

Exploring Trauma and ‘Deferred’ Action in Manjula Padmanabhan’s Play *Lights Out*

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Abstract. The emergence of women playwrights in the domain of Indian English Drama might have been a recent development but the contribution of the women playwrights has left an indelible mark on the oeuvre of Indian English plays. Playwrights like Dina Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan and Poile Sengupta have portrayed the plight of women in the contemporary Indian society from various perspectives. The present paper would like to consider Manjula Padmanabhan’s play *Lights Out* (1984) in the light of trauma studies and try to locate the responses of the witnesses on the issue of gang-rape, which forms the crux of the play. Any solution to the ongoing incident is deferred and the repetitive act of violence questions the position of both the victim of and the witnesses to the horrifying incident. The victim becomes an object of pleasure, and the scopophilic gazers evade the incident and fail to accept a social responsibility to change the reality. The play focusses on the sexual exploitation of women and how this exploitation takes the form of severe post-traumatic stress disorder where the victims as well as the spectators fail to combat social inequality and injustice. (190 Words)

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Tutun Mukherjee writes in her “Prolegomenon to Women’s Theatre”, “One voice that has not been heard much till twentieth century is that of the woman playwright. Drama has not been a genre that women have readily chosen... As playwrights, women scarcely figure on the literary map.” (Mukherjee, 5) Women’s theatre in Indian scenario is indeed a recent development. The presence of women playwrights writing in English has gained wider visibility only in the late twentieth century. The emergence of Indian English Women play wrights has ‘re-ordered’ the canon. The plays written by Dina Mehta, Poile Sengupta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Uma Parameswaran and Bharathi Sarabhai have contributed immensely to the literary canon by addressing the rampant gender differences and exploitation of women in the hands of patriarchal hegemonic structure. In the words of Mukherjee, “[t]he plays written by women, often presenting family situations, symbolize their *resistance* to the social pressures to circumscribe their sphere of activity/productivity and thereby contain their endeavor towards making explicit the various

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kinds of oppression and violence that form a part of women's daily experience." (16) Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery: An Aftermath of Violence- From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* writes, "The last and most recent trauma to come into public awareness is sexual and domestic violence." (Herman, 10) Atrocities of rape, domestic violence and sexual abuse are rampant in the society today and many of these playwrights have focussed on the exploitative nature of patriarchy to unearth the long history of violence inflicted on women.

Trauma has been looked at from various perspectives and it intersects and interrogates the questions of memory, pain and mental disorders caused due to severe stressor events. Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorder – 5 (DSM5) categorizes the stress or event as an "Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways" like "Direct experiencing, witnessing, learning of (in reference to family or close friend), repeated exposure to aversive details". This "witnessing" and "experiencing" of the event becomes a critical point of reference in Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Lights Out* (1984). The paper would like to consider the play in the light of trauma studies and try to locate the responses of the witnesses on the issue of gang-rape, which forms the crux of the play. Any solution to the ongoing incident is deferred and the repetitive act of violence questions the position of both the victim of and the witnesses to the horrifying incident. The play focusses on the sexual exploitation of women and tries to reason if the inaction on the part of the women are the aftermath of trauma. how this exploitation takes the form of severe post-traumatic stress disorder where the victims as well as the spectators fail to combat social inequality and injustice.

C.S. Lakshmis in her introduction to *Body Blows* points out that violence has been imbibed by the women since times immemorial, it has entered in the cognition of women as they have always been at the receiving end of it. The 'body blows' therefore do not necessarily refer to the physical scars but are responsible for the wounds on the psyche of both the victims who suffer and the witnesses who learn about the forms of violence. The title of the play is undoubtedly ironical. Padnanabhan wants to throw light on the trauma, responses and responsibilities of civilized people in combating the events that occur in the dark and remain invisible or unspeakable. Tapashree Ghosh in her article "Gang-Rape and Apathy towards Rape Victim: An Analysis of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*" writes, "[t]he title of play is significant. 'Lights Out' suggests darkness and darkness may connote

ignorance, indifference, fear, violence, lack of vision and lack of hope. It is doubly significant as any theatre performance begins only when all lights in the auditorium are switched off thereby creating a semblance of reality on stage." (Ghosh, 58-59)

The play "based on an eye-witness account" (Padmanabhan, 53) of the "incident [that] took place in Santa Cruz, Bombay, 1982" (Padmanabhan, 53), begins with Bhasker returning from office and his wife Leela "appears at the door of the bedroom" and she "looks like she hasn't changed out of her caftan since the morning. She stands staring at Bhasker, tense with anxiety." (3) Bhasker is "immersed in his paper and does not notice her." (Padmanabhan, 3) The act of un-noticing becomes a major entry point related to responses and responsibilities that the play questions. Leela repeatedly talks about an incident that has robbed her of peace of mind and sleep, "You don't care what I feel, what I go through every day!" (4) and she reminds Bhasker that as usual he had forgotten to call the police. Bhasker remains indifferent to her anxiety, "Pain? You're in pain?" he asks. (5) Leela continuously repeats how the incident, which has not been revealed, frightens her: "And I'm frightened, I'm frightened!" (6) and Bhasker still remains unnerved. Leela and Bhasker are witnesses of the horrifying event, and yet they neither have the courage nor the responsibility to report it. Although Leela says, "...we're part...of what happens outside. That by watching it, we're making ourselves responsible...", (6) yet she is unable to act. The stressor event triggers her anxiety as a mental disorder and she exclaims, "I can't help hearing them. They're so – so *loud* ! And *rude*!" (8)

Neil J. Smelser in the essay "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma" writes, "The likelihood of developing this disorder may increase as the intensity of any physical proximity to the stressor increase." (Smelser, 57) Leela may not watch the event, yet the sounds leave her psyche scarred. Bhasker, on the other hand, derives vicarious pleasure while watching it as Leela affirms, "I don't. ...But...you do! You watch it!" (Padmanabhan, 6) Rape becomes a spectacle for the people in the play. Bhasker goes to the extent of inviting his friend Mohan to witness the incident. Mohan begins the conversation saying, "when does it begin?" (14) His eagerness to watch the incident dismays Leela, "You shouldn't watch...You really shouldn't!" (15) to which Mohan replies non-chalantly, "What harm is there in watching?" (16) Padmanabhan clearly highlights the 'harm' that people like Bhasker and Mohan cause to humanity. Both the men silence Leela and repeatedly denies the incident as rape and evades the reality by labelling it as 'a religious ceremony',

'Sacred rites', an act of 'exorcism'. The vivid description of the sounds that are heard and the 'rasping, gurgling, crying' are evidently the responses of the victims are passed off as "sheer pleasure". Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" writes, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact...". (Mulvey, 750) Although the victim in the play is never to be seen on stage, yet the conversations of the male characters clearly 'style' her accordingly for their 'strong visual and erotic impact', to use Mulvey's words. The detailed description is given by Bhasker, "...the assailants tear the clothes off the victims, and then, perhaps in the general excitement, remove their own clothes as well." (24) This voyeuristic pleasure derived by the active/male gaze intersects with the victim's class as well:

MOHAN: And what are the clothes of the victims like?

BHASKER: Oh tatters and rags, usually-

MOHAN: So you'd say that the victims are, by and large, poor people?

BHASKER: Definitely!(24)

Bhasker's response is. "...they live their lives and we live ours." (24) Naina, a friend of Leela, arrives and she tries to resist the inertness of her friends but is silenced by them. The men continue watching. Eye-witnesses turn to scopophilic onlookers, as Mulvey points out, "The image of the woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer to demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order..."(Mulvey, 756) Naina breaks their inaction, "Three men holding down one woman, with her legs pulled apart, ... What would you call that – a poetry reading?"(Padmanabhan, 39) and adds, "Most forms of rape, especially gang-rape, are accompanied by extreme physical violence!" (39) Leela, who has long been silent on the issue has finally uttered, "It's a rape, isn't it?".(38)

Leela realizes the truth yet her only focus is to keep her children away from this and to safeguard the sanctity of her family and to keep her house clean. Everyone realizes that the victim is crying for help, yet they do nothing. When they are not able to move to action, they label the victim as a "whore" and Bhasker asserts, "If she's a whore, Leela, then

this isn't rape...so on what grounds could we call the police?"(40) The presence of the victim is only established through her sounds of pain and her cry for help. Sohaila Abduali in her introduction to the book *What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape* writes, "Discussions about rape are so often irrational, and sometimes outright bizarre. It's the only crime to which people respond by wanting to lock up the victims. It's the only crime that is so bad that victims are supposed to be destroyed beyond repair by it..." (Abdulali, 1) The play shifts its focus from the victim to the eye-witnesses who are no less than the perpetrators. Rape, a tabooed word, bears the stigma of ostracization. Judith Herman points out, "Most crimes of sexual assault still go unreported, as victims recoil from the public shaming they will almost certainly encounter if they come forward. Those who do muster the courage to report must then withstand the adversarial procedures of civil and criminal law, often described as a "second rape". (Herman, 264-265) Not only the victims, but also the witnesses fail to report the incident to the police. Surinder, Naina's husband, is the only man who tries to criticize the situation, and by the time he convinces others that the incident needs to be acted upon, Naina says, "You're too late-the screaming's stopped..." and Leela affirms 'disappointedly', "Oh! The it must be over for tonight!" Sanchayita Paul Chakraborty and Anindya Sekhar Purakayasta in their article "Resistance Through Theatrical Communication : Two Women's Texts and a Critique of Violence" rightly points out, "Surinder, this gaze network rounds off with further pathological outcome. Surinder is that ironic ever-courageous voice which is satisfied in the planning of resistance, but not in the active enactment of the resistance. Thus, he is indirectly involved in that vicious circle of rape-culture". (Chakraborty, 6)

Leela's constant feeling of being afraid and her hysterical cry at the end of the play bears testimony to her witnessing the horrible rape. Her passive participation and her inaction however are clearly the aftermath of psychological trauma that she encounters unconsciously. Herman identifies three main categories for the many symptoms of PTSD- "These are called "hyperarousal," "intrusion," and "constriction." Hyperarousal reflects the persistent expectation of danger; intrusion reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment; constriction reflects the numbing response of surrender." (Herman, 35) Talking about constriction, she mentions, "When a person is completely powerless, and any form of resistance is futile, she may go into a state of surrender. The system of self-defense shuts down entirely. The helpless person escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but rather by

altering her state of consciousness..." (42) She also observes, "Sometimes situations of inescapable danger may evoke not only terror and rage but also, paradoxically, a state of detached calm, in which terror, rage, and pain dissolve." (42)

The play *Lights Out* is Padmanabhan's plea to act. The play critiques the growing apathy of the educated and civilized people towards social responsibilities. However, the deferred action of Leela, her disassociated responses to the incident and her continuous living in fear make her a victim of trauma too. The female body of the victim signifies the physical violence where as Leela embodies the psychological wound. If the victim of the gang-rape is silenced by the perpetrators, Leela is silenced by her husband and his friend. Judith Herman observes, "The implications of this insight are as horrifying in the present as they were a century ago: the subordinate condition of women is maintained and enforced by the hidden violence of men. There is war between the sexes. Rape victims, battered women, and sexually abused children are its casualties. Hysteria is the combat neurosis of the sex war." (Herman, 32)

The traumatic moment of the victim of rape is also shared by Leela and Naina. Their responses are numbed and their voices, silenced. The play exposes the physical as well as psychological pains that are inflicted on women and how patriarchy has continuously silenced any resistance to the violence faced by women. Trauma, as Caruth has observed, works on its "belatedness" and might not surface during the event but has the capability to recur later. In her words, "...trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available." (Caruth, 4) The play *Lights Out* like the other plays by women playwrights has taken the onus to bring home the truth of the 'body blows' on women. *Lights Out* ends on the idea of deferred action: the victim is heard no more and the onlookers stay imprisoned in their inertia. It is indeed a clarion call by the woman playwright who appeals to her audience to rise from their slumber. This 'feminist intervention with trauma studies' calls for "identification and action" (to borrow Laura Brown's words from Griffiths essay) and the paper thus explores trauma and "connects to feminist literary criticism and its efforts to enact a kind of witnessing encounter between reader and text, in the act of reading itself and receiving previously unspoken and private truths." (Griffiths, 188) and tries to "consider the role of voice and how the victim's identity and

subject position factor into the availability of a receptive audience and the language with which to frame the totality of the trauma.” (188)

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