



Rape and Patriarchy: A Study of Majulla Padmanabhan's Lights Out

KEYWORDS

Catharsis ,scopophilia, Brechtian Technique, Existential Dilemma, Male Gaze

Ms. Parul Nagpal

Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sc., Maharishi Markandeshwer University, Mullana (Ambala)

Dr. Tanu Gupta

Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sc., Maharishi Markandeshwer University, Mullana (Ambala)

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the attitude of people especially men in India Towards physical abuse of women with special reference to an epoch making drama –“Lights-out” by the very eminent dramatist Manjulla Padmanabhan. Rape which sounds raw and crude surprisingly exhorts raw and crude erotic feelings in men and we see through the play that their focus shifts from feeling the pain of the victim and empathizing to figuring out details of why and how the incident would have taken place. They also go a step forward by accusing the woman as a whore if she is attacked by two or more men or even call her a prostitute even though she is crying in pain. The paper undertakes to reveal such horrid realities together with drawing parallels other texts that have also reflected a delay in remedial action and have questioned the essence of human existence. It is not only men but women too that we find faltering and becoming a reason for such heinous crimes to perpetuate further. The paper questions the judicial and social security system of our so called civilized and sophisticated race of people. The paper serves not only as an eye-opener but also gives context and content for the readers to ponder and find out a way to fight out “Rape” both physical and mental.

The creator, the preserver and the destroyer – Lord Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, they all worship Ma Durga who symbolizes power, might, life, vitality, strength, wisdom and one who combines the powers of creation, preservation and destruction. Women in our country and culture have always been associated with names of goddesses like Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, Bhavani, Ambika etc., but their plight and treatment stand in stark contrast. They have been considered holy, pious and embodiments of all virtues in our scriptures but sadly they are the ones who are tortured, exploited, abused, ill-treated, dominated and ripped of their esteem and self respect. Their story of exploitation is as old as their existence. Right from the unequal or partial treatment that she gets from the family that she is born into to the tortures that are inflicted on her by her in-laws and the servitude that she succumbs to in her old age, there is no stopping. The problems like identity crisis, no freedom to make choices, the power of saying “no”, independent decision making and survival, physical and mental abuses etc. have been there since long but today the attitude of society towards rape and rape victim is suffocating to death.

With a few voices raised, a few protests and march-outs here and there, our society by and large has remained a mute spectator of “her” pain. Be it the beating and burning within the confines of the four walls or depriving her of her sanctity and self respect publically, what we chose to do is either to talk about these issues in hushed voices or make protests but seldom do we take actions to curb these problems from the root.

In the Manjulla Padmanabhan's Lights Out this age old issue of woman's plight and helplessness has been taken into consideration. In 'Indian Women and Protest: A Historical Overview and Modern Day Evaluation', Daniel Moase clearly marks out that using “sexuality and violence, women in India have often fought by announcing celibacy and elevating themselves through this renunciation”. But Padmanabhan shuns this kind of renunciation, and rather,

strongly advocates the acceptance of the body, retarding and dismantling the shame associated with it, and demanding to respect it. In 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' Chandra Talpade Mohanty raises an alarm looking at the situations of women in eastern countries like India and she resorts to 'ethnocentric universalism', i.e. studies women in the east as a uniform, homogeneous mass. But the women playwrights like Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta are trying to show how an Indian woman's orientation towards her sexuality can be used to define an alternative culture of expression, instead of dropping her self esteem and looking down upon her femininity or lamenting upon her sexuality, a feeling that is instilled into her right from the time she gains consciousness she should rather learn to enjoy and savor the difference.

Manjulla Padmanabhan whose plays in English have been received with much attention is very vocal and has tried her best to drive home a point of view which if sinks in the society would do much good to the present status of women. The play starts media res, at a point where a crucial decision has to be taken. Set against the backdrop of the middle-class apartment belonging to the so called educated and enlightened couple of Leela and Bhaskar, the audience and the readers are made aware of the daily mystery of heart rending screams from a woman who is never seen but is in obvious pain, which is destroying the fabric of the couple's otherwise smooth and happy living.. These blatant horrifying screams filtering into this middle apartment every night perturb Leela more than Bhaskar. The screams come from nearby building where a woman is gang raped every night, whether the same woman is raped every night or a different one is not made clear. The scream is not so much a cry for help as an expression of pain and frustration. Not surprisingly this horrific incident is used to epitomize the violence and exploitative neo-colonialism of male prejudice. But a greater horror awaits us as we progress reading the play and find out how a painful delay in taking initiative or action not only

harms and pains the victim but also kills Leela every second. Taking quick action may sound very simple but there are a lot of factors that make this simple thing difficult and all these aspects are brought to light by Padmanabhan which are a true reflection of the problems, hurdles and dilemmas that even people with a tender heart face at least in India.

Padmanabhan arouses our horror at the rape and at the same time, a disgust and anger towards the passive spectators of such brutality. We feel like shaking those men and women out of their slumber and telling them in their face that they are acting like Shakespeare's tragic hero Hamlet caught unnecessarily in the existential dilemma of "to be or not to be". The characters like Hamlet have the heart to wait and contemplate for so long even after witnessing the crime themselves before they actually decide to take some action, and when they finally do it is too late. Here again a lot of questions are raised: whether it is lack of courage and character, or they are unaffected and socially alienated or incapacity on their part that leads to this delay or is it a reflection of the Indian judiciary that takes so long contemplating and postponing their judgment and finally when it reaches a decision and delivers it becomes too late. So here delay in justice makes "justice denied" -- the way it happens in the end of this play which ends on a note of despair, where the final decision of taking action and rescuing the woman proves useless. There is no solution suggested and no didactic preaching, only the reader is left uneasy, restless and agitated, squirming and mentally agonized. But perhaps that's what the intention of the playwright was. This is perhaps a Brechtian technique meant to spur the readers to reaction.

The play also reminds us of the "Existential Dilemma" and "Social Alienation" that Samuel Beckett talks about in "Waiting For Godot". The futility of human existence, man as an aimless wanderer, social alienation and inclination towards individualism, incapacity for action which can also be seen as impotency and lack of creativity leading to monotony is all that we are left with is what the play by Beckett and the current play under analysis convey to us. Night after the same painful screams are heard, there is no action, postponing of action keeps taking place, there is social apathy, men are devoid of their manly characteristics and futility of existence is very much evident by the fact that if we cannot do anything to save somebody's life and if we can remain mute spectators of a brutal crime then it doesn't really make a difference whether we are living or dead.

Anna Furse, in 'Performing in Glass: Reproduction, Technology, Performance and the Bio-Spectacular', writes: "We might wrest the gaze from being on us to considering our own gaze on ourselves ... because it is a matter of necessity if we are to grapple with systems of control ... Women's bodies continue to provide spectacle ... The gaze has now successfully penetrated our insides." This deals with two important aspects that have been raised by Manjulla Padmanabhan in her play Lights Out. First, it raises the issue of 'male gaze' that penetrates women's private space, which is convincingly discussed by Laura Mulvey as 'scopophilia'. Therefore, by offering us the opinions of women about the ongoing rape, Padmanabhan re-directs the 'gaze' as emanating from men, towards a situation where it is elicited from women, the sympathetic observers. There is a sea difference in the types of gaze from both the men and the women characters where the women are agonized, moved and perturbed by witnessing the crime, the men on

the other side draw sadistic pleasure in seeing the women cry in pain. For men it is not the pain of the woman rather it's a matter of erotic pleasure for them which again points towards the dark side male psychology which only focuses on the female body and not the soul inside.

If we talk about "Hamartia" or "Catharsis" as in Aristotelian terminology then the tragic flaw which leads to such tragedies every day in our country is the inaction of the mute spectators in the play who represent our society as a whole. They only sit back and dwell into along discussion and no action. As far as the second term or phenomenon is concerned there is no catharsis at all i.e. there is no purgation of emotions on the part of the characters who are watching the scene of molestation, because none of them had actually empathized with the victim, the men were simply drawing pleasure and women wanted it to stop because it was spoiling the tranquility of their daily lives.

The dramatist has raised another issue which has high contemporary relevance and that is of our "social responsibility and sensitivity". Through the characters of Mohan and Bhasker an ugly picture of our society emerges which is highly irresponsible, insensitive, cold and unaffected by the pain and sorrow of people around them. There are also people who have the heart to view such spine chilling incidents as rape and physical violence and yet remain unaffected and unconcerned. This reflects very well in Bhasker's suggestion to his wife Leela who is perturbed and feeling low because of those agonizing screams that she hears every night:

".....not let them disturb you like this.
Pretend they are not there" (Lights Out, 141)

Bhasker emerges as a selfish, stone hearted male who finds fun and pleasure in such a brutal activity and this becomes evident when he responds to Leela's exclamation:

Leela : "No one could enjoy such awful thing!"
Bhasker : "Except those involved" (Lights Out, 142)
Bhasker : "Baby, you must learn to ignore it" (Lights Out, 143)

Mohan complements Bhasker in his temperament and perception when instead of sympathizing and empathizing with the victim he becomes excited. His animal instincts have killed the noble soul and this reflects in his comments:

Mohan: "I mean, how often can you stand and

Watch a crime being committed right in front of you" (Lights Out, 143)

These utterances reveal the psyche of Indian males who derive sensual pleasure even at the sight of such a brutal act just because it involves a woman and her body. They get so overpowered with pleasure that they forget that the woman who is being raped is also a human, is somebody's sister, daughter and mother; they only have the excitement of watching the live show.

When Naina finally convinces these men that it is actually a rape then Padmanabhan discloses another face of male hypocrisy by showing how men, appropriate and articulate situations in their own stride and this they have been doing for countless ages. Taking a double edged sword in their hands they now try to explain that since the victim

is with four men at a time hence she cannot be a decent woman. When the women refuse to be distracted from their conviction of going to the police the men change tracks and say that even if they accept that the incidents may have sexual overtones it cannot be rape as the women being tortured seem to be cheap and probably a whore:

Bhasker: If she's 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?"
(Lights Out, 175)

Here again Padmanabhan has touched a burning issue relating to the Human Rights. Even if it is prostitution a whore cannot be forced to share the bed against her will. So Padmanabhan has highlighted a very important fact that thinking right will be of help only if it is backed by acting right. Leela's constant concern for the poor woman's agony and brutal treatment was righteous but it was never backed by a righteous action. Instead of waiting for her husband to take the plunge, she should have acted actively and taken the right action.

CONCLUSION: Hiding away or running away from reality is no solution to the problem. Similarly we as readers can relate very easily with this incident wherein we see or witness the wrongs, even feel sorry but never take corrective actions. Not being an altogether a didactic play, Lights Out has dealt with a very sensitive issue which has become the need of the hour and is required to be pondered over. Men need to change their train of thoughts and also how they look upon issues like rape and their perceptions about a woman's body. So Padmanabhan has shown that a Woman regardless of the fact that whether she is a victim or spectator of rape would feel the agony and the anger and a Man whether committing rape or witnessing it would drive erotic pleasure and will fail to see the Human soul behind the curves and crevices of a woman.

REFERENCE

1. Moase, Daniel. 'Indian Women and Protest: An Historical Overview and Modern Day Evaluation.' | 2. Mohanty Talpade Chandra, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and colonial Discourse." | 3. Brecht, Bertolt. 1964. Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic. Ed. and trans. John Willett. British edition. London: Methuen. ISBN 0-413-38800-X. USA edition. New York: Hill and Wang. ISBN 0-8090-3100-0. | 4. Beckett, S. Waiting for Godot. London: Faber and Faber 1988. | 5. Furse, Anna. 'Performing in Glass; Reproduction, Technology, Performance and the Bio-Spectacular'. | 6.. Mulvey. Laura (2009). Visual and Other Pleasures. England: Palgrave MacM. pp. 14-27. | 7. Padmanabhan, Manjulla. Lights Out. City Plays. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004. | 8. Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble. New York: Routledge, 1999. | 9. Cixous, Helene. 'The Laugh of the Medusa'. Marks, Elaine and de Courtivron, Isabelle. eds. | New French Feminisms. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980. | 10. Furse, Anna. 'Performing in Glass; Reproduction, Technology, Performance and the Bio-Spectacular'. | 11. Aston, Elaine and Geraldine Harris. eds. Feminist Futures? New York: Palgrave Macmillan, | 2007. 149-168. | 12. Gokhale, Shanta. 'The Dramatists'. Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna. An Illustrated History of Indian | 13. Literature in English. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003. 137-158. | 14. Mehta, Dina. Getting Away With Murder. Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000. |