

Woman Under Cultural Command: A Study in Gendered Trauma, Emotional Deterioration and Survival in Shobha Rao's *The Imperial Police* and *Unleashed*

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Abstract-- This paper explores how women live under a cultural command in Shobha Rao's short stories *The Imperial Police* and *Unleashed*, with particular attention to gendered trauma, Emotional Deterioration and Survival. Rao presents female characters whose lives are controlled by patriarchal authority, institutional power and rigid norms. Through everyday violence, surveillance and enforced silence. These stories show how trauma is not always sudden or visible but develops slowly within women's emotional and psychological lives. This paper examines how fear, obedience and social conditioning contribute to the gradual erosion to women's sense of self. Using Feminist and trauma perspectives, the study highlights how cultural power operates through family structures, law and social expectations to normalize women's suffering. At the same time, Rao does not portray women only as passive victims. Moments of awareness, endurance and emotional resistance reveal subtle forms of survival within oppressive systems. The paper argues that emotional deterioration in these narratives is a direct result of cultural domination, while survival becomes a quiet yet meaningful act of defiance. By focusing on women's lived experiences, the study emphasizes Rao's contribution to contemporary gendered trauma narratives.

Keywords-- Cultural Command, Emotional Deterioration, Gendered Trauma, Patriarchal Power and Women's Survival.

Shobha Rao's short stories *The Imperial Police* and *Unleashed* focus on women who live under strong cultural and patriarchal control. These stories show that trauma in women's lives does not always come from one violent incident. Instead, it develops slowly through everyday fear, silence and obedience. Rao places her female characters in social systems where power controls their bodies, emotions and choices.

In both stories, women experience trauma mainly because they are women living in male-dominated societies. Their suffering is shaped by social rules and expectations. Simone de Beauvoir explains this idea clearly when she says, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 293).

This means that society teaches women how to behave, how much to endure and when to remain silent. Rao's female characters are trained to accept pain as normal. Their trauma grows from constant control rather than from one single act of violence.

Cultural command in these stories works quietly but powerfully. In *The Imperial Police*, authority appears through institution like police, which represent fear rather than safety. Women are constantly aware that they are being judged. Women control their movements, speech and emotions to avoid danger. Over time, this fear becomes part of their emotional life. In Rao's story, women exist in this secondary position where their lives are shaped by male power and authority.

Silence plays an important role in *The Imperial Police*. Women understand that speaking can lead to punishment. Silence becomes a way to stay safe but it also damages emotional health. When women cannot express fear or pain, their emotions remain trapped inside. This leads to emotional breakdown over time. Rao shows that silence is not weakness but a forced response to power. Trauma becomes invisible but it remains deeply present in the women's inner lives.

In *Unleashed*, Rao focuses more on emotional control within personal and social relationships. Here, trauma enters through spaces that are supposed to be safe. Women experience fear and control within families and close relationships. This kind of trauma is especially damaging because it comes from people they are expected to trust. The women begin to doubt themselves. Feeling guilt and confusion. Rao shows how emotional suffering becomes internal when women are blamed or ignored instead of supported. Emotional Deterioration in *Unleashed* happens slowly. Rao does not show sudden breakdowns. Instead, she shows how fear settles into everyday life. Women feel emotionally tired, anxious and unsure of themselves. Trauma becomes part of their actions to avoid conflict or harm. This self-control shows how deeply cultural command affects women's minds.



The female body is an important theme in both stories. “Every moment in a woman’s life was a deal, a deal for her body...” (Rao, 193). This constant monitoring creates fear and emotional stress. In Rao’s stories, women’s bodies make them vulnerable to control rather than deserving of care. This physical vulnerability directly affects emotional well-being. Rao does not exaggerate physical violence. Instead, she focuses on ordinary restrictions where women can go, how they should behave and what they should say. These small controls slowly damage emotional health. Trauma becomes normalized. Women begin to accept restrictions as part of life, which makes it harder to recognize injustice. Emotional Deterioration grows quietly but deeply.

Silence and Obedience appear again and again in both stories. Women remain silent to protect themselves, but silence creates emotional isolation. In *The Imperial Police*, silence comes from fear of authority. In *Unleashed*, silence develops because women are emotionally conditioned to accept suffering. They learn that speaking out will not help them. Rao’s stories clearly reflect this idea. Because of constant silence, women experience emotional fragmentation. Their inner feelings do not match their outward behavior. They appear obedient but inside they feel fear, anger and sadness. Rao’s female characters are aware of injustice but they cannot openly resist it. This awareness itself becomes painful.

Even though cultural command is strong Rao does not present her female character as completely helpless. Survival exists in small but meaningful ways. Awareness, memory and emotional endurance help women remain human. Rao shows that survival does not always mean escape or open rebellion. Sometimes it means continuing to exist without losing one’s sense of self. This kind of survival is a quiet form of resistance. The women may not fight openly but they do not fully accept dehumanization. Rao does not glorify survival but she respects it. Survival is fragile, limited and difficult, yet it keeps hope alive.

When *The Imperial Police* and *Unleashed* are read together, they show how cultural command works in both public and private spaces. Authority may appear in different forms but its emotional effect on women is similar. Fear, silence and emotional decline remain constant. This shows that patriarchy affects women everywhere, not just in extreme situations. Both stories make it clear that emotional deterioration is not the woman’s fault. It is the result of long-term oppression. Women suffer because systems of power deny them freedom and voice.

At the same time, survival remains possible. Rao shows women enduring, remembering and remaining aware even when they are controlled. Through these stories, Rao adds an important voice to feminist and trauma literature. She draws attention to emotional wounds that often remain unseen. In the end, *The Imperial Police* and *Unleashed* show the heavy emotional cost of living under cultural command. Gendered trauma leads to emotional deterioration but survival continues in quiet forms.

Scholars reading Shobha Rao’s fiction often focus on her powerful depiction of women’s suffering within patriarchal and cultural systems. Critics note that Rao presents trauma as a continuous emotional condition rather than a single violent event. Literary studies on this collection emphasize how silence, fear and obedience shape women’s inner lives. Feminist critics frequently draw on Simone de Beauvoir to explain Rao’s representation of gendered suffering. Beauvoir’s assertion that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir, 293) helps scholars understand how Rao’s female characters are socially conditioned to accept pain and control. Some articles on Rao’s short stories highlight survival as quiet endurance. Critics observe that Rao portrays women not only as victims but as individuals who retain awareness and emotional strength within oppressive systems. However, limited scholarship focuses specifically on emotional deterioration under cultural command, a gap this study seeks to address.

Shobha Rao’s short stories *The Imperial Police* and *Unleashed*, included in her collection *An Unrestored Woman*, reveal how women experience life under cultural and patriarchal control. These narratives focus on emotional suffering that develops quietly over time. Rather than highlighting dramatic acts of violence, Rao concentrates on fear, silence and restriction as daily realities. In *The Imperial Police*, power is represented through authority figures and institutions that inspire fear rather than safety. The police symbolize control, surveillance and intimidation. Women understand that they must remain cautious at all times. Their behavior is shaped by the awareness that resistance can invite danger. Rao shows how fear becomes internal settling into the women’s thoughts and emotions. In the author’s note to, Rao explains that her stories deal with women who must live with experiences that are “unrestored” suggesting damage that continues long after the event itself. This idea reflects the emotional condition of the women in this story, whose trauma remains active even when violence is not directly shown.



Emotional deterioration in *The Imperial Police* appears through self-control and emotional restraint. Women learn to speak less, move carefully and suppress reactions. This constant self-monitoring slowly reduces their sense of freedom. Authority does not need to act aggressively at every moment because fear already governs women's actions. Silence functions as a survival tool in this narrative. Women choose quietness because speaking out threatens their safety. However silence also isolates them emotionally. Their thoughts and fears remain unshared, increasing inner distress. Rao presents silence not as weakness but as something forced by unequal power relations. Emotional suffering deepens because women are unable to release or express their pain.

In *Unleashed*, Rao shifts attention to private and emotional spaces. Here, control appears through relationships, expectations and emotional dependence. The women experience pressure within homes and personal connections where care should exist. This contradiction makes the trauma more painful. Rao shows how emotional manipulation creates confusion and self-doubt. The women begin to question their own feelings and blame themselves for their sufferings. The title *Unleashed* carries strong irony. Instead of freedom, the story reveals emotional confinement. Fear and social rules prevent women from acting openly. Survival becomes a daily effort rather than a sign of recovery.

In both stories, the female body becomes an important site of control. Women's bodies are closely observed, judged and restricted. This constant awareness produces fear and emotional strain. Rao avoids graphic violence and instead focuses on how ordinary control affects women's mental health. Women hide their emotions to avoid conflict or rejection. Speaking about pain often leads to blame rather than support. Silence therefore becomes protection but it also increases loneliness. The women experience a gap between their inner emotions and outward behavior. This emotional split contributes to psychological exhaustion. Although the stories present strong control, Rao does not portray women as entirely powerless. Survival appears through awareness, memory and emotional endurance. The women recognize injustice even when they cannot openly challenge it. Rao values this quiet strength.

When *The Imperial Police* and *Unleashed* are read together they reveal how cultural command operates in different spaces. Public authority and private relationships function differently, yet both produce fear and emotional decline. The stories show that gendered trauma follows women wherever power controls their lives.

At the same time, endurance continues as a form of self-preservation. Through these narratives, Rao exposes the emotional cost of living under cultural command. Gendered trauma leads to emotional deterioration but survival remains possible in limited forms. By focusing on women's inner experiences, Rao makes hidden suffering visible and meaningful. Her work reminds readers that even when healing is denied endurance still carries value.

The study finds that Shobha Rao's *The Imperial Police* and *Unleashed* present trauma as a slow emotional process shaped by cultural and patriarchal control. Women experience fear not only through direct violence but through constant social pressure and authority. Cultural command influences their behavior, emotions and sense of identity, leading to emotional deterioration over time. The findings show that silence and obedience function as survival strategies rather than signs of acceptance. Women remain quiet to protect themselves, even though silence increases emotional strain.

The paper also finds that emotional suffering in these stories is gendered because it arises from women's social position within male-dominated systems. Power functions through institutions, relationships and everyday rules, making women internalize control and regulate their own actions. Despite these conditions, the study identifies survival as a significant theme. Women maintain awareness, memory and emotional endurance even when resistance is limited. Survival does not appear as freedom or recovery but as the ability to continue living without losing one's sense of self. Overall the findings reveal that emotional deterioration is a direct result of cultural domination, while survival becomes a quiet form of strength within oppressive environments.

This paper concludes that Shobha Rao's *The Imperial Police* and *Unleashed* clearly reveal how women live under cultural command and patriarchal power. The stories show that gendered trauma develops through everyday fear, silence and control rather than through isolated acts of violence. Emotional deterioration emerges as women continuously adjust their behavior to survive within systems that limit their freedom and voice. Cultural authority operates both in public institutions and private relationships shaping women's emotional lives in similar ways. Rao's female characters are abducted thus mentioned "These abducted women became domestic servants, sex slaves" (Arévalo, 106).

At the same time, Rao does not reduce women to powerless figures. Survival appears as a quiet but meaningful response to oppression.



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Women retain awareness, emotional memory and inner strength even when open resistance is impossible. Their endurance challenges the idea that survival requires visible rebellion. Instead, it highlights how persistence itself carries value within restrictive environments.

By focusing on women lived emotional experiences, Rao exposes the hidden cost of cultural domination on female identity. The paper affirms that emotional deterioration and survival coexist in Rao's narratives, making her stories powerful representations of gendered trauma.

Ultimately, Rao's work deepens feminist literary discussions by foregrounding women's resilience within systems that attempt to silence them.

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