



Urban Silence and Social Apathy in Manjula Padmanabhan's Play *Lights Out*

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ABSTRACT

Manjula Padmanabhan emerges as a postmodern dramatist who takes up sensitive issues related to political and social substances of her times. This paper examines *Lights Out* as a powerful critique of urban silence, presenting the realistic problems instead of fanciful narrative. On the backdrop of a real life incident in Mumbai, the play portrays the act of violence and social apathy of metropolitan India. In a small apartment of a metropolitan city, the play foregrounds the ethical and psychological dimensions of Indian society. Silence does not solely mean absence of speech; a withdrawal from moral duty, the oppression and subjugation also a source of silence. Padmanabhan draws a paradoxical world of gender brutality and complexities of urban life. The play exposes these disturbing indifference of urban elites towards a brutal rape. Through a close reading of the play, this paper reinforces *Lights Out* in the light of Urban silence and social apathy, analyzing how characters' responses to a horrific incident. By situating *Lights Out* within contemporary discussion on gender, this paper also sheds light on the minor characters who remain silent from the beginning to the end, and also challenges audiences' ethical responsibility as a witness in both fiction and reality.

I. Introduction

The contemporary Indian women English writers foreground the social and political realities of the times. Manjula Padmanabhan is one of India's postmodern dramatists who takes up the sensitive issues related



to political and social affairs of her times. She is one of the authors who portrayed realism and feminist through her Indian writings in English. Padmanabhan realises that the ‘gender-roles’ are socially constructed and it enslaves both men and women for the benefit of those who control wealth and power in the society. Padmanabhan underscores the social apathy against females and exposes the gender hierarchy through her works. In his essay, Vinod Bala Sharma remarks, “Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan must be studied as two outstanding playwrights who belong to another category” (Sharma, 2006, p. 26).

The plight of a woman in contemporary society has been brought out by Manjula Padmanabhan in her works. The contemporary Indian women writers have largely given emphasis on the prevailing conditions of women in Indian society. Her work focuses on social issues, where patriarchal society suppresses women and acts as a witness. Her works includes issues related to women, alienation, urban silence, rapes, dowry, deaths, domestic violence etc in a patriarchal discourse, elevates her as one of the feminist outspoke writers in Indian English writing. Like the confessional poet Kamala Das, Manjula Padmanabhan’s works are feministic in nature, as they deal with exploitation in the name of hegemony.

Lights Out (1984) by Manjula Padmanabhan is a one act play with six characters. The play was first performed in 1986 by Sol Theatre Company at Prithvi Theatre, Bombay. It has appeared in the collections of drama entitled ‘Body Blows: women, violence and Survival: Three plays’. Her well acclaimed play *Lights Out* describes the gloomy side of the patriarchal society that is insensitive to female sensibility and emotions. She is one of few Indian women dramatists who exposes the ugly picture of the society. *Lights out* as the title suggests revolves around the activities and events related to darkness of both, the mental and physical. The obscurity of the physical world is shown here by the assault of a lady. Padmanabhan exposes Indian society through her characters’ who are not just quite observers to the terrible crime but also spear to appreciate viewing it.

Lights Out is a one-act play, which demonstrates 1980s urban India and the rising violence in elite society. Padmanabhan gives attention to the psyche of the upper class, withdrawing their moral responsibilities. The playwright throws lights to the women characters’ despite their social status. This paper illustrates the Indian urban society, where women are silenced in terms of patriarchal hegemony. *Lights Out* asks for attention to the plight of women in contemporary society. The play is based on the real life incident of gangrape in open during night in Santacruz, Mumbai in 1982. The play with a clean stamp of garden division, makes a powerful plea for understanding the feminine sensibilities in a world which hardly allows women to be independent, organised, and focused. In the play, Padmanabhan



presents a world, where the females have no identity, no voice and no standing of their own. They have no plea before men for consideration of their concerns, for their rightful existence and this leads to discrimination against them in all walks of life. This paper argues that *Lights Out* portrays urban silence and social apathy towards women, rooted in fear, patriarchal hegemony, and moral dilemma.

II. Literature Review

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* has received a significant critical response for its depiction of real life incidents in a minimalistic setting. Critics have approached the play as a social commentary on gender, class, violence in an elite society.

Shivam Singh and Gunjan Sushil study Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* in the shed of gender discrimination and violence upon women. The play shows extreme violence and questions on moral responsibilities of elite society. The study also highlights how Leela, Bhaskar's wife, is concerned about the unpleasant sounds heard from neighbouring buildings. The article emphasizes the brutality of society while drawing attention to Leela's concern as a woman. In their study they explore how Indian women are still facing similar gender and socio-cultural discrimination (Singh & Sushil, 2021). While their study illustrates gender oppression, silence as a root to such violence remains insufficiently examined.

Ruby Kumari illustrates Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* as a study violence. The study explores women's identity, her freedom and rights in contemporary society. The study juxtaposes the comfort of domestic space and horrific realities of the outer world. It states the moral dilemmas of an elite on the backdrop of Leela and Bhaskar's conversation on the strange. The sound of the sexual assault is the root to such violence. Kumari argues on multiple dimensions of violence - physical, psychological, and systematic which reveals the power dynamics in contemporary society (Kumari, 2025). The discussion over spectatorship is significant, however the presence of silence has received limited critical response.

Similarly, in her study, Tapashree Ghosh focused on the trauma of gang rape in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*. She has drawn a parallel between the fictional world and the world outside, as her study explores the impact of brutal incidents in modern context. Such an incident leaves shock and unanswered to the entire nation. She highlights how middle class characters forward several reasons to prevent them from the incident, and the victim's cries remain unanswered (Ghosh, 2017). Though her study expands socio-political relevance of the play, the primary focus has been given on physical violence rather than moral withdrawal.



In a similar vein, Meenal Basis and Sanjay Kumar Singh study Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* in the shed of political resistance. The study focuses on two of Manjula Padmanabhan's acclaimed plays, *Harvest* and *Lights Out*. The study emphasizes the silence of Jaya from *Harvest* and Leela from *Lights Out* as a form of resistance in an oppressive condition. However the study does not articulate the silence of urban society (Bais & Singh, 2025).

The present study offers a valuable insight into silence that operates not merely as absence of speech but as lack of ethical responsibilities. This paper argues on Frieda's muteness and refusal of urban elites to take any action against the brutal incident, rooted in silence and apathy in the drama. Therefore, the present study repositions the play as a critique of urban silence, where violence is evident inside and outside of the apartment.

III. Urban silence: Imposed and Chosen

The play *Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan is very realistic, both in style and content. It is so realistic to the extent that they represent the lives of common people through incidents that are part of day to day life. The play is an attempt to expose violence against women taking place in the society where silence operates as the structural backbone of the drama. The play foregrounds two distinguish yet interconnected silence; the silence chosen by Frieda, a lower class woman and the silence chosen by the upper elite class against social injustice. Together this portrayal of silence the paper illustrates the social apathy and urban silence.

Within a small apartment of Mumbai, *Lights Out* deviates its characters into two, the upper middle class and lower working class. The beginning of the play introduces Frieda, a middle-aged woman; working as a cook and wearing an untidy sari. She is generally expressionless and her silence may remind of her socio-economic conditions. She is equally disturbed by the indifference of middle class individuals' who used to witness a brutal act of sexual assault, the strange sound from the neighborhood building. Unlike the other characters who are engaged in rational arguments, Frieda is always busy in her household activities. Padmanabhan gives the audience equal spectatorship where the mutability of Frieda also urges social response towards the lower working class. The scene I of the play juxtaposes two different situations as it established Frieda's position within the domestic space, Manjula Padmanabhan writes:

BHASKER: Frieda?(Once he has settled) Frieda! (doesn't wait for a response). Where's my tea? She appears from the kitchen, already carrying the tray, complete with tea cosy and one cup, walking slowly. LEELA appears at the door of the bedroom stage right. She looks as



if she hasn't changed out her caftan since the morning. She stands staring at BHASKER, tense with anxiety, but he is immersed in his paper and does not notice her.

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?

FRIEDA settles the tea tray down on a low table beside the sofa. She bends, pouring the tea into the cup. Heads back to the kitchen. Her activities go unnoticed by the other two. (Padmanabhan, 1986, p. 4-5)

At its core, the play is not just about a single incident or social apathy but it is a critique of social structures, and reinforces the deprived class too. It also depicts the collective failure to respond to both the victim on the outside and the victim inside of an apartment. The play juxtaposes a question on the mutability of Frieda too. It leads to a question whether it is systematic violence or whether it is a choice of the common people. The characters have power to interrupt yet they choose silence over systematic oppression. Her works are unnoticed by the two in the very beginning of the play. As Raby Kumari observes “Lights Out is a social commentary on inequality, violence and systematic oppression in contemporary society” (Kumari, 2025, p.3343) . The scene I of the drama throws lights on Frieda's physical moment instead of her speech. Her actions are unobserved by the couple; the absence of dialogue and her unnoticed appearance further highlights the systematic oppression and domestic hierarchy.

Respected citizens of middle class families have a conversation on a heinous crime as they do not want to get involved in a police case. The verbal excess of Bhasker and Leela contrasts with Frieda's silence whereas her silence is not to be equated with the upper class. The form of silence embodied by Frieda is different from the elites's silence. While the other characters discuss and debate, she walks silently and does her household work. Her silence is awakening: it raises a question - is it a matter of choice or is it structurally imposed? She appears in the scenes, performs her duty and leaves without any dialogue. Thus, scene I of the drama records the appearance and dialogue of all characters' except Frieda.



Speech is aligned with authority and silence marks subordination. Here the dialogue between Leela and Bhaskar implores the silence of elites against violence, meanwhile Frieda's silence suggests the silence against both patriarchy and class struggle. Manjula Padmanabhan silenced the voice of the rape victim and Frieda. We hear cries of the rape victim and see the appearance of Frieda only. However, there is no information cited in the play about the identity of these two women. It can be said that their silence emerges from their socio-economic position. As a domestic worker Frieda's opinion is excluded from the moral deliberation of the elite. Her silence can reflect the systematic marginalisation rather than the ethical evasion.

The contrast between Frieda's silence and the verbosity of other characters is the critique of urban society. Bhaskar along with Leela, Mohan and Naina join the mission to counter the assailants. They consider the victim as whore too. They are analyzing the sound of the cries; is it pain or sexual pleasure? Their verbal engagement leads to inaction and the urban silence. Ironically, Manjula Padmanabhan privileges silence as a significant constrained agency. The apartment becomes a microcosm of urban India and the characters as the portrayal of urban society where silence operates at different levels across the class division. Through the play Manjula Padmanabhan wants to put 'lights on' on the serious issues of silence that reinforces systematic oppression and exclusion.

One of the most striking aspects of *Lights Out* is the comment on the spectatorship. The play illustrates how violence is consumed, processed, and ignored in elite society. The characters' are the passive observer of heinous violence which also marks the passive observer of any society. The characters engaged in debate yet prevented themselves from any action. In her study, Ruby Kumari comments on how characters observe and debate without action on stage (Kumari, 2025, p. 3341). Their justification that someone else should take a stand against assault mirrors the real world instances. Through this depiction of Urban silence, *Lights Out* is a social commentary on the social indifference and apathy. The drama also gives instances of how violence is normalised. The couple have a debate on whether to report the matter to the police or not. Manjula Padmanabhan portrays the indifferent attitude of her male characters' which mirrors the fragility of human ethics. She writes:

BHASKER: We've discussed this before -

LEELA: I know, I know . You've told me they're not interested in cases like this, they don't bother about minor little offences... but...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! (Padmanabhan, 1986, p. 7)

Though the play reveals the systematic failures of human ethics, Padmanabhan also privileges a woman's concern for another woman. The play has not disclosed the identity of the victim. Leela is not connected with the victim however she felt so connected with her. In the drama Leela's appearance sheds her personal sense of righteousness. Her silence is not cowardly but a contradiction between her obedience for her husband and her personal agency as a woman. She is increasingly bothered by the reaction given by her husband. In one of the scenes from the drama, when a neighbour gives advice to prevent the attack, she replies in a low voice, "how can you say that? But how can you watch and not do anything?" (Padmanabhan, 1986, p. 34).

Silence is evident from the very beginning to the ending scene of the drama. In the beginning there is a silence against violence. Moreover, the beginning scene also recounts the silence of Frieda as a minor character. The most thought awakening scene is the Scene IV where characters took sexual assault as an entertainment. This scene reveals how characters watch a crime and approach a source of entertainment. At that time, Leela can't laugh like the others. She is standing in a horrific silence. Her silence reminds us of the collective failure of our society. Similarly, Frieda remains silent, her silence also a social awakening of dominance in the society. Both these two women chose silence which posed a question by Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty in "Can the subaltern speak?" According to the Spivak, a Subaltern woman can't speak in a dominant discourse, she remains silent. Bais and Singh (2025) observe silence, a weapon that is chosen by Padmanabhan's female characters. Thus it leads to a question on the different approaches of urban silence and social apathy for the male and female characters (Bais & Singh, 2025).

The urban silence is different in its meaning for Padmanabhan's urban elites. The play is the depiction of the growing indifferent attitude of the people against crimes. Bhaskar's silence is objectified with failure of an urban elite's immediate action against violence. Leela's silence reminds us of the status of a married woman as an obedient companion. Moreover, Frieda's silence depicts how women are considered as domestic slaves. Though the play is written in 1984, it's far reaching impact has still in the society where after three decades, Indian women are still facing similar social apathy, brutal rape, forceful marriage and silence. The play is an intersection of gender, rape and violence. It is mentioned that there was a gang rape happened near a building and also some disturbing sounds came every night. The identity of the victim is not disclosed and we can interpret that maybe she is a working class lady or a sex worker. Moreover the characters are too hopeless from the system. They have not found an



appropriate reason to complain about the crime to the police, so they all remain silent. Padmanabhan has criticised the system through the indifferent attitude of her characters where people avoid to interfere in the matters of the police. It is clear from the dialogue that the police also do not take interest in such petty affairs on behalf of the evidence of strange sounds. While consolidated Leela, Bhaskar says, “No, that’s not enough,

don’t you see? If the police had to worry about things like that, they’d be psychiatrists, not policemen... you never know with the police these days. They may say it’s none of your business, what goes on in the next compound. After all, there’s the chowkidar...” (Padmanabhan, 1986, p.7).

IV. Conclusion

Thus, the plot is based on a real incident of sexual assault which is ended with a drawing room discussion. The play emerges as a strong criticism against urban silence and social apathy. Manjula Padmanabhan uses theatre as a medium that exposes a deep-rooted apathy of the society. The play is a social commentary on how societal structures reinforce a culture of silence. The three oppressed women are silenced in the play. Their voice has been taken by gender, class and violence. Moreover, the male urban characters chose silence to prevent themselves from the crime. Similarly it is also a critique against the silence of the system. Through the interplay between power and systematic oppression, the play serves as a profound commentary on human condition in an Indian society. The play not only exposes growing urban silence and social apathy; it also reminds the audience to distinguish its evil consequences. Thus, *Lights Out* stands as a crucial text, urging individuals voice and meaningful engagement with justice and ethical responsibility.

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