



## GENDER VIOLENCE, DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIAL APATHY IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN PLAY *LIGHTS OUT*

**ANSHIKA TIWARI**

Research Scholar  
University of Lucknow,  
Lucknow (UP) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*Literature is but a mirror to society. Feminism is a crucial concern in contemporary society. The liberation of women from the entrenched cycle of patriarchal oppression is a major topic of debate. Numerous authors are making efforts through their writings and exerting pressure at political and socio-cultural levels to protect women's rights and uncover instances of exploitation in a male dominated world. Manjula Padmanabhan is one such writer. Her persona reflects in her works. She omits the perfectly idealistic world and unmask the present realistic situations of life. Her play reflected the true ,raw and real picture of society. The two important plays Harvest and Lights Out are perfect example of this. Lights out aim towards gender sensitisation. It outlines the abuse ,physical and mental that women face. The blatant objectification of women by Bhasker and Mohan reveals mentality of men in general. Perpetrators of the crime take advantage of this apathy and force them to turn their 'lights off'. Padmanabhan has portrayed the silence and indifference of modern society. The hypocrisy throws light on the callousness of men and society It stands as a powerful commentary on contemporary social matters.*

**Keywords:** *Exploitation, Gangrape, social indifference, Passivity, Dormancy, Patriarchy.*

**ANSHIKA TIWARI**

1 Page



### INTRODUCTION

Manjula Padmanabhan, a contemporary playwright was born on 23 June 1952. She is an Indian author, dramatist, cartoonist and author of children text. She explores a wide range of topic in her works including science and technology, gender discrimination, social passivity among others. Her father was an Indian diplomat. She was born in Delhi but lead a nomadic life. She took keen interest in reading comics and cartoon as a child. Her early childhood days were spent in Europe and South Asia. She returned to India during her teen years. Earlier she served as a journalist and also did book reviews. She started as an illustrator for Ali Baig's Indrani and the Enchanted Jungle in 1979. She also portrayed a female character Sukhi in 1982 and created a comic work Double talk. She got Onasis award for her play *Harvest* in 1997 and it was also adapted as a film by Govind Nihalani, an award winning film named Deham. Har other plays consist of lights out and Mating Games. Her other works consist of *Unprincess*, *Getting There* and *Island of Lost girls*

A review published in The Hindu on August1,2020 appreciates Padmanabhan

*"In whatever location or form or medium (and she works in many), Padmanabhan is essentially a storyteller. Sometimes, she speaks in pictures, at other times in newspaper columns and reports, and at still other times, she speaks in plays."*

In this play Manjula Padmanabhan has questioned and defied the male dominated world. The discrimination, deprivation ,alienation and subjugation of women. Women have been depicted from a stereotypical male point of view. Gender inequality and the voice of women are met with disparaging remark . The injustice women face is due to the patriarchal setup. Padmanabhan present the bitter truth of society in a very simple language which could be understood even by a layman. Her work present the gloomy and bleak side of the society . she has depicted the daily obstacle and challenges women face especially in Indian society. Lights out is a heart wrenching play by Manjula Padmanabhan. Her works are mainly concerned with problems corresponding to women like violence, rape. Their opinion holds no value in a male dominated society.

Women has been portrayed as helpless and weak. Her plays are based on realistic settings and the narratives shakes the reader to the core. Padmanabhan emphasizes the pressing and immediate need to tackle this prejudice and bias women face. The callous and indifferent remark of the male characters show their insensitivity towards women . Manjula Padmanabhan in the closing act affirms that "This play is based on an eyewitness 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, the incident took place over a period of weeks. And in real life, as in the play, no one went to the aid of the victims." (63)*

The title of the play *Lights out* has implied hidden meaning. In literal sense the characters in the off their lights out of fear as their windows are smashed by unknown assailants. The other meaning suggests the brazen act of neglecting the objectification and demeaning the act of crime against women. The people turn a blind eye to such crimes of sexual violence. Padmanabhan has depicted that in modern world, people are becoming self-centred that has led to break up of the society.

R. N. Rai, in his essay *Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama*, remarks:

*In her another play Lights Out, she draws our attention to the heart rendering screams of a woman, Leela which destroy the fabric of domesticity of a middle-class couple. Women face violence in many aspects of their daily life. This violence is multi-faceted. It is not merely physical but more often mental and emotional. It is deeply complex, subtle and indirect, hard to recognize and much more difficult to overcome. (Rai 22)*

The play is divided into three scenes. In the beginning of the play Bhaskar and Leela are having a discussion. They are husband and wife. The first scene opens in a "drawing dining area of a sixth-floor apartment in a building in Bombay." (4). Leela is concerned about noises and screeches which she hears on daily basis from a neighbouring under construction building. She is deeply affected by the noises and is irritated and perturbed. As Leela is aware of the gang rape she presses on her husband to file a police complaint. But Bhaskar is not interested and ask her "Calm down now, calm down. It's really not worth all this." (7), but it completely frightening and is costing her mental peace, "When you were away on tour, I couldn't sleep at night. And with all the windows shut, with all the curtains drawn with cotton in my ears, the sound still came even though! Even in the children's room on the other side of the house I could hear it." (7). Leela seem to be mentally unstable and restless due to all of this. She has started behaving delusional and neurotic. She has restricted herself in the house. "Because.... because I'm frightened! I can't bear it anymore." (9). She even stopped her children from going out. She also started practicing yoga and meditation to achieve a state of calmness but nothing is helping her. She believes by not helping "Someone told Leela to watch a crime and do nothing is to be...involved it in yourself?" (19) The entry of Mohan in scene two present a more pathetic attitude of society. Mohan has a typical misogynistic and patriarchal mindset. He visited them as "He wanted to see it" (17), out of curiosity. His entry causes more anxiousness and distress than help. He draws all sort



of conjectures regarding the noise. He even comes close to blaming the victim. The sound they here might be out of pleasure or it can be a family issue “After all, it may be something private, a domestic fight, how can we intervene?” (23). He thinks that it could be religious ceremony as well.

In scene three, Naina, Leela’s friend is also concerned and felt uneasy after hearing the screams. Before her arrival the dramatist has depicted that

*“The intensity of the screaming must be precisely maintained, neither too loud as to seem outside the window nor too soft that it can be ignored” (34-35).*

Naina hears a sound as if someone is calling for help. She is not satisfied with the argument put forth considering it to be a religious ceremony and she opens the window, only to see a woman being gangraped, “Naina peers out of the window shielding her eyes against the glare of the lights. Her attention is caught. She gasps, her hand to her mouth, then a strangled voice comes out of her midway between a retch and a cry.” (41). They coerce and push Naina into believing it to be a religious ceremony but Naina persuades them to understand that it is a case of sexual assault.

*Naina: “Three men, holding down one woman, with her legs*

*pulled apart ..... What would you call that ---a poetry reading?”. (46)*  
*Bhaskar says , “The four men, the women, the nakedness, the screaming ,the exhibitionism...”*

*It-could-still-be-a- religious” (43)*

Mohan put forward the case of exorcism, “They say that people under demon’s power, even women has a strength of three big men.” (45).Naina presses hard to explain them, “Most form of rapes, especially Gangrapes, are accompanied by extreme physical violence.” (46) Bhaskar raises question on the character of women being raped. He put forth that she could be a whore. Mohan agrees with Bhaskar,

*“A decent women would never be with four women at once.” . He even goes on to the extent that a whore has nothing to lose .*

*Naina: Why ? A whore can’t be raped? Is that the law.*

*Rape is when a woman is forced to have sex.*

*Bhasker: A whore is a woman who’s whole livelihood is sex (47-48)*

*Mohan :Come on! A whore is not decent, so a whore cannot be raped!”*



Leela keep on insisting to call the police. Both men symbolise as inconsiderate and insensitive towards women issues. Both of them put twisted theories about the voice emerging from the neighbouring building. Naina and Leela are upset with their behaviour. they are termed as hyper sentimental and hyper reactive for being concerned and compassionate toward the suffering of the victim.

The reaction of men depicts the hostile attitude they have toward a nasty and brutal crime like gangrape. They enjoy in having debate and deliberation about the victim, her position and status. They enjoy the speculations and conjectures, instead of giving a helping hand. They question her character and label her as whore .They even believe that a whore has no right.

*Bhasker: "You see, if she were a decent woman, we people would go to her rescue! ... She is not, and so she's being left to her fate!"*

*Whatever rights a women has, they are lost the moment she becomes a whore." (48)*

*Mohan's wretched knowledge towards the incident and his pitiful guesses hurt Leela more. Bhaskar's opinion, "If she is a whore, then, this isn't rape"*

The status of women like Leela and Naina is no better. The victim or the screaming women is physically tortured and raped. Whereas women in home are mentally tortured. Leela feels the urgent need to assist and help the victim even though she is not related by blood to her. She could sense and understand her anguish and agony. But she cannot do anything without her husband's approval. Women are always the subaltern group and are considered as the other. Thus, men always have supreme Power and dominate women physically ,mentally and emotionally.

Men pressurize women to follow their command and forget their individuality. Naina appeared to be a daring and assertive but even her voice is met with the dissent and quelled. Even Leela's neurotic behaviour does not bring a change of heart in Bhaskar include Court Surinder, Naina's husband, hears the cry of help. He questions the dormancy and passivity. He seems to be Furious and outraged at their inaction. He even suggests to killing them . "There is only one way to deal with animals like this" (54) . According to Surinder, violence is the only way to teach them a lesson. They even deliberate on how to trick them into their trap. Surinder decides to use knives, Bhaskar to carry acid and Mohan will click photograph.

But even he fools around and does not take concrete action. The irony of all this is that they are only left discussing and the screaming stopped. Naina words echo to the readers





*“Naina: You’re too late the screaming stopped. There is no one left out there (62)*

*“The light from behind the window turns gradually red so that by the time the last message is heard the stage is livid” (64).*

The ending is thought provoking. Manjula Padmanabhan has pointed out on passivity and inactivity of the people towards such crime.

The study of female characters in the play illustrates the ingrained patriarchy that exist in society. Simone de Beauvoir French existentialist philosopher in her book *The Second Sex* deliberates on how the women in entire history as well as in the contemporary society, were treated. She asks, “What is Women?” woman are considered as ‘other’. “Thus, humanity is male, and man defines woman not herself, but as relative to him.”. In the second volume of the same book, she ponders over the upbringing of children. Boys are considered as little man whereas girls from childhood are considered to be woman

**Frieda** is the cook in the house of Leela and Bhasker. She is a middle-aged woman and is depicted to be expressionless but has a pleasing face. She lives with them and is existing all the time in the same house. she like others, is a witness to the crime but her mute and quiet presence raises question about the existence of women and their opinion. She silently does her work and represents those women who are neglected, excluded, powerless and helpless. Even Padmanabhan asserts that “the audience should be allowed to wonder what she thinks” (3). She represents a class that lives in anonymity and opinion of these class does not matter.

**Leela** belongs to elite class but she is in a no better position. She strives and make all effort to avoid the noise. For her inactivity and silence is like colluding in the crime. Leela is represented to be a conscious, alert and worried about her surrounding and family. Her psychological frailty and fear that is instead in her mind due to the voice. According to dash she wants the crime to stop just for the sake of her and her family safety. Padmanabhan brings out the irony that a learned, literate and upper crust of the society like Leela, are forced into being submissive and docile and continue to be a bystanding participant.

**Naina** strongly expressed her perspective and took stance. She firmly objected and even weep and wail out of annoyance. She is the most reasonable, sensible ,sane and logical character in the play..

Padmanabhan emphasized the position and status of women in society. All the women characters are passive observers but has a zeal and courage to voice out their opinion against the wrong.



An article 'Lights Out for black comedy' published in The Telegraph Online, Drama critic Jayant Kripalani declares the play as a "pure black comedy and is about how we all are in denial when incidents of violence on women occur around us."

The play also exposes the social apathy. It depicts a barbaric act of gang rape but the characters fall short of taking any concrete action. The discussion of men seems to be completely ridiculous, irrational and unethical. The play writer has emphasized the apathy people towards its society and surroundings. This is particularly common among rich middle-class individuals. In today's time people are deeply occupied in their own life. They remain in their comfortable cocoon. even if they have intention of helping, they don't want to embroil themselves in police matters and court cases.

Thus, *Lights Out* depict the pervasive silence and Indifference within modern urban society. Padmanabhan hopes to raise awareness about crimes against women and attitude of society as a silent observer.

As Anjum Hasan says,

*"Manjula Padmanabhan appears interested in exploring, against the backdrop of the sound, are the implications of a insensitivity, so extreme that it has developed a strange, cold logic of its own," (Hassan 25)*

The play also deals with the functioning of police. The inactivity or inaction on the part of the police is questioned. Padmanabhan has pointed various reasons as to why people avoid going to police. When Leela insist on calling the police to which Bhaskar response include code Leela emphasizes that whatever happens outside we are part of it and that by nearly observing we are making ourselves responsible for which Bhaskar calls Sushila , a fool. They are also hesitant because police will question them about the inaction for so long and why did they not reported earlier

*Leela: We should say it happened last night.*

*Bhasker: But then they'd ask us, "why didn't you called last night?" (8)*

*Bhasker: Go tell the police that you are frightened about noises in the next building! They'll laugh in your face" (7)*

Bhaskar event try to put onus about reporting it on neighbours. Padmanabhan has highlighted how people shirk their responsibilities and justify the inactions. He tries to convince Leela that sound can't hurt her . Bhaskar says that the police can sometimes blatantly deny that it's none of their business "You never know with the police these days. They may say its none of our business., what goes on in the next door compound. After all there's the chowkidar.."



(11) Bhaskar even questions about the inaction of chowkidar and owners of the building. Mohan is depicted to be the most insensitive and unthoughtful character. He visited Bhaskar house just for seeing the crime happening as he was curious. The social apathy reaches its peak as they discuss about

*Mohan. :How often can you stand watch a crime being committed right Infront of you?*

*Just far enough not to get involved, just close enough to see everything clearly..”(18)*

As it is not affecting him personally imply for Mohan even question the intellectual capability of learned women like Sushila.

They waste time in discussing about the kind of screaming include court and not taking any action on ground. He even says that the screaming might just all be drama. Mohan put forth that the screaming might not be a call of help, rather some personal issues like domestic fight. The sheer hypocrisy is exposed by Padmanabhan “Personally I am against being entangled in other people’s private lives... Outsiders can never really be the judge of who is right and who is wrong” (24) until it's a murder they should not intervene. They are trying to shake off their responsibility even if it is a torture they have their windows smashed and are being asked to turn off the lights .It is revealed to be a case of gangrape. But they give a completely different interpretation that. this could be a simple case of religious ceremony taking place and they cannot interfere as constitution give right to practice one’s religion.

## CONCLUSION

Manjula Padmanabhan uncovers the grotesque and repugnant side of society. Rape, domestic violence ,sexual harassment are part of women’s life. They are treated as the second sex. Thus, the dramatist has clearly depicted the position and status of women especially in Indian community. She has emphasized the physical, mental, emotional breakdown women are subjected to due to insensitive nature of men.

In the entire play the characters only deliberate and talk about the incident but do not come forward and help. Padmanabhan also reveals the unemotional and impassive side of society. The play exposes the farcical and ludicrous tone and depicts the genuine and authentic picture of society. She wants to awaken the consciousness and emotions within the audience and readers.

**WORKS CITED**

ANSHIKA TIWARI

8 Page





1. Beauvoir, Simone de (2009) [1949]. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Random House: Alfred A. Knopf. [ISBN 978-0-307-26556-2](#).
2. C, Nidhipriya. "IMAGES OF WOMEN IN MANJULA PADMANABHANS LIGHTS OUT." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, vol. 9, July 2021, [ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2107644.pdf](http://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2107644.pdf).
3. Chakravarty, Kheya, and Thenmozhi M. "The Unspoken Voices and Social Status of Women in Manjula Padmanabhan's Lights Out." *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 10, no. 9, Sept. 2022, pp. 146–50. [www.questjournals.org/jrhss/papers/vol10-issue9/1009146150.pdf](http://www.questjournals.org/jrhss/papers/vol10-issue9/1009146150.pdf).
4. Hasan, Anjum. "Rev. Body blows: Women, Violence and Survival: Three plays: *Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan, *Getting Away with Murder* by Dina Mehta and *Mangalam* by Poile Sen Gupta." *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, No.24, December 1999.
5. "Lights out for black comedy." *The Telegraph Online*, July 2004, [www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/lights-out-for-black-comedy/cid/1105874](http://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/lights-out-for-black-comedy/cid/1105874).
6. Mane, Namrata Madhukar, and Deshmukh, Ajay S. "Lights out: The Darkness in the lives of Women." *Studies in Indian Place Names*, vol. 40, no. 71, Mar. 2020. [academia.edu](http://academia.edu), [www.academia.edu/66858940/Lights\\_out\\_The\\_Darkness\\_in\\_the\\_lives\\_of\\_Women?uc-sb-sw=76710769](http://www.academia.edu/66858940/Lights_out_The_Darkness_in_the_lives_of_Women?uc-sb-sw=76710769).
7. "Manjula Padmanabhan." [magnoliana.com](http://magnoliana.com). Accessed 15 July 2024.
8. Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Lights Out*. libgen, [libgen.is/book/index.php?md5=4C6BA3DBCBF10246514B6B9449A24BE1#](http://libgen.is/book/index.php?md5=4C6BA3DBCBF10246514B6B9449A24BE1#).
9. Rai, R.N., Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama. Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama. Ed. Neeru Tandon. New Delhi. Atlantic Publication. 2006.
10. Saraswat, Surbhi. "RAPE and BODY POLITICS: GENDER VIOLENCE IN MANJULA PADMANABAN'S." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2018, [www.academia.edu/36674943/Rape\\_and\\_Body\\_Politics\\_Gender\\_Violence\\_in\\_Manjula\\_Padmanabhans\\_Lights\\_Out](http://www.academia.edu/36674943/Rape_and_Body_Politics_Gender_Violence_in_Manjula_Padmanabhans_Lights_Out).
11. Singh, Shivam, and Gunjan Sushil . "The Theme of Gender Violence in Manjula Padmanabha's Play Lights Out." *the Creative Launcher*, vol. 5, no. 6, Feb. 2021, pp. 34–38. <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2021.5.6.06>.



# **PUNE RESEARCH**

**AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH**

**ISSN 2454 - 3454**

**VOL 10, ISSUE 4**

**ANSHIKA TIWARI**

10 Page

**VOL 10, ISSUE 4   [www.puneresearch.com/english](http://www.puneresearch.com/english)   JULY – AUG 2024**  
**(IMPACT FACTOR 3.94) INDEXED, PEER-REVIEWED / REFEREED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL**