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**Angst and Antagonism:
A Study of Women Dramatist's Protagonists**

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Abstract

The socio- political situation in India in the 1960s and 70s shook up sensitive writers and during this period Indian English Drama has received fresh impetus from young women playwrights like Manjula Padmanabhan, Poile Sengupta and Dina Mehta. Women's theatre has emerged as a distinct dramatic force which stages the various issues of contemporary Indian society. Their plays include themes of relationships like motherhood, intricate baffling relationship of men and women, incest and adultery. Their plays focus on various types of violence as physical, emotional, psychological, and the exploitation of women at home and in Profession. Their plays of resistance present the themes of voicing against feticide, infanticide, rape, inequality, poverty, illiteracy and gender discrimination.

Keywords: Rape, Illiteracy, Inequality, Gender- discrimination

Introduction

Manjula Padmanabhan, a writer and cartoonist living in New Delhi, is among the fewest contemporary playwrights who have added fruit bearing possibilities to the theatrical development in the country. R.K. Dhawan rightly observes: "Very recently Indian English Drama shot into prominence. Young writers like Manjula Padmanabhan have infused new life into this branch of writing." *Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan is based on an eye witness account; the incident took place in Santa Cruz, Mumbai, 1982. The characters are placed here between complete, unnoticed silence and palpable, horrifying screams. A group of urban middle class people watch brutalization of women in a neighboring compound but fail to perform any meaningful action. The play also proposes a complete negligence towards a woman (Leela's) fright and sensitivity, by her husband. Every character in this play whether it's Bhasker, Leela, Mohan, Naina or its Surinder belongs to that middle class society who does nothing to stop any situation rather only talks and talks about it. Bhasker who is Leela's husband pretends to be deeply concerned and in love with Leela but in actual sense he is far too away from all these emotions. He repeatedly tries to calm her down but does nothing in concrete which will pacify her in actual sense. Every night some three to four men rapes a women brutally and nobody does anything to stop that brutalization. Leela, a mother of two children is deeply hurt and moved because of the bizarre sounds that she hears every night. She is so afraid that she fears going out alone, or sending her children alone to play or to buy something. She kinds of forgets to live her life and is mentally tortured because of those strange noises coming out from her window. All she wants from Bhasker is that he lodges a complaint against them so that they can all be removed hence putting a stop to all their atrocities.

As the drama begins, we see as usual Leela in a very frightened state of mind and is expecting Bhasker anytime. Soon, Bhasker arrives from office and Leela starts the discussion by

asking “Did you.....do it?”¹ This statement clearly notifies that Leela wanted to put an end by taking an effort i.e. by complaining. But soon she discovers Bhasker didn't and he has forgotten. The conversation between them keeps going and we will come to know that Bhasker is least interested to take any effort. He is not even bothered about Leela leave aside the stranger who is been molested close to their home. When Leela repeatedly ask Bhasker to file a complaint against those rogues Bhasker blames police instead and says that they won't do anything and even if we complain they won't turn up till two days and if they will they will only blame us and ask us why haven't anybody else filed a complaint against them and why only we are so bothered about it. “they may say it's none of our business, what goes in the next door compound. After all there is chowkidar...”² He tries to convince her that going down to police is not a solution to this problem. This clearly shows Bhasker's laid back attitude towards everything. He is not able to see the agony and pain that Leela is going through nor being a responsible citizen he is helping out that rape victim. This clearly shows somewhere he is enjoying all this as if some kind of street play is going on because he himself says he has seen the incident once or twice. He tries to control her emotions by various means and tries to engage her mind through meditation and up to a certain amount he becomes quite successful until the doorbell rang. Leela starts fidgeting again thinking those mongers have come down to her place to affect her and her kids. Bhasker immediately consoles her by saying that she is over reacting to things and that she is paying too much of attention to those people. He in fact defends him by saying that other people in the same society are all so carefree and least bothered. He tells her she should also be like them and should lead her life peacefully like before. Although, Leela doesn't pay any attention to him and keeps murmuring. Here, we can clearly see gender discrimination that Bhasker is doing with his wife Leela. Irrespective of the fact that she is equally well educated, smart enough to manage her house very well yet her voice doesn't get any attention. She keeps demanding, requesting for the same thing but she is been refused every time by saying something or the other. It seems like Bhasker is treating Leela like a two year old kid whom he is trying to dodge by showing a lollipop and making her do what he feels like. This situation continues in the entire drama and at later stages it gets even worse. Leela is not even bothered about it.

The drama takes a toll when Mohan is introduced in scene two. Mohan, a Delhi based friend has been invited for dinner by Bhasker. Like, every other excited family Leela and Bhasker also arranges the house for their upcoming guest with neat décor, soft music to smoothen the environment etc. Initially, both pretended as if everything is normal although there was a space when Mohan came home. They talked about all other things while Leela continuously looked at her watch and was trying to stop the time. Breaking the silence and awkwardness Mohan asked well! So- when does it begin!³ This statement clearly strikes a point in my mind that how can people so well educated, so well dressed, so well maintained can be curious of a rape that's going to happen? How? Why? If an educated person like him is anxious for something unpleasant to happen then what is the difference between a literate and an illiterate person? If after being so well educated we are letting the crime to happen then what is the need of spending so much money in studies. I feel an illiterate person is more sensitive towards this issue. He is more aware and is more daring than us. An educated person fears for loosing something or the other. Therefore, they don't dare to do something out of box and even if they do they are constantly been poked by someone else. It's only we who keep Discussing and Discussing and go on Discussing. ...

Mohan belongs to that class of people who tastes everything, chews everything and yet cribs about everything. Never appreciates or helps anyone. Leela is shocked to know that Mohan has come down specifically to take a firsthand experience of the incident. Both Mohan and Bhasker discuss about different sounds that a rape victim makes, they discuss about the intensity that a rape victim goes through. They discuss whether its same person or daily there is some new one. How can one talk about those painful sounds?? As like a “singer’s voice, high and sweet?”⁴. All this clearly indicates that Mohan and Bhasker are inhuman characters who don’t bother about anybody’s feelings or emotions. They are rather busy in detailing of an incident which is so shameful. They both try and give different adjectives to the rape incident as Dignified, Restrained, Refined and Exhibitionist. In spite of all this they also talk about rape as “RELIGIOUS AFFAIR”. How can someone call rape incident as some religious ceremony? Talking about rape as a religious act is the most shameful thing that anybody can talk or listen. What kind of people are they? Do they fall into any category or do they have their own category for others to follow them? Are they human or not is the question that arises in my mind.

Rape is a type of sexual assault usually involving sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual penetration perpetrated against a person without that person’s consent. The act may be carried out by physical force, coercion, abuse of authority or against a person who is incapable of giving valid consent, such as one who is unconscious, incapacitated has an intellectual disability or is below the legal age of consent. The term rape is sometimes used interchangeably with the term sexual assault. Rape doesn’t happen with a victim’s consent rather it happens because of victim’s denial to surrender under one’s sexual desires. This heinous crime is related to religion is something which is unbelievable. Suddenly all three of them Bhasker, Leela and Mohan hear those strange sounds and ask isn’t it time for it to begin?⁵. Manjula Padmanabhan brings out the hard reality of our society. If rape happens with someone from our family we go out to police, we reach out to court, we go to public asking justice, we take out rally etc. till the time we get justice but if the same thing happens to a stranger whom we don’t know and is in a need of our help what we do? We only discuss, we talk, blame police, blame government for lack of security for women and when this is not enough we call her a ‘whore’ a ‘prostitute’. When the family members supports their child and files a complaint against them the other family members or their neighbors keeps gossiping about the child or rather threatens them by saying now what will happen to their child’s future. If every citizen decides to fight back against this evil I’m sure none will be able to touch our girls. But the question is “will they”?

Amy M Buddie and Arthur G Miller, in a review of studies of rape myths states: - Rape victims are blamed more when they resist the attack later in the rape encounter rather than earlier, which seems to suggest the stereotype that these women are engaging in token resistance or leading the man on because they have gone along with the sexual experience thus far. Finally rape victims are blamed more when they are raped by an acquaintance or a date rather than by a stranger, which seems to evoke the stereotype that victims really want to have sex because they know their attacker and perhaps even went out on a date with him. The underlining message of their research seems to be that when certain stereotypical elements of rape are in place, rape victims are prone to being blamed. Manjula Padmanabhan wanted to bring out the plight of the common man who being so well educated or so well dressed yet is not able to identify what is good or bad. They are not able to raise courage against something evil. They are all so obsessed about their own self, their own safety and well-being that they are least bothered about others. When the time comes they all behave like “Cowards”. It’s clearly evident when Leela says Oh!

Then it must be over for tonight! That is what happens in real life, nobody turns up on time to help the victim. The playwright is shaken up to know about the inward hollowness of these so called refined people who only think about their own well-being, nothing to do about the world around them. They are concerned about saving their own skin; they turn their back towards their own fellow members because 'they don't want to stick their neck out' out of fear. Thus Padmanabhan bring forth the condition of women in our Indian society irrespective of their education, their feelings and their expression and so on. The dramatist clearly pictures the dual mentality of males. On one side they talk about how much they love their women, respect them and on the other side when time comes they turn their face. Are we women so Vulnerable that anybody can come down and hurt us?

By reading *Lights Out!* One is made to think about and is realized that how being a human you can ignore such painful scene. The playwright unmasks the façade of the indifferent and spineless middle class men folk clubbing them with the swinish and humbug who join hands in inflicting pain on women in particular, paralyzing the system in general as the so called decent and respected watch dogs of society are so much scared that they feel highly insecure not only from the criminals but also from the police, and this serves as a pointed comment on the law and order situation in India. Manjula Padmanabhan in her closing lines of her play *Lights Out!* says "Oh! Then it must be over for tonight! Through *Leela*"⁶This is the only thing that playwright keeps telling us that nobody comes to rescue rape victims. A rape victim goes through lot of humiliation if she survives the act. She then becomes the unwanted element of the society. She not only loses her self-respect, she also loses her dignity because she is left alone to suffer. It's indeed sad that women in our country are blamed for something that they have not done. Even what about small kids I mean girl child. They are also not left alone. They are also being blamed for something that they have not committed. Worst part is when parents try to take stand they are being criticized by their neighborhood and or else stopped saying what will be the future of that girl child. Nobody thinks that the girl child is blamed or is left to suffer for no fault of hers. Her entire life is pushed towards doom if nobody gives her a helping hand and helps her to come out of that trauma. Women in our society are always taught what to wear, how to wear, what not to wear, what to speak, what not to speak, how to behave in public, how to behave in private, how to keep house clean, how to cook etc. but we are never taught how to protect oneself from any stranger, from any unknown person. We are never taught how to deal with problems. We are never given that amount of freedom and confidence that if anything goes wrong family members are there to stand for us and fight for us. Instead of teaching our women how to dress up or how to cook we should teach them how to handle any situation bravely. We should teach them how to protect themselves from any unknown danger. Instead of blaming our girls we should teach our boys how to respect women. We should teach them how to control their feelings because they say they get excited if they see women wearing short dresses. Such an absurd thinking it is. Therefore, in her play she wants to bring forward the plight of our women and also the dual mentality of our society which gives speeches after speeches about respecting, praising and loving women yet stand at number one place in disrespecting women.

Manjula Padmanabhan in her another play *Hidden Fires* has presented hard hitting monologues wherein she has expressed her desire to the common man to act and not be a spectator to what is happening outside their house. Each monologue talks about intolerance, mass destruction, narrow concepts of community and nation, gang rapes, chaos created due to riots etc. The monologue starts with the word from director where the director says that when he

saw riots for the first time in Mumbai back then Bombay in 1992 he felt completely helpless. Like every other common man he too felt helpless and needless to say feared. He further says that however powerful you are, or well-known you are, or well networked you are, you feel this sense of helplessness because no one is doing anything. There are groups of people killing other groups of people. One felt completely stifled by one's inadequacy to do anything.⁷ The plays have long discussions which deepen step by step and consequently make the audience understand its gravity. In the modern world, where on one side, there is so much of progress in every field, on the other hand, people are losing basic values and morals. The lives are losing its importance and money is becoming more important. The growing apathy in the society in the name of civilization has given way to the crimes and violence. Padmanabhan plays successfully aims and inspires audience not to follow the path adopted by the characters of the plays.

Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder* is yet another sensitive, and one might even say, quite a novel handling of the old theme of sexual abuse. She is a well-known playwright, novelist and editor based in Mumbai. It was first performed in 1990 by Indus International, a socio-cultural group for women, at British Council Theatre, Mumbai. It maps the life of three friends as they undergo the grueling journey through their own private hells as they deal with body blows like childhood sexual abuse, discrimination, infidelity, and insecure relationships. They ultimately learn to free themselves of guilt, shame and humiliation to emerge as strong women at the end of it.

Sexual abuse has led to psychosis in Sonali, who at one point in the play mimes the whole incident of her sexual abuse in childhood, so as to, in a way, exorcise her of it. She is constantly ridden with the fear that "someone indoors is watching me". She has been brought up with the idea that "a woman's failure to bear a son is just retribution for her misdeeds in her past life."⁸ This is somewhere the result of the discriminatory treatment meted out to her in childhood, likewise her brother Gopal, which has left a serious void in her unconscious. In this, Mehta presents a 'modern' response that Sonali offers-nausea-inability to do anything about her choked psyche.

The play is in two acts. The first act has four scenes, while the second act has six scenes. As the play opens we are introduced to two friends Mallika and Sonali. Sonali's life is in disarray. She divulges to Mallika her problems with her mother-in-law: "she is a witch, sly, secretive. She spies on me, I know, she stores up evidence against me- with which to bludgeon me one day (intensely) my mother-in-law hates me, Malu"⁹. From the taxi this morning I looked up at my window and saw a withered hand at the parting of my curtains. Going back to history revealed some facts about Sonali's enigmatic nature as a sign of being deprived of having an understanding mother. In one of her recapitulations Sonali records: "my mother used to exhaust herself over her household tasks- may be because she was grateful to uncle for taking us after father died. She drove herself and turned me into her satellite: "I had to run errands her errands, mouth her opines, feel her feelings.... Of course, Gopal escaped all that because he was born with an extra set of accessories."¹⁰ These words establish the traditional Indian mother who distinguishes between her male and a female child. Sonali further confides into Mallika that she is pregnant and wants amniocentesis done. Mallika is outraged-"I thought only ignorant women had this prejudice or depraved women with drudgery as their lot, who are sucked into further poverty and debts when they spawn daughters because girl need dowries..... But to someone like you, how can it matter if the first child is a boy or girl?"¹¹

Mallika too has her tale of woe. Her partner in business is a male chauvinist. Mr. Pankaj Pingalay, who has the gall to tell her “that women should stick to secretarial work- or at best, PR work”¹² Knowing full well that it's Malu who's there on the front line, getting all the business, running the entire office. Sexual harassment against women is rampant in work places. Malu's secretary Thelma reveals that she is harassed by Mr. Pingalay-“he makes vulgar talks... and wicked gestures....asking me to accompany him to hotels outside the city”.¹³

The third friend, Raziya who is a doctor, has her stockpile of sorrows too. Her husband Habib plans to marry a nineteen year old girl as her mother in law has been agitating about it for a long time: you see Malu, I can't give him children”. Mallika is appalled at the indignity Raziya is ready to bear “my god”, one just has to find out what a woman will tamely submit to”. Indian women find it difficult to break free from the shackles of the oppressive traditions. This is where Raziya locates the cause of Mallika, Sonali and her predicament” “I find an accident tyranny at work within me that man's desire for children must be satisfied. Just as Sonali believes that a women's inferior status is partially redeemed when she becomes a mother of sons. And just as you dear Malu, believe that man has the right to the body of a women younger than he.” But Raziya is not the one to exonerate her from the guilt, she is prepared to face the situation squarely, she acknowledges that the villain is not the man alone: “but don't fool yourself that you and I are so different Malu! Or that by identifying man as villain we have won our fight for equality! The enemy is within, don't you see? It's in our minds, Mallika that we are underlings!”¹⁴ The woman here is not a passive victim nor is male so indifferent observer as in Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*. While Sonali relives the traumatic betrayal by her so called uncle; her husband Anil sustains her through his love and understanding. She has overcome herself, killed the ghosts that haunted her and found her way to salvation. A traditional dramatic structure would often hinge on exposition, complication, conflict and denouement. This feminist play is hinged on revelation and recognition. *Getting Away With Murder* goes beyond the narrow feminist agenda by encompassing in its feminist narration a broader perspective in which violence against women is countered not just by women but also men and women fighting a patriarchal order of dominant males and complicit females. Thus, we can see both Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta have beautifully brought the problems of women in front of us. Being a female dramatist both of them were able to bring out the agony faced by every individual in our society. Be it Sonali or Mala of *Getting Away With Murder* or be it Leela of *Lights Out*! Or be it explaining the destruction or devastation created due to riots in a state. They were able to get into the root cause of any problem were able to provide certain amount of solution to its readers. Thus, on one side we see Manjula Padmanabhan's Leela struggling hard to raise her voice against the rape that is happening in front of her on the other hand we see Mala encouraging Sonali to rise above her self-pity and move on in her life. On one side we see full of positivism and on the other side we see depression and sadness through horse's mouth itself.

Conclusion

Indian Women playwrights consider drama a more serious tool of expression and representation have dealt with certain issues which men playwrights have failed to do. They have adopted the genre as a more practical means to present serious familial, social, cultural and political issues, the heinous crimes and practices of the society in satirical way. Their aim is to bring awareness of certain harsh realities, to protect every individual's basic rights, to live freely, and to respect every individual irrespective of different gender caste or creed. The above mentioned plays can be again compressed into one umbrella term as ‘The Plays of Change’ a

new trend that perhaps goes hand in hand with the theatre of women. Both the playwrights have beautifully justified Resistance to Violence. From all the three plays we can clearly see that women in all the three plays are trying their level best to fight against all kinds of violence against men. These plays act as new ray of hope amongst all the odds.

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