

## SURVIVING THE SHADOWS: HUMANITY IN CRISIS IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S LIGHTS OUT

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### Abstract

Lights Out is a haunting one-act play by Manjula Padmanabhan which in a dramatic way shows how common men react to uncommon violence that is taking place in immediate surroundings. The play has concentrated on a group of upper-middle-class Indians who prefer to stay silent instead of rebelling, showing how survival may turn into a moral sacrifice. This essay is going to examine how the play does not only criticize metropolitan indifference and misogyny, but also the psychological processes and feminist politics of such passivity. Based on the text and the major critical theories supporting this line of thought, this paper suggests that the characters created by Padmanabhan unravel the existence of a severe crisis of human beings in a society where the obsession with fear, denial and privilege take the forefront to act out the instinct of intervention.

**Key Words:** - Survival, Moral Compromise, Gendered Violence, Feminist, Violence, Patriarchal etc.

### Introduction

*Lights Out* (1983) by Manjula Padmanabhan is one of the most caustic depictions of Indian society in the urban areas, including moral indifference and psychological paralysis towards the phenomenon of violence perpetrated against women. The play is based on a factual gang rape incident that took place in Mumbai and it is not the violence is seen on stage that shocks the viewers; rather it is the behavior of the witnesses as they take no action and remain silent when violence is taking place. All taking place in a single apartment, a play tells the story of those characters who react to the sounds and, to some extent, sights, of a brutal attack happening over and over again just beyond their window.

Unlike conventional survival narratives that emphasize physical endurance, *Lights Out* questions what it means to survive ethically and psychologically. This study uses feminist criticism and psychological theory, especially concepts such as bystander effect, moral disengagement, and complicity, to examine how humanity fractures under crisis.

In an era marked by increasing insensitivity to violence and human suffering, literature serves as both mirror and conscience. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*, a one-act play first written in 1983 and later included in the collection *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival* (2000), is a bold and unsettling interrogation of urban apathy, ethical paralysis, and the failure of civic responsibility. Based on a real-life gang rape incident in Santa Cruz, Mumbai, the play forces its audience to confront not the act of violence itself, but rather the disturbing silence of those who witness it. Padmanabhan shifts the focus from perpetrators to bystanders, asking urgent questions: What happens to humanity when people learn to live with atrocity? What kind of survival is possible in a society that suppresses empathy?

The whole shooting of *Lights Out* is in a middle-class drawing room, and the story depicts a moral crisis that the six characters of the show Leela, Bhaskar, Mohan, Naina, Surinder, and the maid Frieda gets trapped in and gets progressively uncomfortable because of it. They are in the comfort of their apartment when they hear a woman getting violated in one of the lots across the

road. Most of the characters address their reaction with a combination of fear, denial, voyeurism, justification, and indifference instead of the reaction of outrage or responsibility. Central tension of the play is not regarding what happens outside but how the characters evade the same.

This study explores how *Lights Out* dramatizes a crisis of humanity through the theme of survival not merely physical survival, but psychological, ethical, and gendered survival in a patriarchal and class-stratified society. The characters of Padmanabhan live by switching off the metaphorical and physical lights as it means severing the connection with moral responsibility. The target, victim lady is never named and never seen, which is the way one does not see the victims of normalized violence, i.e., gendered violence. Her screams should act like an alarm warning the audience morally of a wrong issue, which is shut off by the joint rationalization.

The play alludes well to the theory of bystander effect which is a psychological knowledge that shows that a person is less likely to lend a helping hand to others in an emergency situation in the presence of people. It further overlaps with those feminist conceptions of spectatorship, silence, and bodily sovereignty, most notably in the articulation of the manners by which the suffering of women is disregarded or objectified by male characters. The only character to respond with prolonged distress, Leela, is continually patronized, gaslit, and emotionally depleted, which illustrates how female conscience usually is separated in patriarchal conditions.

In addition to it, *Lights Out* could be interpreted as a negative commentary about the urbanite elite, the privileged stratum that is able to not only live in the state of psychological self-deception but also the state of physical unconnection with the violence going on in the centre of the city itself. Their passivity turns into an act of collusion and Padmanabhan employs their inability as a strong accusation of the disintegration of the communal sense in modern Indian society. The setting of the play, the room turns into a very small world of the country itself, where one does not have to fight violence anymore, but to learn to exist with it without a single word.

In this paper I will put forward the argument that *Lights Out* is a work that does not end with the celebration of survival but rather survival has been an attack on it, a costly trade off characteristic of fear, guilt, numbness and moral defeat. This paper shows how denial, the privileges, and gendered silence- based on how the main characters in the play respond to violence- determine who survives at what costs. Drawing on feminist, psychological, and sociological frameworks, the paper examines how Padmanabhan's compact yet powerful play presents a disturbing portrait of humanity in retreat—one that remains deeply relevant in today's world of escalating violence and waning empathy.

At the heart of *Lights Out* is the question of what we owe one another as members of a shared society. Leela's growing distress illustrates the conscience at war with complicity. She asks her husband:

*"Should we just sit here and do nothing?" (Lights Out, 9)*

Her repeated attempts to convince the others to intervene fall on deaf ears. Bhaskar, her husband, typifies the bystander effect, a psychological phenomenon where individuals are less likely to offer help when others are present. He rationalizes inaction by shifting responsibility to authorities, traditions, or the unknowability of the situation:

*"It's just a ritual. These things are part of their religion." (Lights Out, 11)*

This tendency to neutralize moral responsibility echoes Bandura's theory of moral disengagement, where individuals use cognitive mechanisms to justify harmful inaction. The characters' denial of violence—redefining it as ritual—becomes a survival tactic. But this survival is superficial; it is survival at the cost of ethical disintegration.

### Feminist Perspectives: Violence, Witnessing, and the Gender Divide

A feminist lens reveals *Lights Out* as a deeply gendered critique. The play centers on violence against a woman, but the most vocal protestor Leela is continually dismissed by the men. When she becomes hysterical, Bhaskar tells her:

*“You’re imagining things. Why must you always overreact?” (Lights Out, 10)*

Leela’s distress is pathologized, her emotions minimized. Meanwhile, Surinder expresses voyeuristic curiosity:

*“I wouldn’t mind seeing it... if it’s what I think it is...” (Lights Out, 14)*

This disturbing comment reflects male spectatorship of female suffering, a concept feminist critic have long addressed. Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze is relevant here: violence against women becomes an object of male observation, detaching them from empathy. Leela, on the other hand, undergoes vicarious trauma, as she internalizes the violence through sound and imagination. Her emotional breakdown reflects the psychic toll of being a woman in a patriarchal society where women’s pain is simultaneously visible and silenced.

*Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan is a feminist text which is also a political and a psychological drama. The play sheds light on the gendered violence as a practice that is committed and upheld in a patriarchal culture. Although the violence is described off the stage, its symbolic and emotional load dominates through the play and colors the actions of the characters and supports the silence accompanied by women sufferings at the forefront. Both the unseen woman being attacked and the female characters, but particularly Leela, are twin figures of literal victimization, both explicitly and implicitly of metaphorical erasure. This chapter examines the ways in which the play displays criticisms of patriarchal spectatorship, women disempowerment, and how women are victims of the emotional work they are required to do when forced to be witnesses to gendered violence to which they are reluctant.

The most ghostly element of the play is that which is not seen that is the woman is being assaulted outside the apartment. There is no name, no voice no visible identity of her. The only thing that shows her existence is her screams. The erasing of this particular is a conscious attempt to show how patriarchal cultures make women disappear, particularly when they are victims. According to feminist theory, especially to the writings of such theorists as Gayatri Spivak or Judith Herman, the female voice in the discourse of violence becomes absent in the social space as a continuation of patriarchal dominance - the woman is not only physically violated, but rhetorically destroyed. The question, *Can the subaltern speak?* by Spivak comes to haunt here. The response in *Lights Out* appears to be: No, especially when the privileged people are drowning her with their excuses and silences.

The leading female character in the apartment is Leela who represents feminine conscience and moral urgency. Leela is also devastated by the violence in contrast to the male characters, who explain the violence as rational or even erotic. She has to constantly urged her husband and friends, asking them: “Shall we do nothing? Shall we just sit here and do nothing?” That shows how horrified and powerless she becomes. She is completely opposite of the aloofness of the men and this implies that a woman is more inclined to pain of another woman; not as a biological factor but since they live in a society where they are supposed to share this kind of pain.

However, Leela’s voice is persistently undermined by the men around her, who gaslight her distress and attribute her concern to emotional excess or hysteria. Bhaskar tells her to calm down, insisting:

*“You’re imagining things. Why must you always overreact?” (Lights Out, 10)*

Such dismissive language reflects a long-standing patriarchal tendency to pathologize female emotion, reducing moral clarity to irrationality. Leela's breakdown by the end of the play is not a personal failure but the logical result of being forced to carry the moral burden alone.

Perhaps the most shocking feminist critique in the play comes through Surinder's response to the violence. At one point, he says with disturbing eagerness:

*"I wouldn't mind seeing it... if it's what I think it is..." (Lights Out, 14)*

This line is more than just callous it reveals the voyeuristic male gaze, a concept developed by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey. According to Mulvey, in patriarchal structures, women's bodies are reduced to objects for male consumption, especially in scenes of sexualized violence. Surinder's reaction thus typifies a deeply problematic masculinity that eroticizes domination and passivity, reducing even acts of assault to opportunities for arousal and detachment.

Rather than expressing outrage, the male characters display curiosity, denial, or fear of inconvenience. Their lack of empathy reveals how patriarchal privilege enables moral detachment. The female body under assault is not seen as a person in pain, but as a spectacle a discomfiting truth Padmanabhan forces the audience to confront.

Feminist trauma theory is not neutral as regards the effect of witnessing. The female in particular in patriarchal societies find themselves in the position of an unwilling witness of the pain of a fellow woman, which has been labeled in the form of secondary trauma or vicarious victimhood. It could be proven by the fact that Leela became tormented by emotional turmoil. She does not suffer as such but she takes on the horror of what is occurring in the same way that she would experience it if it was she that was hurt. Her compassion turns into pain- a trauma that leaves her in a greater alienation due to the fact that the other people in her life will not contribute to her emotional load.

This division of emotional labor by gender is important: the men are able to survive by detaching, whereas Leela ends up breaking down because she chooses not to get numb. Her body and mind are war zones of empathy and by so doing Padmanabhan shows the unfortunate tendency of women to feel the burden of ethical action in a world that does not act.

Ultimately, *Lights Out* can be read as a feminist allegory of patriarchal denial. The "lights" going out are not merely about avoiding detection by the attackers; they are symbolic of society's deliberate blindness to the suffering of women. The play's refusal to show the violence emphasizes its psychological and cultural consequences how easy it is to normalize the abnormal, how quickly men can dismiss the unthinkable, and how women's voices are constantly battling to be heard.

Padmanabhan's theatrical choice to keep the violence offstage is also a feminist one it denies the audience the spectacle and forces them to engage not with what is seen, but with how people respond to what they hear. In doing so, she critiques not only patriarchal perpetrators of violence, but also the patriarchal bystanders who enable it through silence.

The apartment setting symbolizes urban isolation and privilege. The characters are protected by physical barriers gates, windows, distance but emotionally trapped by their own moral cowardice. Bhaskar insists:

*"Let's just pretend we didn't hear anything." (Light Out, 12)*

This deliberate turning away is an act of psychological self-preservation. In psychoanalytic terms, it represents repression: burying the unbearable truth to maintain mental equilibrium. However, this repression does not result in peace—it leads to guilt, fear, and emotional detachment. By the end of the play, Leela is almost catatonic:

*"It's dark. I can't see anything. I don't want to hear anymore." (Light Out, 19)*

Her cry is symbolic: darkness here is not just physical, but moral blindness. The title *Lights Out* thus becomes a metaphor for the death of empathy in modern society.

In Padmanabhan's world, survival is closely tied to class and privilege. The characters survive because they can afford to do nothing. Their apathy is a function of their social insulation. The play thereby challenges the audience to consider: is survival meaningful when it is bought at the cost of moral bankruptcy?

The silence of the characters complicates them. Judith Butler says that, being ethically responsive means to be exposed to the fragility of the other. In *Lights Out*, the characters refuse this weakness in order to defend themselves. The survival is thereby, morally bankrupt.

*Lights Out*, by Manjula Padmanabhan is a cold reflection on what it is like to live in a very imperiled society. Not just the inability to take action is criticized in the play but the psychological/gendered mechanics that make taking such action impossible. *Lights Out* survival is not epic, but possessed, as full of burden and loss. The play also encourages its viewers to wake up and realize that to truly survive means to connect, understand and act out without fear of ethical conduct. Resistance to silence is to never lose hope of being human in the face of crisis.

*Lights Out* written by Manjula Padmanabhan is an uneasy, sharp piece of philosophical reflection on how we might come to survive and even thrive systemic violence, patriarchal oppression and moral ineptitude. Within the confined living space of an apartment of the urban middle class, as well as by the limited movement of the six characters of the play, *Lights Out* turns out to be a healthy allegory of social apathy of modern India in general. These episodes of violence that take place right outside of the walls of the apartment are never actually depicted; however, the echo of the act sounds strongly, not because of what can be heard, but because of what cannot be performed.

The play finally criticizes a certain type of moral failure the failure not to act, not to react, not even to recognize the misery of another human being. The characters in *Lights Out* do not stay alive, being strong or striving to be good; they survive since they have taken the most convenient way: to remain silent. In this, Padmanabhan exposes the risks of urban privilege which privileges people against the evils others endure and creates a society where being cold is the law to be embraced and admired. The security of the apartment is being used as metaphorical approach of emotional and moral disengagement and the recreation of characters and their departure into silence is condemned judgment on a culture that permits violence to thrive in the name of order, tradition or fear.

Padmanabhan counters this by the emotional and psychological breakdown of Leela. Her ethical conscience cannot make her hide the truth. Nevertheless, her opposition has a steep cost, being isolated, gaslit, and psychologically broken. Leela does not win per se but she is the only one who is not willing to switch off her conscience. Thus, her torment becomes the final remnant of humankind in the world which is moving toward darkness. On the contrary, the characters of the men depicted in the play, especially Bhaskar and Surinder portray the cancerous mix of power, patriarchy and moral disengagement. Their studied non-action and ugliness of fascination points to a place where male is no longer gauged by any bravery at all.

In a feminist take on *Lights Out* it is particularly effective at pointing out the gendered nature of survival. The woman under attack is deprived of her visibility, she is a voiceless, faceless victim who lacks agency. At the same time, the voice of Leela is here and her voice continues to be silenced by the surrounding men. The play therefore proves how women become doubly violated: both during the crime and during the reaction by the society about it. Movies emphasize

how psychic trauma lends the possibility of survival to female characters, and efforts to resist are out ruled as a hysterical act.

Psychologically, the play shows that repression, justification and denial turn into crisis defense mechanism. The characters “turn the lights out” not only to avoid being seen by the perpetrators outside, but to blind themselves to the inner crisis of their collapsing humanity. Padmanabhan does not let the audience look away—she implicates them. The play becomes a mirror, asking: What would *you* do if you heard someone being brutalized outside your window

### **Conclusion**

*Lights Out* is not merely a commentary on one incident of violence. It is a prophetic indictment of a society that increasingly tolerates cruelty as long as it remains out of sight. Padmanabhan presents survival not as a triumph of the human spirit, but as a dangerous compromise, one that often demands the death of empathy, the silencing of dissent, and the erasure of responsibility. In its darkness, the play shines a light on our deepest fears not of violence, but of becoming indifferent to it. To survive, *Lights Out* warns us, is not enough. To survive with humanity intact that is the real challenge.

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