

**A POSTMODERN CRITIQUE OF MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S  
PLAY *LIGHTS OUT***

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**Abstract**

*Lights Out* (1968) is a postmodern play. It portrays the modern middle class society with all its hypocrisy and self-centered ideas. The play has been considered as a case of social apathy, modern man's escapism and so forth. My aim in the paper is to look at the play from a postmodern point of view as to how the play deals with its themes and structure. The paper depends mainly upon the interpretation of the text. A comparative study of the text with some other texts has also been done. The play's loose ending offers itself to multiple interpretations. The characters of the play lift up the multiple interpretations. It is a self critique of the society which is portrayed.

**Keywords:** Comparative, Critique, Postmodern.

Manjula Padmanabhan is a prominent name in the field of Indian English Play. She has been awarded with the prestigious Alexander S. Onassis Award for Theatre in 1997, her plays has been staged successfully in all over India and abroad. Her plays deal mainly with the concurrent issues in the Indian society. And *Lights Out* (1986) is also not an exception in this case; it presents the upper middle class urban society in the first half of the 1990's with all its hypocrisy and self-centered ideas. The play is a postmodern one because it opens up for multiple interpretations.

Postmodernism is a very complex idea. There are debates about its meaning and nature. But certainly it is a historical-cultural phenomenon. Some of the ideas related with postmodernism are – anti-narrative, anarchy, play (of ideas), indeterminacy, metonymy etc. Postmodernism in literature has its roots in the second half of the last century. It denotes some specific qualities of the literary texts. First of all, we can point that the postmodern literature is formless compared to the others; the play under discussion opens abruptly and does not have an ending. Secondly, it presents the negative or the destructive aspect of man as we find in this play. Intertextuality is still another quality of this genre. There are references to various ideas and things here and there in this text too.

At the very opening of the play what strikes us is that it starts abruptly. It resumes as if the scene is not the first one, as if some incidents has already taken place and the audience or the reader knows that.

Bhaskar, instead of doing something to stop the bad thing invites his friend Mohan to experience a voyeuristic pleasure of the inhuman activities going on out there in their next compound. Accordingly, Mohan comes and first inquires for more data about that thing and then

watches it. But, even after watching a brutal rape being going on he tries to explain it in some other terms so as to find a way to stay away from being entangled in such serious cases. This shows the escapist nature of the modern man. Though Leela is a bit different but she also ends up in just insisting her husband on calling the police, but she herself never tries to call the police though there was a telephone in their home itself. The characters are having prolonged conversation only but nobody calls the police.

“To combine, or ‘paste’ together, multiple elements. In postmodernist literature this can be homage to or a parody of past styles. It can be seen as a representation of the chaotic, pluralistic, or information-drenched aspects of postmodern society. It can be a combination of multiple genres to create a unique narrative or to comment on situations in postmodernity.” (Prodhani, 172) So is seen in the play, the playwright pastes together varied elements like the escapist nature of the modern man, upper class peoples’ negative and irresponsible attitude towards the lower class people.

The first speech of the play itself is abrupt – Bhaskar calls for Frieda and asks for his tea. He doesn’t bother to inquire about the whereabouts of Frieda. This shows the upper class people’s attitude towards the lower class people. They just presume that the lives of the lower class people in no ways matter to them or to the society. The lower class people should always be at the service of the society without complaining anything and if they get entangled in some problem they should be left alone in their condition, they should not be helped by anyone.

The attitude of the upper class people towards the lower class is as projected in the play “...well, as long as it’s the poor attacking the poor... you know how it is... they live their lives and we live ours.”(scene2) As if the poor are not valuable as human beings like that of the nice people, typically referred to by the characters of the play. Mohan, a character of the play even goes to the extent of assuming that if the people out there in the disturbing scene in the next compound are all poor then the whole thing may be different. It may rather be some kind of worship; may be some kind of new religion and so forth. He believes that only the poor people worship the negligible objects like stone etc. with great devotion and in some strange and obsolete ways, even by getting naked. He also interprets the ongoing rape of the poor girl as exorcism. Bhaskar tells, “Illiterate people believe that when a demon possesses a woman it is always via the – uh – lower orifice–.” (scene3) And Mohan adds, “...and that’s why, earlier, they were dragging her around in that ungainly position, as if to coax the demon to come out–.”(scene3)

But, this again can be interpreted as an irony of the educated and civilized upper middle class society. People like Mohan and Bhaskar who claim they to be nice and decent talking about the blind faiths and superstitions like exorcism is very much ironical.

To talk about the whole play from the radical feminists’ point of view it talks about the male gaze in the society. Because what we notice is that while the female characters can not even bear the sound of the rape, the male characters like Bhaskar and Mohan are watching the whole incident with voyeuristic pleasure and talking about it all the time and giving different types of interpretations. This shows the hypocritical nature of the so called nice people of the society.

And again, Mohan’s consideration of the victim to be a whore is very much unfortunate. It implies many things; that there exist the things like prostitution in that society and perhaps people like Mohan and Bhaskar has also experienced such filthy things at times, or otherwise how would they recognize the victimized girl to be a whore. It also implies that the people who involve herself in such business like prostitution they are not considered to be proper human beings, and man like the male characters of the play can at any time violate their human rights:

“NAINA: By losing their vulnerability to rape, whores lose their right to be women? Is that what you mean? MOHAN: Right. After all...” (scene3)

The play is self critical of the society that is presented in it. Because what we see or feel watching or reading the play is just the opposite of what its characters argue and do. We see the inactiveness of the people to do something for the wellbeing of the society. They can have talks and formulate plans but can not implement those plans or rather they are unwilling to do welfare to the society.

“Hermeneutics, the science of textual interpretation, also plays a role in postmodern philosophy. Unlike deconstruction, which focuses upon the functional structures of a text, hermeneutics seeks to arrive at an agreement or consensus as to what the text means, or is about.” (Prodhani, 160) As we see that the play opens abruptly, it has no proper beginning. And again, the play has no proper ending too, it ends abruptly. It does not give any solution to resolve the problems; rather the end makes us feel that the incidents would go on further. And new victims would scream, twitch in pain and fall sick or some other Mohans would come and watch and talk about the incidents in different terms. So, it can be said that this loose structure or ‘anti-narrative’ form (as Hayden White puts it) is brilliantly used by the playwright Padmanabhan. And which also helped the playwright to ‘paste’ the fragments of interpretations together and give the play its meaning which is much bigger than the play itself. Or so to say in other words the incredibly short play is made capable of bearing a very big significance for the society.

The ongoing rape of the poor victim can be compared with the public molestation of Draupadi in *Mahabharata*, where Draupadi begs for help but no one comes to her rescue. A cross reference to the Gandhian idea that to watch a crime and to do nothing to stop that means to participate in that can also be seen in the text through the absent character of Sushila.

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