

## **Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* and *Harvest*: a 'Clarion Call' to Indian Society**

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**Article Received:** 14/11/2023

**Article Accepted:** 12/12/2023

**Published Online:** 14/12/2023

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.04.16

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyses different facets of violence and exploitation of women in *Lights Out*, and *Harvest* plays written by Onassis Prize winner Manjula Padmanabhan. She boldly stepped out of conventions that define respectability to address issues of gender, suppression, and exploitation of women in Indian society. In *Lights Out*, the dramatist voices the atrocities committed against women and showcases the conflicts women face in modern society with complete negligence towards women's fright and sensitivity. In her award-winning play *Harvest*, the dramatist showcased how modern technology and science exploit illiterate people. Through the female character, she voices a possible resistance to the exploitation of women. Padmanabhan gives a Clarion Call through her plays that if atrocities on women are not addressed seriously, the Indian society will remain 'Dark.'

**Keywords:** Gender, Suppression, Exploitation, Violence, Fright and Sensitivity, Modern Technology and Science.

### **Introduction**

Manjula Padmanabhan, born in 1953, successfully tried her hand at all types of literature. It includes plays, travelogues, comic strips, short stories, novels, and children's books. Before entering the area of literature, she worked as a cartoonist and carried a long-running cartoon strip, Suki in the Sunday Observer and later the Pioneer. Padmanabhan has acquired the highest profile in Indian English literature. All her works have versatile themes ranging from mystery to science fiction. Padmanabhan's first play, *Lights Out* (1984), and her fifth play, Onassis-award-winning *Harvest* (1997), have been performed on stage and television. Through *Harvest*, Padmanabhan successfully attempts a science-fiction on stage for the first time in India. Out of 1500 entries, she won the first prize for the original theatrical play *Harvest*, dealing with the subject, "Man on the threshold of the 21st century."

Manjula Padmanabhan is one of the Indian female writers in English who has boldly stepped out of conventions that define respectability to address issues of gender,

woman, her body and its behavior, and its exploitation in a family and social setting. In her plays *Lights Out* and *Harvest*, she focused more on the present-day social problems prevailing in Indian society.

Keyssar describes 'Feminist Theatre' as a "Production of scripts characterized by the consciousness of women as women; dramaturgy in which art is inseparable from the condition of women as women; performance (written and acted) that deconstructs sexual difference and thus undermines patriarchal power, scripting and production that present transformation as a structural and ideological replacement for recognition; and the creation of women in the subject position. (1p, Keyssar) In the present era, Feminism is the major concern in the writings of literature writers. Women issues, oppression, harassment, and rape are debatable subjects among writers and common people. Manjula Padmanabhan gives a Clarion call to Indian society through the plays *Lights Out* and *Harvest*; she brings out the pain and struggles that women face in the present Indian society and tickles the audience's sensibility through her characters in both plays.

The government makes efforts to protect the rights of women and check their exploitation. However, women are becoming prey to many social evils like murder, rape, physical and mental harassment, and oppression. The submissive nature of women allows men to rule their lives. Resistance is inevitable in the present scenario of Indian society. Social Commitment is neglected in the present society. People ignore basic human nature, rescuing others, particularly women, when they are in trouble. Through male characters in the play *Lights Out*, Padmanabhan exposes the neglect of the duty of social beings in the present Indian society. "The dramatist's purpose in the play is mainly to highlight social apathy and negligence of men towards women issues. They ignore their duties as social beings and blame others for not fulfilling them well. The twenty-first century remains a witness to a machine world where few people act like machines, heartless. As a society, how responsive are we to other's needs? This is the question Manjula Padmanabhan addresses in her play *Lights Out*." (11p, Chandra) *Lights Out* is based on an eyewitness incident in Santa Cruz, Mumbai 1982. In the play *Lights Out*, as the title suggests, activities are associated with darkness, both psychological and physical worlds. Physical represents to gang rape of a woman, and psychological represents the attitude of people who remains as irresponsible social beings towards the crime. In *Lights Out*, the dramatist shows how the man neglects the woman's fright and sensitivity and behaves as an irresponsible social being, not responding to the crime in their neighboring building under construction. The female character, Leela, could sense the horrible struggle of women in the hands of men, surely a gang rape in the neighboring building.

Leela: I know. You told me they are not interested in cases like this; they are not bothered about minor offenses, but I am frightened! Can't you see that? Isn't that enough?

Bhasker: Tell the police you are frightened about noises in the next building! They will laugh in your face! (5p, *Lights Out*)

From the above dialogues, Padmanabhan displays the negligence of a responsible person of the family and society through the male character Bhasker, who ignores his wife's request to call the police to find out the crime and to rescue the victim from the hands of Goons. He ignores the tension and fright that Leela suffers through day and night. Bhasker does not care about the mental suffering of his wife and the physical suffering of the victim in the neighboring building.

In the present Indian society, people forget that human beings are social beings and dependent on each other. People become very possessive of themselves, never try to face reality, are least bothered about surrounding events, and do not want to interfere in others' matters. They never try to voice their opinion against injustice and indignity to humanity. Women's issues are debatable subjects among scholars and common people. They are harassed physically and mentally by family and in society. The government makes laws to check the violence against women, but most of the women are struggling with a variety of atrocities like rape, murder, and assault physically and mentally. In the play *Harvest*, Padmanabhan focuses much on the body organs trade, and at the same time, she focuses on the deterioration of family bonds due to the thirst for money. The dramatist, through her play *Harvest*, brings out the real incidents and tickles readers' minds. By taking the real incidents which she had seen in Madras(now called Chennai) during 1995 while on the early morning walk, she observed a few people wearing pajamas, dressing gowns, and sterile gauze mouth – masks and came to know that they were recovering from Kidney – transplant surgery. Moreover, the donors are poor villagers of Tamilnadu. News reports described how sudden wealth distorted donors' lives, how a man might sell his kidney or his wife's kidney for Rs.20,000, and how the money would inspire the man to marry a second time, perhaps selling the second wife's kidney too. (106p, *Harvest*) In the play *Harvest*, the protagonist Jaya's husband, Om, exploits the wife and husband relationship to earn money. Padmanabhan portrays this manipulation and oppression of women realistically through the Jaya character. Om introduces his wife, Jaya, as his sister to the Inter Planta Services Guards to abide by the rule that the donor of organs must be unmarried. He even introduces his brother Jeetu as Jaya's husband. Om feels that a slight manipulation of relations could not change their lives. However, Jaya resists converting her from sister to wife and strongly condemns Ohm's decision. The dramatist voices through Jaya against the exploitation of women's sensibilities through suppression:

Jaya: And calling me your sister – what is that? (sobs) If I am your sister, what does that make you? (hysterical edge) Sister, huh! My forehead burns when I say the word "sister"! (22p, *Harvest*)

Frustrated, Jaya, with cozen deeds of Virgil, rightly reacts:

Jaya: I will tell you! He has sold the rights to his organs! His skin. His eyes. His arse. (sobs again) Sold them! ( holds her head) Oh God, Oh God! What is the meaning of this nightmare? ( sobs. To Om) How can I hold your hand and touch your face, knowing that it might be snatched away from me and flung across the globe at any moment? ( sobs) If you

were dead, I could shave my head and break my bangles – but this? To be a widow by slow degrees? To mourn you piece by piece? (sobs) Should I shave half my head? Break my bangles one at a time? (succumbs to her tears) (23p, Harvest)

From the above two dialogues, it is clear that the male character, Om, decides to donate his organs to a foreign receiver in return for an enormous amount of money to have a better life; hence, Om makes Jaya agree to this very forcibly. To reach the economics of life, Om decides to donate organs and leaves the fate of his wife as an unanswered question! Om fails to act as a responsible husband. He does not care about the psychological trauma of his wife.

Advancements in science and technology have made man's life comfortable, but culture, tradition, and social Commitment are declining daily. Man confines to his boundaries, does not like to come out, and never notices the incidents around him. “ Individualism, though it can emancipate us from given social orders, proceeds to confine us to `the solitude of our hearts` and removes the heroic dimensions of life, the purpose worth dying for.”(40p, Lyon) Padmanabhan chose theatre as the right platform to expose the various kinds of oppression faced by women in a patriarchal society. Women are forced to act according to the male in the family; whatever he says, she has to abide. In *Lights Out*, when Leela asks Bhasker about the giving complaint, she is least bothered with her words and suggests music and yoga to detach from the outer world. Through Bhasker, the character dramatist exposes the negligence of a social being. Gradually, Leela becomes neurotic and does not wish to call any guest to their house. When Bhasker invites his friend Mohan to their home, Leela’s condition worsens as Mohan is adamant about looking at crime and asks what is wrong with watching a crime. Instead of helping the helpless woman - the victim, Bhasker and Mohan analyze the type of crime and conclude it is a religious ceremony. Padmanabhan creates a silent character in the play *Lights Out*; her silence creates many doubts for the audience. Frieda remains a spectator and listens to the conversation among other characters about the screams of the victim, but her feelings are neutral. One can anticipate, by Frieda's behavior, that she might have encountered such incidents in her life or suffered incessantly from such incidents earlier in her life. Frieda leads an independent life and is from a lower economic strata. However, when all the characters decide to attack Goons in the neighboring building, she readily brings weapons. Padmanabhan depicts Frieda's bold nature, and she shows the audience that Frieda is bold enough to face such incidents.

In the play *Harvest*, Padmanabhan strongly condemns the exploitation of women through Jaya's character, and she exhibits reluctance of voice, disagreement, and frustration at the end of the play. *Harvest*, as the title suggests, though the central theme is the trade of body organs, the subtext focuses on how women are treated as possessions of men who harvest future generations from their bodies but refuse to identify their feelings. In the play *Harvest*, Virgil (the receiver of body organs) traps Om to target Jaya. Virgil acts as a female receiver (Ginni) throughout the play, but in the end, Jaya understands his selfish nature. He wants a child from Jaya’s womb through advanced medical reproductive mechanisms. Jaya finally realizes it is in her power to decide Virgil's plans. Jaya disagrees with impregnating her with

an advanced medical reproductive mechanism by Virgil, and she demands he come to her to risk his body through the natural process of conjugation. Jaya demands Virgil without any fear and hesitation following:

Jaya: I believe you! I trusted you!

Virgil: Nothing I have said is untrue. I can set it up so that we can be together – go places – anywhere you want – right inside your room –

Jaya: I do not want you to make-believe travels!

Virgil: And it is all possible –

Jaya: (sharply) No! Not without risking your skin! (shouting) Never! Do you hear me, whoever is, wherever you are? Never! Never! There is no closeness without risk! (100p, Harvest)

Padmanabhan depicts boldness from frustration through the character Jaya. Jaya discovers a new definition for winning, “Winning by Losing.” Playing games with the lives of poor people, particularly women, brings out a revolution in Jaya's thoughts and readiness to fight against injustice and exploitation of women. Jaya, a poor, weak, and helpless woman, creates a new set of rules for Virgil, a wealthy person who can buy anything in the world but not the poor man's pride. When Virgil threatens Jaya that he will send guards to force the doors of the room, she, in turn, blackmails him by holding a piece of glass against her throat and denies further argument with him. Jaya boldly faces Virgil, a person acquainted with sophisticated technology. Through the character of Jaya, Padmanabhan shows how to face reality with courage and resist male hegemony. The play's climax makes every woman think intensely and gives relief with the decision to face the consequences of any situation bravely. In the play Harvest, the dramatist creates a new definition – ‘Winning by Losing’ through a female character; Jaya’s empowerment comes from the reality that she is ready to win by losing. She looks happy and relaxed about her decision.

In the play Lights Out, Padmanabhan’s purpose is to highlight the social irresponsibility of upper-middle-class people. This class of people has become so self-centered and possessive of themselves that they intentionally forget their responsibility as social beings. They do not bother to complain to the authorities concerned about crime. This tendency is mainly responsible for the increasing crime rate in the present society. Mainly, nobody takes risks to handle the situation and remains a spectator when it comes to women's issues. The male characters remain spectators and become adamant about looking at the crime instead of rescuing the victim. Politicians have passed many laws for women's safety, but everything needs to be more specific because laws are presented safely in books rather than for practice. The dramatist tickles the audience's sensibilities through the male characters in Lights Out and compels them to think about these characters, which somehow reflect their behavior as social beings.

**Conclusion :**Manjula Padmanabhan pleads through the plays Lights Out and Harvest to open minds, think broadly, raise voices against injustice and indignity to humanity, and resist rampant social evils. The dramatist urges us to face reality with courage and to act as committed social beings.

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