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Manjula Padmanabhan's Play *Lights Out*: The Manifestation of Female Consciousness and Male Chauvinism

Dr. Sachin Namdeo Gadekar

Abstract

Literature is an important medium for representation of the social aesthetics. It represents the contemporary society, their identity, culture, and history with all its colour. Literature has the capacity to transmit everyday life experiences and has the potential to represent the inner reality of human world. Simultaneously, it raises voice against injustice and sensitizes people about the rampant social evils. Hence, literature is an effective tool for knowing the hues and colours of the human society. Indian drama in English has closely represented human condition and has brought stage close to life. Plays do not merely describe human experiences but bring forth the inner and the outer reality of human consciousness. The individual's struggle for survival against various forces is one of the important themes of drama and often found in the intense dramatic situations. The psycho-philosophical realism and the social realism emphasize on the real dramatic situation.

The present paper studies Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Lights Out*, appeared on stage in 1986. It is based on a real incident of gang rape happened in the urban locality of Mumbai. It extends a grim reality of the modern urban society and focuses on the psyche of the middle-class people. More significantly, it is set in an urban socio-cultural patriarchal society where women are always victimized. More disturbing is the reaction of men and their attitude of non-interference even in a serious situation. The paper analyses this reluctant nature



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of people who do not involve in other's problems and the approach of hiding behind the issues of privacy and non-interference. However, it is not a mockery of the middle-class people but a typical tendency growing seriously among people especially those who are staying in cities that is called natural morality by Padmanabhan.

Keywords: victim, violence, modernity, exploitation, sensitivity etc.

Manjula Padmanabhan is one of the leading and globally acclaimed playwrights of the modern Indian English theatre, born in Delhi, then shifted to Sweden, Pakistan, Thailand and then settled in Delhi. She is a well-known artist, illustrator, cartoonist, playwright, and a novelist. Her cartoon strip 'Suki' in *The Sunday Observer* and her *Pioneer* received with much praise later published as a book in 2001. She got an international award to her maiden play *Harvest*. Padmanabhan won the Onassis International Cultural Competition for theatrical plays in 1997 in Greece. *Harvest* presents a dehumanized struggle of poor people for survival. In words of R.K. Dhawan "Padmanabhan projects a dehumanized terrifying world in which mothers sell their sons for the price of rice". (Dhawan 24).

Padmanabhan's another play *Lights Out* (2000) follows an identical track and expresses fear and apathy of society for a woman who is physically tortured in a public place. *Lights Out* presents the heart rendering story of a woman who is raped by men. The play dramatizes the responses of the so-called middle-class people to the heinous crime of gang rape. However, the play challenges the entire social structure, people's responsibilities, and their psyche in a very humiliating situation. The play criticizes human mentality and the behavior of the middle-class family and different kinds of violence faced by women in their daily life. Lakshmi Chandra has pointed out in the preface to the volume *Lights Out: Indian Plays in English* that "the way the play ends focuses on the chilling fact that ordinary middle-class people choose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalized in a neighbouring compound" (Chandra iii). Both plays by Padmanabhan are significant for their techniques and focus on the victimization of women and poor people in India.

Lights out (1986) appeared on stage at Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai in 1986 and published in a collection named *Body Blows-Women, Violence and Survival-Three Plays* (2002). The play, written by a woman dramatist, clearly demarcates the gender differences. It is the three scenes play set in Mumbai. It depicts different dimensions of domestic violence and the sexual assault in a male dominated society. Padmanabhan has addressed this issue of subordinate position to women and several other discriminations in the society. The play though not particularly but specifically addresses this miserable plight of women in India and the



way men look at them as secondary human being. All the three women in the play are shown passive. They are exploited either physically or mentally in the society or in their own houses by their family members. This tragic incident of rape is witnessed at a distance by the middle-class characters who are divided on their opinions of either to inform the police or not. They are merely participants of this violent act. More disturbing is the reaction of society and their mentality of non-interference even in a serious situation. It sheds light on a significant issue of right and wrong termed by Padmanabhan as 'natural morality'. According to her the real world is not an ideal place to everyone. Several people have unpleasant lives which naturally influence everyone. So, this issue can also be studied by using the Marxist approach.

The play is set in an urban socio-cultural patriarchal society in India. The surrounding influences life and invites responses. The play opens with a description of a young middle-class couple named Bhasker and Leela. They are living in an apartment besides a building which is under construction. It opens with Leela's fear and worry for her own safety and for her children. She urges her husband Bhasker to call the police and inform them about crime in the next building. Surprisingly, he opines that police are not interested in such kinds of minor offences. He does not want to take this case to police, also he does not have faith on them. He gets busy in his routine life. He is not worried about what is happening to his next-door neighbor. Everyday Bhasker and Leela hear the shrieks of a poor woman who has been molested regularly. It becomes unbearable to Leela; hence, she requests her husband to do something to rescue that woman. But Bhasker is reluctant and refuses to interfere in other people's lives. Leela becomes helpless and feels more dread and panic.

The way Leela and Bhasker respond to the screaming of an unidentified victim is completely different. Leela is obsessed with strange fear. On the other hand, Bhasker takes the screaming very casually. It may be because of similar gender, Leela sympathizes towards the victim and feels sorry for her suffering, who is also a woman and becomes a victim of male carnal desire. She expects her husband Bhasker's participation in the crisis and requests to seek help from the police. But for Bhasker it is not his business. So, he becomes indifferent to the whole affair that is not related to him and his own family. Whereas for Leela it is an obsession. Her request to Bhasker indicates her pain. She pleads that "we're a part of ...of what happens outside, that by watching it, we're making ourselves responsible". (112). But Bhasker remains indifferent and makes a very strange excuse, "In that case, the police have obviously ignored their complaints! So why should we waste a phone call?" (113). There is a strong contrast between the two responses of Bhasker and Leela. They are



not differencing in the genders but in ideologies which make imbalance in the society. Leela's involvement is more humanistic whereas Bhaskar's reluctance is strange and more dangerous. It emphasizes on the priorities of people and reactions to the whole affair which is not directly linked to them.

The scene II introduces the character of Mohan who has been invited for dinner by Leela and Bhasker. Mohan is also disturbed by the screaming of a woman and wonders about Bhasker's passive reaction to this painful incident. But Mohan is doubtful whether his help will be useful in completely a private affair. Here, the play works at the two levels. First, the painful physical suffering of a woman and second, the mental, or emotional torturing of Leela.

During the whole affair Leela becomes very helpless and hysterical. She looks for support from Bhaskar but in vain. So, she is disturbed and feels impatient. Manjula Padmanabhan has strongly pointed out the different responses of opposite genders to the incident of rape. It is not Bhaskar, but Mohan too neglects that cries of a woman and like Bhaskar he too is only an onlooker. Unlike Leela both Mohan and Bhaskar could not identify themselves with screaming of the raped victim. They even ridicule Leela's over-sensitiveness and blame as purposeless. Leela is horrified by witnessing rape so avoids looking at the scene even from her window. Mohan makes mockery of her reaction and compares the whole affair with an accident in street looked by strangers without having any significant involvement in it. However, Leela's persistent anxiety and Bhaskar and Mohan's non-involvement suggest how society reacts to the suffering of poor or marginalized member of the society. Mohan's response reveals the mentality of people. He replies that, "personally, I am against becoming entangled in other people's private lives. Outsiders can never really be the judge of who is right and who is wrong". (123).

Here, it is not an issue of private life and the public life. Beena Agarwal in her article "Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*: A Credo of Social Empathy and Human Predicament" opines that,

Private life and public life require different levels of commitment but Padmanabhan through the personal crisis of characters in *Lights Out* admits that private spaces of personal life are closely integrated with the public life and it is the harmony of the two that can ensure the balance in society. (Pandey, Barua and Dhawan 270).

The torturing of woman is continued in the third scene. It is witnessed by another woman, Naina, friend of Leela and the wife of Mohan. The screaming of woman makes Naina too restless. On the other hand, both Bhasker and Mohan think that the woman is a prostitute, so they adjust themselves around this heinous open-air performance. But an insistence



of Leela and Naina forces them to take an action. They decide to kill the aggressor to rescue the woman. But the culprit escapes and they could not do anything against him. However, the whole scene shows an intensity of Bhasker and Mohan towards an atrocity inflicted on women. The victim cries for help but it is unheard and neglected only because she is a prostitute and not a civilized woman of society. It is observed that people are reluctant to involve in other's problems and have developed an approach of not taking any stand or action against the criminal. They just talk and sympathize toward the woman who was publicly raped last night. Even they do not dare to go to police. They even feel that police will not come, so, why shall take this matter to the police. They become meek observer as if a religious matter. The play makes mockery of this kind of attitude of the so-called middle-class people. It is a tendency that if it is not going to harm us then why shall we interfere.

There are differences in the responses of Mohan and Bhaskar, and Leela and Naina towards the desperate condition of the woman. Leela is disturbed by the sound of a woman for help. She emotionally connects herself with screaming. She helplessly argues that being only the onlooker is not the solution to this problem. She even owes that she can't bear this situation any longer and won't allow her children to be hurt by this disgusting scene. Naina is also disturbed by the sight and becomes sensitive to the screaming of victim. On the other hand, Mohan and Bhaskar are surprisingly indifferent. They neglect the whole commotion and accept the sound very casually as a religious ceremony. Bhaskar argues "Why should we get involved with some filthy woman and her paramours" (140). Though insisted by Leela they are engaged in their own affairs. Sadly, Bhaskar's remark is very derogatory, who takes doubt on the character of woman and calls her a whore, who does not deserve different treatment. He shamelessly and with a note of triumph in his voice argues that "she could be a whore you know.... a decent woman would never be with four men at once". (139). Mohan has also not different opinion. They make differences between women as 'whore' and 'respectable'. According to them a whore does not have respect in the society. She can be exploited publicly. She cannot get an equal status in the society. Being a woman her dignity of will and desire are openly violated. But it is forgotten that for a whore, though sex is a profession, rape is a physical torture and a distortion of dignity and consciousness. It is popularly said about women that they are nor born but made is also true about a whore who is not born but made by the social system. Leela challenges this stereotypical mentality of men and argues that "If she's a whore does it mean you won't call the police?" (139). Naina defends their rights more boldly and argues that "even a whore has the right to



choose her clients!" (140). Leela and Naina raise the issue of equality and dignity of the woman who is a victim of the male dominance and exploitation.

It has been studied that rape threatens the moral consciousness of women. Her entire inner self is disintegrated by this physical and emotional exploitations. The psycho-dynamic of rape is exposed by the eminent psychologist S. Griffin. Beena Agarwal has quoted the views of Griffin in her article "Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*: A Credo of Social Empathy and Human Predicament". Susan Griffin in *Rape: The Politics of Consciousness*, observes "legally rape is recognized as a crime with physical aspects only, namely the penetration of the vagina by the penis against the will of the victim. In effect, however, the real crime is the annihilation by the man of the woman as human being". (Pandey, Barua and Dhawan 272).

The struggle is evident between the genders with an oppressive social order or conflict for existence. This oppressive system can be studied from the Marxist and psychological perspectives too. Marxist literary criticism views people as products of circumstances and social upbringing. So, as circumstances, people also change. But we neglect the truth that circumstances can also be changed by people. It is worthless to identify the class or caste of a gang rape victim. But more importantly, she is a woman who has been physically harassed. It reflects upon the poor plight of a woman irrespective of change in time or age. The patriarchal system has motivated women to fight for the social equality. This struggle against inequality is at the center of Marxism and studies the power structure or relationship between the proletariat and bourgeois or hierarchy between genders. Terry Eagleton (1976), critic and cultural theorist defines:

Marxist criticism is not merely 'sociology of literature' concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class... a sensitive attention to its forms, styles, and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history. (Vasishta 58)

In a global society, the approach at women has not much changed. Women have limited rights in a male dominated society. Though several women have shown that they can rise to a great height, the issues of equality and safety are yet to be solved. They are vulnerable to violence and rape. More sadly several issues of injustice are not even reported due to stigma surrounded to different injustices. Bhargavi G. Vaishta argues that the "play clearly depicts how a gang rape was not stopped, reported or complained by anyone present there and moreover, it highlights the fears of the people who witness the accused" (62). Women are subordinated



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to men because they are women. Inequalities and sexual harassment are common in the society. They are vulnerable to different kinds of harassments. And it is so common and socialized in such a way that people become insensitive feel that they must suffer in silence. Society as a whole needs to give adequate attention to the issue of harassment. Trostky (1923) argues that "To alter the position of women at the root is possible only if all the conditions of social, family, and domestic existence are altered" (Vasishta 61).

All the differences are made by the dominant social system. Women are often their soft target and can be easily categorized to suit and justify the violation of their fundamental rights. Manjula Padmanabhan has boldly projected this complex inner psyche of human beings and the pseudo social structure in which the marginalized or poor are voiceless and often their suffering is neglected everywhere. Padmanabhan has not presented only the world of women but also the shocking indifference of men. Moreover, the suggestions of Bhaskar and Mohan such as killing the miscreants with knives, the use of petrol bulbs, or making propaganda through photographs and newspapers show the social apathy. The whole disturbing sight decodes the plight of women in the case of rape. Padmanabhan has presented various dimensions of horror of rape. The different traits of human consciousness are used to represent the serious social purpose. The sudden end of the play shocks the human consciousness. The various theatrical techniques emphasize on the sensitive world and their consciousness. In the background the gender issues are also prominent in the plot along with differences at the level of class and position. In words of Beena Agarwal the play *Lights Out* manifests the feminist consciousness and the "male chauvinism and social empathy for the self-respect and self-affirmative life instincts existing within the consciousness of woman". (Pandey, Barua and Dhawan 273). However, one cannot deny the fact that such type of plays will change the outlook of people towards this serious issue of a gang rape and will encourage them to think and face such situations more courageously in future.

Thus, Padmanabhan has depicted a very grim and darker life of the modern urban society where mothers are ready to sell their children and the serious offense like rape is unheard by people. She has presented cruelty and the non-involvement approach of people. It is not a group or a section, but a part of every human society where people are victimized by the dominant group. Moreover, the play also emphasizes on an important fact that women must be more powerful to fight against such injustice. They must not depend on others especially men and must be self-reliant and ready to fight against anguish, pain, and inferiority. Also,



the play focuses on different qualities of women, their strength, and weakness. On the contrary, men are shown as indifferent observers. However, the incident of gang rape is a litmus test of the human society. Its results are very shocking which have shown the fragile human society where self-centric and isolated individuals live together without having any apathy towards the needy. The play demarcates the differences in the views between opposite genders and focuses on the human consciousness, mentality, and the social reality in the modern time that is not much positive but very alarming. It questions the fundamental ideology of the human society and their purpose of social existence.

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