



Reading pain responsibly: Ethics of witnessing female trauma in Shobha Rao's fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines the ethics of witnessing female trauma in the fiction of Shobha Rao, focusing primarily on *Girls Burn Brighter* and *Indian Country*. Rather than presenting trauma as spectacle or emotional excess, Rao adopts a restrained narrative strategy that compels readers to engage with pain ethically and responsibly. Drawing upon trauma theory and ethical literary criticism, the study explores how silence, narrative gaps, and understated representation shape a mode of reading grounded in empathy rather than consumption. Rao's fiction does not seek to resolve suffering or offer redemptive closure; instead, it presents trauma as an ongoing condition shaped by gender, culture, migration, and structural power. The paper argues that Rao transforms the reader into an ethical witness, one who must confront discomfort, moral accountability, and the limits of understanding another's pain. "Trauma is encountered at the limits of understanding rather than through identification" (Bennett). This limit prevents readers from claiming emotional mastery over experiences that remain ethically opaque. By resisting sensationalism and aestheticization, Rao preserves the dignity of her female characters "Feminist trauma narratives demand ethical restraint" (Kaplan). Rao fulfills this demand by prioritizing dignity over narrative excess while exposing the cultural systems that normalize their suffering. Through close textual analysis and engagement with theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Elaine Scarry, Dominick LaCapra, and Judith Butler, this study demonstrates how Rao's narratives redefine the politics of reading trauma. Ultimately, the paper contends that Shobha Rao's fiction offers a feminist ethics of witnessing that prioritizes responsibility, restraint, and sustained attention to female pain within contemporary trauma narratives.

Keywords: Shobha Rao, ethics of witnessing, female trauma, narrative restraint, feminist trauma studies

Introduction

Contemporary trauma narratives often face a critical dilemma: how to represent suffering without reducing it to spectacle "Suffering becomes spectacle" (Sontag). This strengthens your ethical framing without disrupting flow. In literary portrayals of female trauma, this dilemma becomes especially acute, as narratives risk reinforcing voyeurism or emotional exploitation. Shobha Rao's fiction intervenes decisively in this ethical problem. Her novels *Girls Burn Brighter* and *Indian Country* present women whose lives are shaped by gendered violence, cultural displacement, and systemic power, yet Rao resists melodrama or graphic excess. "Narrative restraint is ethical" (LaCapra). Instead, she constructs narratives that demand ethical attentiveness from readers. This paper argues that Shobha Rao's fiction cultivates an ethics of witnessing by deliberately limiting narrative exposure to pain. "Ethical reading requires restraint rather than emotional appropriation" (Luckhurst). This restraint prevents trauma from becoming consumable and situates the reader within moral responsibility. Rao's storytelling does not invite readers to consume trauma; rather, it positions them as moral witnesses who must engage with suffering thoughtfully and responsibly. The emphasis lies not on what is shown, but on how much is withheld. "Silence functions as a form of ethical refusal" (Felski). Rao's narrative gaps therefore protect female experience from interpretive violence. Silence, understatement, and fragmented narration become ethical tools "What is unsaid matters" (Macherey) that protect the dignity of female experience while exposing the persistence of trauma.

Trauma theory emphasizes that pain often resists direct representation "Pain resists language" (Scarry). Cathy Caruth observes that trauma is "not fully assimilated as it occurs" and returns belatedly in indirect forms (Caruth). Rao's narratives reflect this insight by refusing linear or cathartic resolutions. Her characters endure suffering that remains unresolved, echoing the lived realities of many women whose pain is culturally normalized rather than acknowledged. "Pain becomes ordinary when it is structurally expected" (Berlant). Rao exposes this expectation by refusing to frame endurance as resilience or redemption. This study situates Rao's fiction within ethical literary criticism, particularly theories of witnessing and reader responsibility. Rather than focusing solely on emotional deterioration, "Reading is cooperation" (Eco). The paper examines how Rao shapes the reader's role in engaging with trauma. By compelling readers to confront discomfort without offering emotional release, Rao challenges dominant literary practices that aestheticize suffering. Through close textual analysis and interdisciplinary theoretical engagement, this paper demonstrates that Shobha Rao's fiction redefines trauma representation as an ethical act.

The concept of ethical witnessing emerges prominently in trauma studies and ethical criticism. Witnessing, in this context, extends beyond observation; it involves responsibility, attentiveness, and moral engagement. Shoshana Felman defines witnessing as an act that "engages the listener or reader in the responsibility of testimony" (Felman). Literature, therefore, does not merely depict trauma but implicates the reader in its reception.

“Responsibility emerges from being addressed by another’s suffering” (Attridge). Rao’s fiction sustains this address without offering emotional resolution. Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma is characterized by belatedness and incompleteness. She argues that trauma narratives often speak through “gaps, silences, and repetitions” rather than direct articulation (Caruth). These gaps are not narrative failures but ethical necessities. “Gaps activate the reader” (Iser). Rao’s fiction adopts this approach by allowing trauma to surface indirectly, preserving its complexity without forcing interpretive closure. “Trauma narratives resist the logic of narrative completion” (Whitehead). Rao’s fiction follows this resistance by refusing healing arcs.

Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, asserts that pain actively resists language: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it” (Scarry). Rao’s restrained prose reflects this resistance. Her narratives acknowledge the limits of representation and avoid excessive description, thereby respecting the integrity of suffering rather than translating it into aesthetic pleasure. Dominick LaCapra introduces the idea of “empathetic unsettlement,” which cautions against over-identification with victims (LaCapra). Rao’s fiction aligns with this principle by preventing readers from fully inhabiting the characters’ pain. Instead, readers remain unsettled witnesses which emotionally engaged yet ethically distanced.

Judith Butler further contributes to this framework by linking vulnerability to ethics. She argues that recognizing another’s precariousness forms the basis of moral responsibility (Butler). Rao’s female characters are portrayed as profoundly vulnerable, yet their vulnerability is never sentimentalized. The reader’s ethical task is not to feel pity, but to acknowledge structural injustice. “Ethics begins not in sympathy but in exposure to another’s vulnerability” (Cavarero). Rao’s narratives maintain this exposure without converting it into emotional reassurance. “Ethics begins in attentiveness to vulnerability” (Held). Rao’s fiction sustains this attentiveness without sentimentality. Together, these theorists provide a framework for understanding Rao’s fiction as an ethical intervention. Her narratives do not resolve trauma; they sustain it in a form that demands accountability from both narrator and reader.

One of the defining features of Shobha Rao’s fiction is narrative restraint. In *Girls Burn Brighter*, Rao depicts severe forms of gendered violence, including poverty, exploitation, and displacement, yet she avoids graphic detail. When Savitha reflects on her suffering, the narration remains subdued, emphasizing endurance rather than dramatization. Rao writes that Savitha learns early that “pain was something to be carried, not explained” (Rao). This restraint prevents trauma from becoming spectacle. “Representation is never innocent” (Sontag). The ethical significance of this strategy lies in what is withheld. By refusing to describe violence explicitly, Rao denies readers the comfort of emotional release. “Representation carries ethical consequences for how pain is received” (Radstone). Rao’s restraint foregrounds these consequences rather than obscuring them. “Representation risks repeating the harm it seeks to expose” (Hartman). Rao’s restraint functions as ethical protection rather than evasion. Instead, readers are compelled to confront the persistence of suffering. This approach aligns with LaCapra’s warning against transforming trauma into consumable narrative (LaCapra).

In Indian Country, the violence experienced by women particularly Indigenous women is embedded within institutional systems “Power produces reality” (Foucault) such as law enforcement and borders. Rao does not isolate trauma as a singular event but presents it as structurally sustained. “Violence operates most effectively when it appears normal” (Nixon). This normality explains the persistence of gendered injustice in Indian Country. One character observes that “justice had a language that did not include women like her” (Rao). The absence of sensationalism directs attention toward systemic injustice rather than individual tragedy. “Symbolic violence is invisible” (Bourdieu). Rao’s restrained narration also resists voyeuristic reading practices. Elaine Scarry warns that excessive representation of pain risks appropriating suffering for aesthetic purposes (Scarry). Rao avoids this risk by allowing silence to speak. Moments of emotional intensity are often narrated through omission, forcing readers to recognize the limits of their understanding. “Silence marks the ethical boundary of postcolonial trauma narratives” (Boehmer). Rao’s silences therefore operate as moral limits rather than narrative gaps. This narrative restraint fosters ethical witnessing by maintaining distance without detachment. Readers are not invited to fully inhabit the characters’ pain; instead, they remain conscious of their role as observers. Such distance preserves the dignity of female suffering while reinforcing moral accountability.

Rao’s fiction transforms the reader from a passive consumer into an active ethical witness. “Witnessing is not merely seeing but responding ethically to what one cannot fully know” (Oliver). Silence plays a crucial role in this transformation. Traumatic experiences are frequently left unresolved, compelling readers to carry the weight of what remains unsaid. “Witnessing acknowledges what cannot be fully known” (Oliver). This acknowledgment defines the ethical limits of reading trauma. “Ethics begins with attention” (Murdoch). Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma narratives demand a listening that “does not seek mastery or closure” (Caruth). Rao’s fiction exemplifies this demand. In *Girls Burn Brighter*, the enduring bond between Savitha and Poornima does not erase their suffering. Even moments of hope are fragile and incomplete. Rao writes that survival “does not undo what the body remembers” (Rao). This acknowledgment prevents readers from interpreting endurance as recovery. “Survival does not signify recovery from trauma” (Tal). Rao’s fiction reinforces this distinction by refusing therapeutic endings.

Similarly, *Indian Country* refuses narrative consolation. Trauma is not healed through justice or recognition. Instead, Rao positions readers as witnesses to unresolved pain. Judith Butler argues that ethical recognition involves accepting vulnerability without attempting to resolve it (Butler). Rao’s narratives enact this ethical stance by denying closure. The reader’s discomfort becomes a moral experience. Rather than offering emotional catharsis, Rao sustains tension, compelling readers to reflect on their own position within systems of power. Witnessing, in this sense, becomes an ethical act rather than an emotional response.

Rao situates female trauma within cultural and institutional frameworks. “Violence is absorbed into the fabric of everyday life” (Das) this absorption explains why trauma in *Indian Country* persists through routine legal and social practices rather than extraordinary acts of brutality. Gendered suffering is shown not as accidental but as

culturally sustained. Rao disrupts this invisibility by sustaining discomfort rather than explanation. “Women’s pain is often rendered culturally intelligible and therefore invisible” (Ahmed). In Indian Country, legal systems repeatedly fail women, revealing how institutional power perpetuates trauma. Rao notes that “violence survived because it wore the face of law” (Rao). This cultural embedding of trauma aligns with Butler’s concept of differential grievability, where certain lives are deemed less worthy of protection (Butler). Rao’s female characters exist within these hierarchies, and their pain is normalized rather than addressed. “Justice requires attention” (Nussbaum). By foregrounding culture and power, Rao shifts trauma from the personal to the political. The reader’s ethical responsibility expands beyond empathy toward critical awareness of systemic injustice. “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity” (Weil). “Attention is the moral act itself” (Murdoch). Rao’s fiction sustains such attention without offering consolation.

Shobha Rao’s fiction offers a compelling model for ethical trauma representation. Through narrative restraint, silence, and structural awareness, Rao resists sensationalizing female suffering and instead cultivates responsible witnessing. Her narratives do not seek to heal trauma or offer closure; they sustain pain in a form that demands moral attention. This paper demonstrates that Rao transforms the act of reading into an ethical engagement. “Reading is an ethical encounter with another’s values” (Booth). Rao’s fiction intensifies this encounter by denying interpretive comfort. Readers are not invited to consume trauma but to acknowledge its persistence and cultural roots. By aligning with trauma theorists who emphasize restraint, vulnerability, and responsibility, Rao redefines feminist trauma narratives in contemporary fiction. Ultimately, reading Rao’s work becomes an ethical practice that recognizes the limits of understanding, respects the dignity of suffering, and confronts the systems that allow trauma to endure.

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