
Feministic and Realistic Concerns in Manjula Padmanabhan's 'Lights Out'

Prativa Rani Saha* & Dr. R. Kalpana**

** Assistant Professor, VNR VJIET, Hyderabad,*

***Assistant Professor, PSG College of Technology, Coimbatore.*

ABSTRACT:

A profound author of any age or nation never evades the serious issues of his/her age. Manjula Padmanabhan is one such writer who takes up sensitive issues in Indian Writing in English. The contemporary Indian English writers are engrossed with the idea of anticipating the social and political substances of the times. Manjula Padmanabhan is one of the authors who portrayed realism and feminism through her writings. Like the great British novelist Virginia Woolf, she realizes that 'gender-roles' are socially constructed and enslave both men and women for the benefit of those who control wealth and power in society.

The novel 'Lights Out' is an attempt to expose violence against women taking place in the society. The play is based on an eyewitness account; an incident that took place in Santa Cruz, Mumbai in 1982. A group of suburban middle class people are just silent spectators to the molestation of a woman in a neighboring compound but fail to resist or help. Mahesh Dattani suitably observes it as, "a play that deals with urban predicament". The vicious indifferent face of the metropolitan culture is out on display throughout the play.

Keywords: Realism, Feminism, Social issues, Male dominant society etc.

Literature is the mirror of the society. It shows the image of the society as it is reflected through one's actions. It embodies the society and displays it as it is, with its ups and downs. Literature is always associated with public life ever since the start of human civilization. So, a feeling of oneness and social responsibility is compulsory for a skilled craftsman and in every individual. Indeed, a craftsman performs his social responsibility in weaving the abstract abilities artistically and in making it magnificent. Manjula Padmanabhan had tried to show these creative features through her play, 'Lights Out' is successful in presenting it in a very real way.

With feminism being one of the chief concerns of the present age and emancipation of women from the long established cycle of male dominant society is a topic of all time discussion. The authors of this era aim at bringing out the plight of women in the present time. Concerns related to women have always remained controversial topics. Though efforts are being made to protect the rights of women and to ensure that women are not exploited in the name of culture, tradition, religion, values etc. But she still to be a victim in the male-dominated society. Women is being assaulted, raped and murdered even today in the society for no fault of hers.

Manjula Padmanabhan and her works are feministic as they deal with women and problems related to women. Her works focus on social issues where the patriarchal society suppresses women and her acts. She mainly emphasizes the realistic images concerned from their point of view. Her works include concerns related to women, alienation, rapes, dowry deaths, domestic violence etc. in the patriarchal discourse. Her well-acclaimed play 'Lights Out', describes the gloomy side of the patriarchal society that is insensitive to female sensibility and emotions.

The play 'Lights Out' by Manjula Padmanabhan, realistically depicts the social apathy and indifference which is so common in the contemporary times. The writer depicts the ugly picture of the society and its inequality towards the sufferings of women. The play also focuses on realistic and feministic approaches of life showing negligence towards a woman, the fright and sensitivity that she has because of her husband and/or other men in the family. The play also shows that many a time, neither the society, nor do family and friends allow another woman to help the victim (woman). It also highlights why women continue suffering silence in many circumstances. The play also focuses on the suppression of women by various forces in the society.

Lights Out, as the title suggests, revolves around the activities and events related to darkness of both, the mental and the physical world. The obscurity of the physical world is shown here by the assault of a lady, while that of the psyche is reflected in the mentality of the individuals who are not just quiet observers to this terrible crime, but also seem to appreciate viewing it. The mentality of the women is shown where she suffers, struggles to tell the truth and wants to inform the authorities concerned, but is not allowed by her family and friends. The true plight of woman who is not allowed neither to decide nor to take any action on her own.

Manjula Padmanabhan has attempted to make an affirmation among women which is the initial move towards combating violence and slavery. Through the novel 'Lights Out', she raises her voice to change the existing pressing social, political and financial realities. The novel initiates an agonizing process of contemplating on those hushed voices and finally emerging as a signal of light and trust for them. In the present era, all bondages of tradition, culture, respect etc. are fast breaking away under the impact of science, technology, modern political and social theories etc. People are busy creating their own identities and being individualistic bordering on selfishness has become the chief characteristic of the present age. Man remains so engrossed on his 'self' that he overlooks the obligations and responsibilities towards society and requests that society makes on him. The incidents taking place around him do not seem to bother or impact him in any way.

The play opens with a discussion between a husband and a wife regarding the incidents that take place in their neighborhood. The play reveals the responses of women to rape i.e. the fear of the crime and the voice they want to raise against it, is dejected. Here, though Leela tells her husband to call the police and inform about the matter but, her husband refuses and says that they should not bother about such offences. The dramatist's purpose is to highlight man's growing indifference towards his social commitments and his unwillingness and apathy; to take the responsibilities of any other person in the society.

The play shows how people in today's society are so engaged in their lives that they hardly get time to look into the happenings in the lives of people around them. Insulated by their own lives, they do not want to bother themselves with interfering with the lives and troubles of those around them. Though the characters in the play find enough time to discuss the crime, they do not muster courage to stop it. In the second scene, Bhaskar's friend Mohan is more curious to know about the horrible incident than making any attempt to help the victim. The hypocritical, if not sadistic instincts are clearly reflected in the following expression: "But—why not? What harm is there in watching?", though, when it comes to helping the woman, he declares "Personally, I'm against becoming entangled in other people's private lives". These words mark the height of hypocrisy.

The play demonstrates the responses of women to rape i.e. of offensiveness which are given cognizance and all other attempts to treat it contrastingly are rejected. Even at the point when the audience hear the men discussing the victim being dragged on the floor and is brutalized regardless she has the strength to shout, alongside the shouting, pushes them to rise above their constrained part as observers and responding as spokespersons of the social shrewdness of assault. Manjula Padmanabhan's, *Lights Out* highlights the response of the male gaze to the scene of the gang rape in the space of urbanity.

The play is very realistic both in style and content. It is so realistic to the extent that they represent the lives of common people through incidents that are part of day to day life. The dramatist presents these real life scenes in a believable manner and the issues discussed are totally women-centric and expressed from their point of view. The play shows the real life concerns about women where she is victimized and has to encounter many ugly faces of the society. The play also reveals, in this male dominating society where the men instead of discussing the severity of the crime, rather quickly change the direction of thinking and easily convert the case of gang rape to that of domestic violence. It shows that the people in the neighborhood deliberately avoid the situations in which would warrant that they act upon them to resolve the same. The discussion gradually shifts from one direction to other and the crime of gang rape is easily converted to a religious ritual, the scream of the victim is overlooked by the witnesses and is considered as the painful screams during any ritual like nose piercing and ear piercing.

The play uncovers that many a time's women use silence as their guard and defence, as in case of Frieda's behavior. She is seen bringing tea and cleaning the broken shards of glass even before anyone asks her to do it. Frieda's silence is suggestive of the fear of being abused – more because she is a woman from the lower economic strata. Her attempts to earn a living despite the odds show her determination to lead an independent life. She wears her silence as a shroud against oppression. She is the visual impact and her acoustics is strictly restricted until the end of the play. Throughout the play, she is alienated from rest of the characters and incidents, and is seen continuously working like a robot. This again shows that her silence amid other characters who tried voicing against the act is just a technique of survival that grabs the audience's curiosity. It is her approach of defiance to the brutal power of gender and class.

Naina, another character illustrates how quietness can be utilized as a useful tool of subversion. Her entry on the stage provides the much needed support and female company to Leela. Though Naina is honest, courageous and does not shy away from confronting Bhaskar and Mohan when they try to distract the women with spurious arguments to justify the rape. Her behavior and attitude changes subtly when her husband Surinder enters the scene. The playwright shows the limbo that the two women are in.

In the play lights out, the deliberate condition of the woman who is being raped, is displayed and subjugated as a sexual object. The rape of the lady becomes the leit-motif of this erotic spectacle, which is viewed both by the male characters in the play and the audience/reader outside the play. Thus, the spectators both within and outside the play are shown by representing the woman who is assaulted in one case and through the sounds of her groans made by the audience in the other case. In the entire play, the position of the spectator in the room where the lights are out is actually a replication of the position of the spectator outside the text as reader/audience in his seclusion.

Bhasker and Leela represent the typical couple who are more concerned about their family matters, totally overlooking their social responsibilities. Though Leela tries to convince Bhasker that they should inform the police, Bhasker turned a deaf ear. Mohan is an inclusion into the gradually widening network of patriarchy in the play. The excuses given by Mohan are at first a promiscuous indulgence; second, it partakes religiosity. The gaze whether he should involve in offering help to the victim reaches sarcastic point of excess. Surinder is the ironic ever-courageous voice, which is satisfied just with planning resistance, but not in actual put up of the resistance. Thus, he is indirectly involved in that vicious circle of rape-culture. Men who refuse to take any action and offer any help to the victim are implicated in the play and are shown as direct/indirect co-accomplices in the crime.

Not only mere ‘eye witness’ to the crime, resort to inertia keep discussing rather than taking against the ghastly crime. The realism in the play is shown through the screams that try to remove the need for the dramatization of the violation and creates sensation. The disruption through the screams creates awareness in the audience about the various conditions of crimes against women.

Padmanabhan does not restrain away from using strong language bordering on obscenity. The female characters in the play use bold words like ‘pimping rascal’ and ‘wetting yourself without any inhibition’. The dialogues are powerful, razor-sharp and do not care about the retaliation of the audience. The playwright adopts certain language of power through her choice of words and diction in a scathing attack against the basic inhumanness and indifference of the society.

Manjula Padmanabhan has managed to create a considerable degree of awareness by invoking the sense of social responsibility through the play. The author has successfully managed to evoke empathy for the character and for the rape victims at large. Thus, the play not only exposes the reality that takes place in the society in the form of different abuses but also make people identify its consequences. It includes the deep rooted selfishness of common men, their attitude of why should I involve, which is projected in the play very

clearly. Through the play the author conveys an important message on not to follow the footsteps by the spectators in the play. She clearly mentions in the modern world where people are educated and civilized, where they have advanced technologically doesn't value others and have lost their basic morals.

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