

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Social Denial of Sexual Violence in Manjula Padmanabhan's

Lights Out

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Abstract

Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Lights Out* deals with the stigmas and denial of sexual violence against women. It is based on a real-life incident which took place in a Mumbai suburb in 1982. Padmanabhan portrays a world in which women are deprived of their identity, their own voice, their freedom, and their rights, she has to implore men to hear her concerns, this further leads to gender discrimination in every sphere of life. The main theme of the play is associated with a sensitive issue of 'gang rape'. A group of urban middle-class people watches the brutalization of a woman in a neighbouring compound but fails to take any meaningful action to stop it.

Keywords: Sexual Violence, Gang rape, Social denial, Brutalization.

The play *Lights Out* is about the incidents that take place in a span of few hours in a flat. It is about the reaction of a family and family friends to gang rape that takes place in the building next to theirs and is visible from their window. Larry J Siegel discusses rape (from the Latin *rapere*, to take by force) as it is defined in common law as "the carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will (web). It is one of the most loathed, misunderstood, and

frightening crimes. Under traditional common law definitions, rape involves non-consensual sexual intercourse that a male performs against neither a female he is neither married to nor cohabiting with. However, there are many countries and cultures which recognize marital rape as a punishable offence as well. She further states that criminologists now consider rape as a violent, coercive act of aggression, not a forceful expression of sexuality. A similar point of view has been taken by Audre Lorde as she said, “that rape is not aggressive sexuality, it is sexualized aggression” (Lorde 8).

The play deals about the social stigma and stereotypes attached to women and rape. It studies the reaction of people and society towards this evil in a phase-wise manner. The first phase is ‘Avoidance’. As the play opens the lead male of the play as in the society tries to avoid the problem. Leela tries to convince Bhasker that something wrong has been taking place near them but he avoids by saying that it is nothing and that she is over-reacting and even imagining things in vain.

However, when his friend Mohan visits their home, he recognizes the fact that there is something that is taking place, but here starts the ‘Denial phase’. Leela gets the blame that she is too sensitive and that she listens to people more than she should. He accepts the event but denies it to be of any significance. When the details of the incidents come to light from descriptions of it from Leela and Bhasker, the males try to rationalize it that it might be a religious ritual, or domestic trouble and ‘rationalization’ of the events begins.

The screams, beating, cry for help all are distorted into something that does not need intervention from outside. Even the class differences are taken shelter of, to say that poor are doing it another poor so why should they intervene. It is only when Naina comes and witnessing the crime declares that it is ‘Rape’, there is a kind of ‘Acceptance’ of the fact but even then the males try to deny it by saying that it is not rape but exorcism is The men argue by a group of men on the woman. However, when that does not work then starts ‘Blaming the victim’ phase.

The victim of the sexual violence gets the blame, that it was she who was at fault. Her character and her poverty are blamed for her victimization. It is only when Surinder enters that they fully accept the fact that it is rape and that they have to take some action to make it stop. But the action is less and talks are more, and so starts the 'Planning and Procrastination' phase. They are all start planning to take direct action on the perpetrators and to kill them. For this purpose, they make plan and change it again and again so many times that the crime gets over and the perpetrators leave, and finally no action is taken by anyone in this regard.

In the play, three female characters appear Leela, Frieda, and Naina. Leela is a housewife, Freida her maid and Naina is her friend. Though Leela and Naina are friends they are not similar. Social norms have been set by a society which is generally followed by its members, and if they deviate from it is looked down upon, and such people get considered as social deviants as well.

In a patriarchal society, the role of a woman is considered to be that of a housewife, who looks after the house and children. This is not just common to the lower strata of the society but even the higher classes show their inclination towards this belief, but the education and the will in women to become independent saves them from being just a housewife.

The play does not provide any indication towards employment of either Leela or Naina, however the third woman is of course employed that is Frieda but only as a servant of the house. Looking this method of the characterization by the playwright it can be assumed the play shows that in the society of males the role of a woman is insignificant in the eyes of the males. The only woman employed in the play does not say a word in the entire play, she does not have any power to make a decision, whether it is about calling for help when another woman is undergoing brutal beating and rape or when men plan to kill the rapists by different methods, and she is there only to help them.

It is not just her gender role that makes her follow the orders of her employers but it is the economical/financial role as well because she is after all just a housemaid. However, Leela and Naina are not servants, but they, just like Frieda, do not have any say in the process of decision making. All they have to do is voice their feelings and opinions but their words goes unnoticed by the males. The opening of the play itself shows how less the voice of a woman matters:

Leela (moving towards him): Oh..! Bhasker-

Bhasker (not looking up from his paper). Hi.

Leela (when she is near him): Tell me!

Bhasker (not looking up from his paper): Mm?

Leela (sits beside him): Did you ...do it? (p 3)

Leela in this conversation asks Bhasker whether he has contacted the Police about the disturbance outside their building, but he is not at all bothered about it:-

Leela: Can't you try now?

Bhasker (finally lowering his paper): Try what

Leela: The police. Call the police.

Bhasker: (makes a face): Oh, for god's sake! (Going back to his paper). You're still worrying about that thing? (p 4)

The beginning of the play itself shows the gist of the play, that the male is indifferent towards the worries of woman, and that her opinion does not matter in any kind of decision making. It also indicates that something wrong has been taking place for which Leela is concerned but the attitude of Bhasker towards her concern normalizes the situation making one believe that perhaps Leela is worried about something trivial.

It is not only the worry but also the fear that Leela had gets normalized by her husband Bhasker. When she again and again tells him that she is worried and he should call the police, he is not even bothered to look at her from the paper he has been reading:-

Leela: I feel frightened. All through the day, I feel tense-

Bhasker: But there is nothing to be frightened of! They can't hurt you-

Leela: (ignoring him): 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 home from school. Then in the middle of the day, whenever the door-bell rang. Then in the morning, when I sent the children off to school. And now- from the moment I wake up

Bhasker: Oh, come on! You are making too much of it! (p 5)

This shows how insensitive a man is about the fears and sufferings of a woman. Men in their life never feel threatened as a woman does; he never feels the fears and threats that a woman has to undergo every day of her life. It is a Woman's Burden to educate the men about her oppressions. As Audre Lorde had aptly said:

In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes....Women are expected to educate men...The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future. (Web)

It is not only Leela who is concerned about the incidents taking place near their building but other women of the buildings are also concerned but just like Bhasker their families are also too insensitive to take any action in this regard:

Leela: But everyone is talking about it...

Bhasker: Everyone who?

Leela: Kummu, Picky, Tara, Mrs Menon, Nini...

Bhasker: And what are they doing about it?

Leela: well....they're...

Bhasker: Right! Wringing their hands and nagging their husbands!

Leela: No one wants to do it alone.

Bhasker: Huh! So why should we! (p 7)

Leela is not a strong woman, she wants to do the right thing but her reasons for doing so may not be for the best interest of the victim and as T.S. Eliot in *Murder in the Cathedral* said, “The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason”(Eliot, 34). Now and again Leela can be seen as more concerned about the crime taking place near to their residence rather about the crime itself. She is afraid for herself and feels that the sound is disturbing her house:

Leela: (struggling in his half-embrace): But their sounds come inside, inside my nice clean house, and I can't push them out! (Stops struggling.) If only they did not make such a racket, I wouldn't mind so much! (Pause, during which Bhasker rocks her gently) Why do they have to do it here? Why can't they go somewhere else? (p 8)

As her words show, she is more concerned about it happening near them, but it may be because she has not seen it happening and so blaming her for trying to convince her husband in any way possible may not be right, because may be she did it all only to make him understand and convince him to contact the police. Bhasker on the other hand is not completely honest with her. He has witnessed the incident taking place as he has almost all the details he has perhaps watched the rapes being committed more than one time. It is not only women who have been talking about in among themselves but men have been doing the same as is evident from the conversation with Mohan when he visits their house:

Mohan: Well!! So-when does it begin!

Leela: (shrinks): Wh-What?

Bhasker: (expressionless): Around dinner time.

Leela: (eyes starting from her head): You-you told him?

Bhasker: (smoothly): darling, I had to-after all, he's bound to notice when it starts-

Leela: But then-why did he come! (Turning to Mohan) Why did you come, knowing something horrible would happen?

Mohan: Oh-but I insisted!

Bhasker: He wanted to see it-

Leela: You wanted to see it!

Mohan: (unrepentant): Sure! Why not?

Leela: (she's not amused): But why! Why see such awful things, unless you must!

Mohan: Well, I was-curious,

Leela: About such things!

Mohan: (more seriously): I mean, how often can you stand and watch a (horrid glance at Bhasker) crime being committed right in front of you? (p 14-15)

The conversation shows that Bhasker and Mohan both are aware that a crime is being committed but instead of showing any determination to stop it from being committed he has come there to watch it being committed. It shows that the males in the society are so insensitive that they find it like a show to watch as the starting statement of Mohan shows, he asks when does it start, as if it was not a crime being committed but some entertainment show about which he was curious to know how does it get committed.

A famous novelist has said that rationalization is a process not of perceiving reality, but of the attempt to make reality fit one's emotions. 'Nobody can be certain of anything' is a rationalization for feeling of envy and hatred towards those who are certain, She has also said that we can evade reality but the consequences of evading reality. In the play, most of the characters try to evade reality, Bhasker and Mohan by denying the fact that a rape was being committed before their eyes, Leela is evading reality by not taking any direct action and by depending too much on her husband. Bhasker knows that a crime was being committed there but he denies it when Leela complains, though he has accepted it to Mohan. Bhasker and Mohan are more interested in watching it happen than in stopping it:

Mohan: Yes-you see? It's unnatural not to look. It's unnatural not to get involved-

Leela: (gesturing towards the window): But I'd be too frightened to go to their help!

Mohan: Who said anything about help? I'm talking about looking, that's all-
(p16)

The playwright has aptly shown how the men react to the atrocities committed against women.

Bhasker even goes to the extent of suggesting that the screams may be of pleasure:

Bhasker: Or sometimes for the sheer pleasure of it!

Leela: (loosing hope): Pleasure? No, this isn't for pleasure-

Mohan: How do we know?

Leela: (flustered): because...it's so... I mean...the crying, the gurgling-it all sounds so frightening, it just can't be for pleasure- (p 19)

Then they try to convince it other that it may be domestic violence, or exhibitionistic torture.

When all the rationalization fails, they take the shelter of religion and call it a religious ceremony:

Mohan: It's just that-you know, all the description, the screaming, the wild abandon, the exhibitionism, yes, even the nakedness-you know what it could be? You know what would explain everything?

Bhasker and Leela (together): No, what?

Mohan: A religious ceremony! Sacred rites! (p25)

They make excuse for not complaining against the incidents as it may be a religious ceremony and assume that may be it is because of this reason that the police has not come there or that nobody has complained.

Naina, however, watches it being committed and concludes that it is rape but neither Bhasker nor Mohan are ready to accept her version. They still insist that it is a religious ceremony, and when Naina vehemently opposes them they take another way and call it exorcism:

Mohan: In fact-not just any religious ritual but-you know what it reminds me of?

Bhasker: No, what? (Leela returns, subdued).

Mohan: An exorcism!

Bhasker: Well! I never thought of that! (p 37)

Normalization and rationalization are two processes that are used in ignoring social evil in societies. Normalization is when an act, no matter how heinous gets to be considered as a normal incident and rationalization is when the rationale is put forward to defend the incident. A lot of atrocities in the society keep on taking place day by day because they either have been normalized or have been rationalized in the minds of the people who constitute that society.

Rape is not just a crime on a person but also a crime on society, the offenders get bold when nobody opposes them and they commit more and more crimes. Albert Einstein once said, "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing." In the play the characters don't go to help the victim, they don't help because they are waiting for other to respond. In social psychology tests it has been found that in an emergency situation the presence of fellow bystanders who fail to respond inhibits helpfulness. It is equally true, however, that the presence of a helpful bystander provides a strong social model, and the result is an increase in helping behavior among the remaining bystanders. However, in the case presented in the play it is the inhibition of one another that prohibits the remaining others to remain a bystander.

This is very much apt in the scenario presented by the playwright. The play is not about the reaction of few imaginary people in a given situation but is a commentary or is a symbolic representation of the reaction of society as a whole, the characters of the play show how different people react to the sexual violence committed on a woman.

There are people who are watching it getting committed, they can hear the screams, they can see the victim, but they decide not to respond, not to act, not to go for help or to call for help. It's the society that is responsible for the crime being committed because it more busy in rationalizing it than in stopping it.

Studies in social psychology state that whatever factors increase a bystander's attraction towards a victim increases the probability of a pro-social response if the individual needs help. Help is not given freely if a bystander assumes that the victim is to blame, especially if the potential helper tends to assume that most misfortunes are controllable, if so, the problems are perceived as victim's fault.

In the play there is witness to crime being committed on women but none of them go to help. The victim of rape gets victimized by the witness as they shred down her credibility and blame it on her, that somehow it was she who was at fault for being raped. Gayle Rubin in an essay "The Traffic in Women" says:

There is no theory which accounts for oppression of women – in its endless variety and monotonous similarity, cross-culturally and throughout history – with anything like the explanatory power of the Marxist theory of class oppression. (Rubin)

Further, as Judith Butler has said, "gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real", her argument is extended by Tison Pugh and Margaret E Johnson as they say. "Because a woman learns to act like a woman, she is seen and, in effect, becomes a woman." This has been said in the most apt way by Simone de Beauvoir, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir).

In the play when it is under consideration by males that a woman might have been assaulted upon they decide not to interfere with the "assailants" as they live different lives:

Bhasker: I mean, they're not rich. Their clothes are, you know, torn pants, T-shirts, that sort of things-

Mohan: Well, as long as it's the poor attacking the poor (he trails off significantly)...you know how it is...they live their lives and we live ours. (p 24)

A woman loses the hope of getting help in the society because she is poor and she lives a life of poor. A woman is seen as an object, a commodity which can be used by the patriarchal

society for social, economic purposes and abused by sociopaths and criminals. As opposed to men, a woman in patriarchal society can either be a goddess or a whore; there is no middle way for her. For this reason if a woman is raped, society instead of taking the responsibility for the crime blames it on the woman, the victim herself for getting victimized. When everything fails the character of the victim is questioned, it is blamed on her character:

Mohan: Decent women would never submit to this sort of thing.

Leela (dully): If she's a whore, does it mean you won't call the police?

Bhasker: If she is a whore, Leela, then this isn't rape...so on what grounds could we call the police?

Naina: Why? A whore can't be raped? Is that the law? (p 40)

Naina later tries to oppose them saying that even whores have the right to choose their clients but Mohan and Bhasker counter her vehemently. One remarkable point of observation here is that no one is sure whether the victim is a whore, but because she looks poor and is getting raped they declare her to be one. The argument of the men is that a decent woman would not submit to this, however, they do not consider the fact that she has not submitted, even in the danger of her life she is not keeping quiet, she cries for help, she screams and fights for her life and dignity hoping that humanity is still out there and that someone will come to her help, unaware that the society and its people including her fellow women are questioning her character instead of taking any step to stop the attack on her life and dignity. They do not submit to the fact that she was not submitting to be raped by four men but was being brutalized and forced into it.

The play takes a new turn with the entry of Surinder. He not only states that it is rape that is being committed but also makes other men to accept the fact. As against to the people who have normalized and try to rationalize rape, Surinder is the vigilante type, though not up to the extent of taking action but only in making plans. After witnessing the crime his proposal is to, "Let's go and wipe them out." He is abusive to people who try to stop him:

Bhasker: I mean, after all, they're also human beings. We have to understand their problems, their-

Surinder: And what are you-a man? Or a mouse? (p 48)

His anger though is understandable, it is excessive to an extent that makes one wonder whether he is angry because he is angry because of a crime being committed or he is angry because he himself is an aggressive person. On one hand he seems to determine to take direct action on the assailants who are sexually assaulting a woman, on the other hand he himself is almost abusive to his own wife when she tries to reason with him against the violence.

Naina: Surinder, Please! Now stop all this nonsense!

Surinder (turns on her suddenly and says with quiet malevolence): Shut up-or I'll kick your teeth in! (Turning back.) We'll take these. (p 49)

He convinces Bhasker and Mohan to go with him to kill the assailants, and for that they start making plans. Their first plan is to use knives for the killings, which a few moment's later changes into burning them with petrol and then with acid, then running them over by car, then they consider using gun, then to electrocuting and then just to take pictures and sending them to press and to organize a public lynching. However, their plan to kill turns into money making plan soon.

Mohan: But Bhasker, what about the pictures, huh?

Surinder: Who would print them?

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? (p 52)

Not just the woman herself but a crime getting committed on her is also seen as an opportunity to make money, even rape is seen as a commodity that can be capitalized. Finally while they are still busy in making plans all the rape gets over and the rapists get away with it.

William Goldstone has said, “Justice delayed is justice denied” (Web). It fits the events of the play. The planning is nothing but a procrastination to avoid any real action. It is though debatable whether killing/lynching of criminals is justice, but it sure could have saved the victim in the play. However, the accessing planning delays the most important part of it, which was helping the victim and stopping the crime, but then it was never the aim, the aim was to kill, not to stop the rape.

One important aspect of the play is that the victim in the play is never seen onstage, and she is never named. She remains an anonymous victim of sexual violence that keeps on repeating. Many women have been named in the play but only three appear in person, Frieda, Leela and Naina. Frieda is servant in the house of Leela and Bhasker. She is the only woman in the play who is shown as working and she is also the only woman who does not say even a single word throughout the play. She does as she is told. She ignores the screams of the woman being raped and when asked she brings knives in a plan to kill the rapists. She is the representation of women who even though being economically independent to some extent do not have any say in the process of decision making, even though she was just a servant, she still was a woman but she neither acknowledge nor denies the fact of a crime being committed.

Leela is the wife of Bhasker, and seems to be a housewife, as there is nothing to indicate that she is employed, but her description of her fear and her statements show that she is in the house all the day which means she is not employed. She is concerned, worried and scared of the screams and people causing screams. She requests her husband in all the ways she can to call the police but she is more concerned about the crime being committed near to her place than by the crime itself. Her concern is not that the crime should stop but that it should not be committed near to her house but anywhere else. Her fear is for her safety and that of her children, but has no concern for the person getting victimized and brutalized.

Naina is friend of Leela and wife of Surinder. She is the first one to name the incident as a crime and rape, but she is opposed by the combined force of Bhasker and Mohan. She tries to put a defence for the victim but is subdued by the forceful verbal attacks of the two men and even though she is right no one is ready to accept her explanation for the screams of the woman. There is no indication to suggest whether she is employed or not. Just like Leela, her voice is not given any significance when she tries to reason with Surinder to stop him from killing the rapists, but that result in a verbal attack on her from her husband.

None of the women in the play have any role in the decision making, they all have to do as they are told and have to depend on their respective husband for everything. The play shows the set up and norms in a typical patriarchal society. How the voice of a woman is subdued, how her opinion, her fears are undermined.

The play is a micro-representation of a patriarchal society and the playwright has used symbolism is depicting the absurdity of the society. Mohan, a friend of Bhasker, is not disturbed by the screams and cries for help of woman but when he hears that a window in the building has been smashed by people causing the screams and cries is suddenly alarmed and says that they should be prosecuted that.

The locking of children in room when the scream starts shows how society trains people from childhood in ignoring and into denial of the facts that crimes do got committed on women and that no one helps them. It is also noteworthy to see that as the family and guest start their dinner when the scream starts, they sit in the light of candles as they switch off the lights in fear of their window getting smashed and eat while a woman gets raped within their earshot.

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