

Voiceless in the System: Intersection of Gender, Class, and Media in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*

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Abstract--- *"A Burning" by Megha Majumdar is a story set in present-day Kolkata, India, which revolves around the issues of ambition, injustice, and inequality through the struggles of three characters following a terrorist attack on a train, causing widespread anger throughout the nation. A Muslim girl living in the slums is unfairly charged when she makes a post on social media criticizing the government for not acting against the attacks. She seeks justice and freedom from jail and turns to two individuals for help. One is a political person who plans on exploiting her situation for his benefit while the other is a wannabe actress who seeks fame. Both of their stories take place next to one another, giving us an insight into how personal desires and institutional biases clash in a heavily lopsided world. The story acts as a critique of corruption, misinformation, mob rule, and the persecution of the poor, Muslims, and transgender individuals in contemporary India. Truth loses its stability and reliability in an environment where vulnerable individuals get sacrificed at the altar of political and social expedience. It is also worth mentioning that this book reveals how the desire for personal gains and survival tends to undermine solidarity among the oppressed individuals. Through fragmented and fast-paced scenes, Majumdar's energetic prose conveys the fragility of truth and the threat of violence that hangs over vulnerable individuals.*

Keywords--- *Marginalization, Subaltern, Social Vulnerability, Power Structure, Media Spectacle.*

I. INTRODUCTION

THE significance of literature lies in its being a mirror and a lamp. This is because literature both mirrors the societal, political, and moral environment and also enlightens humanity with deeper knowledge of human behavior. Additionally, literature acts as a recorder of history, legends, and beliefs, making it easier for the future generation to learn about the past generations. Literature helps in exploring various topics like love, mortality, self-awareness, fairness, liberty, and inequality. In addition, literature educates through language development and imagination (TEAM Literopedia, 2024).

Indian Literature encompasses the vast and varied array of written and oral literature that has been produced throughout centuries in the Indian subcontinent in various languages. The tradition of Indian literature is among the most ancient in the world, dating back to the religious hymns of the Vedas that were originally written in Sanskrit around 1500 BCE. Indian

literature, through the ages, has included a variety of genres such as religious writings, philosophical writings, epics, lyrics, dramas, tales, and then prose fiction, influenced by Indian religions and culture (Batnag, 2020).

Ancient literature from India encompasses works in Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrits, including the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata. In addition to this, there are instances of early Tamil Sangam literature and Buddhist literature in Pali, which exemplify the coexistence of diverse languages and religious practices. Medieval Indian literature saw the emergence of languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Marathi, along with Bhakti and Sufi poetry with emphasis on devotion and love for God as well as society. Kabir, Mirabai, Tulsidas, Basavanna, and Jayadeva were some of the writers who employed a more direct and emotional approach in their writings.

All critics agree in commending the novel's pace, its eloquent style, and its bold depiction of socio-political truths in modern India. Critics single out how assured Majumdar is in handling such complicated concepts as the disparity between classes, corruption, discrimination, and the lure of power, which she manages to weave into her thrilling narrative without any easy answers. Through the alternating chapters, one gets a sense of momentum in the story, which, along with its revelations about life in the slums, makes it difficult to put down (Ahmad, 2020).

As an author who is good at bringing characters to life through dialogue, Majumdar provides us with the imitation of pressures by Hindu nationalists in the form of Jivan being arrested for his Facebook posts against the government. The vivid voice of Lovely and PT Sir's metamorphosis into something sinister work wonders in demonstrating how the disenfranchised need to be disloyal for loyalty to succeed in a predator society. In spite of its somber subject of terrorism, sedition, and treachery, the book is a treat to read (Roark, 2020).

You can be burning one train, but you cannot be stopping our will to go to work, to class, to family if we have them. Every local train is like a film. On the train, I am observing faces, body movements, voices, fights. This is how people like me are learning. (Chapter 1, lines 45-50)

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This portrays the unbeatable spirit of common Indians amidst chaos. For Jivan, travel is an illustration of the real life “film” which teaches one to survive. It criticizes violence, such as train assaults that cannot stop one from having ambitions in life.

These normally include analyses of state terrorism, media hype, electronic surveillance, and emotional legibility, though they stay within textual boundaries so as not to generalize too much. Consider, for example, the analyses of power pursuit in the hold that identify the societal exploitation process without venturing into the statistical sociology of the issue (Almond, 2020).

A literature review is presented to give an overview of the current scholarly literature on the socio-political dynamics depicted in the novel in modern India. It describes how the book takes a short thriller style with the weaving of topics such as class inequality, crime, power, and the price of ambition, all set against a realistic background in Kolkata. The first reviews discuss its fast pace, poetic language, and revelation of degradation in slums, media sensationalism, and cyber injustices (SuperSummary Editors).

It has been widely acknowledged that the author's polyphonic rhythm and specific details help create a movie-like impression in the narrative when the subject is the terror of the State, the demands of Hindutva nationalism, and the predatory economics of upward mobility. Reviews praise the realistic dialogue and the profound messages contained therein (BookBrowse).

This is a work which makes serious subjects fun by raising some very important moral questions in the form of engaging stories that scratch the surface of India in its dark corners, from monsoon-filled slums to the perverted news cycle. The review praises the immense significance of the slim tome, with emphasis on language strength and an unbiased attitude towards betrayal, sedition, and emotional transparency.

II. THE INDIVIDUAL'S FUTILE STRUGGLE AGAINST SOCIETAL OPPRESSION

The oppression of society versus individual is clearly depicted in this novel as personal aspirations face inevitable collision with rigid institutional forces in modern-day Kolkata. This is illustrated via the portrayal of a world in which even a minor action such as protest on the Internet leads to many issues of panic, legal cases, and prejudice from society, stripping away all personal freedom and turning it into illusion. Society is depicted as a power that threatens through its media rage, its apathy, and nationalism to force conformity on any person who breaks established laws. The price of social progress is shown to be moral compromises made by trading off truth for good standing and loyalty for financial gains, illustrating the bitter price of existence in separate social classes. The rains of Kolkata serve to illustrate the entrapment of the protagonist as the dirty, wet streets reflect his own sense of entrapment in evictions, police brutality, and exploitation by others. Small acts of defiance flicker like light amidst the dark, but they are crushed by the system, emphasizing the ephemeral nature of rebellion (Singh, 2021).

The thriller's high speed adds to its psychological tension, transporting readers through dramatic trials in court as well as in chaotic protests where each individual's voice drowns out in the sounds of the mob. The novel presents an age-old conflict by relating it to the contemporary Indian scenario with bomb blasts, popular controversies, and showmanship in politics (Rowe, 2022). Rather than ending on a positive note, the book highlights the dark aspect of progress in which increased digitization leads to increased alienation. Descriptions support the theme: the heavy smoke of the blasts makes breathing hard, trains crammed with people choke their passengers, and constant rains sap one's willpower. With the use of complex narration that involves both the language of the locals and that of authorities, the author emphasizes the pain of oppressed individuals who emerge from tyranny as damaged individuals and not heroes.

If the police didn't find me guilty, people on the Internet would (Chapter 3, lines 45-46)

This description captures the essence of the theme through an illustration of the frightening change from a formal judicial process to an anarchy of sorts in cyberspace, where public opinion supersedes proof, making individual innocence meaningless.

III. INTERSECTIONALITY OF MARGINALIZED IDENTITIES AMPLIFYING OPPRESSION

In *A Burning*, the ways in which various forms of marginalization compound oppression is demonstrated through how being poor, religious, a woman, and socially distinct makes one more vulnerable in an already intolerant society. It is not just that the various kinds of discrimination simply add up but rather that their effects compound each other in such a way that people are made easy prey amid periods of fear, hysteria, and increasing nationalism, during which diversity becomes viewed as a criminal act. Social class works with community prejudice to censor the voices of people. Irony is also present, as oppressed people sometimes become oppressors when power benefits them, revealing how easily people become complicit. The fast-moving narrative passes through media drama and political campaigns, where identity is used for exploitation and profit. Majumdar writes with clarity and restraint, portraying emotionally broken individuals through dark humor and strong rhythms inspired by oral storytelling traditions (Wallace, 2021).

The connection among the themes comes out in local problems like caste oppression, islamophobia, and transphobia while at the same time being discussed on an international scale through the discourse of privilege, prompting individuals to realize how oppression works through interlinked means. The short form of the novel ensures a significant message in the book that brings out a sense of urgency in the way it is written. However, the question of how identities end up becoming modes of survival once politicized is brought to light by the author. This makes readers think about their social place since the book is focused on the extent of empathy in a divided society. All in all, the story promotes diversity in literature as a tool for highlighting serious social disparities under the veneer of elegance.

When I am thinking about it, I am truly feeling that Jivan and I are both no more than insects. We are no more than grasshoppers whose wings are being plucked (Chapter 12, lines 112-114)

These statements effectively portray the aspect of internationalist oppression since marginalized people are viewed as dehumanized and powerless entities whose dreams are constantly being taken away through multiple social discriminations which reduce their complex identity into vermin.

IV. THE CORROSIVE PURSUIT OF POWER AND ITS MORAL EROSION

In her novel *A Burning*, Megha Majumdar examines the negative aspects of the ambition for power and the moral fall that accompanies it, whereby oppressed groups can be transformed into oppressors within their societies. In the hostile environment of Kolkata, social advancement is possible through moral compromises like false assurances and manipulation. The politics within the novel is portrayed as being corrupt and exploitative, especially due to the use of extreme nationalism to exploit ordinary citizens for political reasons, and sensational media for publicity reasons.

The internal conflict emerges because of the tension between guilt and success, between self-hatred and excitement, and because of the gradual erosion of morals in the process of survival when former victims become active participants in the very system that victimized them. This particular novel is a clear example that demonstrates the corrupting nature of power through the portrayal of conflicts within marginalized communities when former friends find themselves in rivalry for survival. The growth of digital reach leads to the development of surveillance systems and right-wing nationalism via social media and news networks, where immoral and unethical practices become acceptable norms. Specific sensory images help make this decline believable: the smell of political rallies filled with incense and desperation, empty court room promises transformed into rehearsed lies, and rain-filled streets of secretive deals in dark rooms. Irony is one of the most powerful elements used by Majumdar, for it captures that once you get power, you will realize how much your desire to have it was flawed. The use of rhythm by the author makes the reader feel the tragedy without making any preaching and judgments on morality. This rapid plot that involves politics, viruses, and secrets demonstrates how ambition is immoral since quickness is the way out of danger, but thinking can be a risk. Unlike most writers who create villains that are all bad, she makes them tragic because of their dreams.

The theme highlights the brutal economic environment of India, whereby justice is seen as something which is bought, and the conscience is not valued as well, while at the same time indicating that such a threat is also present in any society characterized by disparity and where ambitions can corrupt morals. Through various characters in the book, it becomes evident that involvement is very complicated, as sincere appeals gradually turn into lies and pure illusions get replaced with blind convictions because of ambition. The feeling of suffocation is conveyed through detailed descriptions of humid

weather, noisy courts, and guilty thoughts, which are occasionally alleviated by soulful songs on the streets.

Short-lived hopes are overwhelmed by mechanisms of control, favoritism, and duty, emphasizing the natural tendency of power to draw individuals into immorality. The clarity of Majumdar's style makes his writing highly emotional through effective use of narrative to explore personal agency amid collapsing social structures. Using empathic writing that does not shy away from complexity, Majumdar explores the concept of ambition without providing clear-cut answers. In a world where aspirations of achievement stand in constant conflict with fears of failure, the book serves as a stern reminder that immorality arises not due to temptation, but necessity.

Literature becomes the scalpel that cuts away the cancer of corruption to expose the pulsing veins of wasted potential underneath. Through the novel's harrowing assertion, the quest for power creates not victorious kings out of the downtrodden, but merely shadows, endlessly recreated through oppression's inexorable forge. The horror increases when it is the very ones who rise the farthest who hold the most fetters to bind those beneath them.

The honest souls who paused to deliberate on morals found, when they made their choice, that the treasure was gone (Chapter 21, lines 201-203)

The logic reveals the corruption of power, whereby the indecision on ethical questions leads to missed chances and forces people to forsake morality in order to benefit.

V. CONCLUSION

The paper demonstrates the significant influence of an outstanding story on the contemporary life of India. The reality of Indian citizens can be understood through three main themes explored in the novel. First, the theme reveals the confrontation of individual people with social injustice. Secondly, poverty, religion, and sexual inequality create additional problems in the life of Indians. Finally, the theme of the pursuit of power and its impact on the moral values of people will also be discussed.

This novel highlights how society, the media, and politics silence common folk. Social media is used for instantaneous judgments, whereas poor people are compelled to compromise on their principles just to survive. The theme of the book covers discrimination and its various types, which have more impact on vulnerable communities. The author succeeds in evoking emotions among readers through her powerful descriptions of Kolkata.

Theme of Corruption by Power

The theme of corruption through the power of power is another significant one. This theme highlights that ambition corrupts humans through lying, treachery, and degradation. The media and politics manipulate the common person for their own gains, thus perpetuating the chain of injustice. The book serves as a warning that the quest for power will end up killing humanity because life is far more valued than morality. Generally speaking, *A Burning* does not just focus on Indian societal issues, but global ones like discrimination, social media judgment, and unjust laws.

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