

Manjula Padmanabhan's Writing: A 'Machete Strike' At The Realities Of Indian Society

Dr. R. PADMA

Associate Professor of English, Lakireddy Bali Reddy College of
Engineering,
Mylavaram, NTR District, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Abstract

As a writer, Manjula Padmanabhan explores the oddities in the society as an unconventional Indian woman. Sometimes, her writing is a machete strike at the realities of Indian society. She has boldly stepped forward to address and define women's exploitation, suppression, and issues related to gender discrimination in Indian society. However, she does not consider herself as a Feminist. Her oeuvres primarily focus on the societal issues that are women-centric and are narrated from their viewpoint. Her scripts portray alienation, rape, the physical and mental suffering of Indian women in a patriarchal society. This paper studies with her play, Lights Out, focuses on the activities connected with the darkness of the physical and mental worlds; and also studies her famous play, Harvest, deals with the trade of Human Body organs by the Outsiders and Insiders, projects the exploitation of poor people in India in the light of advanced medical technology.

Key words: Exploitation, Suppression, Gender discrimination, Mental suffering, Outsiders, Insiders, Medical technology.

Introduction:

Among Indian writers in English, Manjula Padmanabhan has acquired a prominent place due to her versatile writings in different genres. At first, she was a journalist, artist, cartoonist, and illustrator for a few years. Later, she entered in the area of literature to become a novelist, short story writer, and playwright. Though born in India in 1953, Padmanabhan grew up in Sweden, Switzerland for two years, and Pakistan for three years. In an interview with Amrita Dutta, Padmanabhan explains about her childhood days:

I was brought up with very few restrictions. (Since) I had no awareness that there might be restrictions on my freedom, I didn't even think of it as liberating. I had no idea that women occupied a sort of specialized domain, or that what lay ahead of you — for 99 per cent of the world's women — are marriage and motherhood.

After her father's retirement at her seventh year, when their family was shifted to India, Padmanabhan was exposed to Indian traditions, and she was astonished at them:

With it, came a sense of being surrounded by a very traditional society. My mother and I were suddenly arguing about the length of my hair. There were dress codes to conform to. In hindsight, perhaps, when my mother saw me in the context of India, she worried for me. She knew I was going to have a hard time. (Dutta)

The 70-year-old Padmanabhan has laid roots in her adult age, which characterizes the radical rupture from the traditional way of living, to try her hand in various genres from a journalist to cartoonist to Illustrator to a comic strip, to fiction to plays. She created a comic character, SUKI which was serialized in the magazines, Sunday Observer and The Pioneer. Suki is a frizzy-haired young lady, who always immerses in reading the newspaper and talking to her frog, grabs the interest of the readers and shows reality in humour. Padmanabhan presents the darker side of the social issues through humour:

Humour is essentially a form of violence. Laughter is a kind of scream. And laughing is what you'd do when you'd rather be screaming. I would imagine most humourists and cartoonists are always talking to the dark side. There is a continuous expression of that in what I write. I have come to terms with the darkness that surrounds all of us; I believe I can face it without fear.(Dutta)

Padmanabhan made available all her Suki's cartoon strips in her blog which are satirical, surprising, funny and thought-provoking, and depict the social issues in the Indian society. She also illustrated 21 books for children. As a writer, Padmanabhan explores the oddities in the society as an unconventional Indian woman. Sometimes, her writing is a machete strike at the realities of Indian society. She has boldly stepped forward to address and define women's exploitation, suppression, and issues related to gender discrimination in Indian society. In her long literary career, she has examined

with enthusiasm the transformation of females into women. However, she does not consider herself as a Feminist: I believe in the duality of human sexual identity and I truly believe in the complementarity of the gendered life, the idea that we are not complete as single entities and that a combination of opposites makes us whole. (Dutta)

Her oeuvres primarily focus on the societal issues that are women-centric and are narrated from their viewpoint. Her scripts portray alienation, rape, the physical and mental suffering of Indian women in a patriarchal society. She started her literary career with her first play, *Lights Out* (1984) which was performed on stage in India and UK. During that time, she became aware of a writer's responsibility in society. She says, "It was a bit different from knowing you can write. As an author, I was working alone, unlike a journalist and a member of a team working on a magazine. I had a sense of solitary destiny." (Dutta)

It is found by the researcher on the Internet that Padmanabhan wrote three more plays, *Sextet*, *The Artist's Model* and *The Mating Game* after the first play. As the books are not available in the market, the researcher asked the playwright about the same through e-mail. In her response, Manjula Padmanabhan says: "About my plays: as I mentioned in my previous message the only ones available in India are *Lights Out* and *Hidden Fires*. I know that Internet searches suggest there are other plays by me -- but they are not published so they are not available for study/research. They have never been performed except as readings and that too, very rarely." (e-mail) She became internationally famous through her Onassis award-winning play, *Harvest*. The play deals with the trade of Human Body organs by the Outsiders and Insiders projects the exploitation of poor people in India in the light of advanced medical technology. Among the women dramatists, Padmanabhan occupies a very distinct position because of her unique themes. In her plays, she tries to project the manifestations of men's domination against women. Her works remain as significant examples for women's individuality, frankness, boldness, resistance and equal status in the patriarchal society.

Description:

The focal point of the playwright in her plays *Lights Out*, and *Harvest* is mainly to project the class struggle and exploitation of weaker sections in the present Indian society. Also, to showcase how poor people's lives have become very tough due to unemployment resulted by the latest technical developments. She also highlights how women are facing physical and emotional torture and violence both at home and in the society. The playwright tries to present the ugly picture of Indian society through the irresponsible and wild behaviour of people as social beings. *Lights Out* deals with a gang-rape in one of the metropolitan cities of India. The Onassis award-winning play, *Harvest* shows the exploitation of Indian poor men and women in the light of twenty-first century advanced medical technology. On account of an eyewitness of a real incident that happened in Santa Cruz, Bombay in 1982, the playwright created the play, *Lights Out*. It was performed on stage in 1986 by SOI Theatre Company at Prithvi Theatre. In the real incident, a group of high middle-class people watch while a woman was being brutally gang-raped in a neighbouring compound over a period of weeks and nobody cares to help the victim. Instead of rescuing the victim, they become commentators and thrilled spectators. Liberation of women from patriarchal society is always a debatable topic in English writing in India. The government has laid strong rules to check women's exploitation and to protect women's rights; however, they are physically and mentally tortured, raped and murdered in the society. The Indian idealistic personality, Mahatma Gandhi opines that the real independence of India is said to be attained only when the women can move alone on the streets without fear during mid-night. But, the present conditions of women have become worse as women are subjected to violence, are insecure in their bodies, and are no longer safe in their own country. Indians have defeated Britishers with non-violence, whereas now they have become unbelievably violent. Every day, rape cases are recorded in the world's largest democratic country. Economists predict that India becomes one of the robust economies in the world soon but the country is put under the fear of sexual violence and gender discrimination. In the play, *Lights Out*, Padmanabhan criticizes people like Mohan and Bhasker for their negligence and insensitiveness, and moreover for suspecting the victim as a "Whore." Bhasker: "... if she is a whore, there is no sense to call it as a rape: "you see that out there...that is the point of being a decent woman! You see, if she were a decent woman, we

people would go to her rescue! She is not, and she's being left to her fate!" (LO.175); "Whatever rights a woman has, they are lost the moment she becomes a whore! (LO.176); They're like animals, really. Decent people like us; we can't understand their lives at all. (LO.177) From the above dialogues of Bhasker, it is understood that the low-class victim is neglected and blamed as "whore" to divert the situation.

The playwright through the character of Naina condemns the opinion of Bhasker about a whore by saying that even a whore has right to choose her clients and she is also a human being like others. The atrocities on women and the growing irresponsibility of men towards the society are highlighted in *Lights Out* by the playwright. Social indifference and apathy of higher middle-class people are also displayed in the play. The attitude of upper middle class people, who are engrossed in their lives so deeply that they do not find time to think about their surroundings, is criticized in the play. Even if they think, they do not show any interest to help the needy or the victims belonging to low class. It is inferred in the story that everyday a woman is brutalized by the rapists. In most cases a rape-victim, though not a culprit tries to give up her life as she feels that not only her life is ended with sexual assault, but also her family members undergo ill-treatment of their neighbours. If the rape-victim survives, the society will not remain calm, tries to insult her in all possible ways. It leaves the people who do the crime but criticizes the victims and make their lives miserable.

Women and girls who survive rape and other sexual violence often suffer humiliation at police stations and hospitals. Police are frequently unwilling to register their complaints, victims and witnesses receive little protection, and medical professionals still compel degrading "two-finger" tests. These obstacles to justice and dignity are compounded by inadequate health care, counseling, and legal support for victims during criminal trials of the accused. (Everyone Blames Me.Nov.8.2017)

Every year rape cases are increasing in India and the law could not show any impact on the culprits. Hence, people need to become alert to resist the crime. The playwright lends her own voice to Surinder when he protests the crime. If people neglect their social responsibility and fail to resist the crime, the society

as a whole will have to face its consequences as it leads to a new dark age. The playwright highlights that acting immediately against the crime is required in the present conditions.

The famous play of Padmanabhan, *Harvest* won the first prize among 1500 entries in the first “Onassis Cultural Competition for Theatre” in 1997. The play depicts class struggle, and exploitation of poor by the rich to fulfil their desires. It was premiered in Greek in the direction of Mimia Kougioumtzis and broadcasted by the BBC world service. It is made into a movie by Govind Nihlani under the title, *BODY* in India. The play mocks at the growing illegal trade of human organs in India. The organ buyers are Americans while donors are poor people from villages of India, who are ready to sell their kidneys for a mere twenty thousand rupees. The germ of an idea to write this play sprouted to the playwright when she came across the competition title “The Challenges Facing Humanity in The Next Century.” It also seemed that the organ trade provided an apt platform for discussing a few possible challenges, especially in the context of multi-national corporations.

The play, *Harvest* is restricted to four members of an urban family. The characters are Om Prakash, Jaya, Ma and Jeetu, Guards and Agents of a transnational corporation called Inter Planta Centre and Ginni. The tricky fact here is that Ginni is a computer animated young woman supposed to be the receiver of organs; in reality it is Virgil, an old man, who enlivens his body with young organs from time to time to live longer. Ginni looks like an American-style blonde youth goddess while Virgil is never seen on the stage; but his voice is audible, attractive and rugged through speakers arranged in the room. The playwright sets the play in Bombay and the time frame is 2010, during which there was a significant advancement of technology. Padmanabhan has become internationally famous in the literary world with *Harvest*, as it deals with international Hi-Fi organ trade where human organs are harvested with great care at the cost of poor people’s lives. The opening scene of *Harvest* depicts through the character of Om, the struggle of a poor man to meet his basic needs. He loses his clerical job due to computerization of government offices and the only option remained for him is to sell his body to meet the needs of his family. Hence, he decides to sell his

organs to a rich client for huge amount so as to lead his life comfortably and happily. He signs a contract with a transnational agency, Inter Planta to donate his organs. However, he does not know which part of his body is taken for the receiver Ginni. It shows that how poor people are exploited with their ignorance in the present society. Padmanabhan has taken this concept from real incidents that she noticed in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, where poor villagers are donors, and rich people are clients.

A third world country like India is facing a significant threat because of illegal organ trade with first world countries. The people of the developed countries are enticing the poor of the third world countries with huge amounts of money in return of precious body parts. People like Om are attracted to sell their organs to overcome their poverty. To meet his basic needs Om's decides to sell his organs for money, whereas Virgil, the rich receiver shows his hypocrisy in trapping the entire family of Om to meet his selfish desire of extending his life for a couple of centuries. The organs of Jeetu are taken by Virgil as he suits better to him than Om. Virgil traps Om's family for Jaya's womb to bear his children through advanced medical technology. He tries to convince Jaya to accept his wish, but she refuses and demands him to come in person if he wants her to bear his children. Virgil rejects her wish to come in person as he cannot put his body into risk because of the polluted environment of third world country, India. He threatens Jaya that he can make guards act according to his orders to implant a device in her womb. However, Jaya, in turn, threatens him that she kills herself to win on him. She sets a new rule —Winning by Losing.

Padmanabhan has shaped Jaya as a New Woman bold enough to resist exploitation in spite of her poverty. When Virgil ridicules Jaya, that "Pride is a poor man's fancy dress," (Harvest.90) she boldly replies: "And if I let you take it from me, I will be naked as well as poor." (Harvest.90) This shows the confidence in Jaya that she can face Virgil with strong spirit. Jaya challenges Virgil in a new way—Winning by Losing: "I'll die knowing that you, who live only to win, will have lost to a poor, weak and helpless woman. And I'll get more pleasure out of that first moment of death than I've had in my entire life so far!" (Harvest.91)

The playwright has succeeded to show the required courage and confidence in the new women to resist the exploitation in the current scenario. The playwright condemns the unethical trap of poor young couples for the sake of bearing children through surrogacy. In an article, Rudrappa elucidates:

The high cost of surrogacy in the US has pushed many potential parents to seek cheaper options elsewhere. Countries like India and Thailand have attracted surrogacy clients from countries like the US, Britain, Australia, and Israel. The global surrogacy trade, however, has been fraught with scandals.

The women from weaker sections in India are still exploited through the business of surrogacy. As poverty rules their lives they have no other option to earn money easily, hence they are selling their wombs by breaking the nature's law. Once they give birth to the baby, the mother and infant are separated immediately. That affects severely the health of the biological mother and infant as well. But nobody cares that, now-a-days, the rich feel that they can buy anything and everything. Manjula Padmanabhan has tried her best to expose the social evils of modern Indian society through her plays *Lights Out* and *Harvest*. One play deals with rape and another with body organ trade; in both the victims are from the more impoverished sections of the society. The playwright has highlighted the exploitation of poor people and its evil consequences which make viewers think seriously.

Conclusion:

The modern Indian can conquer the secrets of Mars on one side and on the other side, people are moving to the darkest side by losing ethics and fundamental moral values. Crime, violence and exploitation are ruling the lives of people which hinder the development of the country. The playwright, Padmanabhan has created thought-provoking plays which certainly inspire the readers to deal with such situations in their real life. Both the plays exhibit the class struggle and exploitation of weaker sections - the two major problems in the Indian society, and the playwright leaves the solution to the audience or readers. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* and *Harvest* are thought-provoking plays for the viewers, and the writer leaves the conclusion to them, as is her trade-mark.

References

Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Lights Out*. Seagull Books Private Limited. India. 2004.

Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Harvest*, Aurora Metro Publications Ltd. Uk. 2003; reprinted, 2015.

Web Sources

Web. 1 Jan 2009.

<http://hymag.com/mymetro/news/culture/features>

<http://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/books/and-still-i-rise-why-manjula-padmanabhan-never-came-to-terms-being-the-second-sex/>. Written by Amrita Dutta, New Delhi, Published: October 4, 2015. 12:00 am

<https://qz.com/1109531/surrogate-mothers-at-risk-in-india-after-the-commercial-surrogacy-ban-is-extended/> Rudrappa, Sharmila. Professor of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin., Oct. 24, 2017 Quartz India.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/08/india-rape-victims-face-barriers-justice>, 'Everyone Blames Me': Barriers to Justice and Support Services for Sexual Assault Survivors in India," Nov. 8, 2017 7:56PM EST.