



## VOICING THE SPATIAL OTHER: PLAYS OF MANJULA PADMANABHAN

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### Abstract

*The present chapter conceptualizes spatial marginalization where gender is one of the dynamic constituents which become the base of 'Othering'. There are other constituents which could be the base of othering along with gender such as race, caste, class, language or location etc. These constituents are overlapping, for example, gender discrimination leads to spatial segregation which appears natural separation of spaces but it is rather socio-politically constructed. Othering is a continuous process which makes one 'outsider', marginalized and not being the participant and locates the person in a disadvantageous position. It is a process as the dominant system enforces the mothering through socialization, hegemonic knowledge system and through various institutions whereas the person or group of people who are at the marginal position struggle continuously to change his/her position of disadvantage by various means of resistance. The victim of gender-spatial othering could be of any gender and not essentially a woman as the position and sociocultural context is the determining factors In the process of marginalization.*

**Keywords:** Voicing and Plays.

## INTRODUCTION

The chapter deals with the spatial positioning of gendered bodies in the specific context and for this purpose, the three selected plays written by Manjula Padmanabhan are the fields of study: *Lights Out*, *Harvest*, and *Hidden Fires*. The theoretical analysis is based on the close textual study of the plays. The themes and theoretical studies are interlinked and overlapping as the three plays cover different dimensions of body politics, and the positioning of gendered bodies within the home, society, communities and religions and in the territory of the nation in gendered spatial context. For example, the play *Lights Out* is located in the urban space of apartment culture and it raise voice against the developing sense of disconnection and unaccountability against the violence; whereas *Harvest* takes up the issue of inhuman and

undignified treatment of individuals, commodification of the body of the poor from the third world and rising impact of technological advancement on everyday lives of the people; *Hidden Fires* revolves around the conflict within the boundaries of the nation, ethnic and sexual violence.

Manjula Padmanabhan is born in 1953 and she belongs to Kerala. She grew up in Europe and Southeast Asia. She has spent her creative life in Bombay and Delhi and has shifted to the US at present (2017). She is a noted playwright, fiction writer, cartoonist, journalist, and an artist of par excellence. Manjula Padmanabhan tackles many genres at the same time. She is the first Indian playwright to earn international fame with her play *Harvest* which was awarded the Onassis International Cultural Competition Prize for Theatrical Plays in Greece in 1997. Her dramatic skill lies in her efforts to recreate theatre as an open-ended process rather than a finished product. Her plays are issue based and she remains concerned to convey social messages through the plays.

The list of her plays includes *Lights Out* (1984), *The Artist's Model* (1995), *The Sextet* (1996), *Harvest* (1998), *Hidden Fires* (2003). She has authored short stories, novels, books for the children and comic strips. She wrote *Getting There* (2000) which is a travel memoir, *Escape* (2008), her first novel, *Hot Death, Cold Soup: Twelve Short Stories* (1996), *Kleptomania: Ten Stories* (2004), *This is Suki!* (2002), *Double Talk* (2005), a comic strip; *Mouse Attack* (2003), *Mouse Invaders* (2004), *Unprincess!* (2005), *I am different! Can you find me?* (2011), *We Are Different!* (2013), *Three Virgins and Other Stories* (2013) and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015) is her second novel. She is the creator of the iconic *Suki*, a comic strip character appeared in the Sunday Observer (Bombay) and later in The Pioneer (New Delhi).

As a female playwright, Padmanabhan does not essentialize the world into two gender-based categories of women and men in her writings. She had admitted the fact that the interdependence of man and woman needs to be acknowledged. Padmanabhan is one of the representatives of contemporary Indian women writers in English who have boldly stepped out of conventions defining respectability to address issues of gender, woman's body, its exploitation in families and within a social setting. Unlike conventional women writing Padmanabhan has been writing on the issues of social concerns which appeals to the masses at large and cannot be strictly put into the category of feminist writing. She admitted in one of her interviews that she was brought up with very few restrictions (Dutta 2). When her father retired and her family came back to India, she observed the conventional way of looking at women in a traditional society which find reflection in her writings. Her approach

was like being outside “looking in” to explore the gender and other social issues within the urban Indian society.

Through her plays, Padmanabhan has opened up fresh dialogues from new angles of feminist concerns. But she does not call herself a feminist as she said, “I believe in the duality of human sexual identity and I truly believe in the complementarity of the gendered life, the idea that we are not complete as single entities and that a combination of opposites makes us whole” (Dutta 5)” which suggests that Padmanabhan is convinced with the popular or rather negative definition of the idea of feminism which is considered as homogeneous, essentialist and partial. In her semi-autobiographical work *Getting There* (2000), she writes:

“At eighteen feminism caught up with me. It forced me to realise that there were problems far worse than being frizzy-haired, bespectacled and fat. It enlarged my horizon of conflicts. It gave me a sense of community and purpose. It gave me a point of view and a vocabulary of complaint. It empowered me to buy my own contact lenses. . . . But for all that it did for me, feminism could not give me a reason to live beyond thirty” (64).

Nevertheless, her writings reflect her serious take on gender issues. In one of her interview, she said, “Selfhood is a very complex issue. . . . In a certain sense, we are all experimenting with sexual/social borders with every choice we make – whether it is to wear bindi or use contraception or to eat garlic and eggs” (qtd. in Nath 4).

### **Methodology**

In the present research, the theories of space and gender are employed to get the comprehensive understanding of the selected socio-cultural and political context. The method of textual analysis with descriptive and analytical approaches has been used in the study. The method of performance analysis and review analysis are also used along with the close reading of the plays to get a comprehensive understanding of the selected plays taking them as performative texts. Gender ethics and sensibility runs throughout the study. The study relies on extensive literature survey which forms the very essence of qualitative research. Library, journals and web sources have been accessed to get an intact exposure on the subject.

### **Delimitation**

The present research is based on urban spatial, socio-political and gender contexts of the post-1980s in India. The selected plays of the playwrights Manjula Padmanabhan are focused on the urban educated middle-class society hence, concerned with the spatial existence and challenges of the urban Indian setting. The research concentrates on Indian English drama and urban proscenium theatre. Also, the study is concerned with the plays of Manjula

Padmanabhan and not with the fiction and prose writings of the selected authors. There is a wide scope of study in different spatial contexts through gender lens but it is not feasible to incorporate several spatial contexts in one study. Though the study is focused on the spatial othering of the gendered bodies it is female genders that are focused in the plays hence, in the research study also. Further, the present study is an attempt to deconstruct the binary category of man/woman and open up a third space of possibilities, equality and recognition of differences, however, the third space is discussed in brief as it was not possible to incorporate the study of alternative spaces in details in the present study.

## RESULTS

Hidden Fires is a different play in comparison to the other plays as taken for analysis in the present research study. It raises the issues of massacre, sexual violence, communal riots. Manjula Padmanabhan has written the play Hidden Fires with a purpose and not for the sake of writing. She tried to suggest that it is high time for violence and people should learn from their history. The play gives the message of non-violence and the sense of compassion for the fellow human beings. Nancy Fraser explains what Habermas meant with the idea of “public sphere” is that it is a body of “private persons” assembled to discuss matters of “public concern” or of “common interest” (58). Habermas’s concept of “public sphere” is exemplified in such kind of theatre where plays are not one way performance. It becomes a platform to discuss certain issues which concern the public in general and it is exemplified through the play Hidden Fires. In the play, Padmanabhan has tried to involve the audience with the game show, directly addressing them and asking public opinion time to time in the midst of the play. As a playwright, she has tried to open up people’s eyes, to let them get away with fear and take stand against the injustice happening around them.

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