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**RESISTANCE THROUGH THEATRICAL COMMUNICATION: TWO WOMEN'S
TEXTS AND A CRITIQUE OF VIOLENCE**

Sanchayita Paul Chakraborty

Research Scholar
Department of English
University of North Bengal
Siliguri, District: Darjeeling, West Bengal-734430, India
Email: sanchayita.dhritiman@gmail.com
Website: www.nbu.ac.in

Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University
Purulia, West Bengal-723101, India
Email: anindyasp@gmail.com
Website: www.skbu.ac.in

Abstract

Theatre has been a democratic literary medium to constitute a synergy of resistance and activism and it allows its representational mode to encapsulate issues like gender with intensity and fervor. It cannot be denied that women are projected in the stereotypical patriarchal roles which reinforce the feminine subjugation and inferiorization. The assimilation of violence into the identity- formation of woman is becoming a norm, reinforced by multiple patriarchal strategies and ideologies. Invasion on the woman's body is taken as natural. This violence imposed on the

woman's body becomes part of the language and lifestyle of a culture. Women playwrights use the platform of theatre to represent the true feminine subjectivity and to subvert the dominant patriarchal ideology working behind the conventional representation of women. The theatrical representation becomes a tool to these writers to voice their resistance against violence against women. Thus it gives birth to a 'new poetics' in the feminist theatre. This paper engages with two women's texts-Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* and Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder*. The plays show how sexual violence is assuming multiple forms to oppress not only the body, but also the psyche, the existence of women, how the 'body blows' are naturalized as something essential to understand women's identity, how violence imposed on the female body becomes the part of the language and representation of the culture. This paper gives a parallax view of the critique of violence which is represented through these texts and how this representation becomes a mode of resistance.

Keywords: Theatre, Feminism

One is not born a woman, rather one becomes a woman. And within this process of becoming, it seems that the assimilation of violence into the identity-formation of woman is becoming a norm, reinforced by multiple patriarchal strategies and ideologies. Invasion on the woman's body is taken as natural in the patriarchal discursive matrix. This violence imposed on the woman's body becomes part of the language and lifestyle of a culture. How the conventional cultural representation of woman can be appropriated to form a space for resistance? Theatre has been used to relocate the cultural production of feminine gender and thus to create an alternative canon of female playwrights. And the representation of violence through the space of theatre becomes a mode of resistance. Elain Aston in her essay 'Finding a Tradition: Feminism and

Theatre History', shows how "theatrical conventions (...) can be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing actual women and replacing them with the masks of patriarchal production" (Aston, page-36) Being within the same theatrical methodology, the female playwrights face the challenge of redefining the theatrical conventions which are structured under the patriarchal ideology. My paper here shows how Manjula Padmanabhan in her play *Lights Out* and Dina Mehta in *Getting Away with Murder* moor on this theatrical convention, but she relocates it by transforming this as a way of ironic self-reflection. Padmanabhan underlines the patriarchal production of woman's role in the theatre space and unfolds how a woman is subsumed within the patriarchal system of narratology of rape. What I actually intends to mean by 'narratology of rape' is that here the voyeuristic structure of knowledge based on the conventions, symbols and representation of rape is enjoyed as a spectacle and within this process, it is normalized by the spectator/reader.

To study theatre from a feminist point of view, we need 'new poetics'. Sue Ellen Case in her essay 'Towards a New Poetics' defines this 'new poetics' –

New feminist theory would abandon the traditional patriarchal values embedded in prior notions of form, practice and audience response in order to construct new critical models and methodologies for the drama that would accommodate the presence of women in the art, support their liberation from the cultural fictions of the female gender and deconstruct the valorization of the male gender.

Recent theorization of woman's subjectivity in Indian postcolonial context have furnished some significant debates around the issue of representation, resignification and resistance, that try to foreground indigenous paradigms for ascertaining differentiated conditions of woman's

subjugation. As it has manifested from these engagements, these theorizations have called for new optics, new mechanism to read the specificities of the Indian question in the kinds of gender deprivation extant and evident in tandem with other parameters of class, sex, caste and community identities.

As we have seen, the issue of sexual violence has found literary expression in arrays in dramatic representations. My paper will try to reconfigure new modes, new paradigms to address the perversity and the deeply-ingrained practice of gender discrimination that has enjoyed various ideological and social legitimating, a corollary of the kind of self-immunity that patriarchy has constituted for itself in Indian society. Therefore the violence has grown into becoming accepted mode of living where the patriarchy has unobtrusively permeated itself in exhorting that legitimization, a social consensus. The plays of well-known Indian English women plays like Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder* and Manjula Padmanavan's *Lights Out* serve as the textual references. The plays show how sexual violence is assuming multiple forms to oppress not only the body, but also the psyche, the existence of women, how the 'body blows' are naturalized as something essential to understand women's identity, how violence imposed on the female body becomes the part of the language and representation of the culture.

This revelation offers an interesting perspective to Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* in which the centre spectacle focuses on a woman's gang-rape by four men. The glaring ending of the play informs that the play sprouts up from an eye-witness account- "*The incident took place in Santa Cruze, Bombay, 1982*".

The play focuses on the response of the male gaze to the spectacle of the gang-rape in the space of urbanity. The male gaze here does not only participate in the voyeuristic enjoyment of the event of rape, but it also indulges in the brutal objectification of the female body as well as a process of justification which remains a central tenet of the drama. In structure and thematic exploration, the text is unfolding the contrapuntal formation of this male gaze that functions on multilayered structural shelter. The point that the text invokes is how this gaze is operational through different discursive networks of legitimization and enjoys immunity in the guise of social security and consumerist advocacy of rape culture. What is ironic in the play that one of the major male protagonists, Mohan only comes to Bhasker's apartment *only* to look at the gang-rape. His scopophilic pleasure in looking at the live spectacle of gang-rape of the woman is quite evident. What changes his role from an eye-witness to a scopophilic gazer is his constant formation of various explanations to evade the active involvement. Throughout the play, his scopophilia continues to exist as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at the sexual violation of the woman and in this process, she is objectified. As Laura Mulvey deconstructs the whole discourse of gazing at and being gazed at-

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.

In the deliberate condition of lights out, the woman who is being raped, is simultaneously looked at and displayed, with her appearance encoded with strong visual and erotic impact. As she is displayed and exploited as a sexual object, she becomes the leit-motif of this erotic spectacle which is viewed both by the male characters in the play and the audience/reader outside the play. So the woman displayed and also the sounds of her groans and cries function on two levels- for

the spectator within the play and the spectator outside the play. In the whole play, the position of the spectator in a room where the lights are out is actually a replication of the position of the spectator outside the text as reader/audience in his seclusion. Here, this position, as Laura Mulvey explains, “*is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire on the performer.*”

Bhasker and Leela are representatives of the typified domestic unit that vaguely looks up to social security from a patriarchal vantage. Mohan is an inclusion into that widening network of patriarchy that gradually gets widened in the play. Excuses that Mohan give are first a promiscuous indulgence, second, it partakes of religiosity. The gaze reaches sarcastic point of excess. With Surinder, this gaze network rounds off with further pathological outcome. Surinder is that ironic ever-courageous voice which is satisfied in the planning of resistance, but not in the active enactment of the resistance. Thus, he is indirectly involved in that vicious circle of rape-culture.

The sexist attitude that the onus of honour and shame lies overwhelmingly on woman’s body is apparent in the play. This finds an echo in the comments of Bhasker and Mohan in the play. They deliberately deny the plain fact the woman is gang raped and even they have gone to the extent to prove that she is a whore as “she’s with four men at once”. Bhasker indulges to differentiate between a whore and a ‘decent’ woman and ultimately following this line of argument, Mohan asserts that “*A whore is not decent, so a whore cannot be raped.*” It indicates that a decent woman can be raped. Here one can refer to the debate concerning the difference between the ‘good body’ and the ‘bad body’ and the concept of legal protection which is very

aptly summarized in Oishik Sircar's article, "Women make demands, but only ladies get protection'. Sircar explains the legal construct,

The good body is that of the good woman-the chaste and loyal wife, maintaining the integrity of the family, culture and nation. A bad woman's sexuality is illegitimate. Her body does not conform to the legal construct of a body that can be violated, so she has no legal recourse.

The characters of Leela, Naina belong to the notion of the 'good body'. But the woman who is gang raped, just for being compelled to be with four men is termed as 'whore' by Mohan. So the violation of the woman's body which is not considered as 'good body' is not considered as violence at all and thus it steps out of the arena of legal surveillance. The whole logic works on the basis of dominant cultural assumptions about sexuality and this play focuses on these cultural constructions. The discussion moves to the extreme point when Mohan embarks on a sexist differentiation- "*the difference between men and women is that women are vulnerable to rape.*"

Rape is a kind of manifestation of imposing male control over the female body. This imposition becomes naturalized in the language and life-style of a culture as it is shown in the play. It comes to the fore mingled with the notion of social apathy in the casual comment of Bhasker- "*These things go on all the time, all over the city-who are we to interfere?*" This callous mentality exposes the gory reality that the attacks on the woman's body seem an inevitable aspect of being female. In fact, femininity is captured in its fractured and kaleidoscopic variety in this play. Female as victim, as caged in the civil gloss, and as showpiece-embodiment of libertine spirit are presented in the play. Leela is the most typical of them. She is married to his 'caring' husband in a posh apartment in some corner of the city. The rape that took place just outside the window of

her apartment broke into her 'genteel' world causing her "as if my insides were knotted up." Has the noise not been disturbing her, one can sense that she would not have been bothered at all. She says,

But their sounds come inside, inside my nice clean house, and I can't push them out!...If only they didn't make such a racket, I wouldn't mind so much!...Why do they have to do it here? Why can't they go somewhere else?

What is most striking in her dialogues is that she is also subsumed under the system of male gaze as she is also reacting to the sexual violence as a spectacle and anticipates its repetition as a spectacle, positioning herself in the safe distance of non-involvement. She says,

I want the police to come and clear them away. I don't want to go there *myself!* (italics in the text)

Even she does not want to call the police herself and prefers to depend on others to take that much action. In contrast to her typical femininity, Naina seems to be straightforward, but again is caught in the discussion than solution. She retorts back to Mohan,

By losing their vulnerability to rape, whores lose their right to be women? Is that what you mean?

But Naina finds her equally handcuffed in this male-dominated, almost a perverted world of patriarchy. Leela and Naina are two faces of woman subjectivity in our society. And the raped woman, whose anatomy is almost dissected and her genetic purity discussed, also has no voice in this phallogentric set-up. Frieda's character is robotically dehumanized to the level of a mere labour who plays her duty silently and undemandingly.

The legitimization of rape rises to the level of perversion when Mohan tries hard to prove the brutalization, the rape of the woman is a kind of ‘religious ritual’, ‘an exorcism’ and the woman is violated as she might be possessed by the evil spirit. This assimilation of violence with the woman’s identity unearths the age-old doctrine of subjugation of woman. *Lights Out* unravels the hegemonic legitimisation of violence against women, the assimilation of violence in the identity of women and the masked perpetuation of sexist mindset in our socio-cultural existence. What is important in Padmanabhan’s play is that how the centrality of the objectified rape victim attains the subject position through her constant representation in the spectator’s eyes. It is true that she is represented in the framework of the traditional dominant patriarchal ideology and her representation conforms to the cultural fiction of the female gender. But Padmanabhan intends to replay this representation as the shock-therapy to the audience who can realize the apathy and brutality that continue to normalize the violence against women.

Dina Mehta, in her play, *Getting Away with Murder*, shows very poignantly, how sexual abuse leads to a kind of psychosis in Sonali. Her miming of the whole incident of sexual violence and the subsequent death of the villainous uncle help her to exorcise herself of it which keeps haunting her nightmares. Her internalization of the phallogocentric doctrine stems up from the discriminatory treatment she suffered in her childhood vis-à-vis her brother Gopal and it resultantly creates a void in her unconscious which seeps again and again into her traumatized dreamscape. Her choked psyche provoked her to commit the female foeticide in the time of her former pregnancy to bypass the life of “*violence and servitude*” for her unborn girl-child. She bursts out to Malu, “*To be born a girl is to be subject to violence and servitude.*” The whole argument becomes more problematic when Sonali tries to justify her female foeticide and her

attempt of sex detection in her next pregnancy in the logic of choice, emancipation and her rights on her own body. Here the desperate violence through abortion inflicted on her own body by herself to get away with the female foetus is interpreted by her as a mode of emancipation and reclamation of her own body. It shows how the idea of woman's emancipation and freedom of choice is structured by patriarchal formulations. Nivedita Menon in her essay "*Refusing Globalisation and the Authentic Nation: Feminist Politics in Current Conjuncture*" comments

“The contradiction between our belief in the need to assert and protect the autonomy of the individual citizen and our simultaneous belief in the operation of the hegemony of the dominant power-laden values makes the ‘freedom to choose’ so problematic.”

Sonali's obsession to have a male child can be analysed through a psychoanalytic study. It offers two explanations. One, she is afraid of the repetition of the sexual assault which she suffered as a girl-child and which left a deep scar in her psyche. The other explanation is she wants to turn her male-child as a signifier of her own desire to possess a penis, which, according to Lacanian theory, is a condition assumed by woman to enter the symbolic order. She suffers from this lack, and in the context of her childhood memory of sexual violence, it is reinforced in her mindscape. This whole idea borrows from her mother's belief that "*a woman's failure to bear a son is just retribution for misdeeds in her past life.*" It shockingly highlights how woman becomes the perpetrator of patriarchal norms. The fear of sexual violence is so ingrained within her psyche that it envelops all her existence with a kind of nightmarish force. At the end of the play, she breaks free from her nightmarish cocooned self and her regression to her dreamscape that helps

her to enact the past makes her rejuvenation possible. Thus, the play voices new ethos of resistance through Sonali's awakening to a condition of revolutionary subjectivity.

In the play, the character of Raziya, in spite of being successful doctor and an individual woman, becomes a representation of self-infliction of violence when she agrees to the second marriage of her husband, just on the ground that she cannot bear any child, and thus fails to conform to the traditional role of wife as a child-bearer. Another individualistic character, Malu, who enacts a stronghold in her office-affairs and challenges any kind of sexual objectification by her co-partner, Mr. Pinglay, also suffers from a helpless emotional dependence to Gopal, the irresponsible lover. Actually, both of them realize their fault within, how they become only the cogs in the wheel of patriarchy-

The enemy is within, don't you see? *It is in our minds, Mallika, that we are underlings!* (italics in the text)

Discussing feminist performances, Anna Furse, in "*Performing in Glass: Reproduction, Technology, Performance and the Bio-Spectacular*", writes:

We might wrest the gaze from being on us to considering our own gaze on ourselves... because it is a matter of necessity if we are to grapple with systems of control.

This has important consequence for the plays like *Lights Out* and *Getting Away with Murder*. It raises the notion of the male gaze. This notion of male gaze shows how Bhasker and Mohan in *Lights Out* and Gopal in *Getting Away with Murder* fit into the pre-existing pattern of fascination

in the representation of women as victims and sex-objects. Their conscious or sometimes, unconscious fascination indicates to the process and social formation which mould their individual subjecthood. Padmanabhan, in her play, by offering us the opinions of women about the ongoing rape, redirects the gaze as emanating from men, towards a situation where it is elicited from women. The assault is occurring in the background and is able to keep the sense of unease alive and immanent. The destruction of pleasure though this unease is radical here. Thus one is made to 'think' about it. Though there are few examples of woman as active representers, these two playwrights does present themselves as active representers, as authors with certain agency to present the woman's experience of violence. *Lights Out* does build on the mediation of the female author watching the male protagonists objectifying the female subject. In this play, women characters like Leela, the Rape-victim, Naina and Frieda are represented as passive figures. Naina tries hard to build up an active resistance against the rape, but it is silenced under the patriarchal control of her heroic husband, Surinder. On the other hand *Getting Away with Murder* incorporates the female perspectives of Sonali, Malu and Rajiya on the violence inflicted on them, alongside the voyeuristic gaze of Gopal and Pinglay. These women playwrights exploit the representation of violence to form an active resistance against this perpetuation of violence in this multifaceted patriarchal setup. Thus they are writing back to the dominant cultural narrative which naturalizes the patriarchal oppression and make it a normative part of women's subjectivity. In the contemporary scenario, it is necessary to negotiate with the socio-political dynamics, the structures and formulations of the present world to revisualise theatre from a feminist perspective in India. These dramatic works would work as the immediate sites of praxis-oriented engagement to analyse the veracity of such diversified formulations/claims.

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