

Chapter IV

Body, Abuse and Woman: *Lights Out* and *Getting Away with Murder*

Engaging with the complex notions of ‘body’ and ‘abuse’ has been one of the regular features of Indian women’s theatre from the 1970s to the new millennium. One of the prime reasons behind the sustenance of such engagement is that the very ‘doing’ of theatre itself enables the discussion on ‘body’. Colette Conroy in her book *theatre and the body* observes that theatre facilitates thinking on body at least in four different ways. Making and watching theatre is directly connected with the actors playing roles of different characters on stage. A particularly trained body of an actor under specific directorial convention, projects itself on stage in a way that would affect the audience differently than it would under different conventions. Again, certain forms of theatre allow the exploration and interrogation of body as a ‘site’ of power, which immediately and inevitably suggests volatility. The body of the actor synthesizes performance and culture and therefore allows the ‘spectating body’ (audience) (Conroy 6) to analyse the ‘working of power upon the body in culture’ (5). Finally, Conroy argues that theatre allows the distinction between an ideal body and the real physical bodies; the ideal body being that dispassionate medium *communiqué* which performs any ‘character’ on stage without interfering in the audience’s process of analysis, while the real bodies are ‘physical objects that vary hugely from each other’ (6). The interaction of the audience and theatre therefore enables the exploration of the potential and the real body as well as the reconsideration of the real through the potential body. Buoyant with the opportunities of pushing ‘the extremes of cultural imagination’ theatre provides ‘space, structure and context for the contemplation of actual and potential’ (Nevitt 6). Exploring such possibilities in theatre, however, must involve the audience, both as individuals and as participants in the social collective. This chapter explores Indian women

playwrights' (and directors') engagement with theatre's nuanced relation with women's body on stage and 'violence', a term, which I critically differentiate from and interpret as abuse.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* and Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder*, the plays I choose for this chapter, were first performed in 1986 and 1990 respectively. Though a number of plays composed in the 1990s and 2000s thematically address the issues of body and violence, my choice of these two plays primarily rests on the fact that they were composed in the 1980s. What is the contribution of 1980s to 'Women's theatre'? The question does not entail easy answers. For, it can only be explored in the role theatre played in producing the 'enormous cultural significance' (Mangai 29) of women's movements that began in the late 1970s.

The women's trade unions, founded by the Gandhian socialists in 1970s, failed to produce serious discussions on women's issues. But the women's groups which emerged as wings of Left political parties around 1975 initiated feminist debates and associated feminism with other social movements of the time. As discussed at length in the introduction of this thesis, the repealing of Emergency in 1977, encouraged the formation of a number of women's groups (notable are *Saheli* and *Salehi*), who largely addressed the educated, urban middle class on issues such as rape, dowry deaths, wife-beating, bride-burning, mothering, housekeeping etc. These women's groups, along with taking to the streets against sexual and cultural oppression on women, organized workshops and produced theatre performances for raising consciousness among women. Inspired by Badal Sircar's 'third theatre', some of the groups 'took to organizing theatre and art groups from amongst their staff. These groups would develop a set of plays and skits which would then be performed during campaigns and protests.' (Mangai 30) One such example is RUWSEC, a women's group in the 1980s, in Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu, who used theatre skills of its members to put across a non-literate dalit women audience, matters of labour, health and violence women suffer within the family.

Conversely, theatre groups like Tripurari Sharma's "Alarippu" performed regularly in public squares, railway platforms, ghettos and *bastis* in order to disseminate women's 'concerns' amongst the public. But before Alarippu was formed in 1983, Maya Krishna Rao collaborated with Anuradha Kapur and Rati Bartholomew to form the "Theatre Union" in 1979. Touring several colleges, community centers and commons, in and around Delhi, "Theatre Union" performed *Om Swaha* (1979) and *Dafa no. 180* (1981). *Om Swaha* protested against atrocities against women for dowry and *Dafa No. 180* addressed the lacunae in legislations regarding rape in India. Both the plays were urgent and appropriate to the moment, for the issues they dealt with, had already caught nation-wide attention. First produced by *Stree Sanharsh* (a Delhi based women's group), *Om Swaha* was patronized and re-produced with different casts by a number of women's groups. *Dafa No.180*, too, followed a similar course, for some proclaimed activists like Urvashi Butalia, Anuradha Kapur, Ragini Prakash, Vaid Sehgal, Ein Lall, etc. collaborated with Maya Rao and her team for its productions. Theatre and women's groups, therefore, in the 1980s proved complimentary to each other. The women's groups (following the strategy set by left/ right wing political activists) brought theatre out of the auditorium to the streets and *mohullas*; and affective/ interventionist as it is, theatre proliferated into different forms, such as the 'street theatre', 'engaged theatre', 'oppositional theatre', 'radical theatre', 'theatre of liberation', 'free theatre', 'applied theatre' etc.. Hence the stimulus acquired by theatre from the women's movements in the late 1970s (and after) cannot be annulled.

Lights Out and *Getting Away with Murder* (none of which was composed to be performed as 'activist' plays), in their own rights, encapsulate what Helen Keyssar describes in *Feminist Theatre and Theory*. To Keyssar,

'productions of scripts characterized by the consciousness of women as women;
dramaturgy in which art is inseparable from the condition of women as women;

performance (written and acted) that deconstructs sexual difference and thus undermines patriarchal power, scripting and production that present transformation as a structural and ideological replacement for recognition; and the creation of women in the subject position (1).

The 1980s, provided playwrights like Padmanabhan and Mehta the necessary impetus for synthesizing politics and aesthetics in their plays but they also preserved their separation from being generalized as 'political' theatre activists.

Apart from engaging theatre and activism at the national level, the 1980s is notorious for the 'corporal turn' in academic feminisms worldwide, a nebulous reflection of which is also found in the plays chosen. Since violence on women is the epicenter of both *Getting Away with Murder* and *Lights Out*, the female body remains the site of major critical explorations. In this regard, the plays are in consonance with Indian feminist approaches to 'embodiment', which draw on the Western feminist notions of embodiment, but at the same time, are critical of them. While the 'First Wave' Anglo-American Feminism rarely focused on the body as a site of critical enquiry, engagement with body during the 'Second Wave' was structured by the inheritance of Cartesian dualism where the split between mind and body traditionally privileged the mind over body and associated women only with the latter. Unproblematised relegation of women to their body is also one of the reasons behind the separation between men and women in terms of their socio-cultural and political roles. For Simone de Beauvoir, the body is 'problematic' for women, because, it limits their 'freedom'. Arguing for a dematerialized view of gender, the liberal feminists accepted Beauvoir's position, but the radical feminists 'looked at the female body (nonetheless subordinated and controlled) as the source of empowerment and having the potential to produce social change in being the "source of actual lived and experienced pain, distress and pleasure"' (Howson, 49). Hence, a number of radical feminists like Koedt, Brownmiller, Greer, Millett and Firestone (to name

only a few), writing in the 1970s, addressed the connotations that female body supplies to women's experience of subordination with respect to sexuality, rape, representation and reproduction (48). In accordance with Susan Bordo, Alexandra Howson argues that the radical feminist texts were 'grounded in a language of activism and quite explicitly engaged with a range of women's bodily experiences, 'from foot-binding, corseting to rape and battering to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilization, unwanted pregnancy, and explicit commodification''(48). In the 1980s, however, the female body came to be seen as 'specific, subordinated matter that could be important in transforming social relations and arrangements.' (49). Howson, therefore, lauds the 1980s' radical feminists such as Adrienne Rich for re-conceiving the ways in which the 'female subject' and the 'female embodiment' may be entwined in order to comprehend the body as a 'resource' for women rather than as an inevitable psychological and biological destiny' (49).

Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder*, explores the female body both as 'destiny' as well as 'resource' for a transformed social arrangement. The play revolves around three upper middle class women who are trapped within their 'private' psycho-social spaces of subordination and surrender, amidst the ambivalence of a re-formed social structure. It offers three different perspectives on the sexual/ anatomical reductionism in gendered relations. Sonali, who has been a victim of child sexual abuse, is desperate to reassert her control over her body. Her friend, Mallika, though a successful entrepreneur, is apprehensive of defying the social norms in marrying Gopal (Sonali's brother and her fiancée) who is younger in age. Raziya is a medical doctor but unquestioningly compromises with a cultural structure that compels her to carry on a failed conjugality with her husband who is set to marry another woman. All three women in the play hail from the 'empowered' upper-middle-class section of the society and have enough scope for economic and individual liberty, but each one of them privately continues struggling with embodied social

stratifications. Though the play is written in English and targeted to an educated urban audience, Mehta never projects a singular grand narrative on the living experiences of women in India. Gopal's display of photographs may be referred to as a dramatic technique for supplementing her contentions.

Gopal: It's smeared with muck. That's Indumati. The mob at her heels is drumming her to the river, where they'll kill her and throw her in.

...

Gopal: This one is a close-up (*switches off a light and projects picture on a wall*). See the tension in her neck? Her eyes looking straight at me, accusingly? I had snatched her moments of deepest dread and humiliation – and was about to walk away with them for public display, like a trophy. I ran all the way to the police station instead ... Indumati was saved in the nick of time.

...

Gopal: ... This is Dulkha Devi of Tharwar. The day after I snapped her in the bazaar, she was stripped naked within sight of the police station, her face blackened, head shaved, forced to run around the village while the men beat her with burning brands and sticks till she died (*switches off*).

...

The village priest denounced her as a witch. She had once repulsed him, it seems, so after her husband died of consumption the *pujari* took his revenge by accusing her of eating him up!

...

Gopal: And these are widows and deserted women who live in Chaibasa. (*Another projection*) Male relatives have accused them of being witches in order to usurp their land. Many such cases are pending in the courts.

...

Gopal: (*Offhand*): That? (*stammering suddenly*) She – she's from Barisola village. ...she's a widow – that's her 3-year old daughter with her – and their lives are in danger because her brother-in-law, who covets her land, has accused her of being a witch. (79 – 81)

The random presentation of slides, as a dramaturgic innovation, reflects Antonin Artaud's dramatic strategy of presenting forms of cruelty through minimum rhetoric and props. But most explicit is Mehta's strategy of projecting the difference in lived experiences of Indian women in different regions of the country. The Dulkha Devi of Tharwaris a victim of patriarchal violence, while Mallika and Raziya are trapped in the structures of socio-patriarchal expectations. Sonali, on the other hand, is undergoing post-traumatic experiences of child sexual abuse, but also resistant against being subject to any further control. Hence, the images of women that emerge throughout the play, not only recognize the socio-patriarchal ideologies operating behind the reduction of women to their bodies, but also, suggest that women's reclaiming control over their body may transform the existing social arrangements.

With regard to the above proposition, the play is in sync with the Western materialist feminists of the 1970s and 1980s. They held that the female body's experience of discomfort or liberation is conditioned by its specific location in the socio-economic and political structures. The British sociologist, Ann Oakley situates women's bodily experiences within a social framework where capitalist structure is fused with the patriarchal. Exclusive women's experiences, such as the menstruation and the menopause, are never accommodated in the capitalist economic structure and even pregnancy sometime goes 'invisible' in a more oppressive frame. Though women's bodily experiences are strategically ignored, women's autonomy over their bodies did not go uncorrupt. The technological innovations in biomedicine have situated woman's body (especially during the elaborate medical process of reproduction) not only under the patriarchal surveillance but reified the body in terms of parts and fragments. 'The surveillance of the female body', as Howson observes, is 'part of a more general shift towards visualizing the unseen' (52). Hence, questioning the socio-patriarchal 'normative' structures associated with the 'nature' of women's bodily experiences brought the materiality of women's experiences into more deliberate focus. But such attention

conferred to the social shaping of experience, unwittingly associated experience with gender as a topic of sociological enquiry. Gender, therefore, is different from sex on the one hand and a blank category to be filled with socio-cultural assumptions and praxis, on the other. Consequently, the body came to be seen as a site where the social assumptions of gender are mapped on. The sex/ gender distinction thus sought, defines the hitherto capricious relation between the anatomy of a woman/ man and her/ his gender identity. For Christine Delphy, even sex is enmeshed within the 'practice of social and cultural determination that transforms 'a physical fact into a category of thought' (57). What follows then, is that, sex is not ahistorical but a culturally mediated social product constituted of historically acquired value. Thus, Indumati of Ranchi, Dhulka Devi of Tharwar, the widows of Chaibasa, Sonali, Mallika and Razia are similar in being looked upon and projected as 'sexed' bodies. Following Foucault's contention that 'body' is discursively constituted through forms of power which germinate not in the macrocosmic institutions of state but the 'micro-practices of everyday life' (73), and that power materializes through its operations on individual bodies, it may be argued that the female body continuously evolves as the produce of 'new knowledge and orthodoxies' (74), and involves itself in the social formation of femininity.

But considering the women characters in *Getting Away with Murder* as Foucaultian 'sexed' bodies, has its own problems. For, the notion of the 'sexed body', which was rooted in its specific genealogy of production and projected against the Cartesian privilege of the mind over body, has been criticized for failing to acknowledge the difference in gendered embodiment of male and female. This *difference*, however, has been addressed by Judith Butler in the context of self-other distinction using the post-Lacanian psychoanalytic framework which focuses on writing and textuality. For Butler, discourses are constitutive but not seminal to the body. The latter has 'something' in excess to what is constituted by the

discourse. This 'something' is the 'imaginary space' that characterizes the 'excess of difference', which according to Howson, 'can only be understood through knowledge of text rather than through substantive knowledge derived from observations and understandings of bodily experience rooted in material locations and practices' (85). But to look at the body as text, it is necessary to espouse the Derridian notion 'There is no outside-the-text' (Derrida, 841), which according to Derrida signifies that 'one never accedes to a text without some relation to its contextual opening that a context is not made up only of what is so trivially called text, that is, the words of a book or the more or less biodegradable paper document in a library' (841). Hence, for Derrida, the 'context' of a text is very important. Moreover, for Derrida, *textuality* is characterized by *difference*, *deference* and *multiplicity* of meaning. Therefore the Derridian structure promotes an ambiguity within a system of shifting signifiers, which puts into rapture any constructed whole, and disturbs its fixity and encourages non-stability. Derived from the idea of textuality, and its 'undecidability', 'woman' for Derrida is 'undecidable'. For feminists, this 'undecidability' provides them, the greatest opportunity to break away from the 'fixed' binary categorization (Howson 86). Derrida's aim of 'destabilising the logocentricity, by rethinking the oppositional binary' (86) is championed by the feminists who advocated the rejection of male/ female binary. They used Derrida's deconstructive methods to 'demonstrate how women come to embody difference' (87). Likewise, some feminists have disrupted sex/ gender distinction arguing against the exclusivity of physiological or social category.

Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*, also, rejects the 'feminist' models that reduce woman to her anatomy. It discusses socio-political, cultural and ritualistic factors that collaborate in constituting the 'female' as a separate category. The protagonists of the play, an upper middle class couple (Leela and Bhasker) are 'annoyed' by the 'spectacle' of gang rapes in their colony. They are gradually joined by a number of friends, viz. Mohan, Naina and Surinder

(Naina's husband), but none of them come out of the apartment to help the victim(s). Instead, the scene becomes a cynosure of sex-battle among the male and female characters.

Composed with a 'bystander effect', *Lights Out* recognizes the female body as subject to patriarchal control, repeated sexual abuse and a matter of continuous socio-cultural, political and religious debate. But at the same time, the play provides scope for reworking the sex/gender distinction as 'a stylized repetition of acts... understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self' (Butler 140). Manjula Padmanabhan portrays Leela as the typical woman, and, Bhaskar and Mohan as the typical men indoctrinated in gender roles. Leela is empathetic towards the women who are raped regularly in the colony but depends upon Bhaskar for acting against the atrocities. As an 'ideal' Indian wife, Leela remains passive, and subordinated to her husband throughout the play. But Padmanabhan introduces Naina as a foil to Leela. She not only challenges the vague masculine explanations of rapes, but also urges the men to act. Hence, both the women appear 'relational' to the 'material' condition they are situated in. As Judith Butler proposes, body acts as the medium through which each sex enacts itself both in acquiescence with and through the disruption of norms. For Butler, gender is not absolutely detached from sex, rather, it is mired in the complex structure of heterosexuality that not only creates but also attempts to establish 'an illusion of stability and fixity ... produced through repetition and enactments (typically interpreted as habitual practice) that make it seem as though gender (as identity) is fixed and attached to sex (as in the 'sexed body')' (111). The materiality of sex-gender dichotomy, therefore, is *not* a mere 'given'; it is a product of the process of materialization through repetitive practice which generates the 'effect of boundary, fixing and surface' (111). Body, as a result comes to be seen as 'matter (immutable) over time' (111). In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler develops her idea of 'materiality' and 'body'. While the former is constituted of 'power' that makes materiality

seem 'given', the latter, for Butler, can only be comprehended through the process of linguistic signification because return to the body as matter, is possible only in return through signs. As a product of the system of signs, body emerges as 'relational'(30).

We can perhaps understand 'female body' in *Lights Out* as limiting and conscious of its boundaries which makes them physiologically separate from others. It is discursively produced in relation to a complex socio-political network of dependency/ interdependency/ non-dependency. Padmanabhan presents her characters through layered representations of gender performativity, which is at best an 'enactment' in relation to the 'compulsory' social norms that are made obligatory through the machinations of heterosexual hierarchical forms of power. Body, then emerges as the material site through which 'gender performatives' are enacted, ratified and questioned. The female body is especially intriguing here, because it has been historically compelled to undergo social, political, economic and 'religious' subjugation and denied human subjectivity and agency. But reading the body as text, argues Helene Keyssar, 'risks biological essentialism' (168). 'The body's role in theatrical representation poses some particularly complex issues for material feminists because, despite the extent to which 'gender' and 'character' may be social and/ or theatrical constructions, the facticity of the actor's biological sex always re-inscribes the performer with the cultural codes associated with his/ her gender' (168-9). This is in accordance with Jill Dolan's argument that body can never be free of connotative signs (Dolan 63). Hence, when a female body is presented on stage as a 'speaking subject', as it is also in the case of the plays by Indian women playwrights, the 'body' relatively acquires multiple significations. My main contention in this chapter, however, is to locate the thematic and dramaturgic uniqueness that Indian women playwrights arrive at, with respect to the female body when it is subject to violence. Though violence can take multifarious shapes (gendered violence, sexual violence, domestic violence, communal violence, religious violence, ethnic violence, 'medical' violence, taboos etc.)

depending on the how, why and on whom it is enacted, my proposition is to look at violence as 'abuse'.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines 'violence' as 'violent behavior that is intended to hurt or kill sb (somebody)' (bracketing mine) (1719). It defines 'abuse' as 'the use of sth (something) in a way that is wrong or harmful' (bracketing mine) (6) and 'unfair, cruel, or violent treatment of sb (somebody)' (bracketing mine) (6). The primary difference between violence and abuse, then, is that the former has more to do with the agent whose behaviour ('violent') is worked out on the victim, while the latter establishes the victim as a subject. My endeavor is to supplement the above difference with the representations of women experiences by Indian women theatre practitioners. However, to focus on the difference is not to see abuse as a non-porous compartment, rather, to build on the framework of violence while preserving the former's subtle separations from it.

With the publication of Susan Griffin's 1971 article, *Rape: The All-American Crime*, the 'Western' view on violence came to be recognized as gendered. Her essay refers to some cultures where violence is invariably equated with masculinity. The feminists in the late 1970s and early '80s have cited her essay in order to argue for the 'maleness' of violence (Price 11). R. Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash define violence in conjugal terms. In *Violence Against Wives: A Case against Patriarchy* they argue that violence is 'the persistent direction of physical force against a marital partner or cohabitant' (11). Hence they argue for a heterosexual definition of violence, where woman is the obvious victim. Later, Anne Jones widens the scope of violence by identifying the use of physical force as only an aspect or form of violence, for the latter also includes 'Behaviour you might not think of as 'violence,' behaviour you might think of merely as getting things off your chest ... if it coerces or frightens another person' (88). However, if causing fear is looked upon as the touchstone of

violence/ violent behaviour, then it not only denies the misogynist dimension of male violence, but its sexual nature as well.

Sonali in *Getting Away with Murder* is a victim of 'sexual' abuse. Suffering from forced sexual subjugation, Sonali embodies the experience of discrimination between boy and girl. 'My mother used to exhaust herself over her household tasks – may be because she was grateful to Uncle for taking us in after Father died. She drove herself – and turned me into her satellite: I had to run her errands, mouth her opinions, feel her feelings ... Of course, Gopal escaped all that because he was born with an extra set of accessories' (Mehta 59). Hence, the gendered nature of abuse can never be denied. Subject to sexual abuse, Sonali is reified both by her uncle and her mother, but with her 'body' under constant conflict of 'authorship', she emerges abnormally conscious of her anatomical existence. Hence, 'abuse' may have more complex results on the victim than mere 'violence'. But looked upon as violence, 'abuse' may be placed within the scope of the existing sociological discourse on the gendered nature of violence.

Lisa Price locates two schools of thinkers who understand violence and sex in two different ways – 'Violence is sex' and 'Violence *not* sex' (Price 18). She quotes Jill Radford, 'while men are murdered more frequently than women, men are rarely murdered simply because they are men' (16). For women, Radford says, it is the 'misogynous' attitude that causes their murder the most. Hence the obvious question that she raises is about the role of sexuality in violence. She builds up a feminist approach to 'rape' in order to vindicate the difference in positions of the aforementioned schools. That rape is a matter of violence which involves no sexuality, is a view espoused by Dorrie Klein, Judith Herman, Peggy R. Sanday and Carole J. Sheffield. For them, rape or for that matter even incest, though carried out on the body ('female'), are expressions of power and domination wrought with the patriarchal notion of control instead of being erotic. Price also includes Susan Brownmiller, who

conceptualizes rape as a theft of property. In her book, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975), she argues,

Like assault rape is an act of physical damage to another person, and like robbery it is also an act of acquiring property: the intent is to 'have' the female body in the acquisitory meaning of the term. A woman is perceived by the rapist both as hatred person and desired property. Hostility *against her* and *possession* of her may be simultaneous motivations, and the hatred for her is expressed in the same act that is the attempt to 'take' her against her will. In one violent crime, rape is an act against person and property. (185)

Clark and Lewis agree with Brownmiller and consider rape to be simply an act of larceny of sexual property. They argue,

A sexual attack is, in itself, neither better nor worse than any other kind of attack. ... to treat rape as a sexual offence simply because it involves a penis and a valuable vagina, only reinforces the connections between women as property and women's sexuality as the source of their property value. (179)

Hence, for Clark, Lewis, Brownmiller, and other proponents of "violence *not* sex", sexuality is always *absent* for both the victimizers and the victims. They leave altogether the very question of sexual identity. Among the notable advocates of 'violence is sex' proposition, are Carol Smart, Catharine MacKinnon and Susan Cole. For Smart, in its process of execution violence always incurs 'pleasure with power' (18). Speaking about the rapists, women murderers, the molesters and child abusers, Mackinnon's views are especially intriguing for she asserts that violence meted out to women by men are always already enmeshed in sexual pleasure. Price cites her thus:

[They] enjoy their acts sexually and as men, to be redundant. It is sex *for them*. What is sex except that which is felt as sexual? When acts of dominance and submission, up to and including acts of violence, are experienced as sexually arousing, as sex itself that is what they are. ... Violence is sex when it is practiced as sex. (19)

Therefore, for MacKinnon, sex and violence are not only complimentary but also emerge as synonymous when held in the context of masculine violence over women. Also worth mentioning is Susan Cole's reading of 'rape' through 'weapons' such as the 'broomsticks' instead of penis. She argues that even if weapons are used for rape, it does not erase the idea of sexuality involved in the act, for, in rape, weapons behave as substitutes to the penis. It is the involvement of certain sections of the woman's body, i.e. the erogenous zones, that makes explicit the ideas of sexual pleasure involved in rape. She says:

That the penis is not a weapon in the assault does not mean that sex is not involved: saying rape is about power and not sex leaves out the crucial fact of where the attackers put their weapons. If rape is about power and not sex, why don't attackers just hit women, and exercise their power that way? Because *rape is sex to them*. (118)

When rape is sex, the theorists who equate violence to sex argue that the rape-victim remembers rape only as a forced traumatic sexual experience.

However, both the group of theorists who advocate 'violence *not* sex' and 'violence is sex', can be criticized on the ground that they take hard essentialist positions in arguing their cases. For the 'violence *not* sex' proponents, violence and sex are two extremely separate categories where the presence of one denies the other. But, for the 'violence is sex' theorists, violence and sex are so enmeshed in each other that they fail to appreciate the subtle differences between the two 'categories', owing to the socio-cultural contingencies of the bodies. Moreover, both the schools tend to theorise violence as a mere set of actions and sex

as 'given'. The perpetrator of violence (considered male) – his intentions and instruments (penis or weapon) in fracturing/ dominating/ controlling/ causing fear/ sexually possessing the female body remains the privileged point of focus. My proposition here is to consider 'violence' both as a 'verb' and 'noun'; that one abuses the 'other' and the 'other' suffers the abuse; and then there is the third 'other': the witness who is party to the entire event, who may either seek pleasure or feel empathetic for the victim. Hence the affect must loom large. Leela and Naina in *Lights Out* are empathetic towards the women who are raped in the colony but Bhaskar and Mohan prefer only to discuss the non-credibility of the actions to be seen as an act of rape and rather seek to justify them as taboos or mere domestic brawls.

Lights Out recreates an eye-witness account of an incident that took place in Santa Cruz, Bombay, 1982. It may be mentioned here that in Bombay, in the period 1985 – 89, 504 cases of rape were registered, only 469 were charge sheeted, of which there were 15 convictions and 10 acquittals, and 441 were pending trial in 1990. Also a large number of convictions in the Sessions Courts were overturned on appeal, or the sentences reduced. At the end of the play there is 'no curtain call' (Padmanabhan 53). A dramatic innovation in the 1980s Indian theatre, some messages appear on the curtain in form of slides. The first slide reminds the audience of the 1982 Bombay incident of regular rapes. The next four slides build the familiarity with the incident and establish a bridge between the play and its context. Even though there is no formal end to the play, Padmanabhan's objective is reached. The play is not a general piece about crimes against women. With 'no curtain call' (53), the play travels with the audience wherever they go. It talks with the audience, making them *uncomfortable*. It arrests their attention and makes them relate the incidents on stage with their lived lives. Its production history reasserts the conviction that theatre, at best, is a collaborative art, where along with the actors, director(s) and members of the production, the audience participate in imagining/ reimagining and exploring forms of realities. It reaffirms theatre as 'a cultural

product of historical, geopolitical, and ideological conditions ... capable of reconstructing those conditions by mediating sociopolitical formations' (Sengupta 3). And that theatre 'is as much a representation of offstage "realities" as a space where "realities" are equally formed and re-formed through human performance, exploring in the process a complex relationship between world, text, performance, viewing, and reception'(4). The 'objective reality', which nonetheless has its own structured and politically meditated presence, is an (in)authentic reference to actuality that is imitated by the actors on stage. Thereafter, the actors produce a reality, which in itself is a result of an interaction between the socio-cultural and political condition of the actors, their training, dramaturgical techniques of (re)production and the source(s) of their reference(s). Lastly, and perhaps the most important form of reality amongst the triad is the *reality* that each member of the audience constitute for him/ herself, depending upon his/ her individual interaction with the performance on stage.

When *Lights Out* was adapted with some changes by "Lights Off" production for performance in the Alliance Francaise de Bangalore in 2012, it produced a similar impact on the audience as it did in its initial productions.

The change that did get announced is that the play is no longer set in 1984 and is set in 2012, making this production of *Lights Out*, a contemporary version and an adaptation of the original and not an original in itself anymore. The audience was surely taken by surprise when the actors walked onto the stage from their seated position from amongst the very same audiences. This method of introduction or curtain call, if one may, definitely adds justice to the original play and its purpose to reach out to everyone in the audience. (Joseph)

The play was staged with a definite purpose of critiquing contemporary events in 2010. According to a report on 13th March, 2010 in The "Times of India", the play was performed on *GyanManch* by a Kolkata-based theatre group *Tree Hat*; the response of the audience was

‘overwhelming’: ‘*The full house attendance for Manjula Padmanabhan's Lights Out was overwhelming to say the least.*’ The director of the performance, Shubhayan Sengupta, is quoted, "Lights Out is our second production. We took a joint decision to stage Manjula's play that talks about social awareness. Though the actual events had taken place in the 80s, we don't see much of a change in the reaction of people to disturbing events happening right in front of them. Our play was intended as an eye-opener." (Dasgupta)

What emerges from these accounts of audience reception is that the play has evoked ‘similar’ tensions in the audience across regions and generations. Woman abuse therefore remains a common reference for experience in India, even though the country is making forays into international politics and establishing itself as one of the major players in world economics. The play suggests narratives of modern Indian response towards ‘organised’ sexual abuse. The characters in the play maintain their distance from the ‘event’ and indulge in discussions as to what if it’s not rape? What if it is just a domestic brawl? Is it decent to interfere into other’s familial matter (however violent it may be)? What if it’s a religious taboo? Is it right to ‘hurt’ someone’s religious sentiments (even if it abuses women) in ‘secular’ India? What if it’s just a superstition or an act of ‘exorcism’? What if the raped woman is a whore? Can a woman who is not ‘decent’ be raped at all? Is it being woman that makes one vulnerable to rape? If one has to act, how must he act? What weapons one must use? Knives? Bulbs? Acids? Petrol? Combinations of acid and petrol? Guns? Is it not better to click pictures before stopping the gang rape? Won’t the live photos of gang rape earn money? Padmanabhan gradually points to the general urban reluctance in acting against someone else’s misery. Such reluctance cohabits the common strategy of ignoring the desperate calls for help. Here one can definitely refer to a ‘joke’ cited by Slavoj Žižek in his book *Violence*:

There is an old joke about a husband who returns home earlier than usual and finds his wife in bed with another man. The surprised wife exclaims: “Why have you come back early?” The husband furiously snaps back: “What are you doing in bed with another man?” the wife calmly replies: “I asked you a question first – don’t try to squeeze out of it by changing the topic!” the same goes for violence: the task is precisely to change the topic, to move from the desperate humanitarian SOS call to stop violence to the analysis of that other SOS ... (11)

Padmanabhan’s intentions behind locating her characters at a 'remove' from the main incident, which, in turn removes the audience twice from the actual event, might have been to critique the 'ordinary' forms of theatre productions. In *Lights Out*, the audience is constantly informed about the rapes but never shown. They are teased throughout the play with gestures', 'actions' and even 'reactions' of the characters on stage. Hence the dramaturgy involves the Brechtian apparatus 'gest' to a good effect. In *Leela*, Padmanabhan portrays a woman who is in distress seeing/ hearing 'violence' unfold before her apartment. The audience may be drawn towards believing her but she is never authenticated throughout the play. She is constantly bullied by her husband and his friend, Mohan. Bhaskar says, 'You're (Leela) making too much of it!' (Padmanabhan 5) (bracketing mine), '... Leela's hypersensitive these days' (35). However, the audience cannot believe Bhaskar either, for, through the entire course of the play he denies what is obvious in the colony. Hence the audience always finds itself in a position of 'uncertainty'. Praggnaparamita Biswas speaking on the play's dramaturgy says that,

'Padmanabhan's ... semiotic application by depicting three different sound effects: heart rending cry for help of the rape victim lady, Leela's hysterical outburst and

Freida's constant reticence generates a series of antithetical verbal/ non-verbal gest which tries to configure the reality of barbarism. Crying is an oral gesture through which the raped lady wants to verbalize her inner turmoil and physical agony, while Leela's hysteria is a strong performative gest through which she likes to ventilate her suppressed emotional pangs of ignorance. Freida's silence indicates a kind of saturation and subsequent acceptance for survival. This three gradual diminishing of resonance modulations denote the fathom of violence against women. The bizarre sounds of screaming intermittently – screams emanating from a woman in the construction site – who is raped and brutalized every night in the midst of arch lights signaling to a gender oppressive society'. (371)

Such 'performative gest(s)' as mentioned above is also found in Dina Mehta's *Getting Away With Murder*, where the audience is provided subtle suggestions for weaving a complex narrative of psycho-social structure, projecting inter-sex battle in multiple levels. The play begins with Mallika, a successful businesswoman waiting in a restaurant for Sonali, an upper middle class housewife. As Sonali arrives and they talk her pregnancy, the waiter informs that the back wheel of Mallika's car has been punctured by someone. Mallika at once understands who has done it – 'I think I know who did it – that creepy bastard I brushed off!' (Mehta 65). Along with Mallika, the audience also knows that it was the *man* who tried to be 'cozy' (55) with Mallika before Sonali's arrival. The waiter's message suggests that a 'man' would never take a 'no' for a proposal from a woman and that if he anyhow fails, he may stoop so low as to harm the woman or at least something she possesses. But even more suggestive is Mallika's mature handling of the situation which bears enough suggestions of her 'habitus' in a so-called male dominated public world. Instead of being disturbed, Malu slights the matter saying 'Come on, Sonali, I'll drop you home in a taxi, then get to office and

send Raju to take care of the Maruti. Get your things while I settle the bill' (65). The act of puncturing Mallika's 'red Maruti' shows the male tendency of asserting his superiority, while, Mallika's act of cool indifference is a 'performative gest' towards the ability of empowered women in managing the 'male world'.

Dramaturgic innovations and adjustments often allow the playwright-directors to comment on contemporary events. While Dina Mehta makes strong commentary on the nexus between caste tensions, upper class greed for land and the police administration, in referring to the reluctance of the police to stop women from being abused and stoned to death, Padmanabhan also makes subtle satirical references to the administrative machineries in *Lights Out*. In the play, Leela repeatedly pleads for calling the police. She believes that the state machinery will indubitably save her from experiencing the pain and fear she is forced to undergo in being exposed to the atrocities on women near her apartment. Even, Naina feels the same. But the men, who claim to know the 'real' 'public world', discourage them to expect the police to intervene in such 'petty' matters and if at all the police comes, the complex legal process will not take into consideration women's experiences. Bhasker advises Leela to go to the doctor instead of police. Mohan says that the police won't interfere in the matters of religion considering the spectacle of woman abuse to be ritualistic. What these accounts refer to is that the state in terms of its repressive apparatuses such as the police, works in collaboration only with the oppressor in order to bring about subordination/ domination/ control of the individual body/ bodies. Hence the body may be considered a site of control. The Dulkha Devi of Tharwar, subject of one of the snaps from Gopal's collections in *Getting Away with Murder*, is 'stripped naked within the sight of the police station, her face blackened, head shaved, forced to run round the village while the men beat her with burning brands and sticks till she died' (80). Gopal adds that she was killed only because she rejected the advances of a

village priest. It would only be pertinent here to refer to the fact that the legal procedures concerning rape as public agenda of protest were put forward by the women's groups in the late 1970s only when Supreme Court acquitted 'the police rapists of a young tribal girl, Mathura' (Menon, 69)

Manjula Padmanabha, however, looks into rape in much wider light. While the women in *Lights Out* are extremely anguished for the regular rapes in the colony, Bhasker, who claims to have seen women being raped 'once or twice' (Padmanabhan 6), mentions the motif of enjoyment in the process (9). But Mohan presses on the act of looking at the 'rape' taking place. Both try to establish that the 'victims want us (them) to watch' (23) (bracketing mine). They graphically describe the actions—

Bhasker: Naked. They are usually naked. ... They start off clothed and then begin to loose 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. (24)

The detailed discussions of the 'ceremony' of unclothing before the act of violence, points to the male sexual arousal at the description of sexual violence on women, defined as 'gorenography' by Jane Caputi:

This equation of sex and violence is the essence of gorenography, and I will see the term here to refer to those materials that, although not sexually explicit enough to qualify as pornography (that is, not enough close-up nudity or graphic sexual acts), nonetheless are pornography ... in that they present violence, domination, torture, and murder in a context that makes these acts sexual. (210)

While the act of sexual abuse on women can produce sexual arousal in men, the same, can create fear in women. Throughout the play, Leela complains that she is afraid and Bhaskar offers her different methods to keep the fear away. Leela exemplifies the 'timid body' and therefore is always sheltered, tamed and taught. She repeatedly asks Bhaskar to call the police but never calls herself. She refers to her children and the precautions she has adopted to protect them from the cynic effects of the spectacle of rape. Hence, in playing the ideal wife and mother, Leela ceases to be the 'speaking subject', which has the potential to cause turmoil in the 'toxic' socio-patriarchal normal. She remains a woman who is not only reified by the others, but also one who has reified herself.

Raziya in *Getting Away with Murder* is to a certain extent Leela's counterpart in *Lights Out*. Raziya, as we meet her in the play, is not the 'Razzle Dazzle' (Mehta 59) she formerly used to be. She has reduced herself to such an inner 'anxiety' that she will not claim or assert her sexuality any more. She confides to Mallika that her husband, Habib, is going to marry a young girl of 19, and she is happy that by the Islamic laws, she will continue to be the 'first wife' of her husband. In an apologetic tone, she divulges Malu that she can't give a child to her husband, 'the fault lies with me (her). The fatal flaw. I'm that joke of nature – a barren woman.' (Mehta 79) (bracketing mine). She is repentant about the fact that her body defies the 'fundamental' aspect of reproduction. It is not that Raziya is unaware of the discursive constructions of the body; that the present connotations of the body have been genealogically produced via the interaction of multiple discourses, but her helplessness is, as she herself puts it, 'an ancient tyranny at work within me (her) that makes me (her) believe that a man's desire for children must be satisfied' (78) (bracketing mine).

Though Raziya capitulated before the cultural expectations of a (barren) woman, Sonali who has been subject to repeated sexual abuse from the tender age of 8, is desperate to (re)claim autonomy over her body. She has experienced throughout, that her body is a site of other's control but she asserts her body as site of resistance too. We understand that Sonali's consciousness of the body is a result of the sexual abuse she has been subject to. She was made aware that the male penis is socially more desired and hence privileged over the female uterus and breasts. Her physical features aroused sexual desire in her uncle and reduced her to *his* 'possession'. The body, looked upon as a 'given', therefore, relegated as an object shaped by the social perspectives inscribed on it. Sonali remains traumatized. She feels being watched, controlled and constantly put under surveillance. She substitutes her mother-in-law with her uncle who wanted to see her naked every time she went to bath. Mehta draws Gopal in absolute contrast to Sonali. He was never taught to share, never expected to be responsible towards the house and therefore has grown up as a freelancer, committed to no serious relationship.

For Sonali, body remains the primary source of apprehension. Hence she has remained desperate to claim authority over it. She asks Mallika to request Raziya for a legally banned test, 'aminocentesis', which no doubt is an innovation in medical science, but at the same time, an instrument lending greater access to the woman body. But Sonali's own emphasis in doing the sex-determination test is shaped by her previous experiences. She wants to be sure if the foetus is a boy or a girl. If it's a girl, she would abort her pregnancy, for, 'To be born a girl is to be subject to violence and servitude' (Mehta 63). She wants to preserve her choice of a boy child, for, she remembers as a girl, the tickles and the touches of her uncle from her childhood; the discrimination between her and her brother; the social education that her mother left her with – if the husband physically abuses the wife, the latter must 'enjoy' it.

Hence, the lack of penis looms large in Sonali's anatomical and social perception of the body. But, as Mallika says, '... At least Sonali is tearing herself up – injecting chaos in her world – to disrupt an order she finds oppressive' (77).

Though Mallika finds Sonali impressive over Raziya, in her assertion of choice and desire for 'emancipation' (63), she is herself 'helpless' in her relationship with Gopal. She loves him but is apprehensive of marrying because she is six years older to him. Raziya condemns her for 'assessing yourself (her) through male eyes' (73) (bracketing mine). Mallika's reluctance in moving out of the relation with Gopal and repeated forgiveness of latter's 'mistakes' of getting into sexual liaison with different girls, may be read, as Mallika's reification of her own body as a result of her social and cultural indoctrinations. But at the same time, Gopal's inability to move away from Mallika, forces us to consider Mallika in a different light too. She may be argued to epitomize the major shift in woman's position from the desirable to the *desiring*. This may also be identified as Mehta's major breakthrough in understanding the changed location of the 'emancipated' working women.

However, Mehta is also aware of the hindrances that women face in industrialist capitalist structures. That women can be strategically reduced to their bodies even in corporate business is represented through Thelma, who was subject to the sexual advances of Mr. Pinglay, Mallika's business partner. When Thelma refused to succumb to the sexual desires, she was blackmailed for some trivial phone calls. Thelma's case may be explained by Adrienne Rich's use of Catherine A. Mackinnon's idea that "sexualization of the woman" is part of the job. Central and intrinsic to the economic realities of women's lives is the requirement that women will market sexual attractiveness to men, who tend to hold the economic power and position to enforce their predilections'. (641) Also worth referring is Mr. Pinglay's

chauvinistic attitude towards women in business. In one instance, Mallika complains to Sonali about Pinglay's high handedness thus:

'Yesterday Pinglay had the gall to tell me that women should stick to secretarial work – or, at best, PR work. Knowing full well that I'm out there on the front-line, getting all the business, running the entire office.' (Mehta 61).

While Mehta intelligently puts the 'feminist' concerns along with the masculine denial of women's capacity for cerebral works in the public sphere, Padmanabhan in presenting a debate over the visualization of rape in the colony subtly subverts the masculine rhetoric with a female one. When Leela finally comes out with a conviction that the brutality outside her apartment is nothing else than rape, Bhasker and Mohan deny it vehemently. They argue that the very act of repeating the abuses every night, must refer to a certain ritualistic exorcism which must be performed daily for the 'fits' come at 'regular times, every day' (Padmanabhan 38). Naina however rejects the explanation –

Naina: Three men, holding down one woman, with her legs pulled apart, while the fourth thrusts his – organ – into her! What would you call that – a poetry reading?
(39)

Bhasker immediately echoes the theorists who argue for 'violence' as not sex.

Bhasker: But the beating, then? The brutality? If all that they wanted was a little *sex*, why would they go to the trouble of so much violence? (39)

Naina retorts, 'Most forms of rape, especially gang rape, are accompanied by extreme physical violence. (39) Hence, Naina apparently brings an end to the sex/violence debate, by positing violence as complimentary to sex in rape. To this, Bhasker and Mohan add a new dimension. They argue that women, who are 'raped' daily in the colony, may be whores and

if they are whores, they cannot claim to be raped because only 'decent' women can be raped. Hence they shift focus from the *bodies* of the victims to the moral standards.

Naina questions why a whore can't be raped, for rape involves the questions of *choice* and a whore can exercise her choice, when she is choosing clients.

Bhasker: Whatever rights a woman has, they are lost the moment she becomes a whore.(41)

Bhasker's words subtly suggest that choice is evocative of the desiring women, who must be looked upon as deviants. They can be hysterical but they cannot claim any rights. The extremely didactic stand that men take at this point also ventilates the general masculine anxiety of losing control over women's sexuality. A whore is sexually 'liberated' and not under the aegis of any particular male. Naina questions Bhaskar about the standards that separate a whore from the 'decent'. Bhaskar replies: 'It becomes difficult once their clothes are off and they're covered in blood and filth. (42). Hence, the entire debate between decent and non-decent comes down to the body as a plain slate which frustrates the processes of rationalization and cultural/ social/ political identification. The naked body emerges as an anatomy which is potentially devoid of any cultural signification. Naina, therefore, asks-

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. (43)

Hence, Mohan and Bhasker consent to the fact that a woman's body is inscribed with sexual significance in terms of male desire. What follows, then, is that the 'male body', anatomically different as it is from the female, has no significance unless and until 'desired'.

Naina pulls the debate a little further, this time, with finer web of words, and Bhasker and Mohan fall in the strategic trap they themselves have framed until now.

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. ...

Bhasker: After all ... what is a woman but someone decent enough to be raped?

Mohan: And what is a man but someone too indecent to be raped?

Naina: But if men are too indecent to be raped does it mean that men are whores? (43)

Hence, Naina, contriving a language of her own, at the end of the debate subvert the man/woman hierarchy in terms of decency, body and abuse.

Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta, therefore, try to build a vocabulary through which the gender/ sex dichotomy is not only broached in terms of body and abuse/ violence but also re-questioned, re-interpreted and finally subverted in a way that puts them in separation from the feminist theatre practitioners of 'home' and the 'world'.