

A sensitive writer of any age or country never avoids the serious issues of his or her age. In Indian writing in English, Manjula Padmanabhan emerges as a sensitive writer who aims at presenting the realistic problems instead of portraying the romantic, fanciful notions. The contemporary Indian English playwrights are preoccupied with the notion of projecting the social and political realities of the times. Manjula Padmanabhan is among these fewest contemporary dramatists who have made a fruitful contribution to the theatrical development in the country. As Vinod Bala Sharma, in the essay "Indian English Drama: An Overview" remarks, Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan must be studied as two outstanding playwrights who belong to another category."¹ Women writers have contributed to the development of Indian writing in English and taken it to the respectable position. The credit for the progress of Indian English literature goes to a good number of women writers. Dr. M. F. Patel writes:

Women writers in India are moving forward with their strong and sure strides, matching the pace of the world. We see them bursting out in full bloom spreading their own individual fragrances. They are considered for their originality, versatility and the indigenous flavor of the soil that they bring to their work. Yes, they are our women writers. Writers first, I must insist. Gender is only incidental...but one must admit, it does spice up their work.²

The focal point of the women writers is largely the prevailing conditions and the problems of women. They aim at bringing out the plight of women in the present

¹ Sharma Vinod Bala, Indian English Drama: An Overview. *Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama*. Ed. Neeru Tandon. New Delhi. Atlantic Publication. 2006. 26. Print.

² Sharma, S.C., Shweta Bakshi, *Studies in Indian Women Writers in English*. New Delhi. A.K. Publication. 2009. 93. Print.

time. Thus, feminism is the major concern of the present era. Emancipation of women from the long established cycle of oppression of patriarchy is the most debatable topic in Indian English literature. Efforts are made on political as well as socio-cultural levels to protect the rights of women and to check their exploitation in the name of male hegemony. In spite of all these efforts, women suffer incessantly under the existing social code of conduct. They are raped, murdered, assaulted physically mainly for no fault of their own. The women writers intend to highlight the causes behind the violence against women. Manjula Padmanabhan is one of these women dramatists who expose the ugly picture of the society and its indifference towards the sufferings of women.

The play *Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan exposes the violence against women. It is based on an eyewitness account; the incident took place in Santa Cruze, Mumbai in 1982. A group of urban middle class people watches brutalization of a woman in a neighbouring compound but fails to perform any meaningful action. About this play, R. N. Rai, in his essay *Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama*, remarks:

In her another play *Lights Out*, she draws our attention to the heart rendering screams of a woman, Leela which destroy the fabric of domesticity of a middle class couple. Women face violence in many aspects of their daily life. This violence is multi-faceted. It is not merely physical but more often mental and emotional. It is deeply complex,

subtle and indirect, hard to recognize and much more difficult to overcome.³

The play opens, revealing the drawing-dinning area of a sixth floor apartment of a building in Bombay, inhabited by a middle class family. The focal point of the space is a large window suggesting the roof top of the neighbouring building. The building is under construction with walls still not distempered and windows without glasses. The building has a chowkidar but not the owner of the building. Some suspicious activities of gang rape have been going on at least for a week but no one takes any action to stop the crime going on in the building. The bizarre sounds of a woman is heard in the third and last scene in the play. The sound is truly ragged and unpleasant. The sound begins with distinct words: "let me go! Help me!" and it ends into general screaming, sobbing. The screaming makes no difference for Bhaskar and Mohan.

The dramatist's purpose is to highlight man's growing indifference towards his social commitments. Social apathy has become a common characteristic, especially of the newly grown rich middle class people. They remain engrossed in their life so much that they get no time to think deeply about their surroundings. Even if they think, they do not want to interfere with the incidents, taking place around them. They have become indifferent towards the events of their surroundings. Similarly in the play, the characters waste their time in discussing about the crime but do not have the courage to stop it. Manjula Padmanabhan's purpose in the play is mainly to highlight this social apathy, especially amongst the members of middle class society.

³ Rai, R.N., Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama. *Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama*. Ed. Neeru Tandon. New Delhi. Atlantic Publication. 2006. 22. Print.

The most famous play of Manjula is *Harvest*. It deals with one of the most unusual theme i.e. organ selling. M. K. Naik makes an observation on recent Indian English Drama with special reference to the plays of Manjula Padmanabhan:

Manjula Padmanabhan created history when her play *Harvest* (1998) won the first prize in the first Onassis International Cultural Competition. This is the first time that an Indian English dramatist has won an honour abroad. *Harvest* is a tautly constructed futuristic play, a frightening vision of a cannibalistic future, in which the sale of human organs has become all too common.⁴

This screen play *Harvest* deals with the first and the third world countries. It is a futuristic play that throws light on the desperation and the survival of a man and his family to sell organs via an agency to someone in the first world for a paltry amount of money. The play consists of the third world donors and the first world receivers. We see the first world receiver and organ purchaser Ginny, whose body is never present on the stage, but visible only on a screen. The four Indian donors belong to the same household: Om, his wife Jaya, Om's mother, referred to as Ma and Om's younger brother, Jeetu. Om, the main character in the play tries to protect and provide for his family. It shows how poverty can compel a man to go to any extent to earn his livelihood. In the play, the character Om is willing to exploit himself as well as his own people in order to live a comfortable life.

Manjula Padmanabhan has again targeted the social evils in her another play *Hidden Fires*. This play was written by Manjula on the request of Jayant Kriplani, Director of the play, who was extremely disappointed by the turbulence and violence

⁴ Das, Bijay Kumar, *Post Modern Indian English Literature*. New Delhi. Atlantic Publishers. 2006. 129. Print.

as the result of the riots in the country. In the play, he states the reasons behind this play, “when I saw the first riots in 1992 in Bombay I felt completely helpless. However powerful you are, or well known you are, or well networked you are, you feel this sense of helplessness because no one is doing anything.”⁵ It makes the purpose of writing this play very clear that “this is a very small way of showing my anguish at what’s happening”⁶.

Padmanabhan has made an experiment in her dramatic art that she has written *Hidden Fires* in the form of monologues. In these monologues, she brings out the disastrous results of violence and riots in the nation. Each monologue highlights different aspects of violence. She raises a number of questions regarding violence. The purpose of the dramatist is to bring out the futility of violence. Alka Saxena writes about this play:

Through *Hidden Fires*, Manjula Padmanabhan attempts to come to grips with the violence of our times. *Hidden Fires* comprises five powerful hard hitting monologues in which the playwright takes head on issues of violence, intolerance to others and narrow concepts of community and nation.⁷

Hidden Fires was staged and directed by Arvind Gaur of Asmita Theatre in August 2004 in New Delhi. In response to the cause which prompted him to pick up Manjula Padmanabhan’s work for solo production, he says, “At a time when our society by and large is in flux-with a spate of sectarian violence hitting hard at its

⁵ Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Hidden fires*. Calcutta. Seagull Publication. 2003. vii. Print.

⁶ *Ibid.* x. print.

⁷ Saxena, Alka. ‘It’s a Bloody Stage’ *Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama*. Ed. Neeru Tandon. New Delhi. Atlantic Publication. 2006. 29. Print.

heart strings, I could not stop believing in the hard hitting monologues in *Hidden Fires*.”⁸

As a social critic, Padmanabhan takes up the unusual and controversial issues in her plays. she focuses on every aspect of the problem and exposes the follies and response of the people towards the existing problem. Each play deals with a different issue or theme but the purpose of the dramatist is to present the real picture which induces the viewer to think over sincerely what is shown on the stage.

The play *Lights Out* exposes the hypocrisy of the urban middle class society and its indifferent attitude towards the crime, going on in the surroundings. Leela, wife of Bhaskar is seen complaining about the crime happening in the neighbouring building. She persistently requests her husband to call the police to settle the matter but he avoids the idea by saying that they should not bother about these little offences. He reacts coldly and calls her idea of calling police ‘Rubbish’. Instead of fulfilling his duty as a social being, he suggests to Leela a number of ways to avoid the crime, “Leela, the thing to do is not let them disturb you like this. Pretend they’re not there...”⁹ Through indifference of Bhaskar, the dramatist exposes the neglect of duty of a social being in these miserable condition.

Bhaskar rejects the idea of calling the police because he does not ‘want to stick my neck out’ as ‘who has the time for all this.’ It shows that people have become so self centered and engrossed in their life that they do not want to pay any heed to such crimes. They intentionally want to forget their social responsibility and do not bother to complain about the immoral activities to the authorities. Instead of

⁸ Saxena, Alka. ‘It’s a Bloody Stage’ *Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama*. Ed. Neeru Tandon. New Delhi. Atlantic Publication. 2006. 30. Print.

⁹ Padmanabhan, Manjula. ‘Lights Out’ (1986) from *Lights On! Indian Plays in English*. Ed. Lakshmi Chandra, Hyderabad. Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages. 114. Print.

performing their duty, they justify their behavior by giving excuses when others are not worried regarding these problems 'so why should we'. They themselves avoid their duties as social beings and blame others for not fulfilling their duties well. Bhaskar represents such people, "what about the owners of that building? Really it's their responsibility..."¹⁰ Manjula believes that the growing indifferent attitude of the people is the major cause of the increasing rate of crimes in the society.

The selfish and indifferent attitude of people can also be seen in the play *Harvest*. The anthropologist Nancy Scheper Hughes notes that "wealthy but ailing patients in the first-world are increasingly turning to healthy if poverty-stricken populations of the third-world in order to procure 'spare' body parts."¹¹ It is another example of the exploitation of the third world bodies that global capitalism gives rise to. The human organ cannot be taken as equal to the other objects produced by the third world for the first world because the organ is not a product of the laboring third world body. The organ is not produced like other commodity by the third world but extracted from it.

In the play, the organ selling emerges as a source of making more money that the poor people can never earn through years of toil and labour. It is one of the best means of making money to overcome poverty. Om, the main character in the play, passes the medical tests at Interplanta and has been decreed an eligible, healthy candidate for selling the rights to his entire body to an anonymous buyer in the United States. Through his confused feelings about signing such a contract, Padmanabhan portrays the complex nature of despair and hope in the character. At first, he expresses intense happiness, "we'll have more money than you and I have

¹⁰ Padmanabhan, Manjula. 'Lights Out' (1986) from *Lights On! Indian Plays in English*. Ed. Lakshmi Chandra, Hyderabad. Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages. 115. Print.

¹¹ Pravinchandra, Shital. *The Third World Body Commodified*. <eSharp Issue 8 Un/Worldly Bodies>

names for!, he says to Ma proudly. Who'd believe there's so much money in the world?"¹² when his wife expresses her dissatisfaction for what he has done, he becomes defensive, "you think I did it lightly. But...we'll be rich! very rich! Insanely rich! But you'd rather live in this one small room, I suppose! Think it's such a fine thing-living day in, day out, like monkeys in a hot-case - lulled to sleep by our neighbours' rhythmic farting...and starving."¹³ When Jaya accuses him of making the wrong choice, he makes the reason clear behind taking such a serious decision which was not made of his own free will:

Om: I went because I lost my job at the company. And why did I lose it? Because I am a clerk and nobody needs clerks anymore! There are no new jobs now- there's nothing left for people like us! Don't you know that?

Jaya: you're wrong, there are choices- there must be choices-

Om: huh! I didn't choose. I stood in queue and was chosen! And if not this queue, there would have been other queues...

This conversation clearly brings out the adverse effect of advanced technology as the machines have replaced the man. The large number of people are unemployed because their works are done by machines. The technology has caused the development and progress of the country on one hand and on the other, it has led to unemployment. The poverty can force a man to do anything to make money. Om's judgement is totally based on the desire of the unlimited wealth.

¹² Padmanbhan, Manjula. *Harvest*. New delhi. Kali for Women. 1998. 11. print

¹³ Ibid. 23. Print.

The attitude of the civilized and rich class towards the poor is absolutely indifferent. It has been shown in the play *Lights Out* also. The discussion between Bhaskar and his friend Mohan is evident of their insensitive attitude towards the plight of poor women. As they converse:

Mohan: so you'd say that the victims are, by and large, poor people?

Bhaskar: definitely!

Leela:: isn't it terrible? Attacking the poor?

Mohan: well, as long as it's the poor attacking poor...you know how it is...they live their lives and we live ours.¹⁴

These plays describe the grim and tragic realities of life in which everybody is ready to take advantage of the adverse circumstances of others. In the play, *Harvest*, the human body and its living parts become a tradeable and saleable thing and one for one's own well being is ready to destroy the entire family like that of Om Prakash's. He is not able to face the problems associated with poverty like food shortage and unemployment therefore he becomes an organ donor in Interplanta services. This is a high-tech contact organization that selects physically fit donors to donate their organs to the white first world buyers, who live in constant fear of old age, accidents or the natural signs of bodily decay. The organ receivers use the body of the donor to keep them alive and healthy for a longer period of time.

In the play, *Lights Out* also, the characters desire to see the crime out of curiosity and seek pleasure out of it which is another way of taking advantage of the adverse situation of others. Bhaskar's friend Mohan reveals his interest in watching

¹⁴ Padmanabhan, Manjula. 'Lights Out' (1986) from *Lights On! Indian Plays in English*. Ed. Lakshmi Chandra, Hyderabad. Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages. 127. Print.

the live crime not due to his social responsibility but only out of curiosity. He is adamant on looking at the crime while it is going to be committed in order to prove himself to be the true and a practical observer of life. Without having any intention of helping the woman or check the crime, he makes a lot of discussion to find truly the nature of the crime. When Leela quotes her friend's remark regarding man's role as a social being, "if you can stop a crime, you must- or else you're helping it to happen"¹⁵, Mohan passes a bitter comment on the insensitivity of intellectuals, "these intellectuals always react like that, always confuse simple issues. After all what's the harm in simply watching something? Even when there's an accident in the street, don't we all turn our heads to look?"¹⁶It raises the notion of 'male gaze' that penetrates woman's private space.

As a social critic, Padmanabhan criticizes the society for several evils. As the play *Hidden Fires* exposes the futility of violence as it brings no good to the society instead causes only destruction , chaos, turbulence everywhere. She professes through different characters that the killing of uncountable people for no reason is totally inhuman and there is no way to justify this violence. It spreads hatred, fret, pain, sorrow among the common masses. As Jayant Kriplani states in 'A word from the director' in the play:

We've come to accept violence as a normal, everyday occurrence. All kinds of violence. The violence of Hindus against Muslims and vice versa, because all fundamentalists are equally contemptible. Or the violence that's being institutionalized by our government. Or the violence of poverty. So I'd like to adopt the term 'minority communtiy' to

¹⁵ Padmanabhan, Manjula. 'Lights Out' (1986) from *Lights On! Indian Plays in English*. Ed. Lakshmi Chandra, Hyderabad. Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages. 195. Print.

¹⁶Ibid. 120. Print.

describe the section to which I belong. A 'minority' that thinks secularism is good, sectarianism is bad, violence unacceptable. That peacewards is where we should be going.¹⁷

In the first monologue i.e. *Hidden Fires*, a man delivers his views who joins the group of killers in order to take revenge of the assault made on him. It shows that the riots begin with the involvement of a few people but the number increases day by day as it grows on a larger scale. The man in the first monologue gives the reason of his transformation from a common man to the murderer. He justifies his action, "when your life's in danger, you'll do anything to defend it, won't you? when your country's in danger, you'll do anything to protect it, won't you? that's what we did. Defended our selves. Saved our country. We saw fires and we- stamped them out."¹⁸

This is how, a victim turns out to be the murderer. The brutal treatment imposed on the innocent people who have no fault provokes them to adopt the same path of violence. As the man in the first monologue describes the brutal killing of his family which compelled him to become a rebel:

That's when they came to my house...they didn't even ask questions. They just began to beat me up. Then they threw me out of my house and set fire to my wife. She was not yet forty. They took away my sisters and their daughters. They strangled my son in front of me and pissed inside his dead mouth.¹⁹

These monologues refer to the Bombay riots in December 1992- January 1993 in which around 900 people died. There were 275 Hindus and 575 Muslims

¹⁷ Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Hidden Fires*. Calcutta. Seagull Publication. 2003. ix. Print.

¹⁸ Ibid. 4. Print.

¹⁹ Ibid. 6. Print.

who were killed in the riots. An investigative commission was formed under justice B.N. Shrikrishna, but the recommendations of the inquiry were not enforced. The whole city burns in the fire of rage, violence, destruction. At this crucial point of time, Manjula has highlighted an unexpected response of the politicians which is not effective in order to console the public. In fact, most of the times, the statements given by such politicians bring dissatisfaction with the government among the common mass. The dramatist has also exposed the insensitive attitude of politicians towards violence. In the second monologue 'Know the Truth', a politician issues his statement in order to console the public through a radio programme:

Telecasts and radio broadcasts from foreign news agencies MUST BE IGNORED. We ask only for little patience- after all, such disturbances are a natural part of Nation Building...so long as all our citizens avoid over-reacting when they are faced with mobs or rapist gangs,so long as they maintain patriotic silence when approached by foreign news agencies, we are certain that complete normalcy will be restored in less than half a year. JAI HIND!²⁰

It can be better understood by the dialogues of the young woman speaker of the radio programme when she introduces about the politician, "and that message was from one of our leaders, speaking from an undisclosed location somewhere in the world."²¹ It shows the negligence on the part of the government that when the country is going through such crucial time, the leaders have hidden themselves for their safety. It is the satire on the Indian politics. As in his message, the leader appeals to the public not to over react while facing mobs and gang rapes and instead

²⁰ Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Hidden Fires*. Calcutta. Seagull Publication. 2003. 13. Print.

²¹ Ibid. 13. Print.

of opposing the wrong done to them, they must maintain silence. Such type of statements from our so called political leaders gives way to the dissatisfaction and hopelessness on the part of the system and the government.

In the play *Lights Out*, the characters do not complain about the crime to the police. The cause is not only their indifferent attitude but they are hopeless on the part of police and the system. Padmanabhan has criticized the system through the characters which suggests that they do not expect the reasonable action from the police. The people avoid their social responsibility because they do not want to interfere in the matters of police as it brings trouble to them also. Moreover, they feel that police does not take interest in such petty affairs. It is evident from the dialogues of Bhaskar who, while consoling his wife Leela, says, "No, that's not enough, don't you see? If the police had to worry about things like that they'd be psychiatrists, not policemen... you never know with the police these days. They may say it's none of your business, what goes on in the next compound. After all, there's the chowkidar..."²²

Through the dialogues of Bhaskar, the dramatist expresses her own views on the police and its laws. Police generally ignores the complaint and does not take a serious action immediately. Leela gives many reasons to complain to the police but according to Bhaskar, the police would not consider any one of them as the reasons are irrational. It is clear from the conversation of Bhaskar and Leela:

Leela: you're sure we can't call the police? Just now, just once?

Bhaskar: Leela, if we called now, what would we say?

²² Padmanabhan, Manjula. 'Lights Out' (1986) from *Lights On! Indian Plays in English*. Ed. Lakshmi Chandra, Hyderabad. Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages. 115. Print.

Leela: we could tell them everything! That there's a building under construction next door and that everynight, in the compound...

Bhaskar: wait! First they'd ask us, 'what is the complaint?' and we'd have to say-

Leela: that we're frightened! That we're badly disturbed!²³

In their long discussion, none of them could make out one valid reason for complaining about such a heinous crime. They kept on making out the answers to give to the police. It is an example of proceedings of police which requires corrections. Though on the part of the characters, we cannot call it absolutely right as these are just the excuses of justifying themselves and the ways of getting rid of their responsibilities.

Apart from criticizing the police and the system, Padmanabhan also brings out the follies of human nature. She very well portrays the psyche of human beings in different circumstances. Their insensitive behaviour towards the serious problems generates the feeling of frustration as well as the sense of pity among the viewers. In the play *Harvest*, Om's mother is one of the examples. When she comes to know about the job of Om, she expresses no such regret. After knowing about the unlimited wealth, Ma is mystified: "what kind of job pays a man to sit at home?" Om tries to hide his job from his mother at first because he doesn't want her to worry but later when she knows, she seems interested only in the benefits for her. she feels extremely happy and cannot believe their good fortune as she says, "tell me again.

²³ Padmanabhan, Manjula. 'Lights Out' (1986) from *Lights On! Indian Plays in English*. Ed. Lakshmi Chandra, Hyderabad. Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages. 199. Print.

All you have to do is sit at home and stay healthy?...and they'll pay you... even if you do nothing but pick your nose all day?"²⁴

By showing Ma's continued amazement at the fact that her son will be paid for doing nothing, Padmanabhan is able to depict the extent to which poverty can vanish the sense of understanding the gravity of the situation in a person. Being an uneducated lower middle class woman, with no means of earning a livelihood, she represents a large chunk of female population which depend financially on the man forever. This gives rise to the dual personality in such a woman. She shows excessive love for the male supporting family financially and hatred towards the other dependents. Ma's words are proof of this.

On one hand, Ma addresses Om as 'my only delight' and on the other, Jaya, her daughter in law and the younger son Jeetu are abused. 'Ho-you', 'barren dog', 'pimping rascal', 'soul's disgrace' are the words she uses for them. She does not remain at all concerned about the lives of her sons. Even when the guards by mistake, take away Jeetu for his organs, Ma is interested only in watching Television.

In the play, *Lights Out*, the dramatist takes the insensitive behavior of the characters to the heights where the viewers start feeling frustrated. Mohan and Bhaskar consider the on going crime no more than a drama and begin to analyze its various parts bit by bit. They discuss about the number of people in the act involved everyday or if everyday the same people come or if their dresses are the same or to which status they belong or what kind of screams are uttered during that heinous

²⁴ Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Harvest*. New Delhi. Kali for Women. 1998. 21. Print.

act- are the sounds like 'hysteria', 'gurgly' or 'crying' or what had been their purpose after all.

The dramatist's purpose in highlighting the long discussion is to expose the so called social concern of these two friends who, on one hand, feel proud of being a part of the civilized society and, on the other, do not bother about their social responsibility. In their baseless discussion, they make a number of guesses as these acts may be some domestic fight for some private cause. Their discussion brings irritation among the viewers as they convers:

Mohan: after all, it may be something private, a domestic fight; how can we intervene?

Bhaskar: it's not likely to be anything domestic. I mean... they're all roughly the same age, I'd say, no parents, no youngsters- and hardly any conversation at all-

Mohan: really? None?

Bhaskar: we hear nothing but the screaming.

Leela: if it's domestic, we wouldn't have to interfere, would we?

Mohan: personally, I'm against becoming entangled in other people's private lives. Outsiders can never really be the judge of who is right and who is wrong.²⁵

They do not discuss the gravity of the crime, rather quickly change the direction of discussion and easily convert it into the case of domestic violence. This

²⁵ Padmanabhan, Manjula. 'Lights Out' (1986) from *Lights On! Indian Plays in English*. Ed. Lakshmi Chandra, Hyderabad. Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages. 123. Print.

shows that they deliberately avoid the situations in which they would be compelled to take some serious step. Through such a long discussion, the dramatist successfully tickles the sensibility of audience through these insensible characters. The time and energy which they seem to spend on the discussion of the crime, they would have made efforts to mitigate it and could easily get rid of it.

The playwright clearly expresses the hypocrisy of urban class society where people like Bhaskar and Mohan spend enough time to find out the appropriate words which may define the true nature of the crime but they do not get the time to call the police or other concerned authorities to check the crime. The discussion gradually shifts from one direction to other and the crime of gang rape has easily been converted to a religious ceremony, screams and cries of the victim are considered the painful screams during nose piercing and ear piercing. They say:

Mohan: but- don't you see? That would explain why no one goes to the help of the victims- because, of course, if it's something religious, no one can interfere, not even the police.

Bhaskar: that's true, of course. If it's religious, then there's no stopping the thing. Restriction of religious freedom and all that.²⁶

Meanwhile, one of Leela's friends Naina and her husband Surinder arrive at their home unexpectedly. They too get involved in the discussion and begin to interpret things on the basis of the available proofs. All this shows the male attitude towards the suffering of women. They are so insensitive about the problems of women. For them, the issues related to women are just the matter of discussion

²⁶ Padmanabhan, Manjula. 'Lights Out' (1986) from *Lights On! Indian Plays in English*. Ed. Lakshmi Chandra, Hyderabad. Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages. 127. Print.

devoid of any sense of pity or sympathy. After such a long discussion, they show their helplessness before Leela saying, “there’s nothing we can do about it. We just have to ignore it.”²⁷ With the arrival of Surindar, their line of thinking changes into another direction and they begin to find out possibilities of this act of being case of ‘exorcism’ in which the body of a woman is possessed by some evil spirit and violence is inflicted on her to push out that spirit from her body. This far fetched explanation of the simple act of rape by these men depicts their negligence and carelessness as social beings as well as their heartless attitude towards the sufferings of women.

On the other side, Leela and Naina oppose the idea as being females they can easily understand the condition of helpless woman therefore, they persistently request to call the police. Here, the playwright has depicted the special bond between the two women. It can also be understood in relation to the concept of lesbianism given by Alice Walker. As she understands the term not in context of the physical relation but as strong emotional bond. Only a woman can understand the feelings, suffering and pain of another woman. This mutual understanding brings them close to each other. As in the play, Leela is so much troubled by the screams and crying of the victim throughout the play. She complains to Bhaskar:

At first it was only at the time it was going on. Then, as soon as it got dark. Then around tea-time, when the children came home from school. Then in the middle of the day, whenever the door bell rang.

²⁷Padmanabhan, Manjula. ‘Lights Out’ (1986) from *Lights On! Indian Plays in English*. Ed. Lakshmi Chandra, Hyderabad. Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages. 136. Print.

Then in the morning, when I sent the children off to school. And now-
from the moment I wake up...²⁸

She pleads to call the police to settle down the matter from the beginning to the end but Bhaskar and others avoid her request. Leela finds it difficult to keep herself as a passive observer of a woman being molested just outside her house. The rude and loud voice dreads her continuously. The fear goes to the extent that she gets frightened of getting mad. As she says to Bhaskar, “when you were away on tour, I couldn’t sleep at night! And with all the windows shut, with all the curtains drawn, with cotton in my ears- the sound still came through! Even in the children’s room, on the other side of the house, I could hear it!”²⁹

Through the character of Leela, the dramatist throws light on the sensitive nature of female section of the society. Woman is soft hearted, emotional and very sensitive by nature. Anything appeals to her heart first. She expresses her emotions with higher intensity. This can be seen in the play *Hidden Fires* also. The violence prevailing in the country generates so much of fear in the hearts of people that they start having nightmares and take a lot of time to overcome that fear. In the second monologue, ‘Know the Truth’, a lady complains about her nightmares on a radio show. Her feelings are expressed by the host of the show as she says:

That was a young caller complaining about some recurring nightmares she has! Poor thing-she imagines that all the young women on her street have been raped and/or murdered- now isn’t that just impossible, folks? That can’t happen on our country, am I right? And now she

²⁸ Padmanabhan, Manjula. ‘Lights Out’ (1986) from *Lights On! Indian Plays in English*. Ed. Lakshmi Chandra, Hyderabad. Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages. 111. Print.

²⁹ Ibid. 112. Print.

thinks there's mob at her door! Poor thing! Oh...delusions can be terrible can't they?³⁰

The play *Harvest* also bring out the sensitive attitude of women towards the prevailing problem. It is only jaya who realizes the gravity of the decision of Om. She is not happy with his decision of organ selling and tries her best to make him understand. She also tries to make Ma understand who sees the benefit only. But everything fails and she expresses her grief in heart rendering manner:

I'll tell you! he's sold the rights to his organs! His skin! His eyes! His arse (sobs again) sold them! (holds her head). Oh god, oh god! What's the meaning of this nightmare! (sobs, to Om). How can I hold your hand, touch your face, knowing that any moment it might be snatched away from me and flung across the globe (sobs). If you were dead I could share my head and break my bangles but this? To be a widow by slow degrees? To mourn you piece? (sobs) should I shave half my head? Break my bangles one at a time?³¹

Jaya and Leela, both suffer in their own ways but their sufferings are not given any heed by their husbands. Neither Bhaskar calls the police on the request of Leela nor Om changes his decision for Jaya. It shows the status of women in their own families and society that her words and deires have no value for man. In the society, a woman does not hold the reputed position like a man.

Having this similarity between Jaya and Leela, both are different from each other. In the play *Lights Out*, Leela fails to take any sensible action. Her request

³⁰ Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Hidden Fires*. Calcutta. Seagull Publication. 2003. 15.

³¹ Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Harvest*. New Delhi. Kali for Women. 1998. 23. Print.

remains unheard and she gradually turns hysterical but the male present there remain unaffected by it. They suggest some impractical solutions to the problem like to have a face to face fight with the persons involved in the act of crime. But nobody cares about the plight of Leela.

On the other side, Jaya asserts herself in the final scene of the play *Harvest*. Om has abandoned her, having willfully chosen to give up his body to Ginny. Jaya comes to know that the actual receiver of organs is an American old man Virgil who wants Jaya's body to have his child. However, Jaya refuses to negotiate with Virgil. She is determined to lay down her own conditions. If Virgil wants her body, he must come to her in person. She says, "I know you're stronger than me, you're richer than me. But if you want me, you must risk your skin for me."³² Knowing that she cannot win against him, Virgil sends his Interplanta employees to break down Jaya's door. But Jaya has discovered "a new definition for winning. Winning by losing."³³ She resists Virgil's advances and retains her own dignity, "I'm holding a piece of glass against my throat"³⁴, she warns the frustrated Virgil. The play concludes on this unresolved note.

Light Out, as the title suggests, focuses on activities associated with darkness, both of the physical world as well as that of the mental. The darkness of the mental world is represented by the rape of a woman while that of the mind is reflected in the attitude of the people who are not only mute spectators to this horrific crime but also seem to enjoy watching it. Though the main theme of *Harvest* is about organ transplant and its abuse, the sub theme focuses on how women are treated as possessions of men who harvest future generations from their bodies but refuse

³² Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Harvest*. New Delhi. Kali for Women. 1998. 100. Print.

³³ Ibid. 100. Print.

³⁴ Ibid. 101. Print.

to give the deserving place in life. Thus the title *Harvest* is ironic in nature because it suggests production of food but in the play organs are used as food produced by the human body. In relation to Jaya also, the title is symbolic as at the end we come to know that the real target of buyer is Jaya therefore she can be taken as the harvester of human body or in other words she is forced to give birth to the child of the buyer Virgil.

Moreover, the playwright brings out another outcome of organ selling in the play. By selling organs, the donor gives the control in the hands of the organ receiver. He leads his life according to the instructions of the receiver. In the play *Harvest*, a contact module is installed in the house of Om through which the receiver Ginny communicates with the donor as well as keep an eye on the daily habits of the donors in order to ensure that the organs that will one day be hers remain healthy too. For example, when she realizes that Om's family shares a toilet with forty other Families, Ginny reacts with horror: "it's wrong, it's disgusting! And i-well, I'm going to change that. I can't accept that. I mean, it's unsanitary!"³⁵ The effect of poverty and patriarchy can also be seen where Jaya angrily wipes off her kum kum mark on her forehead saying, "my forehead burns, when I say the word sister"³⁶, when she comes to know that Om has declared her as his sister as the company demands for an unmarried donor.

In the play *Hidden fires*, the playwright is upset with the prevailing condition in the nation. She expresses her dissatisfaction with the futility of this violence where the innocent people are killed in large numbers for no valid reason. The lives of people does not have any importance. It becomes almost a game in which the life

³⁵ Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Harvest*. New Delhi. Kali for Women. 1998. 28. Print.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 22. Print.

and death are just a part of it and not more than that. The third monologue 'Famous Last Words' is the best example of it. In this, a game of guess is played where one mistake results out the death of one person. The playwright makes a comparison between riots and a game as in both, life does not have any importance.

The same idea is again projected in another monologue i.e. the last one 'Invocation' in which the dramatist expresses the idea that the people, killed in violence, are counted in numbers. The innocent people who are killed have no identity after their death. Only the number of the dead bodies is being displayed. In this last monologue, a woman calls out names of several people but the hidden idea is that she suggests:

My protest concerns the names that are missing from the public record. Do you notice how, when there's a riot, we are rarely told who died? Instead, we are given details of the property that was damaged. We are offered glimpses of who may have been responsible. But we are rarely shown the names of those who died.³⁷

The last monologue contains the message of the playwright. In a way, she summarizes her arguments in the last monologue. As she discusses different aspects of violence and its futility along with its disastrous outcomes. The closing lines of 'Invocation' are thought provoking: "in the names of those who have already died, I make this invocation. Let us be done with violence. Let those who have indulged in violence be named and punished. Let those who have died in violence be named and remembered. With this, I end my invocation."³⁸

³⁷ Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Hidden Fires*. Calcutta. Seagull Books. 2003. 34. Print.

³⁸ Ibid. 40. Print.

Thus, the plays of Manjula Padmanbhan not only expose the evils of society but also make the people perceive its evil consequences. The plays have long discussions which deepens step by step and consequently make the audience understand its gravity. In the modern world, where on one side, there is so much of progress in every field, on the other, people are losing basic values and morals. The lives are loosing its importance and money is becoming more important. The growing apathy in the society in the name of civilization has given way to the crimes and violence. The plays of Padmanbhan convey important messages and achieve successfully its aim as it certainly inspires audience not to follow the path adopted by the characters of the plays.