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Research Article

Women's Political Awakening through Silence and Resistance: A Study of Jaya and Leela in Manjula Padmanabhan's Harvest and Lights Out

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Abstract
Manjula Padmanabhan is the only writer in the field of Indian drama who wrote in English at the time when most parts of Indian stage were dominated by men and which centered on domestic realist matters. Her plays are not conformable, being set about with dystopian futurist possibilities, monstrous violence, crude displays of human barbarity. What is unique about Padmanabhan work is her ability to dramatize social and political problems by mere coincidence: family barely making ends meet in the commoditized world in Harvest (1997), or a park of affluent neighbors witnessing a woman being raped on the street in Lights Out (1986). Both plays put women in their positions as silent and compelled and unseen. But it is ironic that these women, Jaya of Harvest and Leela of Lights Out transform no speech into a speech. They do not protest resoundingly politically, but by not fulfilling the roles that the patriarchal and capitalistic structure assigns them. The present essay affirms that it is evident to note that silence in the plays by Padmanabhan does not consider passivity but take the form of political resistance that is subversive. Upon a close analysis of the particular scenes in these plays and the ones dedicated to the feminist and postcolonial thinking, we witness how Jaya and Leela continue a hypocrisy of global capitalism and middle-class voyeurism, and, therefore, acknowledge its definite feminist orientation of the political consciousness.

Keywords: Women's political, Feminist Theatre, Voyeurism and Spectatorship, Globalization and Exploitation, Patriarchal Oppression, Subaltern Voice

Introduction

Manjula Padmanabhan is one of the most important modern Indian playwrights who have carved a niche in her critical eye both in socio-political aspects specifically gender, authority and human exploitation. Her plays are commonly preoccupied with the latent brutality in patriarchal and capitalist systems challenging the ethical and emotional silence in which women exist. Harvest (1997) and Lights out (1984) are two of her most outstanding works that are an articulation of the agency and resistance of women in oppressive conditions.

Padmanabhan in Harvest has developed a dystopian view of the world in which the human body is created into a commodity in the world market. The play is built around the life of a woman Jaya trapped in the world of patriarchy and dominance of her husband and brother-in-law, who sell dignity to survive. When the men are driven by material lust and subjugation, Jaya is a symbol of strength and political realization, who does not fight back openly but through silence, irony and her unwillingness to be dehumanized.

In a similar vein, in Lights Out, Padmanabhan also tackles the lack of concern about gendered violence among the middle-class and dramatizes a scene in which urban residents are witnessing a violent attack on a woman but it does not motivate them in any way. The main female character Leela is in the contradiction between obedience to the apathy of her husband and her personal sense of righteousness. What is suppressed yet reemerging as political consciousness of women in the face of systemic violence is her silence, hesitation and subsequent voice.

Combined, Jaya and Leela are the embodiments of various aspects of the women political awakening, namely, through silence, resistance and moral disobedience. Their plight underscores why Padmanabhan is more concerned with revealing the interrelationship between gender, power, and resistance in contemporary society.

In Harvest, the man, Om Prakash, of Bombay, who is of middle-class, enters into an agreement with an American company, InterPlanta, to sell his organs. Being symbolized by a glamorous model called Ginni, the corporation seizes his family life, introducing surveillance cameras into their house and determining their eating, cleanliness, and sexual life. Since the very introduction Jaya wife of Om plays a peripheral but crucial role in this set-up. Jaya is a cynic, unlike Om, who rationale his decision by economic survival, or Ma, who is unconvinced by the abrupt materialistic pleasures. Jaya reacts to the initial announcement of a contract by Om by stuttering, unwilling to be celebratory. She goes on to tell him later bitterly: You are selling your body. Not just yours—ours. House, our privacy, our liberty. What do you consider you have done? (Padmanabhan, Harvest 18). Her words demonstrate that by selling the body of one man, she is telling the whole family that it is involved. By not applauding the so-called sacrifice committed by Om,

Jaya is in a position to question the patriarchal reasoning which determines the male economic choices as heroic. Her silence in the boasting of Om turns out to be a declaration of a system according to which human life is commoditized.

A scene is also one of the most telling when Ginni comes onto the screen of the family and gives them instructions on how to act. Ginni instructs them to take more baths and eat better and smile on the camera. Om and Ma readily obey, in order to gratify their benefactor. Jaya, however, resists. She does not smile but turns her head away. Rather than appreciating Ginni because of the food parcels, she does not say anything. This silence disturbs Ginni who questions Om, why is she so quiet? Does not she know how fortunate to her is? (Padmanabhan, Harvest 27). The silence portrayed by Jaya here is incredibly political: she does not want to accept the story about fortune and gratitude that legitimize exploitation. She points out that the panoptic system, as it has been observed by Roshni Prabhakaran, does not only require obedience but also visible demonstrations of this fact (Prabhakaran 3). By refusing to do compliance, Jaya goes against this mechanism. Her silence deprives Ginni of the pleasure of spectacle domination.

Any silence is not responsive, it is tactical. Later scenes also show a bitter reaction on part of Jayas when Ginni attempts to flirt with Om and belittle Jaya in a core manner by identifying herself with a more glamorous and Western woman. "She wants you, Om. Why don't you go? Well, then, be her pet, her doll? (Padmanabhan, Harvest 36). Her silence in earlier occasions adds more weight to such statements. Jaya is waiting until the opportune moment to euphonize with words that will demonstrate the lysting gaze of Ginni with minimal defensive measures. Silence, then is a state of time--an instrument of expressed delayedness. The fact that agency is not always loud can be supplemented when Judith Butler says that it can be a repetition which is often stylized and resignifies norms (Butler 145), that is why Jaya employs this strategy. Her limited interventions and silence re-enact her gaze; not a submissive wife, but a woman who is not willing to be consumed.

This politics of refusal is enhanced by the climax of Harvest. Ginni turns out to be no glamorous lady, he is a dying old man and he is jealous of the youth that Jaya continues to have. He tells her, "I want you. Your blood, your breath, your skin. I would like to live within you (Padmanabhan, Harvest 57). With this grotesque lust, Jaya ends her last statement: I will die because of you, the one who lives to win, will have lost to a poor, weak, and helpless woman (58). In this case Jaya recovers the very notions of weakness and helplessness as strength. She upsets the logic of exploitation by resisting to give in even to the point of death. The previous silences of hers lead to this last word of defiance. The final triumph that Jaya has achieved is her unwillingness to assimilate into the system, as Prabhakaran implies (5). Her political enlightenment is, therefore, constructed not by rebellion but by an intransigent refusal to be the obedient subject.

When Jaya is against the commodification of the body under the pressure of the global capital, Leela in Lights Out is against the normalized being in the middle classes. The play is based on a factual incident in Bombay when the people took a stand just to watch a woman being raped in a broad daylight. Padmanabhan has transformed this occurrence into an event of sort of a moral drama and made the audience confront their voyeuristic nature. In the play, Leela and her husband Mohan are able to observe the violence through their window. Mohan accepts it as an inquisitiveness and whether they should or not call the police. Even their neighbors justify their inactivity by the reason that such kind of events are not unique and unusual and nothing can be done. It is on this background of indifference that we are able to observe the silence of Leela.

In this case Bar One, Mohan calls Leela to the window, and says to her to look. She protests at a start responding, I do not wish to see. I do hear enough" (Padmanabhan, Lights Out 12). The fact that she does not want to look is opposite to how the other people are eager to look. This new silence makes her moral suspension v/s voyeurism. According to Alpna Saini, this subversion of the voyeuristic mode of the play itself where the watching in the play assumes an adjunct role in violence makes Leela not want to look when it is not an aspect of her wish. Leela does not want to be involved by not watching. Her silence here, does not imply that she is a coward but is simply composed of rejection of inside out spectacle out of suffering.

Later in the play, Leela is increasingly bothered by the reactions of the people around her. In the third scene, a neighbor gives advice to the others saying that the attack is a normal thing and they should not intervene. Leela says in a low voice, how can you say that? But how can you watch and not do anything? (Padmanabhan, Lights Out 34). The near breaking of her voice is emphasizing how the other people are morally failing. Leela has horror in her body unlike the men who intellectualize and rationalize horror through trembling, silence and gasps. Her resistance is manifested in her physical rejection to normalize violence.

The most creepy scene is in Scene Four, where the neighbors start to approach the assault as entertainment. One character even makes a joke that it is even better than a film as another character laughs. Leela is not able to laugh; she is standing in horrified silence. Upon being asked to attend, she exclaims: the majority of people do not just stand up and take pictures (42). This sentence is very important, as it reveals the theatricality of voyeurism itself. Just as viewers watch a play, the neighborhoods watch a crime. Leela remains silent and this disturbing parallel reminds the real audience of their role in it. The dramaturgy of Padmanabhan, in this case, is Brechtian: he alienates the viewer and compels him to realize his involvement in the performance. The silence

of Leela is the point that makes theatre transform into political confrontation.

The moment of awakening of Leela is the most obvious in the final scene. When the attack persists, Mohan urges them not to do anything. Leela, and at length finding her tongue, implores: We cannot sit here. It is not something that is not happening (59). Although she is powerless to prevent the violence, her realization of being a com-com plays a role in her change. She shifts to an attitude of conscious opposer, from being a silent witness to silent choice. Here the question posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, which is, Can the subaltern speak? is a lesson. Spivak believes that the subaltern women are not allowed to speak in the dominant discourses (Spivak 271). This paradox is shown by Leela not speaking: she is not able to do anything that her peers would see as a valid intervention, however, when Leela does not speak, it turns into a speech. The silence of her voice is an anti-normalization, even though those nearby cannot hear it.

Jaya and Leela thus occupy different but interconnected terrains of resistance. Jaya resists a global system that commodifies her body; Leela resists a social system that commodifies violence. Both awaken politically by transforming silence into refusal. Their strategies reflect what Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes as "situated knowledges of resistance"—small, everyday acts that disrupt oppressive systems without necessarily overturning them (Mohanty 340). Neither Jaya nor Leela leads a revolution, but both awaken to the political implications of their choices, making silence itself a weapon.

The plays also implicate the audience in these awakenings. In Harvest, spectators watch Jaya's surveillance, complicit with the gaze of Ginni. In Lights Out, spectators mirror the neighbors watching the assault. In both cases, silence on stage provokes discomfort in the audience, forcing them to confront their own silences. As Saini argues, "Padmanabhan makes the audience an extension of the onlookers, thereby denying them the moral high ground" (7). Theatrically, silence becomes contagious: Jaya's refusal to perform and Leela's refusal to laugh spread unease to the audience, awakening their own political consciousness.

Conclusion

Manjula Padmanabhan in Harvest and Lights out reveals how women can be brought to political awakening with silence and struggle. Jaya will not sell herself and hire her body and her emotions to the global capitalism of her flesh; Leela will not sell herself and objectify the violence through the powers of voyeurism. Their silences are lacks as well but other forms of being, not doing nothing but resisting. The voice and agency is something Padmanabhan avoids in the traditional sense giving us an indication of how one can utilize silence as a powerful political instrument when he is oppressed as a woman. The acting of these awakenings also makes audiences concerned about their role in systems of power through dramatizing them on the stage. In these plays, silence is never what is not spoken it is the beginning of politics.

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