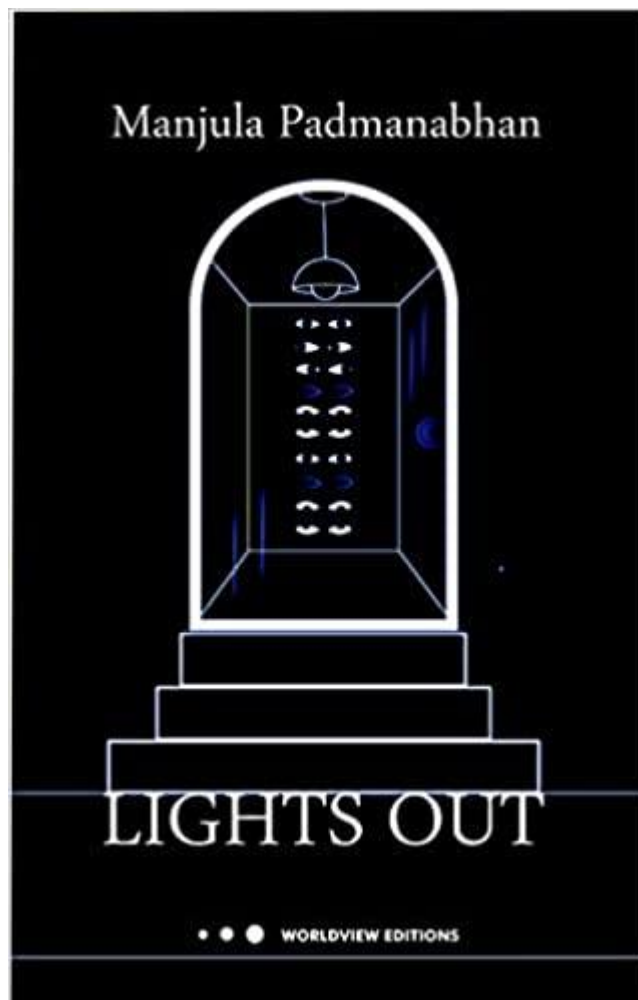


## Dilemma and Misrepresentation of Women: A Study of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

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### Abstract

The aim of my paper is to depict the dilemma of women characters in the play, *Lights Out* written by noted playwright Manjula Padmanabhan. It is a thought provoking work, and the

story is set in a land almost insensitive and cold of women's, pain, and agonies. Padmanabhan has placed almost all of her works in dystopian lands and the reality has been re-shaped. It offers a sensitive character study of the woman characters. It is a play having a tragic setting where a rape is going on the background and how the men are trying to have a justification for it. Since women have no place in the land created by the playwright the play depicts a very heinous side of the male society where there is no place for the women's conscience and sensibility. Here Padmanabhan deftly portrays a pack-rape along with the communal apathy that is often met with, even if there are people within reach to be able to come to the rescue of the victim. Manjula, a feminist, voices her concern about the fate of women in a society where the educated, resourceful, and conscious elite class remains a mute spectator and an indifferent partner in the crimes committed on women. The play is a metaphor to show that the women's position have been reduced to a no one. They have to struggle to have their voice back, to have an existence of their own. It is a sincere effort to show the dilemma of the women presented in a modern day scenario.

**Keywords:** Manjula Padmanabhan, *Lights Out*, Dystopian, dilemma of women, agony, heinous.

Women's liberation or the awakening of the individual and collective consciousness of women has undoubtedly been one of the greatest developments of the last century and as such this opened up a whole new world of women in the literary realm that went on to unfold the angry outburst after an age long of silence and suppression, out of the adverse condition that the woman kind have ever been subject to.

The last few decades have shown women situating themselves between the extremes of servitude and the urge for freedom of expression and activism. Women in this world especially in Indian society lose out only by being women. The social integration is such as to incline them towards the so-called natural vocation of women i.e. to be a wife and a mother. Subordination or acceptance of male authority, whether of father, husband, or son, is a cherished Indian value sanctified by tradition. Their choices and potentials are so often thwarted by the societies of which they are integral part. The enclosed space indicating a woman's lot in the traditional Indian set-up is in response towards the Sita/Savitri prototype or rather the ideas and beliefs provided by *Manusmriti*. As Anees Jung opines, "I had not known then that silence could be a language through which women in this land realized themselves, I owe that legacy to my mother, a legacy which I am just beginning to unravel and understand" (Jung, 1987:20).

With the passage of time silence has been attributed to womanhood as a significant trait through which they realize themselves, and their existence as such. Literature as a medium to show the reality and holding a mirror in front of the society reminds us of the reality that traditionally India is a patriarchal society. The feminine world is covered with many thick and

slack layers of prejudice, convention, ignorance and arrogance. The woman has no autonomous existence. Simone de Beauvoir vividly expresses her state as, “A free and autonomous creature like all others, a woman finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the ‘other’ and reduce her to the status of the ‘second sex.’” (Beauvoir, 1974:391)

However, literature thrives on innovation and experimentation. Indian Women’s drama in English is doing this from quite some time. One focus of this drama has been the exploration of the means of expression through the woman’s body or sexuality. They use this theme both as a methodology for expression as well as a theme for struggle to bring about the change. The present paper is an attempt to bring forth the role which women playwrights have played in highlighting the struggle and expression of women i.e. voicing the female agony and pain through their writings.

The present paper is an attempt to analyze the play *Lights Out!* written by noted feminist playwright Manjula Padmanabhan in 1984. She is a post-colonial writer. In their writings, post-colonial authors have not only exhorted an exposition of the patriarchal ideologies and their oppressive tendencies towards feminist growth and expression, but have also envisioned ways of counteracting those attitudes. They show women’s struggle to find meaning and value in their own life, their self-styled roles, to have their autonomous existence, to have their own authentic and distinct self.

This play is set in a middle-class society situated in Mumbai and is the dramatic adaptation of a real life incident which took place in Santa Cruz area of Mumbai in 1982. It predominantly deals with the urban attitudes and psychology towards the victims and the inflictors of violence. The play as the title suggests, focuses on the activities associated with darkness, both, of the physical world as well as of the mental world. The play has a very weird or inhumane setting where a physical assault is being performed on a woman in the background for a number of days and the people shown are discussing it, over a dining table or over a cup of tea. The play deals with the prevalent hollowness and darkness in the upper sections of the society who are given the responsibility to brighten the future of India and are supposedly educated enough to decide what they got to do. It is grossly critical of the city-based English-educated high-society individuals who fail to rise up to the level of expectation of the people among them. Sociologist, Frank Azurro says, “With increased urbanization and subdividing, the urban mentality creeps toward like a confident snake or a villain in Stephen King novel. Don’t you want the shiny products, the cruises where nanny come along so you can drink and play golf, the house with the cathedral ceilings” (“The Urban Mentality”). It deals with the modern society and in the modern age women are beginning to be conscious of the fact that their rights are also human rights, and the rights for all is the principle of equality of opportunity for everyone in society. There is an active urge from them to be treated on the equal scale with men. It’s time when the biological

difference should not be the reason for their secondary status or any other kind of bias to be inflicted on them.

This newly emerged neo-rich class with lots of wealth, earned ethically or unethically; more and more Indians are becoming a part of the so-called middle class, affluent and with a flair for discussion on weighty issues of national and international importance, portraying themselves as possessing very high moral character and integrity, and assuming the role of a watch-dog of the society and the system, if it exists anywhere. This play is a scathing attack on these neo-rich section whose number is on a rise and are busy criticizing, battering the system or the government or the politicians in the company of friends in the cocktail parties, sitting in the safe pre-cints of their cozy homes, always disparaging the corrupt and rotten system and people involved in this sloth, forgetting that they themselves are equally involved and fair-share contributors in the mess the society is in. The expectations are higher in their case as they are supposed to be the most resourceful sections of the society and the future of any country chiefly rests on it.

Ralph Thomlinson in *Urban Structure: The Social and Spatial Character of Cities*, writes:

The essence of the classic sociological analysis is the connection of the structural characteristics of a society, particularly, its scale, to the quality of its “moral order.” That turns out, not coincidentally to parallel the focal interest of Urban Sociology; the interest between structural features of communities-their moral orders. In fact, the city has long played a significant role in classic sociological theories. It was seen as modern society in microcosm, so that the ways of life in urban were viewed as harbingers of life in the emerging civilization. (113-15)

In the play the heinous act of gang rape is shown with communal apathy that is being associated with it. There are people within range who can come to rescue but are so sterile of emotions and feelings that they fail to reach out for her help. Instead they try to mellow down the situation by putting the blame on the victim herself. Their dried up sensibilities make them unable to understand the pain of the girl who is being brutally raped by the tormentors. Leela and Bhasker, a married couple, have been listening to the sounds of the sexual assault near their residence for over a week. The play builds up the situation in a crescendo like manner since there is no direct reference to the assaults towards the beginning of the play. Instead, we are only given Leela’s pained, hyper-sensitive responses to the heart-rending screams, “Oh don’t! I don’t like you even talking about it!” (181)

There is noticeable difference between Leela and her husband Bhasker's reaction towards the grotesque crime, where Leela being a woman seems disturbed and angered by it whereas he tries to avoid it and seems indifferent towards the crime. His attitude symbolizes the patriarchal attitude towards women where women are treated merely as a sexual object meant only for the consumption for men. He conjures up various possible interpretations of what's being seen and heard. The playwright here underlines the point that however hard we may try to present ourselves innocent about the crimes or the evil around us, we cannot absolve ourselves of our complicity in these crimes by remaining mute. Where Naina denies calling it a religious ritual, men in the play deny calling it a rape. Here the dramatist seems to be further extending the point put forth by Arthur Miller in *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy*. Leela is shocked to see what is being done to a woman in her neighborhood by a number of goons. She repeatedly urges her husband Bhasker to do something through which they can save the woman. She forces him to call the police, but her pleas fell on deaf ears of him:

Leela: (*Wheedingly.*) Can't you call the police? Just for me?

Bhasker: (*Drawing away.*) No.

Leela: But why not?

Bhasker: We've discussed this before... (138)

Whereas Leela is horrified with the incident of rape being committed on a woman and is afraid when she says, "Sometimes it's like a shawl, it wraps itself around my shoulders and I start to shiver (137). Bhasker calling her anxiety, 'rubbish' and 'ridiculous' seems cold about all this and tries his best to absolve himself of any sort of responsibility. He is indifferent not only of the cries of the victim but also of the pleas of his wife. He is the epitome of typical middle-class person who is happy in his cocoon and does not want to come out of it as it may hurt him. So, there is a shifting of dice going on, and the question remains 'Who will bell the cat?' i.e. who will come first for the rescue.

The playwright is dismayed to know about the inward hollowness of these so-called refined people who only think about their own well-being, nothing to care about the world around them. They are concerned about saving their own skin; they turn their back towards the suffering brethren, because 'they don't want to stick their necks out' out of fear. So, Bhasker, like his neighbors a hypocrite, plays it safe and becomes an escapist. Bhasker's friend Mohan, who has come from Delhi, having been told about these incidents, watches the 'crime being committed' in other words, to satisfy his urge for voyeuristic pleasure in witnessing such a crime. As we go through the play, the sheer dehumanization of the female body is brought to light. By a mere command to the inhabitants of the area to put their 'lights out' at night, the perpetrators of such crime succeed in showing the fast degeneration of the society. By adopting such an unsympathetic and callous attitude towards those who are experiencing all forms of

indignities, the playwright through her mouthpiece Sushila, opines that we too are in the same league with the rapists and criminals. Leela reminds Bhasker about what Sushila said, “That we’re part of ...what happens outside. That by watching it, we’re making ourselves responsible (139)”. To which Bhasker out rightly responds by calling it ‘rubbish’. Male chauvinism is at its peak when Mohan, his friend sides with Bhasker and laughs at Sushila’s opinion about their complicity in the crime and calls her an intellectual. But this point of argument also hints at the psyche of Leela, who wants to help the victim only out of responsibility. Her sense of responsibility, not emotional identification with the woman was provoking her to help her out. There is a dichotomy in her character as well, she complains and puts her points of argument in front of her husband in best possible words but doesn’t try even once to step out of the four walls of the house to seek help for the victim. She just like others is equal sharer in shifting of the responsibility. She is least bothered when the victim is made a ‘whore’ by her husband and his friends, all she wants is a peaceful place for herself. She is bothered because the screams are disturbing the atmosphere of her house and also her sleep. She says, “I don’t care what they believe. The sounds torture me. Tell the police I can’t sleep at nights.... tell the police the goondas must go away and take their dirty whores somewhere else! (*She is losing control again.*) I don’t care what they do, or who they are, or what they are-I just want them far away, out of my hearing...out of my life...” (179).

*Lights Out!* is a scathing satire on the so-called decent and civilized people whose life appears as full of absurdities and contradictions to a saner head. If we are not honest to our own family members, then who will trust us? What an irony! A rape is described as a ‘ritual’, ‘a religious ceremony! Sacred rites!’, ‘Cult of the Body-Builders’ or ‘heavenly’ and the rapists as ‘priests’ or holy persons by these *civilized* and *decent* people. Modern man’s total ennui and indifference to his fellow beings has resulted in the collapse of social fabric of fellow-feeling and the system has gone to the dogs where every individual like the characters in *Lights Out!* Has fair share of contribution, The characters are placed here between complete, unnoticed silence and palpable, horrifying screams. A group of urban middle class people watch brutalization of a woman in a neighboring compound but fail to perform meaningful action. The play also proposes a complete negligence towards a woman’s (Leela) fright and sensitivity, by her husband” (Durgesh, B. Ravande, 2007).

Mohan and Bhasker try to justify the crime and to come at some explanation for the molestation that could make it sound ‘right’. Mohan goes ahead saying that it could be an act of exorcism-trying to drive a demon out of the woman’s body. Bhasker nonchalantly observes:

Bhasker: Fanny, how it is most women become possessed?

Mohan: They are more susceptible.

Leela: It’s a rape, isn’t it?

Bhasker: She could be a whore, you know!

Leela: Ugh!

Naina: A whore! Do you think that's what she is?

Mohan: Of course-she's with four men at once!

Naina:( *Uncertainly*) Is that enough to prove she's a whore?

Bhasker: A decent woman would never be found with four men at once.

Naina: But she could have been abducted from somewhere, been brought here and...

Mohan: Decent woman would never submit to this sort of thing. (174)

It never occurs to either of these men that the assault could have been forced upon the woman. It could be possible that the woman had been abducted. The only thing done by these so-called decent men is talking decently about the indecency of the victim and somehow trying to avoid shouldering responsibility towards prevention of such a misdeed. Manjula lays bare what lies hidden in the dark souls of humanity; poking our nose into others' affairs, even for helping somebody, is like inviting some sort of problem; we are happy till such nasty things don't happen to us. Utter selfishness and passivity in such situations mean we identify ourselves with those beasts who assault a woman every evening in public view, and the hypocrisy of the decent people is at its best in the following lines:

Bhasker: Listen... (*Quelling the others.*) listen...you see that out there?

(*He gestures*) Now...that (*With a certain fiendish satisfaction.*) that is the point of being a decent woman! (*Dramatic pause.*) You see, if she were a decent woman, we people would go to her rescue! (*Pause.*) She is not, and so she's left to her fate!

Naina:(*Lamely.*) Surely-I mean-even a whore has a right to choose her clients!

Mohan: Choose her clients! A whore just takes what she gets!

Bhasker: Whatever rights a woman has, they are lost the moment she becomes a whore.

Leela: (*Dully.*) How *horrible* it must be to be a whore.

Naina: You mean, if she's a whore there's nothing, we can do about all this?

Mohan: What's there to do? We can either watch or not watch-that's all. (140)

All this while, the reader is conscious of the rape going on in the background and such inconsequential banter on the part of the men only arouses frustration. The anarchy that prevails has engulfed every aspect of human life; people have gone so shallow that for the crime like rape, they are blaming the woman herself. If the women are not saved even when they are being raped, then what to expect of the women who are considered as whores. The irony is that only because of men, girls are turned into 'whores' and then they suffer for being a 'whore.' Towards the end, when Naina's husband Surinder comes to the scene, and the men decide to rescue the victim of the rape, all they actually end up doing is plan one bizarre thing after another. For Surinder, rescuing the victim is more a question of accepting the challenge thrown by the rapists

upon the self-respect of the inhabitants of the area, Mohan, cruel and inconsiderate goes to the extent to suggest, “Pictures like these we’d make a lot of money-after all, how often does anyone see authentic pics of a gang-rape in action” (187). Mohan depicts the complete dehumanized and inhuman state of the patriarchal set-up where women are reduced to the status of a commodity and are used as things. As soon as they get ready to go out to take photographs and to beat up the culprits, the screams cease, and the crime is done for that night. To this, Leela reacts, “Oh! Then it must be over for tonight!” (189) as if she will miss the drama for which she was gearing up for a long time.

In a way, the play *Lights Out!* shows the darkness prevalent in the inner psyche of the human beings and especially in the so-called educated and civilized sections of the society. Not only of the darkness of the men but also of the women, who keeps on trying to keep on postponing the actions to be taken for the victim’s rescue. The play is replete with bizarre and ridiculous conversations, and we are led to the absurd world of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter; as Godot never comes in *Waiting for Godot*, similarly no one will call the police or raise a voice against the molesters and come to the rescue of molested woman.

Since times immemorial women have been regarded on a secondary status and way back in 1953 Simone de Beauvoir in her classic *Second Sex* has shown us that feminine is defined as the other and the masculine as the self. This network of binary opposition between male-female, activity-passivity, father-mother, culture-nature, logos-ethos, etc. indicates that feminine is invariably associated with the negative aspects. This perception led her to sum up “One is not born a woman, one becomes one.” Consciousness of their own body is either denied to women or is filtered through a discourse that inculcated alienation and self-loathing. It is ideas such as these that the women dramatists today challenge and subvert through their reworking of a woman’s understanding of her body.

The play is a thoughtful exercise to depict the women’s position in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and her urge to break the shackles and restrictions imposed upon her by the patriarchal society. Only Naina has felt the pain of the sufferer and wanted a serious effort for her rescue but was silenced by her ‘manly’ husband Surinder, “there’s no time for women’s nonsense! And if she doesn’t shut up-he’ll kick her teeth in” (184). To stop one brutality he will commit another brutality, this is the state of our ‘protectors’. One of the important though silent character of the play is the maid, Freida, introduced by Mahesh Dattani himself. She is mute, voiceless, and powerless to speak and is the silent spectator in the play. She metaphorizes the urban self’s own inevitable effacement of a voice, especially if you are a victim. She is an excellent instance to delineate the anonymity of the mega city.



Ancient Indian myth of Draupadi attaches considerable significance to woman's social status where she faced no less bad a fate in being 'pawned' and 'given' as a commodity by her husband on his losing a game of dice. All the ministers and lawmakers seemed helpless to save her from this humiliation and participated in this 'spectacle'. The characters both men and women, try to absolve themselves of any sort of responsibility whatsoever and evade all that is unpalatable to the senses, repulsive, unacceptable, or inconvenient to remember. Men, though aware of their social duty as social beings, avoid the crime, living contentedly in their self-imposed bondages. Even the pitiable cries of a woman become a matter of discussion rather than action and they become the spectators of the rape which is a 'spectacle' for them.

The cries of the girl, symbolizing every girl, fell on deaf ears which are busy appropriating and validating the crime. The tormentors are 'looking exactly alike' referring to a faceless, de-individualized, collective force of violence, and hence they could be anyone from the society.

Rather the women are also responsible equally in engendering/endangering the victim representing the womanhood. Their protesting voice is weak, inert, feeble, and passive to attract any sort of help. It seems more of a noise than a voice. It points finger towards that section of the society who are resourceful enough to make a difference to the society but fails to rise up at the occasion. The women are trying to make their voices heard and noticed by the patriarchy who are also the tormentors. The women are fighting for their space and place on this land since a long time but have been bereft of their basic human emotions and rights even today.

The play appears to be more in the nature of a discussion play. It is an ugly face of urban society that has been effectively mirrored through this play. The play was written in 1980s but holds considerable relevance even today where girls are still molested and raped. The infamous 'Nirbhaya' gang rape in national capital, New Delhi is a heated example of atrocities being committed on women and how their state is still the same condition even in the changing scenario. The girls are still viewed in terms of their gender and hence targeted by the insensitive males who endanger them. The women are endangered even in modern times where they are victimized for being women and face humiliation.

*Lights Out!* is an engrossing study of engendered as well as endangered nature of womanhood. Women are in constant struggle to make their voices heard and make their presence felt by the society they are part of.

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