

Victims and Witnesses in Manjula Padmanabhan Lights Out: Trauma, Paralysis and the Ethics of Spectatorship

Abilash Valluri¹, Dr Raja Ratnam Jaladi²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Aditya University, Surampalem, India

²Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English, Gayatri Vidya Parishad College of Engineering (Autonomous), Vizag, India

Received: 25/May/2026

Revised: 18/Jun/2026

Accepted: 23/Jul/2026

Published: 28/Jul/2026

Copyright: International Journal of
English Literature, Linguistics, and
Social Sciences: A Multidisciplinary
Journal

This is an open-access article under the
CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of victimhood and witnesshood in Manjula Padmanabhan's play Lights Out (1984), a foundational text of contemporary Indian English drama. Set in an upper-middle-class Mumbai apartment from which the sounds of a sustained sexual assault are nightly audible, the play stages the deliberation of four educated, comfortable spectators as they decide whether to intervene. Drawing on contemporary trauma theory (Caruth; Herman, Felman and Laub), victimological scholarship (van Dijk; Naqvi), and the ethical-philosophical work of Judith Butler and Jean Baudrillard, this article argues that Padmanabhan's dramaturgy locates the moral crisis of the play not in the unseen perpetrators but in the seen, articulate, and rationalising witnesses. Through a close reading of the play's four characters Bhaskar, Leela, Mohan, and Naina the article identifies four distinct strategies by which the ethical demand of the suffering other is foreclosed: aestheticisation, philosophical deferral, gendered discrediting, and proceduralised inaction. The study further argues that the victim's facelessness in the play is not an artistic limitation but a deliberate dramaturgical strategy that converts a single woman's suffering into an emblem of systemic injustice, while simultaneously implicating the audience as the play's final and most uncomfortable witness. The article contributes to South Asian literary studies, trauma studies, and feminist criticism by reframing Lights Out as a sustained interrogation of bourgeois moral agency in late-modern Indian urban life.

Keywords: Manjula Padmanabhan, Lights Out, trauma theory, witnesshood, moral paralysis, bystander effect, Indian English drama, victimology, feminist criticism, bourgeois apathy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of victimhood has undergone a significant transformation across the longue durée of Western and South Asian thought, evolving from its sacrificial connotations in ancient religious traditions to a modern understanding rooted in systemic injustice and psychological trauma. This evolution reflects deeper shifts in cultural, juridical, and philosophical values, as articulated by theorists including Cathy Caruth, Fatima Naqvi, Jan van Dijk, and Jean Baudrillard. Manjula Padmanabhan's play Lights Out, first written in 1984 and published in 2000 in the collection Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival, interrogates these shifting paradigms with a precision and severity that remain, more than four decades after its composition, unmatched in contemporary Indian English drama.

Set against the backdrop of urban India and based on an actual incident reported in the South Mumbai neighbourhood of Santa Cruz in 1982, *Lights Out* portrays the pervasive apathy of middle-class individuals confronted with acts of violence in their immediate vicinity. The play is structured around a single dramatic premise: from the courtyard of an unfinished construction site visible from the balcony of the Bhaskar couple's sixth-floor apartment, the sounds of a sustained, brutal sexual assault rise nightly into the family's living room. The action of the play consists almost entirely of the conversation among Bhaskar, his wife Leela, their friend Mohan, and Leela's friend Naina, as they deliberate whether to do anything about it. They do not.

This article argues that *Lights Out* demands to be read not primarily as a play about the unseen victim, though her suffering is the play's ethical centre of gravity, but as a play about the seen witnesses, who's articulate, educated, often well-intentioned deliberations enact, in real time, the conversion of an ethical demand into a series of evasive postures. Drawing on contemporary trauma theory, victimology, and feminist ethics, the analysis that follows proposes that Padmanabhan stages four distinct strategies of non-witnessing aestheticisation, philosophical deferral, gendered discrediting, and proceduralised inaction and that these strategies, taken together, constitute a diagnostic account of bourgeois moral paralysis under conditions of late-modern Indian urban life.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on trauma theory (Caruth; Herman; Felman and Laub), victimological scholarship (van Dijk; Naqvi), and the philosophical work of Butler and Baudrillard. Section 3 surveys the existing scholarship on Padmanabhan's drama and identifies the gap that the present study addresses. Section 4 sets out the methodology, which is that of close textual analysis informed by trauma-theoretical and feminist-ethical frames. Section 5 offers a sustained reading of the play, organised around the figure of the unseen victim and the four witnessing characters. Section 6 discusses the play's metatheatrical implications and its address to the audience. Section 7 concludes by reflecting on the play's contemporary relevance and its contribution to debates on moral agency in literary and theatrical studies.

The central research questions guiding this study are threefold. First, how does Padmanabhan's dramaturgy figure the relationship between the unseen victim and the seen witnesses, and what ethical work does this figuration perform? Second, what specific strategies of non-witnessing does the play stage, and how do these strategies map onto contemporary trauma-theoretical and feminist-ethical frameworks? Third, what does the play's address to its audience, through its breaking of the fourth wall and its implication of the spectator, contribute to ongoing debates about the ethics of theatrical witnessing in postcolonial contexts?

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Trauma Theory and the Problem of Witness

Contemporary literary trauma theory takes as its inaugural moment Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), in which Caruth, drawing on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, articulates an influential account of trauma as that which is missed in its happening and returns belatedly in symptom, dream, and repetition (Caruth 3). For Caruth, traumatic experience is paradoxically defined by its inaccessibility: the event is too overwhelming to be assimilated at the moment of its occurrence, and so it is encrypted in the psyche, available only through the disruptions it later visits upon the survivor's life and language.

This framework, however, has been productively complicated by the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, whose *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992) shifts the analytical focus from the survivor to the witness. For Felman and Laub, traumatic experience cannot be processed by the survivor alone; it requires a second party, a witness whose function is not merely to hear the testimony but to bear it, to remain present to the survivor's address even when, and especially when, that address is fragmentary, halting, or unbearable (Felman and Laub 57). The failure of witnessing, in their account, does not leave the survivor where they were; it compounds the original violation. As Laub puts it, the absence of an empathic listener annihilates the story (Felman and Laub 68). This formulation is indispensable for reading *Lights Out*, since the play stages, with

extraordinary precision, the conversion of an ethical address the screams of the woman being raped into a series of non-witnessing postures.

A persistent feminist criticism of the Caruthian paradigm, voiced most powerfully by Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), is that its emphasis on the singular, catastrophic event tends to occlude the forms of trauma most widely distributed in human experience: the chronic, often invisible violences of domestic and gendered life. Herman's contribution was to insist that the diagnostic category of post-traumatic stress disorder, originally developed in the context of combat, needed to be expanded to encompass the experiences of survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and intimate-partner violence (Herman 74). Crucial to Herman's account is the concept of vicarious traumatisation, the secondary traumatic effect that proximity to suffering can produce in those who witness without being able or willing to intervene (Herman 140). This concept is essential for understanding the psychological state of Padmanabhan's witness-characters, whose articulate evasions can be read, at least in part, as defensive formations against the unbearable demand of the address they are receiving.

2.2 *Victimology and the Politics of Recognition*

If trauma theory furnishes the framework for thinking about what happens to the suffering subject, victimological scholarship furnishes the framework for thinking about how that subject is recognised or fails to be recognised within the social and juridical orders that surround her. Jan van Dijk, in *The Future of Victimology* (2007) and related work, traces how the figure of the victim has been historically constructed through religious, legal, and philosophical discourses, and how the association of victimhood with passivity and helplessness has roots in religious traditions where victims were idealised yet rendered powerless (van Dijk 13). This perspective, van Dijk argues, persists in modern contexts, resulting in victims often being seen as objects of sympathy rather than as agents of resistance.

Fatima Naqvi, in *The Literary and Cultural Rhetoric of Victimhood* (2007), further develops this critique, examining how the contemporary culture of victimhood particularly in Western late-twentieth-century discourse, operates simultaneously as a mode of moral authority and as a mechanism of dehumanisation (Naqvi 4). For Naqvi, the elevation of victims as symbols of suffering frequently coexists with their effective marginalisation: victims become emblematic precisely insofar as they cease to be agents. In *Lights Out*, this dynamic is rendered with disturbing literalness: the woman in the courtyard is heard but never seen, named but never voiced as a subject. Her absence is not a dramaturgical accident but a precise figuration of the depoliticisation that Naqvi describes.

Jean Baudrillard's concept of the "victim order," articulated in *The Transparency of Evil* (1993), further illuminates this dynamic. For Baudrillard, modern societies engage in what he terms a mourning for a dead otherness, in which victims are simultaneously acknowledged and erased, made present as figures of mourning even as their actual subjectivity is foreclosed (Baudrillard 134). This paradox is central to the dramaturgical effect of *Lights Out*: the woman's cries are everywhere in the play's auditory environment, yet she herself is nowhere in the play's visible field of subjects.

2.3 *Butler, Precarity, and the Ethics of Address*

Judith Butler's work on precarity and grievability provides a third theoretical resource for the present analysis. In *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), Butler argues that certain lives are framed as grievable as fully human, as worthy of mourning, while others are framed as ungrievable, as not quite human, as outside the field of legitimate ethical concern (Butler, *Precarious Life* 32). The ethical question, for Butler, is not whether a given life is grievable in some abstract sense but how the social and political frames within which lives appear determine in advance which lives will be recognised as such.

This Butlerian frame is directly applicable to the dynamics of *Lights Out*. The woman in the courtyard belongs, in the apartment-dwellers' perception, to a class and caste position that renders her, in advance, ungrievable: her suffering is recognised auditorily but not ethically. She is heard but not heard. The play's tragic insight is that this differential framing does not require explicit articulation by the characters; it operates beneath the level of their conscious deliberation, structuring the very terms in which they consider whether or not to act.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical reception of Manjula Padmanabhan's drama has clustered around three principal axes. The first, occasioned by the international success of *Harvest* (1997) and its award of the Onassis Prize for Theatre, reads her work in relation to the asymmetries of neoliberal globalisation. The second, prompted by the disturbing scenario of *Lights Out*, reads it as a study in bystander ethics and gendered violence. The third, more recent, situates her drama within the broader project of feminist Indian theatre. Each frame has been productive; each has also left certain questions underexplored.

Erin B. Mee's *Theatre of Roots* (2008) offers what remains the most sustained reading of *Lights Out*, situating it in relation to the 1982 Mumbai incident on which it was based and analysing the gendered dynamics of the bourgeois deliberation it stages (Mee 110). Aparna Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence* (2005) likewise treats the play as a landmark in feminist Indian English drama, paying particular attention to the gendered division of moral labour between the male and female characters (Dharwadker 366). Tutun Mukherjee's edited volume *The Theatre of Manjula Padmanabhan* (2012) offers the most comprehensive single collection of scholarship on the playwright, with several contributors addressing *Lights Out* specifically.

These readings have established *Lights Out* as a central text in the Indian feminist canon. They have not, however, attended in sustained fashion to the specific strategies of non-witnessing the play stages, nor to how contemporary trauma theory and victimological scholarship can illuminate the play's ethical structure. The present article addresses this gap by offering a close reading organised around the problematic of witnessing developed by Felman and Laub, supplemented by the victimological work of van Dijk and Naqvi and the philosophical work of Butler and Baudrillard.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study employs close textual analysis informed by trauma-theoretical, victimological, and feminist-ethical frameworks. The primary text is the published version of *Lights Out*, collected in *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival* (Seagull Books, 2000). Analysis proceeds character by character, tracing the rhetorical and ethical operations performed by each of the four witness-figures, and is then synthesised into an account of the play's overall dramaturgical structure.

The selection of theoretical sources has been guided by the principle of conceptual fit rather than by adherence to a single school. Caruth, Herman, Felman and Laub are foundational for trauma studies; van Dijk and Naqvi for victimology; Butler and Baudrillard for the philosophical-ethical questions of recognition and representation. The article also draws, where relevant, on clinical psychiatric concepts (drawn from the DSM-5 and from Briere and Scott's *Principles of Trauma Therapy*) to clarify what is at stake, in psychological terms, in the dynamics of the play stages. The article does not, however, pursue an empirical-clinical analysis; its method remains literary-critical, and its claims are interpretive rather than diagnostic.

The article's argumentative structure is comparative-internal: it compares the four witness-characters within the play to one another, identifying both their commonalities (their shared participation in the failure of witnessing) and their differences (the distinct rhetorical strategies through which each enacts that failure). This internal comparison is then situated in relation to the theoretical frames outlined above, and the play's overall ethical position is reconstructed.

V. ANALYSIS: VICTIMS, WITNESSES, AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF APATHY

5.1 *The Unseen Victim: Facelessness as Dramaturgical Strategy*

The most striking feature of *Lights Out* as a dramaturgical construction is the absence of the victim from the visible field of the play. The woman whose screams structure the action is never seen by the audience; she is heard, referred

to, debated about, but she does not appear. This absence is not an artistic limitation. It is a precise dramaturgical strategy whose effect is to convert a single instance of violence into an emblem of systemic injustice, while simultaneously raising, with peculiar force, the question of what it means to be heard without being seen.

In medical and psychological terms, the victim's portrayal as a distant scream resonates with several clinical concepts that are worth naming clearly. Psychological trauma, as defined in the contemporary clinical literature, refers to an emotional response to a deeply distressing or disturbing experience, including sexual assault (American Psychiatric Association, 271–80). The victim's invisibility and effective voicelessness in Padmanabhan's dramaturgy symbolically mirror the dissociative states often experienced by trauma survivors, in which the survivor feels detached from her own body or voice as a coping mechanism for overwhelming pain (Briere and Scott 15). Studies of trauma response have documented that survivors of sexual violence may experience psychogenic mutism, a partial or complete loss of speech in the absence of organic injury, or pervasive emotional numbness (American Psychiatric Association 274; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 145). The audience's inability to see or hear the victim except through the mediation of the apartment's auditory frame parallels, at the level of theatrical form, the dissociative disconnection that victims themselves may feel.

Dehumanisation, in the sense developed in the trauma-care literature, refers to processes by which individuals are treated as less than fully human, with the resulting denial of agency and dignity producing measurable psychological consequences, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Herman 96). Research in trauma care has consistently shown that systemic neglect and societal apathy toward victims contribute to feelings of invisibility, and that these feelings exacerbate, rather than merely accompany, the underlying mental-health challenges (Herman 105; Briere and Scott 22). The victim's reduction in *Lights Out* to what one might call a concept of a referent, an occasion for debate, a stimulus for the witnesses' moral self-positioning- aligns with the clinical observation that survivors of sexual violence are often stripped of individuality in the aftermath, with the result that their psychological distress is compounded by a secondary erasure performed by their social environment.

Herman's analysis of the physical and psychological dimensions of trauma highlights how such experiences create lasting scars that leave survivors feeling betrayed and abandoned (Herman 51). In *Lights Out*, this betrayal is not only personal but collective: the victim is denied even the basic recognition of her humanity by the very community whose proximity ought to constitute the first line of ethical response. The unseen woman's plight thus extends beyond individual suffering and becomes a symbol of broader social failure. The neighbours' indifference amplifies her isolation, creating a void where communal support should exist. This is precisely what Baudrillard describes as mourning for a dead otherness: a posture in which victims are simultaneously acknowledged and erased, present as ambient noise but absent as subjects of address (Baudrillard 134).

The cultural context of urban India, with its rhetorical emphasis on community, sociality, and collective identity, adds a further layer of poignancy to this dramaturgical choice. By subverting these ideals, *Lights Out* exposes the fragility of social narratives when confronted with the fact of violence and neglect. The middle-class apartment, ostensibly the site of family solidarity and neighbourly care, is revealed as a sealed acoustic chamber in which the address of the suffering other can be received without being answered.

5.2 Bhaskar: The Aestheticisation of Suffering

Bhaskar, the husband, exemplifies the first of the play's four strategies of non-witnessing: the conversion of ethical address into aesthetic spectacle. When Mohan arrives and is invited onto the balcony to observe the scene unfolding in the construction site below, Bhaskar treats it as a curiosity, a feature of the neighbourhood worth pointing out, the way one might point out a particular view or a recurring street vendor. The screams are framed by his commentary as ambient phenomena rather than as the cries of a person being destroyed. This conversion is achieved largely through Bhaskar's tone, which is by turns clinical, ironic, and mildly bored.

In the framework developed by Felman and Laub, the aestheticisation of suffering is one of the principal mechanisms by which the demand of witnessing is foreclosed. To treat suffering as a spectacle is to install oneself as a viewer rather than as a respondent, and to install the sufferer as an object of contemplation rather than as a

subject whose address requires reply (Felman and Laub 80). Bhaskar's balcony, in this reading, is the architectural figure of his ethical position: a vantage from which to look down upon suffering without entering its space. The balcony is, in the most literal sense, the site of his disengagement.

The play's force lies in its refusal to make Bhaskar a monster. He is not cruel in the conventional sense; he is well-spoken, mildly liberal, attentive to his guests, and capable of articulating complex positions on a range of subjects. The horror of the play is that the aestheticisation of suffering is the default operation of a particular kind of bourgeois sensibility, not its perversion but its ordinary functioning. Bhaskar witnesses nightly without witnessing in the strict sense Felman and Laub give to the term: he is present to the address but does not let it reach him as address.

This dynamic is reinforced by Bhaskar's calculated indifference, which can be read as a defensive formation against the demands the screams place upon him. Repeated exposure to the cries from below has produced in him what the trauma literature describes as desensitisation, a numbing of affective response brought on by prolonged proximity to suffering one feels unable to address (Briere and Scott 67). Bhaskar's coolness is not the absence of feeling but its disciplined management. It is, in this sense, a learned response to a situation his class position has not equipped him to confront.

5.3 Mohan: Philosophical Deferral

Mohan, the visiting friend, exemplifies the second strategy of non-witnessing: the conversion of ethical demand into philosophical debate. When the screams can no longer be ignored as ambient sound, Mohan responds by turning the situation into a question, indeed, a series of questions. Is what they are hearing actually rape? Could it be a religious ritual, a tantric ceremony, as one of the men at one point suggests? Could it be a personal matter, a marital dispute, into which it would be impertinent to intrude? Could it be a class matter, an affair of the construction-site labourers, governed by codes that the apartment-dwellers are not in a position to judge? Should one call the police, or would calling the police itself be an act of class violence?

Each of these questions is considered, in itself, a reasonable question. The play's terrible insight is that the act of asking them, in the context in which they are being asked, is itself the failure of witnessing. Felman and Laub note that the witness's task is not to verify the testimony but to receive it; the demand of the suffering other is not for forensic confirmation but for acknowledgement (Felman and Laub 57). Mohan's questions, however well-formed, function precisely to defer acknowledgement, to keep the address suspended in the medium of debate so that no response is ever required. The philosophical sophistication that one might have expected to enable response becomes, in Mohan's hands, the principal instrument of evasion.

This is among the most ethically scalding features of Padmanabhan's dramaturgy: she stages the way in which intellectual articulacy can become the very vehicle of moral abdication. Mohan is the educated middle-class Indian of his moment, and his very capacity for nuance, his ability to consider multiple framings of the situation, is what permits him not to act. The play here anticipates a critique that Butler would later develop in *Precarious Life*: the production of grievable and ungrievable lives is not, primarily, a matter of explicit ideological commitment; it is a matter of which questions are asked, and how, and at what tempo (Butler, *Precarious Life* 32). Mohan's questions slow down the address. They place it under indefinite review. They dissolve its urgency into deliberation.

5.4 Leela: The Discounted Witness

Leela, Bhaskar's wife, occupies a different position. She hears the screams, in some sense, as something close to what they are. She is unable to entertain the framings that the men advance; she does not believe the screams are religious; she does not believe they are a marital dispute; she believes they are what they sound like. Her recognition, however, is systematically discounted by the men in the room, who treat her distress as feminine sentimentality, as nervous excess, as a failure of cosmopolitan sophistication. The play's gendered structure of credibility is here displayed with painful clarity: the woman who hears most accurately is the one whose hearing is least authorised.

This dynamic is the play's most explicit feminist intervention, and it is also where its trauma-theoretical and feminist registers converge most powerfully. The systematic discrediting of women's testimony about the violence they perceive is, as the feminist trauma literature has long observed, a central feature of the social production of insidious trauma (Herman 8). Leela is, in the strict sense, a credible witness: she correctly identifies what she is hearing. The play's tragedy is that her credibility is precisely what is foreclosed by the gendered structure of the household. Her witnessing is converted, by the men around her, into a symptom of her own emotional unreliability, with the result that the address of the woman in the courtyard fails twice: once because the men do not receive it, and again because the woman who does receive it is positioned as unreceiving.

Leela's discomfort and hesitation reflect a moral anxiety that has no permitted outlet. She is caught between her own perception, which is accurate, and the social authority of the men, which is positioned as final. The result is a kind of double bind that Herman would identify as characteristic of survivors of prolonged abuse: a doubled consciousness in which one simultaneously knows and is told one does not know (Herman 87). That Leela is not herself the direct victim of the violence she perceives does not free her from this doubled consciousness; it places her, rather, in a position of secondary trauma whose specific torment is the experience of having one's accurate perception treated as pathology.

5.5 Naina: Proceduralised Inaction

Naina, more politically articulate than Leela, attempts to translate Leela's recognition into a call for action she proposes phoning the police, but her proposal is absorbed into the room's pattern of deferral. The men raise objections about the inefficacy of the police, the risks of involvement, and the question of whether intervention might in fact make matters worse. Naina's intervention, which begins as a clear ethical demand, is converted, through the room's procedural language, into a manageable item on an agenda that is never resolved.

This is the fourth strategy of non-witnessing the play stages: the proceduralisation of the ethical demand. Where Bhaskar aestheticises, and Mohan philosophises, the room collectively proceduralises it converts the question of what to do into a question of what one is in a position to do, and from there into a question of whether anything one is in a position to do would make any difference. The address of the woman in the courtyard, which begins as an ethical demand, is processed through this procedural machinery until it emerges as an unanswerable practical problem and is accordingly set aside.

By the play's close, the screams have stopped, the woman in the courtyard has either been killed or has been left for dead, and the apartment has resumed its ordinary rhythm. The lights of the title go out not on the act of violence in the courtyard but on the apartment itself, which has, by its sustained non-action, ensured that the violence will continue.

5.6 The Apartment as Anti-Witnessing Apparatus

The crucial observation, drawing the four readings together, is that the failure of witnessing in *Lights Out* is not the failure of any single character. It is the failure of the household considered as a structure. The Bhaskar apartment is configured by its architecture (the sixth-floor remove from the courtyard), by its social codes (the rituals of hospitality that organise the evening), by its gendered hierarchy (the men's authority to define the situation), by its class position (its insulation from the labouring bodies whose violence it overhears) to convert ethical address into anything other than ethical address. The apartment is, in the most precise possible sense, an anti-witnessing apparatus.

These dynamics blur the conventional dichotomy between victims and witnesses, exposing what one might call, following Naqvi and Baudrillard, the paradoxical structure of a victim society. Modern urban societies of the kind Padmanabhan dramatises fetishise victimhood at the level of public discourse, elevating victims as symbols of suffering, even as they marginalise actual victims at the level of practical response. The victims' cries for help symbolise a desperate plea for recognition; the witnesses' inaction reflects a societal failure to translate the rhetoric

of empathy into the work of intervention. This paradox is the play's principal diagnostic insight, and it is one that has only sharpened in relevance in the four decades since the play's composition.

VI. DISCUSSION: METATHEATRE AND THE AUDIENCE AS WITNESS

Lights Out does not stop at the implication of its onstage characters. Through a series of metatheatrical gestures, most importantly, its breaking of the fourth wall and its sustained address to the audience as the play's final, most uncomfortable witness, it implicates the spectator as a participant in the very dynamic it indicts. The audience, seated in comfort and attentive silence, occupies a position structurally analogous to that of the apartment-dwellers: proximate to the suffering, capable of perceiving it, and incapable, by the conventions of theatrical spectatorship, of intervening.

This is not an accidental analogy; it is the play's central dramaturgical strategy. By staging an act of bourgeois non-witnessing within a theatrical frame whose own conditions of reception require non-intervention, Padmanabhan forces the spectator to confront the fact that the very practice of attending the play places her in the position of the characters she is invited to judge. The play's force, in this respect, lies not in any sentimental invitation to empathy but in the inescapability of the structural homology it establishes: to watch Lights Out is to be made aware of one's own seat in the bourgeois apartment of contemporary spectatorship.

This metatheatrical implication of the audience aligns Lights Out with what Augusto Boal, in *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), identified as the central political task of contemporary theatre: the conversion of the spectator from passive consumer to active agent. Padmanabhan's play does not, in the manner of Boal's forum theatre, invite the spectator to physically intervene in the action; it invites her, rather, to recognise that the structure of her non-intervention is itself the play's subject. The transformation it seeks is not behavioural but recognitional: it asks the spectator to see, through the play's mirror, the architecture of her own apathy.

The facelessness of the victim, in this metatheatrical reading, takes on an additional dimension. By denying the audience the satisfaction of a particular victim with whom to identify, Padmanabhan denies the audience the consolation of empathic spectatorship. The audience cannot, in the manner of a conventional victim-narrative, weep for the woman in the courtyard, because the woman in the courtyard is not given to them as an object of weeping. She is given, instead, as the absent term whose absence reveals the structure of the spectacle in which the audience is participating. This is a more demanding mode of address, and a more politically rigorous one, than the empathic identification that conventional dramaturgy invites.

VII. CONCLUSION

Manjula Padmanabhan's Lights Out remains, four decades after its composition, one of the most ethically rigorous works of contemporary Indian English drama. This article has argued that its rigour consists in its sustained interrogation of the figure of the witness in its precise dramaturgical staging of the strategies through which an ethical address can be received and yet remain unanswered. Through the figures of Bhaskar (aestheticisation), Mohan (philosophical deferral), Leela (discounted witnessing), and Naina (proceduralised inaction), the play stages four distinct mechanisms by which bourgeois moral agency abdicates its responsibilities, and shows how these mechanisms, taken together, constitute the architecture of an apartment, a class, and ultimately a society organised against the possibility of intervention.

Read through the conceptual frameworks of contemporary trauma theory (Caruth; Herman; Felman and Laub), victimological scholarship (van Dijk; Naqvi), and the philosophical work of Butler and Baudrillard, the play discloses what its conventional readings as bystander parable, as feminist intervention, as bourgeois critique have separately captured but rarely synthesised. It is at once a study in the ethics of witness, a diagnosis of victim society, and a reflection on the conditions under which lives become grievable or fail to do so. Its dramaturgical achievement is to make these multiple registers coexist within a single, taut, hour-long action.

Three implications follow for further research. First, the reading offered here suggests that trauma theory in South Asian literary studies has tended to focus on historical traumas of the public sphere, such as the Partition, the Emergency, and communal violence, at the expense of the structural and insidious traumas of urban domestic life, and that the latter merit fuller critical attention. Second, the article's argument suggests that the witnessing problematic developed by Felman and Laub in the context of Holocaust testimony has substantial purchase on contemporary Indian theatre, and that the theatrical scene, with its inherent thematisation of the relation between performer and spectator, is a privileged site for the staging of witnessing's possibilities and its failures. Third, the metatheatrical dimension of *Lights Out* invites further inquiry into the specific contributions of postcolonial drama to global debates on the ethics of spectatorship.

Lights Out does not console. It diagnoses. Its final image, the apartment plunged into darkness as the screams subside, is not a moment of resolution but a withholding of one. Padmanabhan offers her audience no exit from the predicament her play stages, because the predicament is not one from which exit is available by the means of theatre alone. What she offers, instead, is the painful clarity of recognition. In a contemporary moment in which the conditions she dramatised in 1984 have only intensified, in which the architectures of distance, mediation, and procedural deferral have been multiplied by digital technologies and globalised media, the play's diagnostic force has, if anything, grown. It remains essential reading for any account of moral agency in the late-modern Indian city, and a foundational text for the study of witnessing in postcolonial drama.

REFERENCES

- [1] American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed., American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013.
- [2] Baudrillard, Jean. *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*. Translated by James Benedict, Verso, 1993.
- [3] Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Translated by Charles A. McBride and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, Pluto Press, 1979.
- [4] Briere, John N., and Catherine Scott. *Principles of Trauma Therapy: A Guide to Symptoms, Evaluation, and Treatment*. SAGE Publications, 2006.
- [5] Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2009.
- [6] — — —. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.
- [7] Caruth, Cathy, editor. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- [8] — — —. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- [9] Dharwadkar, Aparna Bhargava. *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947*. University of Iowa Press, 2005.
- [10] Dijk, Jan van. *The Future of Victimology*. Springer, 2007.
- [11] Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Routledge, 1992.
- [12] Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1992.
- [13] Mee, Erin B. *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*. Seagull Books, 2008.
- [14] Mukherjee, Tutun, editor. *The Theatre of Manjula Padmanabhan*. Prestige Books, 2012.
- [15] Naqvi, Fatima. *The Literary and Cultural Rhetoric of Victimhood: Western Europe, 1970–2005*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- [16] Ogden, Pat, Kekuni Minton, and Clare Pain. *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.
- [17] Padmanabhan, Manjula. "Lights Out." *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival*, edited by Manjula Padmanabhan, Seagull Books, 2000, pp. 1–82.
- [18] — — —. *Harvest*. Kali for Women, 1997.