Deconstructing The 'Traditional' Vs. The 'New': Gender Archetypes in Manjula Padmanabhan's Lights Out

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***Abstract*—Manjula Padmanabhan's Lights Out (1986) serves as a harrowing critique of urban Indian middle-class complicity in the face of gendered violence. Based on a true incident in Mumbai, the play juxtaposes the domestic "safety" of an apartment against the brutal reality of a gang rape occurring just outside the window. This paper deconstructs the tension between "traditional" and "new" gender archetypes as represented by the protagonists, Leela and Bhasker. By analyzing the linguistic and behavioral patterns of the characters, the study argues that while the male characters adopt a "new," pseudo-intellectualized veneer of rationality to mask their cowardice, the female experience remains trapped between the traditional role of the "protected" and the modern reality of the "witness." The paper concludes that Padmanabhan exposes the "New Indian Man" as a mere evolution of patriarchal dominance, rebranded through urban apathy.**

***Index Terms*—Manjula Padmanabhan, Lights Out, Gender Archetypes, Indian Drama, Patriarchal Complicity, Urban Apathy.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Manjula Padmanabhan occupies a unique space in contemporary Indian English drama, known for her unflinching exploration of the dark underbelly of societal progress. In Lights Out, she moves away from the direct depiction of violence, choosing instead to focus on the observation of violence.

The play is set entirely within the living room of an upper-middle-class couple, Leela and Bhasker, whose lives are disrupted by the nightly screams of a woman being assaulted in the neighboring compound.

The central conflict of the play is not just between the victims and the victimizers outside, but between the occupants of the room. This domestic space becomes a laboratory for deconstructing gender archetypes. In the Indian context, the "traditional" woman is often seen as the domestic anchor, while the "traditional" man is the protector. However, Padmanabhan complicates these roles by introducing "new" urban identities: the sensitized housewife and the rationalist, modern professional.

Through their dialogue, the play reveals how these archetypes are used to rationalize inaction and maintain the status quo of patriarchal power.

II. THE ARCHITECTURE OF APATHY: THE DOMESTIC SPACE

The setting of Lights Out is crucial to understanding the gendered response to violence. The apartment, situated on the sixth floor, acts as a physical and psychological barrier. For Bhasker, the "new" urban man, the apartment is a fortress of privacy. For Leela, it is a glass cage where the screams of the victim puncture her domestic peace.

The window serves as the threshold between the "traditional" world of raw, physical violence and the "new" world of voyeuristic detachment. Padmanabhan uses this space to show how gender archetypes are performed. Bhasker's insistence on keeping the lights out—nominally to avoid being seen by the criminals—is a metaphor for the willful blindness of the privileged.

III. DECONSTRUCTING THE MALE ARCHETYPE

From Protector to Voyeur. In traditional patriarchal structures, the male archetype is defined by his ability to provide "raksha" (protection). However, in the "new" urban setting, this physical bravery is replaced by intellectualization. Bhasker and his friend Mohan represent the "New Indian Man"—educated, articulate, and supposedly civilized.

The Myth of Rationality

Bhasker uses the language of logic to silence Leela's emotional distress. When Leela expresses horror at the screams, Bhasker dismisses her by categorizing the event as "religious rituals" or "domestic disputes." This transition from the traditional protector to the "rational observer" is a strategic move to avoid the moral responsibility of intervention.

"It's not our business, Leela. We have to look at this objectively. If we call the police, we get involved in a mess that lasts years." (Padmanabhan, 1986). Here, the archetype of the "Wise Provider" is deconstructed into the "Self-Preserving Coward." The "newness" of his character lies in his ability to use the legal system and social decorum as excuses for his paralysis.

Voyeurism as Power

The arrival of Mohan introduces a darker shift in the male archetype. The "New Man" is not just indifferent; he is voyeuristic. Mohan's desire to "watch" the assault under the guise of "understanding the phenomenon" highlights a disturbing evolution of patriarchy. The traditional male might have exerted power through physical dominance; the new male exerts power through the "gaze." By turning a woman's agony into a spectacle, Mohan and Bhasker reclaim a sense of control without ever risking their safety.

The Female Archetype: The Burden of Witness

Leela represents the tension between the "traditional" housewife and the "new" woman who possesses an awakened social conscience. Unlike the men, Leela is physically affected by the violence. She experiences "hysteria"—a classic label used by patriarchy to dismiss female trauma—but in Padmanabhan's hands, this hysteria is the only sane response to an insane situation.

The Traditional Victim vs. The Modern Witness

Leela's character is initially framed within the traditional archetype: she is fearful, domestic, and dependent on her husband for security. However, as the play progresses, she becomes the moral compass. Her "traditional" sensitivity to the suffering of another woman clashes with the "new" apathy of her husband. Padmanabhan suggests that the "new" woman in urban India is burdened with a double trauma: she is susceptible to the same violence occurring outside, and she is silenced by the men inside who claim to protect her. Leela's request to close the windows or call the police is consistently shot down, showing that her agency is still restricted by the "traditional" hierarchy of the household, even in a "modern" apartment.

IV. LINGUISTIC DECONSTRUCTION: GENDERED RHETORIC

The power dynamic in Lights Out is primarily linguistic. Bhasker and Mohan use a "masculine" discourse of facts, distance, and technicality. They discuss the distance of the building, the frequency of the screams, and the potential motives of the attackers as if they were discussing a scientific experiment.

The male characters, Bhasker and Mohan, utilize a "masculine" discourse characterized by clinical detachment and pseudo-objectivity. Their speech is heavily laden with logical fallacies designed to prioritize their own comfort over the victim's safety. Bhasker employs a rhetoric of categorization, where he attempts to label the screams of the woman as something manageable or culturally sanctioned—such as a "domestic dispute" or "religious chanting." By stripping the event of its individual human agony and placing it into a generic social category, he effectively "de-violences" the act through language.

Mohan's rhetoric takes this a step further into the realm of academic voyeurism. He speaks of the assault as a "phenomenon" or a "socio-urban problem," using the high-register vocabulary of a social scientist. This linguistic strategy allows him to watch the violence without the moral burden of intervention. To Mohan, the victim is not a person but a data point. His speech is marked by an assertive, uninterrupted flow that dominates the domestic space, effectively drowning out the physical screams from the compound with the intellectual noise of his own "rationality."

In sharp contrast, the female characters, particularly Leela, operate within a rhetoric of the visceral. Her language is sensory, fragmented, and urgent. While the men talk about the "distance" and the "legality" of the situation, Leela speaks of the "sound" that vibrates through the floor and the "smell" of her own fear. Her discourse is often dismissed by the men as "hysterical" or "emotional," labels traditionally used in patriarchal structures to invalidate female testimony.

Leela's speech is frequently interrupted or truncated by the men's authoritative interjections. This linguistic marginalization mirrors her physical confinement within the apartment. Her inability to "prove" her distress through the "logical" framework demanded by Bhasker reveals the inherent gender bias in what society considers "valid" communication. For Leela, the "New" rhetoric of urban rationality is simply a more sophisticated cage that prevents her from acting on her "Traditional" maternal or empathetic instincts.

Finally, there is the rhetoric of silence, which is perhaps the most powerful linguistic element in the play. The "Lights Out" of the title is a physical command that translates into a verbal pact of silence. The characters' decision to speak about the violence rather than against it creates a linguistic barrier that is as impenetrable as the apartment walls. By the end of the play, the "New" gender archetype is defined by a polished, articulate silence—a sophisticated refusal to name the crime for what it is, thereby becoming linguistically complicit in its continuation.

Leela's language is visceral. She speaks of the "sound" and the "feeling" in her gut. By contrasting these two modes of communication, Padmanabhan shows how the "New" male archetype uses language as a tool of oppression to invalidate the "Traditional" female empathy.

V. COMPLICITY AND THE "NEW" SOCIAL ORDER

The play reaches its climax when Frieda, the domestic help, is introduced. Frieda represents the working-class woman who does not have the luxury of "lights out." Her presence shatters the middle-class illusions of the couple.

The "New" gender archetype of the "Liberated Couple" is exposed as a sham. They are only liberated as long as the violence remains outside their door. When the violence threatens to spill over, they revert to the most primitive forms of self-interest. Surinder, another female character who arrives later, initially seems more "modern" and assertive than Leela, yet even she eventually succumbs to the pressure of silence, highlighting how the patriarchal structure co-opts even the most "new" or "progressive" voices.

The Panoptic Window: Urban Space and the Voyeuristic Archetype.

In Lights Out, the apartment window functions as a "panoptic" device—a term derived from Jeremy Bentham's prison design where the observer sees without being seen. However, Padmanabhan subverts this power dynamic. In the traditional panopticon, the gaze is used for discipline; in this urban middle-class setting, the gaze is used for a perverse kind of "new" entertainment that reinforces gender hierarchies.

The Window as a Screen

For Bhasker and Mohan, the window is not a portal to a world requiring their intervention, but a screen upon which a "traditional" drama of violence is performed. By insisting that the lights remain off, they transform their living room into a darkened theater. This creates a "new" male archetype: the Detached Spectator. This archetype is a product of high-rise urban living, where physical elevation from the street correlates with a moral elevation—a false sense of superiority over the "primitive" violence occurring below.

The window serves to "frame" the woman's agony, turning a human rights violation into a visual composition. When Mohan suggests using binoculars, he is literalizing this voyeurism. The "new" man doesn't just ignore the victim; he consumes her trauma as a narrative to be analyzed and debated. This consumption is inherently gendered, as the male characters find a strange, unspoken bond in their shared observation of female vulnerability.

VI. THE DOMESTIC FORTRESS VS. THE VULNERABLE COMPOUND

The physical boundaries of the "flat" represent the "new" India—private, gated, and sanitized. The "compound" outside represents the "traditional" India—exposed, chaotic, and dangerous. The gender archetypes are mapped onto these spaces: Leela is

confined to the "safe" interior, yet her psyche is colonized by the screams from the "unsafe" exterior.

Padmanabhan suggests that the middle-class "new" identity is predicated on the exclusion of the "other." The gender archetypes within the home are reinforced by this exclusion. By refusing to let the "traditional" violence of the street enter the "modern" space of the apartment, the men believe they are protecting their domestic sanctity. In reality, they are merely trapping Leela in a state of perpetual witness without concern. The "new" urban space, therefore, does not liberate the woman; it merely isolates her from the communal sisterhood that might have existed in a less "modern," more integrated social structure.

VII. THE COLLAPSE OF THE PRIVATE/PUBLIC BINARY:

Ultimately, the play argues that the "New Indian Man" maintains his status by strictly policing the boundary between the private and the public. As long as the rape is "public" (outside), it is not his "private" (inside) concern. Leela's attempt to break this binary—by bringing the public horror into the private conversation—is what triggers the men's most aggressive rhetorical defenses. The deconstruction of these archetypes reveals that "modernity" in the Indian urban context is often just a "traditional" patriarchy that has moved to a higher floor and learned to keep the lights off.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In Lights Out, Manjula Padmanabhan successfully deconstructs the binary of "traditional" and "new" gender roles. She reveals that for the Indian man, "modernity" is often a mask for a more sophisticated form of patriarchal indifference. The "New Man" (Bhasker) is no more heroic than the "Traditional Man"; in fact, he is perhaps more insidious because he uses the tools of civilization—logic, law, and privacy—to justify his inhumanity.

The "New Woman" (Leela), meanwhile, finds herself in a state of perpetual conflict. She is modern enough to recognize the injustice, but remains traditionally bound by a domestic structure that denies her a voice. Padmanabhan's play is a call to action, suggesting that unless the "lights" are turned on within the human conscience, the distinction between the "traditional" and the "new" remains a superficial comfort for an apathetic society.

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