

## A Socio-Cultural Study of Women's Images in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

Meenal Bais<sup>1</sup>,

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar,

Dept. of English, O.P. Jindal University,

Raigarh, Chhattisgarh, India.

[meen.phd20eng01@opju.ac.in](mailto:meen.phd20eng01@opju.ac.in),

Dr Sanjay Kumar Singh<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>2\*</sup>Professor,

Dept. of Humanities,

O. P. Jindal University, Raigarh, Chhattisgarh, India.

[sanjay.singh@opju.ac.in](mailto:sanjay.singh@opju.ac.in).\*

### **ABSTRACT**

Manjula Padmanabhan, born on June 23, 1953, is an Indian playwright, journalist, author of children's books. She wrote on the diverse themes of science, technology, gender issues. This research investigates the plight of women in her play *Lights Out*, analyzing how their portrayals both reflect and critique socio-cultural norms in a dystopian context. Through the lens of feminist theory, the research explores themes of autonomy, survival, and resistance, revealing the complexities of female identity within a patriarchal framework. By examining character interactions, dialogues, and the socio-political landscape, this study highlights the resilience and agency of women, providing insights into contemporary gender issues.

**Keywords:** *Lights Out*, Socio-Cultural Study, Women's Representation, Dystopia, Power Dynamics, Gender Roles, Autonomy, Resistance, Patriarchy, Feminism, Identity.

Manjula Padmanabhan, a prominent emerging playwright in contemporary modern theatre, was born on June 23, 1953, in Delhi, into a diplomatic family. A prolific and versatile writer, she has made significant contributions as playwright, a novelist, journalist, short story writer, bringing a fresh perspective to Indian theatre. Her notable works include the plays *Lights Out* (1982), *The Artist Model* (1995), and *Harvest* (1997). Although the number of women playwrights was relatively small in the late 20th century, some, like Padmanabhan, rose to prominence during this period.

Indian Writing in English has a history spanning approximately 150 years, emerging as a significant literary tradition. The term broadly encompasses the diverse mosaic of Indian cultures, traditions, religions, and communities. Despite this diversity, it has successfully mirrored the multicultural and multilingual fabric of Indian society. It explores shared customs, cultural values, and the nation's rich heritage. Mr. Naik accurately notes that Indian Writing in English emerged as "an intriguing result of the lively interaction between a robust Britain and a stagnant India in the late eighteenth century." This exchange motivated numerous Indian writers to authentically depict their country and its essence in their literary works.

Drama is a literary genre and form of performance art that involves acting out stories. It puts considerable impact through its ability to blend auditory and visual storytelling. Shukla Supriya describes drama in *Indian English Drama: An Introduction* as "a simulated portrayal of life, merging the real with the imaginary, art with reality, while depicting events and characters within

the confines of space and time.” Similarly, O.P. Bhatnagar, a distinguished Indian poet, emphasizes that “the principles of art are inherently tied to the cultural and social ethos of its era”<sup>1</sup>

Indian drama blends the essence of narrative poetry with the visual dynamics of art, creating a form of storytelling that is vividly brought to life. Its roots stretch back to the Vedic Period, marking it as one of India's most enduring and cherished art forms. As a reflection of the nation's cultural consciousness, drama became a powerful medium for expressing the wisdom and truths embedded in the revered "Fifth Veda."

A pivotal role played in shaping Indian Writing in English by women writing. Dr. M. F. Patel, in *Studies in Indian Women Writers in English*, notes that “Indian women writers are progressing confidently and steadily, keeping pace with the rest of the world.” Their work often centers on the challenges and circumstances faced by women, striving to highlight their struggles and experiences in contemporary society. <sup>2</sup>

The play *Lights Out* depicts chilling portrayal of a society on the brink of collapse, interwoven with personal turmoil. In his essay *Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama*, R. N. Rai observes that *Lights Out* brings to light vividly the harrowing cries of Leela, a woman whose anguish disrupts the fragile domestic harmony of a middle-class couple. Rai emphasizes that women encounter violence in numerous facets of their daily life. This violence is not confined to the physical; it often takes on psychological and emotional forms. It is a deeply intricate and nuanced phenomenon—subtle, covert, and difficult to identify, making it even harder to address and overcome.<sup>3</sup>

The play's dystopian setting amplifies the challenges faced by its characters, particularly women, whose experiences reflect broader socio-cultural issues. This research aims to explore the representation of women in *Lights Out*, examining how Padmanabhan's portrayal challenges traditional gender norms and critiques patriarchal structures. By focusing on character dynamics, power relations, and themes of resistance, this study seeks to illuminate the complexities of female identity in contemporary society.

The play *Lights Out* is an exceptional theatrical work, first performed in 1986 at Prithvi Theatre in Mumbai by the Sole Theatre Company. The play has been widely praised for its originality and its foundation in real-world events. It is inspired by a firsthand account of an incident in Santacruz., Mumbai, in 1982. In this harrowing event, women were repeatedly assaulted by a group of men at a construction site over several weeks. Despite the victims' desperate cries for help, the surrounding community did not intervene.

This disturbing incident deeply impacted Padmanabhan, compelling her to highlight societal issues such as the vulnerability of women, their diminishing status, and the erosion of humanity. Through *Lights Out*, she seeks to draw attention to the struggles of women, particularly in India, where they often fall prey to male-dominated power dynamics that seek to marginalize and oppress them.

Padmanabhan portrays a world where women are denied identity, voice, and status, forced to appeal to men for recognition and basic rights. This lack of agency perpetuates systemic discrimination across all aspects of life. The play explores two key themes: gender inequality and male dominance, as well as violence and societal indifference to suffering.

The play commences with Bhaskar and his wife, Leela, having a conversation in the living room of their upscale sixth-floor apartment in Mumbai. Leela is deeply troubled by the nightly echoes of a woman's screams and cries coming from a nearby building. She is aware that an empty adjacent structure is the site of a girl being gang-raped every night. Distressed by the persistent violence, Leela urges Bhaskar to inform the authorities about these horrific acts.

However, Bhaskar, like many others in their community, prefers to remain uninvolved, avoiding any confrontation or legal complications. The other residents of their building also choose silence, unwilling to address or intervene in the disturbing events. Leela, unable to reconcile the blatant injustice with her conscience, finds herself grappling with her own emotional turmoil. Her husband's indifference to her distress and mental anguish leaves her feeling increasingly isolated and powerless, intensifying her frustration and despair.

"You don't mind what I feel, what I go through every day! ... I feel terrified. All as the day progressed, I feel tense ... At first it was exclusively at the time it was going on. Then when it got dim. Then around break time, when the kids came from school. Then around mid-afternoon. At the point when the doorbell rang. Then, at that point, toward the beginning of the day. At the point when I sent youngsters off to school. Furthermore, presently - from the second I wake up..."<sup>4</sup>

Leela is deeply tormented by the horrific events unfolding nearby. The anguished cries of the victims haunt her, filling her with an overwhelming sense of helplessness and sorrow. The persistent screams weigh heavily on her mind, as she empathizes with the emotional suffering of the victims. Yet, she finds no ally in her fight for justice.

Though everyone in the neighborhood is aware of the atrocities, they merely observe and offer varied opinions, unwilling to take action to end the inhuman acts. This collective apathy profoundly affects Leela's mental state, pushing her toward paranoia. She becomes so consumed by the trauma that she isolates herself at home, even forbidding her children from stepping outside. Desperate to block out the haunting sounds, she resorts to pressing her hands against her ears or stuffing them with cotton, but the cries still echo in her mind.

Haunted by guilt, Leela begins to blame herself for the continued violence, believing her inaction contributes to the cycle of horror. Meanwhile, Bhaskar dismisses her concerns, insisting that filing a police complaint would only invite trouble. He fears intense questioning or potential blame from the authorities, prioritizing their comfort over confronting the grim reality.

In *Lights Out*, Manjula Padmanabhan portrays Leela as a traditional woman, emblematic of middle-class Indian values. Leela takes pride in her role as an honorable woman and upholds the divinity of her domestic life and marital relationship. However, she is deeply disturbed by the horrifying acts occurring just outside her home under the streetlight. The relentless cries for help from the neighboring compound unsettle her, filling her with fear and agitation.

Leela, unable to tolerate the sounds any longer, pleads with her husband, Bhaskar, to report the incident to the police and put an end to the horrific acts. Her repeated appeals fall on deaf ears:

**LEELA:** (*Wheeling*.) "Can't you call the police? Just for me?"

**BHASKAR:** (*Drawing away.*) "No."

**LEELA:** "But why not?"

**BHASKAR:** "We've discussed this before----" <sup>5</sup>

Leela's reaction underscores her straightforward and traditional mindset, as she naively believes the police will intervene and bring the perpetrators to justice. In contrast, Bhaskar, aware of systemic corruption, indifference, and inefficiency within law enforcement, dismisses her expectations:

**LEELA:** "I know, I know- - you've let me know they're not keen on cases like this, they don't fret over the minor little offenses-yet I'm scared! Might you at any point see that? Isn't excessively enough?"

**BHASKAR:** "Go let the police know that you're scared about commotions in the following structure! They'll chuckle in front of you." <sup>6</sup>

Leela perceives the sexual violence unfolding in the vicinity as a violation of her home's sanctity, and the resulting fear shatters her sense of safety and peace. Her inability to articulate a valid reason for her dread prevents her from convincing Bhaskar to act. As the play progresses, Leela's identification with the unseen victim intensifies. She feels a profound, indirect impact from the violence, even though it does not physically harm her. For Leela, the torment is psychological—an invisible yet powerful force that unsettles her deeply.

Towards the climax, Leela's suppressed fear erupts, highlighting the emotional strain she endures. Through her character, Padmanabhan emphasizes the emotional sensitivity and empathetic nature of women. Leela's plight reflects the silent, psychological violence often inflicted upon women, revealing their vulnerability and deep emotional connection to suffering around them

Leela's heightened sensitivity makes her deeply responsive to events around her, as anything that touches her heart triggers an intense emotional reaction. The pervasive violence in society instills profound fear in people, often manifesting as nightmares and taking considerable time to overcome. Padmanabhan, through Leela's character, brings light on the struggles faced by women in a society where even the well-educated, privileged, and socially aware elite choose to remain apathetic and unresponsive to crimes against women. As Swami Vivekananda's words resonate here the welfare of the world depends on improving the condition of women, as progress is unattainable without gender equality, much like a bird cannot fly with just one wing.

In the play *Lights Out*, another woman character, Naina, Leela's friend, represents a different perspective. Initially, she dismisses the strange sounds as part of a local slum's religious ceremony. However, her curiosity leads her to investigate, and she is horrified to witness four men assaulting a woman. Three men restrain the victim while the fourth attacks her brutally. Naina is visibly shaken by the scene:

**NAINA:** "Someone's being..... (She battles for her voice.) They're- - they're (She dry-spews.)"

**BHASKAR:** "Don't express anything without holding back - Leela will be disturbed!"

(Mohan stays at the window, entranced.)

NAINA:"Someone's being ..... (She actually ca unfinished her proclamation. She dry-regurgitates once more.) There's a lady being - - - "

MOHAN:(Over his shoulder)"Dragged around by the foot."

(Leela, who has been sitting unmoving, presently holds her head with two hands, covering her ears.)

BHASKAR:(Brightly.)"Do you figure it very well may be a piece of the custom, Mohan?"

NAINA:"What custom? That is no custom! That is a - - - a - - - - - "7

While Naina categorically denies it being a ritual, the men in the play refuse to label it as rape. Bhaskar's informal demeanor, along with the dismissive attitudes of Mohan and Surinder, underscores the entrenched patriarchal mindset, where men dictate what women should think, feel, or do. This casual disregard for the women's perspectives fosters fear in Leela, Naina, and even Leela's domestic helper, Frieda. By perpetuating this dynamic, the men maintain the dominance of patriarchal power both within and beyond the home.

Padmanabhan vividly portrays male dominance and the suppression of women throughout the play. Among the characters, Naina is perhaps the most perceptive and shares with Leela a visceral disgust for the violence. However, Naina is more proactive, urging Bhaskar and Mohan to intervene. Unlike Leela, who pleads with her husband, Naina confronts their inaction, condemning their indifference and pushing them to act instead of passively observing.

Naina's presence in *Lights Out* is pivotal in championing the cause of women's emancipation and resistance against sexual violence. She is quick to challenge the men's attempts to rationalize or trivialize the assault. Shocked by their readiness to label the victim as a prostitute, Naina firmly counters that even a prostitute deserves protection from such brutal violence. She challenges the reductive views that portray women as inherently vulnerable and rejects the conventional, patriarchal notions of femininity perpetuated by the male characters. In this sense, Naina can be seen as a voice for the playwright, offering a progressive perspective that seeks to redefine women's roles and images in society through the medium of the play.

Naina exemplifies the strength of silence as a form of protest. Her arrival in the narrative brings crucial support to Leela, amplifying the collective voice of women. Together, they argue that police intervention is the only viable solution to the horrific crimes. Bold and unflinching, Naina challenges Bhaskar and Mohan directly, dismissing their hollow justifications for the violence. However, her confidence falters when her husband, Surinder, enters the scene. His domineering presence casts a shadow over everyone, causing Naina, typically assertive, to shrink back in his presence.

Surinder's reaction to the ongoing violence initially offers a glimmer of hope, as he exhibits visible anger—a stark contrast to the apathy of Bhaskar and Mohan. However, this hope is short-lived when it becomes evident that his anger stems not from empathy for the victim but from a personal affront: the attackers had the audacity to draw attention to their crimes by throwing stones at their building. Surinder's response is aggressive and self-centered, focusing on retaliation rather than justice. While Leela surprisingly aligns with his plans for vigilantism, Naina urges caution, warning against taking the law into their own hands. Surinder's dismissive and violent response reveals his true character:

*"You shut up. This is no time for women's nonsense"*<sup>8</sup>

*"Shut up—or I'll kick your teeth in"*<sup>9</sup>

Understanding her husband's temper and his propensity for violence, Naina chooses to remain silent, realizing that further argument would only redirect his anger toward her. Her silence in this instance becomes a strategic form of resistance, a way to navigate the oppressive dynamics of power within her marriage.

Similarly, the character of Frieda, the domestic worker in the play, employs silence in a different but equally powerful way. Frieda, a maid and cook, remains largely unnoticed, silently attending to her duties without engaging in the ongoing conversations. Her silence reflects her marginalized position as both a woman and a member of the lower economic class. While her silence appears passive, it is deeply layered, carrying both the weight of her subjugation and her subtle resistance to it.

Frieda's presence complicates the narrative of violence and oppression, as her experience of suppression is less overt but equally significant. She adheres to her role with robotic efficiency, responding to every demand of her employers without question. Even as the discussion about retaliating against the perpetrators unfolds, Frieda quietly gathers knives and acids, signaling her acknowledgment of the need to stop the violence. Despite her muted presence, her actions suggest a quiet defiance and a commitment to survival in a challenging environment.

Padmanabhan uses Frieda's silence as a dual symbol: a shield against her vulnerable position and a commentary on how the oppressed navigate systems of power. Her unspoken resilience is evident in her efforts to earn a living independently, even under harsh circumstances. Though she works inconspicuously, her constant movement—bringing tea, cleaning broken glass, and arranging items—emphasizes her significant presence on stage. Her silence becomes a tool of survival, allowing her to exist in a public sphere while protecting herself from further subjugation.

Through Frieda, the playwright showcases a nuanced perspective on the intersection of gender and class. While her silence may stem from fear of abuse due to her socioeconomic status, her determination to work and sustain herself demonstrates a quiet strength. Frieda's silence, far from diminishing her character, underscores her resilience and her ability to assert her presence in a world that often disregards her voice.

In *Lights Out*, the female characters are multifaceted, embodying both strength and vulnerability. The protagonist, for instance, navigates a world rife with oppression and fear. Her journey reflects the struggles many women face in patriarchal societies, where autonomy is often curtailed. Characters like her serve as a lens through which the audience can examine the intricate realities of women's lives, illustrating their capacity for resilience even in dire circumstances.

The character interactions highlight various dimensions of female identity. For example, moments of camaraderie between women reveal a shared understanding of their plight, fostering solidarity. Yet, these relationships are also marked by competition and conflict, reflecting societal pressures that pit women against each other.

The power dynamics between male and female characters are central to understanding the socio-cultural context of *Lights Out*. Men are often depicted as figures of authority, wielding control

over their female counterparts. However, Padmanabhan complicates these dynamics by illustrating how women resist and negotiate their positions within these power structures.

Key scenes reveal the subtleties of power, such as when female characters assert their agency through small acts of defiance. These moments challenge the status quo, demonstrating that resistance can manifest in various forms, even when overt rebellion seems impossible.

The theme of survival is prominent in *Lights Out*, with female characters employing diverse strategies to navigate their oppressive environment. The play illustrates the lengths to which women will go to protect themselves and their loved ones. For instance, when faced with external threats, characters band together, showcasing their strength in unity.

*Lights Out* serves as a critique of traditional gender roles entrenched in patriarchal societies. Padmanabhan examines how these norms restrict women's identities, pushing them into predefined roles as caretakers or submissive partners. The play challenges these limitations by showcasing women's struggles for autonomy and recognition.

The interactions between male and female characters reveal the pervasive nature of patriarchy, as men often seek to maintain control. Yet, Padmanabhan also highlights the potential for subversion, as women begin to redefine their roles in response to their circumstances. The play encourages a reevaluation of gender expectations, illustrating the potential for change.

The dystopian backdrop of *Lights Out* amplifies the challenges faced by women, creating a heightened sense of urgency in their struggles. The setting serves as a metaphor for societal fears regarding gender inequality and the consequences of environmental degradation. As resources dwindle and societal structures collapse, the play underscores the precariousness of women's lives in such a context.

Padmanabhan's portrayal of a dystopian future invites audiences to reflect on contemporary issues, such as violence against women and systemic oppression. The themes resonate with current societal anxieties, making the play's critique all the more relevant.

The play encourages an examination of intersectionality, highlighting how various factors like class, race, and age intersect with gender to shape women's lived experiences. For instance, characters from different socio-economic backgrounds navigate their realities in distinct ways, revealing the complexity of their identities. Padmanabhan's nuanced portrayal underscores the diversity of women's experiences, challenging monolithic representations of femininity. In the postmodern age, the limitations imposed by tradition, culture, and geography are gradually diminishing due to developments in science, technology, and contemporary political and social ideas. This era is characterized by individualism. As Lyon points out, "Although individualism liberates us from traditional social frameworks, it also leaves us isolated in 'the solitude of our own hearts' (de Tocqueville), removing the heroic dimensions of life and the feeling of having a purpose worthy of sacrifice."<sup>10</sup>

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* presents a complex portrayal of women that critiques societal norms and highlights the resilience of female identity. Through character dynamics, power struggles, and themes of survival, the play engages with pressing socio-cultural issues, inviting audiences to reflect on the realities faced by women in both the narrative and the contemporary

world. Padmanabhan's work ultimately serves as a powerful commentary on the need for societal change and the potential for women's agency in challenging oppressive structures.

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