

Chapter V

Grim Realities: Rape Culture and Apathy in Manjula Padmanabhan's

Lights Out

The behaviour of individuals in the public sphere is heavily influenced by the knowledge and observations they acquire within their domestic environment. The ill-treatment of women within households is consequently manifested in the public sphere, as it is a result of the indoctrination or exposure of men to such behaviour. It is important to note that violence against women does not remain confined to the private sphere, but rather extends to the public sphere through various forms such as trafficking, acid attacks, sexual harassment, and rape. The abuse inflicted upon women in the private sphere serves the purpose of maintaining power and controlling the actions of women. The same approach is employed in the public sphere to assert dominance and regulate the behaviour of women. The primary objective of men is to exert control over women and instil fear within them, thereby ensuring the preservation of their power.

The act of rape can be defined as a reprehensible and abominable transgression against an individual's bodily autonomy and fundamental human rights. It is an egregious offense that encompasses sexual violation and intrusion of an individual's body using physical force, coercion, or the absence of consent on the part of the victim. It is an intolerable offense that can cause immense and long-lasting physical, emotional, and psychological harm to the victim. Moreover, the perpetration of such a reprehensible act is not only an affront to the survivor's dignity but also contravenes society's moral and ethical standards.

Rape is a threat to women, and is the most heinous act of sexual violence to outrage the modesty of women. Rape is an atrocity against women. Although men can also be victimised by rape, it is worth noting that men commit most sexual acts perpetrated against both men and women. Furthermore, the majority of rape victims are women. India has recorded an alarming sum of 31,677 instances of rape in the year 2021, translating to an average of 86 cases daily, which represents a significant increase from the previous year, during which there were recorded 28,046 cases, and a modest uptick from 2019, during which there were 32,033 incidences of rape. These statistics have been collated and presented within the ‘Crime in India 2021’ report, published by the esteemed National Crime Records Bureau, which operates under the Ministry of Home Affairs (“India lodged”).

In *What is Rape? Social Theory and Conceptual Analysis*, Hilkje Charlotte Hänel posits that rape should be understood as a social practice. Hänel presents two primary arguments to support her claim: firstly, she contends that rape should not be viewed solely as an isolated act, but rather as a broader social phenomenon; secondly, she asserts that, usually, rape can be characterised as an “accepted practice” (130). Hänel proceeds to elaborate on her argument by providing further explanation and analysis:

Rape is some sort of fact; one (or more) person(s) an act on another person or subject that person to an act. Yet, rape is more than that. First, it is not one act, but a cumulation of diverse acts (e.g., undressing, fixating, overpowering, penetrating, and /or man more). Second, it has a specific social meaning. It is made intelligible by specific schemas that we apply to the acts. The fact that rape is only intelligible within a social structure that imposes a specific meaning onto the cumulated actions suggests that rape is not merely an act, but rather a social practice. (131)

The author agrees with the idea that rape is a social practice, which is in line with the Haslanerian perspective. Drawing from Sewell's work, Haslanger defines resources as entities that possess the potential to augment or sustain power dynamics. A rudimentary comprehension of rape could posit that rape itself functions as a resource, as it can be employed to bolster or perpetuate power dynamics over both the victim and women as a whole.

Feminists assert rape is an insidious crime that seeks to dehumanise and subjugate women. Legal scholar Leslie Francis notes, "Rape is criminal. Rape is gendered. Rape is sexual. In yet another three-word sentence, rape is Controversial" (qtd. in Smith x). Joanna Bourke, a British historian and academic, in her work *Rape: A History from the 1890s to the Present*, has rightly pointed out that rape is not a natural disaster but "it is the embodied violation of another person" (2). All these perspectives attest to the fact that rape is a serious and deeply troubling issue that must be addressed with the utmost care and attention.

The act of rape cannot be simply reduced to the exploitation of her physical body, as it encompasses a complex interplay of coercion and the assertion of male dominance. This notion is eloquently expounded by Susan Brownmiller, who posits that rape is a prerogative reserved solely for men, and represents a fundamental tool of force wielded against women. When a woman resists and struggles to escape from the heinous act, the male's ego is further intensified, as he seeks to conquer her body through force, viewing it as "the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood" (14). It is important to note that the primary objective of the male is not simply to subjugate and conquer the female, but rather to keep her in a perpetual state of fear and anxiety, thus allowing him to assume a position of unwavering authority.

In her work titled *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Susan Brownmiller confidently expounds the notion that man realises “that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times along with the user of fire and the first crude stone axe” (14 – 15). Furthermore, she affirms rape is neither less nor more than a “conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (15). The fear of rape experienced by women perpetuates their submissive status within the male-dominated society, ultimately limiting their actions within the public domain.

Cathrine Mackinnon, a radical feminist, in her work, *Toward a Feminist Theory of State*, articulates that rape is not a transgression or individual actions gone wrong but rather, it constitutes “an act of terrorism and torture within a systematic context of group subjugation, like lynching” (172). According to this definition, Women are not raped due to their deficiency but due to male power. As per Mackinnon’s assertion, the exploitation of women’s bodies is socially constructed wherein the position of being vulnerable to rape is defined socially and not biologically. She further states that “rape functions as a means to perpetuate systematic female subordination; insofar as each rape constitutes an instance of female subordination, each rape is necessarily harmful” (20).

Mackinnon asserts that rape is a manifestation of male power and cyclical subordination of women, which starts with the creation of their gender as women and is sustained through the exercise of this engendered status in rape. She cites journalist Carolyn Craven to reinforce her conceptualisation of rape: “Rape is an extension of sexism in some ways, and that’s an extension of dealing with a woman as an object” (171). Hilkje Charlotte Hänel, in her work *What is Rape? Social Theory and Conceptual Analysis*, substantiates Mackinnon’s concept by positing that “rape is a social practice which is part of a broader sexist ideology” (13).

The play *Lights Out* is based on an eyewitness testimony of a gang-rape. The central focus of the play revolves around a victim of rape, who remains imperceptible throughout the play, manifesting only through the discourse of the spectators. This play is based on the true event that occurred in Santa Cruz, Bombay, in the year 1982. The rape itself unfolds over the course of several weeks, wherein a group of ordinary individuals from the middle class observe the brutalisation of a woman within the neighbouring compound. Despite the play's primary theme being rape, it ultimately delves into the broader "social responses to violence and to issues of gender" (Padmanabhan xi).

The phenomenon of gang rape is closely associated with the concept of 'heightened masculinity' and 'masculine aggression.' In their article titled "Gang Rape: A Study in Inner-city Johannesburg," Lisa Vetten and Sadiyya Haffejee cite Benedict's perspective on gang rape. Helen Benedict, an American novelist, and journalist, suggests that "boys gang-rape for each other, in a kind of frenzied machismo, to prove themselves, to show off, to be part of a gang, or at best, out of fear of being ostracised if they don't" (32). She further argues that in acting together, the group establishes a shared understanding of masculinity and authority, which may diminish their inhibitions and attenuate feelings of accountability. This form of gang rape is commonly referred to as "fraternity gang rape" (7), as aptly expounded upon by Peggy Reeves Sanday in her seminal work titled *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus*. The word "fraternity" denotes "a group of people who share the same work or interests" ("Fraternity" 573). In this context, the word fraternity signifies that the offenders share the common objective of violating the female body and are bonded together through their engagement in sexual activity.

In this play, the perpetrators engage in the act of marginalising the victim "from her subjectivity by reducing her to a hyper visible pleasurable object available for their use

and subject to their power” (Bergoffen 41). The victim, in this case, is nothing more than a tool exploited by the offenders to ascertain and showcase their power and heterosexual desires, exploiting her one after another. The offenders strive to establish their masculinity through the subjugation of a defenceless victim, who lies helplessly, adorned in wounds, and covered in blood. The three offenders restrain the victim, “with her legs pulled apart, while the fourth thrusts his – organ – into her!” (46). Here the victim serves as an “object of desire in porno-staged acts of sexual intercourse that boys often watch together. She is the duck or the quail raised and put in place for the hunter” (Sanday 7).

Gang rape mostly takes place at night and most probably in the public sphere. The rape occurred during the night in the play, *Lights Out*, in the open area where the construction work was in progress. The perpetrators displayed a complete lack of remorse as they subjected the victim to violent acts. In her article titled “Rape as Torture: Application of the U.S. Torture Statute to the Physical and Psychological Consequences of Rape and Sexual Violence on Victims,” Lindsay Gorman asserts that gang rape entails severe physical torture including “Beating, machete wounds, burning and mutilation of the genitals, and penetration by a host of objects such as rifle barrels, chili peppers, bottles, and sticks” (3). Gang rape, particularly, is often accompanied by a considerable degree of force and brutality, resulting in severe physical harm and injury inflicted upon the victim. In the play, the victim is subjected to brutal attacks by the offenders, as revealed through the conversation between Bhasker and Mohan:

MOHAN. Earlier, I saw them actually sort of pounding and kicking – in rhythm,
almost –

BHASKER. See, they’re kicking her –

MOHAN. Yes, around the stomach and the – uh – chest and in the face.

BHASKER. And there now – they’re hitting her with their fists, aren’t they?

MOHAN. Yes, that too. (44)

Rape is an act that violates the integrity of a woman’s body. Feminist believes that the abhorrent act of rape is inextricably linked to a pervasive culture that promotes and normalises sexual violence against women. This culture, commonly referred to as rape culture, is characterised by a set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that perpetuate and condone sexual assault and harassment, and create an environment in which victims are often blamed, shamed, and disbelieved. The normalisation of rape culture in society has far-reaching consequences, as it not only affects the physical and emotional well-being of the survivors but also perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes and reinforces the power imbalances between men and women. In the work titled *Encyclopedia of Rape*, Merrill D. Smith cites the editors of *Transforming a Rape Culture*, to articulate the notion that a rape culture “is a complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women” (174). She further asserts that,

A rape culture believes that sexual aggression in men is biologically determined, rather than learned behavior. In turn, it considers women to be sexually passive and meant to be dominated by men. Consequentially, a normal sexual encounter is represented as a heterosexual man forcing himself upon a woman. Thus in a rape culture, rape is the model for most sexual activity. (174)

In the realm of sexual dynamics, rape has been posited as a manifestation of sexual desire, rather than an embodiment of power, control, and anger. It is ingrained in women to believe that men possess an inherent inclination towards sexual aggression, leading to the perception that women have to take precautionary measures to avoid being victimised.

This implies that “rape culture is one in which rape and other sexual violence against women and children are both prevalent and considered the norm” (174).

Rape culture engenders fear among women and compels them to relinquish their autonomy and prospects in order to preserve their personal security. While a man may walk alone in the midnight hours without trepidation, a woman cannot do the same. This fear robs certain joys of women, such as taking a leisurely evening walk, enjoying a cup of coffee, or visiting friends and family on their own. It is imperative to note that “this fear is more than a fear of being mugged or robbed; it is the fear of being sexually violated” (Gordon and Stephanie 2). This fear has been so deeply ingrained in the psyche of women that they have developed a self-imposed restriction, to safeguard themselves against the danger of rape and sexual assault as Patricia D. Rozee asserts in her work, *Fear of Rape*. Indeed, researchers Margaret T. Gordon and Stephanie Riger have found that one-third of women in their studies report that the fear of rape is a constant presence in their minds, even if it is not at the forefront of their conscious thoughts.

In the play, the author has clubbed the concept of voyeurism with that of sexual objectification. Voyeurism, also termed as scopophilia, entails the experience of sexual gratification by observing the private and intimate activities of others, and this phenomenon is predominantly observed in individuals who identify as masculine or male. In the drama male characters who witness the rape are depicted as deriving pleasure from the brutal act, least concerned about the pain and suffering of the victim. This highlights the male gaze towards the subject of rape. The perpetrators and male spectators derive enjoyment from the rape and are roused by the sounds produced by the victim in agony. In contrast, the victim and female spectators are struggling to evade the crime, as they do not wish for it to occur.

Bhasker invites Mohan to watch the heinous act, but Leela, his wife, fears he would frighten. Bhasker says he would enjoy the act and even “some people do...” (11). In this context, he refers to ‘some people,’ including himself, indicating that he derives pleasure from the victim’s suffering and perceives her as a sexual object. When Leela defies his ideology that “No one could enjoy such awful things! (11), her husband replies “except those involved...” (12). Here, the playwright shows that Bhasker is quite upset that he is not one of the offenders involved in the sexual activities. Whenever his wife compels him to report the incident to the police, he resists, which shows that he does not want to end the act or be interrupted by someone, which gives him immense pleasure.

Mohan and Bhasker evince an interest in observing the criminal act and derive pleasure from it. Leela, in turn, expresses her perplexity at their pleasure. She confronts and urges them to desist from their voyeuristic tendencies. Mohan retorts with a gendered remark, “oh! I understand. After all, it’s hardly the thing for a woman!” (18), insinuating the sensitivity of the feminine psyche renders such atrocities. Conversely, for men, it is a source of gratification. Mohan’s inquisitiveness compels him to inquire about the nature of the screams, whether it resembles “like a singer’s voice, high and sweet? Was it musical?” (21). Leela’s response is decidedly grim, as she characterises the victim’s screams as being “rasping, gurgling, crying” (22), evoking a sense of fear and trepidation. In contradistinction to Leela’s perspective, Bhasker posits that the rasping and gurgling emanate from the “screaming for a little while” (22) or stem from the “sheer pleasure of it!” (23). The screaming of a victim evokes fear in Leela, but Bhasker appears to be relatively unaffected by it, and in fact, he experiences a sense of gratification from it.

Every day, crime happens, but no one dares to question the assailants. They watch everything silently. Mohan and Bhasker have a deep discussion about the dresses of the victims and the offenders, and how they behave:

MOHAN. I thought, from the clothes ... ?

BHASKER. But they're not fully clothed.

MOHAN. What?

LEELA. You mean they are ...

BHASKER. Naked. They're usually naked.

LEELA. Oh, how disgusting, how terrible! To be naked in public!

MOHAN. Ah yes, I think you did mention it to me earlier. But then, where does the question of clothes arise at all?

BHASKER. They start off clothed and then begin to lose them.

MOHAN. All of them? The assailants too?

BHASKER. Well, the assailants tear the clothes off the victims and then, perhaps in the general excitement, remove their own clothes as well. (28)

In this context, the phrase 'general excitement' denotes a perspective wherein the act of brutality is not perceived as an offense but rather as a form of pornography. Mohan, for instance, exhibits a 'curiosity' to witness such a crime, and is even 'mesmerised' by it. The conversation between Bhasker and Mohan highlights their profound dismay at the offenders' apparent enjoyment of the situation, given that they themselves are not involved, and shows their apathy toward the victim. Their focus is solely on the victim's body parts, with no regard for her emotional state. They view her through a lens of sexual desire and derive amusement from her pain and Leela's sensitivity. Empathy is conspicuously absent from their perspective.

The phenomenon of sexualised gazing is always accompanied by the possibility of sexual objectification. The act of sexual objectification is characterised by the separation of women's bodies, body parts, or sexual functions from their personhood, thereby reducing them to mere instruments. In essence, "when objectified, women are treated *as bodies*—and in particular, as bodies that exist for the use and pleasure of others" (Fredrickson and Roberts 175). The practice of objectifying women's bodies perpetuates the view that women are inferior to men and reinforces gender inequality. The male characters in this play perceive the victim as a corporeal entity, a commodity, and an inanimate object. The idea of objectification is heavily influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir extensively discusses the dichotomous perspective of perceiving women as 'the Other.' In the context of a gender dichotomy, the male and female genders are perceived as opposing forces. The physical forms of men and women are depicted in distinct ways and subjected to discriminatory treatment. Simone de Beauvoir in reference to Monsieur Benda, asserts that,

A man's body has meaning by itself, disregarding the body of the woman, whereas the woman's body seems devoid of meaning without reference to the male. Man thinks himself without women. woman does not think herself without man." And she is nothing other than what man decides; she thus called "the sex," meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other. (26)

When a woman is positioned as the 'Other' in relation to a man, she undergoes a process of diminishment. Her identity as an individual is diminished, and she is reduced to a mere physical entity that can be objectified, quantified, and commodified within the

realms of the sex industry. When a woman's body is seen as an object and not as her own, she is treated sexual object to fulfil a man's desires. In her work titled *Gendered Bodies and Sexualities*, Regina Papa posits that "sexual objectification disregards the personal and intellectual capabilities of a woman and reduces her to the status of a mere instrument. A woman is spoken of or interpreted only as a body; either the whole body is objectified or body parts fetishised" (73).

The male spectators present during the incident erroneously believe that their mere act of watching does not implicate them in the crime. However, this is not true as they are also complicit in the offense. Their passive behaviour serves as a tacit approval for the perpetrators to continue their actions without fear of repercussions. This passivity is indicative of their acceptance of patriarchal norms of masculinity, which view women as inferior and powerless in the face of men. Mohan, for instance, describes the rape incident as a mere accident: "After all, what the harm in simply watching something? Even when there's an accident in the street, don't we all turn our heads to look?" (19). While accidents are unforeseeable and unintentional, rape is a deliberate act of violence that causes immense harm to the victim. The male spectators' perception of rape as an accident reflects their objectification of the victim as a sexual object rather than as a human being who is being hunted by a group of sexual predators.

In *What is Rape? Social Theory and Conceptual Analysis*, Hilkje Charlotte Hänel, refers to the viewpoint put forth by Gardner and Shute with regard to the concept of rape. According to Gardner and Shute, the fundamental flaw associated with rape stems from its inherent lack of moral sanction, specifically due to the act being characterised by dehumanising objectification. In this context, the rapist, through his reprehensible actions, reduces the victim to a mere object, devoid of agency, and treats her as a mere means to

fulfil his own desires. By employing this approach, the perpetrator effectively instrumentalises the victim, exploiting her for his own self-serving objectives.

The objectification of women is ingrained in cultural norms and perpetuated through various forms of media, which is highlighted by Manjula Padmanabhan in her play. In scene III, Mohan suggests capturing the gang rape on camera and even proposes to sell the images for a substantial sum:

MOHAN. But Bhasker, what about the pictures, huh?

SURINDER. Who would print them?

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 ...(61)

This serves to evince the inclination of the commercial industry, inclusive of magazines, films, and newspapers, to seek gain from the objectification of women. Even the two female characters, Leel and Nina, in the play seemingly acquiesce to Mohan's proposition, thereby implying their implicit endorsement of it. This demonstrates the deeply entrenched nature of patriarchal ideology in modern societies, where both men and women consume media through the lens of the 'male gaze.'

Mohan not only stops to take a mere image of the rape but also delves into the technical aspects of photography, specifically regarding zoom and angle. In this instance, the camera can be seen as a substitute for the male observer's eyes, as it scrutinises the victim from head to toe. Through this act, the camera conveniently divides the victim into fragmented parts, thereby reducing her to a mere series of dismembered parts. This, in turn, aligns with Laura Mulvey's concept "the pleasure in looking at another person as an

object” (qtd. in Walsh), which posits that the act of objectifying another individual serves as a source of gratification.

In the realm of media and artwork, it has been observed that men are often depicted with a notable emphasis on their heads, while women frequently emphasis their bodies. In their article titled “Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks,” Fredrickson and Roberts state that “it is not uncommon for magazine photographs to portray dismembered women, eliminating their heads altogether, focusing exclusively on their bodies or body parts” (176). Crawford and Unger, in their work *Women and Gender: A Feminist Psychology*, introduce the concept of androcentrism in this regard, suggesting that the “faceism” exhibited by men is, in fact, a manifestation of the “body-ism” perpetuated by women (qtd. in Fredrikson and Roberts 177). This objectification of the female body, as defined by Bartky (1990), is undeniably evident in the visual media, whereby women are portrayed solely as objects of physical allure. Manjula Padmanabhan concurs with the aforementioned statement, as substantiated in the subsequent lines:

I believe that audiences love to watch women screaming, resisting and then succumbing to their assailants. In my opinion, the sad reason that audiences enjoy watching such scenes is that they confirm deep-seated beliefs about men, women and sexuality. I believe that the vast majority of films that are supposed to be “about rape”, including those that claim to be highly critical male aggression, have the same effect as pornography. They are watched because they provide pleasure.

(xii)

Male gaze and sexual objectification of women are not only factors that manifest rape but also include victim blaming which is a common occurrence in rape culture.

Unlike other crimes such as robbery, smuggling, and murder where only the offenders are held accountable, in cases of rape, the victims are often unjustly blamed. The female victims are accused of inviting their own violation due to their behaviour, provocative clothing, drunkenness, and other factors. This unwarranted blame is a result of the socialisation of males and females' acceptance of women as a subject of sexual violation. In the play Bhasker and Mohan never utter a word against the offenders, instead, they are more conscious in defining the character of the victim. They label the victims as a "filthy woman" rather than a "decent woman" (49), and as a result, the act is not considered as rape. In this instance, the responsibility was placed on the victims to establish her innocence, rather than on the prosecutor to demonstrate the guilt of the accused.

Mohan and Bhasker assert that only promiscuous women are susceptible to rape which leads them to defame the victim by labelling her with a derogatory term, namely a "whore" (47). When Nina challenges this characterisation and asks how they arrived at such a conclusion, they justify their statement by pointing out that "of course, she's with four men at once!" (47). When Nina further questions the notion that a woman deemed a "whore" is exempt from being a victim of rape and queries: "why? A whore can't be raped? Is that the law?" (47). Mohan retorts that rape is an act of forced sex and that the prostitute's entire life revolves around sex, leaving her with nothing to lose, thereby implying that a "whore cannot be raped!" (47). Consequently, Mohan and Bhasker subscribe to the notion that "once fallen," a woman is always ready for sex. (Sanday 13).

In the play, the dramatist has posed a complex inquiry regarding the absence of rights bestowed upon prostitutes in comparison to those of ordinary women. The male spectators maintain the belief that the prostitute lacks bodily autonomy due to the nature of her profession involving sexual activity. Bhaskar, in his argument, contends that "whatever rights a woman has, they are lost the moment she becomes a whore" (48). Consequently,

he suggests that it is preferable to refrain from engaging in any action, whether it be merely observing or abstaining altogether. He questions, “why should we get involved with some filthy woman and her paramours?” (49). This perspective highlights a significant shift in the perception of female sexuality among men.

Mohan and Bhasker exhibit a lack of guilt or concern for the victim of rape, instead choosing to defame her as whore and display apathy towards her plight. Women who are victims of rape are often subjected to further victimisation due to the patriarchal dichotomy of ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ In this societal construct, a ‘good’ woman is defined as a wife, daughter, mother, or sister who lives under the protection of her husband, father, or brother. On the other hand, a woman who deviates from these established norms is labelled as a ‘bad’ woman and is seen as engaging in sexual activities and lacking in protection. According to the sociologist and feminist Kathleen Barry, “a whore is a woman reduced to her sexual utility” (qtd. in Papa 79). In this context, a whore is regarded as a sexual slave devoid of personal autonomy and the ability to make decisions.

This phenomenon of victim-blaming and defamation is a common occurrence in society, as highlighted by American author and journalist Bernard Lefkowitz in his non-fiction work, *Our Guys: Outrage at Glen Ridge*. Lefkowitz recounts the story of a group of star athletes in a picturesque suburban community who were accused and subsequently convicted of raping a mentally disabled girl. Despite the evidence against them, the community rallied behind the athletes, portraying the victim as a seductress who lured the boys into committing the heinous act. This same pattern is evident in Joyce Carol Oates’s novella, *Rape: A Love Story*, where the character Teena Maguire is brutally gang-raped and nearly killed by a group of violent young men in a park at night, in the presence of her daughter, Bethie Maguire. The gang rape is being justified by the church, embodied by

Father Muldoon, based on rumours that imply that Bethie's mother has a past of "promiscuous and reckless sexual behavior" (112).

Teena, a young mother who is a widow, is depicted as a woman who enjoys nightlife, alcohol, and the company of men. She is described as outgoing, joyful, and sexually active with multiple partners, which deviates from the traditional image of a widow in the local community. The behaviour of Teena irritates her community which makes them to believe the rapists are "good boys" and blame her. They view "the rape is considered to be the punishment she deserves for having enjoyed sexual freedom as a widow" (Vieco 158). In these three literary pieces, the victims are held accountable for challenging the patriarchal ideologies, with rape being seen as a fitting punishment for their transgressions. The culprits are never held responsible, as the community ascribes to the notion that 'boys will be boys' while girls are expected to be submissive. This underscores the societal expectation for males to retain their carnal desires, while females are anticipated to exhibit deference. In her work titled *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood and Privilege on Campus*, Peggy Reeves Sanday has rightly put forward that "while the conception of male sexuality remained the same, the conception of female sexuality became dualistic: women were either pure or promiscuous, and sexuality was either private and marital or public and prostituted. While males were expected to be as lustful as ever, proper female bore the burden of giving the new nation of a semblance of respectability" (13).

Mohan and Bhasker hold a steadfast conviction that women are susceptible to the crime of rape, as expressed in their ongoing dialogue:

NAINA. By losing their vulnerability to rape, whores lose their right to be women?

Is that what you mean?

MOHAN. Right. After all, finally, the difference between men and women is that women are vulnerable to rape ...

BHASKER. And men are not.

LEELA. Call – the – police. Call – the – police.

NAINA. (getting into the litany) And women believe they are vulnerable to rape –

MOHAN. And men do not.

NAINA. And women are decent enough to be raped ...

MOHAN. And men are not. (51)

The aforementioned lines provide evidence that women are perceived as vulnerable and “anti-ideal,” while men are seen as invulnerable and the epitome of the “human ideal.” When the invulnerable body is regarded as the ideal human form, vulnerability is consequently degraded. Invulnerability is closely associated with various attributes such as “autonomy, sovereignty, agency, power, mastery, and domination” (Bergoffen 102). On the other hand, vulnerability is linked to qualities such as “passivity, dependency, subjection, powerlessness, weakness, and victimhood” (Bergoffen 102). In this context, Mohan suggests that possessing a vulnerable body means being exposed to both the “pleasures and dangers (to the pleasures of danger) of the surprise and wonder of the unexpected – the pleasures and dangers of contingency, singularity and finitude” (Bergoffen 102).

The male characters in the play exhibit a passive response to the suffering of the victims, refraining from offering assistance or expressing remorse. This inaction reflects the themes of “Existential Dilemma” and “Social Alienation” (Nagpal and Gupta 534), as explored in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Both works illustrate how characters observe suffering without intervening or feeling guilt, emphasising a pervasive sense of

purposelessness, isolation, and an inability to effect meaningful change. Each night, the characters in *Lights Out* are confronted with the same anguished screams; however, regrettably, no measures are taken by them to alleviate the victims' pain. Their consistent inaction shows their indifference towards the victims. Their lack of action reflects a loss of courage and strength, highlighting how disconnected they are from a meaningful life. The play implies that existence may seem devoid of purpose if individuals neglect to act and foster transformation.

The act of rape is not solely a violation or exploitation of the victim's physical body, but rather a warning or threat to the entire female community, instilling a sense of fear and vulnerability. This heinous act serves to reinforce the notion that women are mere objects of sexual desire, subject to the whims and desires of men. The harm inflicted by men extends beyond the physical mutilation of the female body, as it also impacts their mental well-being. The primary objective of such acts is to instil fear and reinforce the notion that women are subservient and lack the freedom to move about freely. Rape serves as a reminder that women are viewed as sexual objects by men, who hold a position of dominance and power over them. While the physical wounds may heal, the emotional scars left behind are indelible, serving as a constant reminder of their position in society.

The playwright illuminates this phenomenon through the character of Leela, who serves as a witness to rape rather than a victim. Despite not experiencing the full extent of trauma that a victim may endure, Leela still experiences a profound sense of "terror, rage, and despair," a condition which psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman termed as "traumatic countertransference" or "vicarious traumatization" (140). Through Leela's character, the writer exposes the ways in which rape, sexual violence can traumatise women, leaving them in a state of darkness, discomfort, and unrest. The traumatic event disrupts the ordinary course of life, affecting both the body and mind. As Herman notes, the threat of

such an event initially triggers the sympathetic nervous system, leading to an adrenaline rush and a heightened state of alertness, while also evoking “intense feelings of fear and anger” (34). Leela remains in a constant state of alertness, sensing the presence of danger. In psychology, this stage is called “hyperarousal”, “which is the first cardinal symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, the traumatized person startles easily, reacts irritably, to small provocations, and sleeps poorly” (35).

Leela perpetually resides in a state of fear, which manifests in symptoms of depression and anxiety. She experiences a sensation that her “insides are knotted up” (6). But her husband’s neglect of her emotions intensifies her pain. However, her husband’s disregard for her emotional well-being exacerbates her distress:

LEELA. (suddenly) You don’t care, do you!

BHASKER. Of course I do –

LEELA. You don’t care what I feel, what I go through every day!

BHASKER. (putting the paper down) Darling, I –

LEELA. I feel frightened. All through the day, I feel tense – (6)

The sensation of security arises as a result of the absence of threat, enabling the individuals to establish an emotionally stable environment for themselves. Leela experiences a sense of insecurity within her own dwelling, which triggers her apprehension. Whenever the doorbell rings, she hesitates to open it, fearing an impending attack. Leela’s fear stems from her guilt, as she believes herself powerless to aid victims and bring offenders to justice. The combination of Leela’s powerlessness and her guilt regarding her inability to rescue the victim engenders a state of restlessness within her.

This sentiment is effectively conveyed through the conversation between Leela and her husband:

LEELA. That we're part of ... of what happens outside. That by watching it, we're making ourselves responsible.

BHASKER. (finds his paper) Rubbish!

LEELA. That's what I said at first! But then ...

BHASKER. (starts reading) Sushila's a fool.

LEELA. We don't even really watch it, do we? I mean, I don't. (pause) But ... you do! You watch it! (7-8)

Due to maladaptive coping mechanisms in response to trauma, Leela exhibits a distinct lack of interpersonal communication skills, which becomes apparent in her interaction with Bhasker during scene one:

LEELA. (sits beside him) Did you ... do it?

.....

BHASKER. (absorbed in his paper) MM.

LEELA. (stares at him, then buries her face in her hands) No! You didn't?

BHASKER. What?

LEELA. Again?

BHASKER. Again what?

LEELA. How could you forget? (lifts her head to stare at him)

.....

LEELA. (TEARFULLY) I wish I could!

BHASKER. Could what?

LEELA. Forget! (5)

Instead of engaging in open and honest discourse, she consciously opts for silence and deliberately avoids discussing her emotional state. Notably, she relies solely on short phrases rather than effectively expressing her thoughts through complete sentences. Furthermore, Bhasker's lack of proactive measures to intervene in the criminal act and his emotional neglect deeply distressed Leela, leading her to convey her discontent through hesitant and fragmented utterances. Additionally, she develops a habitual tendency to isolate herself from others, both physically and emotionally. This is evidenced by her deliberate decision to confine herself and her children to a far room within the house, to shield them from external stimuli. She explicitly articulates her decision to "never let the children out any more" (5). It becomes evident that Leela consciously chooses to withdraw from social interactions, imposing this isolation not only on herself but also on her children. This behaviour serves as a clear indication of her inability to cope with the traumatic situation and her adoption of negative coping mechanisms to navigate through the distressing event.

The fear that has been instilled within Leela due to the incident has caused her to retreat into a state of darkness and isolation. To shield herself from any perceived threats, she takes measures such as covering the windows and turning off the lights during the evening, effectively cutting herself off from the outside world. This deliberate avoidance of communication with others is a manifestation of her attempt to distance herself from any potential harm. The incident has left her deeply disturbed, resulting in her aversion to socialising and her reluctance to extend invitations to anyone to her house. Upon learning

of Bhasker's arrangement to host Mohan in their residence for the evening, she experiences an abrupt surge of anxiety, accompanied by a momentary pause. The conversation reads thus:

BHASKER. (takes a deep breath and plunges ahead) Well, anyway. There's someone coming tonight.

LEELA. What? You – you've called someone?

BHASKER. Yes, Mohan.

LEELA. Mohan? Mohan who?

BHASKER. Mohan Ram, remember him? From Delhi?

LEELA. Who? Oh ... your Delhi friend! (pause, then sudden panic) But – what'll we do about ... ? (12)

Leela's intermission during the conversation serves as evidence that she wishes to avoid any witnesses to the incident, as well as her unwillingness to greet anyone due to the emotions of fear, anxiety, and powerlessness that she feels in regards to defending the victim and stopping the crime. Upon Mohan's arrival, Leela finds herself immobilised, unsure of how to react, and having put in considerable effort to appear composed in Mohan's presence. Frequently glancing at her watch, Leela experiences a state of tension, as she aims to prevent any potential embarrassment in front of Mohan. Leela's discontent extends not only to Mohan's arrival but also to the arrival of her friend Nina and her husband Surinder, with whom she is unable to engage in meaningful conversation. While conversing with Naina, she endeavours to muffle the noise and converses abruptly, yet when her efforts prove futile, she withdraws from everyone and seeks momentary refuge to seclude herself from others. Hence, Leela's incapacity to cope with her overwhelming

traumatic encounters impedes her ability to socialise and communicate efficiently with others.

Leela has been urging her husband, Bhasker, to contact the authorities in order to report the recurring criminal activity. However, he appears to be relatively unconcerned about the matter. The occurrence of the rape incident has never allowed Leela to experience tranquillity; she constantly feels “frightened” and “tense.” She strongly desires to avoid encountering any unpleasant noises emanating from the vicinity adjacent to her apartment. She articulates her distress, stating that her fear is comparable to a “shawl” that envelops her (8). Leela is apprehensive of the sounds she hears, as evidenced by her conversation with her husband, where she states, “with all the windows shut, with all the curtains drawn ...” (8). The “ugly sounds” only serve to exacerbate her trauma, particularly when her husband disregards her persistent pleas to contact the police and alleviate her suffering (11).

Bhasker’s adherence to a patriarchal self-centred mindset leads him to hold on to a dismissive attitude towards women, resulting in his ignorance towards his wife’s emotional anxiety. Both Bhasker and Mohan fail to acknowledge Leela’s pain and suffering as they “continue to discount Leela’s discomfort, scrambling for any justification that does not require them to interfere in whatever is going on” to stop the crime and ease her pain (Lieder 519). Bhasker’s negligence and lack of emotional support, coupled with the dismissal of her fears and underestimation of her agony, serve as a manifestation of Leela’s unresolved trauma, as aptly identified by Kimberly Flemke as the sensation of being “unprotected by caretakers” (126).

In their article “The AIDS Crisis Is Not Over,” Caruth and Kennan explore the detrimental consequences of disregarding the emotional state of a traumatised individual,

which intensifies the effects of the original trauma. Caruth and Keenan argue that in such cases, a ‘dual trauma’ occurs: “on the one hand, there’s a cataclysmic event, which produces symptoms and calls for testimony. And then it happens again, when the value of the witness in the testimony is denied, and there’s no one to hear the account, no one to attend or respond — not simply to the event, but to its witness as well” (qtd. in Griffiths 2). This is exemplified in the case of Leela, who unfortunately endures not one, but two traumatic experiences. The first is a horrifying gang rape incident, which understandably triggers symptoms of hysteria and distress. However, the trauma does not conclude there. The second trauma emerges from the rejection of the importance of having a witness to share her experience. This rejection leaves Leela feeling utterly isolated, without anyone to listen to her narrative or provide the necessary support. Consequently, the far-reaching and profound impact of the dual trauma experienced by Leela deprives her of the fundamental human need to have her experiences acknowledged, validated, and responded to.

Cathy Caruth posits the belief that individuals who have undergone trauma commonly reawaken their trauma and associated negative emotions through the act of witnessing the traumatic experiences of others. According to Caruth, “one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (*Unclaimed* 8). In Caruth’s analysis, when one experiences the pain of witnessing another person’s suffering, they can empathetically connect with that pain due to their own experiences of anguish. Despite potential differences in these two pains, a connection and means of communication can still be established. Within the context of this play, Leela demonstrates sympathy towards the victim as she has experienced trauma, specifically the trauma of enduring emotional abuse daily from her husband. To put it differently, Leela

can relate her trauma to that of the victim, as both have experienced trauma at the hands of men and share the same gender identity, that of a woman.

As a result of the traumatic experience, Leela exhibits hypersensitivity, as evidenced by her physical response of holding “her head with both hands” and “covering her ears.” She experiences intense auditory hallucinations of screaming, even in the absence of any actual rape incident. This obsession with the screaming voice manifests as a form of hallucination, which gradually increases in intensity over time and begins to dominate her daily life. Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, in *Witness and Memory*, indicate that the repressed memories of traumatic incidents have a profound and enduring impact on an individual’s present reality, casting an ominous shadow that permeates every aspect of their existence. These memories, deeply ingrained within their physical and psychological being, render them vulnerable to the deferred consequences that await them, burdening them with the weight of their past and impeding their ability to fully engage with the present. Leela’s inability to forget the trauma leads to the continuous recurrence of the unpleasant sound, which repeatedly disrupts her peaceful existence. She expresses her predicament in the following manner:

LEELA. (ignoring him) At first it was only at the time it was going on. The, as soon as it got dark. Then around teatime, when the children came home from school. Then in the middle of the day, whenever the doorbell rang. Then in the morning, when I sent the children off to school. And now from the moment I wake up ... (6)

Leela’s physical reaction to the sound triggered her trauma, indicating her failed adaptation and ineffective coping mechanisms. Further, she admits that the scream of the victim causes her severe bodily pain. Leela becomes overwhelmed with her emotions and

cannot handle the trauma anymore, leading to a nervous breakdown. Her inability to endure the distressing screams, coupled with her ongoing struggle with persistent fears, anxieties, heightened sensitivity, and hyper-vigilance, ultimately leads to her physical collapse. Throughout the course of the play, Leela clings to the hope that her husband and the other male characters will take decisive action in response to the distressing screams. However, as their arguments prove futile and the disruptive screams persist, Leela abruptly interrupts their discussion with an unexpected breakdown:

LEELA screams, bringing the discussion to a halt.

LEELA. AAAAAAAH!

NAINA. Quick! She's hysterical! *(tries to hold LEELA'S head still)*

LEELA. AAAAAAAHH!

.....

MOHAN, Come on, now, come on –

NAINA. Don't take it so hard, Leela, no one's going to hurt you.

BHASKER. I told you she's hypersensitive!

LEELA. AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH! *(sobbing now)* (51-52)

The male characters, instead of taking any proactive measures against the perpetrators of the gang rape, simply rationalise their passive stance by defaming the victim and avoiding culpability. The gang rape reaches its conclusion, and the perpetrators depart from the scene. Leela's husband fails to provide a tranquil environment or empathise with her emotional distress, thereby exacerbating her pain. He does not offer the necessary support to help his wife recover from the traumatic incident; instead, he

criticises her for being sensitive. His negligent demeanour causes her to lose faith in the societal structures and cultural norms that are meant to establish order and ensure safety.

In *Witness and Memory*, Douglass and Vogler argue that trauma is not solely a result of “nature” or individual actions, but rather is a result of the ways in which “political, economic, and institutional power” has been organised (23). This concept is referred to as “social suffering” by Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret M. Lock. The manifestation of “socially produced trauma” demonstrates a lack of recognition and understanding of the survivor’s narrative, leading to feelings of shame and a denial of the involvement of others in the traumatic history. In this case, Leela’s emotions are dismissed by her husband, who also fails to expose the brutality or bring the perpetrators to justice. Anthropologist and Utrecht University Professor Antonius C. G. M. Robben suggests that this denial impedes the healing process and prevents the traumatised individual from moving forward and finding a resolution. In his article, “How Traumatized Societies Remember: The Aftermath of Argentina’s Dirty War,” Robben states that “[t]he contest of memory denies conflicting parties sufficient room to work through their traumas, hinder then from gradually standing back from the past and proceeding from testimony to historical interpretation and from re-experience to commemoration” (qtd. in Griffiths 2). Leela’s failure to protect the victim and her husband’s ignorance of her emotions further obstruct her healing process.

To solve problems, it is imperative that individuals do not resort to hiding or running away from reality. This notion is exemplified in the play *Lights Out*, where we observe individuals who bear witness to injustice, yet fail to take any action to rectify the situation. The play delves into a highly sensitive matter that necessitates deep contemplation. It is crucial for men to undergo a transformation in their perception of rape and the female form. Padmanabhan skilfully illustrates that women experience immense

anguish and fury, regardless of whether they are the victims or mere observers of such heinous acts. Those men who perpetrate or observe acts of rape are solely fixated on the physicality of a woman, completely disregarding her inherent humanity.

In view of these observations, it becomes clear that a profound transformation in thinking and perception is indispensable to rectify the prevailing attitudes and beliefs surrounding the heinous crime of rape and the intricate dynamics of gender. By fostering a sense of empathy and deep understanding, society at large can create an environment that places paramount importance on the inherent dignity and holistic well-being of every individual. Collectively, the society must strive towards cultivating a culture of consent, respect, and equality, wherein the violation of one's bodily autonomy is unequivocally condemned and met with swift justice. Only through collective action and unwavering commitment can there be hope to eradicate the pervasive culture of silence and indifference that surrounds rape and its aftermath. In conclusion, *Lights Out* serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for societal transformation and underscores the significance of active engagement in confronting the complex and deeply rooted issues surrounding rape and gender inequality.