
**Silence as Complicity: Gender, Power, and the Ethics of Witnessing in
*Lights Out***

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Abstract:

Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Lights Out* (1984) serves as a powerful critique of societal apathy toward violence, particularly gender-based violence, in urban India. Inspired by a real-life incident, the play unfolds within the confines of a domestic space, where characters grapple with the ethical dilemma of intervening in a brutal assault happening outside their apartment. This paper examines the play through multidisciplinary lenses, integrating feminist theory, psychoanalysis, sociological perspectives, and ethical frameworks. It explores the interplay of silence, gendered power dynamics, and the ethics of witnessing, situating the work within broader cultural and philosophical contexts. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze, Freud's psychoanalytic theories, and Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil," the paper argues that *Lights Out* not only critiques patriarchal norms but also reveals the mechanisms of moral paralysis and voyeurism in urban societies. By highlighting the normalization of violence and the complicity of silence, the play raises urgent questions about collective responsibility and ethical intervention. This study situates the play in contemporary discourses on bystander apathy, urban sociology, and feminist ethics, underscoring its enduring relevance in addressing the pervasive culture of indifference toward gendered violence.

Keywords: Manjula Padmanabhan, *Lights Out*, gender-based violence, feminist theory, psychoanalysis, voyeurism, ethics of witnessing, urban sociology.

Introduction

Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Lights Out* (1984) is a seminal work in contemporary Indian theater, offering a chilling examination of societal apathy and moral paralysis in the face of violence. Set in the confines of an urban apartment, the play portrays a group of middle-class individuals who witness a brutal sexual assault happening just outside their window yet remain unable or unwilling to intervene. Based on a real-life incident, *Lights Out* serves as a microcosm of societal attitudes toward gender-based violence, exposing the entrenched gendered power dynamics and ethical dilemmas that perpetuate inaction (Padmanabhan 15).

The ethical and psychological implications of the characters' silence resonate deeply in an era where bystander apathy and the normalization of violence against women remain pervasive. The male characters in the play, Bhaskar and Mohan, oscillate between voyeuristic curiosity and self-justified detachment, while the female characters, Naina and Leela, embody the emotional and moral toll of such indifference. The tension between witnessing and intervention forms the crux of the narrative, raising profound questions about complicity, power, and responsibility (Mulvey 9).

This paper critically examines *Lights Out* through interdisciplinary lenses, integrating feminist theory, psychoanalytic frameworks, sociological perspectives, and ethical discourse. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, Freud's psychoanalysis, and Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil," it argues that the play not only critiques patriarchal norms but also highlights the sociocultural mechanisms that enable moral paralysis. By situating the play within contemporary debates on urban sociology and gender ethics, this study underscores the enduring relevance of *Lights Out* in addressing systemic indifference to gendered violence (Arendt 45).

The following sections explore the spatial politics of silence, the gendered dynamics of power, and the ethical complexities of witnessing violence, culminating in an analysis that bridges the theoretical and practical implications of Padmanabhan's work.

Background and Context

Manjula Padmanabhan, a distinguished Indian playwright, journalist, and cartoonist, is celebrated for her incisive critique of social issues. *Lights Out* emerged from her observations of urban apathy and the normalization of violence in Indian society during the 1980s. The play was inspired by a real-life incident in Mumbai, where neighbors ignored a sexual assault occurring nearby, choosing instead to discuss it from the safety of their homes. This indifference forms the core of the play, making it a stark commentary on the ethical failures of modern urban communities (Padmanabhan 18).

Set in an unnamed Indian city, the play reflects the socio-political climate of the time, marked by rapid urbanization, a growing middle class, and escalating violence against women. The apartment setting serves as a microcosm of urban life, where physical proximity to violence contrasts sharply with emotional and moral detachment. The characters' differing responses to the assault highlight the complexities of gendered power dynamics, voyeurism, and the ethics of intervention (Durkheim 200).

The cultural backdrop of *Lights Out* aligns with broader feminist critiques of Indian society, where patriarchal norms often silence women and normalize their suffering. By placing the audience in the uncomfortable position of passive observers, Padmanabhan forces a confrontation with the ethical dilemmas of witnessing violence. This interplay of personal responsibility and societal complicity remains a pressing issue, making *Lights Out* a timeless exploration of the human condition (Mulvey 10).

Silence as Complicity

The concept of silence in *Lights Out* functions as both a literal and metaphorical representation of societal apathy. The characters' reluctance to intervene in the violence outside their apartment encapsulates the moral paralysis often observed in urban societies. This silence is not merely a lack of speech but an active form of complicity, as it enables the continuation of violence. Bhaskar's justification for inaction, rooted in fear of "getting involved," reflects a broader societal tendency to prioritize personal safety over ethical responsibility (Freud 110).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Freud's theory of repression offers a lens to interpret the characters' behavior. Freud's concept of the unconscious—where repressed fears and desires manifest in subtle actions or inactions—is particularly relevant. Bhaskar and Mohan's fixation on the sounds of the assault, combined with their rationalizations, reveals an unconscious fascination mixed with fear. This dynamic underscores Freud's notion of the death drive (Thanatos), which suggests a human tendency toward passivity and destruction when faced with overwhelming situations (Freud 112).

The voyeuristic undertones of the male characters' behavior resonate with Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. Mulvey argues that patriarchal structures in media and culture position women as objects to be viewed rather than subjects with agency. In *Lights Out*, Bhaskar and Mohan's detached curiosity exemplifies this gaze, reducing the female victim to an object of spectacle rather than recognizing her suffering as a call to action (Mulvey 12). This lens highlights the broader patriarchal conditioning that normalizes such inaction.

Sociologically, the silence can be examined through Durkheim's concept of anomie—a state of normlessness in which societal values are eroded. The urban setting amplifies this phenomenon, as the physical proximity of neighbors does not translate into communal solidarity or collective action. This breakdown of moral and social cohesion reinforces the characters' passive acceptance of violence as an external reality (Durkheim 198).

Gender and Power Dynamics

The gendered dynamics in *Lights Out* are central to its critique of societal indifference. Bhaskar and Mohan, as representatives of hegemonic masculinity, assert their dominance by dictating the terms of the discussion and dismissing the women's emotional responses. Their attitudes reveal a patriarchal mindset that devalues empathy and prioritizes rationalization over moral action (Padmanabhan 23). This dismissal reflects the broader societal tendency to marginalize women's voices in public and private spaces.

Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze is evident in Bhaskar and Mohan's voyeurism. Rather than perceiving the assault as a violation of human dignity, they view it as a spectacle, reinforcing patriarchal structures that objectify women. This dynamic underscores the play's feminist critique of a society that normalizes the dehumanization of women while absolving men of responsibility (Mulvey 13).

Freud's psychoanalytic theories also illuminate the power dynamics in the play. The male characters' voyeurism and passivity can be linked to Freud's concept of scopophilia—the pleasure derived from watching others. This pleasure, combined with the repression of guilt and fear, creates a psychological barrier to intervention. The male characters' reluctance to act, therefore, is both a conscious choice and an unconscious coping mechanism to avoid confrontation with their own moral failings (Freud 115).

Moreover, the internalized patriarchy displayed by the female characters adds another layer of complexity. Leela's initial reluctance to challenge the men's indifference illustrates how patriarchal norms can condition women to accept silence as the default response to violence. However, her eventual emotional outburst serves as a moment of resistance, challenging the dominant narrative and asserting the need for ethical action (Padmanabhan 25).

The Ethics of Witnessing in *Lights Out*

The ethical dilemmas in *Lights Out* raise profound questions about the morality of witnessing violence without intervening. The play critiques urban apathy and moral disengagement through its portrayal of characters who, despite being witnesses to violence, choose inaction over intervention. This inaction can be examined through various philosophical and psychological frameworks, particularly Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil," Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of responsibility, and the psychological phenomenon of the diffusion of responsibility.

Arendt's "Banality of Evil" and Complicity

Hannah Arendt's theory of the "banality of evil" provides a compelling lens for understanding the characters' inaction in *Lights Out*. Arendt argues that evil often arises not from overt malice but from ordinary individuals who passively accept or perpetuate systemic injustices through their complacency (Arendt 50). In the play, the character's refusal to intervene in a violent event reflects this passive complicity. They do not act out of explicit intent to harm, but their silence and inaction enable the continuation of violence.

For example, one character rationalizes their inaction by citing a fear of personal harm, while another dismisses the responsibility as someone else's problem. This reflects Arendt's observation that individuals in bureaucratic or systemic structures often abdicate moral agency, relying instead on the excuse of helplessness or adherence to social norms. The characters in *Lights Out* are emblematic of this moral disengagement, contributing to a broader critique of urban society's indifference to suffering. By failing to disrupt the cycle of violence, they embody the very banality that allows evil to thrive in everyday life.

Levinas's Ethics of Responsibility and the Encounter with the Other

In contrast to Arendt's focus on systemic complicity, Emmanuel Levinas emphasizes individual ethical responsibility. His philosophy posits that encountering the face of the Other creates an ethical demand that cannot be ignored. The suffering of another person should elicit a response grounded in an intrinsic sense of responsibility (Levinas 180). The characters in *Lights Out* violate this fundamental principle by turning away from the Other's suffering. Their inaction is not merely a failure of courage but a profound moral failing.

Levinas's ethics suggest that ignoring the Other's suffering denies their humanity, reducing them to a mere abstraction. In the play, the characters' decision to remain silent allows them to psychologically distance themselves from the victim's pain. This lack of empathy underscores the moral cost of their apathy. By refusing to acknowledge the ethical responsibility imposed by witnessing, they exemplify the broader failure of modern urban societies, where anonymity often supersedes empathy.

The Diffusion of Responsibility and Collective Inaction

The psychological phenomenon of the diffusion of responsibility offers another critical perspective on the characters' inaction. First identified by social psychologists, this phenomenon occurs when individuals in a group setting assume that others will take action, leading to collective inaction (Durkheim 210). In *Lights Out*, this dynamic is evident as the characters rely on each other to intervene. Each assumes that someone else will take responsibility, resulting in no one acting.

This aligns with contemporary studies on bystander apathy, which reveal how social and psychological factors discourage intervention in public crises. Fear of social judgment, a desire to conform, and the ambiguity of responsibility often paralyze witnesses, even when action is clearly needed. In *Lights Out*, the characters' paralysis mirrors these findings, illustrating how group dynamics can erode individual moral accountability. The play's critique extends beyond the characters to a societal level, challenging audiences to reflect on their own potential complicity in similar scenarios.

The Philosophical Tension Between Individual and Collective Responsibility

At its core, *Lights Out* interrogates the tension between individual ethics and collective responsibility. While Arendt's theory and Levinas's ethics focus on individual moral agency, the diffusion of responsibility highlights the challenges of navigating ethical behavior in a group context. The characters' moral failure stems from their inability to reconcile these conflicting dimensions of responsibility. They remain trapped in a collective mindset that absolves them of individual accountability, underscoring the ethical dangers of such reliance.

The play's critique is particularly relevant in an age of increasing urbanization and social disconnection. In dense urban environments, where anonymity and detachment prevail, the ethical imperative to intervene in the face of violence often gives way to indifference. *Lights Out* challenges its audience to confront this moral inertia, urging a reevaluation of both individual and collective roles in addressing societal violence.

Broader Implications and the Politics of the Gaze in *Lights Out*

The themes explored in *Lights Out* transcend the narrative confines of the play, shedding light on pervasive societal issues. The normalization of gender-based violence and the culture of voyeurism depicted in the play are not limited to its specific context; instead, they reflect systemic patterns entrenched across cultures. The feminist critique embedded in the play resonates with contemporary movements such as #MeToo, which challenge the systemic silencing of women and demand accountability not only from perpetrators but also from passive bystanders. Additionally, the politics of the gaze, as theorized by Laura Mulvey, provides a compelling framework to understand how the play critiques patriarchal structures. By implicating the audience as passive witnesses, playwright Manjula Padmanabhan

transforms the theatrical experience into a moral and ethical confrontation with societal indifference.

The Normalization of Gender-Based Violence

At its core, *Lights Out* critiques the normalization of gender-based violence, a phenomenon deeply embedded in patriarchal societies. The play's depiction of characters who remain silent and inactive while witnessing violence against a woman reflects broader societal attitudes that trivialize or ignore such acts. This normalization perpetuates a culture of impunity, wherein perpetrators are rarely held accountable, and victims are often silenced or dismissed. In this way, the play serves as a microcosm of the larger societal failure to address gender-based violence effectively.

Contemporary feminist movements, such as #MeToo, underscore the urgency of dismantling these cultural norms. By amplifying the voices of survivors and exposing systemic patterns of abuse, these movements challenge the silence that *Lights Out* critiques. The parallels between the play's themes and the goals of #MeToo highlight its relevance in addressing ongoing struggles for gender justice. The characters' inaction mirrors the societal complicity that these movements seek to dismantle, urging audiences to recognize their own potential role in perpetuating or combating such systems of oppression (Mulvey 16).

The Culture of Voyeurism and Ethical Disengagement

The play also critiques the culture of voyeurism, wherein acts of violence or suffering become spectacles rather than calls for intervention. The characters in *Lights Out* exemplify this voyeuristic tendency by observing the violence but failing to act. This dynamic reflects broader societal patterns, where individuals often consume images or narratives of violence through media without engaging meaningfully with the underlying issues.

Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze provides a critical framework for understanding this phenomenon. Mulvey argues that the gaze—whether cinematic, artistic, or societal—is often structured by patriarchal norms that position women as objects of observation rather than agents of their own narratives (Mulvey 18). In *Lights Out*, Padmanabhan subverts this concept by positioning the audience as complicit voyeurs. Through the metatheatrical device of making the audience witness the characters' inaction, the play disrupts traditional passive spectatorship, compelling viewers to confront their own ethical disengagement.

This critique of voyeurism extends beyond the theater, resonating with the ways in which contemporary media often sensationalize violence against women without addressing systemic causes. The audience's discomfort in watching the events unfold in *Lights Out* mirrors the unease that arises when media coverage of violence fails to translate into meaningful action. Padmanabhan's use of the gaze thus transforms the play into a call for accountability, urging audiences to move from passive observation to active engagement.

The Metatheatrical Element and Audience Implication

One of the most powerful aspects of *Lights Out* is its metatheatrical approach, which implicates the audience in the characters' moral failure. By positioning the audience as witnesses to the events on stage, Padmanabhan blurs the line between the fictional world of the play and the real-world ethical dilemmas it represents. This strategy forces viewers to reflect on their own responses to violence and injustice. Are they, like the characters, passive observers? Or do they take action when confronted with ethical challenges in their own lives?

Mulvey's analysis of the gaze further enriches this metatheatrical critique. By framing the audience's gaze as a parallel to the characters' inaction, Padmanabhan underscores the shared responsibility of witnesses, whether onstage or off. The discomfort this creates is intentional, designed to provoke introspection and, ideally, a commitment to change. This interplay between audience and narrative enhances the play's impact, transforming it from a passive viewing experience into an active moral interrogation.

Broader Societal Implications

The implications of *Lights Out* extend beyond the theater, addressing systemic issues such as patriarchy, urban apathy, and the ethical responsibilities of witnesses. The play challenges the audience to recognize how societal norms and structures perpetuate violence and silence. Its critique of voyeurism and the gaze is particularly relevant in a digital age where social media often amplifies images of violence without fostering meaningful engagement. The act of watching, whether in a theater or online, becomes a moral act when it leads to awareness and action. Padmanabhan's work thus aligns with feminist calls for accountability, urging individuals and societies to confront their complicity in maintaining systems of oppression.

Conclusion

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* is a powerful indictment of societal apathy and the normalization of violence against women. Through its exploration of silence, gendered power dynamics, and the ethics of witnessing, the play exposes the mechanisms that enable moral paralysis in urban societies. By integrating feminist theory, psychoanalysis, sociological perspectives, and ethical discourse, this paper highlights the enduring relevance of the play in addressing systemic indifference to gender-based violence.

The analysis underscores the need for a shift in societal attitudes, advocating for greater individual and collective responsibility in the face of violence. *Lights Out* not only critiques the failings of its characters but also challenges its audience to confront their own complicity, making it a timeless and essential work in the discourse on gender, ethics, and urban sociology.

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