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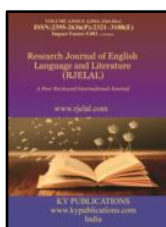
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RAPE & BODY POLITICS: GENDER VIOLENCE IN MANJULA PADMANABAN'S *LIGHTS OUT*

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ABSTRACT

Lights Out protests against physical vulnerability of women. Like her other plays Manjula Padmanabhan has confronted with the realistic issues that disturbs her as an individual. Though the time has changed the globalized world is of no aid to women of any class. The playwright through this play focuses on an urgent need to address this treatment and vulnerability quotient in women. The play is a perfect example of subjugation and subordination of woman in walks of life.

Key Words: Body Politics, Gender Violence, Rape, *verfremdungseffekt*, Distancing Effect.

Introduction

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* is about the insensitivity of the urban population. The play is based on a real life incident of gang rape of women which happened for many days in Mumbai where inmates of high society were a mute audience to the crime being committed right outside their own house. Manjula Padmanabhan presents this blasé attitude of the city inmates with great intensity in *Lights Out*. The play is not only about insensitivity towards the victims of rape but also towards all those who are perceived as underlings. Manjula Padmanabhan exposes the apathy of society towards women who were subjected to gang rapes. The play also poses the question of men's responsibility. Padmanabhan acknowledges at the end of the play that:

The play is based on an eye witness account. The incident took place in Santa Cruz, Bombay, 1982. The characters are fictional. The incident is a fact. In real life, as in the play, a group of ordinary middle class people chose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalized in a

neighbouring compound. In real life, as in the play, no-one went to the aid of the victims. (53)

Manjula Padmanabhan has strikingly presented the gender violence and societal response to it in three scenes. Scene I is set in the flat of Bhasker and Leela where Leela is shown worried about some upcoming event. Simultaneously audience's attention is drawn to Frieda, the maid, who is working silently. Scene II begins with the arrival of Mohan in the claustrophobic flat of Bhaskar and Leela for a dinner. Mohan is already aware of this morbid, macabre scene enacted night after night. He is curious but takes it seriously. They frame various speculations regarding the nature of the daily attacks that go on. Scene III opens with the bizarre sounds of a woman screaming for help. The sound is gravelled and unpleasant with distinct words – "Let me go! Help me!" But as the evening progresses it degenerates into a general screaming and sobbing. Two more characters are introduced in this scene. One is Leela's friend Naina, who like Leela, is agonized by the sounds while the men Bhasker and Mohan are fascinated and morbidly

curious. The other character is Naina's husband, Surinder. The edge of criticism gets sharper with Leela's and Naina's position being played down as "hypersensitive" for being empathetic to the victims suffering. The drama is structured upon dialogic debate, thereby breaking the hegemony of monologic, monophonic structure. Ideas are born of male and female perspective clashes to an open-ended debate. The playwright has not privileged one over the other; the ideas are presented in the form of a problem play for the audience to look for the way out.

Subjugation on the basis of class

In cities the elite and the underlings often belong to the same urban space. While the elite occupy the economic, centre; the underlings aid in providing comfort to the privileged class. In the play though Frieda shares the same space as other characters but still she is deprived of the basic human necessities. All through the play, she does not behave like a human being; she works like a machine. Even before receiving the command, she performs her duties. Padmanabhan's directional note in the beginning of the play stresses the robotic existence of Frieda.

Note on FRIEDA's role: She remains constantly in sight, performing her duties in a mute, undemanding way. The other characters pay no attention to her except to give her orders. When she has no specific task at hand, she can be seen moving about in the kitchen. The audience should be allowed to wonder what she thinks. (2)

Not only the audience but readers also wonder about the mute existence of Frieda all through the play. Being present in the same house she is also a witness to the crime but never utters anything. The voiceless existence of Frieda makes her a surrogate victim of atrocities a fate that many marginalized people face. The voiceless and powerless Frieda embodies the plight of an urban being and the urban dilemma. Frieda's silence as mentioned by Padmanabhan in the directional note "allowing the audience to wonder" is an excellent instance of the use of theatre to access,

comprehend and represent the anonymity of the city space.

Self-Subjugation

Leela tries to escape the horror of violence by drawing curtains and shutting windows. The moment Bhaskar comes home Leela proposes for filing a police complaint as she is distressed by these incident. For this Bhasker says:

BHASKER. Baby, you must learn to ignore it now, I insist.

LEELA. If it takes so much effort to ignore something, isn't that the same thing as not ignoring it? (11)

For Leela silence is complicity in the crime. It scorches her conscience. The loud and rugged voice makes her mad. It becomes a fixation for Leela. She identifies with the victim who is a woman suffering the male aggression. She repeatedly requests Bhaskar to file a police complaint. It is worth noticing here that Leela doesn't call the police herself and waits for Bhaskar to take this action. This incident also presents the gender imbalance in India as we find that even when the drama unfolds in the urban setup the plight of woman and man's indifference towards her suffering remains the same:

In the second scene Leela becomes more disturbed while Bhaskar is shown as fiddling with the music system as he waits for the arrival of Mohan Ram, who wants to see the "crime being committed". Instead of showing concern he is curious. "What harm is there in watching?"(16). Obviously, he wants to draw sadistic pleasure as he would see a woman being traumatized.

Voyeurism& Gender Violence

Both men discuss the incident in detail suggesting their voyeuristic intent. SalilTripathi, comments on such tendency of men as he writes:

From the time of the ritual disrobing of Draupadi in *Mahabharata*, many men have participated in such stripping of a woman, forming a tight circle around her, as they have cheered, jeered and leered. Most men who should have stepped in to stop have turned their eyes away, expressing their inability to do anything, leaving Draupadi to the mercy of divine powers. And all that

Krishna can do is to keep adding yards to her never-ending sari, prolonging the humiliation. (Tripathi)

Gradually it becomes clear that this 'act' is basically 'gang rape' and has been going on night after night without any resistance or sympathy from the people in the area. By a mere command of the perpetrators the inhabitants of the area put their lights out at night as this heinous crime is committed. The title of the play *Lights Out* simply suggests the shameless act of ignoring this dehumanization of women that is accepted by the world by avoiding confrontation. Padmanabhan elaborates the violence of the voyeurs who are equally guilty of the crime of sexual violence to the female body:

BHASKAR. He wanted to see it—

LEELA. You wanted to see it!

MOHAN. (*unrepentant*) Sure! Why not?

LEELA (*she's not amused*) But why! Why see such awful things, unless you must!

MOHAN. Well, I was—curious.

LEELA. About such things! (15)

Both Bhaskar and Mohan here depict a male chauvinist attitude by distancing themselves from the sufferings of a poor woman and theorising and philosophising their ideas:

MOHAN. But this! Just far enough not to get involved, just close enough to see everything clearly. (15)

Both consider this heinous crime as a normal incident-- observing sometimes saying that the victim is diseased or wondering whether the voice of the victim is musical? They reduce such a horrid crime to an amusement:

BHASKAR. They start off clothed and then begin to lose them.

MOHAN. All of them? The assailants too?

BHASKAR. Well, the assailants tear the clothes off the victims and then, perhaps in the general excitement, remove their own clothes as well.

Similarly they distort the fact as a class struggle and their helplessness towards such issues.

MOHAN. Well, as long as it's the poor attacking the poor (*he trails off*

significantly) ... you know how it is... they live their lives and we live ours. (24)

In a similar fashion they stoop to such a level that they show their ignorance towards this whole act and rename it as a religious ceremony. In Scene II, Manjula Padmanabhan justly presents public opinion after the woman undergoes this trauma. It is common that while reporting sexual assault, the victims face formidable task of establishing their creditability and dealing with the reactions of society. Most of the time the general public may not be sympathetic to the victim's plight and consider the victim responsible for this act. She is accused of having an immoral character, poor judgement, improper behaviour or wearing provocative attire etc.

Rape & Body Politics

The third scene opens with the ragged sound that pierces Leela's ear and creating a palpable tension. The cry for help and escape makes no difference to the attitude of Bhasker and Mohan. These screams, and the consequent indifference are the leitmotif signifying the loud anonymity of urban voices. These voices are usually freighted but unheard.

MOHAN. Personally I'm against becoming entangled in other people's private lives. Outsides can never really be judge of who is right and who is wrong. (33)

Further

BHASKER. And now... they're holding her legs apart—

MOHAN. One man each leg, spread wide apart...

They both watch in silence, for a few moments, as a fresh bout of screaming starts.

BHASKAR. Hmmm. Well, you know, illiterate people believe that when a demon possesses a woman, it is always via the—uh—*lower orifice*— (37)

It is not the situation of the victim that makes them comment like this but is symptomatic of their attitude towards women and their positioning in society. The later comments are more shocking as they throw more light on these educated hypocrites who negate the truth so easily

without feeling shame or disgust on their “second rape”, a term used by Madigan and Gamble to describe the act of violation, alienation and disparagement a survivor receives when she turns to others for help and support (5). Society is least concerned about the violence of sexual assault and the impact it has on the victims. The playwright depicts this same idea of ‘second rape’ through the male characters.

BHASKAR. Funny, how it is most often women who become possessed... *Pause while screams intensify.*

MOHAN. They are more susceptible...

BHASKAR. The weaker sex, after all...

Another character Naina is introduced by the playwright to create a microcosm of the urban ceiling in that room. She shows her concern towards the victim and tries to call police but she is stopped by her friends who call the rape a “religious ceremony” and later call the victim a whore. Even then Naina shows her concern for the victim saying:

NAINA: Why? A whore can't be raped? Is that the law? (40)

Padmanabhan gives voice to the sex workers who are given a sub-human treatment by the society. Urban space gives way to different professions. The play poses a question that does being a sex worker makes a person not even worthy of being human? Society deprives them of their basic human rights, robbing them of their basic identity as women. The play voices a concern for the rape victims and whores who undergo the same trauma when it comes to forced sex. The play also highlights the patriarchal views of society. Kalpana Kannabiran has rightly said that the women is confronting the situation where they are in the combat between identity and legal system due to identity politics which further pushes the women to seek the identity in the family and home. Kannabiran further highlights the atrocities of the social conditioning on a serious note:

This denial of access has serious consequences for all women, especially family women: all that needs to be done in instances of aggression or rape in their case is to prove that they are not the property of any man—that they are prostitutes. And a

prostitute, or worse, still, an independent single woman, by definition, has no constitutional or democratic rights in this society. (234)

Cities as they grow are always seen as male spaces primarily. Even global cities such as London and New York, host to various ethnic groups are equally inhospitable to women. While illustrating this Mona Domosh says, “Behaviour on the streets of Victorian cities are governed by strict social codes for men and women, for working class and middle class, for blacks and whites. For women the implications often revolve around their sexuality. One of the most common terms for prostitute after all is ‘streetwalker’ ” (93-94).

Padmanabhan admits that the rape in all conditions is a violation of the dignity of woman's will and desire. Mahesh Dattani in his play *Thirty Days in September* admits that rape is not mere a physical torture but a violation of the female consciousness. It simply disintegrates the inner self of the woman. Susan Giffins in her book *Rape: The Power of Consciousness* writes, “Legally rape is recognised as a crime with physical aspects only, namely the penetration of the vagina by the penis against the will of the victim. In effect, however, the real crime is the annihilation by the man of the woman as human being” (129).

BHASKER: Whatever rights a woman has, they are lost the moment she becomes a whore. (41)

The two different worlds coexist in urban setting. People living in the comfort zone usually have only approximation of the tough situation of poor people. Though they seem to know certain facts, they still want to remain aloof from it especially when it comes to bridging these gaps. Bhasker tries to convince the ladies about the two different worlds in the city.

BHASKER: It's a hard world out there, Naina, a hard world. People like us—there's just no contact at all. (42)

After a while Surinder, Naina's husband reaches there. He poses to be very agitated about this crime in the neighbourhood and suggest killing the assailants. “Let's go and wipe them out.” At the same time he is deeply prejudiced towards the

marginalized and says that these underlings are used to difficult life.

SURINDER (*silencing the others with his voice*): I'm telling you—these bastards understand only one thing: violence! (46)

The play ends on an ironic note when all of them come to know the rape and torture is over. Leela replies "Oh! Then it must be over for tonight" (54). Padmanabhan's play bears out that there is a thin line between onstage action and the real life incident. The significance of the motif of the scream in the play is one of the most significant theatrical devices used by the playwright. Scream as a sound, loud, anonymous, frightening, and unsettling, yet not visibly ascribed to any specific character on the stage is the central feature of the play. It is also suggested that the alleged act of torture, which is supposed to create the screams from the victims, is viewed as 'drama', 'a staged performance!' by the callous male onlookers:

Leela (turns to Bhaskar): Well, but what about the *screaming*!

Mohan: Is it for help?

Leela (turns to Bhaskar): Isn't it for help?

Mohan: Or is it just in general? That matters, you know. After all- it could just be some, you know, drama... (17)

In the above instance Padmanabhan makes a direct allusion to the theatrical aspect of the act, which in itself is being discussed, described and narrated to the spectators by the characters of this play. Though the recurring incident, heard and seen by Bhaskar's family and others, shares some characteristics of a play or a drama, it is for almost all the time 'reported' to the audience. The scream is described as 'different' every night while the tormentors are described as 'looking exactly alike', perhaps referring to a faceless, de-individualized, collective force of violence. The theatrical devices also account for the element of exaggeration implied in the production, reception, and depiction of the scream and its loudness, its vulgarity, its frightening afterlife for 'sensitive souls' like Leela, who find it a torture.

The play presents the entire dramatic situation in terms of "insider/outsider dichotomy" and poses a question on the idea of urban

spectatorship. Leela and Bhaskar are presented as prototypes of spectators in the city. Their characterization raises the question whether they are located outside or inside of what they are watching as Leela says that whatever they are watching they are making themselves responsible for that act. For Leela the idea of witnessing rape was horrible but Mohan and Bhaskar do not share the same feeling. For them it is crazy on the part of Leela to be oversensitive on such 'petty' issues. Bhaskar admits this when he says "These intellectuals always react like that, always confuse simple issues; after all, what's the harm in simply watching something? Even when there's an accident in the street, don't we all turn heads to look?" (16).

Bhaskar's insensitivity and inability as he compare the act of rape to a road accident speaks volumes about patriarchal apathy towards a horrific crime. Similarly Mohan reveals his mind, "Personally, I am against becoming entangled in the other people's private lives. Outsiders can never really be the judge of who's right and who's wrong" (20). The play underscores the concept of the responsibility of the audience as well. Watching a play, we constantly negotiate between the inside and the outside of the dramatic text. The concept of seeing without responsibility is thus interesting enough akin to the dominant idea of spectatorship in the contemporary urban space. Leela knows that just being an onlooker is the solution of this problem. As she says, "That, I will absolutely not permit whatever the secular laws of this country. I will not allow my children to be harmed by disgusting sights" (30).

Through this play Padmanabhan present three different viewpoints of the urban spectators towards the horrors of rape. One is represented by Leela and Naina who empathise with the victim. They see the crime as an inner crisis but do not take any action on their own and kept pleading to the male characters to call police or take some action. The second one is represented by Mohan and Bhaskar who were indifferent towards the victim. They come up with the idea for propaganda through photographs and newspaper reports. The third perspective is presented by Surinder who suggests

killing the miscreants with knives to decode the apathy of the society.

Even for Surinder, rescuing the victim is not more important than accepting the challenge thrown by the rapists upon the self-respect of the inhabitants of the area. Mohan is shown as the most cruel and inconsiderate as he goes to the extent of suggesting, "Pictures like these...we'd make a lot of money-after all, and how often does anyone see authentic pictures of a gang-rape in action?" (*Lights Out*). The play ends on the note of utter despair, without suggesting any kind of solution to the problem of coercive violation of a female body. Padmanabhan has used Brechtian technique of 'distancing', 'defamiliarizing', 'verfremdungseffekt.' It is very well used as the assault occurs in the background (both back stage and back of our mind) and leaves the audience uneasy. While discussing this play JayantKripalani affirms, "It's a pure black comedy and is about how we all are in denial when incidents of violence on women occur around us. I can say that the audience will identify with the characters" (Kripalani Web).

Rape is a way of controlling female body by proclaiming the rights of body as a commodity. Anna Furse, in "Performing in Glass: Reproduction, Technology, Performance and the Bio-Spectacular", discusses about feminist perspective, " We might wrest the gaze from being on us to considering our own gaze on ourselves... because it is a matter of necessity if we are to grapple with systems of control" (149). This notion offers a very strong critique to the situation in the play by offering the opinions of men towards the situation where the women should take a lead as they were neither subdued nor inefficient to voice against the recurrent rape. ManjulaPadmanabhan in her interview with PraggnaparamitaBiswas talks on this:

All the characters in the play are equally insensitive: none of them attempts to help the victim directly. Whatever their intentions and words, their actions are what we remember: they do nothing. After all, it could be argued that the women are much more insensitive than the men, because they complain about the lack of action, but none of them – including Frieda

– picks up the phone and calls the police. Or the ambulance. They don't even close the windows. So where is the question of male versus female sensitivity? In my view, there isn't really much difference between the men and the women in the play except that they say different kinds of things.

Conclusion

The play uses a deliberately absurdist and surreal tone in order to hold up a mirror to the society in which such acts as this true-life event took place. (Singh and Mukherjee 625) Padmanabhan unmasks the indifferent and spineless middle class men joining hands and paralysing the system in general. Through this play the playwright mirrors the society that affirms that there are people like Bhaskar and Mohan within us. Our indifference amounts to our complicity in the crime.

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