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Surrendering to the Menacing Darkness of Silence, Fear and Inaction in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

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Abstract:

This study intends to focus on the consumption of violence and the associated fear, deliberately and subtly illustrated by the elements of silence and fear in Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Lights Out*. Based on a true incident that took place in Santa Cruz in Mumbai in 1982, the play portrays a gang rape that could probably and possibly have been stopped by the silent, terrified, sympathetic viewers watching the crime being committed, thus consuming violence indifferently. The emphasis on the dramatization of the helpless spectators debating over the happenings in the adjacent building and conjuring up various possible interpretations, the discussion of these elite, conscious and educated nevertheless remain confined to either voyeurism for some or doubling up their own fears and safety. The brutal violence inflicted on the victim, the palpable and heart rending screams which disturb the fabric of domesticity of a middle class couple with their friends who watch it all with fear, ultimately doing nothing unfolds to us the 'near-schizophrenic' life in a metro. The "light out" is no more a thing behind closed doors but there is greater darkness in genuine human concern and humanity at large.

Keywords: Violence, Silence, Fear, Rape, Women, Humanity.

"A woman's garb covers me from tip to toe.

Inside, made of stone, a hardened heart alone

Can stone ever be molten by tear's ebb and flow?"

-Binodini Dasi.

Violence against women is a worldwide phenomenon which spans all social classes and age groups. Violence in both its subtle and blatant form is so deeply embedded in cultures around the world that it is almost rendered invisible. To quote Charlotte Bunch – "Opening the door on the subject of violence against the world's females is like standing at the threshold of an immense dark chamber vibrating with collective anguish, but with the sounds with protest throttled back to a murmur. Where there should be outrage aimed at an intolerable status quo there is instead denial, and the largely passive acceptance of the way things are". (Bunch) In this limelight, this study intends to focus on the consumption of violence and the associated fear, deliberately and subtly illustrated by the elements of silence and darkness in Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Lights Out*. Violence in India is multifaceted: not merely physical, it

is more often mental and emotional, subtle and indirect, most often insidious and difficult to recognize. *Lights Out* is based on a true incident, an eye-witness account. The incident took place in Santa Cruz, Bombay, 1982, wherein just like the play, a group of urban middle-class people chose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalized in a neighboring compound in the most inhuman manner. This had gone on for several weeks and just as in the play, no one went to the aid of the victims. The lights were ritually put out in the locality for the nights, for those who had their lights on had their windows smashed, so they chose to stay in the darkness rather than helping a victim whose heart-rending screams of an obvious pain could reach their ears and disturb the very fabric of the domesticity of a middle-class couple, yet they chose to consume silence and fear.

Leela and Bhaskar, an urban middle-class couple have been hearing the terrifying screams of sexual assault on a woman for several weeks in their neighborhood. Leela discloses her fears and persists on Bhaskar to call the police, to which he acts unresponsively calling Leela “oversensitive” about the issue and he also points at the difficulty of persuading the police about the credibility of the crime. At one instance it is revealed that though Bhaskar has apparently no desire to do anything for the crime being committed freely before their eyes day after day, nevertheless he does watch it, as Leela’s dialogue makes it evident, “We don’t even really watch, do we? I don’t. But...you do. You watch it!” (Padmanabhan, 6) And Bhaskar admits to this.

Bhaskar’s friend Mohan comes to their house to see the “crime being committed”. The perpetrators of such inhuman violence have commanded the inhabitants of the locality to put their lights out at night, thus succeeding in throwing darkness upon the very common human instincts that could have compelled them to react instantly to the ongoing crime and rescue the woman in distress. The conversation goes on amongst the group; Bhaskar and Mohan desperately try to come up with some or the other illusory explanation for the molestation that would make it sound right according to them.

What follows in the play is the discussion encircling the various illogical explanations justifying either the action of the perpetrators or their clear avoidance of staying away from the crime. They talk of the divide between the rich and the poor. Mohan says, “Well, as long as it’s the poor attacking the poor... you know how it is... they live their lives and we live ours”. (Padmanabhan, 24) They also discuss on the happenings being part of a religious ceremony which should not be interfered. Soon they are joined by Naina, Leela’s school friend, who initially appears to be a bit more outspoken and bolder than her terrified friend. She brushes aside the objections of the men, looks out of the window to ascertain, to see for herself what actually is happening. At this juncture, the audience has a distant hope lingering somewhere around the corner of the mind that perhaps Naina would be the beholder of the eye that cares to see the anguish of the woman. However, she is horrified to see three men holding down a woman while the fourth violates her mercilessly. The sight of this extreme torture shocks her into inarticulateness. She confronts Bhaskar and Mohan when they try to distract the women with spurious arguments to justify the crime. Together with Leela, she argues for police intervention as the solution to the problem. Discussions and debates continue and the men bring in ideas as exorcism of the woman in progress or even that the woman

could be a whore, for in Bhaskar's words, "A decent woman would never be with four men at once". (Padmanabhan, 40) The men refuse to realize that the assault could have been forced on the helpless woman by the four men whom she could not possibly overpower or fight against. At some point of time, their purposeful insensitivity raises the suspicion that the men were perhaps too scared to act, perhaps their trying to cover or hush up the happenings are a mere attempt to conceal their own fears, which their patriarchal self could not possibly admit to reveal or accept.

BHASKAR: But it's not even that loud. You're imagining it-

LEELA: (holding her arms tight around her) : And I'm frightened, I'm frightened!

BHASKAR: (reaching for her again): Calm down now, calm down. It's really not worth all this. (Padmanabhan, 7)

Eventually, Naina's husband Surinder comes on the scene. Surinder plans to kill them all. His exasperation is seen clearly in his desire to go and wipe the victimizers out. Incited by Surinder, the men decide to rescue the victim; nevertheless they end up each planning one bizarre thing to do after another. According to Surinder, rescuing the victim is more a question of accepting the challenge thrown by the rapists upon the self-respect of the inhabitants of the area. He does not trust the police or the law, and he considers all the worry and waiting as "women's nonsense" and shuts Naina up when she intervenes. (Padmanabhan, 47)

On the other hand, Mohan is cruel and inconsiderate enough to suggest, "Pictures like this... we will make a lot of money, after all how often does anyone see authentic pictures of a gang rape in action". Surinder suggests using knives while Bhaskar comes up with the idea of throwing acid on the perpetrators, while Mohan still has his doubts regarding the course of action that the others are eager to pursue.

MOHAN: Maybe we should wait for them to come out of the compound? And then throw it?

BHASKAR: The risk of being seen is lowered then.

SURINDER: We can take knives as well, just in case.

MOHAN: Supposing someone catches us, on the way? (Padmanabhan, 50)

Towards the end, they discover that before they could possibly arrive at the most feasible course of action to counter the crime they have been witnessing so long, it so happens that the victimizers have already left. The play ends on a note of despair, without concluding or coming to any solution to the tragic spectacle of coercive violence, a violation of a woman's private bodily space.

Lights Out leaves us pondering over the plight of a woman in an urban society where the educated, intellectual, urban conscious elite remain a mute spectator even when this goes on for days altogether. The play quite subtly questions the notions of urban violence operating through inside and outside, private and public, also representing the

perpetuating nature of gender violence in the city and shocks the middle class from its callous indifference. In an age where women's causes and women's issues are debated not merely amongst scholars but amongst the common men as well, and there are efforts being made on political and at socio-cultural levels to uphold the rights of women, to check their exploitation in the name of male hegemony, the women are raped, murdered and assaulted at home, workplace and just everywhere. It cannot be ruled out that one of the principal reasons for the continued cycle of exploitation of women is the growing apathy that has eventually become a part of the psychological conditioning of modern man of metropolitan culture.

India has ever been a land of contrasts and a wide spectrum of value systems from the extremely traditional to the extremely modern exist side by side. Society here remains firmly rooted in the patriarchal ideology which is premised upon the subject of male supremacy and a legitimization of women's oppression. Because this basic ideology remains largely unchallenged and unchanged at the same time, violence against women is also perpetuated, sometimes in the old forms and sometimes in different newer guises. What is significant to our understanding is that violence runs along lines of power in the sex/gender system. The family with its division of labor by sex, is the prime institution that underlies the sex/gender system. The subordinate role of women in the family is duplicated in the society as a whole.

Lights Out shows the clear documentation of the grim darkness of the nature of the crime committed, the mental and physical violence inflicted on the victim, and the muffled echoes of inaction, the silent consumption that perturbs the audience. The screams at the background of the play make the horror of rape a real experience and bring the pain, trauma and helplessness of the victim into the personal thinking space of the audience. The terrifying screams and the words break up the narrative and serve as pointers to the issue of violence against women and lay bare the passive acceptance of it by society. For days on end, Bhaskar ignores Leela's entreaties to call the police despite the traumatic effect on her being apparent. The women Leela and Naina are silenced abruptly by their male counterparts, and we also come to know that other neighboring women Kummu, Picky, Tara, Mrs. Menon and Nini all talk about the incident among themselves; in Bhaskar's words, "And what they are doing about it?... Right! Wringing their hands and nagging their husbands". This raises the question of a woman's silence and unwilling acceptance in the everyday world, here fears find no concern, her pleas remain unheard, or even when they are heard, she is treated as a frightened creature of circumstances, whilst her male counterpart succeeds in concealing his fears and cowardliness beneath the woman's fear and pleadings. This draws a parallel to the statement made by Shirlee Hennigan in *The Woman Director in the Contemporary Professional Theater*, "The socialization process makes a male... blind to the discrimination he perpetuates, and one cannot help to solve a problem if they are a factor contributing to it".

Leela's neurotic state of mind that has been perceiving the terrifying screams of anguish for several days signifies that in some way or the other, she has began identifying herself with the distressed woman being brutalized. She sympathizes with her to some extent, yet the urban schizophrenic attitude of a city dweller makes her wish

the victimizers could go somewhere else to carry on with their brutal proceedings. This again brings us to the near insensitive psychology that ceases one from acting in accordance to one's human instincts. With all the urbanization, sympathy finds no place in human heart to trigger one to do the upright thing. The absence of mere human feeling makes them feel happy if they are able to live peacefully at home as Leela says, "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, 44)

Amidst the horrifying screams, it is noteworthy that Freida, the maid in the household is in the background mostly setting the plates for dinner or answering the doorbell. Her muteness leaves us pondering over her possible thought processes reacting to the situation, and the consumption of the silent fear and violence on her part. We have hints of Freida being the urban self's own inevitable effacement of a voice, a muffled voice that could have shaken the minds and hearts into a darkness similar to those that have destroyed the peace of the neighborhood. As a constantly present character who speaks nowhere, yet is seen all the time on the stage, Freida is a voice that remains voiceless within the civic community. However, in the last scene when she is ordered to bring things like knives, acid and the rest of the self defensive arms, she is just too eager to get them at once, and this definitely makes it certain that even she was keen on meting out a just punishment to the perpetrators.

It is notable that the assault on the helpless victim takes place offstage and only the screams are heard in the background throughout the play. This might have been done by the playwright with the objective of avoiding extremely violent scenes on the stage, for the screams alone shake the nerves of the audience. Moreover, there is a clear purpose that the group discussing all about the crime, its ugliness and associated reasons, have absolutely no intention or drive for actually rescuing the victim. And true indeed, for even at the end, when they finally decide on rescuing the poor victim, the victimizers have already left the place.

NAINA: They've all gone!

LEELA: (*disappointedly*): Oh! Then it must be over for tonight! (Padmanabhan, 53)

The urban psychology of spectatorship on the one hand prompts to voyeurism as is evident from Mohan Ram's character, passive acceptance as shown by Bhaskar, apparently enthusiastic and revengeful people like Surinder, and then there are people like Leela and Naina who are simply too scared to do anything, and even if they try to respond, they are abruptly silenced by their male counterparts. At one point in the play, Leela argues, "That we're part of... of what happened outside. That by watching it, we are making ourselves responsible...". Padmanabhan, 6. In the progressive twenty-first century, it would not have been an utterly shocking if the women could themselves take a step by either calling the police or resorting to some such action in order to help the woman in distress, unfortunately however nothing as such happens. It is strange to note that the essential moral dictum of straining oneself from being a partner to the crime could have driven them enough to rush to the aid of the woman. But the very idea of silent spectatorship in the contemporary urban space assumes greater importance and as

such inaction rules the heads and hearts of the whole lot of six people in the play. They end up doing nothing at all, and when they decide to go, it's too late.

A drama of intense feeling encircling the screams that go a long way to pierce the unfeeling the human hearts and the impulsive creatures of the concrete jungle. These are the very representatives of the urban educated middle-class, a class that constitutes the greatest section of the Indian society. A vital aspect of the society in this age is the police that is expected to be in charge of the law and order and the citizen is expected to communicate and complain to the police in case of violation of any civil right. However, as *Lights Out* makes it very evident, the truth is altogether a variation from the set principles. The people here are scared even to report the ongoing crime to the police. There are two possible reasons behind this. One is that the citizen fears whether or not he would sound credible enough for the police to take action, and the second reason might be that the citizen fears undesirable involvement in legal procedure which might be lengthy and troublesome. Despite the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) and Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), the police force in a metropolitan city and elsewhere remains namesake when it comes to a grave problem like the one in the play.

Lights Out leaves us not merely horrified at the nature of the crime and the turn of events of the play, but it also makes us agitated and uneasy, realizing that as city dwellers, we have often let go of such crimes, succumbing to the terrors of such inhuman violence, thus knowingly or at times unknowingly becoming partners-in-crime ourselves. Men are not born biologically violent, rape exists because of a patriarchal, misogynistic culture that condones it, whether tacitly or explicitly, and because of widespread lawlessness that goes a long way to encourage it. Our responses to sexual violence must recognize, name, and both institutionally and individually counter the dangerous mix of impunity and entitlement at the core of contemporary masculinity that allows such violence, for good behavior is definitely not something that we can legislate, nor can it even be prompted or propelled in accordance to the need of the hour, it only comes from the essential human feeling.

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