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AGENTIC FEMALE FRATERNITY OF THE RECOVERING PATRIARCHAL WOMEN IN SHOBHA RAO'S GIRLS BURN BRIGHTER

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ABSTRACT:
The paper critically reads Shobha Rao's Girls Burn Brighter (2018) as the feminist novel that clearly sets out to explore the possibilities of an agentic female fraternity in the teeth of the worst patriarchal and misogynist cultures. Contextualizing the theoretic perspectives of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Pramod K. Nayar, and Lois Tyson, with regard to their concepts of subaltern speech, agency, and recovering patriarchal women, the paper projects Rao's characters of Poornima and Savitha as the epitomes of female subalterns on their way to gaining agency as to recover from patriarchal misogyny. The novel shows that India, being the worst place with regard to female existence, has its females still the most redeeming feature of its society as they have started to formulate the lasting bonds of sisterhood/fraternity help them get hold of resilient agency.

INTRODUCTION

Shobha Rao's Girls Burn Brighter is the story of two girls, Poornima and Savitha, united because of one man, Poornima's father, who hires Savitha to work on the loom for him. Poornima and Savitha epitomize countless women's daily struggle of survival in India. Rao asserts that women-suffering under patriarchy's boot, like a ladybug harassed by a crow, has become the

normal. Poornima and Savitha are emblematic of the lives of girls in India, the environment they grow up in, the upbringing they receive, when they are nothing but children filling their days with play.

Her mother having died of cancer when she was young, Poornima is the homemaker, cooking meals for her father and her three younger siblings, shouldering the weight of a whole family when, had she been born in the West, she would have been in school. Sorrow and scutwork are what make her life. Savitha is born of a father, who is now an alcoholic suffering from arthritis, and a mother who works as a maidservant in homes to make ends meet.

Poornima's father hires Savitha to help him on the looms so that more money can be raked in. Poornima's marriage is in the offing but it enters a cul-de-sac after Poornima decides to not get married because of how far she will be from Indravalli, the village they live in, after her marriage and Savitha will not be able to visit her. Her relationship with her father falls on the rocks as a result, but she is happy with Savitha, until another match is found for her, this one acceptable to Savitha.

Unfortunately for them, Poornima's father rapes Savitha one night and the elders decide that the rapist and the raped should be married, Savitha escapes in the night after lying in an open-eyed stupor for three days, Poornima refusing to leave her side. Giving up on looking for Savitha, Poornima is married and resides in the home of her husband, Kishore.

Separated from each other by tragedy, space, and patriarchy, the two women still manage to serve as the other's strength through their travails. Though perceived to be happy in her marriage with an accountant, Poornima suffers because of pacts between men. Since her father could not manage to give the dowry he had promised to her in-laws in toto, they relentlessly poke her with their remarks.

Despite her husband's having deformed fingers, she is reasoned out by her in-laws who had agreed to accept her as Kishore's wife only because he was physically deformed. Otherwise, their marriage would never have happened, letting Poornima know her worth among her in-laws. When her sister-in-law Aruna's marriage with a bright and hopeful perspective is spurned, Poornima's connubial life takes a turn for the worst, culminating in her mother-in-law and Kishore dousing her in hot oil, burning part of her face and neck, leaving her deformed for life.

Savitha, after leaving Indravalli, settles in Vijayawada for lack of a better option and is coerced into becoming a prostitute through incarceration and drugging. As time passes, Savitha is offered a choice by Guru, the man in charge of the prostitution ring: either to be a concubine of a Saudi prince, who has a predilection for amputees, and be compensated for it, or continue in her present life. She chooses the former, getting her left hand amputated, only to find the Saudi prince has acquired someone else. Consequently, she will be going to the USA and her family will be duly compensated. Savitha lands in

Seattle, living as a cleaner girl and an object of sexual gratification for Suresh, one of her employers.

Meanwhile, refusing to go back to her father, whom she views more as Savitha's rapist, Poornima embarks on a search for Savitha, not caring it's been more than two years since Savitha disappeared. Eventually, after staying on Vijayawada train station for a few weeks, Poornima is led by a boy who promises to take her to Savitha, only for Guru to clutch her into his service.

Because of the 'accounting' she imbibed while living with Kishore, himself an accountant, Poornima lands a job with the ring, building trust as an honest and upright employee. After months spent doing the books, Poornima learns where Savitha is during a normal conversation with Guru and dedicates herself to making the same journey. Her persistence in learning the official requirements, procedures, and English pays off when she becomes an escort of girls, taking them to Singapore and Dubai. The day comes when she is tasked with taking a girl to Seattle.

When she arrives in Seattle, she finds out through Mohan, the younger brother of Suresh and the man Savitha loves, that Savitha fled, two days ago, devastating Poornima for she frittered away two weeks when Savitha was so close, who is now moving East by road, using her meager resources and hitchhiking when possible. Near Spearfish Canyon in South Dakota, she is violated and robbed by two men who leave her behind a gas station. After rain forces her to take shelter in the restroom, she has a break-down against the hopelessness of her situation.

Meanwhile, Mohan drives Poornima, certain of the only place where Savitha could have gone because of her comparing it to a 'flute song', to Spearfish Canyon. Once near Spearfish, Poornima prompts Mohan to stop because she has to use the restroom. She finds the restroom locked from the inside and waits while rain assaults her. Mohan comes around and asks her if she has been waiting all this time. She laughs after answering in the affirmative, feeling love for him, as the door opens behind her, unaware that Savitha is on the other side of the door.

Its dramatic ending, the love characters have for each other, and the realistic depiction of gender violence in India notwithstanding, *Girls Burn Brighter* met with mixed reviews tilting towards the positive, while criticism was hailed for the lack of character complexity and the gratuitous cruelty, losing its punch.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hannah Beckerman of The Guardian (2018) praised the novel as "a timely and harrowing portrayal of human trafficking, cultural misogyny and the battles still fought every day by millions of women worldwide", while pointing out "the relentlessness of the abuse [means] that by the time we reach the novel's final act of sexual brutality, there is a feeling of weary acceptance – by both Savitha and the reader – that this is just how life is".

Bethanne Patrick of the LA Times (2018) applauded the novel for its "sustained and elegant prose", saying "Rao writes cleanly and eloquently about women who, without their brightness, might have been left to die in their beds. She writes them into life, into existence, into the light of day", while noting that the "few chapters towards the end may jump out for the change in tone", ascribing it to "a common debut novel problem, where the sections written first, with electric intensity, are not fully integrated".

"Girls Burn Brighter feels about two decades too late", according to Diksha Basu's review in The New York Times (2018). Though Basu's review is not entirely critical, applauding Rao, "a quick and engrossing storyteller", for "the pages keep turning, the language is lyrical and lovely, and many phrases call for pause and appreciation," Basu criticizes "the pure evil that Savitha and Poornima face" because it is "so shocking and so unbelievably constant that the reader ends up numbed to the horror". Because Rao is concerned with heaping more and more others' cruelty on her narrating characters, "the characters lack complexity: they are either Good or they are Bad". Basu takes the point further, noting how "all of the dozens of characters we meet in India are Bad. Rao describes the colors of birds and sunsets and vegetables and skin and cloth - but the characters remain all black or white". The final verdict states, "Not only is Rao's book lazy world-building, it feels hazardous in the current global moment". The depiction of most Indians is so one-dimensional that "[y]ou couldn't fault a reader of this novel for thinking that all Indians lack empathy".

Ann Levin of USA Today (2018) lambasted the novel for "the story" which "is told in an operatic key that sacrifices plausibility. The bad characters are monstrous. The girls are angelic. The misogyny is unrelenting", resulting in the "empowering message" getting "lost in the overheated language and imagery". All in all, Rao raked in less than favorable reviews for thr excessively negative portrayal of India and Indians, taking her point too far, her attempts at evincing shock begetting blasé reactions from characters and readers.

Compared to professional literary reviews, Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter* has only started begetting academic research responses. Agarwal (2020) made the inner world of Rao's characters and their mental workings, the concern of her work (pp. 277-286). Asif et al. (2021) used gender studies to review the patriarchal norms employed to exploit women, attempting to redefine women's status by means of a postmodern feminist view (pp. 131-138). In comparison, this study analyzes the work from a postcolonial feminist angle, seeking to highlight how Rao re-presents women as capable of taking agency when it is not given to them and retaining it.

THEORETIC FRAMEWORK

Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" urges that "intellectuals must attempt to disclose and know the discourse of society's Other" (p. 66), the 'Other' being not just the colonized peoples but their women as well, who are doubly colonized. Spivak goes further, elucidating the two types of representation: "representation as 'speaking for', as in politics, and

representation as 're-presentation', as in art or philosophy" (p. 70). The paper at hand discusses this "re-presentation" of women, not as described in the traditional roles of patriarchy, but as women with agency.

Pramod K. Nayar (2015) defines 'agency' as "the ability, capacity and freedom of an individual to make choices for her/his life and to carry through with these choices within existing social structures" (p. 5). The price of regaining agency is "to enact a set of choices, however terrible the consequences of such choices might be". The paper takes the concept of 'recovering' patriarchal women from Tyson and applies it to Savitha and Poornima: two recovering patriarchal women on their way to gaining agency in their lives.

According to Tyson (2015), a patriarchal woman is "a woman who has internalized the norms and values of *patriarchy*", patriarchy being "any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles". A patriarchal woman is one who has been programmed "not to see the ways in which women are oppressed by traditional gender roles". In the 'traditional gender roles' laid out by patriarchy, women are described as "emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive" (p. 81). The paper sets to highlight how these roles are reversed in the characters of Poornima and Savitha.

Tyson discusses how patriarchy uses biological essentialism to "keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political, and social power" (p. 82). For Spivak, "The small peasant proprietors 'cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must appear simultaneously as their master, as an authority over them'" (p. 71), thus keeping them in their colonized, socially underprivileged role. Women, because they have been denied their voice by patriarchy, are beholden to patriarchy for their representation. The oppressors represent the oppressed, effectively silencing them.

In the world, "patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women's self-confidence and assertiveness", and then proceeds to point out "the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally […] self-effacing and submissive" (p. 82). Explaining patriarchy's perspective, 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" (p. 86).

Spivak writes that "the [absent collective] consciousness of the small peasant proprietor class finds its 'bearer' in a 'representative' who appears to work in another's interest" (2015, p. 71). What is applicable to the 'small peasant proprietor' class holds true for women as well and this paper extrapolates it through the characters of Poornima and Savitha that how they rise from their status of patriarchal women to 'recovering' patriarchal women with agency, having gained the strength to wrest agency from patriarchy because of their

relationship with each other, their desire to be with each other- their feminine fraternity.

DISCUSSION

Rao sets the tone of *Girls Burn Brighter* in the beginning chapter, starring an old woman, who has nurtured countless trees, and a journalist, who is interviewing her. The old woman's 'daughters' are staunch in "their strength, despite drought and disease and insects and floods and famine, […] shining with gold-green light" (2018, p. 4). The trees become sisters of Savitha and Poornima, the main characters of the story, suffering every hardship imaginable and yet continuing to survive, thrive and cling to each other. Women face parental disdain, patriarchal desire and suppression, society condemning them for being the way they are after fashioning them to be that way, beating them into shape till they try to grow out of the role assigned to them.

Poornima and Savitha are undesired from birth because they are girls. When Savitha relates that she was born on the day of a solar eclipse and how her mother was "paralyzed" with the thought that she was "about to give birth to a rakshasa", Poornima comments that her mother must have been relieved on seeing that Savitha was "just a regular, cooing little baby". Savitha responds, "Not really, I was still a girl" (p. 18). For parents, having a girl is little different from birthing a demon, as evident from the novel: "It's a curse: daughters, darkness" (p. 29). Women are wrought as humans who are only fit as wives, mothers, servants, housemakers from the moment of their birth.

However, when they grow up, they are suddenly desired, by parents as reliable cooks, cleaners, and gofers, and by men as objects of sexual gratification. Poornima remembers what her mother always did: "something for someone else". Even her own memories of her mother are comprised of the times when her mother was "doing something for her child, never for herself", leading Poornima, as a not-so-glorified caretaker, never living her own life, to pose the question: "is that how lives were meant to be spent?" (p. 115).

Despite their value as chattel, their parents still feel burdened by the onus of marrying them off and afford the extortionate dowry demanded by the boy's parents. While discussing the harrowing arrangements and planning of Poornima's marriage, her father comments to the matchmaker, "Whenever [daughters] stand 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" (p. 61).

After her marriage, Poornima plays a ritualistic game with Kishore, her husband: "It was a game that had been played since ancient times: the same game, in the same way" (p. 84). It was a game "she already knew he would win or rather that she would lose" (p. 85). The game is symbolic of marriage, not just Kishore and Poornima's. The game has been "[p]layed since ancient times" and the rules are rigged to favor the man.

Poornima becomes the target of further detestation from her in-laws because she does not bear a child, thus not blessing her husband with an heir. On one

occasion after receiving a comment about being barren, Poornima poses the question before her mother-in-law: "How do you know your son isn't the one who's barren?" and "The slap that followed was so powerful that it knocked Poornima backward, reeling" (p. 101). The reaction, physically and culturally violent, exhibits how women are confined to a submissive role where they cannot question or raise their voices against anything that demeans them, reduces their already diminutive social and cultural stature and it is not just men who do that, but women too.

A woman continues to abuse another woman after Aruna's marriage-match does not follow through, Kishore and Poornima's mother-in-law spill boiling oil on her. The act is an instance of the complicity of women with men in the oppression of their own sex (pp. 109-110). Her mother-in-law did it out of love for her own daughter, targeting someone else's daughter with indifference.

During hospitalization because of the injuries she has received, the doctor tries to console her: "As long as you have proper breasts a man won't leave you". This comment he makes, after she wakes up, thinking that the news that her marriage won't dissolve will be comforting. Poornima, however, wishes that the oil had "gotten the breasts, too" (p. 117). Rao posits that for men, a woman's breasts are enough to qualify or disqualify her as a desirable wife, thus showing the directly proportional relationship between sexual appeal and connubial desirability in the minds of men.

After the latest act of violence leaving her disfigured, she is told to leave the house. As Poornima "couldn't recall a single day when she hadn't been slapped or screamed at or forced to ask for forgiveness" (p. 106), understandably she "was glad she would soon be out of the house" (p. 107). The possibility of living alone on the street sounds better than enduring her existence with her in-laws.

What her in-laws did to Poornima is not unique. The alarming frequency of female faces burned with acid or oil has inured the society to them, as observed when Poornima, resolute in her decision to find Savitha, decides to go to Vijayawada instead of back to her father. When she goes to a medical shop for supplies, the old man there helps Poornima wrap her burns and apply iodine without asking questions "as if he saw women with this exact same injury every day, which Poornima figured he probably did" (p. 121). Patriarchal violence and coercion persist in more than one form.

Not just bent into becoming slaves, women also serve as business assets for patriarchy, a valuable and desired commodity, renewable, cheap to afford, offering maximum returns. Speaking of Guru, the leader of the prostitution ring, Rao writes that Poornima "knew for a fact that he made over one hundred thousand rupees a month off the girls. In some months, he made two lakhs" (p. 137). Women are not just chattel or prostitutes; they are money-minting machines too.

Poornima and Savitha both provide sexual satisfaction and are paid in violence. While Poornima is more or less the victim of one man, Savitha becomes a prostitute. Later in the novel, she realizes "that's all she'd ever be in the eyes of men: a thing to enter, to inhabit for a time, and then to leave" (p. 143). From Poornima's father to Suresh, from Indravalli to Seattle, she is a sexual succor, a place for men to relieve their sexual drive and then move on with their lives, without regret. She knows, when in the United States, that "she was an *investment*, something Savitha knew only in the terms of cows and goats and chickens". Because of this, she cannot walk away from her life even if she has the wherewithal, because "why would anyone let their cow or goat or chicken simply walk away?" (Italics in original, p. 195). She is worse off than cattle because unlike them, she has a voice and it is stifled.

In her quest to find Savitha, Poornima eventually arrives in Seattle, chaperoning another prostitute, who is afraid of Poornima because of the latter's scars. In her mind, Poornima tells her that it is not her, but men all around her she should be afraid of; "Flames, flames all around you, licking at your just-born breasts, your just-bled body" (p. 238). She wishes the girl would see that the ones she has to be afraid of are actually those feeding on her body and her life. "To find herself in this place, passed like a beedie between the hands of men" (p. 249) is what her life consists of and yet, she is scared of the only person who has sympathy for her.

For Savitha, sexual exploitation exacerbates when she is forced to lose a limb to make her more desirable to cater to a customer's liking, so that she can be sold to a Saudi prince for a hefty price. Later in the United States, Savitha decides that "[s]he would let them buy it- her hand; she had nothing left to sell" (p. 157). She has accepted her body as something to be traded, either whole or in pieces. Her impetus for accepting her fate is not her lack of fight or that she does not want to be with Poornima. She thinks of her sisters and "their waiting dowries" and to save them the same despair, she sacrifices herself. She understands that "[e]very moment in a woman's life was a deal, a deal for her body: first for its blooming and then for its wilting" (p. 163). She loses her hand to make profit for a man and become sexual amusement for the whims of another.

The history of men taking advantage of women physically and financially is perennial, going back to the time when humanity was inchoate, its life on earth incipient. Women serve as profitable business commodities not just in India, but the United States as well, a society more enlightened and egalitarian. In conversation with Mohan, Suresh poses the burning question: "You think Dad got us where we are *without* girls like her?" (Italics in original, p. 200). The expansive business that the three male employers of Savitha manage is because of their trade: human trafficking and prostitution. They exercise tight control on their 'employees', keeping them intimidated and impoverished.

Halfway through the novel, Savitha thinks "they were all simply children", only to assert vehemently the next instant "we're all old. Old, old women, ravaged by time, and waiting to die" (p. 152). They are ravaged not just by time, but society as well. Society is complicit with patriarchy in the oppression

of women. Tyson (2015) writes how "good girls" are stereotyped as "(gentle, submissive, virginal, angelic)" (p. 85). This can be observed in *Girls Burn Brighter* as Poornima being not "obedient" enough to comply when asked to sing, she is labeled as "wicked" (Rao, p. 35).

Society demands from women to be silent and submissive, doing what they are told to do without demurral and they are not expected to have a voice. Poornima and Savitha are both fitted in their roles by men even before they understand those roles. When Poornima's father rapes Savitha she feels a rage against him "for no other reason than that he hadn't asked her what *she* wanted" (Italics in original, p. 143). The act of sexual violence, in Savitha's mind, is despicable not just because it ravishes her body, but because her freedom of choice is violated, silencing her independence as a human being.

Poornima also finds herself cast in gender roles and they benefit her. Guru, the man who owns the brothel, starts trusting Poornima as his accountant, who realizes"it was because of her scar that he trusted her", as the scar "made her look damaged, harmless, and, most important, pathetic" (p. 136). Because Poornima's scar fits her in the mold of gender roles, it becomes an advantage with Guru.

In their roles, women are expected to be obedient and serve others. When Savitha looks back on her life, she finds that it has consisted of "doing so that there could be eating and sleeping and surviving" (p. 197). Her 'life' is of a breathing machine that is turned off after a certain amount of work is done. This is because they are not considered biologically developed or able enough to do the same work as men.

Poornima defies this biological essentialism when she sets out to learn English so that she may pave her way to the USA and Savitha. The English class for business people has "five men in it, and Poornima" (p. 229). As she has a conversation in English with her teacher, she does not notice "the five other men in the class, staring at her face in horror" (p. 230). For the men, the 'horror' is not (just) because of her scars, but the fact that she is speaking English, something they do not expect a woman from her background to do, and even better too than them on that.

Poornima flouting traditional gender roles is because of her desire to be with Savitha. Amidst vicious patriarchal oppression, Savitha and Poornima find strength in each other, survive and emerge free. Soon after meeting each other, they strike a friendship that is stronger than the bond they share with their families. Their bond outlives years and inter-continental travel, abusive marriage, prostitution, amputation, menial work, intimidation, and all kinds of male oppression.

Through their love for each other, Poornima and Savitha become most important to each other, more than society, their obligations, and their hardships. When Poornima's marriage prospects are under discussion the first time and Savitha is not in favor, Poornima realizes that "*Savitha* was more important than the man she would marry" (Italics in original, p. 30), her desire

to stay with her friend taking precedence over getting married in her heart and mind. It is this desire that makes her refuse to sing when she is told to. This is the first instance of Poornima exercising agency, in a decision that is drastic and seismic, climacteric in effect.

Poornima and Savitha's friendship may appear flimsy, unable to stand up to patriarchal oppression. While watching clouds in the sky contacting the tops of mountains, Poornima ponders about the clouds' intentions and whether they are destructive, resolving to damage the mountain. She dismisses the thought because the clouds stand no chance against the mountains, thinking "those useless bits of fluff could maim a mountain" (p. 41) as absurd a thought as Poornima and Savitha resisting patriarchy. Yet that is what they do, their strength surprising even them.

Their strength flows between them even after Poornima and Savitha are separated by space and ignorance of each other's whereabouts or life. Poornima finds strength in the memory of Savitha, the latter's presence that she feels in the cinema while watching a film with her husband and sister-in-law: "Savitha had been there, seated next to her. In some way more essential than even Kishore and Aruna had been there" (p. 93). It is because of Savitha being with Poornima without actually being there that Poornima decides "she would never again ask forgiveness for a thing she didn't do, for crimes she could in no way recall committing" (p. 95).

Their bond transcends time and space, defying patriarchy to support each other, hinting how female sisterhood can be as omnipresent as oppressive patriarchy. Poornima finds agency yet again when she examines the stack of papers lying on the desk in the bedroom she shares with Kishore. Finding out that she can make sense of the columns and numbers, she feels that the stack of papers "was leading to something; she could sense it" (p. 103). And it does. Without any formal education or sense of accounting, Poornima manages to secure a job as an accountant which ultimately leads her to finding Savitha and allows her to rise above her station. She makes a choice that determines the course of her life even when walled in by patriarchal norms.

Poornima's choice would not have led to finding Savitha without patriarchy leeching off her. When she resides in Vijayawada railway station after her in-laws force her to leave, she meets Rishi, a boy who has helped countless girls like Poornima find 'jobs' (p. 127). Claiming to have helped find Savitha a job, he lures Poornima into following him to a brothel, hoping to have her replaced with one of the girls who had fled (p. 128). Poornima manages to be an accountant there. Both Rishi and Kishore (from whose papers Poornima grasped accounting), though not intentionally, assist Poornima in gaining a hint of autonomy and agency. In spite of their mala fide actions, Poornima inches closer towards her goal and freedom.

Poornima's agency, or a semblance of it, continues to mount as she molds the harshest circumstances to her favor, circumstances born not just of men but nature too. When she is locked in a room after arriving at the brothel, thinking that Savitha might be there, she refrains from eating the apple in the

refrigerator even though she is hungry, thinking "eating an apple–an apple–might spoil [her] chance of finding [Savitha]" (p. 133). Her refusal to eat the apple is reminiscent of the original sin committed by Eve; eating the forbidden apple after being manipulated by Satan. Thus, Rao establishes that women have restraint and there is no logic underpinning women being labelled as more fickle and/or sinful. Her desire of meeting and being with Savitha again raises Poornima from the stereotype of women being innately sinful and intemperate, conquering instinct and basic human need.

Savitha exercises similar control with alcohol. After her interactions with Suresh and Mohan, both of whom are regular imbibers, she also develops a liking for alcohol. However, remembering what drinking did to her father, she decides to quit and she "never again touched the beer or whiskey she was offered" (p. 208). This is another clear instance of women heeding logic and good sense over emotions and instant gratification, their will stronger than men's.

Another instance of their agency and persistence in face of asperity is Poornima scheming to follow Savitha to USA, beginning by inquiring Guru as discreetly as possible. Even when he laughs at Poornima's impossibility of going abroad, "Poornima laughed with him, but she knew she would" get there (p. 138). Poornima is plucky in the face of adversities because she has the desire to reunite with Savitha, not letting others dampen her courage. Her belief in realizing her sole desire is staunch enough to ascertain her conviction to do anything on the way towards her goal, no matter how impossible the next step may seem.

Savitha also tries her luck with discreet questioning, hoping to find a way back home to Poornima. A piece of Poornima's half-sewn sari is torn off (p. 193), presumably in order to send a message and uproot any thoughts of leaving out of her mind. Whoever intimidates her into submission realizes that the sari is the most important belonging Savitha has, her only remaining link to Poornima and that tearing it would be the most effective message/warning. Here, her bond with Poornima is used against her, sabotaging her source of strength. It is her love and regard for Poornima that stops Savitha from taking further action.

Poornima receives another blow to her courage and conviction after arriving in USA. She finds out from Mohan that Savitha had run away two days ago. "To miss her by two days? No. No, *that* she would not abide" (Italics in original, p. 302). Determined not to give up, Poornima convinces Mohan to help her and hits the road in hot pursuit of Savitha across the United States, headed East. During the drive, Poornima keeps her eyes trained on the roadside in the hopes that she may see Savitha there, thinking: "As if life granted such a thing so lovely and effortless and miraculous as seeing Savitha on the crest of a hill" (p. 304). Poornima's struggle is a struggle against seemingly insurmountable odds that would exhaust the resolve of the most courageous. However, her fraternity with Savitha does not let her accept defeat.

Keeping her strong throughout the novel, Savitha causes Poornima to break down as the latter closes in on her; "She hadn't cried in years, but now she began to cry" (p. 305). Poornima bore her nuptial and professional agonies without shedding a tear, but the thought of not meeting Savitha again, whom she hasn't met for four years, causes her to shed tears. The sense of loss is so great that anticipating it dissolves Poornima's defenses.

Poornima and Savitha are each other's strength, driving them to unimaginable actions. At the end, it is implied that they will be reunited, ending their exhausting expedition for each other. Because of each other, they have gained agency in their lives. They are changed women who can lead lives radically different from how they used to be, all because they came to know each other.

CONCLUSION

Girls Burn Brighter is a tale of two girls who are struck by innumerable sufferings from the day they are born. Disdain, penury, having to ride herd on family members, enduring the lecherous gazes of men and hoping the gazes just stay gazes. Like pendulums, they hover between being desired and being a burden, never stopping at a middle point. On both extremes, they are exploited, never asked what they want or how they would like to be treated. Speaking for themselves is a privilege denied for so long they have forgotten they ever had it. Patriarchal society has conspired for centuries to keep them in the spot carved out for them, of the submissive, nurturing, emotional homemakers, accepting everything with a silent bow. They are not expected to speak, much less raise their voices. The options available to most of them are of being the sex slave of one family, tending to their needs like an obedient slave, or be a prostitute and sate the sexual urges of countless men. However, they have a third option that they are gradually discovering; finding strength in each other instead of suffering in silence. Poornima and Savitha stand tall like two stalwart trees, braving the storms of physical violence, verbal abuse, and economic impoverishment that patriarchy hurls at them, aiming to subjugate them and only finding them more resolute in their refusal to genuflect. They find agency through each other, fostering a relationship that grew like a plant, providing them both with an anchor to lean on even in the most asperous circumstances.

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