

# Spectators of Violence: A Critical Study of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

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**Abstract:** Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* is a compelling exploration of violence, spectatorship, and societal apathy. Based on a real-life incident, the play exposes the disturbing indifference of urban elites toward acts of brutality occurring in their immediate surroundings. This article critically examines *Lights Out* through the lens of violence and spectatorship, analyzing how the characters' passive responses to a horrifying event mirror broader social attitudes toward violence, power, and gender dynamics. The article focuses about Padmanabhan's dramatic techniques, character portrayals, and the ethical dilemmas posed by witnessing violence without intervention. The paper aims to explore the playwright's projection of violence in her selected plays. In Padmanabhan's plays, the different types of violence the characters come across in the selected plays are projected. And the dramatists projects the clear impression on gender inequality and a dominant appeal for realizing the emotions of human in the world where both men and women hardly finds themselves to be free, independent and resistant thought out the play. It interrogates how the play forces both its characters and its audience to confront their complicity in systemic violence by positioning them as spectators rather than agents of change. Again the article explores the play's commentary on gendered violence, power hierarchies, and the alienation of the privileged class from social realities. By situating *Lights Out* within contemporary discussions on violence and by drawing parallels with real-world instances of bystander apathy, this study underscores the enduring relevance of Padmanabhan's work. The analysis ultimately highlights the play's role as a critical socio-political text that challenges audiences to reflect on their ethical responsibilities as witnesses to violence in both fiction and reality.

**Keywords:** Exploration, Violence, Spectator, Apathy, Dynamics, Power, Hierarchy

## INTRODUCTION

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* (1986) stands as a powerful critique of societal apathy and the normalization of violence in urban Indian society. Based on a real-life incident, the play unravels the

disturbing indifference of middle-class individuals as they witness a brutal act of sexual violence occurring just outside their window. The play *Lights Out* is based on real life incident which took place in Mumbai suburb in 1982. Padmanabhan portrays a world in which women is deprived of her identity, her own voice, her freedom, her rights; she has to implore unto men to hear to her concerns, this further leads to gender discrimination in every sphere of life. *Lights Out* opens at point where a critical decision has to be taken. Leela and Bhaskar, a higher middle class married couple, have been hearing to strange sounds of sexual harassment of a woman from their neighbouring building very often. Leela is terrified and traumatised because of these sounds. Set within the confined walls of an apartment, *Lights Out* juxtaposes the comfort of domestic spaces with the horrifying realities of the external world. The play's minimalist setting and sharp dialogues accentuate the moral paralysis of its characters, making it a seminal work in contemporary Indian drama. Padmanabhan's exploration of violence, power, and spectatorship remains profoundly relevant, especially in light of ongoing global conversations around gendered violence and social responsibility.

The play *Lights Out* (1986) by Manjula Padmanabhan focuses on gang rape and indifference and intolerance of people to crimes like gang rape. Respected citizens of middle class families choose to stay away from heinous crimes against woman such as gang rape as they do not want to be involved in a police case. The play opens and we see Leela is deeply perturbed and shocked by the scene of violence that takes place every night in the opposite building where women are gang raped. Her husband is indifferent to the incident as it does not concern them directly. He does not want to involve himself in the matter. But, Leela insists on calling the police as she is afraid of the incident. At the core of *Lights Out* lies the concept of spectatorship—how individuals observe acts of violence without

intervening there by becoming complicit in the perpetuation of harm. The play forces both its characters and its audience to confront the ethical dilemmas of witnessing violence. The characters, trapped in their own passivity, embody the broader social tendency to detach from uncomfortable realities. Through this lens, Padmanabhan highlights the thin boundary between observer and participant, questioning whether inaction makes one as culpable as the perpetrator. The significance of this study lies in *Lights Out's* unflinching portrayal of human indifference and moral ambiguity. By situating the play within the broader discourse on societal violence and bystander apathy, the article sheds light on the dynamics of power and privilege that shape human responses to conflict. The play serves as a mirror to society's collective failure to confront violence, especially when it occurs in proximity yet remains detached from one's immediate reality. This article aims to critically examine how *Lights Out* navigates the theme of violence through its characters and narrative structure. It investigates the psychological and social dimensions of spectatorship, the gendered implications of the violence depicted, and the ways in which the audience is implicated in the act of watching. By engaging with the play's socio-political subtext, the study seeks to underscore the enduring relevance of Padmanabhan's work as a commentary on the ethics of witnessing and the responsibilities of both individuals and society in the face of violence.

#### Manjula Padmanabhan's Thematic Concerns and Dramatic Style:

Manjula Padmanabhan's literary and theatrical works are known for their sharp critique of social issues, particularly themes of violence, power, alienation, and the complexities of the human condition. Her writings often explore dystopian realities, gender dynamics, and the ethical dilemmas individuals face in oppressive or morally ambiguous circumstances. In her celebrated play *Harvest* (1997), she critiques the commodification of the human body in a futuristic world dominated by economic disparity. Similarly, in *Lights Out*, she turns her focus toward urban apathy and the unsettling normalization of violence, exposing how societal privilege fosters detachment from brutality. Throughout her works, Padmanabhan questions the moral responsibilities of individuals when confronted with injustice, making her an essential voice in contemporary Indian drama.

#### Dramatic Style and Narrative Techniques in *Lights Out*:

In *Lights Out*, Padmanabhan employs a minimalist yet impactful dramatic style to heighten the audience's engagement with the play's themes. The entire play unfolds within the confines of an apartment, symbolizing the isolation of the characters from the external world. This limited setting serves as a stark contrast to the horrific violence occurring just outside, emphasizing the psychological and physical barriers that prevent individuals from intervening in acts of brutality. The enclosed space also reinforces the idea that the characters are not just physically but also morally trapped, unable to break free from their passivity. Dialogue plays a crucial role in conveying the characters' indifference and helplessness. Rather than engaging in direct action, the characters engage in prolonged discussions, debates, and rationalizations about whether or not to intervene. Their conversations, often punctuated by hesitation and evasion, reflect the real-life tendency of bystanders to avoid responsibility. The absence of direct on-stage violence is another notable narrative choice—while the audience never sees the attack itself, they hear it through the characters' reactions and fragmented descriptions. This technique intensifies the discomfort, making the violence more haunting by forcing the audience to visualize it based on their own perceptions. Padmanabhan structures the play in a way that mirrors the stages of moral disengagement. The characters progress from initial discomfort to justifications then to passive acceptance, and finally to complete detachment presented in the play. This trajectory reflects how individuals often desensitize themselves to repeated exposure to violence, a theme that remains relevant in contemporary discussions about media consumption and societal apathy. The voyeuristic element in *Lights Out*—where characters become spectators rather than actors—creates an unsettling dynamic, implicating not just them but also the audience in the ethical dilemma of watching violence unfold without taking action. Through her dramatic style and narrative techniques, Manjula Padmanabhan masterfully constructs a psychological and social critique that forces audiences to confront their own role as passive witnesses to injustice. *Lights Out* is not just a play about violence; it is an interrogation of society's complicity in allowing violence to persist,

making it a powerful and thought-provoking theatrical experience.

#### The Politics of Violence in *Lights Out*:

Violence is at the heart of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*, not only as a physical act but also as a psychological and societal phenomenon. The play is based on a real-life incident in which a group of people witnessed a brutal act of sexual violence from the safety of their homes but chose not to intervene. Through its unsettling depiction of passive spectatorship, the play forces audiences to reflect on their own role in perpetuating violence by remaining indifferent. *Lights Out* presents violence not merely as an external event but as a deeply ingrained social and psychological issue, exposing the mechanisms through which power, control, and fear operate in society.

The play explores multiple dimensions of violence—physical, psychological, and systemic—each revealing different facets of power and complicity. The central act of violence in the play—a woman being assaulted by a group of men—is never directly shown on stage but is heard and described through the characters' reactions. This off-stage depiction heightens its horror, forcing the audience to construct the scene in their minds. The invisibility of the act parallels the way society often chooses to ignore or silence victims of violence rather than confronting the reality. Beyond the physical act, the play delves into the psychological violence inflicted upon both the victim and the witnesses. The characters experience fear, guilt, and moral conflict, yet they ultimately rationalize their inaction. Leela, the only character who expresses deep distress, faces gas-lighting and dismissal by her husband and friends, illustrating how emotional responses to violence are often suppressed or invalidated. The play critiques the larger societal structures that normalize and perpetuate violence. The male characters, especially Mohan and his friend, justify their inaction by suggesting that such incidents are common and that intervention could be dangerous. Their arguments reflect the systemic failures of law enforcement and public accountability, highlighting how institutions condition individuals to accept violence as an inevitable part of life rather than something to be challenged.

Violence in *Lights Out* is also a means of asserting power and control, both in the direct act of assault and in the characters' responses to it. The play exposes the ways in which patriarchal structures enable violence against women. While the female victim is physically violated outside, the women inside the house—especially Leela—are emotionally and intellectually subdued by their male counterparts. Mohan's dismissive attitude toward his wife's concerns reflects the broader societal tendency to silence women and undermine their agency in matters of justice and morality. Interestingly, the play suggests that inaction can also be a form of power. By choosing not to intervene, the spectators maintain their own security and control over their immediate environment. However, this illusion of control is deeply troubling, as it ultimately upholds the very structures of violence they claim to fear.

#### Spectatorship of Violence:

One of the most thought-provoking aspects of *Lights Out* is its commentary on spectatorship—how violence is consumed, processed, and ignored. The characters in the play are not direct perpetrators, yet their passive observation makes them complicit. The characters engage in lengthy debates about whether they should intervene, exposing their moral confusion. Their justifications—fear, helplessness, and a belief that someone else should take responsibility—mirror real-world instances of bystander apathy. The play also implicates the audience, making them active participants in the ethical dilemma. Just as the characters watch and discuss the assault without acting, the audience is placed in a similar position—observing an act of violence unfold on stage without the power to change its outcome. This deliberate mirroring forces viewers to question their own responses to real-life violence and their complicity in a culture of passive spectatorship. By framing violence as both an external event and an internalized societal condition, *Lights Out* challenges audiences to confront the uncomfortable realities of power, gender, and moral responsibility. The play's exploration of violence not only reveals the fragility of human ethics but also exposes the systemic failures that allow such brutality to persist. Through its unsettling portrayal of passive spectatorship, *Lights Out* becomes a powerful critique of urban indifference and a call to action against the normalization of violence in society.

### The Characters as Spectators of Violence:

In *Lights Out*, Manjula Padmanabhan presents a group of middle-class individuals who find themselves in a disturbing ethical dilemma: they witness a brutal act of violence happening just outside their home but choose not to intervene. Through these characters, the play explores the psychological, social, and moral implications of bystander apathy. They are not direct perpetrators of violence, yet their passivity and rationalizations make them complicit. By analyzing their roles, reactions, and internal conflicts, we can understand how *Lights Out* critiques the normalization of violence in society. Each character in the play represents a different psychological response to violence, ranging from denial to helplessness to moral outrage. The Pragmatic Bystander Mohan is the embodiment of rational detachment. He acknowledges the violence occurring outside but dismisses it as an unavoidable aspect of urban life. He repeatedly discourages action, arguing that involvement might bring trouble. His indifference reflects a common middle-class attitude—one that prioritizes personal security over moral responsibility. Mohan's dismissive attitude toward his wife Leela's distress highlights patriarchal control, as he invalidates her concerns and maintains dominance in the household. Unlike Mohan, Leela is deeply disturbed by the violence outside. She expresses horror and a strong desire to help the victim, yet she is powerless against her husband's authority and societal constraints. Her emotional response highlights the contrast between moral responsibility and societal conditioning. Despite her distress, she ultimately conforms to inaction. Leela represents the internal conflict many bystanders experience—knowing what is right but feeling trapped by fear and social norms.

The Cynical Enabler Surinder, Mohan's friend, adds an element of casual cruelty to the conversation. He treats the situation as entertainment, joking about the violence and suggesting that it might not be as serious as Leela believes. His reaction exposes another dangerous aspect of spectatorship—how violence can be trivialized or normalized through indifference and mockery. His behavior reflects a broader societal failure: instead of condemning violence, some individuals contribute to its perpetuation through apathy or amusement.

Naina remains largely indifferent to the situation. Unlike Leela, she neither expresses distress nor

pushes for action. Her detachment represents those who remain silent in the face of injustice—not actively supporting violence but also not opposing it. She symbolizes the ease with which people disconnect from violence when it does not directly affect. The victim, a woman subjected to repeated violence, remains unseen, reinforcing how society erases the suffering of marginalized individuals. The perpetrators, too, are heard but not seen, emphasizing how systemic violence is often faceless, making it easier for people to ignore.

While none of the characters actively engage in the act of violence, their inaction plays a crucial role in allowing it to continue. Their justifications reflect common societal excuses for bystander apathy. Mohan and Surinder suggest that intervening could be dangerous, reinforcing the idea that self-preservation takes precedence over justice. The argument that "this happens all the time" reflects how frequent exposure to violence desensitizes individuals, making them less likely to act. The assumption that the authorities or someone else should intervene absolves the characters of personal accountability. The characters' responses to violence reveal different psychological coping mechanisms that individuals use when confronted with disturbing realities. Mohan and Surinder intellectualize the situation, using logic to justify their inaction. This detachment shields them from guilt. Leela's distress indicates an emotional response, but societal constraints prevent her from acting on it. Her powerlessness reflects how fear can override moral impulse. Naina's indifference suggests how individuals emotionally detach themselves from violence to avoid discomfort. This alienation is a key factor in how violence becomes socially accepted. The characters in *Lights Out* serve as representations of society's complex and often troubling response to violence. They illustrate the psychological distance people create to avoid confronting moral responsibility, the social structures that reinforce passivity, and the ways in which violence is simultaneously visible and ignored. By making them spectators rather than active participants, Padmanabhan compels the audience to examine their own position in the cycle of violence. Are we, too, silent witnesses who justify inaction? The play's unsettling portrayal of bystander apathy forces us to confront the uncomfortable truth about our own complicity in systemic violence.

### Audience as Spectators:

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* is not just a play about violence and apathy; it is an unsettling commentary on the role of spectatorship, implicating the audience in the very act of passivity it critiques. The play deliberately positions the audience as silent witnesses to the unfolding events, mirroring the characters who observe violence without taking action. By doing so, Padmanabhan forces the viewers to confront their own moral responsibilities, raising uncomfortable questions about complicity and ethical disengagement. The audience in *Lights Out* is placed in a voyeuristic position, much like the characters who watch the assault from their apartment. The structure of the play makes it impossible to ignore this parallel—just as the characters discuss the violence without intervening, the audience watches the characters engage in this moral dilemma without being able to change its course. The absence of direct on-stage violence intensifies this experience, making it an act of imagination rather than spectacle. This absence heightens the psychological discomfort, as the audience must construct the horror in their minds, much like the characters do. The ethics of witnessing, a central theme in *Lights Out*, extends beyond the play's immediate narrative to broader societal questions. What is the responsibility of a spectator when confronted with violence—whether on stage, in the media, or in real life? Padmanabhan challenges the audience to examine their own responses to injustice. Do they, like Mohan and Surinder, rationalize inaction with self-preserving logic? Do they, like Naina, detach themselves entirely? Or do they, like Leela, experience distress but remain powerless within social constraints? By reflecting these psychological responses in her characters, Padmanabhan creates an unsettling mirror for the audience, making them confront their own tendencies toward passivity. The audience's engagement with *Lights Out* does not end with the play itself; it extends into real-world considerations of violence and social responsibility. Padmanabhan does not offer easy resolutions—there is no moment of redemption or moral clarity in the play. Instead, she leaves the audience in a state of discomfort, forcing them to question how often they have been silent witnesses in their own lives. The play's stark portrayal of bystander apathy serves as a call to self-awareness, compelling the audience to reconsider their own role in systems of violence. Are they merely spectators, or do they have a moral duty to

act? In blurring the lines between fiction and reality, *Lights Out* transforms the stage into a space of ethical confrontation, demanding reflection long after the final scene fades into darkness.

### The Role of Social Commentary in *Lights Out*:

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* serves as a powerful critique of societal structures that enable violence, normalize apathy, and reinforce systems of power and alienation. At its core, the play is not just about a singular act of brutality but about the collective failure of society to respond to violence with urgency and responsibility. Through its portrayal of middle-class indifference, patriarchal dominance, and the ethical dilemma of spectatorship, *Lights Out* exposes the deep-seated issues of power, control, and moral disengagement that persist in society. The play critiques societal structures by illustrating how violence operates within everyday spaces, not as an anomaly but as a systemic issue. The characters in *Lights Out* are not powerless in the conventional sense; they have the means to intervene, yet they choose not to, reflecting a disturbing reality where privilege often breeds inaction. This inaction is justified through various rationalizations—fear, detachment, and resignation to the status quo—all of which highlight how individuals become complicit in sustaining cycles of oppression. By setting the play in an urban, middle-class household, Padmanabhan underscores how apathy is not limited to institutions of power but is deeply embedded in domestic and social interactions.

*Lights Out* also resonates deeply with contemporary issues of violence, inequality, and systemic oppression. The real-life incident that inspired the play mirrors countless instances of gender-based violence, bystander apathy, and institutional failure that continue to make headlines worldwide. Whether in cases of public assaults where no one intervenes, the silence surrounding domestic violence, or the larger systemic disregard for marginalized communities, the play's themes remain disturbingly relevant. The reluctance of the characters to act as mirrors in broader societal tendencies to distance oneself from difficult realities—whether through media consumption, desensitization, or avoidance of direct involvement is being reflected. The normalization of violence in the play echoes the way modern societies often consume tragedy as spectacle, treating real-world suffering as an abstract

issue rather than a call to action. Even today, *Lights Out* remains an urgent and unsettling commentary on the human condition. As societies continue to grapple with violence—whether in the form of gendered violence, political brutality, or structural inequalities—the play forces audiences to confront their own role within these dynamics. The discomfort it evokes is not meant to provide easy answers but to challenge passivity, urging individuals to reconsider the ethics of witnessing and the moral responsibility that comes with it. By holding up a mirror to society's failures, *Lights Out* ensures that its critique remains relevant, compelling audiences to question whether they, too, are merely spectators in a world where violence persists in plain sight.

### CONCLUSION

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* presents a stark and unsettling exploration of violence, power, and spectatorship, exposing the deep-rooted apathy that allows atrocities to continue unchecked. Through its characters, the play critiques the normalization of violence and the moral dilemmas faced by those who witness it yet choose not to act. The interplay between power and passivity highlights how societal structures reinforce a culture of silence, where fear, detachment, and self-preservation take precedence over moral responsibility. By positioning both the characters and the audience as spectators, *Lights Out* challenges the ethical boundaries of witnessing violence, making the viewers complicit in the very indifference it critiques. Beyond its immediate narrative, the play serves as a profound commentary on the human condition, exposing how individuals rationalize inaction in the face of suffering. It forces audiences to confront difficult questions: When does silence become complicity? How do societal hierarchies dictate responses to violence? And to what extent are individuals responsible for disrupting cycles of oppression? In the play *Lights Out*, Manjula Padmanabhan not only exposes growing apathy amongst the so called civilized people but also wants to make audience distinguish its evil consequences. The play makes the reader understand the hidden purpose of sensitizing them towards this unconcern. In the world of growing technology when distances gradually shrink and modern means of communication have tapering the distances amongst the people, one thing is disheartening that people are drifting away from one

another at the level of humanity. By refusing to offer resolution or catharsis, Padmanabhan ensures that these questions linger, making *Lights Out* a deeply thought-provoking work that resonates beyond the stage. Even decades after its writing, the play remains strikingly relevant in contemporary discourse. In a world where acts of violence—whether gendered, political, or systemic—continue to unfold in full view, the themes of *Lights Out* continue to challenge audiences to reconsider their own roles as passive observers. Whether in the context of media consumption, public apathy, or the bystander effect, the play compels reflection on the ways in which complicity manifests in everyday life. As societies continue to struggle with issues of violence and accountability, *Lights Out* stands as a crucial text, urging individuals to move beyond spectatorship and toward meaningful engagement with justice and ethical responsibility.

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