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Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out!* A Satire on the *Enlightened* for their Intended Darkness

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Today man lives in a time when there is a rapid increase in urbanization and industrialization, along with a revolution in the field of IT sector, leading to an unprecedented increase in job opportunities for the people—skilled or unskilled, educated or unlettered labour or techno-savvy. As a result of all this, the last decade has witnessed a great shift in population from rural agrarian world to the urban areas in search of unemployment. A new class of neo-rich has emerged in India with the free flow of wealth, ethically or unethically; more and more Indians are becoming a part of the so called middle-class, affluent and with a flair for discussion on weighty issues of national and international importance, portraying themselves as possessing very high moral character and integrity, and assuming the role of a watch-dog of society and the system, if it exists anywhere in our country. Such middle-class families whose number is increasing everyday are always busy in criticizing, battering the system or the government or the politicians in the company of friends in cocktail parties, sitting in the safe precincts of their cozy homes, always disparaging the corrupt and rotten system and people involved in this sloth, forgetting that they themselves are equally involved and fair-share contributors in the mess we ourselves find in. The total apathy of the middle-class regarding their responsibilities and duties towards the system is leading us towards death and destruction—socially, ethically, morally and emotionally. These issues of self-centeredness and indifference towards other by the impotent and toothless Indian middle-class have been highlighted in *Lights Out!* by Manjula Padmanabhan.

This play is a scathing attack on the double standards of the middle-class people who enjoy the fruit of liberty and abundance in the prevailing system. They are seen always chattering about the ways to bring the country out of the morass in which it finds itself, but they remain only confined to the lip-service, always avoiding taking concrete steps, because they are 'ninny lions' presenting themselves as valiants, but inwardly cowards. Priyanka Dasgupta observes: "*Lights Out!* deals with a very common yet misunderstood 'bystander effect'. A middle class couple debates over an incident that is happening outside their

building and conjures up various possible interpretations of what's being seen and heard. During the course of the conversation, few others join the couple. But none of them want to go out and help. They are either happy being voyeurs or too concerned about their safety" (Priyanka Dasgupta, TNN Mar 13, 2010). Manjula, a feministic, voices her concerns about the fate of women in a society where the educated, resourceful and conscious elite class remains a mute spectator and an indifferent partner in the crimes committed on women. The playwright here underlines the point that however hard we may try to present ourselves innocent about the crimes or the evil around us, we can not absolve ourselves of our complicity in these crimes and evil by remaining muted. Here the dramatist seems to be further extending the point put forth by Arthur Miller in his *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy*. Leela in *Lights Out!* is shocked to see what is being done to a woman outside her home under the street light by a group of goons. She repeatedly urges her husband Bhasker to do something in this regard, to act or call the police, but her pleas fell on deaf ears of her husband:

Leela: (*Wheedlingly*.) Can't you call the police? Just for me?

Bhasker: (*Drawing away*.) No.

Leela: But why not?

Bhasker: We've discussed this before---- (*Lights Out!*, p.112)

Leela is a traditional straight-forward Indian woman who fails to understand how the police act; she thinks that the police can book the perpetrators of the crime while her husband is aware of the police ways—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 minor little offenses— but I'm frightened! Can't you see that? Isn't that enough?

Bhasker: Go tell the police that you're frightened about noises in the next building! They'll laugh in your face. (*Lights Out!*, p.112)

The apathetic attitude of the police towards the victims of crime is revealed by Bhasker, and this is the main cause why people don't approach the police with social concern because the agency entrusted the task of protecting its citizens is devoid of any humanity in general.

The playwright is dismayed to know about the inward hollowness of these so-called refined people who only think about their own well-being, nothing to do about the world around them. They are concerned about saving their own skin; they turn their back towards their own brethren—oppressed, cornered and crushed—because 'they don't want to stick their necks out' out of fear. Bhasker is reluctant to call the police despite the constant

persuasions of Leela because he cowers at the sight of as what will happen to them when the goons come to know about the complainant. So, he like his neighbours plays it safe and becomes an escapist with the arguments that if others are not coming forward to complain, 'So why should we!' He is completely indifferent to the developments outside his home, but the irony is that he asserts, 'I'm not deaf and I'm not disturbed by them' (*Lights Out!*, p.114), and further gives logic in defence of his stand of not calling the police, 'You never know with the police these days. They may say it's none of our business, what goes on in the next-door compound. After all, there's the chowkidar...' (*Lights Out!*, p.115). By adopting such an unsympathetic and callous attitude towards those who are experiencing all forms of indignities, the playwright through her mouthpiece Sushila, opines that we are in the same league with the rapists and the criminals:

Leela: (*Changing tack.*) You know what Sushila said?

Bhasker: No idea. (*Pointedly losing interest. Looks around for his paper.*)

Leela: That we're part of ...what happens outside. That by watching it, we're making ourselves responsible---

Bhasker: (*Finds his paper.*) Rubbish!

Leela: That's what I said at first! But then...

Bhasker: (*Starts reading.*) Sushila's a fool. (*Lights Out!*, p.112).

Male chauvinism is at its best when Bhasker's friend Mohan sides with the former and laughs at Sushila's opinion about their complicity in the crime, and calls her an intellectual mockingly. Though Leela is on the verge of losing her sanity as the scene of woman being assaulted remains permanently in her conscious and subconscious mind but the male world doesn't realize the gravity of the crime, and both Bhasker and Mohan don't heed to her pleas, and time and again puts aside her concerns with hypocritical ways. That only a woman can understand the bruised and battered psyche of a woman becomes amply clear when other women characters like Sushila and Naina voice their concern about the woman in the clutches of rapists. The difference in the attitude of male and female towards the crime is presented by Mohan and Naina:

Mohan:...After all, finally, the difference between men and women is that women are vulnerable to rape...

Bhasker: And men are not....

Naina: And women believe they are vulnerable to rape—

Mohan: And men do not.

Naina: And women are decent enough to be raped...

Mohan: And men are not....

Bhasker: After all,...what is a woman but someone decent enough to be raped?

Mohan: And what is a man but someone too indecent to be raped!

Naina: But if women are too indecent to be raped does it mean that men are whores? (*Lights Out!*, p.142).

Manjula lays bare what lies hidden in the dark souls of humanity; poking our nose into others affair, even for helping somebody, is like inviting problems; we are happy till such nasty things don't happen to us. Utter selfishness and passivity in such situations mean we identify ourselves with those beasts who assault a woman every evening in public view; but the humanity has lost its vision and it sees only what it intends to see, and this selectivity emboldens the outlaws, and this indifference by the humanity the playwright covertly warns, will lead us one day to stand in queue near the black spot underneath lamppost waiting for our turn to be brutalized by the ruffians.

The incapacitated middle-class people are very focused about its own interests; they can discuss all that is wicked and horrible, uprooting our social structure but they will not come out of the 'shady zones'; they are great thinkers, philosophers, but only thinkers; they never come to the fore-front to stand for justice and righteousness. They pretend to be very honest and full of integrity, but in reality they are chicken-hearted people who as Manjula emphasizes are hypocrites, sham, devoid of any values, and they, as the arguments given by Bhasker and Mohan to Leela and Naina in their indisposition towards the lot of victim, can lead anybody to nuts:

Mohan: ...it could just be some, you know, drama—

...Was there an edge of hysteria?...Perhaps the victim is always somewhat diseased?...Nothing's proven yet except that the screaming is, quite possibly, genuine. Or at least it sounds genuine...People scream for all sorts of reasons!...Or sometimes for the sheer pleasure of it!(pp.121-122)

Bhasker: Well, the assailants tear the clothes off the victims and then, perhaps in the general excitement, remove their own clothes as well. (*Lights Out!*, p.126).

The male protagonists in the play are great stage actors, always justifying their stand with meek pretexts. Their every response and move is calculated and goaded by the darkness in the recesses of their souls. No doubt, Bhasker is worried about his wife and children but instead of acting like a responsible, conscious member of the society, dispelling the fears of Leela, he tries to hide his fears in the garb of ridiculous, disgusting and inhuman arguments and suggestions, and surrenders himself before the perpetrators of crime as well as inert and

toothless state mechanism. This self-centric approach by modern man has completely plagued the very foundation of our social ties where every individual finds himself alone in this world.

Lights Out! is a subtle satire on the *decent* and *civilized* people whose life appears as full of absurdities and contradictions to a saner head. If we are not honest to our own family members, then who will trust us? What an irony! A rape is described as a ‘ritual’, ‘a religious ceremony! Sacred rites!’, ‘the Cult of the Body-Builders’ or ‘heavenly’ and the rapists as ‘priests’ or holy persons by these *civilized* and *decent* people. Modern man’s total ennui and indifference to his fellow beings has resulted in the collapse of social fabric of fellow-feeling and the system has gone to the dogs where every individual like the characters in *Lights Out!* has his fair share of contribution : “ The characters are placed here between complete, unnoticed silence and palpable, horrifying screams. A group of urban middle class people watch brutalization of a woman in a neighbouring compound but fail to perform meaningful action. The play also proposes a complete negligence towards a woman’s (Leela) fright and sensitivity, by her husband” (Durgesh, B.Ravande, TRIVENI, 2007). Our society is full of selfish cowards like Bhasker and Mohan, and to the playwright such Bhaskers and Mohans are the main cause of unabated crimes in our society, and such people are more harmful than those involved in the gang-rape as they can give a bad name to anybody nonchalantly just to escape from their responsibilities towards the system of which they are part. That’s why they never feel ashamed of calling the tortured woman a ‘whore’:

Bhasker: And listen: there’s one more extremely important consideration to be taken into account...(There is a note of triumph in his voice).

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

Bhasker: She could be a whore, you know!

Leela: Ugh!

Naina: A whore! Do you think that’s what she is?

Mohan: Of course—she’s with four men at once!

Naina: (*Uncertainly.*) Is that enough to prove she’s a whore?

Bhasker: A decent woman would never be found with four men at once.

Naina: But she could have been abducted from somewhere, been brought here and...

Mohan: Decent woman would never submit to this sort of thing. (*Lights Out!*, p.139).

Through their arguments both Bhasker and Mohan somehow are able to sway Naina and Leela with the point that woman outside is a bad character; she is willingly with the four men pouncing on her, and the act can’t be defined as rape. Such pointless discussions and

meaningless responses prove that there is a meaning in their design and every calculated move is a deliberate ploy to avoid calling the police or encountering the rapists. The play is replete with bizarre and ridiculous conversation and we are led to the absurd world of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter; as Godot never comes in *Waiting for Godot*, similarly no one will call the police or raise a voice against the molesters and come to the rescue of molested woman.

To the playwright's probing 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 subjugated to innumerable physical, emotional and mental torture at the hands of men. These Talibanised men care a fig for the sentiments of women and remain insensitive to the feminist concerns of women at home or outside. Some like Frieda learn to remain mum or bear the torture as is the case with the woman assaulted while others who are vocal and a little bit assertive or persuasive like Leela and Naina are neglected and cornered and forced to accept the dicta of their husbands, fathers or brothers. When Naina questions Mohan about the rape, 'What would *you* call that —a poetry reading?' (*Lights Out!*, p.139), Bhasker's response is the height of insensitivity, '...If all they wanted was a little sex, why would they go to the trouble of so much violence?' (*Lights Out!*, p.139). The playwright asserts that only a woman can understand the trauma of a wronged woman, her gentle sensibilities and pains of bruised body and crushed soul. The males get pleasure by inflicting agony on women or by watching them in such a state. That's why Leela can't bring herself to the window at the time of crime and is horrified when Mohan and Bhasker move towards it but the latter seem to be very curious to watch the wrongdoing, a typical trait of males enjoying voyeuristic pleasures since time immemorial:

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, *The Wall Street Journal*, Jul 19, 2012).

Throughout the play, the main characters belonging to two opposite camps based on their sex are involved in a heated argument whether the offense is a rape or not, where the males' ulterior motive is to while away the time and not to intervene in the crime, and they

are successful in their motive of bluffing the women to the end. The difference in approach is because a woman always has a feministic sense of belongingness and identifies herself with the victim while a male fails to understand the delicate mind and sensitivity of women.

Lights Out! provides enough fodder for intellectual introspection of the mind-set of the Indian middle-class and a peep into the interior where their own selfish ends only stir them into any action; they assume the role of Bapu's three monkeys who deliberately refuse to listen, speak or see anything the world beyond. This happens, the playwright feels, because of utter failure and irresponsiveness of the state mechanism and civil society in protecting its citizens; the outlaws act in connivance with the state machinery—police—and as a result the total lawlessness prevails where the criminals call the shots while the lawful and the god-fearing cower at the very sight of these offenders, and the *decent* and *civilized* people search for lame excuses for avoiding direct confrontation with the molesters. The hypocrisy of the elite class is at its best in the discussion among Bhasker, Naina, Mohan and Leela:

Bhasker: Listen...(Quelling the others.) listen...you see that out there? (He gestures.) Now...that (With a certain fiendish satisfaction.) that is the point of being a decent woman! (Dramatic pause.) You see, if she were a descent woman, we people would go to her rescue! (Pause.) She is not, and so she's left to her fate!

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.

Leela: (Dully.) How horrible it must be to be a whore.

Naina: You mean, if she's a whore there's nothing we can do about all this?

Mohan: What's there to do? We can either watch or not watch—that's all. (*Lights Out!*, p.140).

The anarchy that prevails has engulfed the every aspect of human life; people prefer returning to their cells instead of raising their voice against the culprits or come forward to the administration for redressal of their grievances because the common people take it for granted that the law enforcing agencies and the law-breakers are hand-in-glove with each other. Then who will safeguard the rights of the citizens and do justice to them?

The play probes deep into the human psyche and studies the complex human nature which shapes our relationships in the world around us, and it is on account of these complexities, uncertainties and the working of human mind at conscious and subconscious

levels that to come clean regarding transparency, truthfulness and uprightness in human relations remains only a distant dream. Jayant Kripalani affirms about the play, “It’s 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” (Jayant Kripalani, The Telegraph, July 11, 2004). Manjula Padmanabhan unmasks the façade of the indifferent and spineless middle-class men-folk clubbing them with the brutes and hypocrites who join hands in inflicting pain on women in particular, paralyzing the system in general as the so-called *decent* and respected watch-dogs of society are so much scared that they feel highly insecure not only from the criminals but also from the police, and this serves as a pointed comment on the law and order situation in India. The playwright leaves for us a question to be answered: Who are *civilized* or *decent*—those who live in the safe confines of their homes discussing all that is plaguing our social structure, silently watching the others being brutalized and raped or those helpless, exploited, insulted and crushed people who are sitting at the fag end of their lives, like the woman in the clutches of four wolves, assaulted in the open? The playwright affirms that all of us have a ‘Bhasker’ or ‘Mohan’ in us; nobody can raise an accusing finger at others, because by becoming indifferent and unconcerned towards the defenceless and the vulnerable, we are siding with the oppressors, helping in their misdeeds, and the day is not far when the humanity will be in the clutches of such wolves who molest the woman.

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