

A BOOK REVIEW : "**GIRLS BURN BRIGHTER**"
BY SOBHA RAO

*Ms. Abhipsa Mishra

In the dim dark world of agony and fear,
 SHE stands powerful.
Face stained with the trail of tears,
 SHE stands powerful.
There is no trace of loving heart to cheer
 SHE stands powerful.
The fire of sufferings burn her more and more
 SHE stands powerful.
The sadistic society abuses her, teases her, curses her
 But **SHE** stands powerful
 Nothing she wants from the folklore,
 But a heart to solace her , a hand to hold her .
The entire humanity to stand by her and just make a roar,
 That **SHE is powerful ..SHE stands powerful.**

This small poem penned down by me draws the curtain raiser of a searing debut novel "Girls burn Brighter" by an Indian-American writer Sobha Rao. It was published on 6 March 2018 by Flatiron Books (a subdivision of Macmillan publishers). This book was named as one of the best books of 2018 by NPR and the Washington Post and was a finalist for a Goodreads Choice Award.

The novel plots a mesmerizing, heart-melting, utterly wonderful tale of love, passion, poverty, grief, fate and power of friendship infused with originality, charm, pathos and strong flow of human emotions. The contemporary fictional melodrama features two

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young, but poor girls Poornima and Savitha who bravely faced all wrath of the ruthless society for the eternal bond of friendship.

The story, set in the small, impoverished village of Indravelli in Andhra Pradesh in India resonates the plight of two electrifying feminine protagonists Poornima and Savitha ,who were driven apart from each other by circumstances, but never extinguishes the fire of hope that burns brighter than their devastated life journey. And how they move in a relentless search for each other, even crossed seven seas baring all odds and obstacles in lust for an extraordinary bond is the epicenter of the story.

The story in brief

The story set in 2001 in the small village of Indravelli, near the banks of Krishna River, in Andhra Pradesh.

The opening chapter of the story starts with a highly emotional and thought provoking power pack interaction between a childless old woman and a journalist. There is an old childless woman who has cultivated a grove of trees in her Indian village “as a way to care for something, as a way to nurture something fragile and lovely”. When a journalist comes to interview her, she says that she sees the trees as her children. Then the journalist congratulates her and says- “You’re a fortunate woman to have so many sons”. The woman replies: “You’re mistaken, young man. These aren’t my sons... These are my daughters.” These lines portray the cultural ethos and the conservative mindset of that subset of community who value sons more than their daughters. This brings home the fact how girls are still considered to be a curse and the yearning for a son makes people superstitious.

The story beautifully weaves the strings of association and the tragic life of two female adolescents , one is -16-year-old Poornima and the other is 17-year-old Savitha. Both girls have grown up in families that are economically backward and emotionally deprived. Both these girls have seemingly striking features in common.

“They are poor, they are deprived and they are girls”.

Poornima's mother dies of cancer who is her moral strength and power. But her death shatters her mental peace and engrosses her in deep melancholy and solitude. Poornima is the eldest of her five siblings so she toils at the loom to provide for her younger siblings and cold, lazy father, who can't wait to marry her off. Soon after, Poornima's father hires a local girl, 17-year-old Savitha, to help with the looms. Savitha's family is even poorer: she and her siblings scour the local rubbish dump each day for items to sell.

Then there is a turning point in both of their lives. An instant attachment develops between the two girls, which soon blossoms into a long lasting love for each other : “Savitha... was alive, more alive than anyone she'd ever known. She made even the smallest of life seem grand... watching Savitha, watching her delight, was like cultivating her own.” Together they find solace in each other's heart, find small delights in every menial things right from bananas, blend rice to flute song. Wow, such a mesmerizing chilling chemistry is brewing up among them however, without being aware that their happiness is going to be hijacked by the cruel destiny.

Now the dark night enters bringing a seismic shock in each one's life. That night when Savitha is working at Poornima's house, Poornima's father takes a vindictive opportunity and rapes her. As a sign of punishment, the elderly village persons declare the official marriage of Savitha and Poornima's father. But Savitha after being victimized by the brutal act of sexual violence chooses to flee away from the village in search of peace however never knows that it would land her in a dungeon where she experiences even greater mistreatment. She falls into the hands of a pimp, called Guru, who forces her into prostitution.

Meanwhile, Poornima is plunged forcibly by her merciless father to fit into a loveless match whose family treats her with contempt even worse than her father did. Her father pays a portion of the dowry at the time of marriage but promises to pay the remaining within a year. A year passes but still the dowry remains unpaid. Enraged, Poornima's

husband and mother-in-law douse her in hot oil, leaving her face permanently disfigured. When the marriage becomes intolerable, she runs away and eventually meets the wicked man Guru. Due to her disfigurement, she is saved from prostitution.

Over time, Poornima comes to learn that Savitha has been sold to a sleazy Indian businessman in Seattle, USA who uses destitute village girls to clean his apartment buildings — and much worse..Ultimately with the help of Mohan (the owner's son) who has feelings for Savitha, Poornima meets her soul mate.

The book ends with Savitha and Poornima on either side of a bathroom door, neither having seen the other one yet.

Striking features of the novel

The story is indeed a kind of psychological gimmick that has made every attempt to be glued to the character sketch and a wonderful display of human emotions.

The novel is narrated in alternate sections made for both Poornima and Savitha, which encourages immersion in each girl's story. Alternating between both these girls' perspectives, the skillful writer with her earnest and beautiful prose gracefully twists various plots of the story, is able to captivate readers mind and allure one to turn through pages with utmost sincerity and interest.

The two heroines of the novel are juxtaposed to bring an exciting connection throughout the story and how they both encounter insurmountable obstacles against the strictures of poverty and patriarchal societies. Both the characters Poornima and Savitha are almost prototypes: Savitha is exuberant, immature and nature loving and a foodie, while Poornima — a realistic, sensitive but more practical. The strong usage of metaphors in this book exemplifies this different personality types but eventually tempers them to conquer their bleak fate and find love for each other in the world of despair and cruelty.

Both Poornima and Savitha endure multiple episodes of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. There are rapes, enforced prostitution, hot oil attacks, forcible drug-taking, amputated limbs that are just the seaming truth of everyday realistic happenings in a girl's life raising in most of the rural belts in India .The writer puts every mention of it with utmost audacity and sheer brilliance.

The fictional story beautifully visualizes an ancient rural landscape and impoverished life style like use of Charkha, age old dowry system, girl being considered as a burden of the family.

The novel catalogues unremitting plethora of crushing poverty, menial slavery, marital torture, physical assaults, human trafficking, prostitution, mutilation, cultural misogyny and the baffling struggle made every day by millions of women worldwide.

As the pages keep turning, there is a lyrical and lovely sequence of the scenes, and many phrases call for pause and great deal of appreciation-like-garlands of jasmine, plump as pillows mirroring Exotic India. The writer with her artistic mastery tries to picturesque two hard realities –life and death by narrating- “Yogurt rice with a banana was like life, simple, straightforward, with a beginning and an end, while the other — the banana split — was like death, complex, infused with a kind of mystery that was beyond Savitha's comprehension, and every bite, like every death, dumbfounding.”

Savitha in a state of introspection-“Every moment in a woman's life was a deal, a deal for her body: first for its blooming and then for its wilting; first for her bleeding and then for her virginity and then for her bearing (counting only the sons) and then for her widowing.”

When Poornima was just a toddler, she was about to fall into a river. Her mother ,beside herself screamed at her father to grab her. But he hesitated: I was standing there, I was thinking. she's just a girl. Let her go. That's the thing with girls, isn't it.. Push.

“Your mother must have been relieved”,.. Poornima said. Not really. I was still a girl.

All these statements do raise our eyebrows and triggers every nerve and soul to understand the worth of a girl as if she is born to suffer, even in this “Me too movement” era.

Overall, the language used is simple, vivid and the storylines are very lucid and deftly woven together that moves along at a good pace.

The story is narrated in an operatic way that intrigues plausibility.

About the Author

Sobha Rao, is raised in a weavers family of an Andhra town called Mangalagiri, where she grew up observing the lives of that subset of women population who were deprived of food, education, freedom and even living a life of their own and were undervalued by the society. From the very childhood she has developed a heart of compassion and a voice to protest for the injustices and domestic violence done to women and has challenged her to become a writer and infringe upon the contemporary right of the society to rule women. The novel's plot began to take shape while she was working as a legal advisor at a San Jose-based NGO for victims of domestic violence, right out of law school. Like Savitha, one of her clients was a Telugu woman who had been trafficked into the United States by a rich Telugu businessman. Moreover, the writer won the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction and was anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories 2015* and unfolds herself clearly a writer of great ambition.