

Dispensable lives: A discourse on rape, violence and silence in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

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Abstract

Characterized by eccentric, unpredictable and erratic behaviour, the epidemiology of hysteria eluded medical explanation in 19th century Victorian England. Although there were hysterical males, the attribution of this mental breakdown was bestowed only upon women because of Victorian gender distinctions. Manjula Padmanabhan's one-act play *Lights Out* brings out the hypocrisy and the nonchalant approach of its city-bred men, who, even after witnessing with their naked eyes the act of a gruesome bodily assault upon a woman, chose to remain silent and passive. When the female characters demanded a police intervention, they were simply relegated to the stereotype of a 'fussy/hysterical' women. The research paper brings to the forefront the urban apathy to gang rape and how female opinion in a patriarchal set-up is dismissed as inconsequential and unsolicited, thereby stripping them off their voice and agency.

Keywords: *rape, apathy, power dynamics, hysteria.*

Manjula Padmanabhan through her one-act play *Lights Out*, has exposed the hypocrisy and apathy of the urban lot towards rape. On one hand these metropolitan citizens claim to be progressive, emotionally intelligent and vigilant towards the moral flaws of the society. But on the flip side these same aware and informed citizens refuse to confront the violent and grotesque side of the society, citing reasons like non-interference and breach of privacy. The play, which was published in 1984, was told to Manjula Padmanabhan by a friend who had gone for a dinner at a cousin's place in a middle class locality in Santa Cruz, Mumbai in 1982. Halfway through the evening, violent screams were heard from outside the window. As if on cue, the cousin promptly ordered the lights to be switched off. And consequently, all the lights in the nearby building were dramatically switched off too. This was a regular incident in the locality and although numb with shock and fear, the residents did not raise an alarm for the fear of their own safety. Instead they took measures such as switching off the lights, avoiding dinner at that time, playing loud music or simply drawing the curtains. They chose silence over confrontation.

In the play, humanitarian values are tossed out of the window and a series of mindless discussions and debates concerning the rape takes the centre stage. No meaningful discourse is ever established by the

characters as they are so immersed in intellectually justifying the physical assault happening right outside of their apartment window. The female character of Leela rather switches off the lights, draws the curtains than to antagonize the culprits. The moral cowardice of the characters in the play is enraging and appalling. Leela is subjected to violent screams and unpleasant noises on a daily basis every night, but she is expected to remain silent and non-reactive by her husband Bhaskar and his friend Mohan as it was a personal matter of those involved and any form of aggression could jeopardize their own lives. When Leela insists on calling the police, Bhaskar mockingly tells her, “Go tell the police that you're frightened about noises in the next building! They'll laugh in your face!” (Padmanabhan 7).

When Manjula Padmanabhan was told about this flagrantly violent incident, it had greatly disturbed her. So much so, that she immediately decided to shine light in this neglected area of darkness. Thus evolved the play *Lights Out*, a powerful discourse in an environment where society's non-alignment policy towards women's issues is normalized. In an article published in *Sunday Observer*, Padmanabhan had stated that

“The incident left a very powerful impression on my mind. To me the horror of the situation was not what was going on, for in a way, it doesn't matter what the issue is. It was the situation of watching something terrible happening to one of your species and doing nothing about it.”

Through the artistic medium of theatre, Padmanabhan decided to expose the brutality of rape and the accompanying apathy of the society towards it. This incident could very well have become a news piece but it would not have much impact upon the viewers as journalistic information often has a short shelf-life. Theatre provides visibility, people vicariously live through the experience of the victim onstage. The ideological imprint left by a theatrical experience reverberates throughout one's life. *Lights Out* is a social play in the sense that it aims at raising awareness amongst audience and brings out appropriate response from them. In the play, Bhaskar's friend Mohan stays back for dinner and since he is already made aware of the situation, he is eager and excited to 'see' the incident. He is irritatingly, almost indecently curious about the crime and has come specially to watch it, for “how often can you stand and watch a crime being committed right in front of you?” (*Lights Out* 18). Mohan's intent on watching the rape is too unsavoury as he wants to enjoy the nudity of a woman being defeated by her perpetrators. By displaying the victim as an object of male fascination, it almost has a dehumanizing effect to witness her fear, panic, injury and pain. The play deconstructs the definition of masculinity by positioning the male characters as mere spineless individuals who have shamelessly turned a violent act into a comic spectacle.

Manjula Padmanabhan has exposed the voyeuristic pleasure that the male characters derive from watching the rape assault right across their building.

Lights Out begins with the female character Leela, wife of Bhaskar, in a state of impatient despair. She is waiting for Bhaskar to return home as he is supposed to make a police complaint that day. He returns, and although not insensitive to Leela's apprehensions, Bhaskar is not so keen and worried as Leela. He has simply managed to shut out his barely-surfaced doubts about his indifference to the crime being committed outside his window everyday. As human beings living in a wounded and fragile environment, we have survived ignoring so much that we get thick skinned even on matters that demand our immediate intervention. It is Bhaskar's self-righteous and cocky friend Mohan who refutes all of Leela's convictions and forms a number of theories about what the incident outside actually is, without having seen it himself. In a very condescending tone, he touts, "I don't want to get involved. Besides, if the victim only screams and does not ask for help, how can we, decent people, interfere?" (24). His absurd theories create a sense of suspended reality and impotence amongst the others. Finally he comes to a triumphant conclusion that the crime being committed is some kind of an occult practice, a religious rite and that is why "...no one can interfere. Not even the police" (30). His arguments are intellectually designed to protect the criminals, making excuses for their act, because he is in favour of victim-blaming; a dominating hegemonic approach signifying gendered violence in contemporary culture.

Both men in the play 'theorize' rape rather than showing any prompt action to prevent it. This typical ostrich-like behaviour is carried out to deny the victim's suffering and to escape the possibility of actual involvement in something unpleasant. This abominable behaviour of middle-class society is deplorable, to say the least. The culprits committing the crime and the bystanders are channelizing their cultural fantasies of domination that reduce women to spectacles of violence and victimization.

Catharine Mackinnon's feminist theory of interweaving gender inequality with power dynamics presents a touchstone analysis of *Lights Out*. She posits that gender inequality is a hierarchically structured power dynamics where men control women's sexuality through the latter's objectification. Mackinnon argues that male power shapes religion, law, social order and reality making the subordination of women appear natural.

Lights Out is about the coward within us all. A woman is gang-raped every evening and five persons witness the incident but find out one excuse or another to do whatsoever nothing in the matter.

Only in a desensitized society can such social injustices be carried out. The play ultimately is about the corruption of the human soul.

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