

Bigotry and Hypocrisy: Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* as a Reflection of Contemporary Society

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Drama and society has always been sharing a two-way nexus where the drama replicates the follies of the society and attacks them fiercely. The society in turn is expected to imbibe the values the theatre imparts and progress. The advent of women's theatre bands together with the street theatre movement, and the compulsion for the then unheard voices to be heard gave rise to the Feminist theatre narratives in the 1970s.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* published in 1984 is based on an eye witness account of an incident of rape that took place in Mumbai in 1982. Set in an apartment in Mumbai, the play revolves around an account of a brutal gang rape narrated by the characters, that had been taking place outside their dwelling for many consecutive days. The setting itself is denotative of the modern day world where the lives of people are restricted within the four walls of their abode. Even the people sharing the same roof are observed to be incapable of establishing intimacy. The people who live within these apartments are least concerned about the events in the lives of other people, and therefore seclude themselves from other interactions.

The weakened interactions in human relationships appear a major feature of the modern society. *Lights Out* opens in the apartment of Bhasker and Leela, the stage description of which reveals the presence of a half built apartment that can be viewed from their window. Bhasker right after stepping in the house from work immerses himself in reading a newspaper. Neither does he try to meet his wife Leela, nor does he exhibit any interest when Leela attempts to catch up a conversation with him. Leela tries to gain his attention to a matter of prime importance to her, and thus she reiterates her point.

Throughout the play it is quite evident that there is a dearth of communication between the couple. Rarely does Bhaskar pay attention to what Leela has to say. The former makes use of many adjectives like "sensitive", "hysterical" etc. to represent the latter thus attempting to invalidate her statements and apprehensions. Remarkable enough is it to notice that the term "hysteria" was originally perceived as exclusive to women, the word being derived from the Greek word for "uterus" (Felman 2). The attempts from Bhasker's side are to relegate Leela to the status of a mad woman. This resonates the efforts Mr. Rochester makes to detain Bertha Mason at Thornfield's attic in *Jane Eyre*. The silenced Bertha is given a chance to justify herself in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Bhasker leads a carefree life away from his responsibilities similar to that of Mr. Rochester.

Exertion of authority by the male characters over the women characters is prevalent throughout the course of the play. Beginning from Bhaskar's ignorance to Leela's persuasion to Surinder's threat of harming Naina if she tries to express herself, are all explicitly giving away messages of masculine misogyny. Bhasker asserts his authority over his wife by claiming her as "My Leela" (149). Even as an acquaintance Mohan gains an upper hand in the conversation with Leela, and ventures to "correct" her misinterpretations. Both Bhasker and Mohan do the same with Naina as well. Bhasker even dares to cover Naina's mouth when she was about to utter the term "rape".

Women are asked to suppress their sexual passions, and it is not expected from them to get pleasure out of watching the sexual acts. Even Leela abides by this demand of the patriarchal society by not looking at the act, and by not entertaining the men to have a talk on that. Thus the pretensions which form a major part in the play develop itself as a characteristic of the modern society. As per the unwritten norms dictated by the patriarchal society, women should always be "passive" when it comes to anything related to sex. Leela even knows the exact number of perpetrators involved in the act outside. But she refuses to admit that she has seen it, and also never wants to hear the word "rape" or any discussions regarding the topic. Leela is thus being the "ideal" woman who is least interested in the affairs of sex. Her sole concern is that she would not be able to invite guests and host parties at her home if the act keeps on taking place outside.

Leela: I don't care what they believe. The sounds torture me. Tell the police I can't sleep at nights... tell the police the goondas must go away and take their dirty whores somewhere else! (*She is losing control again.*) 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... (Padmanabhan 179)

Leela finds the cries for help disturbing and thus she wants the sounds to be away from her. It doesn't concern her or any other characters save Naina, whether a woman is being attacked however brutally it is. Leela depends on the presumptions made by the men and makes attempts to believe them to be true, since what they were saying was what she wanted to hear. When all their deductions turned ineffective, they tried to fabricate new reasons like exorcism. They pass judgements on prostitutes, claiming them to be indecent women. According to them it is alright to rape a whore since she is indecent. The men fail to acknowledge prostitution as a job, and condemns it. They disregard the importance of consent in the case of a prostitute since they feel that prostitutes are devoid of the rights to choose.

Naina (*lamely*). Surely – I mean – even a whore has the right to choose her clients?

Mohan. Choose her clients! A whore just takes what she gets!

Bhasker. Whatever rights a woman has, they are lost the moment she becomes a whore.” (176)

At first, Mohan pretends not to know who a whore is, but later engages very actively in the discussion on prostitutes. But all the accusation lay on the women, since the patriarchal society bestows the men with freedom of having multiple sexual partners, while women are supposed to stay loyal to one partner that is her husband. In the sex especially after marriage women’s consent is assumed to be given. Thus the case of marital rape has always been controversial and incomprehensible to many. In Pateman’s text *Political Theory*, the theorist explores the necessity of consent both in the state and individual level. But the consent of women and its history has always been ignored.

Women exemplify the individuals who consent theorists have declared are incapable of consenting. Yet, simultaneously, women have been treated as irrelevant or has been reinterpreted as “consent”. (150)

Consent theory argues that voluntary acts or commitments must form the base of relationships of authority and obligation. But as of the trends that are being exhibited in the society, it reaches the deduction that many are unaware of the need of receiving consent. Numerous cases of violence against women in diverse forms like rape, domestic violence etc... are being reported worldwide. In the state of Kerala, the most recent form of violence practised by the perpetrators on women are acid attacks and setting the person ablaze. Even though similar cases have been reported earlier, the frequency of occurrence has increased exponentially which is a cause of alarm. The reason behind majority of the cases are either unrequited love or denial of sexual favours. The idea that women irrespective of their attitude by default are meant to submit to the advances of men, is engrained in the minds of the latter. Many theorists have endeavoured to register man’s consent ranging from John Locke’s theory of tacit consent to Hobbes and Rousseau. But the literature that mentions of women’s consent is very limited, many of which is fairly disquieting.

Why do you consult their words when it is not their mouths that speak?... The lips always say “No,” and rightly so; but the tone is not always the same, and that cannot lie... Must her modesty condemn her to misery? Does she not require a means of indicating her inclinations without open expression? (Rousseau 348)

Framed in a manner that superficially is in favour of women, the sentence in its inherent nature is a threat to the existence of women. Through the act of thrusting the virtue of modesty on women, Rousseau passes the message that the refusal from a woman’s part should not be taken at face value.

Lights Out operates in the silence of the people of the modern urban society. The insensitivity and apathy of the urban public is genuinely portrayed through the characters who evade from their own responsibilities and delegate their duties to others. The responsible people in power turns a blind eye towards the crime. The police are not anywhere in the scene despite the occurrence of the incident for two weeks. The chowkidar who lives in their apartment also is silent at the act. The offenders chose to make a show at the right place since they know that not a single finger would rise against them. They force the people to put their lights out, and watch the show they screen by inciting the voyeuristic instinct in them. The hypocrisy that governs the characters judge everything and everyone. Bhasker who enjoys the act everyday denies at regular intervals that he hasn’t seen what has been happening, even though he involuntarily spits the truth out of knowing the event to the minutest detail. Bhasker and Mohan pretends not to know what has been happening, and reaches to discrete imaginative conclusions by deceiving their own consciences. *Lights Out* thus accurately depicts the modern urban society where insensitivity predominates. The prejudices and hypocrisy of the people force them to consider themselves superior and everything else is awarded the status of “the Other”. As long as there is a threat on the lives of women, the poor and the minority, so long will *Lights Out* remain pertinent.

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