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STAGING BRUTALITY: REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S LIGHTS OUT

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Manjula Padmanabhan's Lights Out, a play that explores the intersections of urban alienation, moral apathy, and the representation of violence. Inspired by a real-life incident, the play uses an offstage act of brutality—a woman's rape—as its central event, challenging conventional depictions of violence on stage. Employing Johan Galtung's framework of direct and structural violence, the analysis highlights how Padmanabhan critiques the urban middle class's detachment and complicity through inaction. The play's deliberate decision to keep violence unseen shifts focus to the ethical and psychological dimensions of spectatorship, invoking Laura Mulvey's concept of the gaze to examine passive complicity. By juxtaposing physical and psychological violence, Padmanabhan underscores societal indifference as both cause and consequence of systemic failures. Through stark staging and unsettling soundscapes, Lights Out compels audiences to confront their own roles in perpetuating societal violence and moral paralysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Manjula Padmanabhan is a playwright known for addressing social issues, particularly those related to gender and power. While her other works, such as *Harvest*, focus on the exploitation of the poor in a globalized world, her play *Lights Out* looks at the darker aspects of urban life, especially the indifference to violence and the treatment of women. The play is set in an apartment building, where the quiet, everyday setting becomes the backdrop for violence that exposes the deeper problems of society.

In the play, the ordinary setting of an apartment building becomes a stage for individual and societal brutality. As the city outside becomes dark, the veneer of civility within the building crumbles, exposing the tensions and violence beneath urban life. Padmanabhan uses dramatic techniques like stark lighting, unsettling sound and a claustrophobic setting to create a sense of dread and reveal the insidious nature of both physical and psychological violence. *Lights Out* compels audiences to confront not only the immediate horrors of brutality but also the broader social and cultural forces that enable and perpetuate it.

This paper analyses how Manjula Padmanabhan depicts violence in her play *Lights Out* and the broader implications of this portrayal. By focusing on the unseen yet ever-present act of violence, an offstage rape, the play challenges conventional ways of representing violence on stage. It examines the roles of spectatorship, moral apathy and complicity

in perpetuating societal indifference. The paper argues that *Lights Out* uses the absence of visible violence as a powerful narrative strategy to highlight the pervasive apathy and voyeurism of its characters—and by extension, the audience. This representation amplifies the horror of the act and compels viewers to confront their own moral responsibilities in the face of injustice.

The play *Lights Out* was inspired by a real-life incident recounted to the playwright by a friend. Set in an urban apartment complex, the play explores the reactions, or lack thereof, of middle-class neighbours to an act of brutal violence occurring just outside their windows. The offstage rape of a woman becomes the central event around which the drama unfolds, shedding light on themes such as apathy, voyeurism and urban alienation. The juxtaposition of the apartment with the under-construction building vividly illustrates two different worlds. This exclusion mirrors the inaction of the characters in *Lights Out*, who rationalize their refusal to help the victim based on her perceived social and economic status. This "visual forgetfulness" is what Datta and Deb describe as a deliberate mechanism of middle-class identity, where "othered" spaces are quarantined to maintain the illusion of civility (116).

Violence is a central theme in *Lights Out*, which can be examined through two key dimensions: direct and structural violence. Johan Galtung's theory of violence provides a useful framework for this analysis. Galtung distinguishes between direct violence, which is visible and immediate, and structural violence, which is embedded in social systems and institutions, often manifesting as inequality, oppression and apathy (Galtung 291). In *Lights Out*, the offstage rape represents direct or physical violence, while the characters' inaction and indifference embody structural violence, reflecting deeper societal failures. The apartment complex in *Lights Out* symbolizes the alienation inherent in modern urban life. The physical distance from the crime scene parallels the emotional detachment of the characters. The urban middle class, as described by Datta and Deb, occupies a space of privilege and exclusion, insulating themselves from the struggles of those in lower socioeconomic positions through physical and psychological barriers (116-117). This detachment is further reinforced by the window, which, much like the gated communities discussed in 'Politics of Dark Rooms and Neurotic Urbanity', creates a divide that both shields and distances the middle-class residents from the suffering of the urban poor (Datta and Deb 118). The play critiques this isolation by using the characters' refusal to act as a representation of the broader societal indifference enabled by such spatial segregation.

The notion of spectatorship is also pivotal to understanding the play. Laura Mulvey's theories on the gaze, originally developed in the context of film studies, offer insight into how audiences and characters observe and consume acts of violence (Malvey 6). *Lights Out* explores a voyeuristic dynamic where the characters, much like spectators, watch without intervening, turning the act of viewing into a morally charged act of complicity. The framing of violence as a spectacle in *Lights Out* ties into Datta and Deb's analysis of voyeurism as a form of passive complicity (121). The characters' act of watching without intervening exemplifies what they call "involvement without involvement"—a disturbing dynamic where moral accountability is diluted through passive observation (121). This mirrors real-world tendencies in urban India, where the commodification of public tragedies often allows individuals to dissociate from their ethical responsibilities.

Representing violence on stage presents unique challenges. *Lights Out* adopts a deliberate strategy of keeping the violence offstage, creating tension between the unseen brutality and the characters' reactions. Padmanabhan in the introduction to the play writes, "One thing that was clear to me from the outset was that the audience must never see the 'action.' I have long believed that depictions of rape are enormously titillating to viewers. I was determined not to offer up that form of entertainment" (Padmanabhan, 3). By denying the audience the spectacle of violence, Padmanabhan shifts the focus to the ethical and psychological dimensions of inaction, forcing viewers to engage intellectually with the play's themes.

Lights Out demonstrates how theatre can use the absence of visible violence to amplify its moral and emotional impact, challenging performers and audiences to grapple with the ethical dilemmas it presents. This is a deliberate choice by the playwright, who writes, "The familiar tropes of popular crime dramas are: foreshadow the horror, glorify the criminals, wallow in their gore, then gorge on the fruits of retribution. We neither see the victim nor the aggressors. We never get to understand 'why.' It's a play that cannot end with applause" (Padmanabhan, 4). By showing only the characters' reactions to the violence, and not the violence itself, the play critiques societal indifference of the urban middle class. Their inaction and apathy, the play suggests, are the very reasons why such crimes continue. Banerjee emphasizes how this inaction reflects a broader societal issue: "The refusal of the middle class to intervene in acts of violence is a symptom of the moral paralysis that plagues urban life" (185).

The central act of violence in the play—a brutal rape—occurs offstage, leaving it unseen yet ever-present throughout the play. From the beginning, the violence of the act is discussed without being explicitly named, building up curiosity and suspense. The stage directions to the third scene states, "From outside the window can also be heard the unmistakable

sounds of a woman screaming for help. The sound is truly ragged and unpleasant. Initially, it should be vigorous and determined, with distinct words - "let me go", "help me!" and so on- and as the evening progresses it degenerates into general screaming with a jagged, tired edge to it (Padmanabhan, 33). This choice of representation magnifies the horror of the act, as the audience must imagine the violence through the fragmented, detached descriptions of the characters. The offstage positioning of the violence creates a striking contrast between the brutality of the event and the ordinary reactions of the witnesses, intensifying the moral and emotional significance of the drama. The unseen nature of the violence creates a profound dramatic tension. By not depicting the crime visually, Padmanabhan shifts the audience's focus to the characters' reactions, or lack thereof. The recurring sound of the woman's screams serves as a haunting reminder of the ongoing atrocity, emphasizing the witnesses' inaction. This tension underscores the theme of complicity, as the characters' refusal to act reflects a broader societal tendency to ignore or rationalize such violence when it does not directly impact them

Alongside the physical violence that occurs offstage, *Lights Out* explores the psychological violence that permeates the lives of its characters. The charaters' inability—or unwillingness—to intervene creates a pervasive sense of moral conflict. Each character grapples with varying degrees of guilt, fear and justification, reflecting the emotional turmoil that arises when ethical responsibility is ignored. Leela, who appears interested in stopping the violence only because it occurs nearby, tells her husband what her friend said: "That we are part of… of what happens outside. That by watching it, we're making ourselves responsible (Padmanabhan, 9)." Despite Bhasker and Mohan dismissing such views, none of the characters fully absolve themselves, as they continually offer excuses and justifications for their inaction.

The play shows how the characters' apathy and rationalizations, such as fear of retaliation and a desire to maintain the status quo, lead to a dehumanization that allows them to distance themselves from the victim's suffering. Mohan dismisses the need for concern, saying, "…as long as it's the poor attacking the poor… you know how it is… they live their lives and we live ours (Padmanabhan, 29)." This detachment reflects not just the characters' flaws, but a broader societal indifference to violence, especially violence against women. The play juxtaposes the unseen violence of the rape with the visible inaction of the witnesses. This illuminates the complex nature of violence, challenging audiences to confront the invisible yet devastating psychological and societal consequences of their own inaction.

In *Lights Out*, the inaction of the characters serves as a poignant critique of societal voyeurism. Mohan explains to Leela, who is unable to understand his curiosity regarding the violence that takes place outside, that "Usually, you're too close for comfort … or you arrive few minutes too late and see only the results. …or it is happening to someone you know and you have to get involved yourself … But this! just far enough not to get involved, just close enough to see everything clearly (Padmanabhan, 18)." The audience, like the characters who observe the ongoing violence from the safety of their apartment, becomes a passive witness to the unfolding drama. This parallel creates an unsettling effect, compelling viewers to question their own tendency to observe suffering from a distance without taking action. The characters' inaction reflects societal failure to intervene in instances of violence, especially when it is perceived as someone else's problem.

This dynamic raise critical ethical dilemmas surrounding intervention and passivity. The characters justify their inaction with arguments about fear of retaliation, respect for privacy and scepticism about their ability to make a difference. These justifications reflect common rationalizations used in real-life scenarios, where bystanders fail to act in the face of injustice. By exposing these excuses, *Lights Out* challenges audiences to confront the moral consequences of their own complacency and the collective societal responsibility for such failures.

The apartment window serves as a metaphor for the violence, presenting the offstage events as a spectacle for the neighbours to observe. This framing casts the characters as voyeurs who consume the unfolding tragedy from a safe distance, further emphasizing their detachment and complicity. The fragmented sounds from the offstage scene are amplified by the physical and emotional boundaries created by the window, underscoring the divide between the violent reality and the characters' insulated lives. Through this metaphor of spectacle, *Lights Out* critiques the desensitization of individuals to brutality. The characters' ability to watch without acting highlights the normalization of violence in society, where repeated exposure diminishes empathy and urgency. This critique extends to the audience itself, which is also implicated as a passive spectator of the play's events. By making viewers uncomfortably aware of their own position as observers, Padmanabhan blurs the line between the fictional world of the play and the real-world ethical dilemmas it reflects.

In the play light and darkness symbolize the characters' responses to violence. Light represents awareness, morality and the potential for action, while darkness symbolizes ignorance, denial and complicity. The dimly lit stage reflects the characters' refusal to confront the violence outside. This highlights how individuals and societies often choose the comfort of darkness—ignorance and inaction—over the discomfort of addressing injustices. By framing the violence in

a setting of dimness and shadow, Padmanabhan emphasizes the characters' moral blindness. Their reluctance to turn on the lights and face the consequences and brutality mirrors broader societal tendencies to suppress awareness of uncomfortable truths. This symbolism underscores the need to confront, rather than evade, acts of violence and oppression.

The apartment complex in *Lights Out* symbolizes the alienation inherent in modern urban life, where physical and psychological barriers enable detachment and indifference. The walls and windows of the apartment serve as literal and figurative divides, insulating the urban middle class from the struggles of those in lower socioeconomic positions. As Datta and Deb note, this privileged class occupies spaces of exclusion that prioritize comfort and convenience over ethical responsibility, fostering a culture of apathy and rationalization (116-117). The window, much like the gated communities discussed in 'Politics of Dark Rooms and neurotic urbanity', reinforces this detachment by shielding residents from the violence and suffering outside, while simultaneously deepening their emotional distance (Datta and Deb 118). The play critiques this isolation by portraying the neighbours' refusal to act as a microcosm of broader societal indifference perpetuated by spatial segregation.

Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* critiques the pervasive influence of patriarchy, particularly in its depiction of gendered violence. The offstage rape symbolizes the broader subjugation of women within a patriarchal society, where their bodies are sites of both control and violation. Leela repeatedly urges her husband to report the violence to the authorities, but she never feels empowered to take this action herself. She is repeatedly silenced by Bhasker, who dismisses her concerns as mere "oversensitivity". Similarly, Naina is repeatedly instructed by her husband, Surinder, to remain silent, with him asserting, "This is no time for women's nonsense! (Padmanabhan, 52)." It is ironic that in his attempt to rescue the women and punish the assailants, he is unable to recognize his own abusive behaviour towards his wife. Bhargavi observes that "the silence and helplessness of the female characters in the play reflect the societal norms that suppress women's agency and voice" (59).

The interplay between male dominance and female silence is evident in the male characters' rationalizations and justifications for inaction. Their reluctance to intervene stems from a mix of fear and an ingrained sense of entitlement, which prioritizes their own safety and convenience over the victim's suffering. This dynamic is further reinforced by the silence of Frieda, the cook, whose position within the household hierarchy reflects the compounded marginalization of working-class women. Padmanabhan uses the silence of this character very effectively. Playwright's note on Frieda's role in the beginning of the play states, "She remains constantly in sight, performing her duties in a mute, undemanding way. The other characters pay no attention to her except to give her orders. When she has no specific task at hand, she can be seen moving about the kitchen. The audience should be allowed to wonder what she thinks (Padmanabhan, 5). When middle-class women themselves are suppressed and discouraged from asserting their agency, the scope for women like Frieda to voice their opinions or engage meaningfully becomes even more limited. Her silence thus mirrors the layered inequalities within a patriarchal society, emphasizing how systemic subjugation silences not only the victim of the violence but also those on the periphery, who are rendered invisible and powerless. Together, these elements underscore the complicity of patriarchal structures in enabling and perpetuating violence against women.

The play offers a scathing critique of middle-class apathy, exposing the moral paralysis that prevents action in the face of injustice. The characters' self-centred concerns, such as fear of retaliation, reluctance to "get involved" and desire to maintain their comfortable routines, mirror the indifference of the urban middle class to systemic issues like gendered violence.

Padmanabhan uses satire to expose the absurdity of their rationalizations. Their passive discussions about the violence, juxtaposed with their refusal to act, highlight the disconnect between intellectual awareness and ethical responsibility. The emotional engagement provoked by the play becomes a tool for social critique, as viewers are left to grapple with the ethical dilemmas posed by the narrative. This reflective discomfort encourages introspection, challenging audiences to consider their own responsibilities as witnesses to injustice.

The two proposed endings of *Lights Out* highlight Manjula Padmanabhan's blending of fiction and reality. This compels the audience to confront uncomfortable truths about societal indifference to violence. Both versions, whether through projected slides or voice-over narration, present a factual account of the real-life incident that inspired the play, juxtaposed against the fictionalized narrative. This convergence of fact and fiction transforms the theatrical experience into a moral reckoning, forcing viewers to consider their own potential parallels to the characters' apathy and detachment. By emphasizing the factual nature of the incident, Padmanabhan denies the audience the comfort of viewing the play as mere fiction, demanding they confront the pervasive indifference within their own social contexts.

The visual and auditory elements in the staging heighten this confrontation. The gradual reddening of the curtain or the stage, which eventually obscures the text, serves as a powerful metaphor for the violence that consumes not only the victim but also the moral fabric of society. The absence of a curtain call reinforces this unease, stripping the ending of any performative closure and leaving the audience in a state of discomfort and contemplation. Padmanabhan's decision to let the factual statements persist—both visually and aurally—shifts the focus from the fictional characters to the broader societal implications of inaction. The projected or spoken messages highlight the repetition of such incidents over weeks, emphasizing the systemic, normalized nature of violence and complicity in urban middle-class settings. By presenting these endings, Padmanabhan disrupts the traditional boundaries of theatre, transforming it into a space for ethical engagement rather than passive consumption. The combination of reality and performance not only implicates the audience as complicit witnesses, but also compels them to confront the unsettling fact that the violence depicted onstage reflects real-world indifference, rather than dramatic exaggeration. This strategy ensures that the audience leaves not with a sense of resolution but with the weight of ethical accountability, haunted by the silence and inaction that allows such violence to persist.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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