
'Lights Out': A Social Satire, By Manjula Padmanabhan

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ABSTRACT

'Lights out' by Manjula Padmanabhan , has for its theme the sensitive issue of gang rape, based on a real incident that took place in Santacruz Mumbai,1982. The incident took place over a period of weeks, the same happening in the play as well.

The plot opens with Leela and Bhaskar, a young couple who stay on the sixth floor of a high risebuilding in Mumbai. Leela is troubled by the voices she hears from a flat in an adjacent unfinishedbuilding. She and Bhaskar hear and see things happening from the rear window of the house.Theysee men and a woman enter the apartment and hear sounds which are indicative of a gang rape.The most odious is the retching sound that torments Leela day in and day out. Many options are offered, some practical, others not so practical. Friends like Mohan, Surinder and Naina are roped in to find a solution to the problem. Finally the group decides to ACT but it is too late .The crime has already been committed and the criminals have left the scene of the crime. The curtains fall and the LIGHTS ARE OUT .Padmanabhan very subtly points out that social apathy and procrastination are the root cause of crime in society.

KEYWORDS: *Social apathy, social activism, passive spectatorship, procrastination, inertia to act, violence against women, social issues, social satire.*

MANJULA PADMANABHAN, THE SOCIAL ACTIVIST AT WORK.

While the plot of the play appears deceptively simple,Manjula Padmanabhan appears in the true avatar of a social activist ,shaking the audience and her readers from their long and deep slumber. While doing so she touches upon a wide range of social issues which seem to lie under the surface of the so called 'civilized' and 'organized' society but are gnawing away at it's heart.

An artist should make efforts to wed the aesthetic nature of art, to its humanistic creed, because true aestheticity lies in the poignancy of its human concerns. 'Art for a purpose' seems to be Manjula Padmanabhan's creed and she takes her job as a social activist, very seriously indeed. It is every one's duty as a social being ,to understand the demands that society makes on them, to act when needed, to avert a crime and not indulge in voyeurism or passive spectatorship. Each member of the society is expected to rise to the occasion, rather than discuss,analyze and intellectualize issues of concern.

SOCIAL APATHY, PROCRASTINATION AND INERTIA TO ACT

‘Lights Out’ is a case of social apathy. Literature has been related to public domain from the very beginning of human civilization. Manjula Padmanabhan, therefore feels that a sense of commitment is mandatory for the social artist. Writing has to have a purpose, and what better purpose can be understood than social awakening, arousing the soul within ,acting responsibly but first of all - ACTING AND TAKING A STEP.

As stated earlier, the plot of the play revolves around Leela's trauma. She is troubled by what is happening in the adjoining building. She senses criminal activities going on in the house and feeling helpless as a female, seeks the intervention and help of her husband. She urges her husband to inform the police so that some action might be taken.

The mention of the police, almost immediately indicates the expectations that society has from them. Ironically, it is not certain that they will arrive. Bhaskar says “You never know with the police these days. They may say it’s none of your business, what goes on in the next door compound.”(p.142)The police, it's position and status ,all come under the scanner and become questionable.

Bhaskar now says, “After all there is the chowkidar...”(p.142)The onus is now on the chowkidar. One notices an interesting hit at the functioning of society .All want some action to be taken, but social apathy , lack of courage, insecurity ,and not wanting to take responsibility for any action-all lead to procrastination and inertia to act.

Bhaskar now takes a circuitous route to reach a solution. He tells Leela to try to ‘ignore it ,’ ‘do some meditation ‘ and see her yoga teacher.

The reader begins to wonder if all this is necessary to ‘ignore ‘ an issue. Leela remarks

“If it takes so much effort to ignore something, isn’t it the same thing as not ignoring it.”(p.144) Padmanabhan very deftly raises pertinent questions about society persistently evading issues and choosing to stay out of messy situations but wanting some action to be taken all the same. Inertia to act, is seen at it’s best .

MARGINALIZATION, SUBORDINATION, DEHUMANISATIN AND FEMININE SENSIBILITY

Interestingly, the play has a set of three ladies and three men as their main characters.

Frieda is the servant in the family. She is seen doing her job. She follows orders and does not ask any questions .She belongs to and represents that section of society which does not look beyond their job and are passive members. Then there is Leela.She is sensitive, rather over sensitive to the issues at hand ,but finds herself totally dependent on her husband for the execution of her plans and for finding a solution to her problems. People like her are well intentioned and mean well, but are helpless and totally ineffective. Their sensitive nature seems to be a waste as they can do nothing to help either themselves or society.Leela's friend Naina ,on the other hand is bold ,confident, intelligent and can think for herself.She can speak for herself and has the courage to speak out. She comes into the house like a gush of fresh air. She manages to silence Mohan and Bhaskar and their

'male' thinking. She levies arguments in favour of prostitutes and openly declares that they too have a right to dignity, much to the chagrin of Mohan and Bhaskar. While Naina's confidence is to be appreciated, we realize that the three of them are practically the same. They are dominated by male members of the society and despite being thinking individuals, are victims of suppression, domination and subjection, all because they are women. They seem to be marginalized and considered second grade citizens. Their feminine sensibilities are not recognized or appreciated but are crushed and suppressed by their male counterparts.

MALE AGGRESSION AND DOMINANCE

While Naina's entry into the plot spells hope for the feminine class, her husband's entry crushes All Surinder is loud, bold, aggressive, dominating and has a large male ego. Surinder literally takes over all the controls as soon as he enters. He dictates terms to Bhaskar, Leela, Frieda and Mohan. When Naina tries to reason out issues with him, his verbal violence humiliates and silences her. "You shut up! This is no time for women's nonsense". Continuing to show his malevolent streak, he says, "Shut up or I'll kick your teeth in." Naina is left without option but to keep quiet. The aggression leaves her acutely embarrassed. The readers notice, with much consternation, social apathy, together with violence, in all its forms-verbal, physical and emotional. Marriage is seen as giving the male, a legitimate license for violence on the female. The same institution of marriage, renders the female, totally helpless, succumbing to the torture perpetrated on her by her male counterpart.

IMPRACTICALITY OF SOLUTIONS SOUGHT

Surinder's entry into the plot, initially brings relief to the readers, who for the past forty six odd pages have been subjected to the sheer torture of mere discussion, at times, senseless and impractical. With Surinder entering the scene, the audience feels that finally some action is going to be seen. All along, there has been only speculation and conjecture, but no concrete step seems to be taken. Unfortunately much is expected of Surinder, but very little delivered. Surinder suggests that they take knives with them. "The three of us'll have one knife each. They won't be expecting anything. We'll tackle one at a time..." (p.184)

The knives are blunt and hence the purpose is defeated. Bhaskar feels that "there is going to be a lot of blood" and Mohan suggests "We could take some towels as well" (p.184). The reader's are tremendously disturbed by the absurdity and impracticality of the whole situation. Further absurd suggestions include, throwing petrol on them, using bulbs filled with acid, using a combination of acid and petrol, following the culprits in a car and running them over, and seeking the help of the press to take pictures of the incident and print them. Each of these suggestions strike one as being impractical, vague and mindless.

Finally when the group decides to ACT, Naina announces "You're too late-the screaming's stopped.

There's no one left out there...(p.189)

A SOCIAL COMMENTARY AND MESSAGE

The play comes to an end with the display of brief messages that are projected on the curtain. The messages are shown ,not read out. The technique used by Manjula Padmanabhan is to let the reader /audience soak in and absorb the message, rather than read and forget it.

In the form of five brief slides, Padmanabhan very deftly awakens her audience to not indulge in voyeurism, procrastination, social apathy, social indifference and not to assume a laid back approach. She would rather they focus on imbibing the right approach to responding to evils and ills which society is diseased with.

The last slide which reads ‘And in real life, as in the play, no one went to the aid of the victim’, conveys poignantly ,the essence of the play.

Manjula Padmanabhan’s message to her readers is NOT TO BEHAVE in the way the characters of the play behaved ,but on the contrary, to be more responsive ,pro active and responsible – shouldering the need and the responsibility to make a better society.

Works Cited

- i. Manjula Padmanabhan, Lights Out, City Plays, Seagull Books, Calcutta New Delhi 2004.