

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*: An Exploration of Voyeurism

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Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* is an unconventionally set play where the action takes place outside the immediate vicinity of both the audience as well as the actors on stage. The play deals with the voyeuristic reactions of the protagonists towards an incident which they are a witness to, but the audience is not. The present paper deals with the subjectivity of a voyeur as described in the play *Lights Out* and to analyse it in the light of psychoanalytical, socio-cultural and patriarchal discourses.

Voyeurism and exhibitionism are both largely pejorative terms with clinical underpinnings: largely describing the voyeur/exhibitionist as a subject afflicted with some psychological disorder with its foundations in infant sexuality, somewhat along on the lines of Freudian psychoanalysis. In more general connotations, these terms wield a self-exclusive tone of reprimand. But the sexual aura associated with these terms has been diluted in its contemporary usage. When using the term "voyeurism" one cannot limit oneself to its psychoanalytic meaning of obtaining erotic gratification by secretly observing sexual objects or acts. For example, *Collins Cobuild* offers an alternate definition of "voyeurism":

If you describe someone's behaviour as voyeurism, you disapprove of them because you think they enjoy watching other people's suffering or problems.

The concept of voyeurism has evolved, especially in popular culture, to include non-pornographic instances, where viewers (the voyeurs) are granted an intimate interaction of a non-sexual nature with a subject group or individual. Reality Cinema/television is one example of this evolution. Viewers are allowed the surveillance of subjects in given situations while the subjects are aware of their audience. Therefore, whatever they do could technically be classified as exhibitionism. The voyeur and the exhibitionist, therefore, have a strong inter-relation. A voyeur could survive in complete anonymity, but an exhibitionist thrives on voyeurs.

The tendency towards voyeurism and exhibitionism could either be an aberration or the norm. But, aren't we all interested in and curious about other people's lives? To what extent should this kind of interest and curiosity be permissible? Medico-clinical text books generally differentiate between occasional and sustained paraphilia. Only those subjects that display voyeuristic and exhibitionistic symptoms repeatedly over a period of time are labelled paraphiliacs. Literature, film and television abound in instances involving voyeuristic and exhibitionistic devices to such an extent that it is possible to see all art/literature flourishing in the minute personal details of other people's lives. Is all art a subtle kind of voyeurism and is autobiography a sort of refined

exhibitionism? Voyeurism is a common plot method in several films such as *Ek Chhoti Si Love Story*, *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha*, *Ragini MMS* and *American Pie*. Voyeuristic photography has been a crucial constituent of the mis-en-scene of films such as Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*. Similarly, literature too has often resorted to voyeuristic details or devices.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* is one such text which employs voyeurism as a plot method. The play is based on an eye-witness account of an incident, involving the exhibitionistic gang-rape of a woman or probably several women, which took place in Mumbai in 1982. A group of middle class men and women witness the repeated rape and abuse of a woman in the neighbourhood. Instead of trying to save the woman or report the matter to the authorities, they chose to stand and watch, deliberating on whether the incident should be classified as rape and discussing as to who could qualify as a rape victim. The rapists, as it goes, instil fear and awe in their defiance of the authority and their open invitation to voyeurs - which the men in the group avail of the very last detail; while the victim woman/women invite/s conjectures about propriety and "character".

The play opens in the drawing / dining area of a sixth floor apartment of a building in Bombay, where Bhasker, a middle class executive, his wife, Leela and their children are living with their maid-servant Frieda. The central point of the dining area is a large window, through which the audience has a distant view of the rooftop of a neighboring building. From this window, there is a suggestion of the gang rape of some women on the rooftop of the neighboring building, which has been going on since the previous week. The terrible cries of victim women have disturbed Bhaskar and Leela's domestic life.

LEELA: I feel frightened. All through the day, I feel tense . . .
(Padmanabhan 5)

Some critics are of the view that Leela identifies herself with the women and feels helpless in not being able to do something about it. Neeta writes:

Her disturbed state of mind proves the fact that she has gradually started to identify herself with that woman. She feels the intensity of her pain in the horrifying situations of her life. Being a woman, she sympathizes with her and wishes to do something for her. (1)

Durgesh B Ravande also considers Leela as sympathetic towards the victimized woman;

Being a woman, Leela finds it difficult to keep herself as a passive observer of a woman being molested just outside her house. (1)

But Leela is more of a neuroticphobic. Her worry is not on account of her concern for the victimized women, but by the possibility of the incident disrupting her comfortable home-space. Leela is, in fact, psychologically obsessed with the fear of being hurtherself. Her husband repeatedly assures her that those men are not going to hurt her. But she is tortured by the obsessive compulsive desire to drive the sounds away:

But their sounds come inside, inside my nice clean house, and I can't push them out! If only they didn't make such a racket, I wouldn't mind so much! Why they have to do it here? Why can't they go somewhere else? (Padmanabhan 8)

She does not even want to investigate the cause of the ruckus. She does not want to peep out of the window. She does not even know it is a rape going on right outside her window until her friend Naina testifies it to be a brutal rape. Hers is the peculiar case of a person who is absolutely neither interested in the victimized women's fate, nor in the voyeuristic details of rape and torture. She is only paranoid about her own safety and security:

I don't care what they believe. The sounds torture me. Tell the police I can't sleep at nights . . . tell the police the goondas must go away and take their dirty whores somewhere else! 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)

Other watchers are, however, not so indifferent. They are motivated by the insatiable urge of a voyeur to observe the incident and comment on it. Bhasker, Leela's husband, Mohan, his friend who has expressly dropped in to witness the incident, Naina, Leela's friend and her husband Surinder - all display a kind of irrepressible urge to look out of the window and define for themselves what they see.

Although Naina's attitude towards the rape appears a tad different from the rest, yet she is as powerless as the rest to do anything about it. When she hears the terrible sounds and wants to explore the cause, Bhasker advises her not to look out of the window, but she is adamant to witness it. It is she who uses the word "rape" for the first time to describe the incident; word that was otherwise too strong for the sensibilities of rest of the group. (Kumar 39) Unlike Leela, Naina identifies herself with the woman being raped and wants to help her, but she keeps requesting the men in the group to act, rather than acting herself and even joins the discussion and analysis of the incident later.

The men in the group, on the other hand, abstain from any action. This could be attributed to either their indifference, or their helplessness or their voyeuristic curiosity in the scene of rape. When Leela says that the watchman of the building did not inform the police because he could be frightened, Bhasker remarks that he may instead be enjoying the incident. Mohan too revels in the opportunity of watching such a spectacle:

How often can you stand and watch crime being committed in front of you? (Padmanabhan 15)

He finds it a rare opportunity to observe a crime so closely without being hurt. He is not concerned about helping the victim.

Who said anything about help? I'm talking about looking, that's all. (Padmanabhan 16)

In the second scene, Mohan and Bhasker discuss the details of the crime and try to analyse inanities like whether the screaming is high-pitched or hysterical, whether the screaming seems genuine or not, whether it is the same woman every night or different women on different nights, and other such absurd issues. They interpret the rape in different ways, remarking that it could be a family affair, a domestic fight, a religious ritual or exorcism:

After all, it may be something private, a domestic fight; how can we intervene. . . . Well, then, unless it's a murder, I don't think anyone should come between the members of a family.
(Padmanabhan 20)

Laura Mulvey, a British feminist film theorist puts the observer in masculine subject position with the figure of the women on screen as object of desire and 'male gaze'. Mulvey mentions three perspectives or looks that occur in films which function to sexually objectify women. The first is that of the male character on screen and how he identifies with the female character. The second perspective is that of the viewers as they see the female character on screen. The third perspective links the first two perspectives together: it is the male spectator's perspective of the male character in the film. This third perspective permits the male spectator to treat the female character as his personal sex object through identification with the male character in the film. The male gaze eroticises and objectifies the female body (Mulvey 5). The play also deals with the male viewers who are actually there to be looked at, experienced and analysed as subjects on stage.

It seems that they deliberately avoid considering it a rape in order not to obstruct the satiation of their voyeuristic curiosity. The rapists, on the other hand, have kept the lights on for everyone to watch and they commit the act in full view of three buildings. They indirectly invite the people to watch and simultaneously challenge them to act. It is difficult to analyse their exhibitionistic behavior especially because their actions are prosecutable by the law. Ian Kerner explains exhibitionistic acts in terms of the sense of power associated with them:

With exhibitionism, there is also an underlying sense of power that comes from being observed - a power in knowing that we may be arousing the watcher(s). (1)

This assertion of power over the watchers as well as the law institutes them as subjects. In their display of power and their persecution of the women, they subject themselves to the discourses of patriarchy and law. They admit their influence and revolt against the norms of decency instituted by both law and patriarchy. Patriarchy, on the one hand, inaugurates the notion of the woman as an instrument of power, while on the other hand it also nourishes the idea of decorum by exalting women to the level of a goddess in order to create a discourse of propriety. A voyeur is, thus, as equally a subject of the discourse of patriarchy which institutes the woman as a sexual object.

Violence has an intimate relation with religion, social norms, cultural constructions, and undoubtedly direct manifestations of violence in physical and psychological signifiers. Rehana Ghadially in her book *Women in Indian*

Society: A Reader has asserted that "...as many as thirty specific forms of violence against women has been identified" (149). Unequal distribution both the physical and economic power is also responsible for the violence at times. Ghadially further asserts "People in position of power- upper caste men, police, labor contractors, military personnel-dismiss violence done to lower caste and class women as insignificant" (149). Sometimes the oppression goes to the extent that the victimized women feel that she should morally and ethically accept suppression. But more than this at times women are not permitted to raise voice against the injustice and lower caste and class women become subject at dual margins. Women are kept at margins and are made to bear the violence of males. Bertrand De Jouvenel in his book *On Power: The Natural History of its Growth* says "a man feels himself more of a man when he is imposing himself and making others the instruments of his will" and which gives him "incomparable pleasure" (110).

These impositions and confinements define the lives of women. Margins and denials ascribed to the lives of women under the guise of social moral codes are responsible for violence against women. Their place at the lowest rank in the hierarchical order precincts lives of women. In the hierarchy of structural oppression, there are women who are placed further down the scale. Tribal, 'lower caste' differently abled, lesbian, lower class women all come in at the lower end of the hierarchy of women. Patriarchal power structures and social constructions which permeate the lives of women subordinate their status, Susan Hekman while writing about different notions of "Feminism" in an edited book *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory* illumines "The cause of women's subordination is not the political/economic/legal/ structures or even biology, but the meaning conferred on the identity 'woman' in all aspects of cultural life" (99). Cultural constructions are one of the indirect forms of violence women bear in their lives silently. Women's body and their being emotional are used as the strongest tools for marginalizing her role in society, "It is because 'women' is defined as irrational, close to nature, more emotional and dependent that women occupy inferior role in society" (Hekman 105).

According to Baudrillard, our society has substituted all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that human experience is a simulation of reality. The simulacra that Baudrillard mentions are the allusionsto symbolism of culture and media that create supposed reality. Baudrillard assumed that society has become so inundated with these simulacra and our lives so full of the constructs of society that all meaning is rendered pointless by being considerably inconsistent. Baudrillard called this phenomenon the "precession of simulacra" (Hegarty 6). The present play can be read, among other things, to be a stage of the simulacra created by culture to perceive a certain kind of reality. The play constructs a reality basing it on a certain kind of reported incident and then goes on to build a narrative around that perceived reality. The incident involving the exhibitionistic gang-rape of a woman or probably several women, which took place in Mumbai in 1982, is used as an originating point which then yields to the construction of a narrative around it involving the voyeuristic tendencies of the neighbours who could pose several perspectives to the issue.

Another feature that works in the formation of paraphiliac subjectivities is the taboo status associated with anything sexual. As Foucault suggests in *History of Sexuality* that a recent rise in the discussion of sex, although in a permissible lexicon that classified where, when and with whom you could talk about it, has resulted in an increasing interest in sexualities that did not fit within the norms; resulting in an increasing categorisation of unusual sexual orientations and a resulting sense of "pleasure and power" on both those studying sexuality as well as those indulging in unusual orientations themselves. This derived sense of pleasure and power constitutes the paraphiliac as a subject, affording the subject both structure and agency. The paraphiliac subject, thus, would be both free in determining his/her affiliation and unfree in being by turn determined by the structures of law, social discourse and sexuality. His/her depiction, thus, in literature, art or film cannot be unregimented by the existing discourses on sexuality, law and morality.

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