

## **The Theme of Gender Violence in Manjula Padmanabhan's Play *Lights Out***

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### **Abstract**

Many Indian women writers have contributed to the development of Indian writing in English and taken it to the respectable position. Manjula Padmanabhan is one of them. She was born in Delhi in 1953. She has spent early years of her life in Europe and Southeast Asia. Later, she returned to India. She is a playwright, journalist, comic strip artist and children's book author. In Indian writing in English, Manjula Padmanabhan emerges as a sensitive writer who aims at the presenting the realistic problems instead of portraying the romantic, fanciful notions. She is one of the Indian woman playwright who attempted to bring a positive behavioural change in women towards themselves as well as society toward women. Her plays are issues oriented and deal with social reality. Thus, her style and content are realistic in a believable manner. Her plays are majorly women centric and thus present their perspective and narrative. Thus, this paper is a study of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* (2000) in the light of gender insensitivity and violence.

**Keywords-** Lights Out, gender, patriarchy, Violence, Rape, Domestic abuse

The contemporary Indian English playwrights are preoccupied with the notion of projecting the social and political realities of the times. Manjula Padmanabhan is one of these fewest contemporary, dramatist who have made a fruitful contribution to the theatrical development in the country. Vinod Bala Sharma, in the essay "Indian English Drama: An Overview" remarks, "Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan must be studied as two outstanding playwrights who belong to another category" (Sharma 26).

The major issues for contemporary Indian female writers are largely the prevailing conditions and the problems of women. Their aim is to bring out the plight of women in the

present time. Thus, feminism is the major concern of the present era. Emancipation of women from the long- established cycle of oppression of patriarchy is the most debatable topic in Indian English literature. Efforts are made on political as well as socio-cultural levels to protect the rights of women and to check their exploitation in the name of male hegemony. In spite of all these efforts, women suffer incessantly under the existing social code of conduct. They are raped, murdered, assaulted physically mainly for no fault of their own. The women writers intend to highlight the causes behind the violence against women. Manjula Padmanabhan is one of these few women dramatists who exposes the ugly picture of the society and its indifference towards the sufferings of women.

Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Lights Out* was started as a piece of journalism based on a friend's account of how she and a group of people were witnesses to a gang rape in their neighbourhood. It is one-act play with six characters. The incident took place in Santa Cruz, Mumbai in 1982. About this play, R. N. Rai, in his essay *Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama*, remarks:

In her another play *Lights Out*, she draws our attention to the heart rendering screams of a woman, Leela which destroy the fabric of domesticity of a middle-class couple. Women face violence in many aspects of their daily life. This violence is multi-faceted. It is not merely physical but more often mental and emotional. It is deeply complex, subtle and indirect, hard to recognize and much more difficult to overcome. (Rai 22)

The play shows extreme violence, against a woman and a group of people watches this brutal incident in a neighbouring, compound but fails to do any meaningful action. Some suspicious activities of gang rape have been going on at least for a week but no one has courage to stop the crime. Only bizarre sound of a woman is heard in the third and last scene in the play. The sound is really severe and unpleasant. Leela, the wife of Bhaskar is deeply frustrated with the screams and bizarre sound which she hears everyday in their neighbourhood. She accuses her husband's carelessness in lodging a complaint. The screaming makes no difference for Bhaskar. Leela says:

You don't care what I feel, what I go through every day! ... I feel frightened. All through the day, I feel tense ... At first it was only at the time it was going on. Then as soon as it got dark. Then around tea time, when the children came from school. Then in the middle of the day. Whenever the doorbell rang. Then in the morning. When I sent children off to school. And now – from the moment I wake up... (4, 5)

At this Bhaskar says: 'But see I'm not deaf and I'm not disturbed by them'. (8)

He tries his best to persuade her that police complaint didn't work "... So why should we waste a phone call" "... I don't want to stick my necks out, that's all" (7)

Leela gives many reasons to complain to the police but according to Bhaskar, the police would not consider any one of them as the reasons are irrational. It is clear from the conversation of Bhaskar and Leela:

LEELA: I don't even have to watch! The sounds are bad enough! And... you're sure we can't call the police? Just now, just once?

BHASKAR: Leela, if we called now, what would we say?

LEELA: we could tell them everything! That there's a building under construction next door and that every night, in the compound...

BHASKAR: wait! first they'd ask us, „what is the complaint?“and we'd have to say-

LEELA: that we're frightened! That we're badly disturbed! (6)

In their long discussion, none of them could make out one valid reason for complaining about such a heinous crime. Leela implores to Bhaskar to take action against the perpetrator, but all her pleas fall on deaf ears. Bhaskar is least disturbed by all these actions and sounds, instead he suggests to practice meditation and also suggest Leela to learn to ignore. Here the dialogue between Leela and Bhaskar shows that how the average person is confused and afraid of the police system. The first scene ends with Leela trying in vain to keep her cool reflective of a women's sensitivity to her surroundings:

I was really I was. I did just what my guruji told me. I sat on a cushion, there by the window and I made my mind blank. I thought of a white wall, in the nothing written on it. And I thought of the cosmos, and of breath, coming in... and out ... in ... and out ... in... and out. And in my mind, I said... Om... again and again .... Om ... Om ... until my mind became absolutely quiet, absolutely calm...absolutely calm... Om...Om...Om....” (11)

Meanwhile, one of Leela's friend Naina and her husband Surinder comes at their home. They too get involved in the discussion and begins to interpret things on the basis of available proofs. Leela tells Naina about the strange and bizarre sound of which she hears from neighbouring compound. While Mohan interprets it as a religious ceremony.

MOHAN: It's some sort of religious ceremony you see, the local slum dwellers putting on a programme.

NAINA: A religious ceremony? How strange-I mean what festival is it? I mean are you sure? It sounds more as if someone's calling for help.... (33)

At this Naina grows inquisitive and looks out of the window to know what kind of religious ceremony is going on exactly and she got terrified that four men assaulting a woman sexually. She is shaken to see three men holding a woman as the fourth attacks her brutally through which readers also witness the assault. She says: “Three men, holding down one woman, with her legs pulled apart, while the fourth thrusts his – organ – into her!” (39)

Still Mohan and Bhaskar doesn't agree with Naina. Now they started calling it an exorcism.

MOHAN: Don't you see, that's the only situation which explains why this is being repeated night after night- I read somewhere that there's a pattern to demonic possession, that the first come on at regular times, every day-

BHASKAR: Though- you know- as it's a different woman every night it's rather unlikely that they'd each be possessed by the same, very punctual, demon! (39)

When all the people almost agreed with the point that there is something horrible happening with the woman Bhaskar adds a new point, “She could be a whore.” (39) There, conversations seem totally like absurd and nonsense. The dramatist’s purpose here is to highlight man’s growing indifference towards his social commitments. Social apathy has become a common characteristic, especially of the newly grown rich middle- class people. They remain engrossed in their life so much that they get no time to think deeply about their surroundings. Even if they think, they do not want to interfere with the incidents, taking place around them. They have become indifferent towards the events of their surroundings. Similarly, in the play, the characters waste their time in discussing about the crime but do not have the courage to stop it. Padmanabhan’s purpose in the play is mainly to highlight this social apathy, especially among the members of middle- class society. All the characters in the play, just talks about the rape but no one is willing to do anything. Although they all know that there is something injustice is happening to a woman or someone is forcing for sex. Through the attitude of Bhaskar, his friend Mohan and other male characters in the play Padmanabhan has tried to show the fact that the mind-set of male, towards female is like they want to control women, men are the one to decide what a woman should think, what a woman should do, what a woman should sense. As L. Amrithashwori Devi (2011) truly comments, “The subjugation, the torture or the way our women suffer may be different but the age, old system of dominance over women by men will never end and they are and will always be victim in our male chauvinistic society.” (Devi 88)

Scene III opens with same discussion while the victim is helplessly crying for help. The male characters desire to see the crime out of curiosity and seek pleasure out of it which is another way of talking advantage of the adverse situation of others. Bhaskar’s friend Mohan reveals his interest in watching the live crime not due to his social responsibility but only out of curiosity. He is adamant on looking at the crime while it is going to be committed in order to prove himself to be the true and a practical observer of life. Without having any intention of helping the woman or check the crime, he makes a lot of discussion to find truly the nature of the crime. When Leela quotes her friend’s remark about man’s role as a social being, “if you can stop a crime, you must- or else you’re helping it to happen”, (16). Mohan passes a bitter comment on the insensitivity of intellectuals, “these intellectuals always react like that, always confuse simple issues. After all what’s the harm in simply watching something? Even when there’s an accident in the street, don’t we all turn our heads to look?” (16). It raises the notion of ‘male gaze’ that penetrates woman’s private space.

Although the play is written in 1986, still it shows that even after three decades how Indian women are facing similar forms of gender, socio-cultural discrimination and violence. Mostly these are: rape, domestic violence, honour killing, forced marriage, stalking and sexual harassment. A woman is often considered as domestic slave, an object, week which cannot protect herself from any kind of physical attacks by a male without minding the relations. So Manjula Padmanabhan believes that the growing indifferent attitude of the people is the major cause of the increasing rate of crimes in the society. *Lights Out* clearly

depicts these intersectional dimensions to domestic violence, rape and sexual assault. The playwright has tried to clearly portray the response of ‘surrounded’ people against a gang rape of a woman. The readers hear the screams and know about it only through the dialogues of remaining characters. How many? Who involved? Who is victim? All these questions are left for the reader's perception. It is mentioned that gang rape happened in an apartment at night-time. That gang rape victim may be a lower caste woman, an employee, a sex worker, or anyone, but a woman, a weakling and meant for bodily pleasure for the male. So, no one complains about the crime to the police. The cause is not only their indifferent attitude but they are hopeless on the part of police and the system. Padmanabhan has criticized the system through the characters which suggests that they do not expect the reasonable action from the police. The people avoid their social responsibility because they do not want to interfere in the matters of police as it brings trouble to them also. Moreover, they feel that police do not take interest in such petty affairs. It is clear from the dialogues of Bhaskar who, while consoling his wife Leela, says, “No, that’s not enough, don’t you see? If the police had to worry about things like that, they’d be psychiatrists, not policemen... you never know with the police these days. They may say it’s none of your business, what goes on in the next compound. After all, there’s the chowkidar...” (7).

Thus, the plot of the play is based on a real incident about the vulnerability of women ends up as a mere drawing room or dinner table discussion. This play emerges as a strong voice of protest against physical vulnerability of women. *Lights Out*, as the title suggests, focuses on activities associated with darkness, both of the physical world as well as that of the mental. The darkness of the mental world is represented by the rape of a woman while that of the mind is reflected in the attitude of the people who are not only mute spectators to this horrific crime but also seem to enjoy watching it. So, from the consequences we can say that the *Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan not only exposes the evils of society, but also makes the people perceive its evil consequences.

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