

WOMEN IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S LIGHT'S OUT

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The paper entitled "Women in Manjula Padmanabhan's Light's Out" aims to explore the playwright's projection of women in her plays. For this purpose three aspects are chosen for the study of image of woman in Manjula's plays, the traditional woman, the rebellious woman and the new woman, who adopt their situations and act according. In Padmanabhan's plays, we see a steady change in the female character. In other words, the character does not remain the same as she appears in the beginning. Padmanabhan's women are not extraordinary women. She does not portray them as good or evil characters, they have their strengths and weaknesses, and they have their good days and bad days. They are persistently trying to prove themselves in a man's world. Padmanabhan's image of women can be described in the words of C.K. Meena as she is mentioned in Unmasking the Middle Class that men he has drawn his women with great sympathy, but they are by no means saintly victims. Padmanabhan reveals the image of the transformed female, who is led from passive observance to tradition to its active rejection in order to become a woman thinking.

Index Terms: Rebellious, Extraordinary women, Persistent, Observance.

Indian Writing in English has a recent history of one and half century old. The term Indian Writing in English is used in a wider sense; in spite of its difference in cultures, customs, races and religions. Indian Writing in English has successfully captured and reflected the multi-cultural and multilingual society. It expresses about the shared tradition, cultural exercises and Indian heritage. In *Indian Writing in English*, M. K. Naik, states that Indian Writing in English began as an interesting by-product of lively encounter in the late eighteenth century between a vigorous and enterprising Britain and a stagnant and chaotic India. Consequently, a large number of Indians were greatly moved by the genuine desire to present an accurate picture of India through their writings.

Drama is a very influential and more powerful medium in the English literature because of its audio visual means of expression. Shukla Supriya, in *Indian English Drama: An Introduction*, comments that drama is a counterfeit representation of life combining in itself the real and the fictional, art and reality and representing the events and characters within the given dimension of space and time. It combines the elements of narrative poetry with those of visual arts. In short, it is a narrative made visible. The origin of Indian drama is outlined from the Vedic Period and is considered as one of most popular medium in India. As an indication of our nation's sensibility Indian drama came into existence by means of imparting the truth about popularly known "Fifth Veda."

Women writers have also played an important role in the development of Indian writing in English. Dr. M. F. Patel writes in *Studies in Indian women Writers in English*:

Women writers in India are moving forward with their strong and sure strides, matching the pace of the world. The focal point of the women writers is largely the prevailing conditions and the problems of women. They aim at bringing out the plight of women in the present time. (93)

It was in the 1940s and 50s that some names of women playwrights came to spotlight but it was not until the last three decades of the twentieth century that the plays by women became a dominant strain in the literary and cultural life of the nation.

Manjula Padmanabhan, in her plays, gives importance to female characters rather than the male ones. Her plays are mostly woman centric. They deal with the lives of women, their status in society as well as family and their mind set. Her plays expose the piteous condition of women in every state of society.

Manjula Padmanabhan was born in Delhi in 1953; she went to a boarding school in her teenage years. After passing out from Bombay University, with her courage and self-confidence made her own way in life. In her later years, she made her place as a playwright, a cartoonist, journalist, novelist and a children's book author. Apart from writing newspaper columns she also created comic strips such as Suki, an Indian female comic character. In the year 1997, she won the Greek Onassis Award for her play *Harvest*. Apart from this, she has written various other important works like *Lights Out!* (1984), *Hidden Fires*, *The Artist's Model* (1995), and *Sextet*. She has also authored a collection of short stories, called *Kleptomania*. Her most recent book, published in 2008, is *Escape*. Her works focus on social issues also but mainly where the patriarchal society suppresses women and her acts. She mainly affirms the realistic images connected with their point of view. Her works include concerns related to women, alienation, rapes, dowry deaths, domestic violence etc. in the patriarchal discourse.

The paper attempts to explore about the women and about how characters make their survival in the play *Light's Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan. And the dramatists portrays the clear impression on gender inequality and a dominant appeal for realizing the women emotions in a world where she hardly finds herself to be free, independent, resistant and well thought out.

In the context of Indian culture the statues of women has been a paradox. Women, worshiped as goddess and exalted as mother is in most practical aspects of life, overworked and undervalued, systematically subordinated. They had four fold status-role sequences. Those were her role as a daughter, wife, mother and housewife. The woman, whose status and role traditionally was well defined and almost fixed in the society, is now experiencing far-reaching changes. The woman in modern times is entering into certain new fields that were unknown to the woman's sphere of role-sets. They are actively participating in social, economic, and political activities. But in the present scenario, women have generally received higher education than the women of their preceding generation. There have been far reaching consequences in the economic status of women. The early years of the 20th century witnessed a rapid growth in breaking down injustices against women. As a result of it many number of women's societies leaped up. In the views of Manu in *Manusimurthi* is,

Woman is viewed merely as the mother and the wife and those roles are idealised. The ideal wife is faithful and service to husband and his family members without any complain is virtuous.

Light's Out is an excellent play by Manjula Padmanabhan. The play focuses on a daily occurrence of gang rape committed by unknown hoolians in an unused apartment in the heart of Mumbai. Nobody even cares to know who the criminals are and why and how they resort or choose for such heinous acts, abandoned. The play with clear stamp of gender- division makes a very powerful plea for understanding the feminine sensibility in a world which hardly allows women to be independent, strong, organized and focused.

The play opens with a serious discussion between Leela and Bhaskar, a higher middle class married couple, who have been hearing to strange sounds of sexual harassment of a woman from their neighbouring building very often. Leela is terrified and disturbed because of these sounds. These sounds make Leela hysterical; she is able to hear the voice of the victim and her cries in her subconscious mind too. Leela appeals to Bhaskar to take an action against the perpetrators but all her pleas falls on the deaf ears. Bhaskar is least disturbed by all these actions and sounds. Leela begs her husband Bhaskar to call for police but he brushes away her request. Then, there comes Mohan, Bhaskar's friend, who also makes fun of Leela's feelings with Bhaskar and Naina, Leela's friend is told that the strange sounds that she hears are the sounds of locale slum religious ceremony. But Naina grows curious and looks out of the window to know what kind of religious ceremony is taking place exactly and finds that its horror four men assaulting a woman sexually. Through the casual attitude of Bhaskar and other male characters in the play Padmanabhan tries to project the mind set of male, usually men try to control woman, men are the one to decide what a woman should think, what a woman should do, what a woman should sense etc.

The play *Lights Out* is about what we normally lecture, but we do not practice. Men usually pretend that they care for woman but they really do not. Urban society has its well defined ethos that's why men are silent when crimes like rape are committed. Mostly, the women characters in many plays are portrayed weak, dependent, pure, humble, and sacrificial etc. The dramatist displays a clear-cut impression of gender inequality and creates a dominant appeal for understanding the women emotions in a world where she hardly finds herself to be free, independent and hardy throughout. Padmanabhan through her female characters from her selected play portray the different types of women. And the female characters in her play are categorized into three types - the traditional woman, the rebellious woman and the new woman. The new women are those who adopt their situations and act according. In Padmanabhan's plays, we see a steady change in the female character.

The traditional woman depicted in Padmanabhan play is Leela in *Lights Out*. She is a middle class woman who values her status as a respectable woman. She believes in the sanctity of the domestic circle and cherishes the values of marital state. She is shocked to see what is being done to a woman outside her home under the street light. She is unable to bear the painful cry for help that she regularly hears from a neighbouring compound. Having merely heard these strange, frightening sounds, she turns suspicious and agitated. She troubles her husband Bhasker to call the police and to deal out with the offensive act. She repeatedly urges her husband Bhaskar to do something in this regard, but her pleas fell on deaf ears of her husband:

LEELA: (Wheedling.) Can't you call the police? Just for me?

BHASKAR: (Drawing away.) No.

LEELA: But why not?

BHASKAR: We've discussed this before---- (112)

But through this incident she is also proved as a traditional straight-forward Indian woman who fails to understand how the police act; she thinks that the police can book the culprits of the crime while her husband is aware of the police ways of dealing like inaction, corruption, high-handedness and laziness:

LEELA: I know, I know--- you've told me they're not interested in cases like this, they don't bother about the minor little offenses- but I'm frightened! Can't you see that? Isn't that enough?

BHASKAR: Go tell the police that you're frightened about noises in the next building! They'll laugh in your face. (112)

She remarks the incident of sexual violence as a potential warning to the sanctity of the home. The continuous fear of these sounds diffuses her life and articulated in her the inpatients to request her husband. Her dying request for action is replied with silence from him. She fails to give a valid reason for her fear, and therefore is unable to convince Bhasker to take action. She quite often identifies herself with the woman who is being brutalized with pain and how the agony of an unidentified woman has an indirect impact on her. She is equally affected by violence as the anonymous woman, but violence in her case is bloodless and implicit. And the violence that affects her is unseen and psychological. Her fear bursts out towards the end of the play and provides an appropriate climax to the drama.

Through the character of Leela, the dramatist throws light on the sensitive nature of female section of the society. Woman is soft hearted, emotional and very sensitive by nature. Anything appeals to her heart first; she expresses her emotions with higher intensity. The violence prevailing in the country generates so much of fear in the hearts of people that they start having nightmares and take a lot of time to overcome that fear. Padmanabhan voices her concern about the fate of women in a society through the character Leela, where the educated, resourceful, capable and conscious elite class remains a mute spectator and an indifferent partner in the crimes committed on women. Here, the words of Swami Vivekananda are worth recording is *It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing.*

Naina in *Lights Out* is another character who falls in second category. Naina, Leela's friend is the one who raises her voice against the strange sounds that she hears are the sounds of locale slum religious ceremony. But Naina grows curious and looks out of the window to know what kind of religious ceremony is taking place exactly and finds to her horror four men assaulting and attacking a woman sexually. She is shaken to see three men holding a woman as the fourth attacks her brutally.

NAINA: Someone's being..... (She fights for her voice.) They're--- they're (She dry- retches.)

BHASKAR: Don't say anything out loud - Leela will be upset! (Mohan remains at the window, mesmerised)

NAINA: Someone's being (She still cannot complete her statement. She dry- Retches again.) There's woman being ---

MOHAN: (Over his shoulder) Dragged around by the foot. (Leela, who has been sitting motionless, now holds her head with both hands, Covering her ears.)

BHASKAR: (*Brightly*.) Do you think it can be a part of the ritual, Mohan?

NAINA: What ritual? That's no ritual! That's a --- a----- (112)

Where Naina denies calling it a religious ritual, men in the play deny calling it a rape. Through the informal attitude of Bhaskar and other male characters in the play Padmanabhan tries to project the mind set of male, usually men try to control woman, men are the one to decide what a woman should think, what a woman should do, what a woman should sense etc. The chief intention of the carefree outlook by Bhaskar, his two friends Mohan and Surinder build internal fear in the minds of Leela, her friend Naina and Leela's domestic helper Frieda. By doing so, they can uphold and withstand the ever ruling patriarchal power inside as well as outside the home. The display of male dominance and women sedition is clearly seen in *Lights Out*.

She is perhaps the most sensitive of all in the play, and shares with Leela a certain kind of hatred for the act of violence. While Leela turns agitated and stresses her husband to call the police, Naina is even more active in influencing Bhaskar and Mohan to take action. She is shocked to notice that the incident is an act of rape, and that both Bhaskar and Mohan believe it to be out of their means to start an action. She strongly convicts their incapability and advises them to act and not just watch. Her presence firmly supports the cause of the emancipation of the woman from the act of sexual violence. She reacts sharply to the various ways in which the men justify the act. She is shocked to notice that they can afford to call the woman a prostitute, and she argues that even a prostitute has the right to be saved from an act of sexual violence. She counters various reductionist thoughts that present women as vulnerable. She completely opposes the conventional views about women that the men continuously spoke about. She may even be perceived as a kind of a mouthpiece for the playwright, who attempts to re-inscribe the images of women through a play like this.

Naina (*Light's out*) illustrates how silence can be utilized as a useful tool of agitation. Her entry in the play provides the much needed support and female community to Leela. Together they argue for police interference can be the only solution to the problem Naina is outspoken, bold and does not withdraw away from opposing Bhaskar and Mohan when they try to distract the women with false arguments to justify the rape. But her behaviour changes a little when her husband Surinder enters the scene. His dominating personality overrides everybody, but the effect is more on Naina who suddenly becomes very quiet. The reason for this becomes clear when we observe Surinder's reaction to the rape. He becomes very angry and this to a certain extent comes as relief to the audience given the uncaring attitude of the other two men. But this relief remains short lived when it becomes clear that the reason for his anger is not the pain of the violated women but at the insult that he perceives on the attackers throwing stones at the windows of their building to draw attention to their activities and continuing to do them with licence. He immediately calls for an attack on them. Though Naina is surprised to see Leela eagerly becoming a part of his plans she cautions the group against taking the law into their hands. But "you shut up. This is no time for women's nonsense" (47) and "Shut up- or I'll kick your teeth in" (49) is how Surinder reacts to her suggest waiting for the police. One assumes that being used to her husband's violent ways she knows that plain quarrel will only result in his anger deflecting to her so she simply keeps quiet at that point of time. So for Naina silence works as a tool to overthrow the domination of power.

The last category woman is Frieda in Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*, who comes across her problems with the weapon silence. She is a maid servant and cook, who are seen give a hand to Leela throughout. She is seen moving continually and making arrangements according to the instructions given to her. She does not speak in the course of the play. She is made to remain silent throughout, and her silence speaks volumes about her dominated status. Her silence has both gender and class facet in it. Her presence in the play further confuses our understanding of violence and suppression. In her case, it is not openly noticed violence, but a different kind of suppression that silences her. Her subjugation in the present order of things is not just considered to be normal but is declared in a different ways. Whereas Padmanabhan uses silence as other aspect of language which is projected in her plays. She uses silence in both ways as a strategy of resistance to the oppressive power and as a weapon used by the powerful.

Frieda's very presence on the stage and her acute silence raises many questions like: Can she hear the terrible sounds of the rape victim? Why she is not bothered like others? Frieda has a robotic quality; she comes at every brook and call of her master and seen attending to the works even though she is not told. She arranges for knives and acids while the discussion to attack the goons is on among the verbal characters. She indirectly tells that the crime needs to be stopped. Through her, the dramatist tries to show, despite belonging to economically poor background she tries to come out into an open society to earn her living and live independently under odd circumstances. But at the same time her silence acts as defend against subjugation. All through the play she goes about her work as inconspicuously as possible. Her silence among other vocal characters highlights her presence on stage effectively on stage. She is seen bring tea and cleaning the broken piece of glasses even before anyone asks her to do it. While her silence suggests her fear of being abused because of her being a woman of a lower economic strata, her coming in to the public sphere to earn a livelihood shows her resolve to lead an independent life in spite of all odds. She wears her silence as a coat for protection against subjugation.

Padmanabhan in one of her interview has stated that: One is not born a woman, rather one becomes a woman. To the playwright's eyes, the lot of women in India has not changed for the better; they are still in the 21st century treated as playthings for the men- folk as they were treated in the past; they are conquered to numerous physical, emotional and mental tortures at the hands of men. In both her plays *Harvest* and *Lights Out* she portrays and discusses the social status of women and their responsibility towards country. And she also highlights man's growing indifference towards his social commitment. She portrays her female characters as brave enough to fight and survive in the techno-centric world. When there were many local theatre groups in different part of the country, the need for such a theatrical production giving importance to female resistance was unavoidable. The colonial idea of pride as a poor man's fancy dress has been questioned by the playwright. Female body is used in *Harvest* as a weapon of resistance, which was in all sense proved to be a historical need of a post-colonial nation like India. In *Light's Out*, she speaks about the raped female body as it generates multiple responses within the hegemonic male system of knowledge. By carefully selecting her material, intervening with stage directions and bringing into conflict multiple points- of- view, the dramatist theatricalizes the violence of rape to perform dissention of a raped body beyond the typical sympathetic look usually reserved for a violated female body. Padmanabhan reveals the image of the transformed female, who is led from passive observance to tradition to its active rejection in order to become a woman thinking.

This paper attempts to look at the different set of social conditions under which these women are trapped such as: gender discrimination, female infanticide, child marriage, status of a widow in a patriarchal society, male chauvinism. These issues are being discussed in their respective texts separately focusing on anyone of the issues in a detailed manner.

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