



## Urban Apathy, Gendered Violence, and Ethical Complicity in Lights Out

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**Abstract:** Indian English drama has increasingly turned toward social realism to interrogate gendered violence and the ethical failures of urban society. *Lights Out*, written by Manjula Padmanabhan, remains one of the most compelling dramatic explorations of moral passivity within metropolitan middle-class culture. Inspired by a real incident that occurred in Santa Cruz, Mumbai, the play dramatizes how privileged observers respond to repeated cries of sexual assault occurring nearby yet refuse meaningful intervention. Through the interactions among Bhaskar, Leela, Mohan, Naina, and Surinder, Padmanabhan exposes patriarchy, voyeurism, fear, and institutional distrust embedded within urban consciousness. The violence remains offstage, shifting dramatic emphasis from spectacle to ethical psychology and spectatorship. Drawing upon feminist criticism, theories of structural violence, and socio-cultural studies of gender inequality, this article examines how the play critiques middle-class apathy, masculine authority, and normalized misogyny. It argues that silence functions as complicity, transforming domestic comfort into moral failure. By analysing characterization, dramatic technique, dialogue patterns, symbolism, and spatial politics, the article situates *Lights Out* within contemporary feminist theatre and postcolonial urban discourse and demonstrates its enduring relevance to conversations surrounding gendered violence in modern India.

**Keywords:** Urban apathy; gendered violence; feminist theatre; spectatorship; patriarchy; Indian English drama; middle-class morality.

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### Introduction

Modern Indian English drama has consistently engaged with socio-political anxieties emerging from rapid urbanization, globalization, and shifting moral structures, and within this tradition *Lights Out* occupies a distinctive position because it refuses sensationalism while confronting one of the most disturbing realities of contemporary society: sexual violence against women and the indifference surrounding it. First staged in 1984 and inspired by a real gang-rape incident reported in Santa Cruz, Mumbai, during the early 1980s, the play deliberately avoids dramatizing the act itself and instead focuses on the witnesses who hear the violence yet remain immobilized by fear, curiosity, and social convenience. The drama unfolds entirely inside a comfortable apartment belonging to an upper-middle-class couple, and this confined domestic setting sharply contrasts with the brutal assault occurring outside, thereby generating a sustained moral tension between security and responsibility. Rather than presenting heroic intervention or dramatic confrontation, the narrative evolves through conversation, hesitation,



rationalization, and ultimately silence, transforming the stage into a psychological arena where ethical choices are debated but never realized. Critics such as Nakathorige and Dar observe that the offstage violence shifts attention from spectacle to spectatorship, compelling audiences to confront their own responses to suffering heard but not seen. The play therefore becomes less a narrative about crime and more an inquiry into complicity, asking how privilege, fear, and social conditioning shape moral decisions, and this article examines the dramatic strategies through which Padmanabhan critiques patriarchal authority, middle-class apathy, and institutional distrust while situating the text within feminist theatre and postcolonial urban discourse.

### **Urban Middle-Class Apathy and Moral Paralysis**

One of the central concerns of *Lights Out* lies in its sharp critique of metropolitan indifference, as the characters repeatedly discuss the screams coming from a nearby compound where a woman is assaulted nightly yet consistently replace action with speculation and debate, thereby revealing a pattern of moral paralysis rooted in class privilege and self-preservation. Bhaskar, the host and primary voice of authority, embodies rationalized apathy by insisting that intervention could invite danger, police harassment, or unnecessary entanglement, and his arguments echo broader urban anxieties shaped by mistrust of state institutions and fear of retaliation; however, what initially appears as pragmatic caution gradually exposes itself as ethical compromise. Rather than ignorance, the play portrays conscious avoidance, since the characters clearly recognize the severity of the violence but choose to reframe it through procedural language, hypothetical consequences, and detached reasoning. Bais and Singh interpret this pattern as a psychological manifestation of survival instinct within modern urban spaces, yet Padmanabhan demonstrates how such instinct, when repeatedly prioritized over empathy, becomes complicity. The apartment functions symbolically as a fortress of middle-class insulation where economic comfort produces emotional distance, and the recurring screams that penetrate its walls disrupt domestic stability without ever dismantling it. The normalization of nightly assault further illustrates how repeated exposure can desensitize individuals, transforming horror into routine background noise and allowing moral failure to masquerade as social prudence, thereby presenting urban apathy not as accidental ignorance but as a deliberate strategy of disengagement.

### **Gendered Violence and Feminist Intervention**

Padmanabhan's feminist critique emerges most forcefully through contrasting gendered responses to the unseen assault, as Leela and Naina articulate emotional distress and moral urgency while male characters repeatedly dismiss intervention through rationalization and authority, thereby revealing how patriarchal discourse delegitimizes feminine empathy and legitimizes masculine detachment. Leela's insistence on contacting the police is framed by Bhaskar as hysteria or exaggeration, reinforcing cultural stereotypes that associate women with emotional excess and men with reasoned judgment, and P. Sujeetha Rao argues that this dynamic reflects broader structures of gender inequality in which women's voices are systematically trivialized within domestic and public spheres. The victim remains unseen and unnamed, symbolizing the countless silenced women whose suffering is rendered invisible within patriarchal society, and by refusing to stage the assault visually Padmanabhan resists turning the female body into spectacle, instead compelling audiences to confront violence through sound and imagination. Indulekha observes that this strategy prevents voyeuristic consumption of trauma and reorients attention toward ethical accountability rather than sensational representation. Domestic labor further complicates this feminist reading, as Leela



must continue preparing dinner and maintaining hospitality even while distressed, illustrating how patriarchal expectations of composure and service persist despite external crisis. Through these layered interactions, the play demonstrates that gendered violence is sustained not only through physical assault but also through everyday structures that silence women's moral authority, thereby positioning feminist consciousness as both ethical awareness and frustrated resistance within an environment dominated by masculine control.

### **Offstage Violence and the Politics of Sound**

The absence of visible violence constitutes one of the most innovative theatrical strategies in *Lights Out*, as Padmanabhan constructs dramatic tension through auditory presence rather than visual spectacle, using screams, cries for help, and abrupt silences as recurring motifs that interrupt conversation and destabilize domestic routine. This offstage technique redirects attention toward ethical psychology and spectatorship, since the audience, like the characters, must respond to violence that is heard but not seen, thereby intensifying imaginative engagement and moral discomfort. Nakathorige and Dar argue that the play's reliance on sound transforms theatre into a site of ethical interrogation, because the unseen assault compels viewers to confront their own position as listeners who cannot claim ignorance. Darkness functions symbolically throughout the narrative, as characters metaphorically "switch off" awareness in order to preserve comfort, and the title itself reflects ethical blindness rather than mere absence of light. Each interruption of screams challenges the illusion of normalcy, yet the characters repeatedly attempt to restore routine through conversation and distraction, revealing how social rituals operate as mechanisms of denial. By privileging sound over sight, Padmanabhan destabilizes conventional dramatic expectations and emphasizes that violence need not be visible to demand response, thereby exposing the fragility of moral detachment and demonstrating how silence can echo louder than spectacle.

### **Patriarchy and Masculine Authority**

Masculine discourse dominates decision-making within the play, as Bhaskar and Mohan repeatedly reinterpret violence as misunderstanding, rumor, or exaggerated threat, converting trauma into intellectual debate and stripping it of urgency, while Leela's attempts to foreground ethical responsibility are systematically undermined through dismissal and patronization. Patriarchy here operates not through overt brutality but through everyday conversational authority, where male voices frame the parameters of action and define what constitutes rational response. Surinder initially appears to disrupt this pattern by expressing anger and proposing direct confrontation, yet his aggression ultimately remains performative and unfocused, revealing another facet of masculinity that substitutes spectacle for responsibility without producing meaningful intervention. The play thus critiques both passive and aggressive models of masculinity, suggesting that neither offers genuine protection for vulnerable women. Language becomes a tool of power, as calm reasoning is equated with superiority while emotional urgency is marginalized, thereby reproducing gender hierarchy within the intimate space of the home. Through these interactions, Padmanabhan exposes how patriarchal authority shapes moral outcomes by privileging male interpretation over female experience, ultimately demonstrating that systemic inequality is sustained through subtle conversational dynamics as much as through overt coercion.

### **Voyeurism and Ethical Spectatorship**

Voyeurism constitutes another significant thematic layer within *Lights Out*, as Mohan's curiosity about observing the incident transforms violence into spectacle and mirrors broader cultural tendencies to consume suffering through mediated distance rather than ethical



engagement. His suggestion that they watch from afar reflects a mindset in which the pain of others becomes material for fascination rather than action, and this detachment parallels media sensationalism surrounding gendered violence where outrage often substitutes for intervention. By constructing the drama around listeners rather than victims, Padmanabhan implicates both characters and audience in a shared structure of spectatorship, collapsing the boundary between stage and reality and prompting reflection on personal responsibility. The audience hears the same screams and experiences the same interruptions, thereby occupying a morally ambiguous position that challenges passive consumption of art. This layered spectatorship aligns with feminist theatre's aim to disrupt complacency and provoke ethical introspection, suggesting that awareness without action risks becoming another form of voyeurism. Through this strategy, the play extends its critique beyond fictional characters to societal patterns of observation that prioritize safety and curiosity over justice.

### **Fear, Institutions, and Structural Violence**

Fear operates persistently as justification for inaction, as Bhaskar argues that contacting authorities may result in harassment, legal entanglement, or retaliation, thereby reflecting widespread distrust toward state institutions and exposing the fragile relationship between citizens and systems of protection. Bais and Singh interpret this hesitation as commentary on bureaucratic inefficiency and social insecurity within urban India, where institutional failure indirectly sustains violence by discouraging civic engagement. Structural violence thus extends beyond individual perpetrators to encompass the broader environment that normalizes disengagement through uncertainty and intimidation. The characters imagine potential consequences more vividly than the suffering of the victim, revealing how fear distorts moral calculation and transforms responsibility into risk assessment. Padmanabhan suggests that when justice systems appear unreliable, ethical duty becomes negotiable and silence acquires rational justification. This interplay between personal fear and systemic weakness underscores the complexity of complicity, demonstrating that moral paralysis emerges from intertwined psychological and institutional factors rather than isolated cowardice, and highlighting how social distrust contributes to the perpetuation of gendered violence.

### **Domestic Space as Ethical Battlefield**

The apartment setting functions symbolically as an ethical battlefield where comfort and conscience collide, as hospitality rituals such as dinner preparation and polite conversation continue despite the persistent intrusion of screams, thereby exposing contradictions within middle-class morality and revealing how domestic order can coexist with external brutality. Indulekha observes that this juxtaposition underscores the artificial normalcy maintained through routine, where food, lighting, and social etiquette become tools of distraction that mask moral unease. Leela's dual role as hostess and concerned witness further complicates the scene, illustrating how gendered expectations of composure constrain women's ability to disrupt domestic harmony even in the face of crisis. The spatial divide between inside and outside mirrors class divisions, as violence affects marginalized bodies beyond the walls while the privileged observe from safety, reinforcing structural inequality embedded within urban landscapes. By confining action to the apartment, Padmanabhan intensifies psychological tension and demonstrates that ethical failure occurs not in distant alleys but within intimate living rooms, thereby transforming domestic space into a microcosm of societal indifference.

### **Silence as Complicity**

The most disturbing dimension of *Lights Out* lies in its portrayal of collective silence, as no character ultimately intervenes and even Surinder's passionate outrage dissolves into



hesitation, leaving the victim unheard and justice unrealized. The screams eventually cease, yet their absence offers no resolution, only temporary relief that allows routine to resume without confrontation. Scholars describe this silence as a defense mechanism rooted in privilege and fear, but Padmanabhan frames it as active complicity rather than passive avoidance, emphasizing that inaction enables continuation of violence as effectively as participation. By denying closure or redemption, the play refuses to comfort its audience and instead leaves ethical discomfort unresolved, compelling reflection beyond the performance. Silence emerges as the most pervasive form of violence, echoing through domestic walls and social structures alike, and the drama ultimately suggests that darkness persists not because atrocities remain hidden but because society repeatedly chooses not to see, hear, or act.

### **Conclusion**

Lights Out remains one of the most incisive explorations of urban ethical crisis in Indian English drama, as Manjula Padmanabhan crafts a minimalist yet psychologically intense narrative that exposes how patriarchy, voyeurism, institutional distrust, and middle-class privilege converge to produce moral paralysis. Through offstage violence, layered dialogue, and symbolic manipulation of sound and space, the play shifts attention from perpetrators to witnesses and transforms domestic routine into a site of ethical inquiry. Feminist readings reveal how women's empathy is marginalized within patriarchal discourse, while structural analysis demonstrates how systemic fear and distrust sustain complicity. By refusing spectacle and denying resolution, the drama confronts audiences with uncomfortable recognition of their own potential silence in the face of injustice. Ultimately, Lights Out argues that gendered violence endures not only because criminals act but because societies rationalize inaction, and its enduring relevance lies in this unsettling reminder that moral darkness is sustained through everyday choices made within seemingly ordinary spaces.

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