



ARTIVISM AND RESISTANCE: A STUDY OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN SELECT PROTEST PLAYS

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Abstract: The paper attempts to comprehend the complex relationship of art and activism through the medium of political theatre or the theatre of protest. The plays which are included in the purview of the study are *Lights Out* (1984) by Manjula Padmanabhan and *Nirbhaya* (2013) by Yael Farber. The plays break the silence over the issues of sexual violence and rape and can be marked as instances of unapologetic expressions of resistance and self-identity through performing arts. The plays written by women playwrights portray the grim realities of women as victims of sexual violence and body politics in the Indian social scenario. Protest and emancipation is aimed at by employing innovative methods in content and structure of the play.

Keywords: Artivism, protest theatre, sexual violence, rape culture, resistance.

Bertolt Brecht says, “Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.” Art, with time, has stepped into new contours apart from its aesthetic function. Art is no more just for art’s sake. ‘Artivism’ is the new approach to channelize social change where art connects with activism. Art becomes the political tool and the voice of dissent and creative resistance. Artivism explores the politics of art and the aestheticism in protests. The 21st century hearkens to the alarming need raised by art to challenge the established social structures and the perils of such institutions which lays dominance of one over the other. Activism which is

understood as an exclusive political activity has broken its age-old barriers adopting contemporary methods to invite social change. Art which was earlier considered rarefied seeped into the common populace, reflecting the surroundings the individual lives in and resisting the conventions of hierarchy and discrimination. This change became visible in every art form such as literature, theatre, painting, cinema, music, dance, graffiti and different platforms on social media, all of which performed its political function too. Art continues to express its dissent and protest against social evils.

The Indian feminist theatre spearheaded by likes such as Mahasweta Devi, Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta incessantly raised questions of gender inequality and the hypocrisy of Indian society and culture in its approach to man and woman. The paper attempts to study how theatre performs as a space to protest against sexual violence by treating the sensitive issue of 'gang rape' in select plays which include Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out!* (1986) and Yael Farber's *Nirbhaya* (2013). The study tries to understand 'rape culture' in Indian society and how the medium of performing arts by female playwrights becomes an alternative discourse on sexual violence.

Manjula Padmanabhan is an Indian English playwright who has made impeccable contributions to Indian feminist theatre. The winner of the Greek Onassis Award in 1997 for the play, *Harvest*, Manjula Padmanabhan has other famous works to her credit such as *Lights Out!*, a play; a collection of short stories titled *Kleptomania* and other books that include *Escape*, *This is Suki!*, *Double Talk*, *An Upbeat Story*, *Body in the Backyard* and *Getting There* which is a fictionalized memoir.

This paper studies Manjula Padmanabhan's play, *Lights Out!* that discusses the sensitive issue of 'gang rape' and was first staged in 1986 by Sol Theatre Company at Prithvi Theatre in Mumbai. The play *Lights Out!* which is based on an eye witness account of the real incident that took place in Santa Cruz, Mumbai in 1982, is a stark depiction of sexual violence faced by women in India and the attitude of the educated middle class towards the violent act. The playwright succeeds in providing the readers and the audience with realistic theatrical experience employing the Brechtian distancing effect. *Lights Out!* is a critique of the male chauvinism and hypocrisy in domestic and public spaces and the social class system prevailing in India on the pretext of the gruesome crime of rape.

The plot of the one act play unravels in the apartment of an upper middle class couple, Leela and Bhasker. Leela is at the verge of being hysteric and is extremely disturbed by the screams and cries that comes from a nearby building which is under construction. She is enraged over Bhasker's inaction in informing the police about the recurring act. Leela's character too remains dependent on Bhasker for a decision. She though not indifferent to the brutality, is reluctant lodge the complaint so that the crime shall not affect her or her family in any way. She shuts her children in around the time when the molestation is expected. She puts the lights out at her home fearing the consequences. Bhasker rejects her idea of calling the police as 'rubbish' and asks her to shut her ears from the voices.

Bhasker's friend Mohan is yet another representative of the Indian masculine construct who shrugs off Leela's concern by isolating the issue as 'poor attacking the poor' or as a religious practice which need not be addressed in a secular nation. The men do not accept the truth that a woman is being victimized and tortured by a group of naked men. They also mock Leela's friend's opinion to take action. Another character of the play, Naina makes the much needed turn to the

tone of the play. She identifies the crime as gang rape, till then which was a spectacle of religious performance for the men. They argue on physical attack on the perpetrators which can be observed as another means to display their macho power and the suppression of the rational opinions of the women. The play continues in inaction while the men are debating the effective way to overpower the molesters.

The play in every turn bares open the male hypocrisy and several layers of social issues doubled by gender based violence in urban Indian setting. The characters of Bhasker, Mohan and Surinder are images of a long held patriarchal lineage and superiority. The position of women in the domestic and public space is determined by the men. Leela is confined to the walls of her home and tamed in the name of love by Bhasker. Whereas the male characters criticize another character referred in the play named Sushila Leela's friend, for her alertness on taking action against the crime and for being socially committed. The men give remarks on the susceptibility and weakness of women in handling issues such as violence and rape. The conversations between Bhasker and Mohan reveal their attitude to women.

Bhasker: My Leela is very sensitive!

Mohan: Oh, I understand- after all, it's hardly the thing for a woman!

The male characters show the tendency to mark the blame upon the victims, especially the women for such crimes.

Bhasker: Funny, how it is most often women who become possessed...

Mohan: They are more susceptible...

Bhasker: The weaker sex, after all...

The treatment of the crime of ‘gang rape’ in the play requires a thorough discussion. The play does not explicitly enact the visual presentation of the appalling crime. The intensity of the molestation and rape is built through screams, cries and other verbal expressions. The men describe the grip of the naked men over the woman. The play presents a picture in which the men normalize sexual violence. The theme of visibility is interpreted in different ways by the characters. While Leela comments that if one comes across such scenes one should act to stop the crime. Seeing makes the viewers responsible to analyze the situation and act as required.

Leela: Sushila said- if you can stop a crime, you must- or else you’re helping it to happen...

Whereas the men capture a comfortable bird’s eye view of the crime from their windows and engage in discussions about the ‘spectacle’. The horrifying violent crime of rape is referred to as a spectacle and becomes a subject of male gaze. The men derive voyeuristic pleasure from the sight to the extent that they decide to photograph the crime.

Mohan: Hey, come on! Any newspaper! Pictures like these, even the foreign press would snap them up- I’m telling you, we’d make a lot of money- after all, how often does anyone see authentic pictures of a gang rape in action?

Bhasker: You’ve got a point- such pictures must be very rare...

“Feminist scholars, practitioners and activists pejoratively refer to a ‘rape culture’ as the social, cultural and structural discourses and practices in which sexual violence is tolerated, accepted, eroticized, minimized and trivialized.” (Powell and Henry 2). *Lights Out!* exposes the urban Indian middle class as a site of rape culture. The male characters see the victimized

woman as a whore who has lost her right to be a woman. The playwright effectively conveys the wrong notions held by the men and asserts the act as gang rape which involves coercive sex.

The play emerges as a protest against the male hypocrisy and the physical vulnerability of women which become palpable in the rebellion of the female characters. *Lights Out!* is a play that travelled ahead of its times or rather a play that gave a foresight into the gross realities of the dystopian age that was yet to come.

This paper also tries to study the representation of sexual violence in the play *Nirbhaya* (2013) written and directed by Yael Farber and examines the play's element of resistance and protest. The play is based on the true incident of the 2012 Delhi gang rape that shook the conscience of the nation and as well as gained attention around the world. *Nirbhaya*, meaning fearless in Hindi, was the pseudonym given to the victim of the crime which went on to become the symbol of strength in the fight against rape and other modes of sexual violence. The play, first performed in 2013 at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe was an unsettling performance that urged the spectators to become spec-actors in order to break the silence over such violent acts. Farber in an interview says, "I'm a theatremaker. I want to trigger things. I want people having fierce conversations in the bar afterwards, understanding something better or seeing things differently. Opening up, waking up."

The play is presented in the form of a documentary drama. The play can also be categorized as an example for testimonial theatre and human rights theatre. *Nirbhaya* is crafted in finesse in terms of its writing, techniques and its visual treatment. The cast includes five female characters and a single male character. Each female character of the play recounts their harrowing personal experience of violence which adds to the disturbing nature of the play. They all have been victims

of different forms of gender based violence which are rape, marital rape, abuse from family and attack in the name of dowry. The stage setting is minimal with a number of rusting bus seats to resemble the gang rape incident. The crime is treated with the close affinity to the real incident revealing the horrifying nature of the attack. The testimonies are effective in developing the needed tension of the play adding to exposing the widespread instances of violence faced by women in India in private and public spaces.

The victimized body becomes an effective tool for expression and resistance through theatre. The play lends the appearance of a physical poetry portraying hard hitting truths of violence and misogyny. The raised hand used several times in the play becomes the sign of protest. *Nirbhaya* reverberates with the appeal to break the silence and make the voices heard. Poorna Jagannathan, member of the cast says, “Silences are what make us complicit in the violence.” By keeping silent over these immediate issues, we are in one way aiding the perpetrators.

The victim of the gang rape in Delhi, the 23 year old student, who was forced and raped in a bus for hours, beaten and left on the way with little life succumbed to her injuries two weeks later. The incident invited immediate reactions and street protests all over India. The impact of the horrifying crime necessitated an urgent examination into the role of several social institutions. Art and its commitment towards shaping the minds of the masses for developing critical thinking and representation of the different faces and phases of the society is channeled effectively through Yael Farber’s play, *Nirbhaya*. The event also raised the need to relook at the processes of judiciary and the punishments for such vicious crimes.

The plays become the medium for resistance and challenging this rape culture by addressing the causes of sexual violence and disrupt the existing norms of masculinity, sexuality,

gender and violence. Gender inequality and imbalanced gender relations are the underlying causes for sexual violence. The play leaves the readers and audience with the realization of the need to subvert the primary ideas of rape culture that it is primal for man to show his physical dominance over woman and a woman is vulnerable to victimization. It is time that we rewrite sexual violence faced by women as 'men's violence against women' as in the headlines we come across. 'Woman raped' needs to be replaced by 'Man rapes woman'. Theatre has significantly contributed to draft an alternate discourse on gender inequality and sexual violence with its reach to the masses in the most realistic form.

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