

The Existence of Gendered Subaltern-ism in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

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Abstract: This article attempts to view Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* under the postcolonial lens so as to reemphasize the standardization of gender and proneness of the 'weaker sex' to be seen as a victim to gender subalternism, which pushes them to a deprived zone of speechlessness and disempowerment. Basing on Gayatri C. Spivak's seminal work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'subaltern', this paper identifies different role plays and power-structures embellished in the society that widows a woman of her own freedom and identity. Putting a specific emphasis on 'silence' as a form of weakness and tool, the author exposes the brutality of the dominant gender, their perceptions, and thoughts, along with an attempt taken by the female character, Naina, to revert back and subvert the preconceived patriarchal notions of gender, power, and sexuality.

Index Terms – Subaltern, silence, madness, rape, colonization

I. INTRODUCTION

The play *Lights out* caricatures different characters framed within an urban modern society. The play begins with the author apprising the readers of the upper-middle class status that the main characters Bhaskar and Leela belong to. This play *Lights out*, can be traced around the framework of Gayatri C. Spivak's famous essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', with shifting notions of subaltern-isms and notion of patriarchy in place of the White colonizers in the above essay. The play begins with the character Frieda, who serves as a quintessential example, who can be seen as a subaltern figure, whose silence is contrasted with the sound of the door as said by Frances, "While the audience members can see Frieda's body, they cannot hear her voice" (523) and who seems to mold her activities according to the wave of patriarchy brought in by the main male character of the play, Bhasker, who seems to follow the notions of patriarchy in general. "Keys in one hand, briefcase and the Evening News in the other" seems to imply a workaholic person, returning from office, thus attributing economic independence to Bhaskar, as compared to the next character introduced in the play, i.e., Leela, who comes from the 'bedroom'; thus clearly defining the set and preconceived gender roles by marginalizing both the women characters to domestic chores, deriving her source of decent living from her husband which foregrounds the underlying distinction between the 'Self' and the 'Other', where the masculine with access to all form of socio-political agencies is the 'Self' and the feminine is set in contrast to the Self and thus is termed as the 'Other'. As Frances states, "Frieda, Leela, and the disembodied screaming woman all carry traces of the ways in which they have been gendered, classed, and cast, of the many violences, small, and large, that they have been forced to bear as a women living in a neoliberal, patriarchal world." (524) The two female characters introduced at the beginning of the play seems to highlight the expected role of women in a patriarchal setup: as managing the household chores and as an object of sexual gratification. Here, the women who seem to be serving the needs of Bhaskar, represent the subaltern.

II. THE EMERGENCE OF THE TERM 'SUBALTERN'

The term 'subaltern' was not first used by Gayatri C. Spivak, the initial use of the term can be traced back to the writings of Antonio Francesco Gramsci who defined 'subaltern' to signify a set of people who are considered subordinate to the hegemonic groups and classes, where the term 'hegemony' is a mode of non-coercive authority where there is a persuasion and a conviction that the interests of the ruling class are the interest of the masses. In his essay *On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India* Ranajit Guha presents the word 'subaltern' in an oppositional term with the word 'elite'. For Guha, the elite were the

European colonizers as well as the dominant indigenous groups who had access to the political and economic hegemonic powers, or through their western-style education and financial wealth in case of landowners of industrial and mercantile bourgeoisie. So, the subalterns occupy a negative space which symbolizes their state of disempowerment, loss of identity and lack of socio-political resistance. So according to this interpretation by Guha, patriarchy can be considered as a part of the hegemonic process where the character Bhasker represents the notions of patriarchy and can be made to stand in contrast to the perceived submissiveness and consequent condition of speechlessness of Leela.

III. GENDERED SUBALTERNISM IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *LIGHTS OUT*

The first statement that puts some light on the relationship that Bhasker and Leela share, is foregrounded by the author through the line "She stands staring at Bhaskar, tense with anxiety. But he is immersed in his paper and does not notice her." The categorization of a certain group of people as the 'subaltern' can be manifested in multiple ways, through class, caste, gender, etc. If we specifically focus on gendered subalternity, the author seems to paint the character of Leela as a gendered subaltern awkwardly wrapped in her speechlessness and is direly disempowered to generate any discourse which is reflected in the first few dialogues in the beginning of the play where Bhaskar rather disinterested, reacts to Leela's anxiety with frequent non-clausal and monosyllabic replies. This scene also depicts the preconceived notions of patriarchy which considers females as irrational, emotional and men who are seen in the light of the Other and their rationality is staked in sharp contrast to female's irrationality. The inconsistency in her speech points to the non-coercive exertion of dominance of patriarchy. The author, through Leela, tries to establish the fact that the subaltern 'can' speak, but the elites, who are the part of the hegemony fail to hear her speech. Thus as explained by Dr. Sayan Chattopadhyay, it has been argued by some scholars that rather than saying that the subaltern cannot speak, it is more appropriate to say that the subaltern cannot be heard. Leela constantly tries to make her point and put in the picture as to how tortured and threatened she feels when she hears those consistent noises at night. She requests Bhaskar to call the police, but he pays no heed and turns a deaf ear to her fears and requests, and later states that, "Go tell the police that you're frightened about noises in the next building! They'll laugh in your face!" As Spivak argues, someone within the position of 'subalternity' encounters an impossibility to generate discourse about one's own desires, own interests and about one's own self-identity, which triggers ethical intervention. So, as a form of an ethical response, the elite (as described by Ranajit Guha) propose and are supposed to speak for the subaltern, as the elite has direct associations with the socio-political agencies, unlike the subaltern. But here, according to Bhaskar, the civil forces won't pay a heed and wouldn't bother about these minor little offences and instead of taking any action by 'responding' to the subaltern, they will ridicule and laugh it away as a trivial thing, thus gagging the voice of the subaltern. This statement by Bhaskar also reflects Torvald's statement in *The Doll's House* when he says that "no man would sacrifice his honour for the one he loves" (Act 3: 94) Struggling out from the vacuum of disempowerment, she states "...-the sound came through! Even in the children's room, on the other side of the house, I could hear it!", highlights another aspect that being a mother is one of the important facets of female culture: "Through nursing and education of children, women understood themselves as offering an important contribution ... and consequently claiming an importance sense of authority." (Wiedenbeck 26) As stated by Wiedenbeck, "The wife was considered a partner, a yoke-fellow, but was ultimately subordinate to her husband. Her lack of self-mastery meant that she must not only be under the guidance and authority of her husband, but that he was also responsible for everything about her, even her actions and emotions; she was ultimately subsumed into his person, stripping her of her basic sense of autonomy and self." At first glance, the play represents a stereotypical representation of the women figures as irrational, naïve, dependent on men and solely marginalized to the private sphere which "relegates women to the demesne of domesticity and deprives them of a political voice while requiring the men to identify with a discourse of rationality which splits off and denies the importance of feeling." (Rice and Waugh 143) When Leela describes the core reason for her fear as emerging from a fact that Sushila said that when someone watches a crime and does nothing about it, eventually becomes a part of that crime, though that statement is completely rational from an unbiased point of view, we get to know that Bhaskar finds his wife, her friends, and women in general as intellectually inferior. Leela is depicted as irrational, submissive, childish and her speechlessness contributes to her status as a subaltern. Leela's marginalization to private and domestic sphere and depending on her husband both economically and for rational judgements (though superficially) serves to her disadvantage. But, in the first eight pages, Leela tries to 'speak' and overcome her

position of subalternity, repeatedly justifying through innumerable unsuccessful attempts about the different emotional and psychological tortures that she has to undergo due to the sound. Despite Bhasker's intrusions and manipulations, she tried to establish her authority in discourse by overlapping Bhasker's arguments, her statement with reference to this situation was: "No! It's this. I can't imagine letting someone else see it all" (Padmanabhan 143) The dynamics of superiority and inferiority between the sexes is revealed when Bhaskar insensitive of Leela's condition, claims her to be over-sensitive and as a reaction to which Mohan replies "after all, it's hardly a thing for a woman!", which implies to certain prejudiced notions that characterizes a woman in the patriarchal mind. As stated " ...patriarchy has rendered them identical and women marginalized from the supremacy of phallogocentric order have occupied a position allied to unreason, madness and chaos." (4) Even when she tries to articulate the traumatic situation that takes place in the neighborhood, Mohan mocks saying that, " it gives us an opportunity to compare Leela's version with the real thing" (150), as if her version is not the real version as a subaltern subject is perceived as having no voice, no language and no reality of their own. In their course of conversations when they come to decipher the picture of the crime that has been continuously being committed in the neighborhood, Mohan tried to find out their class reference. When he came to know that the victim seems to belong to the lower class, he made a blatant comment stating that, " ...they live their lives and we live ours." (158) If we consider the victim belonging to the poor classes as a subaltern, these elites' who belong to the upper-middle class, instead of voicing for the subaltern, are busy deriving assumptions and pleasure from the rape scene. When they failed to voice for the subaltern victim who was getting physically tortured every passing day in their neighborhood, they tried to justify the 'mysterious' with the dominant power-structures active in the society. Religion can be, justly said, as a tool for enhancing and strengthening patriarchal structures; Even in the Genesis, Eve was derived from the rib bone of Adam, thus propagating the view that women are derived from man and thus, are inferior, thus making them subject to torture and exertion of authority. As stated by Strenski, " Religious Studies deploys the hegemonic power of language and conceptualization over others by naming what they do "religion" the concept of religion in the first place has been a significantly coercive force" (347) The struggle of the woman being raped and tortured as a part of a ritual can be seen as strategy of power and domination. Religion, here, is considered as an agency of power, which like the white colonizers, seem to ward off evil thus purifying and civilizing the Other; and here the victimized woman can be considered as a subaltern, as she is disempowered and dominated by a gang of men who repeatedly torture by raping her every night. Secondly, she does tries to call for help, but her speech is not considered as meaningful discourse, as the interpretation is decided by the hegemonic class as when Leela tries to interpret the truth of the situation and Mohan intrudes to state, " Oh, well! How naïve! People scream for all sorts of reasons!" Therefore, the raped victim who can be considered a subaltern, can speak, but cannot be heard by the occupants of the hegemonic or dominant class. In addition to this, as Grapard tells us, "this society is dominated by the desire to see. Yet it is one in which men control the gaze, while women serve as the objects of male visual invasion, imprisoned by the all-encircling male surveillance of their thoroughly mastered bodies." (Strenski 349) As reflected in the play, the freedom of worship is given prior superiority over freedom of an individual. Instead of helping the victim, the unjust exertion of power coerces the men to see the victim as an object of pleasure and exaggerated gossip. Thus, the process of colonizing the subaltern is not one-fold, but has multiple dimensions and affects in multiple ways, as in, politically, culturally, socially, physically on the basis of race, class and gender. Even they are unable to communicate the intensity of pain as experienced by the women 'subaltern' characters like Leela and the raped victim, to the male spectators. Colonialism has different facets including political, social, cultural, psychological and physical. So, gang-raping a woman accounts to the physical force of violence that is exerted on the victim based on her gender and class. But this physical form of colonization is completely ignored by the male characters in the play and they deal with the concept of rape with triviality. As stated in an article in Shodhganga, "The subaltern is the one who is denied an authentic presence. He/She is the one bereft of voice or dignity. The gravity of the situation is intensified when the subaltern is a woman. She is denied a subject position. Being at the precarious juncture, crisscrossed by multiple forces of oppression, she is the one who occupies the lowest position in the social ladder." (2)

IV. INTERPLAY OF POWER-STRUCTURES INTENSIFYING SUBALTERN-ISM

Rape is perceived as a physical act of sexual violence which a man can do and the woman can suffer. The subaltern or the victim of rape also has the right to bodily integrity, i.e., it is as per his/her choice as to with

whom she wants a physical connection, but this marginalized category disempowers them to such an extent that even their screams goes unheard. The readers are apprised of the fact that this action of rape is a regular nightly occurrence, and the 'screams' of the victim pervades in almost half of the play sequence, and according to Spivak, this situation of disempowerment of the subaltern requires ethical intervention of the class of people who have connections with the various socio-political agencies, directly or indirectly, but here in the play, the male spectators didn't realize the seriousness of the case in the first place, and secondly, couldn't stop that event from happening; as reflected by Frances Lieder," They spent so much time debating what they should do that the attack ends. The play concludes with their doing nothing." When, according to Ranajit Guha's distinction, the elites tried to intervene, they didn't really seem to represent the victimized but tried to mold justifications so as to normalize the severity of the situation. Even when Naina tried to intervene stating that the screams don't at all seem religious, Mohan replies," We all agree it sounds bizarre, not at all religious. But then I think that drums sound quite awful, too- you know, during some festivals when they go around beating their drums at night..." (168) so in turn, overshadowing the scream of the woman for help which requires intervention to a form of socio-cultural practice which shuns any external interventions as any sort of deviation becomes a "part of the ritual". Instead of finding a way to help the victimized, they tried to find an explanation to her screaming; when 'religion' couldn't justify, they tried to put all the ungainly elements of nakedness, beating, kicking, dragging into the homogenous practices of 'exorcism'. Such perception further foregrounds the perspective of the 'Other' as pagan, uncivilized, evil, possessed and thus that normalizes the reason for screaming as it is for the woman's own good, i.e., she is being rescued by a group of men, this practice of exorcism reflects the idea of the explanation of the White colonizers of a 'civilizing mission'; they even refer her as the 'Devil' as 'woman' are perceived as the weaker sex, there's a chance of getting easily possessed by the Devil, as reflected in the dialogue of Bhaskar " Funny, how it is most often women who become possessed..." (172) "They are more susceptible... The weaker sex after all..." (173) When Naina tries to reason out the situation and their latter justification is ruled out, they blatantly constructed their perceived normality around the victim being a 'whore'. As reflected in an article in Shodhganga "Women are misinterpreted either as angels, the true emblem of purity and innocence, of service and sacrifice or as the evil temptress, the demon ready to tempt and lead man to havoc. The discourse of patriarchy reads women's desire for choices and liberation of women as forms of aberrations." Instead of identifying the incident of gang-rape, the male spectators tried to shift the blame from the men accused to the 'subaltern victim' herself, based on her gender: as she is a whore, because she is a women and "she's with four men at once." (174) and "decent women would never submit to this sort of thing..." As explained by Frances Lieder," By classifying the woman as not just a whore, but a tattered (read lower-class) whore, Mohan and Bhaskar identify her as so other that they cannot even begin to understand her behavior. By existing on a different socioeconomic plane, the screaming woman is not only beyond their understanding, but beyond their assistance" (523); their comments bereft a 'whore' to have a bodily integrity of her own and thus doesn't have a sexual choice of her own. Thus the victimized woman, seemingly a 'whore' according to the male spectators, is perceived as a sexual object whose sole purpose is to give pleasure to men either physically or visually. The consequent dialogues flash a clear picture of the patriarchal mindset, which limits a woman who pursue or express her sexual desires and is just an 'object' for sexual gratification; once the clothes are off, one cannot distinguish between a decent lady and a whore, according to Mohan. It is finally the voice of Naina, which seems to duly represent the voice of the subaltern, in the play. Irrespective of all forms of suppressions and fabrications, she questions the working of the patriarchal mind and has a reasonable deliverance of the dignity of a woman. It is only when Surinder comes, they did decide to plan to intervene the illegal activity that is happening in the neighborhood. But his reaction, in a way, reflects the patriarchal perception of women as the weaker sex, as 'a damsel in distress' and in turn it foregrounds the same attempt with a little difference: brown men, saving brown women from brown men. Even though Surinder seems to voice for the subaltern, he still assumes the position of superiority and perceives women as 'inferior': (To Naina) "You shut up! This is no time for women's nonsense!" (182) Even in their attempt to carry out an intervention, the men were the ones who were consciously involved in reasoning out a solution, and the womenfolk were silenced and were not allowed to be a part of their discussion. The solutions that they thought of executing was more centered on showing or exerting male power rather than creating a favorable situation for the victimized. In fact, they were carrying out this 'ethical intervention' because they think that it is their duty, being the superior class, to protect their subjects, as Bhaskar commented," Look what they're doing to us! Threatening us, breaking our windows,

terrorizing our women... (187) They spent so much time in finding out methods to rescue the victim that the attack ends. So, the play ends with their doing nothing.

V. CONCLUSION

The scream acts as a demand for ethical intervention and also highlights the different types of experiences that the women characters in the play face, and the range of violence and physical coercion of power exerted on them. As Frances concludes, "– they all seem powerless to alter their circumstances and trapped by cultural expectations placed upon them- and the differences-if Frieda is experiencing pain, we certainly never see it, and Leela's pain stems from psychological sources." (524) At the end of the play, Leela's hysterical scream compels Bhaskar to immediately act; there is a perceived power in Leela's scream, unlike the scream of the lower class raped victim outside. Naina, on the other hand, is pushed by Surinder to the margins of conversation and is threatened to suffer domestic abuse, and she watches helplessly as the victims and the assailants in the neighborhood disappear. Frieda is an effective example that being a silent witness won't solve any problem, rather there is a need to articulate one's desires, needs and have to make an effort to get heard to come out of the position of subalternity.

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