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REVIEW ARTICLE

COMMUNICATING A THIRD SPACE: "THE POETICS OF EXILE" IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S LIGHTS OUT!

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ABSTRACT

Manjula Padmanabhan's oeuvres are often branded as 'feminist' since they primarily focus on social issues that are totally women centric and told from their point of view. Her scripts penned realism like 'dowry deaths', gang rape, alienation, and marginalization of Indian women in a patriarchal discourse. Her well-acclaimed dramatic piece *Lights Out!* (2000), delineates the darker side of patriarchy that is insensitive to female sensibility. It forefingers on the trial and tribulations of a macabre crime, i.e. the daily rape of an anonymous woman, that is never shown onstage combined with routine tea, candlelight dinner and the gracious conversations of hosts and guests in a middle-class flat. This paper attempts to read beyond the narrative where this 'space in erasure' is viewed through the 'Third Space theory,' enunciated by the social theorist Homi Bhabha. This 'in-between' space provides an emancipated terrain for the subjugated women to extend their novel strategies of selfhood or resistance there by breaking the First space-Second space dualism.

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INTRODUCTION

Scripted in 1985-86 by Delhi-based Indian writer Manjula Padmanabhan's dramatic magnum opus *Lights Out!* published in 2000, deals with the physical abuse of a woman and the way it upsets the serenity and squeamish stability of the neighbourhood. It is based on an eyewitness account of the incident that took place in Santa Cruz, Mumbai, in 1982. A woman is being raped in a nearby building under construction that is never shown onstage, but sensed through a range of acoustic and ophthalmic signs exposed by various characters with in the drama. The drama delineates a group of young men who 'eye witness' the crime, resort to inertia discuss than perform and a group of oppressed women who discard their gendered limitations and inaugurate new structures of authority by stepping to the Third Space. The drama introduces the couple Leela and Bhaskar in their affluent upper floor, middle-class flat. The first scene portrays Leela's traumatized inner broodings by the disturbing tantrums and yearnings heard every night for help from the nearby building, which is under construction. Her apprehension echoes in her words to her husband, "When you were away on tour, I couldn't sleep at night! And with all the windows shut with all the curtains drawn, with cotton in my ears – the sound still came through! Even in the children's room, on the other side of the house, I could hear it!" (Padmanabhan, 2000, p.138). Audience/readers sense that a dehumanizing crime is being committed and shrieks of a woman being molested hovers the whole stage.

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Commanding the nearby inhabitants of the area to put their 'lights out' at night, the perpetrators physically mistreats an anonymous woman there by insulting both the physic and psyche of the women in general. Leela's hysteric peevishness to call the police are in total contrast to that of Bhaskar who is seen insensitive and relaxed, asks their servant Frieda, for his usual evening tea. He starts reading the newspaper and casually cossets Leela to relax with some Yoga and informs that he had forgotten to call the police. However, later he reveals his latent intention that, "police generally ignores the complaint... [and] I don't want to stick my neck out, that's all" (p. 7). He further suggests, "Baby, you must learn to ignore it now, I insist" (p. 7). For Leela, she finds it difficult to absolve herself from the guilt of being a passive observer of a woman being molested just outside her house, "that we're part of ... what happens outside. That by watching it, we're making ourselves responsible" (p. 7). Right from the beginning, the 'protagonist Leela' (if she could be claimed so) appears as a neurotic person clasped in tension throughout the day, "I carry it around all day. Sometimes it's like a shawl, it wraps itself around my shoulders and I start to shiver" (p. 5). She is horrified to see three men holding down a woman while the fourth violating her mercilessly. This macabre spectacle shocks Leela into inarticulateness, "Did you...do it? Oh... Bhaskar...some one's being...They're- they're..." (p. 4).

Another male character introduced on stage is Mohan, a guest invited by Bhaskar for dinner. He, who is informed of the morbid scene enacted every night, comes to their house to have a glimpse of the 'crime being committed,' in other words, to satisfy his urge for voyeuristic pleasure in witnessing such an

act. His words, "How often can you stand and watch a crime being committed right in front of you?" (p. 15) seems chivalric and optimistic. However his hypocrisy and detachment is revealed when he says, "What harm is there in watching?" (p. 8) and,

"...unless they actually call for help, is it our business to go? That's the question. After all, it may be something private, a domestic fight, how can we intervene? Personally, I'm against becoming entangled in other people's private lives. Outsiders can never really be the judge of who is right and who is wrong...unless it is murder, I don't think anyone should come between the members of a family". (p. 20).

This communicates not only his reluctance and lack of enthusiasm to act practically in favour of the victim but reveals his hidden attempts to stop the women (Leela and Naina) from calling the police, so that he and Bhaskar can prolong their 'revelry'. So he transpires with the fantastic explanation that the activity could be a religious ceremony and any endeavor to interfere would be considered as "restriction of religious freedom" (p. 25) to which Leela responds, "But even when its not a ... nice religion?" (p. 25). Mohan, after many counter arguments, answers, "I am almost convinced of it!" (p. 27). In addition, Mohan invents another novice idea that it could be an exorcism trying to drive a demon out of the woman. Bhasker taking cue with his friend observes, "Funny, how it is most often women who become possessed" (p. 38), to which Mohan numbly answers, "They are more susceptible" (p. 38). Exasperated, Leela finally blasts, "It's a rape, isn't it?" (p. 38). But Bhasker apathetically responds, "She could be a whore, you know!" (p. 39), since "a decent woman would never be with four men at once!" (p. 40). However, Leela confirms that, "its four people ganging up on one victim" (p. 27) enters their deaf ears. The bizarre sounds and yearnings of the woman screaming for help, "Let me go! Help me!" (p. 57) are successfully manipulated as the subjects of triviality. Here through this gendered verbal fencing, the dramatist pinpoints a woman's helplessness to step beyond her circumscribed space in contrast to the deliberate lethargy and escapism from the part of men folks to react against the crime enacted routinely in front of them.

By the time Leela's friend, Naina appears on stage, which provides the much needed support and female solidarity to Leela. Like the former, she is also agonized by the groaning and put forward the need to call the police. While Bhasker and Mohan by passing judgment that such howling can only emanate from prostitutes, who voluntarily succumb themselves to physical abuse on daily basis repudiate the female stance. They further substantiate their claim that, "a whore is not decent, so a whore cannot be raped...After all, what does a whore have to lose" (p. 40) for which Naina responds sarcastically, "if only decent woman can be raped what is the point of being decent?" (p. 40). Mohan tries to put her on the defensive stating, "You must have seen a lot of rape, Naina, to recognize it at one glance" (p. 40) for which she retaliates, "It can only be rape... not poetry reading" (p. 40). Using irony and wry humor and bold words like "arse", "pimping rascal" (p. 39) and "wetting yourself" (p. 52) these female characters articulate beyond the usual narratives by subverting the

language of power/men there by boldly treading their way to 'the space beyond'. Nancy Walker retorts that the members of the oppressed group use humour to negate "the power of hegemonic discourse quite simply by refusing to take that power seriously" (Walker, 1990, p. 44). In doing so they, "initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 41).

Women generally occupy a secondary position within the society and are exempted from the male hegemonic sphere. Even there they are physically and psychologically tortured and are forced to flee to a Third Space, where they maintain their liberal subjectivity. Here the women enjoy more freedom than their counter parts, by subverting and deconstructing their subdued role and oppressed position. The boldest out spoken female character in the drama Naina, tries her best to counter the male arguments that deliberately try to pacify the rape. However, her deportment changes astoundingly when her husband Surinder enters the scene. His domineering personality overshadows not only his wife but also everybody on the stage. However, the effect is more on Naina who suddenly becomes very subdued and returns from the forefront. He seems infuriated by the whole incident and expresses, "let's go and wipe them out!" (p. 58). On the contrary, later we learn that his reaction is purely personal and selfish, and sheds no sympathy towards the victim. Surinder rages to his wife's suggestion of waiting for the police, "Shut up- or I'll kick your teeth in...you shut up. This is no time for women's nonsense" (p. 52).

As the rest of the characters continue planning an attack with knives and acid to rescue the offended lady, she sees the assailants and the rape victim leaving the spot but she withholds the information from Surinder and others. Either she wants to prevent an imminent brutal attack between these men and the gangsters or it can be sensed as an attempt from her part to subvert the hegemony of patriarchal power. Thinking in terms of 'Third Space Feminism', her silence primarily acts as a tool of resistance against her husband's verbal violence. As a result, she escapes the bondage thrust upon her by the gendered society and liberally enters the Third Space where she holds the superior position to take decision all by herself. From the drama, we come to know that almost all women characters are subjected to both corporeal and mental mistreat and each one of them resist these suppressions in their own way by creating a scenario "beyond ... a new horizon" (Bhabha, 1994, p.40). Leela exhibits concern and solidarity for the victimized woman, becomes hysterical for her own situational submissiveness, and forced inertness. According to Helene Cixous, "hysteria is a kind of female language that opposes the rigid structures of male discourse and thought... hysterics have lost speech... it's the body that talks" (Cixous, 1980, p. 351). Feminist understanding of hysteria presents it "as a specifically feminine protolanguage, communicating through the body message that cannot be verbalized. ...a specifically feminine pathology that speaks to and against patriarchy" (Showalter, 1998, p. 36). Later she eagerly becomes a part of Surinder's plans taking an alternate path from her husband, by actively collecting weapons for the 'rescue operation'. By doing so, she embraces a post-colonial subjectivity within her newly created space.

The dramatist has cautiously placed another female character Frieda on stage to have only the visual impact and her acoustics is strictly restricted until the end of the play. Throughout the play, she is alienated from rest of the characters and incidents, and is seen continuously working like a robot. Within the subtext, her silence amid other vocal characters can be learnt as a technique of survival that grabs the audience's curiosity and is a strategy of resistance to the oppressive power of gender and class. "The power comes from emotional distance or unavailability and this kind of behavior is usually seen only in men" says Susan Gal (Gal, 1991, p. 426). This "division and the displacement" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 41) to the Third Space becomes the 'other' for the oppressed. The anonymous 'raped lady' even within her limited claustrophobic terrain resists orally by crying, there by verbalizing her inner turmoil and physical agony. Since she could not resist the gangsters physically, she shows her resentment through these oral gestures. Her yearnings for help to escape her predators are contrasted with Frieda's muteness. Her tantrums are set in such a way that its resonance raise and fall according to the situation of the plot. As the 'mad woman in the attic', the invisible woman monopolize the stage and the play ends by her withdrawal with the perpetrators from the site of crime leaving the audience/readers plunged in Kafkaesque existentialism.

Within this "dynamic and radically open [Third] space" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 42) these refugee women enjoy the "poetics of exile" (p. 42) where they relish their right to,

"...signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'... It is in this sense that the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing". (Ikas, 2009, p.6).

Helen Keyssar describes this new domain as an abode 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" (Keyssar, 1996, p.1).

The play exemplifies a complete negligence towards feminine sensitivity, from the part of neo-colonial male dominant Indian society, who prefers to discuss than to perform. Bhaskar becomes eloquent about the shamelessness of the naked assailants than planning to rescue the victim. Mohan goes to the extent, "Pictures like these... after all, how often does anyone see authentic pictures of a gang-rape in action?" (Padmanabhan, 2000, p. 52). The only male who decides to act against the gooners is Surinder. Nevertheless, this relief remains short-lived when it becomes clear that the reason for his anger is not the pain of the violated woman but the insult that he perceives from the hooligans who threw stones at his windows to seek attention of their activities and continue to do them with impunity. The three men when finally decide to act, to drag the aggressors away and rescue the victim, but all in vain, as the oppressors have already left the scene of the crime.

Manjula Padmanabhan's dramatic ventures boldly step out of the theatrical conventions. She herself enters the Third Space by engendering new style and formulating a unique vision of herself. She undermines the classical Indian aesthetic where a single protagonist leads a linear plot focusing on the catharsis. Here *Lights Out!* portrays the escapist attitude of Indian urban men along with the vulnerability of women to the blemishes within the society. It ends with a note of despair, without suggesting any kind of solution to the issues raised by the dramatist. Through the alienation effect or *Verfremdungs* effect the dramatist leaves the audience or readers agitated and make them uneasy, thus paving the way for further discussion. Padmanabhan's writings generally address issues related to woman: of gender, class, and exploitation within the family and culture. She rejects both the imperial stance that the Third World traditions and culture are to be blamed for the female oppression within the society, as well as the fundamentalist logic that, challenging the inequality within one's own community is akin to 'cultural imperialism'. Instead, as argued in the beginning, the suppressed female psyche strive to build a decolonial feminist stance of 'Third Space feminism' that upholds female rights, dignity, self-esteem and freedom without falling prey to any of the discourses that silence and suppress women.

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