

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

**IJELLH**

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 8, August 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

Smt Mona Gupta

Research Scholar

RDVV University

Jabalpur, M.P. India

monagupta390@gmail.com

Dr. Abha Pandey

Professor and Head Department of English

Govt. Makoshal Arts and Commerce College

Jabalpur, M. P, India

english\_dept 1@yahoo.co.in

### Empathy and Apathy in Manjula Padmnabhan's *Light's Out*

#### Abstract

Human response in understanding and perceiving someone's emotions show variations. These variations are observed either in form of compassion or cold, detached attitude. The psychological term for former is 'empathy' and for latter is 'apathy'. Empathy and apathy form the basis of human social behaviour. This paper aims at studying empathy and apathy in Manjula Padmnabhan's play *Lights Out* and its affect on the victim of the play.

Key words: Empathy, Apathy.

Theodore Lipps, a German psychologist defined empathy as "emotional appreciation of another person's feelings. It is direct apprehension of the state of mind of another person without, as in sympathy, feeling as he does". Empathy is described as a process or ability to

understand an individual's subjective experience while maintaining the stance of an observer. In simple words it is stepping in the shoes of sufferer to gauge his /her feelings. "I do not ask the wounded person how he feels; I myself become the wounded person". These lines from Walt Whitman's poem entitled "Song of Myself" very well reflect empathy.

The word apathy is opposite of empathy. Cambridge English dictionary defines apathy as "behaviour that shows no interest or energy and shows that someone is unwilling to take action, especially over something important." Apathy is withdrawal into inactivity. Indifference, insensitivity, impassivity are near synonyms for the word apathy as they all denote lack of responsiveness to something that might normally excite interest or emotion.

Manjula Padmanabhan is a powerful contemporary Indian English playwright Her play *lights out* delineates plight of a rape victim whose heart rending shrieks remain unattended for nearly a week by human souls! This play is based on a real life rape incident which occurred in a posh area of Santa cruz Bombay in the year 1982. The silence of community members, the response of the male and the female characters of the play is the main focus of the study.

In the very beginning of the play Leela is shown empathising with echoes of rape victim in form of shrill painful cries that are heard many times a day at intervals. The rape victim is off stage but her presence on stage is maintained through scream, shrieks and sob sounds. The intensity of cries from high to low, to complete silence, then its repetition followed by long cry and hiccups are sufficient enough to infer that something very wrong and horrible is going on with the victim and she needs to be rescued immediately.

Leela is shown worried, scared and tense as the piercing unpleasant shrieks of a woman cause sleepless nights and a disturbed day routine. Leela's empathy gets translated in her emotional turmoil, hysterical behaviour, anger, frustration and concern for the victimized woman. Her unconscious identification with the victim is supposed to be a feminine trait.

Leela's empathy for victimized woman and her own situational helplessness is thus exhibited repeatedly in her dread and panic. Her guilty conscience makes her comment "That we are part of...what happen outside. That by watching it we are making ourselves responsible--" (BB:6)

In total contrast Leela's husband Bhaskar is shown relaxed and unaffected by the ongoing crime in vicinity. Returning from office, he absorbs himself in reading news paper and enjoying evening tea. He overlooks Leela's pleading to report the matter to the police as he feels it a trivial offence which needs no reporting. He suggests Leela to ignore the sounds or to practice meditation for mental peace. Moreover, to him it's the duty of watchman and the owners of neighbouring compound to take action against the crime. Why should we! (BB:8)

Bhaskar's apathy becomes more prominent when he is joined by his friend Mohan for dinner. The two friends in company enjoy music, drink, dinner and discussion on the rape which is morbidly, enacted night after night. Both friends have shown curiosity to watch the ongoing sexual assault. Mohan's inquisitiveness makes him inquire, "When does it begin!" ...So we will eat first and then- (BB:14)

Strangely, friends have long discussion and speculations on the pitch and vigorousness of the scream, the number of assailants, the manner of sexual assault, the types of clothes worn, the presence or absence of clothes on body of assailant and victim and so on. ...What kind of screaming is it? High pitched? Hysterical?(BB:17)They even wait for the screams to be heard so as to compare their version with that of Leela's. Was it like a singer's voice, high and sweet? Was it musical?(BB:18)... they speculate screams and violence as a part of drama, or a domestic abuse, a ritual, or religious method for exorcism. The voyeuristic attitude of friends is again visible in their thought of clicking pictures -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?(BB:52)

The indifferent attitude of Bhaskar and Mohan humiliates and disgusts Leela. She couldn't resist questioning Mohan, how can anyone enjoy witnessing miseries befalling on others. (BB: 15) even their nonessentials ranting on different types of screams, definition of torture and speculating the cause of violence irritates her. Being a woman, she could not stand the brutal crush of woman's dignity being watched and discussed as some sort of entertainment. She even disapproves their tarnishing the dignity of victim by calling her a whore. Her continuous request to call police which is more than twenty times and frequently getting hysterical speaks volume about her mental state.

Like Leela, the other woman characters Kummu, Picky, Tara, and Mrs Menon are also perturbed by the sound of victim's pain but none could muster courage to take rescue initiative for the fear that their action may land them in trouble. Naina is one more woman character who makes an unexpected visit to Leela's place and rightly guesses the anguished cry of a female voice demanding help. She looks down the window and is shocked to see a woman being kicked, dragged and sexually brutalised by assaulters. The very next moment she asserts urgency to get it stopped by calling police. You're... you're mad! Both of you-you're talking nonsense! Just one look outside the window and you'll know its rape! (BB:39) Her rapport with the victim is easily seen in her concern to save the victim from clutches of offenders. Naina stands in defence of the gang rape victim who is apathetically and lamely accused as a whore by Bhaskar and Mohan. If she were a decent woman, we people would go to her rescue! She is not, and so she's being left to her fate! (BB:41)

Surinder is the only male character who promptly comes in action to save gang rape victim. He is Naina's husband. His comment ...As it is, that woman's life is over. She will commit suicide, if she lives at all!(BB:46) shows his worry and understanding of rape

victim's plight. Unlike Bhaskar and Mohan, Surinder empathises with the victim's deplorable state and at least make plan to do away with culprits. In the play Bhaskar and Mohan are bystanders who remain unresponsive to an issue of a grave concern. Unfortunately the delayed action could not bring any assistance to the victim as the assailants moved on to some other place and victims voice was heard no more.

Crime and violence against women is a daily occurrence in our society. It is usually overlooked by onlookers. The playwright successfully conveys the message that the growing indifferent attitude of people is the major cause of escalating/increasing rate of crime in society. Empaths need not be gender biased. Empathy is the link between self and others. The ability to see things from another person's perspective assists in responding appropriately to the situation. Empathy builds a sense of community and reduces the tendency to discriminate. Indiscriminate affinity and response to the situational needs alone can make us civilized human beings.

### Works Cited

*Body Blows Women, Violence and Survival Three Plays*. Calcutta: Seagull Books,2000.

Murphy,Gardner.*An Introduction to Psychology*.Calcutta:Oxford &IBH Publishing Co, 1964.

[https://www.poetry](https://www.poetryfoundation.org) foundation.org “Song of Myself” 1892 version by Walt Whitman