*Lights Out* is based on an eye-witness account of an incident that took place in Santa Cruz,

Mumbai, 1982. Here Padmanabhan deftly portrays a pack-rape along with the communal apathy

that it is often met with, even if there are people within range to be able to come to the rescue of

the victim. Leela and Bhasker, a married couple, have been hearing sounds of the sexual assault

being made on a woman near their residence. The play builds up the situation in a gradual

crescendo-like manner, since there is no direct reference to the assaults towards the beginning of

the play. Instead, we are only given Leela’s pained, hyper-sensitive responses to the heart-

rending screams, “Oh don’t ! I don’t like you even talking about it!”(21).

Bhasker’s friend Mohan, having been told about these incidents, comes to their house, to see

the ‘crime being committed’ – in other words, to satisfy his urge for voyeuristic pleasure in

witnessing such an act. As it begins to dawn upon the reader (or audience) that the ‘act’ is

a ‘gang-rape’, and has been going on night after night without arousing any resistance or

sympathy, the sheer dehumanization of the female body is brought to light. By a mere command

to the inhabitants of the area to put their ‘lights out’ at night, the perpetrators of such inhuman

violence succeed in throwing darkness upon the human instincts of what one might call a fast

degenerating society. Padmanabhan tries to arouse anger at such a mindless societal passivity in

the face of sexual violence to the female body.

As if apathy is not enough, there are hints of ‘it’ being a religious ceremony. When Leela

responds, “But even when its not a … nice religion?”(25), Mohan, after offering some concocted

arguments, answers, “I am almost convinced of it!”(27), as if he and Bhasker are desperately

trying to arrive at some explanation for the molestation that would make it sound ‘right’. Mohan

next comes up with the idea that it could be an exorcism – trying to drive a demon out of the

woman. When Bhasker nonchalantly observes, “Funny, how it is most often women who become

possessed”(38), Mohan insensitively answers, “They are more susceptible.”(38). Exasperated,

Leela finally bursts out: ”It’s a rape, isn’t it?”(38). To which again, Bhasker apathetically

responds, “She could be a whore, you know!”(39), because “a decent woman would never

be with four men at once !”(40).

It never occurs to either of these men that the assault could have been forced upon the

woman. It could be possible that the woman had been abducted. Thus, the idea that emerges is

that these men are somehow trying to avoid shouldering responsibility towards prevention of

such a crime. Hence, they find it easier to lay blame upon the woman who is being assaulted. So

that when Naina raises the question, “Even a whore has the right to choose her clients?”(41), and

Leela expresses the misery of a whore’s situation suggesting that it is forcefully thrust upon her,

and not something she chooses to do through volition, Mohan can only come up with a lame

explanation: “After all, finally, the difference between men and women is that women are

vulnerable to rape…”(43). All this while, the reader is conscious of the rape going on in the

background and such inconsequential banter on the part of the men only arouses frustration.

Towards the end, when Naina’s husband Surinder comes on the scene, and the men decide to

rescue the victim of the rape, all they actually end up doing is plan one bizarre thing after

another. For Surinder, rescuing the victim is more a question of accepting the challenge thrown

by the rapists upon the self-respect of the inhabitants of the area. Mohan, cruel and inconsiderate,

goes to the extent to suggest, “Pictures like these…we’d make a lot of money – after all, how

often does anyone see authentic pictures of a gang-rape in action?”(52). Meanwhile, the

victimizers have already left. Padmanabhan arouses our horror at the rape and at the same time, a

disgust and anger towards the passive spectators of such brutality. The play ends on a note of

despair, without suggesting any kind of solution to the problem of coercive violation of a

woman’s private bodily space. But perhaps that’s what the intention of the playwright was – to

leave us agitated and uneasy, and make us realize that we too might have been such unknowing

partners-in-crime. The inanity of the characters is thus a Brechtian technique meant to spur the

readers to reaction.