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Implication of Insensitivity in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

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Abstract:

Indian English Drama has a very few women dramatists. Out of the few, Manjula Padmanabhan seems to be engaged in a serious attempt to bring about a positive attitudinal change in women towards themselves as well as in society towards women. This paper is a study of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* (2000) in the light of gender insensitivity and its implications. Manjula Padmanabhan started this play as a piece of journalism based on a friend's account of how she and a group of people were witnesses to a gang rape in their neighbourhood. They were informed that it was a regular occurrence and the residents adjust their daily schedules accordingly. About the writing of the play the dramatist says that the Bombay's *Sunday Observer* could not see any "news" in the story, as it was a year old. It can mostly be presented as a general piece about crimes against women, she was told. With Rekha Khanna, the then editor, assuring the dramatist of support and help in getting the play produced, she wrote this play, first performed as an excellent reading in Madras, and later in Bombay and Delhi. It was also filmed for television. The crux of the play is that in domestic problems which prevail in every house hold, women, the silent sufferer, is subjected to both mental and physical abuse day after day. She is forced to live as a mute victim of psychological and emotional trauma of everyday existence replete with seen/unseen violence. As the play unfolds, the reader or audience is bound to realize that woman in her roles of wife, mother or daughter suffers domestic abuse. Manjula Padmanabhan handles this sensitive issue with great subtlety.

Keywords: Manjula Padmanabhan, Indian English Drama, Women writers, gender insensitivity, rape, domestic abuse.

Of the Indian women dramatists Manjula Padmanabhan attempted to bring about a positive attitudinal change in women towards themselves as well as in society towards

women. She represents the contemporary drama to show that the women dramatists of Indian English drama, though very few in number, have emerged as a formidable force to reckon within India and abroad. She is one of the foremost among contemporary Indian English dramatists. Her artistic concerns lay with many millions of people “whose lives I cannot ignore – and which have an impact on my life – who seems to live beyond the edge of the acceptable universe” (Doctor). Truly the characters of her plays are ‘People I look at: describe and comment upon’ (Doctor). Answering a question on what she learned from the confrontation of her characters the dramatist replies that she identifies herself with all her characters. Says the dramatist: “I wear all their masks when I write about them, regardless of who they are and what they do” (Doctor). Manjula Padmanabhan, a “rather slow, sleepy, middle aged person with short hair and fondness for the internet,” (Doctor) created ripples in Indian English literature by being the first recipient of International Onassis Prize (1997). A dramatist who believes in natural morality, who does not like rules and regulations, which prevent free flow of ideas and choices, has a unique technique of combining situations and characters in her dramas. Yet she has an uncanny ability of distancing herself from her creation, “You cannot watch a sunset unless you are at some distance from it”. (Doctor)

A dramatist who started her career as a cartoonist, Padmanabhan knows pretty well that there is ‘cruel side to humor.’ The dramatist uses humor “Channeling the rough stuff going on around her” (Doctor). She further says that humor is like ‘sugar coating on a pill – it helps the medicine go down.’ (Bhorpujari) Truly enough, for a cartoonist, dramatist, short storywriter and novelist that Manjula Padmanabhan is reflecting the real world and its issues edging on the ‘cruel side of humor’ seems to be of primary importance.

In the play, a group of ordinary middle class people mostly men, choose to stand and watch while a woman gets molested in the neighboring compound. It is a one-act play with six characters. The action of the play unfolds in an upper middle class drawing-dining area of a sixth floor apartment in Mumbai. Leela, the lady of the house is frustrated with the screams and sounds she hears everyday in their vicinity. She accuses her husband’s carelessness in lodging a complaint. The following reveals the taken-for-granted attitude of an average husband and the wife’s feeling of neglect in a normal Indian household:

“You don’t care what I feel, what I go through every day! ... I feel frightened. All through the day, I feel tense ... At first it was only at the time it was going on. Then as soon as it got dark. Then around tea time, when the children came from school. Then in the middle of the day. Whenever the doorbell rang. Then in the morning. When I sent children off to school. And now – from the moment I wake up...” (4-5)

Leela becomes paranoid about the noises in the next building to such an extent that she stops sending the children out. She spends the whole day with the door shut, curtains closely drawn and stuffing her ears with cotton to avoid the sound. Yet she hears it all over the house including the children's room. By watching and hearing the noises every day, Leela feels they are in fact making themselves responsible, revealing the active role a woman assumes in the making of a society in spite of being confined to the four walls: "That we're part of ... of what happens outside. That by watching it, we're making ourselves responsible...."(6)

Bhasker, the husband who knows where the screams originate from remains apathetic: 'But see I'm not deaf and I'm not disturbed by them' (8). Much to her chagrin he tries to prove to her that police complaint would not really hold good in terms of law: "... So why should *we* waste a phone call" "... I don't want to stick my necks out, that's all" (7).

The women folk of the apartment complex express their readiness in lodging a complaint. But with their constraints as women they know none can do it alone. Leela comments, "No one wants to do it alone" (8). There is an element of suspense attached to the issue under discussion between Bhasker and Leela. Bhasker who knows what it is all about suppresses information from Leela: "... there's no guarantee it'll be on tonight..." (9)

The following lines from the text reveal the by-standers apathy of people as well as the callousness of the police force in the country: "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..." (9)

The first scene ends with Leela trying in vain to keep her cool reflective of a woman's sensitivity to her surroundings:

"I was, really I was. I did just what my guruji told me. I sat on a cushion, there by the window and I made my mind blank. I thought of a white wall, in the nothing written on it. And I thought of the cosmos, and of breath, coming in... and out ... in ... and out ... in... and out. And in my mind I said .. Om... again and again Om .. Om .. until my mind became absolutely quiet, absolutely calm..... Om...Om...Om...." (11)

Mohan, Bhasker's friend adds a new dimension to the typical male response a crime to be depicted in the play. He expresses his curiosity over how often one can stand and watch a crime being committed right in one's presence. The conversation that follows between Mohan and Bhasker throws light on the voyeuristic pleasure one derives by watching an act of crime. Mohan says,

“But this! Just for enough not to get involved, just close enough to see everything clearly. Or so Bhasker tells me”. “... 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?” (15-16)

What follows is a middle class intellectual analysis, which invariably leads to inaction:

Mohan: “... how shall I describe what I mean? Was there ...

Okay! Was it, for instance, like a singer’s voice,
high and sweet? Was it musical?”(18)

Bhasker : “.... What sort of situation would produce that, d’you suppose?”

Mohan : “.... Well, all right, we’ll rule out pleasure for the moment....

After all, it may be something private, a domestic fight; how can we intervene? ... Personally, I’m against becoming entangled in other people’s private lives. Outsiders can never really be the judge of who is right and who is wrong”.

“Well, the assailants tear the clothes off the victims
and then, perhaps in the general excitement, remove
their own clothes as well”. (18-20 & 24)

The discussion reveals that the crime is a rape and for sure that the two men take pleasure in discussing it. Commenting on the discussion, Anjum Hasan says:

A group of ordinary middle class people chose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalised in the neighbouring compound. However, this is something that is revealed only at the end. As the tension in the play builds up, one gets drawn into what seems like an absurd comedy – the insistent sounds of women’s terrified screams are discussed by two nonchalant men and uneasy woman in a manner an archetypal is almost bizarre. (Hasan)

If Bhasker is a ‘protective’ husband--“Don’t say anything” out loud – Leela will get upset!” (35) Mohan passes off as a class conscious pseudo intellectual:

“Well, as long as it’s the poor attacking
the poor .. You know how it is...

They live their lives and we live ours”. (24)

However, both are archetypal symbols of male chauvinism that dominate a society: Mohan’s observations, knowing pretty well that it is a rape are at once disgusting. Their observations--that ‘the screaming’, the wild abandon, the exhibitionism, yes, even the nakedness --” lead them to conclude that the noise ‘Can be part of religious ceremony! Sacred rites’ ... (25)

The discussion that follows shows that anything can be passed off under the banner of religion in a secular country:

“Not if it’s in the name of religion. Look at Sadhus? They sit willingly on nails or walk across smoldering coal. Look at the fast days? The flagellation with knives” (26)

The whole discussion is a pointer on how a serious matter can be made to appear frivolous in the course of an intellectual analysis. The discussion also points out how middle class morality determines one to impose one's own value based judgements on issues which concern the larger public.

Scene III opens with the crime under discussion actually taking place with the victim helplessly shouting for help. Mohan, Leela and Bhasker are found discussing the banquet the cook has produced, as Leela’s feminine instinct is alert to what is happening outside. Mohan, the intellectual too agrees that the actual sound is unpleasant and that it sets his teeth on edge.

The entry of Naina, Leela’s school friend changes the tone of the play. Naina recognises some one’s call for help. She loses no time in getting ready to rush. As expected the men folk prevent her from doing so. They all try to make her believe that the screams are all part of a religious ritual, but she prefers to see it herself to believe it. Naina smells something fishy about the whole thing from the way Bhasker and Mohan stop her from going out. When Naina peeps out of window, Bhasker and Mohan rush to the rescue of the horrified Naina. Bhasker, the ‘responsible’ husband tries to divert Naina’s attention, lest Leela should get upset with the disclosure. As Mohan remains at the window mesmerised, Naina shouts.

“Someone’s being ... There’s a woman being-” (35)

What follows is a description of rape through the eyes of Mohan and Bhasker a la chorus in a Greek drama.

Mohan: “Earlier I saw them actually sort of pounding and kicking – in rhythm, almost –“ (37)

Bhasker: “ ...see, they’re kicking her – And there now- they’re hitting her with their fists, aren’t they?...”

Mohan: “One man each leg. spread wide apart –“

Bhasker: “.... Well, you know, illiterate people believe that when a demon possesses a woman, it is always via the - uh – *lower orifice*”-

Mohan : “yes, of course, and that’s why, earlier, they were dragging her around in that ungainly position, as if to coax the demon to come out”(37).

When Naina insists that it is nothing but a rape, a mocking Mohan says:

“You must’ve seen a lot of rape... to recognize ...” – (39)

Disgusted Naina shoots back:

“Three men, holding down one woman, with her legs pulled apart What would *you* call that ---a poetry reading?” – (39)

Both the men pull Naina into a revolting discussion on rape, with the men insisting that the victim could be a whore.

Lude exhibitionism of male chauvinism of the average Indian male gets revealed in this Scene III of the play. Mohan comes out as symbol of an insensitive urban male, “You see, if she were a decent woman, we people would go to her rescue! ... She is not, and so she’s being left to her fate!” (41)

while Bhasker emerges as a middle class escapist, an upholder of “decency and middle class values”. – They [whores] live at the outer limits of human society,” concludes Bhasker... (42)

Naina, whose entry initially promises some positive action, too ends up intellectualizing rape, this time from a woman’s point of view:

“And women believe they are vulnerable to rape -” (43)

Unfortunately, the entire discussion dilutes the much needed action to stop the crime. The discussion also throws light on how today’s media functions:

Mohan: “Hey, come on! Any newspaper! Pictures like these, even the foreign press would snap them up----I’m telling you, we’d make a lot of money— after all, how often does anyone see authentic pictures of a gang-rape in action ?” (52)

A play based on a real incident concerning the vulnerability of women ends up as a mere drawing room or dinner table discussion. However, the play emerges as a strong voice of protest against physical vulnerability of women. What Manjula Padmanabhan “appears interested in exploring, against the backdrop of the sound, are the implications of a insensitivity, so extreme that it has developed a strange, cold logic of its own,” says Anjum Hasan.

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