



Emotional Deterioration As A Culturally Sustained Process In Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines emotional deterioration as a process shaped and sustained by cultural forces in the fictional writings of Shobha Rao, with particular attention to *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018). Rather than presenting suffering as sudden or exceptional, the study reveals how distress develops gradually through everyday practices, inherited norms and unequal power relations. Rao's narratives portray women whose inner lives are steadily worn down by social expectations, economic dependence and restricted mobility, making emotional decline both continuous and normalized. The analysis highlights how cultural frameworks teach endurance while discouraging expression, causing pain to be absorbed inward rather than resisted outward. At the same time, the paper observes how human connection, especially between women, emerges as a fragile yet meaningful response to prolonged hardship. Emotional survival in these texts does not appear as triumph but as persistence shaped by care, memory and shared presence. By focusing on lived experience rather than dramatic violence, this study offers a nuanced understanding of how culture quietly participates in the making of emotional vulnerability. The paper contributes to contemporary literary criticism by foregrounding emotional deterioration as an ongoing, socially maintained condition, thereby inviting readers to reconsider suffering not as an individual failure but as a collective cultural outcome.

KEYWORDS:

Quiet trauma, Relational survival, Female interiority, Gendered suffering and Human vulnerability.

Shobha Rao is a contemporary writer whose fiction closely examines women's lives shaped by social inequality, cultural restriction and emotional vulnerability. Her novel *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018) traces the intertwined journeys of Poornima and Savitha, two girls bound by friendship in circumstances marked by poverty, displacement and gendered limitation. The narrative moves across spaces and life stages, showing how culture quietly influences emotional growth and decline. Rather than presenting suffering as exceptional, Rao situates it within everyday life. The novel foregrounds inner experience, revealing how emotions are shaped, restrained and gradually worn down through social expectation and repeated adjustment.

This paper focuses on emotional deterioration as a slow and culturally sustained process rather than an immediate response to trauma. In *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018), emotional pain develops through silence, dependence and unequal power relations. Gender roles train women to endure rather than question, making

suffering appear normal. Power operates not only through violence but through routine control, restricted choice and emotional suppression. The research problem lies in understanding how such everyday conditions gradually weaken emotional stability. By examining gendered endurance and social silence, the study highlights how emotional erosion emerges through cultural learning and lived practice, not through individual weakness.

The paper aims to analyze emotional deterioration as a culturally maintained condition in *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018). It limits its scope to textual analysis of women's emotional experiences shaped by culture, gender and power. The study begins with theoretical grounding, moves into detailed narrative analysis and concludes by interpreting emotional decline as a shared social outcome rather than a personal failure.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) offers a foundational framework for understanding emotional deterioration as a culturally sustained process. De Beauvoir explains that womanhood is not natural but socially produced through childhood training, social behavior and unequal life conditions. From an early age, girls learn adjustment, patience and emotional restraint, which gradually shape character and self-perception. As Simone de Beauvoir famously states, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 293). Social life reinforces these lessons by rewarding silence and endurance while limiting independence. The woman's situation, marked by economic dependence and restricted agency, further deepens emotional vulnerability. De Beauvoir's theory reveals how culture quietly governs emotional life, making inner decline appear normal. This framework helps examine emotional erosion not as personal weakness but as the outcome of continuous social conditioning.

Existing studies on Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018) largely examine themes of gender violence, migration, poverty and female survival. Critics frequently focus on the intense suffering experienced by Poornima and Savitha, particularly in relation to exploitation, displacement and social inequality. As Dhawan and Sharma observe, "These stories revolve around female characters who are confronted with social disgrace and mistreatment" (7949). Feminist readings highlight sisterhood as a source of strength, while cultural analyses explore structural oppression. However, much of this scholarship treats emotional pain as a direct result of visible trauma or extreme events. The gradual emotional weakening caused by daily silence, dependency and cultural expectation receives limited attention. As a result, emotional decline is often discussed as episodic suffering rather than an ongoing inner process shaped by social norms.

This paper identifies a gap in existing criticism by foregrounding emotional deterioration as a culturally sustained condition in *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018). Previous studies do not sufficiently explore how routine practices, learned endurance and social silence slowly erode emotional stability in characters like Poornima and Savitha. By applying de Beauvoir's ideas on childhood, social life and woman's situation, the study reframes emotional decline as socially produced rather than individually experienced. This approach justifies a deeper reading of Rao's novel as a narrative of cultural pain and emotional erosion embedded in everyday life.

Girls Burn Brighter (2018) unfolds within social environments where gender, poverty, and cultural hierarchy shape emotional life from an early age. The novel traces the parallel journeys of Poornima and Savitha, whose friendship begins in childhood and continues across spaces marked by instability and displacement. Their world is structured by limited choices, economic struggle and rigid expectations placed on female behavior. Rao situates emotional experience within these conditions, showing how daily survival slowly reshapes inner life. The narrative moves through domestic spaces, labor sites and unfamiliar territories, emphasizing how each environment reinforces emotional restraint and dependence. Rather than foregrounding dramatic moments alone, the text focuses on ordinary routines that wear down emotional strength over time. Childhood, marriage, migration and labor are not isolated stages but connected phases through which emotional deterioration deepens. This context reveals culture as an active force that trains endurance while discouraging expression. Emotional decline appears gradual, quiet and continuous, rooted in lived experience rather than individual temperament. The novel thus provides a fertile ground to examine emotional deterioration as a culturally sustained process embedded in everyday life.

Emotional deterioration in the novel develops through gendered expectations that define how women respond to hardship. From childhood, Poornima learns that responsibility outweighs comfort and silence ensures survival. Her emotional needs remain unaddressed as she adapts to scarcity and neglect. As she grows older, this early conditioning shapes how she absorbs further suffering. Marriage intensifies this

process by placing her within relationships marked by control and dependence. Emotional exhaustion replaces resistance, and pain becomes familiar rather than disruptive. Savitha's experience follows a similar pattern, though shaped by displacement and fear. Separation from home and exposure to exploitation demand emotional adjustment rather than healing. She learns to withdraw inwardly, managing distress through emotional distance. In both cases, emotional deterioration does not erupt suddenly but settles gradually into daily existence. This understanding aligns with Rahim's view that "Trauma is often experienced as an ongoing psychological condition rather than a singular event" (Rahim, 41). Gendered roles teach them to endure rather than question, transforming emotional pain into a private burden. The novel presents emotional erosion as a learned response shaped by repeated exposure to inequality. By portraying deterioration as cumulative, Rao highlights how culture scripts women's emotional lives through expectation and restraint.

Cultural power in *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018) operates through ordinary structures rather than overt authority alone. Patriarchal systems regulate movement, labor and relationships, shaping emotional vulnerability alongside physical insecurity. This imbalance reflects what Beauvoir identifies when she argues that "Humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but as relation to himself;" (Beauvoir, 5). Power reveals itself in expectations of obedience, economic dependency and controlled mobility. Poornima's experiences within marital and labor settings demonstrate how authority becomes routine rather than dramatic. Control is exercised through silence, isolation and limited alternatives, making resistance costly. Similarly, Savitha's survival depends on navigating spaces where fear and uncertainty dictate behavior. Violence exists, but its emotional impact is prolonged through anticipation and repetition rather than singular events. Cultural systems normalize pain by framing endurance as necessity and adaptation as strength. Emotional deterioration thrives in this environment because suffering is neither questioned nor addressed. Patriarchy thus sustains emotional decline by embedding it within accepted social practices. Rao's narrative exposes how power works quietly, shaping inner life through repetition and constraint. Emotional erosion becomes a shared condition, produced not by individual failure but by cultural design.

Symbolically, fire and movement in *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018) reflect emotional endurance shaped by cultural pain. Fire suggests intensity without escape, burning continuously rather than consuming completely. It mirrors the characters' emotional state, where suffering persists without resolution. Movement across spaces like villages, cities, borders symbolize not freedom but ongoing instability. Each relocation alters conditions without easing emotional strain. Emotional deterioration travels with the characters, shaped by cultural memory rather than place alone. Light appears intermittently through connection and care, suggesting moments of emotional survival rather than healing. These symbols reinforce the novel's central concern with sustained endurance. Emotional life is shown as something carried forward, shaped by experience and expectation. Through these symbolic patterns, Rao deepens the representation of emotional erosion as a continuous process. The narrative thus aligns symbolic movement with inner decline, reinforcing the idea that culture sustains emotional pain across time and space.

The analysis reveals that emotional deterioration in *Girls Burn Brighter* emerges as a continuous process shaped by cultural expectation rather than isolated hardship. The characters' inner lives change gradually through repeated adjustment, silence and endurance. Gendered roles teach Poornima and Savitha to absorb suffering quietly, turning emotional pain into a normal part of daily existence. Cultural systems reinforce this decline by limiting choice and discouraging expression, allowing emotional erosion to persist without visible rupture. Moments of care and connection provide temporary relief but do not reverse deterioration. The findings demonstrate that emotional weakening functions as a learned response, produced through social practice and sustained across life stages, making distress an ongoing condition rather than an individual failure.

This study contributes to literary criticism by shifting attention from dramatic trauma to slow emotional decline sustained by culture. It reframes emotional suffering as a socially produced experience shaped by gender, power and silence. By applying this lens to Shobha Rao's novel, the paper extends feminist literary analysis toward everyday emotional life rather than exceptional violence. It offers a new way to read women's endurance as culturally instructed rather than naturally resilient. The study thus enriches contemporary discussions on gendered emotion, cultural influence, and inner life in modern fiction.

This paper concludes that emotional deterioration in *Girls Burn Brighter* functions as a culturally sustained process shaped by gendered expectation and social practice. Through the lives of Poornima and Savitha, the novel reveals how emotional decline develops quietly through repeated adjustment, silence and

endurance. Culture influences not only external circumstances but also inner emotional response, teaching women to manage pain inwardly rather than challenge its source. The analysis demonstrates that emotional erosion is cumulative, unfolding across childhood, adulthood and displacement. Moments of care and connection offer emotional support but do not dismantle the structures that produce suffering. Emotional deterioration therefore appears not as personal weakness, but as a shared condition rooted in social organization and cultural belief.

The study opens broader possibilities for examining emotional life as a socially shaped experience in contemporary literature. It encourages future research to explore how culture regulates emotion across different genres, communities, and global contexts. Comparative studies may extend this framework to other women-centred narratives that portray endurance without resolution. Interdisciplinary approaches drawing from sociology, psychology and gender studies can further deepen understanding of culturally shaped emotional decline. By foregrounding everyday emotional experience, this perspective invites readers and scholars to reconsider how literature reflects hidden forms of suffering sustained by social norms.

Works Cited

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