CONSTRUCTING GENDER: A STUDY OF MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *LIGHTS OUT!* AND GURCHARAN DAS' *MIRA*

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Abstract

The human history has witnessed a constant power struggle between the two sexes—male and female — and this conflict has its genesis in the socio-cultural process of constructing and appropriating the gender identities. In this process of labelling, enabling or restricting whereby the roles of a man or a woman are defined, the dominant patriarchy keeps itself at the centre while the female, the 'other', is pushed to the margins. This hierarchy favouring male over female faced resistance in the past from women and further more fiercely in the 20th century when they started voicing their concerns about not getting justice at the hands of male writers so far as their position in society was concerned—in private as well as public places, and this voice found place in different forms of arts, particularly by women, questioning the very pyramid of power structure from where this labelling is created. Just to counter the male hegemony, the women writers started coming out with their own writings, speaking from their side. The present paper analyses the socio-cultural process of constructing gender by two contemporary playwrights, Manjula Padmanabhan and Gurcharan Das, in their two plays Lights Out! and Mira respectively. Despite being contemporary, the playwrights differ in their perspective, accordingly in dramaturgy as well in positioning of gender. Thematic issues, time, setting, symbols, language as well as stagecraft—all these contribute in determining how Manjula and Das are similar as well as different from each other in their perceptions of gender, remaining oblivious to their own gender.

Key words: Gender, hierarchy, resistance, patriarchy, identity

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The debate regarding the conceptualisation and presentation of gender in the literary texts is a perennial feature of the human history, putting the writers into two opposite camps on the basis of their gender. The Feminist movement came into being as a reaction against women's continued marginalisation by the male writers, accusing them of not doing justice to the portrayal of women in literary texts. Being at the margins and feeling slighted, the women writers and the critics, from radical to moderate, started coming out with gender-centric texts as a reactionary tactic. The focus as they claim was to do justice to women in texts as well as society, which they felt was not possible at the hands of men. Beauvoir's argument is an extension in this regard: 'Although male writers, such as Stendhal, can portray women characters extremely well from the outside, only women can represent the lived experience of women—a task which she expressively undertakes in her fiction of 1960s' (2004: 99). Though human history is mainly regarded as man's history but the 20th century unfolded a new world for the women writers and their presence became more and more visible in the last 50 years. India being a multilingual, multicultural country, women writings started coming up in regional languages with local colour and issues. But under the effect of colonial rulers, English gradually started making its presence felt so far as literary writings were concerned. Among different genres Drama remained a poor cousin to other flourishing literary forms like poetry, fiction and short story, and limited largely to the men's world. The genres of fiction and drama represent two different worlds — the former is identified with the private space, as fiction-writing is considered a solitary private exercise, very close to a woman's heart, as argued by Virginia Woolf: "…a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," (p. 6) while drama, which is to be performed on stage, is identified with public space, and representative of male assertion.

The arrival of women playwrights in English like Manjula Padmanabhan, Poile Sengupta, Dina Mehta and Uma Parmeshwaran on the literary scene invited attention, particularly after the arrival of feminism. All their works focus on women-centric issues, 'called as Feminist theatre', giving a voice to the marginalised women. This was apparently to re-appropriate her position vis-à-vis man. Though their male predecessors gave considerable space to women in their body of works—Mahesh Dattani, Tendulkar, Partap Sharma, Gurcharan Das and Nissim Ezekiel— but their women were constructed, it was maintained, from a man's perspective, hence looked with suspicion. Assuming that authorial voice affects the presentation

of gender in texts, the present paper aims at studying the process of gender positioning in the literary texts. For this purpose the two contemporary playwrights' works—Gurcharan Das' *Mira* and Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out!* — have been selected. Both the plays are based on the past. *Lights Out!* as claimed by Manjula herself is based on a real life incident of early 1980s whereas Das allows a re-look into the life of 16th century saint Mirabai. Though both the playwrights are not very prolific in their writings, yet their works raise questions relating to gender, man-woman relationships, society, religion, history, etc. In this regard Manjula is perhaps better equipped than Das with her armoury of dramatic devices like silence, body, language, locale, light, dark, music and setting, etc. Though they appear quite concerned with the fate of woman in a society hostile to her and develop the thematic issues with the dramaturgy suited to them, but in doing so they take different positions in positioning the gender in its milieu.

Manjula's dramatic world is painted in black and grey; there is darkness all around, embodying impotency of human values, state-apathy, violence, selfishness, obscured rationality, etc. Traversing through her dramatic world one recalls the India portrayed by V.S. Naipaul in his fictional works. Not only in her texts, even the setting, the sound and visuals, the technique, the costume, the juxtapositioning of physical, spatial and mental world, all come together to achieve the desired effect. The play describes not only the reactions and responses of middle class educated families towards the fate of the rape victim but also highlights the gross apathy of the state machinery in safeguarding its citizens, particularly women. Facing an existential dilemma, Manjula's own self, being a repository of womanly experiences, makes her identify with the victim. Locating woman in her private, controlled spaces, she not only feels what is passing through the inner recesses of her mind, the inner conflict and anguish lying beneath her exterior—her cravings for dignity, space, identity, control over her body and soul— but also makes her dramaturgy a vehicle to protest against the continuous exploitation and subversion of woman.

Padmanabhan uses her own unique set of binaries—silence/cries, light/darkness, decent/indecent, male hegemony/female subservience, private/public, body/soul, mask/reality, inside/outside, self/society—to bring to the fore the stark realities lying underneath the Indian social system. The lives of the people on the margins, especially of woman twice marginalised in Indian society, are at the centre-stage in her plays. Manjula describes them in the

backdrop of changing and developing India of post-1980s. She is not a radical feminist; rather she believes in the middle path where both sexes have their fair share: "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 2015). She uses her text as an active agent to unfold the power structure controlling the human relations, and the textual staging of rape in *Lights Out!* makes the audience participatory.

The play explains how the gender affects the perception of an individual in looking at the issues related to woman's body and soul. Manjula is of the opinion that only a woman can feel the pulse of another woman in issues related to her body and soul. Leela, the central character in the play, shares her pain with her husband Bhasker regarding the horrific crime being committed repeatedly at the appointed hour every night in an under-construction structure under the lights outside their flat and wants him to take some steps to stop the crime. But her repeated pleas get no prompt and serious action from indifferent Bhasker; rather she is advised to concentrate on something important:

LEELA. But I can hear them…

BHASKER. *(As if to a child)* But sounds can't hurt you…

LEELA. Oh, but they do, those dirty, ugly sounds… (*Lights Out!*:8)

Leela internalises the pains of the assaulted woman and goes through the trauma as if she herself is being assaulted. She doesn't have the courage to go near the window and see the crime with her eyes. It is only through incoherent, rugged recurring voices coming from outside that she visualises the horrific crime being committed.

To show the power relations between man and woman, Padmanabhan uses language which is direct, loaded with power and authority, giving it a gender. The discourse shows the stamp of male authority; Bhasker, Mohan and Surinder, three male characters, use language as a device to silence women. On one pretext or another, they keep deferring the call to the police or taking any action regarding the crime. Their naming of the rape incident (religious ceremony, ritual, exorcism, sacred rites (*Lights Out!*: 127-28), the culprits (priest, exorcism exerciser to bring relief to the victims, paramours, the cult of body-builders, *sadhus* (*Lights Out!*: 127-28) and the victim (demon possessed, whore, indecent, willing partner (*Lights Out!:* 127-28) show the height of insensitivity towards the lot

of women in general. Kate Clark underlines that naming strategy also has a pattern behind it: "Naming is a powerful ideological tool. It is also an accurate pointer to the ideology of the maker... The naming of the assault and its participants as those of religion also works in giving it a positive hue" (Clark: 22). The frequent use of cuss words by the male characters hurts the feminine sensibility. Language has its own gender, and according to Virginia Woolf, words and sentences can be defined as belonging to man and woman: "That's a man's sentence" (Woolf: 77). Leela is on the verge of a nervous breakdown but cannot pronounce the word 'rape'. The use of words, like 'organ', 'whore' 'nakedness', 'holding legs apart', 'lower orifice', 'slut', 'wet', is a male strategy in a patriarchal world to disintegrate the psyche of a sensitive woman, further pushing her to the periphery in a man-woman hierarchy of relationships. Monique Plaza quotes Foucault while referring to the power game behind the bodily oppression: "What do they say except that they want to defend the freedom that men have at the present time to repress us by rape? What do they say except that what they [men] call (their) freedom is the repression of our bodies?" (99) Naina's throat runs dry and her heart sinks when she visualises the rape-scene but is unable to pronounce the word 'rape'. Manjula's deliberate use of such words in the text exposes the power games played by men to maintain the gender hierarchy. Mohan's sarcastic use of words with Naina is just aimed at unsettling her: "…You must've seen a lot of rape, Naina to recognize it at one glance" (39). This comment makes one think about the interrogation of the rape victim by the police in the rape cases in our country. Mohan or any other male can be clubbed with thinking of the patriarchy-ridden police towards women in Indian society. Naina, who initially appears empowered and bold to take some steps, becomes subdued when her husband Surinder snubs her and she falls in line with the designs of the men-folk.

A woman 'would like' whereas a man 'wants' and this characterises the active/passive binary between the two genders. Foucault asserts that all social interactions pervade through the exercise of power: "I mean that in human relations, whatever they are - whether it be a question of communicating verbally . . . or a question of a love relationship, an institutional or economic relationship power is always present: I mean the relationship in which one wishes to direct the behaviour of another" (Foucault: 11). The discourse between the two groups on gendered lines—men and women—underlines the manoeuvrings of the male characters in not taking any step. The delaying tactics and naming tricks tell about the height of the

absurdity but even here a pattern is visible when both men become consenting partners to subvert the women-psyche:

> LEELA. …We are listening to the sounds of a woman being raped. Outside our window, under the lights.
>
> BHASKER. Don't over-react, Leela, it's almost definitely an exorcism…
>
> NAINA. Most forms of rape, especially gang rape, are accompanied by extreme physical violence!
>
> MOHAN. But are all the rapists normally naked, like these people out there?
>
> BHASKER. And do they usually perform under the lights, in front of an audience of decent people, respectable people?...
>
> NAINA. *(Disgusted)* What? What's left?
>
> BHASKER. She could be a whore, you know! (*Lights Out!*: 138-39)

The difference in gender perspective becomes clear with regard to crime on women when Leela questions Bhasker: "We don't even really watch it, do we? I mean *I* don't. *Pause.* But…*you* do! *You* watch it!" (*Lights Out!*: 6). This male-gaze syndrome foregrounds woman's sexual identity and presents her as an object to be consumed by the curious onlookers. The rape-scene appears to give them sadistic pleasure. Women, on the other hand, guard their bodies with the sanctified consciousness. Their body belongs to them only and any violation of it is outrageous and unacceptable while for men it is a trivial issue. That's why what women can't see through their eyes, even don't want to think about or pronounce the word, becomes a spectacle for men. Manjula further removes the façade from the faces of middle class' complicity in the wrongdoings in the society by quoting Sushila, an educated woman: 'That we're part of…of what happens outside. That by watching it, we're making ourselves responsible' (*Lights Out!*: 6). A point is well raised by Arthur Miller in his play *Incident at Vichy* while discussing anti-Semitism: 'Each man has his Jew; it is the other. And the Jews have their Jews'. (? Indicating that we can't wash our hands off the wrongdoings happening around us.)

The rape-scene brings voyeuristic pleasure to men and satisfies the male gaze because for them a female body is an object of sexual desire, but they cover their lowly intentions with their weird renaming of the horrific crime, as Bhasker remarks: "Now that we know the cultural significance of the spectacle—perhaps we should let them

watch?" (*Lights Out!*: 30) The cultural labelling of a woman as good or bad is a subversive design to keep her in her place. The rape scene becomes a spectacle for men and, as Laura Mulvey explains, 'how pleasure in looking has been split between an active male looker and passive female object of the gaze' (124).

The stage in itself becomes an active participant in expressing the objective of the playwright to the audience. In the beginning of *Lights Out!*, the setting has symbolic associations: change from dusk to night, a window that never opens, the curtains always remain drawn transforming a middle class home into a prison. The mechanised movements of maid Frieda further adds to the prevailing nervousness. The assaulters' decision of violating the body and soul of the victim, instead of avoiding the public view, under the lights in the open, tell that the culprits have scant respect for women and no fear of the state agencies. Normally, the criminals always look for certain dingy, dungeon places for their criminal activities; but here they appear flaunting their despicable acts while the sensible looking middle class people (Bhasker, Leela, Surinder, Naina and the entire neighbourhood) are forced to keep the lights switched off in their homes during nights when the rapists assault the victims. Sexual acts remains within the precincts of private spaces but here its performance in public space becomes a subversive ploy, targeting the women. Overlapping of spatial world is further disadvantageous to woman. The so-called decent, chicken-hearted people, not to invite the wrath of the goons, willingly oblige them by sitting in the candle light. Leela's pleas to Bhasker about the police and the crimes depict her frustration and vulnerability before the guiles of men: "…you've told me they're (police) not interested in cases like this, they don't bother about minor little offense—but—but—I'm frightened!" (*Lights Out!*: 5). This criminal/innocent spectator projection on the stage exposes the total anarchy that has overcome the Indian society where people "don't want to stick (their) neck out" (*Lights Out!*: 7). No doubt, the rape incident has almost arrested Leela's sanity and her heart goes out to the victim, but her main concern is that crime happens near her flat and can affect her children and family. Her comments, "But their sounds come inside, inside my nice clean house, and I can't push them out! (*Sobs struggling*) If only they didn't make such a racket, I wouldn't mind so much! (*Pause, during which Bhasker rocks her gently.*) Why do they have to do it here? Why can't they go somewhere else?" (*Lights Out!*: 8) show that Leela is not so much worried about the crime; her worry is that it is committed near her house and thus can affect her family. This again exposes the

hypocrisy of the middle class India. At the scheduled visit of Mohan, Bhasker and Leela devise a strategy to conceal the reality about the crime: "We'll just keep the window shut, draw the curtains and put on some music. In fact, why not put the music on right away—(*starts to get up*)" (*Lights Out!*: 10). Leela's synchronised noise-making with outside sounds and increasing the volume shows her running away from reality.

The continuous interplay of mask and reality in the play underlines that reality appears hallucinatory whereas illusion has become the essential part of life in this world of post-truth in modern times. The male characters in *Lights Out!* adopt the tactics of unknowing what they know: "Baby, you must learn to ignore it now, I insist" (*Lights Out!:* 11). Bhasker's advice to Leela to ignore what is happening outside their flat confirms the fact he knows what has been going on for days, and suggest that "(they'll) just keep the window shut, draw the curtains and put on some music" (*Lights Out!:* 10). What a strategy to run away from reality and to feign ignorance! Still he wears a mask of ignorance and chooses to ignore the reality, and instead he involves himself in preposterous argumentation with an ulterior motive of not raising voice against the culprits. When Bhsaker's friend Mohan hears the sounds coming into the Bhasker's flat, he goes near the window and immediately realizes what the brutes are doing to the helpless girl. But like his friend Bhasker, he also crosses all limits of common sense with his absurd, outrageous comments about the rape, the victim and the culprits. Leela who has become paranoid thinking about the crime also wants to run away from the reality.

The juxtaposition of light and darkness throughout the play signifies hiding/revealing stratagem. When the criminals reach the fixed spot with the victim and start assaulting her, the family, along with Mohan, decides to take dinner. Leela asks Frieda to draw the curtains, switch off the lights and light the candles. The actions of shutting out everything and sitting in darkness signify their escape from reality while it keeps clawing in their deeper recesses of mind. The beginning of Scene iii shows that the outside light penetrates inside the room through the curtains and symbolizes the presence of the far removed absence of the place of crime echoing John Donne in *The Sun Rising*: "Busy old fool, unruly sun,/ Why dost thou thus, /Through windows, and through curtains call on us?" Escapism is a predominant feature in Manjula's plays; her characters feign ignorance by adopting various positions when hard-pressed against the oppressive realty. The playwright devises a plan to bring out the dichotomy between the real and the unreal. At one point Leela

says, "I'll see what Frieda says" (*Lights Out*!: 2) but throughout the play Frieda is silent. The discussion among the characters about the incident centres on covering the truth, while all, including Frieda, are aware of the reality.

The body/soul conflict in the play also describes how Manjula looks at gender. From patriarchal perspective, a woman cannot be divested of her sexuality; she is constructed as an object of desire, to be consumed, foregrounding her physicality. For a woman, her body belongs to her only and unless she so wants she cannot allow it to become somebody else's (man) territory. So any violation on her body leaves permanent scars not only on her body but also on her soul. While Leela can't look outside the window furtively even though her mind visualises the outside scene and when Naina and her neighbour casually glance outside, she gets stunned. But man has a different perspective in this regard.

Though women appear subdued and subservient to their male masters, yet they resist their relegation through various strategies—silence and expression of indifference like Frieda, forward-backward movements by Leela and Naina. The women playwrights in India repeatedly use silence/pause as dramatic device to highlight man-woman relationships. According to Gilbert Helen, "three types of silences — inaudibility, mutedness, and refusal to speak are used on stage" (1996: 190) to show the power relations. In performance, this silence becomes a living vehicle to convey the desired message. Nancy Duncan describes "silence a powerful tool for articulating identity" (*Body Space*: 151). In the play, the male characters' strategy of not taking concrete steps to call the police by futile argumentation and Leela's continued silence depicts the politics of language, as remarked by Rajeshwari Rajan: "Silence that speaks and …speech that fails as communication" (1993: 97). Helene Cixous elaborates on woman's position vis-à-vis man: "Most interesting! It's all there, a woman cannot, is unable, hasn't the power. Not to mention 'speaking': it's exactly this that she's forever deprived of. Unable to speak of pleasure—no pleasure, no desire: power, desire, speaking, pleasure, none of these is for women" (483).

In performance silence and body become speech; the physical movements (Frieda), incoherent, gurgling voices, body struggle (raped woman) represent this muted defiance of the patriarchal structure. Gilbert says: "Silence can be more active than passive, especially on stage where a silent character still speaks the languages of body and space…it is a discourse in its own right and a form of communication with its own enunciative effects" (190)

The few enlightened, sagacious voices that question the wrongdoings and challenge this pyramid of power structure (male/female, centre/periphery) are ridiculed and frowned upon by so-called civilized or culturally *rich* people. Sushila's comments "… if you can stop a crime, you must—or else you're helping it to happen…" (*Lights Out!:* 16) earn the ire of the patriarchal forces, a subversive device to destabilize and suppress not only Leela but women in general: "This Sushila sounds like an intellectual!.. These intellectuals always react like that, always confuse simple issues" (*Lights Out!:* 16). Surinder shows some resistance to the tacit silence of Mohan and Bhasker and appears to be made of sterner stuff initially when he witnesses the crime and exhorts all, stirring them to realize their responsibilities and take some decisive steps:

> Listen. Listen. What do you think those turds are doing? Just screwing one woman, is it? And they have nowhere else to go so they come and do it here, is it? After putting on the spotlights, so that all you nice people can watch? (*He pauses dramatically*) They're screwing this whole bloody colony, dammit!… They're making jackasses of us! (*Lights Out!:* 47)

But later Surinder also mellows down and appears complicit with the male duo in bluffing women. By the time they reach the spot with their paraphernalia to take on the culprits, the assaulters along with the victim have left the scene, much to the relief of the males. Gilbert comments how, in various ways, the playwright can use his tools to show protest: "Silence on stage can be a forceful and effective manner in/through which to express a post colonial discourse of alterity, difference, and autonomy. The careful redeployment of linguistic signifiers- such as tone, rhythm, register and lexicon- can generate as much political resistance as the rewriting of history or the introduction of politically embedded properties to a stage. The strategic use of languages in post colonial plays helps to reinvest colonized peoples and their characteristic systems of communication with a sense of power and an active place on the stage." (1996:168)

The consistent undercurrent of resistance runs throughout Manjula's works. Amid all sorts of helplessness, she creates situations and signs which question the powerful, hegemonic forces and ask for spaces, dignified ones, for one and all. Leela, Sushila, Frieda, Naina, Surinder—all signify protest against the unjust, cruel world in their own way. With Leela's nagging pleas, Sushila's comments about everybody's responsibility, Naina's persistent questioning of Bhasker and Mohan, Frieda's mechanized, muted support for action against the criminals— all these question the centre.

In Manjula's world man is deceitful, schemer, misogynist and indifferent to violence on women. Meanwhile her women are silent but conscious, identifying with their own gender issues, concerned about their families, though are reliant on their men and repeatedly abused. On the other hand, Gurcharan Das in Mira portrays a confident, assertive, independent woman questioning the patriarchy while his men are a confused lot, having inflated egos which can be punctured easily, propagators of male hegemony, and who fade away before their women. Mira is Shakespeare's Portia—full of wisdom, confident, witty, never afraid to speak her mind. Language and space are two very important components of dramaturgy that are used to reflect upon the politics of gender construction. These two plays *Lights Out!* and *Mira* are a reconstruction of Kantian binary of Reason/Body—the former identified with the male while the latter with the female. Man communicates through his knowledge while woman presents herself with her speech-silences and body. Reason (knowledge) is located in public spaces as it requires approval from the outer public while woman remains confined to her inner, private spaces, depending on man for any recognition, but this binary of knowledge/body stands questioned when applied to corresponding gender identity.

The dramatic worlds of Manjula and Das, despite them being contemporaries, have a gap of almost four centuries. In 16th century patriarchal India, women were considered a tool for continuing the family legacy and name by providing a male chid, and the onus for protecting the honour of the family lay on her, a clear implication to her bodily chastity. But Das through his play *Mira* questions all those forces and structures which wanted her to conform to male dicta of the day. The musical play deconstructs the entire power structures favouring man; in the power game with the patriarchal forces, well supported by women also, Mira refuses to merge her own 'self' with her husband's, keeping her separate identity alive. After her marriage with the prince of Mewar, Mira finds herself pulled between conservative social norms on the one hand and her free spirit on the other. She never fits into the image of a docile, subservient woman who will keep her mouth shut and accept everything that the conservative patriarchy expects of her. The playwright uses various techniques to show her defiance—argumentative language, use of her body and mind, her love for Lord Krishna —all these deflate the male ego and bring these forces to the ground. She never hesitates from expressing her physical desires or desists from speaking her mind, a characteristic that is not acceptable to the patriarchy: "He has to love me, for me to give him a son. A single lamp, no matter

how bright, always casts a shadow. Put another one beside it and the darkness of both disappears…It takes two to make a son. The chariot can't go anywhere on a single wheel" (107). All this signifies her longings for love and emotional communion.

Deprived of love and attachment from her husband, she woefully comments: "A body without love is dead" (109) Accepting the feminist viewpoint that sentence has a gender, the language Mira speaks is a powerful language overcoming the socio-cultural gender limitations for expressing her desires openly: "Let's go upstairs. Then I can also be with you" (110). Mira refuses to play the second fiddle, refuses to accept the role being imposed upon her. Devoid of love and affection, she feels imprisoned in the palace; her free spirit wants to break the barriers which she finally does towards the end when she surrenders herself before her God, Krishna, with whom she feels a complete communion of body and soul. "I live in a golden cage hung with silk; my food is honey and my drink is milk–but all I want is a nest in a tree" (123). Even Das has made effective use of body and space in presenting Mira. Even in private she wants her own space when she asks her husband: —"'Isn't the bed small for two of us?'…Will I have one for myself later on?" (104) While women become the victims of male discourse in *Lights Out!*, here Mira can see through the designs of men as well as consenting women: "I am sitting on the shoulder of a man who is sinking in quicksand" (124) and "I will do anything for you. I live for you. But not this. If I did, I'd stop being Mira. I am being asked to play the actor who is elevated from peasant to king for two hours" (113). Das comments about her assertive nature: "By abandoning husband, she had defied male prerogative and upset Rajput honour" (13). Towards the end she transcends all the physical barriers and become one with her lord Krishna: "My soul is universe. The universe is my lord, Krishna. I am he who I love and he who I love is I" (130).

No doubt Mira suffers immensely at the hands of different people as well as systems—physically, mentally and emotionally. Rana looks at her as an object; her sister-in-law Uda suspects of her infidelity and spreads the news to spoil her image, the entire surrounding asks for her to conform, but all these work as catalysts to further strengthen her willpower to question the authorities. Cixous elucidates why it is difficult for a woman to speak her mind in a male-dominated society:

> Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing at times entirely lost for words, sounds and language slipping away- that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the

deaf male ear which hears in language only that speaks in the masculine (14).

But she is a rebel in everything she says and does; motherhood is the essence of being woman, still Mira is not enthusiastic to become a mother. Rather she questions the very institution of marriage by showing her reservation in becoming a mother: "They say it is painful when the son comes out.' (104) The indifference of Rana pushes Mira more vigorously towards Krishna. But as the time passes and Rana is left helpless and lonely in life, his efforts to come closer to Mira get a strong rebuff from her who refuses to allow him to encroach her space and touch her body, saying: 'When wine finishes you turn elsewhere; when youth finishes you turn inside" (134).

The incompatibility between the Rana and Mira arises because Mira refuses to fit into the image of a pliant, dependent woman, and this incompatibility ultimately culminates in their separation, emotional as well as physical. Rana and Mira live in two different worlds; war, victory and valour occupy Rana's mind whereas Mira longs for soft touches and love, and deprivation of these raise a wall of mistrust between the two. She is a rational, conscious woman challenging the binaries propounded by Kant, and before her Rana and other people propagating patriarchy appear reduced in stature. She defies all sorts of societal hierarchies emanating from gender, class, caste and religion. The play holds an existentialism outlook. The individual has to be responsible for whatever decisions he takes: "I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing" (Sartre). Mira's journey from being Mira a young girl to that of a Mira (Mirabai) a saint— leaves many questions for the patriarchal society of the day to answer.

Das develops and gives space to his characters to question the cultural construction of gender identities. Physically Mira undergoes all sorts of torture inflicted upon her—from drinking poison to physical violence at hands of her husband to callous behaviour of the family, particularly Uda, but all these fail to curb her strong will which finally culminates in her becoming a saint. Poison becoming nectar at her touches shows her existential power vis-à-vis man, redefining the gendered identities thrust upon man and woman.

The socio-cultural process of constructing gender in the present world by Manjula and Das negates the premises where male writers were looked with suspicion for not giving judicious space and scope to the women characters in literary texts. In Manjula's world, while men are portrayed as cunning, independent, patronising in comparison to dependent, submissive, subservient, but conscious women who

sees the designs of the men folk but daren't reject the patriarchy in a straightforward manner as done by Mira in Das' play, where men appear incapacitated and reduced in stature before women. To conclude, the authorial voice becomes extinct once the text becomes an end product, as what Roland Barthes said, and the text, with setting, locale, body and space, is ready for multiple interpretations without alluding to author's perspective. Endorsement of what Barthes said underlines an acceptable conclusion: "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified meaning to close the writing" (148), and for giving a free-play in interpreting the text presupposes the birth of the reader at the cost of the death of the author.

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