the portrayal of female trauma in literature and its effects on societal perceptions. Exploring the trauma inflicted on Savitha and Poornima sheds light on the universal problem of gender-based discrimination and violence. Analyzing how societal norms contribute to the interpretation of trauma offers insights into ways societies evolve to better support each gender's distinct experiences. It informs the wider conversation on gender equality by emphasizing the need to understand and acknowledge female trauma as valid and significant in constructing societal standards. Through this study, the role in shaping perceptions of gender-specific trauma is better understood, potentially influencing future literary and academic engagements with these themes.

## Literature Review

Trauma theory deals with the mental perplexities of individuals affected by various violent circumstances in their daily lives. Many prominent figures, such as John Erichsen, Herman Oppenheim, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Pierre Janet, significantly contributed to this theory. This theory caught more attention from Sigmund Freud's work on "hysteria" after World War I (Sütterlin, 2020), while Cathy Caruth's contribution further broadened "the theoretical framework to include feminist, race, and postcolonial theory" (Balaev, 2018). This theory helps us understand the prolonged effects of a traumatic event and the survivor's reaction to it. Many postmodern novelists have written about the core concept of trauma in their works of fiction. Including many, *Girls Burn Brighter* by Shobha Rao is one such realistic novel that portrays the trauma of the main characters. The unique feature of Rao's novel is that it differentiates women's trauma from men's. Other perspectives of the novel have been explored by other researchers, which are given below.

Qamar et al. (2022), in their research article, explore the given novel from the theoretical viewpoints of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Pramod K. Nayar, and Lois Tyson. They focused on ideas concerning subaltern speech, agency, and the recovery of women subjected to patriarchy. Their paper analyzes how the characters in the novel tackle diverse instances of domination and aggression stemming from patriarchy. This work also shows how patriarchy has confined women to a submissive status for a long time and has manipulated them to accept every decision of men without question. This paper concludes that the main characters find strength in each other to confront the oppressive system (p. 1317).

In the research paper of Asif et al. (2021), the given novel is analyzed from the postmodern feminist standpoint. They develop their argument on the works of Judith Butler's concept of performativity, Helene Cixous's notion of feminine writing, and Chandra Mohanty's idea of stereotype and objectification. In their work, they highlight the constructed nature of gender challenge binary-based dichotomies and argue for the destabilization of patriarchal norms and the promotion of gender equality. Overall, the article provides a comprehensive analysis of the gender relations portrayed in the selected novels and offers insights into the potential for resistance and empowerment within a postmodern feminist framework. (131–8).

In her thesis, Rizky (2023) examines the aspects of oppression and intersectionality in *Girls Burn Brighter*. She uses Iris Young's theory of "five faces of oppression" and Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of "intersectionality" (p. 24). She adopts a sociological approach to construct her argument and points out oppression, marginalization, exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence faced by women in a patriarchal society. She also uses intersectionality to examine the experiences of marginalized groups, such as women in society. Her findings are that the main female characters of the novel face oppression, which is "influenced by the intersection of factors such as gender, social class, political power, and cultural representation" (p. 65).

Agarwal (2020) examines the given novel from a psychoanalytic perspective and observes how women suffer at the hands of patriarchy. This study highlights the "mental state of women who are bound to live in obscurity and are denied the complete recognition of their human identity" (p. 278). This work brings forth women's struggle for survival in the face of marginality and deprivation in a male-dominated society. Agarwal's research concludes that "the main characters [in the specified novel] adopt the method of affirmation diverting from the norm of non-compliance." Further, the paper reveals that "women enduring in impoverishment fundamentally carry the mental state of oppression" (p. 286).

These research works show how the novel is analyzed from various viewpoints. All of these works are valid in their own perspective, but none of these researches points out the psychic trauma faced by the novel's female protagonists, which leaves a research gap. Thus, to fill this gap, the present research paper explores the prolonged impacts of the harsh events faced by the protagonists of Shobha Rao's novel *Girls Burn Brighter* and how those events traumatize them and disrupt their normal lives.

## Theoretical Framework

Humans living in society suffer from trauma daily, but each individual's experience is different from the others based on various factors and the nature of trauma. Women's trauma is different based on social, cultural, and biological factors. In some cultures, women's trauma is neglected based on their social status. Women suffer from traumatic experiences that are considered normal by the dominant institutions of society. These experiences also occur within the range of normal domestic practices, such as domestic violence, verbal and sexual assault by loved ones, neglect by society, and psychic torture. These sets of experiences are categorized as secret, insidious, and everyday trauma. Women, in particular, are prone to secret and insidious traumas because of their lack of authority in society. They remain silent and endure the mental havoc privately, for they know that no one would believe them, and if believed, they would not be welcome in society anymore. Hence, it is important to understand the nature of women's trauma beyond the set standards of the dominant social institutions.

By employing a feminist perspective, we understand that the nature of trauma is restricted to and shaped by society's dominant groups. The dominant groups formulate such a discourse of "real" trauma in which they indicate themselves as victims instead of culprits. The consequence of such a biased discourse is that the sufferings and traumas of marginalized groups, such as women, are abandoned, whereas the sympathies and favours go to the prevailing class only. Due to this negligence, women are exposed to long-term psychic abnormalities, which, in turn, hampers their daily life activities and mental growth. As a result of the submissive status of women in rural culture, their traumas remain concealed and unexplored. The privately endured, hidden traumas that a feminist viewpoint brings to light are not the events in which dominant cultural forms and institutions are reflected and reinforced (Caruth, 1995, p.102).

To analyze the everyday experiences that are traumatic, Root (1992), as cited in Caruth, (1995), gives the concept of "insidious trauma", which refers to the events that do not seem to be injurious to physical



health but disrupt psychic health. Because of its seemingly nonviolent nature, the effects of such experiences are not considered traumatic. According to her model, any woman living in a culture where sexual assault is common and considered normal experiences insidious trauma. Consequently, the whole group(s) display certain signs of trauma even if they have not experienced it yet and develop a certain fright regarding certain situations, such as an approaching stranger. This model helps us to expand the vision of trauma to those traumatic events that are neglected by the overriding discourse.

Moreover, the experience of trauma varies from gender to gender, which is why there is a need to examine women's trauma in light of gender differences. Women's trauma is different from that of men in the sense that it mostly does "occur in secret", which is why Russell (1986) calls it "secret trauma." These experiences occur in familiar relations where women are physically harmed and forced into consensual abuse by their lovers, which, later after realization, is considered rape (Brown, 1989). Due to the complex nature of these relationships, women in society fear expressing and sharing their sufferings with others. These experiences are not unusual; they fall well within the "range of human experience" as they reflect the experiences of most women. They are private occurrences, often known only to the victim and offender (p. 101). As these events are confined to the victim only, they are the least understood.

Thus, it is seen that a feminist viewpoint brings into focus the lives of females, the concealed, private, everyday painful experiences, reminding us that traumatic events are within the normal human experience scope. Therefore, traumatic events are not required to be necessarily violent and extreme, such as wars, genocides, accidents, and natural disasters, but they are also familiar and seemingly normal events, such as verbal abuse, male gaze, taunts, and negligence. Confronted with this truth, we would then be compelled to expand our understanding of human reactions to include those that are considered common (p.110). Hence, to understand the perception of trauma in a more holistic manner, it is necessary to reconsider the already established parameters of trauma—specifically in the case of women's trauma. This research paper helps in understanding how women's trauma develops and continues to distress them due to negligence and lack of understanding of the nature of their trauma.

## Discussion

Trauma theory highlights the mental disturbances of an individual developed after encountering a life-threatening or shocking incident(s)—simply called traumatic event(s). Psychic trauma, or simply trauma, as described by Caruth (1995), is an "intense personal suffering." Trauma is an excessive emotional reaction to a disturbing or threatening event witnessed by a victim. The American Psychiatric Association (1994) describes trauma as a "direct personal encounter with an incident that includes actual or potential death or severe injury, or another menace to one's physical wellbeing; or observing an incident that involves death, injury, or a risk to the physical wellbeing of another individual; or discovering about sudden or violent death, severe harm, or death or injury threat faced by a family member or other close acquaintance (Criterion A1)" (p. 424). This definition clarifies that it is not necessary for the victim to be directly affected by the event(s). Rather, the victim may happen to be an observer of the traumatic event(s).

These mental disturbances are studied in the form of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is a mental abnormality that results from witnessing a catastrophic event. The American Psychiatric Association (2013) describes PTSD as "encountering actual or imminent death, severe injury, or sexual violence." According to the set criteria for PTSD, the encounter can be 1) direct contact with the traumatic event(s), 2) observing others being affected by the event(s), 3) being informed about a loved one affected by the event(s), 4) perpetual contact with the details of the event(s) (p. 271). According to this definition, PTSD develops as a result of occurrences that are beyond the grasping capacity of the normal human mind. However, this criteria (given by APA) is highly debatable, for sometimes PTSD develops as a result of experiences that are considered normal and that happen daily, such as verbal abuse or negligence. These happenings may not be lethal in a literal sense, physically injurious, or overtly violent in nature, but they still have greater potential to cause PTSD.

These normal occurrences are mostly faced by women as they suffer in secret. Most of the time, they remain silent because they are either threatened by the perpetrators or they feel ashamed to share their stories. The patriarchal structures and male-dominated discourse do not give them enough space to express their traumas, because of which their trauma remains buried. Hence, to unveil and understand



such hidden experiences, a feminist perspective draws our attention to the lives of the girls and women who suffer everyday pain due to these hidden experiences; it also claims that “traumatic events do lie within the range of normal human experience” (Brown, 1989, p. 110). Based on this argument, women’s trauma is distinguished from men’s, first, because it is secret in nature; second, it is not considered a trauma by the set standards of society.

The novel *Girls Burn Brighter* by Shobha Rao depicts the uniqueness of women’s trauma. Women’s trauma is unique in the sense that it occurs in secret and is not accepted by society. The concept of secret trauma is given by Russell (1986). She understands “secret trauma” as “for girls and women, most traumas do occur in secret” (p. 101). These events take place in scenarios that should be safe — bedrooms, securely inside marital boundaries, in the back seats of cars, with the true nature of the act only fully recognized years later as rape. Furthermore, they occur within the professional confines of doctors' consulting rooms and therapists' offices — places where patients should be safe, but find themselves sexually exploited by professionals, who are fully conscious that their standing in society likely acts as a protection for their scandalous acts (Brown, 1989). From a statistical perspective, these episodes are not unusual; they fall well within the “range of human experience.” They represent experiences to which women adapt and potentials for which women create space in their lives and psyches. They are private occurrences, often known only to the victim and offender” (p. 101).

In the novel, the female protagonist Poornima faces “secret trauma,” first, at the hand of her father and second, at the hand of her husband. Poornima’s father slaps her when she refuses to sing in front of the family who brings the marriage proposal. “Poornima’s father slapped her hard.” He does not stop at a mere slap. He seizes her by her hair and yells at her, “You see this? You see what you’ve done?” ...Poornima blinked. She held back tears. Her scalp burned, hairs snapped like electric wires” (Rao, 2018, p. 42). This intimidation from her father shows how decisions are forced upon daughters and how their choices are snubbed by the elders in such important matters. Poornima lacks autonomy and freedom of choice at home because of her gender. She suffers as she is forced into a marriage without consent.

Traditionally, in rural societies, the opinion of girls is not asked in marital matters, which results in bad experiences. Their future is decided by their fathers or elders, and they have no option but to accept it without question. This is exemplified in the marriage of Poornima in the novel. Poornima is dragged into the marriage by her father, although she struggles to restrain him. Her father grabs her by her arm while she resists and says, “I want to stop,” she said to her father.” Despite her protest and instead of listening to her, her father tightly holds Poornima by her elbow and warns her, “Don’t be stupid” (p. 84). That is why, in such societies, girls are not safe—neither at their father's house nor at their in-laws’. At their father’s home, they suffer secretly at the hands of their fathers and brothers, while at their in-laws’ home, they face problems at the hands of their husbands and in-laws.

Poornima is married into a middle-class family—richer than her own. Her marriage is fixed on a particular amount of dowry. But her father fails to provide half of the dowry’s money. Because of this, Poornima faces violence at her in-laws’ house in the form of mistreatment. Her lower financial status than her in-laws makes her an easy target. She is threatened with consequences by her in-laws for not fulfilling the promise made by her father as she is told by her husband, “Tell him there is worse to come...unless he pays up” (p. 100). She is also mistreated by her mother-in-law for the remaining amount of money as she taunts her, “And here we are, feeding you three times a day, without even a grandchild to show for it. No-good fathers beget no-good daughters, that’s what I say” (p. 108).

Poornima, due to her passive and reluctant obedience to her husband, secretly suffers from constant abuse in a controlling relationship. The husband's commands and lack of resistance from Poornima show that he is dominant while Poornima lacks power. This monotonous and oppressive nature of the abuse makes her suffer psychologically and emotionally. Despite her hesitance and innocence, she listens to the directives of her husband, Kishore, when he asks her to “Take off your blouse” or “Massage my feet” (p. 99). This type of abuse—that is, sex without consent—is what is known as “marital rape”, which is defined as “a spouse having sexual intercourse with their spouse(s) without their consent” (Arora, 2022). The shyness and unfamiliarity of the situation make Poornima uncomfortable and ultimately result in her disconnection from the body, which is a common response to a traumatic experience.



Another instance of domestic abuse that represents the form of secret trauma is the act of slapping Poornima by her mother-in-law when Poornima replies to her in response to the blame for being barren. Her mother-in-law holds her responsible for not bearing a child when Poornima replies, "How do you know your son isn't the one who's barren?" By hearing this, her mother-in-law hits her so powerfully that "it knocked Poornima backwards, reeling, crashing into the stove" (p. 105). This behaviour is indicative of power dynamics, toxic and abusive conditions, and a form of hidden trauma that is persistent but not much recognized. The words and actions of Poornima's mother-in-law, as she says, "Go ahead. There'll be worse" (p.105), psychologically intimidate her, leaving long-lasting stress and feelings of worthlessness and distress her psyche. Such type of ruthless behaviour eventually leads to self-doubt and dissociation from the immediate environment, resulting in PTSD.

Moreover, Poornima's physical abuse is in the form of violent sexual interaction with her husband, which also occurs in bed in the dark. Kishore treats her violently and "grabs her hair, yanks her around the bed by it, slam into her with such force that her head would hit the wall behind the bed" (p. 108), which results in emotional distress, fear, and anxiety. Such type of violence—resulting from marital rape and perpetuated by one's partner—usually results in a higher degree of PTSD, as shown by a study "Those who suffer from marital rape exhibit substantial levels of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, gynaecological issues, and adverse physical health conditions" (Martin et al., 2007). The physical manifestation of the enduring traumatic experience is seen in the form of "bruises...across her body." The "green and blue and grey and black" bruises spread all over her body like small nests "as if tiny birds were coming in the night to build them" (p. 108). Poornima faces this repeated abuse over two weeks and is unable to recognize the true colour of her skin. These instances show the sufferings of a girl at the hands of her father and husband, because of which she shows the symptoms of PTSD. Thus, her trauma is classified as secret trauma, for she undergoes the traumatic events either in the corner of the hut or in bed at night.

Poornima also encounters "insidious trauma." Root (1992) introduced the idea of insidious 'trauma,' which pertains to the "effects of oppression that might not be openly violent or pose an imminent danger to physical health, but inflict harm to the psyche and spirit." (p. 107). The insidious trauma in Poornima's life develops due to the suppression of curiosity and individuality. The story of her name is a hope for a male child, but it makes her feel more devalued, so "She never again asked about her name" (p. 5). Poornima's feeling of triviality is further enhanced by her father's behaviour, which makes her realize that neither her feelings nor her identity matter at all. That is why she even avoids looking at the full moon after getting the upsetting remarks about her name. She was named so because of the prediction of having a boy after her. For her, the full moon becomes nothing more than a stone and a symbol of inferiority, "It's just a stone, she decided, a big grey stone in the sky" (p. 5). The suppression of emotions about the full moon constantly reminds her of her unimportance within the family. Despite her efforts, these thoughts continue to resurface as an effect of emotional neglect. She tries to push back the memory of the bitter conversation with her father about her name, but "It would pop up out of nowhere at times, seemingly out of nothing" (p. 5).

Regardless of being a human being with thoughts, feelings, and desires, Poornima is repeatedly referred to and treated as an object, or more accurately, an ox. Her value is measured primarily by her physical strength and ability to do work normally assigned to animals. The phrase "Forget the oxen" (p. 10) highlights the intention of her worth as a person. Such treatment insidiously inflicts psychological trauma by denying Poornima's dignity and self-worth. The realization that Poornima is seen as a tool for labour over her humanity saddens her, and she asks herself some speculative questions: "What if he did make her pull the plough? What if her mother-in-law was cruel? What if all she had were girls?" (p. 10) which reflects the fear, uncertainty, and anxiety raised by the patriarchal society. These fears foreground her hidden trauma of being a woman in her society.

In the same way, Poornima's friend Savitha also faces both secret and insidious trauma. She is raped by her employer, who is Poornima's father, in the dead of the night, "Who?" [Poornima asks her] Savitha—whose head was bent over her knees, let out a wail...Their eyes met. "Poori," she murmured...It was then that Poornima knew" (p. 70). This incident psychologically haunts Savitha for the rest of her life, and her entire life turns into ruins because of society, which fails to understand her situation. The society—instead

of punishing the culprit—fixes her marriage with Poornima's father. The elders of the village, in order to punish the culprit, ironically decide that "Poornima's father was to marry Savitha. They all agreed." The decision on the part of the victim is such that "No one bothered to tell Savitha the decision" (p. 75). As a result of this attitude of the elders of the society, Savitha is forced to run away because she does not accept her position as her best friend's stepmother, "I will be many things, Poori, but I won't be your stepmother" (p. 76). It happens because the established system fails to deliver justice to a rape victim because she is a girl.

This perspective argues that societal norms and patriarchal structure are equally responsible for women's trauma because they fail to consider it as trauma. These customs and institutions only give preference to male trauma because women's experiences are excluded. As Brown puts it, "The range of human experience is defined as what is common and typical in the lives of the ruling class: white, young, physically capable, educated, middle-class, Christian males. Therefore, trauma is something that interrupts these specific human lives, but not others" (p. 101). Following the same principles, the experiences of Poornima and Savitha are ignored and are not counted as being traumatic. Due to this ignorance, they show symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. They face fear, anxiety, dissociation, flashbacks, memory distortion, and hallucination.

Furthermore, the consideration of only men's trauma gives rise to a sort of gender-specific trauma, which means that women's trauma is significantly different and is not treated the same by the patriarchal society. One reason is that the events that lead to the misunderstanding of women's trauma are "statistically," as Brown argues, "well within the range of human experience" (p.101). Due to this seemingly normal nature of women's trauma, it is excluded from the dominant discourse. Men being considered dominant and women being submissive, opposite experiences are framed by factors such as "material, ideological and institutional factors", which are based on gender differences (Segalo, 2015). Based on these factors, they argue that women's trauma is not only different from men's trauma, but women are more prone to PTSD than men because of its negligence by the male-dominated discourse.

According to a survey, "The probability of female participants fulfilling the PTSD criteria was roughly twice as much as it was for male participants" (Tolin & Foa, 2006). Another study shows that females have a "significantly higher lifetime prevalence of PTSD than men" (Kessler et al., 1995). This study also shows that the most prominent events responsible for women's trauma and PTSD are rape and sexual molestation. It proves that "together, rape and molestation were the nominated events for 49% of women with PTSD" (p. 1053). This survey, then, justifies that the lives of Poornima and Savitha are chiefly destroyed by rape, sexual molestation, and other forms of abuse. Due to these events, their psychic lives are deeply affected, which eventually results in PTSD. But being women, both of them are simply neglected by the people around them; their troubles are not taken seriously, which further pushes them into mental chaos.

Moreover, the systemic bias built against women by the patriarchal structure blocks all the ways for the expression of women's trauma. The victims of rape, domestic violence, and other types of assault are hated and segregated as Brown states that a female who lives "in a battering relationship is treated quite differently (and less well) than is the survivor of a train wreck" (p. 102) and testifies that on the basis of their inferior status, women are handled differently than men. Women in such matters are counted evil, while men—the perpetrators—are "almost always seen as the innocent victim[s] of a random event" (p. 102). The same happens to Savitha when she is raped by Poornima's father—instead of punishing the man, she is to be married to him without consent.

The societal norms do not give away to the expression of the hidden traumas of women, which leads to a lack of knowledge about such traumas. This ignorance and negligence further endanger the lives of women. Women are living in societies where their personality and identity as equal individuals are not valued, and they face threats, assaults, and insecurity. Women's lives lack safety and security, both at home and outside. These threats and assaults on women's dignity are serious objections to the credibility of social norms. Brown, in this regard, argues that admitting that psychic trauma in the lives of women is caused by "everyday assaults" and "Recognizing the lack of safety in everyday life for women and other non-dominant groups exposes the profound flaws in many societal structures and questions the seemingly



harmless facade through which regular oppression functions" (p. 105). Therefore, a feminist interpretation of the novel is necessary, one that not only highlights "the truths of women's existence and illuminates the concealed instances of trauma," but also "exposes the covert harsh boundaries and concealed dangers" (p. 108).

In Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*, the social institutions are severely criticized, for they provide ample advantage to men over women. Due to these institutions, the safety of women is compromised, which is evident in the novel when both Poornima and Savitha go fetch water. They come across four young men when one of them points to them and tells the others: "Look over there...Look at those hips. Those curves" (p. 20). This incident appears harmless and usual, but it is enough to put a girl of their age in shock. But the established models designed by patriarchy would not consider it traumatic, nor would it hold the four men responsible and punish them because, apparently, they are not involved in any act that could cause any physical injury. Thus, the rules of patriarchy put a wedge between men and women and deepen the division based on gender, which further marginalizes and silences women.

In the context of a society where social justice is absent, the general conception of the dignity and freedom of women fades away and is replaced by a general resentment against them. Young girls are considered a burden on the family, and boys are preferred over them. Poornima is named Poornima because a sadhu tells her mother in a dream that if her first daughter is named Poornima (which means full moon), she will "have a boy next" (p. 5). This type of maltreatment is called "emotional neglect", which is defined as "when a child is not provided with the nurture and stimulation they need to grow and thrive" (Fernandes et al., 2021). Being a girl, such a treatment severely deteriorates the individuality of Poornima as a girl. Parental maltreatment and emotional treatment depress her so much she decides not to even look at the moon, which reflects self-hatred and self-doubt. Another important point in this context is that the person who tells this prediction to Poornima's mother is also a male. It, then, becomes apparent that patriarchy is perpetuated by a male-dominated discourse for the benefit of males only. The worth of a mother is determined by her sons (male children), not daughters.

Fear of giving birth to a baby girl is considered similar to giving birth to a "demon" (p.17) by society. Such insecurities make the mother think about killing her unborn baby, or it leads to the fear of evil that the unborn child brings to the family. These thoughts affect the mother and, eventually, the newborn child. In the novel, Savitha tells her birth story, which indicates the societal superstitions about girls being born into a family. She tells Poornima that her mother even thought about killing her because it was "than unleashing evil into the world" (p. 17). Savitha is born a girl, not a demon, but her remark that "I was still a girl" (p. 18) emphasizes the trauma developed due to gender bias, where preference is always given to the baby boy. The psychological impact of this discrimination and gender bias is significant, causing harm that is often unseen but felt throughout women's lives. It reveals that cultural superstitions, anxieties, and society exert pressure on individuals due to gender bias.

It is clear from the aforementioned discussion that women's trauma is secret and hidden as well as unique and alien. It is secret because women do suffer behind closed doors, behind the veil of marriage, in dark rooms, in corners, and in silence. Their trauma also differs from that of men because the events leading to men's trauma are traumatic, but those that cause trauma in women are taken for granted and are counted as normal. This division is created due to the nature of society, which embraces men as victims but does not show any sympathy for women and considers them as a shame. So, there is a need, as Brown puts it, to approach "The investigation into trauma should serve as a challenge and a catalyst for transforming those societal structures that inflict harm and sustain open wounds, rather than being viewed as a mere engaging intellectual topic devoid of emotional or spiritual involvement" (p. 109). There is a need to enhance the structure of relationships in which both the partners (or all the people involved) are equally respected and worthy enough "To perceive others as inherently valuable and unique beings of the earth who are sources of joy, love, and dignity in their relationships with one another" (Heyward, 1989). With the help of feminist analysis, these institutions are deconstructed, and a more inclusive system is incorporated, which ensures the rights, honour, dignity, and safety of both genders—particularly women. Besides, a good understanding of women's trauma is necessary to de-escalate the social evils done to them and to make society more just in terms of gender treatment. Thus, trauma studies also need a broader horizon and a more positive approach towards the consideration of women's trauma. It needs to offer



women an effective channel to express and share their worries and anxieties so that they may get treatment on time as well as preventive measures may be taken against the perpetrators.

## Conclusion

*Girls Burn Brighter* portrays the profound and enduring trauma experienced by characters like Savitha and Poornima within a dominant patriarchal structure. The novel depicts their suffering; it foregrounds the insidious consequences of their hidden trauma. Both women endure horrific physical, emotional, and psychic abuse—Poornima at the hands of her father, husband, and mother-in-law, and Savitha through sexual violence—which exemplifies how societal norms often silence women and force them to bear their pain in silence. This gendered experience of trauma, often dismissed as insignificant, leaves women particularly vulnerable to the long-term effects of trauma, even if not explicitly diagnosed with PTSD. The novel also highlights the systemic bias against women inherent in patriarchal systems, which actively inhibit their ability to acknowledge, process, and heal from trauma. By highlighting these injustices, *Girls Burn Brighter* emphasizes that understanding women's trauma is not only crucial for individual healing but also for dismantling oppressive structures and advancing gender equality. This realization stresses the need for trauma literature to thoughtfully engage with women's experiences in the hope of ultimately preventing gender-based victimization. Through the traumatic yet resilient stories of Savitha and Poornima, we can better comprehend and respond to the experiences of numerous women globally. Through feminist analysis, the patriarchal structures can be deconstructed to build an inclusive system that enforces all genders' rights, honour, dignity, and safety, with particular emphasis on women.

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