



The Unspoken Voices and Social Status of Women in Manjula Padmanabhan's Lights Out

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ABSTRACT: *In Lights Out Manjula Padmanabhan has painstakingly knitted the agony and distress of women in society. With dreadful yells, imperceptible silence, and tangible knots, the characters are painted on a palette that is entirely justified. A superficial group of urban middle-class people watch as a woman is assaulted in front of them in a nearby compound, but they do nothing to stop it. The drama focuses on crimes against women and also portrays the challenges women confront in contemporary society. The paper examines the status of women in the society and how they are subdued and strangled in a toxic relationship.*

KEYWORDS: Gender discrimination, Patriarchy, rape, violence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Indian Writing in English has a long history of hundred and fifty years of existence in the realm of World Literature. Regardless of its diversity in civilization, culture, customs, ethnicities, and faith, it carries on an encyclopedic elucidation. The genre has effectively encapsulated and stitched the multicultural and multilingual society in a thread. It talks about the varied and apportioned custom, tradition, and culture of the country which prompted M.K. Naik to quote in his work *Indian Writing in English* that the genre came into existence because of the dynamic interaction between a brisk and entrepreneurial Britain and chaotic India in the late eighteenth century which resulted intellectuals to paint and endorse the true face and condition of India to the world.

Out of the various tools and mediums put in service or adopted by Indian writers to express their thoughts and ideas, drama is appraised as the most noteworthy and dynamic medium. It is the audio-visual character of expressing one's emotions and ideas that has established drama as the most efficacious and potent class in the literary arena. The accouchement and blossoming of drama in Greece, Rome, England, and India belabored the certitude that it has been the intrinsic part of the customs and lifestyles, moral commitment, religious and philosophical judgment, and the cause for socio-political changes in many countries. Drama is the metaphoric depiction of life amalgamating in it the real and fictional, art and reality binding and furnishing the proceedings and characters' acreage of space and time. It incorporates the values of narrative poetry with visual arts. As Martin Esslin mentioned in his work, "It is a narrative made visible. (36)"

It is said that "the perfection of each individual thing considered in itself is imperfect, being a part of the perfection of the entire universe, which arises from the sum total of the perfections of all individual things". (232-42) Naturally, an artist expresses his perfection and realization through his art, and drama and theatre play an important role to bring out the artist's concern and idea to life.

Considered as "Fifth Veda", drama has had a bounteous and splendid history and legacy, beginning its odyssey with Sanskrit plays. As Keith observes, "Indian tradition preserved in the *Natyashastra* the oldest of the texts of the theory of the drama, claims for the drama a divine origin, and a close connection with the sacred Vedas themselves. (10)"

With Krishna Mohan Banerjee's "Persecuted" (1813), Indian English drama first described the light of the day although the real peregrinate starts with Michel Madhusudhan Dutt's "Is this called Civilization" (1871), though the creative effort was somehow stalled till the 20th century. After a long wait for a few decades, it was in the first half of the 20th century that the Indian English Drama starts rolling under the influence of the British Empire. The pre-independence epoch was graced by the likes of Rabindranath Tagore, Lobo Prabhu, T.P.

Kailasam, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Bharati Sarabhai, and others. The contemporary era of Indian English Drama was under the magic commands of geniuses Pratap Sharma, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, and the likes. Talking about the post-modern era, it is painted with the sagacity of young masterminds like Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, Poile Sengupta, Dina Mehta, Uma Parameswaran, and others.

Even though the history of Indian drama and theatre dates back as old as the 1st century B.C., it seriously shortfalls the presence of women writers till the 19th century. A valid justification may be the comprehensive expunging of female voices. Indian women like their contemporaries have chosen to explore the arena of novel writing than drama. As Tutun Mukherjee remarks, "The denial of education to women, the male exclusivity in the print culture, the tendency to 'vulgarise' and 'devalue' oral culture (generally the female domain), the separation of the private and public space has all served to confine women to certain genres and restrict or erase their presences in others". (4). The drama and theatre together as a cultural progeny hold a disparate space and locus in the history of women's writing and cultural partaking and the alliance between the two has not been facile. The assumption that women are incompetent to showcase the public and artistic responsibility added the fire more in them to prove that a woman can also excel well in each and every genre. From the late 19th-century women writers in India have chipped in the genre. The age witnessed brilliant playwrights and their works being written and performed with more vigour and a new beginning. As R. K Dhawan says, "Very recently Indian English Drama has shot into prominence". (201) Writers such as Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have suffused new life into this branch of writing.

Indian women writers are marching forward with strong and sure strides with their powerful works and a striking onslaught of the age-old traditions and norms. As Dr. M.F. Patel points out, "They aim at bringing out the plight of women...". Their works became the most sharpened tool to showcase the wrongdoings going on against women in society.

Among the jewels brightening the skyline of Indian English Drama, Manjula Padmanabhan is a well-known name. Born in 1953, Padmanabhan is a cartoonist, author, journalist, novelist, playwright, and children's book author and winner of the prestigious Greek Onasis Award for her play *Harvest*. Her plays mainly share out lives of women and their status in family and society respectively. She exquisitely unmasked the ugly truth and the heart-rending condition of women in Indian society. Her works mainly contained issues related to women, rape, domestic violence, and others.

This paper mainly focused on women and their struggle for survival in this patriarchal world. The dramatist has doubtlessly churned out the subjugation and makes a plea to apprehend the feelings that women undergo in a world where there is no room for their emotion, freedom, and their thoughts. In Indian society, the status of women has been a conundrum. The society which held women in higher alter, worshipping them as the source of power and fertility, of motherly love and tranquillity, the same society has defined and confined women in very strict roles. They are defined as a mother, a housewife, a daughter, and a wife. Even Manu in his Manusimurthi has idealized the ideal role of a woman as a mother, taking care of her children and family and the wife whose main and only job was to be faithful towards her husband and serve her in-laws' family without any grouch. As Kaplan visualizes, this situation can only be changed "when women are freed from constant reproduction when they are educated equally with men in childhood, when they join the labour force at his side ... women will protest and break down the taboo". (4)

II. DISCUSSION

The play *Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan calls for the consideration of the predicament women faced throughout their lifetime generally in this mundane world and distinctly in the orthodox Indian patriarchal system. The drama has a distinct imprint of gender-based biasness and in the course of happenings appeals to comprehend the struggle and sensitivity in society which otherwise fails to recognize their value.

Padmanabhan in her play has uncovered the ugly reality of human beings, what is hidden in the crepuscular soul of humans and how they behave and bear their true color in time of need. Although we are living a luxurious life in the 21st century till women are faced with and treated as a pawn by men. They are dominated and ill-treated and even go through multifarious physical and mental tortures. Their emotional sentiments are unheard of by men and they closed their eyes to the problems and injustice faced by women at home or outside the home. Some women who show courage to speak up their minds and are suave like Leela and Naina are ignored, threatened, and sew up to accept the dictatorship of the male character present in their life. Although the play, the characters both male and female are entangled in a fervid argument about the offense going on in the neighbourhood, whether the crime is rape or not. The covert intention of the male characters is to not entangle in the crime scene and to keep a strong hold on the women so that they could never interfere in the matter. This attitude of the male characters clearly shows the basic difference of approach toward a crime, while women do always exhibit a feministic sense of attachment and recognize themselves with the sufferer, the men fail to do so.

The play is gleaned from the real-life incidence of gang rape that materializes in the suburbs of Bombay in the 80s. The playwright has singled out her characters in two halves, the reaction of the male and the female characters on witnessing the horrific crime and their riposte based on their gender. Men representing the power and provider of safety and security in society look down upon the crime and began explaining the same for their own benefit, whereas women, they are so systematically conditioned both socially and psychologically that they at some point become incapable to take any sound and unconstrained resolution. The tête-à-tête between Bhasker, Leela, Mohan, Naina, and Surinder transpires in the background of the crime executed by a group of perpetrators on a woman daily in front of Bhasker and Leela's apartment. Leela, a homemaker is disturbed and anxious and revulsed about the happenings outside her apartment. She is hysterical and deranged overhearing the hoarse cry of the victim again and again which is joined by the animalistic shrill of the perpetrators. She in her despair pleaded with her husband Bhasker to take-action and file a complaint with the police. Because of the intensity and regularity of the crime, it takes a toll on Leela's mental stability and she began to hyperventilate as evening approaches. Bhasker, on the other hand, remains quite unresponsive and callous towards the crime and his simple cerebration for not informing the police unfolds his detached mentality and taking for granted nature. He belongs to that type of middle-class mentality who just want to save his own skin.

However, in all this ongoing drama Leela is traumatized to witness the crime happening outside her apartment and the poor fate of the woman undergoing the torture. Her repeated hankering of calling the police to her husband falls on the deaf ear and she was forcefully silenced. Leela is the representative of the middle-class women in India whose belief lies in the purity of home and the righteousness of married life. The awful cry of the victim and the ferine nature of the perpetrators shook her belief in a safe and secure home. She becomes a victim of agitation and restlessness. Being cocooned in the safety of her home and husband, Leela fails to comprehend the working procedure of the Indian Police System. The harrowing condition and outlook of the police against the victim is babbled by Bhasker's statement: "Go tell the police that you're frightened about noises in the next building! They'll laugh in your face." (6)

The playwright has openly showcased the hollow and selfish mentality of the well-refined class of people dwelling in the society. She has unmasked the hypocrisy with what these people continue to live their life. Concerned about their safety and security they even turn their face from their own people as "they don't want to stick their necks out". They are the escapist who plays a safe game and like others avoid social responsibility with the contretemps that if no one is coming openly against the crime "so why should we".

Leela, on the contrary, views this sexual violence as an ultimatum in her life. The thin thread of sanity that she is holding on to is getting weaker day by day. She recognizes herself with the victim and feels incapable of not helping her. Neeta in this case writes that "her disturbed state of mind proves the fact that she has gradually started to identify herself with that woman". She can perceive the ferocity of her pricking in the direful situation of her life. As a woman, she commiserates with the woman and wants to help her.

Leela belongs to that class of people who is more aware and anxious to keep her and her family safe, obsessed with the safety of her own home. Her repeated imploration to call the police is not to help the victim but to move the crime scene from her home to another place. She is a woman who is affected seriously by the crime so much so that her fear becomes a psychological outburst but at the same time she just wants the crime to stop just for the sake of her and her family's safety. With Leela, Padmanabhan has shed light on the hypersensitive nature of women. They are compassionate, mawkish, and sensitive. The ongoing violence in the country triggers so much terror in people's minds that they begin experiencing nightmares and it takes them a long time to get over their anxiety. Through the character Leela, Padmanabhan emphasizes her concern about what transpires to women in a society where the educated, smart, competent, and conscientious elite class is a passive observer and a complicit accomplice in crimes against women. So true are the words of Swami Vivekananda where he has opined that unless the situation and condition of women are ameliorated, it is a hard job to even ponder about their well-being.

As opposed to Leela, Naina is the person who voiced her opinion and strongly opposed to the crime. She recognized herself with the rape victim and cry out for help. While the male characters called the rape as a religious ceremony, she denies to agree with them and points out the truth. Bhasker and Mohan's discussion of the crime in a gruesome manner and attempting to narrate the details in a way to circumvent it as a rape makes Naina cry out in frustration. The male characters in every possible way dominated over the females in the play and thereby establishing the patriarchal rule both inside and outside the home. Naina is the most sensible and rationalistic woman. She like Leela abhors violence but she is more vocal to stop the crime. Her constant urges to act made the male characters to act. Although she is utterly shocked by Mohan and Bhasker's explanation of rape as a religious ceremony of the slum people and questioning the victim's character labeling her as an immoral woman, she stands her point. It is she who argued that even a prostitute has the right to be extricated. She firmly believes they are incapable of taking action and counsels them to act rather than passively observe. Her presence lends strong support to the cause of woman's emancipation from sexual assault. When she hears

the men's justifications for the deed, she responds angrily. She confronts different reductionist ideas that portray women as helpless. She absolutely rejects the stereotypes of women that the guys frequently discussed. But we can see a change in Naina with the entry of her better half Surinder. It is his overbearing personality that subdues others and Naina is the one most affected by it. When we see Surinder's response to the rape, the reason why is evident. Given the callous attitude of the other two males, the spectator is rather relieved when he becomes quite angry. However, this relief is fleeting because it soon becomes apparent that the assailants' insulting behavior in hurling stones at their building's windows to bring attention to their unlawful activities while continuing to carry them out only adds to his rage rather than alleviates it. He instantly requests that they be attacked. In case of Naina's protest not to take the law into their hands she was attacked by Surinder's threatening remarks "you shut up. This is no time for women's nonsense" (47) and "Shut up or I'll kick your teeth in" (49). Though she is a strong and independent woman with a voice yet at some point she is dominated and oppressed by Surinder.

Freida is another woman of substance who made her presence felt with the strong weapon of silence. She is a helping hand of Leela and comes from a shattered background. In the whole play, she was seen carrying out the works instructed to her without uttering a single word and this eerie silence brings out her dominated stature. Her silence poses questions like whether she is affected by the crime or not? Is the cry for help of the victim reaching her or not? But we see her arranging the instruments like knives and acid once the males decided to go and attack the perpetrators which enhances the fact that she is also walking in the same line as the other two females and want this madness to stop. Though she hails from low economic strata yet she is out in society to earn and live an independent life. And she uses silence as her weapon. She wears it as armour to protect herself from being subdued.

III. CONCLUSION

Padmanabhan in her play has rightly pointed out the social status of women in Indian society. On one hand, she has highlighted women's subjugation both physically, psychologically, and emotionally by their male counterparts and on the other side, she has also shown how women are coming out of their protective cocoon and raising their voices for their rights and against injustices striking on them. They are brave enough to swim against the tides and denied being trimmed and being a bonsai tree. Padmanabhan has transformed her women characters from being a passive silent observer to spirited and rebellious characters to being a woman of substance.

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