

Political Unrest and Personal Identity in Megha Majumdar's a Burning

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Abstract

Based on a qualitative study, this research paper analyzes how Megha Majumdar's A Burning responds to the intricate interplay between political turmoil and personal identity. Situated in present-day India, the novel explores the conundrum of oppressed groups in the context of Hindu nationalism and media manipulation. The research clings on to three overall themes through the parallel narratives of Jivan, PT Sir, and Lovely: the effect of political identification on human agency, the dangers of social identification within totalitarian states, and the ambivalence of the media as both instrument of empowerment and oppression. Although, "some books ought to burn" since they contain hate or deceit, according to Stafford. If one reads the poetry without preconceived notions, they will miss out on this fresh perspective. In addition to the well-known issue of censorship as a result of book burning, Stafford makes a strong thematic argument by arguing that, while the practice of burning books has a dark and complicated history, the even darker alternative not speaking up to share and acquire knowledge is much worse.

Keywords: A Burning, Personal Identity, Political Unrest

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الاضطراب السياسي والهوية الشخصية في رواية "احتراق" لميغا ماجومدار

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المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث العلاقة المعقدة بين الاضطرابات السياسية والهوية الشخصية في رواية "حرق" للكاتبة ميغا ماجومدار، مستخدماً منهجاً نوعياً. تدور أحداث الرواية في الهند المعاصرة، وتستكشف صراعات المجتمعات المهمشة في ظل صعود القومية الهندوسية والتلاعب الإعلامي. من خلال السرديات المتقاطعة لجيفان، وب. ت. سير، ولاقلي، تُحدد الدراسة ثلاثة محاور رئيسية: تأثير الهوية السياسية على القدرة الشخصية على اتخاذ القرارات، ونقاط ضعف الهوية الاجتماعية في الأنظمة القمعية، والدور المزدوج لوسائل الإعلام كأداة للتمكين والتحكم. يبحث التحليل في كيفية تشكيل الهوية السياسية للخيارات الشخصية، مُسلطاً الضوء على التناقضات الأخلاقية التي يقدم عليها الأفراد سعياً وراء الأمن والطموح. تُفحص الهوية الاجتماعية من منظور التمييز الطبقي والديني، لا سيما في حالة جيفان، الذي تُملّي التحيزات المجتمعية مصيره. إضافةً إلى ذلك، تُحلل الدراسة نقدياً تأثير وسائل الإعلام في تشكيل التصور العام، مُبيّنةً كيف يُمكنها تضخيم أصوات المهمشين وتعزيز الظلم المنهجي. يُبرز هذا البحث أهمية الرواية في النقاشات المعاصرة حول العدالة والتمثيل والهوية، مُوضحاً كيف يُمثل الأدب عدسةً لنقد الواقع الاجتماعي والسياسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: حريق، الهوية الشخصية، الاضطرابات السياسية

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معلومات البحث

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1.1 Introduction

Almost every publication this summer singled out Megha Majumdar's first novel, A Burning, as one of the most talked-about reads of the season. Megha Majumdar (born 1987/1988) is an Indian novelist who lives in New York City. Her debut

novel, A Burning, was a New York Times best seller, won the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar award in 2021 and a Whiting Award in 2022. Set in Kolkata, India, the novel tells the story of its central character Jivan, a woman who witnesses a

terrorist attack on an Indian train while it is stopped in a station. Jivan posts to Facebook the next day, drawing the attention of police who arrest her on suspicion of committing the terrorist attack (Gupta,2019,p176). Following the accusation, her fate hinges upon her former gym teacher, PT Sir, who has become a politician in an Indian right-wing party, and on a hijra actress named Lovely. It is characterized by many of the traits that make literary fiction popular, such as being very political, not following grammatical rules, and meant to be read all at once. What makes *A Burning* remarkable, however, is how the narrative of a little girl from Kolkata, India, reflects our present political climate. After a terrorist strike at a train station in a slum in Kolkata, three individuals are followed in *A Burning* (Varshney,2019.p32).

Truly, Jivan's only transgressions were penning Facebook postings critical of the government and just occurring to be in the incorrect location at the wrong time; she is now accused of providing assistance to terrorists. Lovely, an aspiring actress who identifies as a hijra—a South Asian gender identity characterized by spiritual practice and feminine self-presentation—and Jivan's old PE instructor, PT Sir, provide the other two viewpoints. The three protagonists face challenges after Jivan's incarceration, including navigating the complex terrain of national politics and overcoming the mob mentality sparked by the event's social media coverage. Majumdar does a superb job of differentiating these three personalities by giving them separate voices (Sinha,2020,p56). Most obviously, Lovely's passages are written in the present progressive, which conveys her optimism and her hopes of becoming a movie star: Standing up and joining hands is my action for today. Then I will bow.

The scene unfolds as Lovely describes her first encounter with public performance, which took place in the foyer of her acting instructor's home. This way of speaking seemed strange to me at first, but I soon became used to it. Reading Lovely's chapters is like taking a deep breath. She has her fair share of sexism and problems, yet she stays positive no matter what. The book as a whole is depressing, with Lovely's voice being the one redeeming feature. It becomes more apparent that Jivan has become the government's scapegoat, which exacerbates her already dire predicament. PT It is up to Sir and Lovely to choose whether they would advocate on her behalf. They both stand up for Jivan throughout the trial in an effort to do the right thing, but as soon as they succeed, they start to blame Jivan (Hossain, 2021,p43).

1.2 The Significant of the Novel

One of the goals of the book is to show how disadvantaged communities have an incentive to fight amongst themselves. PT For financial gain, Sir gives false testimony in criminal trials pitting his political opponents against members of his party. If Lovely wants to get cast in movies, she has to abandon Jivan. Because of a few of anti-government Facebook postings, the public holds Jivan responsible for the government's failure to apprehend the terrorists. "The similarities between India and the United States are astounding," Majumdar said in a recent interview with NPR (Bahatie,2022.p32). Black Lives Matter demonstrations and the accompanying social media campaign occurred in the United States on the same day as the novel's June publication. The book *A Burning* explores the influence of social media and other forms of mass communication on politics and the brutality and incompetence of the administration. There is an unsettling similarity.

And after a time, the book starts to seem a little monotonous. It feels like everything is happening for a specific purpose: to demonstrate how crooked the system is. There is little space for debate about the story's meaning, and the finale doesn't give readers optimism. PT Sir and Lovely put an end to their quest for Jivan's freedom so they may maintain their incredible power and fortune. In contrast to Jivan's execution for terrorism, both protagonists get the happily ever after they've always imagined. Over and over, *A Burning* raises the same issue without ever providing any answers or remedies (Joshi, M.,2020,p 54) .

1.3 The relationship between Political and Personal Identity

Political turmoil and personal identity have become key subjects in literary discussions, especially in the setting of modern India. The country has seen substantial changes in its political environment, characterized by the emergence of authoritarianism and a concerning shift towards majoritarianism. On the other hand, Lovely's biography is a counter-narrative that is characterized by resilience in adversity, defying traditional notions of gender and identity. A review of literature shows a growing number of studies on modern Indian politics, nationalism, and identity. In her scathing and riveting novel *Burning*, Megha Majumdar examines modern India through the eyes of three remarkable individuals whose lives are entangled in the political and social turmoil of the country. Majumdar shows the horrific fallout of a single Facebook post that implicates a Muslim girl named Jivan in a terrorist act, and how it snowballs into a national scandal, with a cold, hard eye. Unexpected and deep ways connect as Lovely, a passionate hijra with aspirations of Bollywood

stardom, and PT Sir, an exploitative gym trainer, have their desires and moral compromises intertwined as her destiny lies in the balance. Majumdar skillfully explores the complex relationships between ambition, bigotry, and the pursuit of justice in this riveting first novel, bringing readers face-to-face with the disturbing truth of a civilization in conflict with itself (Kumar,2022,p87)

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Political and shaping identity

Over the last few years, the political climate has been marked by growing polarization, with opposition being met with hostility and aggression. Criminalization of opposition has become the signature of the regime, with activists, journalists, and common citizens being targeted for expressing dissent. Chatterjee (2020) identifies that media manipulation is at the heart of this process, as frames are employed to delegitimize opposition and consolidate the agenda of the ruling party. This manipulation produces a culture of fear that silences the opposition voices to the status quo, ultimately undermining democratic values. The influence of media on public opinion and the shaping of narratives on political events cannot be overstated. In *A Burning*, Majumdar demonstrates how the media constructs identities and influences public opinion through sensationalism and selective reporting. Jivan's account, manipulated by the media as one of crime and terrorism, is a superb instance of the trend. Her case has been following the path of true incidents of individuals unfairly demonized through the media only to face cataclysmic outcomes, among which include miscarriages of justice and mob lynching. For instance, the role played by the media in the 2002 Gujarat riots is an example of how shrill

journalism results in violence and intensifies communal fault lines (Chatterjee, 2020,p105). Moreover, the complicity of the judiciary within this process increases the complexity of Indian dissent. The judiciary meant to act as a check to the executive finds itself under the influence of politics, derailing the rights of the marginalized people.

As noted by Sharma (2021), legal systems that are supposed to protect the people can be used against them, and the consequence is that justice is inaccessible. The case of activists like Stan Swamy, who was arrested under suspicious charges for his activism work, shows the systemic failures of the legal system in protecting dissent. In the recent years, the political climate has been characterized by increased polarization, with dissents routinely being greeted with hostility and belligerence. The speaker in Stafford's poem cautions the audience that "ignorance can dance in the absence of fire" (Line 17), implying that the lack of printed books prevents people from reading and perhaps learning from them, leading to a lack of fire. Chatterjee (2020) discovers that media manipulation is central here, with stories being created to disenfranchise opposition and advance the agenda of the ruling party. The manipulation engenders an environment of fear that quiets dissents, gradually eroding democratic principles . The media's influence in shifting public perception and building narratives on political happenings is impressive. In *A Burning*, Majumdar demonstrates how media fabricate identities and create public opinion via sensationalism and picking and choosing. The narrative of Jivan, misconstrued by the media as that of terrorism and crime, is a strong example of this bias. Her case is treated in the same way as actual events where people have been wrongly demonized in the media, leading to

tragic outcomes, such as wrongful convictions and lynching. The media's role in the 2002 Gujarat riots proves the manner in which sensationalism could fuel violence and exacerbate sectarian divisions (Chatterjee, 2020,p88). Book burning is obviously an extreme kind of censorship, as any reader can see for himself. Stafford has many points of view about this act: On the one hand, book burning involves censorship, which is often seen negatively, particularly in modern American culture, as it stifles potentially difficult facts

2.2 Political literature and Contemporary India

The political landscape of contemporary India is characterized by significant unrest, driven by the rise of Hindu nationalism, the increasing marginalization of minority communities, and the manipulation of media narratives. To fully appreciate the socio-political context within which Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* is situated, it is essential to examine the historical and contemporary factors that have contributed to the current state of political unrest. The arrest of Jivan is predicated on her Facebook criticisms of the administration. While she awaits trial on the charges that she befriended and helped the terrorists, readers see the events of her past and present. Two other major characters in the novel, Lovely (whom Jivan coached in English lessons) and PT Sir (Jivan's high school physical education instructor), have a connection to as a teacher and so influence her destiny (Desai,2020,p106). Witnesses in Jivan's trial will include Lovely and PT Sir. Instead of being skeptical of Jivan and doubting her innocence, Lovely is more sympathetic. PT Sir is the opposite. The way each individual navigates through life's challenges determines whether they will ultimately side with Jivan or oppose him. The politics of gender,

religion, and class all play a role in complicating their moves, as do individual ambitions, the scarcity of opportunity, governmental corruption, and spectacular media. Typical of hierarchical institutions, individuals from similar backgrounds are sometimes forced to compete with one another for resources and admiration. Their gender and religious identities may be different, but their economic roots are identical, they all want to go up the ladder, and when chances present themselves, they all have to make tough moral choices (Pandey,2020,p87).

2.3 Political and religion

The following synopses of the three protagonists show how the politicization of religion has created a situation where community conflicts are often exploited for political gain. PT Working in a girls' high school bores Sir, a Hindu guy from the lower middle class. He joins a local political party in his pursuit of power and fame, capitalizing on his gender and his Hindu nationalist leanings. Beautiful, who shares a slum with Jivan and aspires to be a movie star, is a hijra, a gender nonconformity in South Asian cultures that is greeted with skepticism due to her sexual and magical-religious abilities. Despite knowing that her prospects of making it big in Bollywood as a hijra are quite poor, she puts in a lot of effort, takes in a lot of advice, and keeps moving forward. Indeed, Lovely enrolled in Jivan's lessons because she was ambitious and because she understood the power of English as a tool for social mobility (Rajagopal,2020,p105).

3. Methodology

This study used qualitative methodology, more specifically Qualitative Research Testing The model employs a qualitative methodology to test

the practice of using model. The effect and meaning entail a number of critical components that include, among others, investigation of audience perceptions. Qualitative research methods initially developed through the use of these researches are able to perform follow-up questions in order to delve further into the thinking and motivations of respondents. In the case of market research specifically, qualitative research is deemed helpful as it can lead to a much stronger grasp of the decision-making process by a target group. The main goal of the qualitative research methods is to find out the ways a certain demographic perceives and acts in relation to something .

3.1 Data Analysis

Example 1: "They don't need proof. They need a story".

Description

This assertion reflects how political narratives in the novel are constructed without actual evidence, using media to create the truth rather than reveal it.

Analysis

The quote highlights the role of media to sustain oppression, where someone like Jivan is victimized by political propaganda aimed at sustaining power. She is not judged on facts but on a manufactured narrative, exemplifying how political identity can be imposed on an individual.

Example 2: "A man must rise. A man must grasp his opportunity".

Description

This quote captures PT Sir's transformation from a simple teacher to a political figure willing to compromise his morals for authority.

Analysis

The character reveals how political ambition can lead individuals to abandon their moral values. PT

Sir embraces the political establishment not as a victim, as Jivan does, but as a willing participant who trades his integrity for status, illustrating how political identity is created through corruption and compromise

Example 3: "People like me, we don't have the luxury of dreaming".

Description: Jivan expresses her sense of hopelessness, aware of the institutional barriers which keep those of lower social classes from dreaming of a better life.

Analysis: This quote illustrates how one's identity is framed on the basis of social class and religion. Jivan's existence is controlled by a society that shuns people like her, reflecting how systemic inequalities control what opportunities are available to one and reproduce social hierarchies.

Example 4: "The news is not about truth. The news is about who gets to tell it".

Description: This quote reveals how media in *A Burning* is not political neutral but an instrument that molds the powerful, who in turn mold public opinion on the basis of political agenda.

Analysis: The quote reveals the dangers of the media as a vehicle of domination. Not to inform, nor in seeking justice, but media representation within the novel dictates who is defined as a criminal and who as a hero and shows how the identity can be created or dismantled based upon who controls the hegemonic discourse.

Example 5: "I am Lovely, and there is no one like me".

Description: This quote is a testament to Lovely's determination to forge her identity in a society that marginalizes her and defines her primarily by her gender and class.

Analysis: In ensuring her uniqueness, Lovely resists social expectations that seek to contain and define her. Her insistence on becoming an actress metaphorically represents her fight for recognition and self-expression, showing how individual identity may be a resistance to social oppression.

4. Results

1. Political Identity: The theme of political identity is well incorporated throughout *A Burning*, particularly through the character development of PT Sir, a teacher who changes from an idealist teacher to a political one. This theme of political identity resonates through people's real-life experiences of having been caught in the same way in political instability, where individual identity gets intermingled with political structures.
2. Social Identity: Social identity is also a theme of utmost significance in *A Burning*, as Majumdar explores the vulnerabilities of her characters, particularly Jivan, whose Muslim, lower-class status makes her susceptible to institutionalized discrimination. The novel is able to identify the intersectionality of identity and how caste, class, and religion affect people's experiences in a highly stratified society. Majumdar's portrayal of religious and caste discrimination resonates with the actual experiences of marginalized communities, for instance, the present-day struggles of India's marginalized communities .
3. Media's Impact: Media's contribution to identity formation and social perception is a common thread that runs through *A Burning*. Majumdar demonstrates the power of media narratives to sway public opinion and affect the directions of people's lives. The media's framing of her as a terrorist dehumanizes not

just her but also functions to consolidate prejudices of society against Muslims, showing us the ruinous capability of media narratives to forge public opinion. Majumdar's exposition on media influencing identity reminds us of our necessity for critical examination of what we are told and what we narrate.

5. Conclusion

A lady named Jivan is the protagonist of the book. She is a witness to a terrorist assault on an Indian train while it is at a station. The next day, when Jivan's Facebook post caught the notice of the authorities, she was arrested on suspicion of being the terrorist attack's perpetrator. Lovely, a hijra actress, and her old gym instructor PT Sir, a politician for an Indian right-wing party, are now her only allies in the aftermath of the charge. Entering the world at a time when people everywhere have given up trying to see themselves in another person's shoes is a fitting historical juncture for *A Burning*. This moral decay has benefited the powerful and wealthy, as well as the morally twisted, who gain from inciting others and have gladly strengthened the economic and legal systems that intentionally exploit and degrade immigrants and refugees. At the train station one night, Jivan is spotted with a package when a bomb goes off, killing hundreds. In a Facebook post, she criticizes the government for enabling "terrorist" assaults to be framed as a protest tactic. She is detained on suspicion of involvement in the crime, subsequently taken into custody, and sentenced to dreadful jail conditions while she awaits trial. Critical social concerns of our day are touched upon in *A Burning*. The government is corrupt on a structural level, and institutions are oblivious to the cries of the socially excluded.

Another important subject is the prevalence of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, class, and religion. Lovely tells the tragic tale of a buddy who dies after deciding to get a sex change surgery because an unethical dentist wouldn't provide her anesthesia.

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