

*Review*

## **Gender-Divide and Feminine Subversion in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out***

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The position of woman in this world has become focal point of discourse all across this world and this concern with the plight of woman finds manifestation in different art forms. The play *Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan, centred round a rape incident, throws many probing questions regarding the forces governing the man-woman relationship and offers answers to these questions in its own way. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the man-woman relationship from the view point of a gender-identity and constant power struggle between the two important entities of society—man and woman where the former maneuvers to make the latter subservience to himself. The cultural, social inheritance of dominance by man across the time line offers him exclusive authority to silence any voice from woman that asserts or protests against him, and this results in disintegration or subversion of woman.

**Key words:** Manjula Padmanabhan, *Lights Out*, disintegration, patriarchal, subservient

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Human beings are the sum total of the experiences they have in their life, because their sensibilities are developed and shaped by what the individuals come across, observe, feel and think about the things happening around their life. So, it is but natural for an artist to express his own perception of life in its varied colours through his art. Theatre is one of the most powerful yet very subtle forms to express, to communicate the incommunicable with audience; it is closest to the human being because no other form brings the individual so close to his interior self, asking questions about his own existence vis-à-vis his milieu. As life becomes meaningful only in its societal form, what its

members—male and female—do in their life will invite responses and reactions from their surroundings. Now-a-day we live in a time where one of the most important aspects of any discourse is the relationship between the two inseparable entities of the social structure—man and woman. There is a growing demand for looking at man-woman relationship from an objective, rather hitherto neglected, feminine point of view.

*Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan asks for attention to the plight of women in this world in general, and in India in particular because they become victims of maneuvers of male in an attempt to slight and subvert them. The play with a clear stamp of gender-division

makes a very powerful plea for understanding the feminine sensibilities in a world which hardly allows woman to be independent, strong, organized and focused.

In *Lights Out* Manjula Padmanabhan presents a world where the females have no identity, no voice and no standing of their own; they have to plead before men for consideration of their concerns, for their rightful existence, and this leads to discrimination against them in all walks of life. The play is based on a real life incident of rape of a woman in open during night in 80's in the Mumbai suburb. The playwright segregates all her characters into two different sections on the basis of their gender and their perception of the rape incident, and shows how their responses to the horrific crime are affected by their gender identity. Man represents power, authority and sense of security in society as well as home, someone who can give or provide while woman is the receptor of all these. On account of her perennial subjugation and subordination to man in every walk of life, woman has been so conditioned socially as well as psychologically that she can not take any independent decision. For a woman the idea of sanctity of her body and soul, and her right over her body is deep-seated in her psyche while for man she is just a plaything, and that's why he never tries to look at the issues related to woman's dignity and rights from hers perspective. The conversation between husband Bhasker and his wife Leela who are later on joined by Bhasker's friend Mohan and the couple's neighbours Surinder and Naina, takes place in the backdrop of the crime committed by a group of offenders on a hapless woman every night under the street lights outside. From the very beginning, Leela a housewife appears very perturbed and disgusted over what happens outside their flat; she is almost hysterical as in her sub-consciousness she keeps on hearing the frightful voices of the victim when the latter is brutalized by the perpetrators of the crime or the horrible scenes of crime keep floating in front of her mental eyes. She wants her husband to act by calling the police or take some steps for stopping this dastardly act on a hapless woman. As this crime is committed continuously for many days at the much appointed time and in a similar fashion, Leela as the evening approaches becomes alarmingly upset and acutely nervous. But Bhasker appears to be least bothered about the fate of the victim—outside his flat (rape victim) as well as inside his flat (Leela). His weird logic for not calling up the police in the matter reveals his non-seriousness, a typical middle class matter-of-fact justification. Jayant Kripalani declares that the play is "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", (The Telegraph, July11, 2004) and here Bhasker and Mohan are found in a mood of denial in accepting the viewpoint of Leela and Naina.

The prevailing patriarchal system leaves no scope for a free thinking woman; man is not only her master in social, material spheres only; rather he controls the inner recesses of her mind. He decides what she should want, what she should feel and think; he wants to be loved and wants she must want this. This predominating practice of male chauvinism in this play, subverting the very psyche of the feminine world, reflects about the position of woman in society. The protagonist Bhasker along with his friend Mohan from beginning to the end seems uninvolved and inattentive to the concerns both of Leela as well as the assaulted woman. Bhasker advises Leela not to think about the shocking incident; instead he wants her to concentrate on her Yoga which will help her in overcoming her frightful obsession. The rationale behind this is that Leela should take this rape incident as casually or lightly as taken by Bhasker and Mohan. The difference in male-female approach further becomes evident when at the constant urges of Leela, Bhasker mollifies the former by saying that whatever is happening outside will not hurt her:

Leela: But I can hear them...

Bhasker: (*As if to a child*) But sounds can't hurt you...

Leela: Oh, but they do, those dirty, ugly sounds...

Bhasker: So shut your ears, see? Like this— (*Place his hands over her ears.*) There! Is that better? (114)

For Leela the body-violation is the most horrific crime with which no woman can come to terms with, while for men like Bhasker it is just an every day incident, because man Manjula opines can not identify with what happens inside the heart of a woman on issues related with the purity of body and soul. The main motive behind the adoption of indifferent attitude by Bhasker and Mohan in the play is to internalize the fear-psychosis in the minds of female characters Leela, Frieda and Naina and keep the position of male dominance status quo.

The play becomes a testimony to what Kate Millet underlines in her masterpiece *Sexual Politics*: "...woman's willing submission to man helps the former's own reduction and oppression. While speaking of Millet, Seldon argues: "...women as much as men perpetuate these attitudes, and the acting-out of these sex-roles in the unequal and repressive relations of domination and subordination is what Millet calls 'sexual politics'". (Seldon, 133) This point finds ample support in the views of Joan Riviere who observes the complicity of women in their own belittling: "Women adopt a public mask of 'womanliness' or 'femininity' in accordance with a male image of what a woman should be. Thus, they conform to the stereotypes of patriarchy." (Seldon, 141) Lack of assertiveness on account of cultural subjugation shows

Leela, Frieda and Naina complicit in their subdued roles as women. By accepting man as their saviour, they let themselves demeaned by the patronizing forces of males.

The play describes that only a woman can understand the pains and *angst* of another woman; the victim in the play is in no way related to Leela, still she feels some sort of connection, rather a relationship and a sense of belonging with the victim; she feels that it is not only the poor woman outside alone is being violated, rather she feels blows on her own body and soul but Bhasker, assuming a patronizing position, tries to soothe his wife with a casual comment: 'Calm down now, calm down. It's really not worth all this' (112) and this patronizing approach is aimed at vilifying the woman. The playwright being a woman feels affinity with all the women of the world and through Leela feels the trauma of the raped woman. The whole setting as well as the delineation of characters in the play underlines the insensitivity, brazenness and apathy of men towards women and one notices a perceptible animosity and incompatibility in their body of thoughts. For centuries or perhaps since her arrival in this world, woman has been searching for her space, for expression of her individual self but she is constantly and continuously denied this liberty by her counterpart. Socially, culturally and economically, she remains reduced in her size or stature, and her voice remains muzzled. In the traditional Indian homes man calls the shots while woman has to go by the dicta of their men-folk. A woman is very conscious of the integrity and chastity of her body, and her soul feels that her body belongs to her only and any act by man to take control of her body without the consent of her soul is a sin and hence unacceptable to her. This gender insensitivity and ennuï on the part of man vis-a-vis woman underlines the crux of the man-woman relationships.

Salil Tripathi, thinking about modern-day oppressed women, reminisces about the place of woman in Indian society in the past:

From the time of the ritual disrobing of Draupadi in Mahabharata, many men have participated in such public 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. (Salil Tripathi, Jul 19, 2012).

And this continuous humiliation of woman acquires symbolic significance as she will continue to experience the patronizing attitude of man and live on his charity.

The position and identity of woman has cultural

connotations; their labeling as decent or indecent (whore) by man shows their marginalized position in the societal hierarchy. Instead of some concrete actions, meaningless chattering happens on the part of men in the play. First Bhasker and then his friend Mohan give strange arguments in not taking any step; they even don't stop short of assassinating the character of the victim by calling her 'whore, or using certain innuendos questioning the morals of woman. The absurdity and irrationality is at its highest when Bhasker and Mohan agree that only a dignified woman can be raped, implying that one who is being assaulted deserves to be assaulted. By comparing this despicable act with a religious ceremony, these morons and chicken hearted people cross all sense of civility and respect for women. As she has to earn her name and identity from man, she willingly accepts the place of subservience to her counterpart. Even the candor of talk tells the command of Bhasker and Mohan and later on Surinder in discussion over the issue of rescuing the woman from the culprits. The play abounds in instances to sweepingly silent the feminine voice, at times mockingly:

Bhasker: (*With an ironical smile.*) Someone told Leela that to watch a crime and do nothing is to be—what? Involved in it yourself?

Mohan: Huh! Ridiculous!

Bhasker: Just what I said. They are there and you are here. What's the connection!

Leela: Sushila said—if you can stop a crime, you must—or else you're helping it to happen...

Mohan: (*Snorts derisively.*) This Sushila sounds like an intellectual!

Bhasker: And she is!

Leela: No, she's not! She's my friend...

Bhasker: She's done her M.A. in political science.

Mohan: That proves it!

Leela: Not at all, she's very nice...

Mohan: 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 our heads to look? (*Lights Out, 120*)

In Derridean terms of binary oppositions between male and female and the presence of a centre between the two, it is the former which is vested with the authority and male controls the female and this, Simon de Beauvoir says, leads to all sorts of discrimination against woman, and *Lights Out* confirms this argument. The sketches of Frieda and Leela befit the mindsets of dominating males. Frieda's tense but ever complying, subdued and eager-obedient persona reveal her wretchedness, her willing submission before the clutches of males. While Leela voices her concerns, Frieda can only feel as she has

been reduced to the state of a robotic figure. Raman Seldon's quote of Beauvoir about the socially conditioned subordination of woman gives immense authority to man which the latter uses to further weaken the position of woman in his relations with her:

"When a woman tries to define herself, she starts by saying 'I am a woman': no man would do this. This fact reveals the basic asymmetry between the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine': man defines the human, not woman, in an imbalance which goes back to the Old Testament. Being dispersed among men, women have no separate history, no natural solidarity; nor have they combined as other oppressed groups have. Woman is riveted into a lop-sided relationship with man: he is the 'One', she the 'Other'. Man's dominance has secured an ideological climate of compliance; 'legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth'..." (Seldon, 129-130)

Light and darkness become the powerful symbols in the play; one leading to another and there is constant interplay of their symbolic interpretations. The rape act with which Leela is mentally preoccupied happens during night representing darkness but the ghastly crime is performed under the street lights. This *dark* act under the lights describes the darkness of the man in this world; the perpetrators preference to commit the crime under the broad light-night instead of some dingy, shoddy place and the so-called *civilized* peoples' preference for candles despite the power supply at home speak of the utter lawlessness and apathy of middle class men towards the fate or well-being of the woman. Instead of the offenders, it is the *dignified* people who will to live in darkness. Even words like 'space', 'time' and 'sound' have symbolic significance; the crime is committed in a residential area every night. The playwright is seeking the answer to the questions (i) why the rapists choose the residential area for assaulting a woman in public and (ii) why the crime is committed every night at the appointed time. The answer to these questions will raise another question as who these enlightened people are and why they prefer darkness. By keeping the window shut one wants to avoid facing reality but the ticking of mental watch in Leela's sub-consciousness makes her hysterical at the approach of evening. She's never seen the crime but the nasty sounds by the criminals and the cries of the victim during assault make her understand the brutality of act and leave an unforgettable imprint on her mind whereas men's involvement in meaningless arguments becomes a ploy in their hands to thwart any attempt by woman to raise her head:

Leela: (*Struggling in his half-embrace.*) But their sounds come inside, inside my nice clean house, and I can't push them out! (*Stops struggling.*) If only they didn't make such a racket, I wouldn't mind so much! (*Pause during which Bhasker rocks her gently.*) Why do they have to do it here? Why can't they go somewhere else?

Bhasker: (*Taking a deep breath.*) Leela, the thing to do is not let them disturb you like this. Pretend they're not there...

Leela: But *how?* I can't *help* hearing them? They're so— so, loud! And rude! How can I make myself deaf just for them!

Bhasker: (*Lets go of her.*) But see— I'm not deaf and I'm not disturbed by them!

Leela: I don't understand how you do it— (*Lights Out, 114*)

The discussion implies that males wear pretensions while women don't. Bhasker's willingness to become a deaf when he should have been the most vigilant disappoints Leela. The words 'pretend' and 'deaf', beyond their literal meanings, assumes metaphoric associations where the control-button in the discourse rests with man. The play depicts the life of middle class families and brings to the fore the utter hollowness surrounding them; one finds continuous manifestations of the shallowness of ideas, pointless bantering and wrangling in the speeches of male personae. Despite high claims of modernity and equality for both sexes, gender divide still remains the talking point in the age-old parochial male-dominated Indian social system and this gets equal support from the so-called civilized men-folk dwelling in cities. Even in the metropolis like Mumbai women still have to seek their recognition from their men-folk and have to fall back on them for any sort of support they expect. Inside the house (Frieda, Leela) or outside (raped woman), they stand marginalized—emotionally and physically.

Even the discourse with regard to the rape incident involving various characters has the stamp of male-authority. Manjula sees that there is 'method in madness' in the meaningless excuses put forth by male characters in not taking any action; this way they destabilize the consciousness of woman and put them in their places with regard to their places vis-à-vis males. The use of bad sociological connotations or insinuations defiling the character of victim by male characters suggests the order of prevailing power equations in the Indian social set-up. No saner head in his senses can describe a rape as a 'ritual', 'a religious ceremony! Sacred rites!', 'the Cult of the Body-Builders' or 'heavenly' and the rapists as 'priests' or holy persons; but the playwright feels that this is a gambit used by these *civilized* and *decent* men to scuttle what the pleading women want:

Leela: So. We are listening to the sounds of a

woman being raped. Outside our window, under the lights.

Bhasker: Don't over-react, Leela, it's almost definitely an exorcism...

Naina: Three men, holding down one woman, with her legs pulled apart, while the fourth thrusts his— organ— into her! What would *you* call that— a poetry recitation?

Bhasker: But the beating, then? The brutality? If all that they wanted was a little sex, why would they go to the trouble of so much violence?

Naina: Most forms of rape, especially gang rape, are accompanied by extreme physical violence!

Mohan: But are all the rapists normally naked, like these people out there?

Bhasker: And do they usually perform under the lights, in front of an audience of decent people, respectable people?...

Naina: (*Disgusted*) What? What's left?

Bhasker: She could be a whore, you know! (*Lights Out*, 138-39)

The male-female discourse demonstrates the control of the former over the latter; content as well as style confirms the subservience of woman. The choice of words, sentence structure used by male characters, along with the tone and tenor smack of manliness, authority and power. Peter Barry while detailing such difference in the language used by man and woman, quotes of Virginia Woolf:

"...language used is gendered, so that when a woman turns to novel writing she finds that there is 'no common sentence ready for her use'. The great male novelists have written 'a natural prose, swift but not slovenly, expressive but not precious, taking their own tint without ceasing to be common property'... 'That's a man's sentence'." (Robert Con Davis, 121).

Male characters' choice of words and phrases with sexual overtones, without any inhibition, sounds very repulsive to women and arouses their abhorrence for such language but for men, it gives them voyeuristic pleasure; it is they who give labels to women—decent or whore—and sits on judgment with regard to the place of woman in society. The age-old tradition of referring woman as 'fair sex' or 'weaker sex' or 'better-half' in common parlance puts woman in a lower pedestal to man. Describing the difference in the language used by man and woman which becomes a tool in the hand of man for exerting influence on woman, Robin Lakoff believes that "women's language actually is inferior, since it contains patterns of 'weakness' and 'uncertainty', focuses on the 'trivial', the frivolous, the unserious, and stresses personal emotional responses. Male utterances,

she argues, is 'stronger' and should be adopted by women if they wish to achieve social equality with women." (Seldon, 131).

That's why, Leela despite being very much aware of the nature of the crime outside her house, can not utter the word 'rape' easily; she is on the brink of nervous breakdown when she has to finally utter that word, and that only to convince Bhaker and Mohan to take some action. Being extremely sensitive and emotional, woman is always lyrical and more so in issues related to her heart, like her rights over her body and soul. On the contrary, man is brutish and coarse and insensitive at times:

Bhasker: And there's so much blood!

Mohan; Oh yes! From being dragged about on that concrete, I suppose. Blood around the mouth as well— which explains the gurgling sound of the screaming.

Bhasker: Isn't it astounding that someone in such a condition has the energy left to scream?

Mohan: They say that people under a demon's power, even women, have the strength of three big men...

Bhasker: Funny, how it is most often women who become possessed...

(*Pause while screams intensely*)

Mohan: They are more susceptible...

Bhasker: The weaker sex, after all...(138)

What seems horrifying to woman appears pleasing to man and this divide in use of language asserts the supremacy of man over woman. Even a sentence argues Woolf has its gender which gets its sanction from the power-centred male. Barry's explanation attests this: "She [Woolf] quotes an example and says 'That is a man's sentence'. She doesn't make its qualities explicit, but the example seems to be characterized by carefully balanced and patterned rhetorical sequences. But 'it was a sentence unsuited for a woman's use...'". (Peter Barry, 121). The violence inflicted on woman involves not only physicality; even the use of language carries the expression of hostility and power, one complementing the other in over-powering and disintegrating the psyche of woman. The passive and inert victim is given body-blows as well as verbal volleys for extracting her complete submission. Masculinity crosses all barriers of social, cultural, economic and educational constrains as the males of all classes overtly or covertly come together to deny women their space and freedom, thus aptly reminiscing of what Simon de Beauvoir said in her *The Second Sex*: 'One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman'. (301)

The identity or role that a woman gets is just a construct of social, cultural mores which have their sanction from the patriarchal society. The male gender is

always identified with power and authority while woman as someone who remains in awe of *his* lofty position. Helene Cixous' interpretation of presence/absence of phallus with man/woman correspondingly, puts man in a commanding position while woman remains subservient as she feels incapacitated on account of what she lacks in comparison to man:

"...she misses the great lack [phallus], so that without man she would be indefinite, indefinable, non sexed, unable to recognize herself: outside the Symbolic. But fortunately there is man: he who comes...Prince Charming. And it's man who teaches woman (because man is always the Master as well), who teaches her to be aware of lack, to be aware of absence, aware of death. It's man who will finally order woman, "set her to rights," by teaching her that without man she could "misrecognize."(Helene, 46)

The bizarre rational given by the patriarchal forces in calling the rape-victim as 'filthy', 'whore' or 'indecent woman who can not be raped' reveal the hostility, disrespect and insolence of man towards woman, and this macho-cum-judgmental attitude adopted by men can be traced back to human history. While Leela's pleas fall on deaf ears of men at home, Frieda remains muted throughout the play. No doubt, Leela and Naina seem to be actively contributing in the action of the play; nonetheless, it is Frieda's presence and her actions and movements which arouse everybody's curiosity. Her quiet, ever complying persona becomes a symbol of the place of woman in society. She is at the beck and call of everyone but nobody gives a heed to what passes through her mind throughout the play. It is obvious that she must be aware of what other members of the family are aware of and are discussing about but she has learnt to remain silent and her silence speaks of the marginalization not only of herself alone but also of all womanhood who stand at a disadvantaged and subsidiary position in social hierarchy or rather their 'social castration' as referred by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

## CONCLUSION

The play makes it abundantly clear that gender-superiority/inferiority is very much ingrained in the consciousness of human being. Males on account of his edge over woman in social, cultural and biological realms enjoys the power equations in his favour and thus

controls both mind and body of woman, and in order to maintain the prevailing situation, he uses this superior, envious position to disintegrate and destabilize the rational thinking of woman. As she remains vulnerable to the guiles of man, this element of vulnerability results in her subversion, leading to her own complicity in the arrest of her independent thoughts. Man will never will to have woman as equal and will continue trying to overshadow her until or unless she tries to come out of *his* shadow by asserting her individuality, her identity independent of her men-folk. Leela's painful cries towards the end of the play affirm her submission and subversion to the wiles of the men-folk which the latter wanted: "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..."(143)

The advantageous position of man in man-woman relationship vests with him unprecedented power and authority which he exercises to keep woman—physically as well as mentally—under his thumb. To keep the position in their favour or to maintain status quo in the factors governing the relationship, men confuse, baffle, ridicule and even unnerve the consciousness of woman, as this would serve their ulterior motive to remain at the helm of affairs.

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