

**The Theme of Woman Subjugation and Gender Inequality in
Manjula Padmanabhan's Play *Lights Out***

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Abstract

The plays of Manjula Padmanabhan not only have a prominent place in the Indian English Drama, but also are equally important in the canon of Feminist theatre. Padmanabhan's 'Lights Out' is a realistic play that generates a lot of discussion. The main theme of the play is associated with a sensitive issue a 'gang rape', probing various questions pertaining to exploitation of women in the society and home. The role of women in the world is designated by a man ever since history has been written. Padmanabhan throws light on man-women relationships and the patriarchal power that rule the society. A woman is always seen playing a subservient role to a man. The status of the woman and the plight of her suffering between two influential beings firstly a man, who with his age old dominant power has a control on woman and secondly a woman who turns into an instrument under his authority. 'Light's Out' is a play based on the real incident that has taken place in Santa Cruz , Mumbai in 1982. Padmanabhan exhibits a world in which woman has identity crisis, her every utterance is made silent ; she implores unto man about her troubles and finds no help. The play is set in sixth floor apartment, in Mumbai which belongs to upper middle class married couple Leela and Bhaskar. They have been hearing to sounds of sexual crimes and cries from their neighbouring building. The dramatist explicitly displays the reactions of women and men regarding the sexual assault and an urgent need to look at the growing demand of feminine point of view. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the theme of exploitation of woman, suppression of her rights through the view point of gender inequality.

Introduction- Manjula Padmanabhan is a prominent feminist dramatist of modern Indian drama. 'Lights Out' by Padmanabhan draws attention to the suffering of women and how they are exploited in this male chauvinist society. The dramatist displays an unambiguous impression of gender inequality and creates a dominant appeal for comprehending the women emotions in a world where she hardly finds herself to be free, independent, resilient, well thought out.

The play is based on real life incident which took place in Mumbai suburb in 1982. Padmanabhan portrays a world in which women is deprived of her identity, her own voice, her freedom, her rights; she has to implore unto men to hear to her concerns, this further leads to gender discrimination in every sphere of life.

'Lights Out' opens at point where a critical decision has to be taken. Leela and Bhaskar, a higher middle class married couple, have been hearing to strange sounds of sexual harassment of a woman from their neighbouring building very often. Leela is terrified and traumatised because of these sounds. These sounds make Leela hysterical, she is able to hear to the voice of the victim and her cries in her subconscious mind. Leela implores to Bhaskar to take an action against the perpetrators but all her pleas falls on the deaf ears. Bhaskar is least disturbed by all these actions and sounds. It is because for a woman the very thought of purity of her body and soul, and right over her own body is intensely embedded in her mind and conscious but for a man a woman is an object of play and to have pleasure with her body. This is the main reason why the men in the play never tries to see the matters associated with woman's honour and respect from female perspective. Leela begs her husband Bhaskar to call for police but he brushes away her request by saying that the sounds merely cannot hurt her:

LEELA : But I can hear them.....

BHASKAR: (*As if to a child.*)But sounds can't hurt you.....

LEELA : Oh, but they do, those dirty, ugly sounds

BHASKAR : So shut your ears, see? Like this – (*Places his hands over hers.*)There! Is that better? (88)

The most ghastly offence which no women in the world can accept is body-abuse. In the play, for Leela rape symbolises the most heinous crime and voice out to help her stop it but for Bhaskar it is just an event. Further he advises Leela to practice yoga through which she can

reduce her fear instead of thinking of this incident. Naina , Leela's friend is told that the strange sounds that she hears are the sounds of locale slum religious ceremony. But Naina grows inquisitive and looks out of the window to know what kind of religious ceremony is taking place exactly and finds to her horror four men assaulting a woman sexually. She is shaken to see three men holding a woman as the fourth attacks her brutally.

NAINA : Someone's being..... (*She fights for her voice.*) They're--- they're (*She dry-
retches.*)

BHASKAR : Don't say anything out loud – Leela will be upset!

(*Mohan remains at the window , mesmerised*)

NAINA : Someone's being(*She still cannot complete her statement .She dry-
Retches again.*) There's woman being ---

MOHAN : (*Over his shoulder .*) Dragged around by the foot.

(*Leela, who has been sitting motionless , now holds her head with both hands,
Covering her ears.*)

BHASKAR : (*Brightly.*)Do you think it can be a part of the ritual, Mohan?

NAINA : What ritual? That's no ritual! That's a --- a-----(112)

Where Naina denies to call it a religious ritual, men in the play deny to call it a rape.

Through the casual attitude of Bhaskar and other male characters in the play Padmanabhan tries to project the mind set of male, usually men try to control woman , men are the one to decide what a woman should think, what a woman should do, what a woman should sense etc. The chief intention of the unconcerned outlook by Bhaskar, his two friends Mohan and Surinder is to build internal dread in the minds of Leela, her friend Naina and Leela's domestic help Frieda. By doing so, they can uphold and sustain the ever reigning patriarchal power inside as well as outside the home. The display of male dominance and women subversion is evidently seen in 'Lights Out'.

There is no relation of the victim with the characters of the play but still her pain is seen through the suffering of Leela, Naina and also Frieda. These three being women feel affinity with the victim, through Leela trauma of the rape,through Naina subversion of women, through Frieda's silence the fear of being abused because of her economic status. Frieda's very presence on the stage and her acute silence raises many questions like : Can she hear the terrible sounds of the rape victim? Why is she not disturbed like others? Frieda has a robotic

quality, she comes at every beck and call of her master and seen attending to the works even though she is not told. She arranges for knives and acids while the discussion to attack the goons is on among the verbal characters. She indirectly tells that the crime need to be stopped. Through her, the dramatist tries to show, despite belonging to economically poor background she strives to come out into an open society to earn her living and live independently under odd circumstances. But at the same time her silence acts as shield against subjugation. Feminist writer like Padmanabhan tries to project the injustice done to women for centuries by male dominance and patriarchy in society through 'Lights Out'. Woman is considered inferior to man and suppressed for thousands of years in human history. Challenging this male superiority, under consequent subjugation and suppression of women the play points out certain questions relating to psychology, society, culture and male-dominated economic ideology. As L.Amritashwori Devi 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, 2011:196)

The heated conversations between Bhaskar and Mohan leads to a worthless excuses for not taking any initiation to stop the crime. This nature of man makes the woman to perturb their sensibilities. The choice of words used by men in the play to describe rape is a local slum religious ceremony. No human in right senses call a rape, body assault, sexual brutality as a sacred ritual.

BHASKAR: Often, in an exorcism, the possessed person is already in pain great agony,
has convulsions and screams loudly and recklessly, sometimes in a hoarse,
unnatural voice.....

MOHAN : There we go! That explains the ugly sound of the voice!

BHASKAR : Look at her struggle!

MOHAN : Like the very Devil!

BHASKER : And there's so much blood!

MOHAN : Oh yes! From being dragged about on that concrete, I suppose. Blood around
her mouth as well – which explains the gurgling sound of the screaming

BHASKAR : Isn't it astounding that someone in such a condition has the energy left to
scream?

MOHAN : They say that people under a demon's power, even women, have a strength of

three big men.....

BHASKER : Funny, how it is most often women who become possessed.....(115)

The words used by men like ‘exorcism’, ‘possessed’ reflects their cadence of male potent to judge the event and term them.

BHASKAR: She could be a whore, you know!

LEELA : Ugh!

NAIANA : A whore! Do you think that’s what she is?

MOHAN : Of course – she’s with four men at once!

NAINA : (*Uncertainly.*)Is it enough to prove that she is a whore?

BHASKER : A decent women would not be with four men at once.(117)

The male characters act as adjudicators to tag women with different words like whore, decent, possessed, respectable etc. Such reactions of men roots revulsion in women and they detest seeing the fictitious discrimination; but for men, women are mere an instrument of pleasure. Down the history women are relegate as ‘weaker sex’ which puts them always in an inferior base to man. Such a treatment leads to identity crisis in woman which is deftly showcased in ‘Lights Out’. Padmanabhan provokes host of questions on gender identity , equality and its impact on woman’s identity, her autonomy and her decision making. The unanswered questions are On what account men is superior to woman? On what basis male and female are built in the name of gender? How a man is master and a woman subservient? Naina is shown as a much awaited and essential help for Leela but even her voice is made silent. She initially argues to call the police but the arrival of her husband Surinder, changes her faintly. Surinder’s dominating demeanor overshadows Naina’s personality and she becomes silent.

NAINA: Surinder, please! Now stop all this nonsense!

SURINDER: (*Turns on her suddenly and says with quiet malevolence.*) Shut up—or I’ll kick your teeth in!(*Turning back.*) We’ll take these---
(*Naina subsides, embarsssed.Neither she northe others notice that the sounds outside hsve ceased.*) (125)

The play exposes the reality that the world one lives in is a man's world and the gearstick is in their hands, woman must wrestle for her space. Man from time immemorial has treated woman as a liability, source of necessity and an object of pleasure to meet his requirements. This undemocratic attitude of man disturbs woman to the core. Violence and assault against a woman is not a women's issue its human rights issue.

Conclusion: The play at the end provokes the observers to comprehend where the society stands when the question of woman's safety, independence and her identity is concerned. Today one can see how the honour of an educated and employed women is been outraged in a traditional and democratic societies like India let the unimaginable fate of millions of illiterate women in the world over. Padmanbhan has successfully uncovered the follies of the people and made them aware through her work.

Works Cited

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