**“Lights Out”** by **Manjula Padmanabhan** : A Comprehensive study (1)

You may take up the study of the play in the light of:

1.Social issues like the middle class psychology vis-à-vis crime and exploitation upon the poor.

2. As a social satire.

2.Feminism as a theme(issues like gender subjugation, torture upon women).

3.Title of the play.

4.Issue of the plight of the marginalized

5.Role played by ‘sound’ and ‘silence’ in the play

6.Dramatic technique

Manjula Padmanabhan’s ‘Lights Out’ is a realistic play. The main theme of the play is associated with the issue of a ‘gang rape’, probing various questions pertaining to exploitation of women in the society and home. In the play, she presents a world where the females have no identity. The play is based on a real life incident of rape of a woman in open during night in a Mumbai suburb. Drama critic Jayant Kripalani declares the play as a “pure black comedy and is about how we all are in denial when incidents of violence on women occur around us.”

The story of the play in brief:

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 traumatized because of these sounds. These sounds make Leela hysterical; she is able to hear to the voice of the victim and her cries in her subconscious mind. Leela implores to Bhaskar to take an action against the perpetrators but all her pleas falls on the deaf ears. Bhaskar is least disturbed by all these actions and sounds for, to a man, a woman is an object of play and to have pleasure with her body. Leela begs her husband Bhaskar to call for police but he brushes away her request. He advices Leela to practice yoga through which she can reduce her fear instead of thinking of this incident. Naina , Leela’s friend is told that the strange sounds that she hears are the sounds of a local slum religious ceremony. But Naina grows inquisitive and looks out of the window to know what kind of religious ceremony is taking place exactly and finds to her horror four men assaulting a woman sexually. She is shaken to see three men holding a woman as the fourth attacks her brutally. Where Naina denies to call it a religious ritual, men in the play deny to call it a rape. Freida- the maid servant of the family who appears robotic in her ways of doing works for the family, significantly, arranges for knives and acids while the discussion to attack the goons is on among the verbal characters (Thus she indirectly tells that the crime need to be stopped). Naina in the play at the beginning is shown to be seriously pleading in favour of an action against the crime but even her voice is made silent. She initially argues to call the police but the arrival of her husband Surinder, changes her faintly. Surinder’s dominating demeanor overshadows Naina’s personality and she becomes silent. As the characters were unable to come to any unanimous decision about what to do about the crime, they finally decided upon taking snaps and make money by selling the authentic rape scenes to the news channels and the media -and finally when they were about to go out to take advantage of the heinous crime, they found for themselves that it was too late for them to come, for the perpetrators and the victim had already gone away from the site before they reached the spot. The play at the end thus provokes the observers to comprehend where the society stands when the question of woman’s safety, independence and her identity are concerned.

Analysis:

Manjula Padmanabhan dramatizes her belief that the major cause behind the spurt in cases of crime in the society has been the indifferent attitude of the people. The play depicts with great transparency the intersectional dimensions to rape and sexual assault. The play also gives a scope to the audience to internalize upon his own stance vis-à-vis the suffering of the women in the society both emotionally and physically. In the play, a group of ordinary middle class people mostly men, choose to stand and watch while a woman gets molested in the neighboring compound.

Though the main theme of the play is associated with the sensitive issue of a ‘gang rape’, it probes various questions pertaining to exploitation of women in the society and at home. The role of women is designated by a patriarchal design in the society. Padmanabhan throws light on man-women relationships and the patriarchal power that rule the society. A woman is always seen playing a subservient role to a man. The status of the woman and the plight of her suffering between two influential beings firstly a man, who with his age old dominant power has a control on woman and secondly a woman who turns into an instrument under his authority. The dramatist explicitly displays the reactions of women and men regarding the sexual assault and an urgent need to look at the growing demand of feminine point of view.

There is no relation of the victim with the characters of the play but still her pain is seen through the suffering of Leela, Naina and also Frieda. These three being women feel affinity with the victim, through Leela trauma of the rape,nthrough Naina subversion of women, through Frieda’s silence the fear of being abused because of her economic status. Freida’s very presence on the stage and her acute silence raises many questions like : Can she hear the terrible sounds of the rape victim? Why is she not disturbed like others? Freida robotically moves around the family, doing the family chores. She comes at every call of her master and seen attending at times to the works even though she is not told. But significantly, she arranges for knives and acids while the discussion to attack the goons is on among the other characters. In this way, Freida, as it were, wants to state that she also wants the crime to be stopped.