

The Main Female Characters' Oppression in *Girls Burn Brighter* by Shobha Rao

Wilma Afrilia Rizky

English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana

Malik Ibrahim Malang

wilmaafri1@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.18860/lilics.v2i2.3778>

Copyright © Wilma Aprilia Rizky

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).**How to Cite: APA Style 7th edition****Submission****Track:**

Received:

23-06-2023

Available online:

31-10-2023

Corresponding

Author:

Wilma Afrilia Rizky

wilmaafri1@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

The perception of women's inferiority in society has created significant issues in the form of oppression of women. Furthermore, literary works portray these issues to raise awareness because they have an important role in addressing the oppression against women. Shobha Rao's novel Girls Burn Brighter is a feminist literary work highlighting women's oppression. This study aimed to examine the oppression of the main female characters as revealed in the novel through literary devices. This study used a sociological approach since the novel raises the social phenomena of female oppression, which was examined through the perspective of feminist literary criticism. The researcher applied Iris Young's theory of oppression to explore the forms of oppression and Kimberly Crenshaw's theory of Intersectionality to look at the factors of oppression experienced by main female characters. The results of this study found that the main female characters, namely Poonima and Savitha, experienced oppression in the form of marginalization, exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Their experiences of oppression manifest in the form of marginalization of job opportunities, sexual and labor exploitation, powerlessness to speak up, cultural imperialism of the dowry system, and physical and sexual violence. These forms of oppression were influenced by intersecting factors such as gender, social class, political power, skin color, and dominant culture.

Keywords: *feminist literary criticism, intersectionality, oppression***INTRODUCTION**

The idea of women's inferiority in society has led to significant oppression against women. Men are often seen as having more value than women in many aspects of life, leading to negative consequences for individuals and society. Lerner (1989) highlights the importance of men's authority in social institutions, which limits women's access to power. Most women experience oppression due to the lack of equal opportunities, the ability to realize their potential, and legal rights.

The dominance of men over women in society is reflected in the way society treats women in a daily life. One country that reflects a society established on the notion of male superiority over women is India. In India, male superiority and positioning of women as servants contribute to perpetuating the oppression of women (Johnson & Johnson, 2001). The existence of hierarchical unequal power between men and women leads to the disregard of women's rights in households, workplaces, education systems, and decision-making processes. This has led to the prevalence of oppression of women in India. For instance, in 2021, there were 4,05,861 cases of crimes against women registered in 2021, up 15.3% from the previous year (NCRB, 2022). The large number of serious incidents indicate how common oppression of women is in India, including domestic violence, dowry-related fatalities, sexual assault, and rape. Indian women still have a low quality of life and are still being oppressed.

Literature plays a significant role in addressing the issue of oppression of women. Literary works reflect society, depicting the experiences and sufferings of female characters (Barry, 1981). It can raise awareness about women's challenges in various contexts, providing examples of female characters who define acceptable forms of femininity and set legitimate goals for both women and men. Literary works explore characters, themes, and narratives to describe various forms of oppression women experience. The novel is a form of literary work that can describe the problem of the oppression of women.

Shobha Rao is one of the novelists who portray women's oppression in her works. Since literary works convey certain moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities through characterization, her fictional characters are verbal representations of human beings (Abrams, 1981; Barry, 1981). Rao's novel entitled *Girls Burn Brighter* highlighted the oppression, especially traditional roles and expectations imposed on women in Indian society. It also addressed intersectional oppression within the dowry system, which controlled women's value through financial burdens. Hence, Rao's portrayals of oppression provided a pathway to using literature as a medium of social critique.

Several previous studies related to this study fall into three categories. The first category was the study of the novel *Girls Burn Brighter*. Such studies found that the female main character in the novel experienced psychological suffering and became a victim of their status and agency as a woman influenced by an oppressive system (Agarwal, 2020; Asif et al., 2021; Qamar, 2023). The second category was the oppression of women. Such studies discussed female characters living in a society that prioritizes males encounter several forms of oppression (Rehman and Rabbani, 2018; Dominilla et al., 2020; Alfando and Wahyuni, 2022; Kristami et al., 2022). The third category was Intersectionality. These studies discovered the experiences of intersectional oppression faced by female characters (Mustaqim, 2018; Istiadah et al., 2021; Sibuea et al., 2021). However, no previous study examined oppression and Intersectionality experienced by the main female characters in the novel *Girls Burn Brighter*.

The position of the novel *Girls Burn Brighter* was important to depict intersectional oppression experienced by Indian women due to various overlapping aspects of their identity. This study aimed to complement previous research that did not emphasize the complexity of the oppression experienced by women in the novel *Girls Burn Brighter* and consider the interacting dimensions of identity and social forces. In line with that, this study attempted to answer two research questions. First, what types of oppression do the

main female characters experience in Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*? The second is, what are the underlying factors contributing to the oppression experienced by the main female characters in Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*?

From the above explanation, the novel could be studied by using feminist literary criticism with the sociological approach. Feminist literary criticism analyzes and interpreted literary texts through feminist theory, focusing on the portrayal of male domination and the social, psychological, political, economic, and forces within the text (Bell, 2016; Guo, 2018). This approach was particularly relevant to analyze *Girls Burn Brighter* since it sought to analyze gender relations and the portrayal of women's oppression in literature, focusing on the principles of feminism (Wiyatmi, 2012).

In more detail, this study applied the theory of oppression by Iris Marion Young and Intersectionality by Kimberle Crenshaw. The theory of Five Faces Oppression by Iris Marion Young would investigate the types of oppression experienced by main female characters, including marginalization, exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Then, the theory of Intersectionality by Kimberly Crenshaw was used to investigate the complex experiences of women in the novel. Furthermore, this study was intended to contribute to the analysis of literary works and assist future researchers in understanding literary criticism from an intersectional feminist perspective.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was designed as a feminist literary criticism. The researcher proposed this study to analyze the literary work Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*, which referred to the oppression of Indian women. In conducting this study, the researcher applied a sociological approach to examine the representation of women in literary works. Two theories were used as the foundation of this study. The second theory was the five structures of oppression by Iris Young. This theory was used to determine what types of oppression Poornima and Savitha faced in the novel. The second theory was the intersectionality theory by Kimberlé Crenshaw. It is used to examine the factors of oppression of main female characters.

The data source was from the novel *Girls Burn Brighter* written by Shobha Rao. The novel used in this study was the first edition published by Flatiron Books in 2018, which consists of 309 pages. The data of this study was presented in the forms of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and dialogues, which indicated the type of oppression and revealed the occurrence of oppression against Poornima and Savitha as the main characters in the novel.

Furthermore, the data were collected in several steps. The first step was reading the novel. The researcher read the novel being analyzed by understanding the story in depth. The second step was identifying the highlighted data quoting the original data in the novel and then relating it to oppression. Then, these data were utilized in the data analysis process to expose the oppression conveyed in the novel to answer the problem of this study.

The collected data were analyzed through several steps. The first step was reviewing the collected data related to oppression. The second step was classifying the data that indicated the oppression of women using Iris Young's theory of oppression and investigating the intersectional oppression of Indian women who had experienced oppression by applying Crenshaw's intersectionality theory. The third step was the

researcher interpreted the data that had been identified. Fourth, the researcher concluded the oppression of women in the novel.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The Depiction of Oppression Encountered by the Main Female Characters in Rao's Girls Burn Brighter

Girls Burn Brighter was a 2001 Indian novel set in Indravalli, a village with rich culture and tradition. The novel portrays social inequality for women in rural South India, with poverty and caste system limitations. The female characters, Poornima and Savitha, experienced hardships and social injustices. The surrounding community lives in a hierarchical socio-cultural system and oppresses marginalized individuals. This novel explored the portrayal of oppression using Iris Young's five faces of oppression, including marginalization, exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

Marginalization

In Girls Burn Brighter, women encounter barriers while accessing resources, information, and job opportunities. The excerpt below illustrates how women are still marginalized in India's society.

Datum 1

Poornima turned. "Who?"

"Savitha."

So that was her name.

Poornima stood still, a mat half unrolled. "She's all I could find," her father said,

"...She was a year or two older, Poornima guessed, though neither truly knew their exact ages.

Only the birthdates of the boys were recorded in the village". (Rao, 2018, p. 12-13)

The datum above revealed a marginalization of women in data identity. Village women, including Poornima and Savitha, were unaware of their birthdates. Unaware of Savitha's name, Poornima tried to guess her age, but they were still determining their exact ages. It was due to society's prioritization of recording boys' birthdates, which often disregarded girls' birthdates. This marginalization of women in data identity implied that they were undervalued and disregarded, aligning with Young's concept of marginalization.

The lack of information about their ages indicated that Poornima and Savitha did not have equal access to information that should be accessible to all members of society, regardless of gender. This situation aligned with Young's concept of marginalization, where individuals or groups are excluded and separated from society. The uncertainty about Poornima and Savitha's ages reflected the unfairness of women's access to personal information and the lack of social recognition for women. Thus, the uncertainty about Poornima and Savitha's ages portrayed the unfairness of women's access to personal information and the lack of social recognition for women.

Savitha also encountered a form of exclusion when looking for jobs. Savitha's inability to get employment reflected how marginalized women were in the workplace. She faced multiple challenges and needed to be allowed to develop herself professionally. The following excerpt illustrates the marginalization she encountered while seeking employment.

Datum 2

... tallied all the ways in which she could make money: she could collect garbage, which clearly wasn't bringing in enough; she could cook and clean, as her mother did, though there were hardly any families rich enough in Indravalli to keep even her mother employed; she could work the charkha and the loom—she did belong to the caste of weavers, after all—but money from making cotton saris was dwindling each year (Rao, 2018, p.9)

Savitha's inability to find employment highlights the marginalization faced by women in the workplace. She faced multiple challenges and was not allowed to develop professionally. She considered various low-paying positions, such as collecting garbage and working as a housekeeper, but realized these efforts needed to be improved to cover her expenses. Ultimately, she relied on her weaving business to support her family, taking over Poornima's mother's position as a weaver. Despite declining weaving income, Savitha continued working as a weaver to support her family. This case highlights the limited employment opportunities for women from the weaver caste in Indravalli, who faced economic marginalization and were encouraged to work menial jobs to support their families financially. Instead of working for personal benefit, women were encouraged to do menial jobs to support their families financially. As mentioned by Young (1990), marginalization restricts women's access to employment and contributes to their economic poverty.

Exploitation

Young (1990) defines exploitation as the act of utilizing people's labor for profit without providing fair compensation. Women were often victims of exploitation, as seen in the novel *Girls Burn Brighter*. Savitha and Poornima's situations were examples of labor exploitation in India, as they worked without receiving fair compensation for their time and effort. This exploitation led to economic injustice and perpetuated gender inequality. It can be seen from the excerpt below:

Datum 3

There were the lunch dishes to wash and dinner to prepare. Her mother-in-law and Aruna liked their tea at four o'clock, and it was already ten past. Poornima hurried to the kitchen" (Rao, 2018, p. 86)

Poornima faced household responsibilities, including washing lunch dishes, preparing dinner, and serving tea. Despite her limited time and capacity, she rushed to the kitchen to fulfill the family's needs. Her husband's family treated her like a maid, highlighting her responsibilities and unpaid household chores. This could be categorized as exploitation since it is in line with Delphy's that women labor in marriage, stating that her husband and family benefit from her domestic work without providing fair compensation (Young, 1990). Moreover, the fact that Poornima rushed to the kitchen to serve tea to her mother-in-law and Aruna demonstrates the extra work put on her. This aligns with Singh and Pattanaik's (2020) statement that Poornima's position as a woman in Indian society required her to perform unpaid domestic labor. In this context, the household tasks assigned to her were considered natural duties for women despite the time, energy, and valuable contributions they made.

Savitha experienced another labor exploitation in her workplace. She worked for Poornima's father as a weaver but got long working hours and low wages. Poornima's father demanded extensive work without providing proper compensation, as shown in the excerpt below.

Datum 4

"He said it was because they were falling behind on the sari orders. "Doesn't she know we have work to do?" he'd say if Savitha went home for even an hour or two in the evenings. "Tell her I'll pay her extra for staying longer. I can't afford much. Hardly any to spare. But some," he said". (Rao, 2018, p. 45)

Savitha's employer exploited her by demanding extended working hours without offering her a fair wage. In this case, women were not paid a fair wage for the amount of work they were expected to do. The line *"Tell her I'll pay her extra for staying longer. I can't afford much."* indicates that her employer could not afford much to provide fair compensation. This case highlighted the exploitation of women in the workplace, as they were not being paid an appropriate wage for the work they were expected to do. Savitha was paid insufficient pay, which did not fairly compensate her for the long hours she put in and her significant contribution to the sari-making process. Additionally, Savitha was used as a sexual object. It is shown in the following excerpt.

Datum 5

*Her first customer was a middle-aged man, ...and said, "Will you give me a kiss?" Savitha looked up at him. "I don't know how," she said. The statement so guileless that the man seemed to almost wilt when he heard it. "Here," he said finally, "let me show you."
"...After that, the mechanics of it all became routine: the five to six customers she had per day, the constant clucking and recriminations from the madam." (Rao, 2018, p. 133-134)*

The datum above demonstrates Savitha's forced prostitution. Savitha was previously drugged with a cup of tea by a man in a tea shop, as stated in the sentence, "he offered her a cup of tea" (p. 130). She is being forced into prostitution by it. She is then depicted as an object for the customer's sexual fulfillment in the line "Will you give me a kiss?" without asking for her consent. Then, the line "the mechanics of it all became routine" refers to how Savitha's body gets objectified to accommodate the daily routine of her sexual labor with numerous customers. With five to six customers each day, Savitha must perform repetitious sexual work in a short amount of time.

In this case, Savitha's story reveals the exploitation that many women encounter when engaged in sexual activity. By using Savitha's work for the advantage of others without paying her fairly, exploitation occurs in her case (Young, 1990). Savitha was a prostitution-related victim of sex trafficking. She performs sexual labor without being adequately compensated for it. Savitha loses control over her money and personal dignity due to the use of her work and body for the gratification of consumers. This illustrates the value transferred from Savitha's labor to the consumers and brothel owner.

Powerlessness

Women are vulnerable to oppression when they lack awareness of their oppression and accept their inferiority to men as a societal norm. They do not identify their voice and enslavement, making them unable to fight against it. Iris Young's theory of powerlessness

provides a framework for understanding how certain groups are denied the ability to make decisions that impact their lives (1990, p. 56). In the novel *Girls Burn Brighter*, Poornima experiences powerlessness as she remains silent and accepts oppression. It is shown in the excerpt below:

Datum 6

"But the air was stifling, no longer lovely, and Poornima felt a rising panic. She tried to stop him, she tried to buck him off, but he kept his grip on her elbow and steered her toward the dais. "I want to stop," she said to her father. Her father tightened his hold on Poornima's elbow. He said, "Don't be stupid." Poornima thought, and the words seemed decent enough" (Rao, 2018, p. 71)

Poornima was forced into an arranged marriage against her will by her father. Despite her objections, her father ignored her and warned her not to be stupid. Poornima chants, *"Don't be stupid,"* to cope with her powerlessness and lack of control over her life. Her father excluded her from the decision-making process, and when she expressed her wish to end her marriage, she was denied. Despite her objections, she lacked family status and the power to assert her agency. Her attempts to refuse the marriage failed, leaving her with no choice but to submit to her father's demands. As a result, she was forced to marry Kishore and unable to decide her own life.

Cultural imperialism

Cultural imperialism had impacted how women were treated, especially patriarchal norms within family structures. Women were required to adhere to these standards to avoid the consequences. In *Girls Burn Brighter*, women must fulfill their gender roles. In Poornima's society, men held significant power and influence over the shaping of gender norms, which were widely accepted as natural as it is shown in the following excerpt.

Datum 7

"The farmer was no longer interested. He sent word to Poornima's father. He said ... he had heard his daughter was as dark as a tamarind. Poornima's father was crestfallen. He prodded Ramayya, who'd brought the news, ... She's hardly as dark as a tamarind. Do you think she is? It's a curse: daughters, darkness." (Rao, 2018, p.23)

It is also supported by the evidence below.

Datum 8

"She thought about beauty. If her skin had been lighter, her hair thicker, or if her eyes had been bigger, her father might've found a better match for her: someone who wanted a wife, not an ox". (Rao, 2018, p.7)

Cultural imperialism had significantly impacted beauty standards in Poornima's society. The line *"his daughter was as dark as a tamarind"* highlighted colorism in Indian society, where fair skin was valued more than dark skin. This often made women with dark complexions unattractive. The farmer's rejection of marrying Poornima exemplified the oppression against women who did not conform to society's beauty standards. Furthermore, Chen et al. (2020) highlight the negative impact of Western imperialism on Indian society, particularly in terms of beauty standards. Poornima's story highlighted the unrealistic expectations of fair skin, thick hair, and big eyes based on Eurocentric ideals.

This double oppression led to the marginalization of women with dark skin. Her father's statement, "*It's a curse: daughters, darkness,*" reflected the internalization of Western beauty standards and cultural bias against dark skin. This perpetuated the idea that fair skin was desirable while dark skin was undesirable and a curse, perpetuating the marginalization of women with dark skin in Indian society.

Poornima's oppression due to her dark skin continued until she was forced to marry a man with an idiosyncrasy. This evidence was shown through indirect characterization through dialogue in the following excerpt.

Datum 9

"They're looking for matches for the older one ... When Ramayya finally spoke, his voice was lowered. "There's nothing wrong with him. Nothing like that." More huffing, a further drop. "But what is it?" Poornima's father's voice rose with suspicion. "Our girl's no catch, you know. So no need to be so dubious. Just a small affectation. An idiosyncrasy" (Rao, 2018, p.41)

It is also supported by the evidence below.

Datum 10

"She gasped. His right hand: it wasn't whole. He was missing two fingers. His middle and most of his index. ... So this, she thought with disgust, this is what they meant by idiosyncrasy" (Rao, 2018, p.72)

Poornima's dominant culture values physical appearance and colorism, making finding a suitable husband difficult due to her unattractive appearance. Her unattractive appearance was mentioned in the phrase "*Our girl's no catch*" which suggested that finding a suitable husband would be difficult for her due to her physical characteristics that did not conform to the dominant cultural norm. According to Kukreja (2020), colorism forces women to marry men who have been rejected in the local marriage market due to physical disabilities. As a poor, dark-skinned woman, Poornima was inevitably married to a man with a physical disability. Furthermore, Poornima's gasping and disgust at the sight of her husband's missing fingers suggested that she did not want to marry him. However, it was also implied that only disabled men would be willing to marry Poornima, which reinforces the notion that dark-skinned women were undesirable in her culture.

Violence

Gender-based oppression against women was a severe issue, affecting physical, sexual, and mental abuse. Victims often lacked justice, as seen in Savitha and Poornima's experience of physical violence from men, including her father, husband, and in-laws. This highlighted the consequences of social and political issues like gender injustice, poverty, and social inequality in India. In Poornima's case, she experienced sexual harassment by her husband.

The first was the physical violence experienced by Poornima. Poornima endured frequent physical violence from her family as punishment for not following their rules. They believed that Poornima deserved to be punished for causing her physical harm and resulting in injuries. This is shown in the following excerpt.

Datum 11

"negotiations with the family from Repalle fell apart. They refused to budge from their dowry demands ... Poornima's father slapped her hard. Then he grabbed her by the hair. He said, "You see this? You see what you've done?" His grip on her hair tightened and he said, "The next time somebody asks you to sing, what're you going to do?"

.... Poornima blinked. She held back tears. Her scalp burned, hairs snapped like electric wires. Her brothers and sister crowded around the door of the hut to see. "What?" he growled. "What will you do? Say it. Say it." "Sing," she whispered, wincing in pain. "I'm going to sing." (Rao, 2018, p. 34)

Poornima experienced physical violence after negotiations for marriage with the Repalle family failed. When asked by the prospective groom's family, she refused to sing, fearing being married to a man who would take her too far away from the village. Her father, who found it challenging to find a suitable groom, used his physical strength to inflict pain on Poornima by slapping her and grabbing her by the hair. This violence was an expression of the violence she faced as a woman from a low-income family in a class-based society. The physical violence she experienced was linked to cultural imperialism in society, which was triggered by the harmful practice of dowry. Poornima and her family had no control over the high demands for dowry and gender roles from the Repalle family, forcing them to submit. The Repalle family refused to back down from their demands, and Poornima's father could not fulfill them. He responded by hitting and pulling her hair, forcing her to comply with the family's demands and sing, even though she did not want to.

Poornima's physical violence worsened due to her infertility issues and delayed dowry debt. Her husband and mother-in-law continued to abuse her, and she was threatened with even worse consequences, such as hot oil being poured on her body. This was demonstrated through the following excerpt.

Datum 12

"The five thousand rupees was still outstanding, and her mother-in-law and Kishore reminded her of it every time she put a bite of food in her mouth, or drank a glass of water. "You think it's free?" her mother-in-law hissed". (Rao, 2018, p. 94)

It is also supported by the evidence below.

Datum 13

"Kishore and her mother-in-law sprang away and raced to the other end of the kitchen. ... She turned her head to follow them, and that was why, when the oil landed, it splattered across the left side of her face, down her neck, and caught her upper arm and shoulder. Poornima felt a fire, and then the fire, and everything with it, went out." (Rao, 2018, p. 98)

Poornima experienced physical violence from her husband and mother-in-law due to an unpaid dowry debt of five thousand rupees owed by her father. The violence escalated when they poured hot oil on her face, causing burns and a facial deformity. In Poornima's case, the unpaid dowry promised by her father made her a target of mistreatment from her husband's family. The system of dowry caused injustice and violence in Poornima's married life. This incident led to her being sent back to her father's home, where her husband's family mistreated her. As Umar stated unfulfilled dowry promises allow the bride to be returned to her parents' home. The dowry system contributes to

domestic violence. Violence against women in the household is one of the most accepted crimes (Rastogi & Therly, 2006).

The second form of violence was sexual violence. Both main characters, Poornima and Savitha, experienced various forms of sexual violence and exploitation during their life journey. In Poornima's case, she experienced sexual harassment by her husband, as it was shown through direct characterization in the form of the author's description in the following excerpt.

Datum 14

"She couldn't decide—as she watched his face, its grimace, its shudderings—what hurt more: the thing coming in or the thing going out. But then it ended. Just like that. After one final push, Kishore looked down at her and smiled. A true smile. And she thought, Yes, after all, yes, you are the one I belong to now." (p. 78)

Poornima experienced marital rape by her husband, Kishore, who forced her to have sexual intercourse with her without her consent. Kishore felt entitled to take over his wife's body and force her to have sex, as demonstrated by the line, *"you are the one I belong to now."* This sexual relationship could be classified as marital rape, as Kishore violated Poornima's rights to her own body and viewed her as a sexual object. Poornima was powerless in front of Kishore and had to serve her husband as a good wife. The text highlighted the violence and pain experienced by Poornima as a result of her husband's sexual abuse.

Meanwhile, Savitha also experienced sexual violence throughout her life from Indravalli to Seattle. She became a victim of rape by a man who employed her as a weaver. Later on, Savitha was also trafficked to other places and faced various forms of sexual violence. This violence was shown through direct characterization in the form of the author's description in the following excerpt.

Datum 15

"A darkness fell over the lantern light. Savitha turned and saw Poornima's father. He smiled, and she thought, But he's never smiled. And then he said, "Come with me." ... It was then that she saw Savitha's clothes, ripped. Some on, some off. Lying around her like torn sails". (Rao, 2018, p. 56-57)

The above datum described the sexual violence experienced by Savitha while working for Poornima's father. When Poornima saw Savitha's torn clothing, she realized that Savitha had become a victim of sexual violence perpetrated by her father. This showed that when Savitha worked for Poornima's father as a weaver, she was seen as a vulnerable and powerless subordinate. Poornima's father, who should have protected her, instead committed sexual violence against her. This was reflected in the above quote, where Savitha was treated as a sexual object by Poornima's father. Furthermore, Savitha also experienced sexual violence when she was trapped as a prostitute in America. This sexual violence is shown in the following excerpt.

Datum 16

"When she lay on her back, he said, No, you'll do the other thing. And so she turned, but he said, No, no, that's not what I mean. Savitha looked at him, confused, and then he showed her what to do. He had a bottle of something clear that he smeared over her stub, and then he showed her. He said, Like this, and then he got on the bed. On all fours. He told her to go in and

out, and when she did, he said, Oh, yeah, like that, like that. A pain hit somewhere behind her eyes, and she turned away. But the pain was thunder, it broke and it broke. And he said, Yeah, oh yeah, yes, just like that. And she began to cry, willing it to end". (Rao, 2018, p. 173)

The above datum describes a scene of sexual violence experienced by Savitha in America. In this case, Suresh forced Savitha to perform certain sexual acts that she did not want to do. Savitha is merely used as a sexual plaything for a deviant sexual scene. Even when Savitha cried and felt pain, Suresh still forced her to continue. Savitha was in a difficult situation and had no choice but to do what he asked. This showed that as a victim of sexual violence, Savitha felt powerless.

The Factors of Women's Oppression: Intersectionality Perspective

This section explored how the oppressions faced by the main female characters in Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter* were examined through the perspectives of Intersectionality. Intersectionality theory recognized that a single factor did not solely influence oppression, but rather the result of the intersection of various interconnected factors such as gender, race, social class, religion, and so on. In the context of this novel, intersectionality theory examines the experiences of oppression of the female characters in various dimensions of their lives. There are three basic conceptualizations of Intersectionality offered by Crenshaw (1991): political, structural, and representational.

The factors of oppression based on structural Intersectionality.

Structural Intersectionality highlighted the qualitative differences in individuals' experiences based on their intersecting identities and addressed the convergence of race, gender, and class domination (Dennissen et al., 2020; Cooper, 2018).

Oppression based on gender and social class

In the marginalization section, it was found that Savitha experienced marginalization in obtaining decent employment. She realized that the available options for her, such as being a garbage collector as a domestic worker, needed to sufficiency.

Datum7

Poornima stood still, a mat half unrolled. "She's all I could find," her father said, lying back on his hemp-rope bed, smoking. "The weaving collective said I should be happy. As if my wages are low. Besides, she should be grateful. That father of hers, old Subbudu, can hardly feed himself, let alone that miserable wife and those four daughters." (Rao, 2018, p. 12)

In this case, Poornima's father encouraged Savitha to be grateful for her job as a weaver despite the low wages. This highlighted the marginalization of women like Savitha, who were often placed in low-paying jobs and expected to be grateful for their insufficient income. Savitha's family's poverty highlighted the role of social class in marginalizing her. In the context of structural Intersectionality, Savitha's oppression was influenced by gender and social class. Social norms based on gender led to unfair divisions of roles and jobs, such as housekeeping, which limit her choices of employment. Her low socioeconomic status in Indravalli also created structural inequality in economic resources. Higher education increased employment opportunities, but Savitha faced difficulties accessing the same opportunities as more privileged individuals, resulting in limitations in skill development and job opportunities. Therefore, intersectional factors such as gender and

social class contributed to Savitha's oppression. These factors contributed to her limited access to better economic opportunities and the challenges she faced in navigating the world of work.

Oppression based on Gender, Skin Color, Social Class, and Culture

In the Cultural Imperialism section, it was previously found that Poornima experienced oppression in getting a suitable partner or husband. In the dominant Poornima culture, physical appearance was valued highly, so finding a suitable husband would be difficult because her physical characteristics did not conform to the dominant cultural norms.

Datum 18

So this, Poornima thought with disgust, this is what they meant by idiosyncrasy. ... But who is this man? And why am I to hand him these two bananas and an apple [as a part of the Hinduism wedding ceremony]. These fruits. I don't want to place them in his hand, she thought; I don't want to place them in a hand so harmed. (Rao, 2018, p. 72)

Poornima expressed disgust towards her husband's missing finger hand, expressing rejection and resentment. The excerpt implied that only men with disabilities were willing to marry her, reinforcing the belief that poor, dark-skinned women were undesirable in her culture. Poornima's case demonstrated how intersectional factors like gender, skin color, social class, and dominant culture influence her experiences of oppression. She was deemed unworthy of finding a partner who met the standards of the dominant culture due to her perceived unideal appearance. Factors such as gender, social class, dominant culture, and skin color influence the value and judgment placed on women in their search for life partners.

The factors of oppression based on political Intersectionality

Political Intersectionality emphasizes the importance of considering intersecting subordinate identities in shaping policies for marginalized groups. It exposes the marginalization experienced by women of color due to the neglect of race and gender intersections (Dennissen et al., 2020).

Oppression based on gender, social class, and political power

In the violence section previously, it was found that Savitha experienced sexual violence while working for Poornima's father. This could be connected to the following excerpt through Crenshaw's theory of political Intersectionality in the context of the oppression faced by women in seeking proper justice.

Datum 19

Deep into that night, the village elders came to a decision: Poornima's father was to marry Savitha. They all agreed: it was to be his punishment, and it was just. (Rao, 2018, p. 62)

Savitha's case highlighted the impact of political, gender, and power factors on Savitha's oppression. The village elders' decision to force Savitha to marry her rapist reflected imbalanced power dynamics and patriarchal norms. These village elders, predominantly male and holding authority positions, used their political power to enact laws that favored men. The theory of political Intersectionality suggests that the political

and legal systems contributed to the oppression of women in obtaining justice. The village elders' decision to suggest Poornima's father marry Savitha as punishment reflected a perspective that views women as objects controlled by men, disregarding women's rights to seek justice. The intersection of gender and political factors, such as an unfair political and legal system, contributed to the oppression of women seeking justice in cases of sexual violence.

The factors of oppression based on representational Intersectionality.

Representational Intersectionality examines the cultural construction of identity, especially in media, and critiques how it perpetuated oppressive stereotypes that undermine the challenges faced by women of color (Crenshaw, 1991)

Oppression based on gender, skin color, and cultural representation

In the cultural imperialism section previously, it was found that Poornima experiences discrimination and negative judgment due to her dark skin color. In Poornima's case, her skin color was deemed unattractive and undesirable, which reinforces the belief that white women were more beautiful than black women.

Datum 20

"If her skin had been lighter, her hair thicker, or if her eyes had been bigger, her father might've found a better match for her: someone who wanted a wife, not an ox. She'd once heard Ramayya saying, when he'd come to see her father, "Your Poornima's a good worker, but you know these boys today, they want a modern girl. They want fashion." (Rao, 2018, p.7)

Poornima faced expectations related to her physical appearance and the ideal image of a wife. When a woman's beauty did not meet societal expectations, she was often seen as an object to be admired and sometimes even ridiculed. Poornima was bound by the beauty standards that must be maintained due to these social expectations. Furthermore, the quote reflects how women were often perceived as objects men could use to achieve their goals. Poornima was called an "ox," illustrating how women were often seen as objects men could exploit for their interests. In this case, Poornima was a woman who was deemed worthless because of her skin color, reflecting the social stereotype that dark-skinned women were considered unattractive.

Thus, Poornima's experience was influenced by the interaction between gender and her skin color. Poornima faced discrimination and unfair treatment due to the image shaped by popular culture regarding beauty and the value of women. As a woman with dark skin, Poornima faced social expectations that did not align with her appearance. This reflected how women were often perceived as objects that men could exploit to achieve their own goals.

CONCLUSION & SUGGESTION

This study found five faces of oppression and Intersectionality in the novel *Girls Burn Brighter*. These forms of oppression included marginalization, exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Savitha experienced marginalization when she was excluded from choosing work that could improve her standard of living. For exploitation, Poornima and Savitha depicted women as objects to be used for the gratification and benefit of others, including labor and sexual. Powerlessness was

experienced by Poornima when she could not speak up due to patriarchal norms that place men in positions of power and authority over women. Meanwhile, cultural imperialism of the dowry system caused Poornima to experience many forms of oppression. Thus, Poornima and Savitha experienced violence dominated by sexual violence by their husbands or non-relatives.

The experiences of oppression faced by Poornima and Savitha were explored through an intersectional perspective. The factors of oppression within structural Intersectionality, such as gender, social class, skin color, and culture, contribute to Savitha and Poornima's experience of receiving injustice. In the political context, the causes of oppression in intersectionality findings were primarily related to gender and a political system that failed to consider the interests of marginalized groups. Meanwhile, in representational Intersectionality, factors of oppression such as gender, skin color, and culture interacted and influenced Poornima's experience of oppression related to negative judgments about her physical appearance and social expectations imposed by the dominant culture.

As a suggestion, future researchers in the novel *Girls Burn Brighter* can utilize psychoanalytic approaches and relevant theories to explore the characters' traumatization and behavior. Psychoanalytic approaches can help understand the trauma experienced by characters like Poornima and Savitha, while feminist approaches can examine the struggles of women, particularly Poornima, in patriarchal societies. These approaches can provide deeper insight into the novel's themes and a deeper understanding of the issues within the work.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H. (1981). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New York: Harcourt. Brace & World, Inc.
- Agarwal, B. (2020). Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*: A Psycho Analysis of Women's Inner World. *The Indian Journal of English Studies*, 57(1), 277-286.
- Alfando, J., & Wahyuni, D. (2022). Being Black and Being A Woman: Double Oppression Experience in Angie Thomas's "On The Come Up"(2019). *English Language and Literature*, 11(4), 508-522.
- Asif, M., & Zafar, N., & Iftikhar, T. (2021). Reconceptualization of Gender Relations in Saeed's *Amal Unbound* and Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*. *Sir Syed Journal of Education & Social Research*, 4(2), 131-138.
- Barry, P. (1981). *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory*. In *Beginning theory (fourth edition)*. Manchester University Press.
- Bell, E. (2016). *Feminist Literary Criticism*. The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies, 1-3.
- Chen, T., Lian, K., Lorenzana, D., Shahzad, N., & Wong, R. (2020). Occidentalisation of beauty standards: Eurocentrism in Asia. *International Socioeconomics Laboratory*, 1(2), 1-11.
- Cooper, B., Disch, L., & Hawkesworth, M. (2016). *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. University of Chicago Legal Forum 140: 139-167.
- Dennissen, M., Benschop, Y., & van Den Brink, M. (2020). Rethinking diversity management: An intersectional analysis of diversity networks. *Organization Studies*, 41(2), 219-240.

- Dominilla, A. F., Kuncara, S. D., & Valiantien, N. M. (2020). The Oppression Towards Black Female Characters as Maids in The Help Novel By Kathryn Stockett. *Ilmu Budaya: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni dan Budaya*, 4(4), 662-673.
- Guo, R. (2019). Brief analysis of feminist literary criticism. *Atlantis Press: International Workshop on Education Reform and Social Sciences (ERSS 2018)*, 453-456.
- Istiadah, Furaida, A., & Nabillah, D. R. (2021). *Multiple Oppression Suffered by Javanese Female Characters in Okky Madasari's The Year of The Voiceless. The 3rd Annual International Conference on Language, Literature, and Media*, (1), 140-158.
- Johnson, P. S., & Johnson, J. A. (2001). The oppression of women in India. *Violence against women*, 7(9), 1051-1068.
- Kristami, O., Surya, S., & Lubis, I. (2022). Oppression on Women as Reflected in Lakshmi's Character of Sold Novel by Patricia McCormick. *Ilmu Budaya: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni dan Budaya*, 6(1), 274-285.
- Kukreja, R. (2021). Colorism as Marriage Capital: Cross-Region Marriage Migration in India and Dark-Skinned Migrant Brides. *Gender & Society*, 35(1), 85-109.
- Lerner, G. (1989). *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford University Press: New York.
- Mustaqim, A. H. (2018). Ketertindasan dan Perlawanan Perempuan Interseksionalitas dalam Cerpenn Pohon Api Karya Oka Rusmini. *Paradigma Jurnal Kajian Budaya*, 8(1), 71-83.
- National Crime Records Bureau. (2022). Crime in India: Statistics-2021 Volume I. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi.
- Qamar, S., Khan, M. A., & Shaheen, A. (2022). Agentic Female Fraternity of the Recovering Patriarchal Women in Rao's Girls Burn Brighter. *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, 19(4), 1306-1318.
- Rastogi, M., & Therly, P. (2006). Dowry and its link to violence against women in India: Feminist psychological perspectives. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 7(1), 66-77.
- Rehman, Z., & Rabbani, M. (2018). A Study of Multiplicity of Oppression and Repressive Structures in The God of Small Things. *International Journal of English and Education*, 7(4), 199-213.
- Sibuea, Y., Udasmoro, W., & Cholsy, H. (2021). Perlawanan Strategis Perempuan terhadap Eksploitasi Laki-laki dalam Novel Claudine en Menage (1902) Karya Gabriele Sidonie Colette. *Mozaik Humaniora*, 20(2), 236-246.
- Singh, P., & Pattanaik, F. (2020). Unfolding unpaid domestic work in India: women's constraints, choices, and career. *Palgrave Communications*, 6(1), 1-13.
- Wiyatmi. (2012). *Kritik Sastra Feminis: Teori dan Aplikasinya dalam Sastra Indonesia*. Yogyakarta: Penerbit Ombak.
- Young, I. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.