



Calcutta in the Age of Viral Outrage: Social Media, False Narratives, and Justice in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*

**Mahananda Biswas,
Research Scholar in English, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central
University of Haryana, Mahendragarh, Haryana, India**

Abstract

Megha Majumdar's debut novel, *A Burning* (2020) is a riveting and politically urgent exploration of how social media, mob mentality, and institutional failure converge to destroy an innocent life in contemporary Calcutta. Set against the turbulent backdrop of religious nationalism, class inequality, and digital vigilantism, the novel charts the tragic fate of Jivan, a young Muslim woman from the city's slums who is falsely accused of complicity in a terrorist attack on the basis of a single Facebook comment. This paper examines the novel's treatment of social media as a double-edged instrument that simultaneously empowers and destroys, constructing false narratives that become indistinguishable from truth in the public imagination. Drawing on theories of media ecology, postcolonial critique, and discourse analysis, the paper argues that Majumdar presents Calcutta not merely as a geographical backdrop but as a semiotic space - a city whose layered histories of communal tension, political opportunism, and economic disparity make it uniquely susceptible to the distortions of viral outrage. Through the three interlocking narratives of Jivan, PT Sir, and Lovely, the novel interrogates who gets to speak, who is heard, and who bears the ultimate cost when truth is sacrificed on the altar of political convenience and digital spectacle. The paper further explores how the novel critiques the complicity of media, the judiciary, and ordinary citizens in manufacturing and sustaining injustice.

Keywords: Social Media, False Narratives, Justice, Islamophobia, Viral Outrage, Political Fiction.

1. Introduction: Calcutta and the Architecture of Outrage

In the opening pages of Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* (2020), a train station near a Calcutta slum erupts in fire. Over a hundred people perish in the locked carriages. It is an act of mass murder, swift and terrible, and it sets in motion a chain of events that will consume the lives of three ordinary people. What is most striking about the novel's premise, however, is not the act of terrorism itself but what follows it - the race to assign blame, the hunger of the crowd for a villain, and the terrifying ease with which social media transforms suspicion into conviction and accusation into truth.

Majumdar's choice of Calcutta - or Kolkata, as the city was officially renamed in 2001 - as the setting for this story is far from incidental. Calcutta is a city freighted with literary,

political, and cultural significance. It is the city of Tagore and Satyajit Ray, of the Bengal famine and the Partition, of communist trade unions and communal violence. It is a city of extraordinary intellectual vitality and chronic infrastructural decay, of teeming slums and colonial grandeur. In choosing Calcutta as her canvas, Majumdar situates her novel within a particular social geography - one defined by communal memory, economic desperation, and the ever-present tension between aspiration and constraint.

Yet *A Burning* is also urgently contemporary. It is a novel about the twenty-first century condition - about what happens when the logic of social media platforms, with their appetite for outrage and their algorithmic reward of emotional excess, intersects with the older fault lines of religion, caste, and class. The novel asks: in an age when a Facebook post can become the evidence that sends a person to the gallows, what does justice mean? Who controls the narrative of guilt and innocence? And what does it cost to tell the truth?

This paper undertakes a close reading of *A Burning* through the lens of media ecology, political discourse, and postcolonial criticism. It argues that Majumdar's novel is not simply a thriller about a miscarriage of justice; it is a searching meditation on the relationship between narrative power and political power in contemporary India, with Calcutta serving as both microcosm and symbol of a nation in the grip of communal nationalism and digital hysteria. The paper proceeds through six interconnected arguments: the role of social media in manufacturing guilt; the construction of the Muslim woman as convenient terrorist; the failure of institutional justice; Calcutta as a semiotic character; the moral tragedy of complicity; and the novel's place in the tradition of the political novel.

2. The Digital Pyre: Social Media as the New Instrument of Mob Justice

When Jivan, exhausted after a day of work at a clothing store in Calcutta's Kolabagan neighbourhood, picks up her new phone and scrolls through Facebook on the night of the terrorist attack, she does what millions of people do every day: she reacts. She encounters a post that angers her - a post showing policemen idling in a Jeep while the burning carriages trap passengers inside - and she writes a comment. Her comment, born of righteous fury at the state's indifference, will become the instrument of her destruction.

The comment is an expression of outrage at institutional failure and sympathy for the victims. But in the media ecosystem that *A Burning* inhabits, context is an early casualty. When a news channel discovers the comment, it is stripped of its context, framed as evidence of terrorist sympathies, and broadcast to millions of viewers before Jivan has had any opportunity to explain herself. This moment captures with chilling precision the mechanics of viral outrage: the speed at which interpretation replaces information, and the ease with which a voice crying out against injustice is recast as a voice celebrating it.

Majumdar's portrayal of social media is nuanced and double-edged. On one hand, it is the instrument of Jivan's downfall. The Facebook comment - perhaps no more than a hundred words typed in anger and exhaustion - becomes, in the hands of a media industry hungry for a narrative, the definitive proof of her guilt. On the other hand, social media is also the only platform available to people like Jivan, who lack access to conventional channels of power. She has no lawyer of consequence, no political connections, no family wealth. Facebook is, for her, a form of citizenship - a space where she can speak, react, and be heard. The tragedy is that this space, which offers the illusion of democratic participation, is in fact deeply unequal. The powerful can use media to shape narratives; the powerless are consumed by them.

This dynamic is reinforced by Majumdar's treatment of the news media more broadly. The television channels in the novel operate as amplifiers of prejudice. They do not investigate; they perform. They do not seek truth; they manufacture drama. The journalists who descend on Jivan's neighbourhood are interested not in her story, but in confirming the story they have

Calcutta in the Age of Viral Outrage: Social Media, False Narratives, and Justice in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*

already decided to tell. The trail of crushed cigarettes outside her home is a metonym for this media presence: it leaves marks but produces no light. In this sense, Majumdar writes in the tradition of the great realist novelists who understood that the production of public opinion is itself a form of power - and that this power is almost always wielded against the poor.

The novel's treatment of social media also reflects a broader anxiety about the relationship between speed and truth. In the age of viral outrage, the news cycle moves faster than justice. By the time a correction might be issued, a clarification offered, or a counter-narrative assembled, the original lie has already taken root. Jivan is convicted in the court of public opinion long before she stands before any judge. Her name, her face, her Facebook profile - all of these become sites of hatred, recycled and amplified across platforms until she is no longer a person but a symbol: the Muslim terrorist from the slums. This process of symbolic reduction - the transformation of a complex human being into a two-dimensional villain - is one of the novel's most important insights about the culture of viral outrage.

It is worth noting, too, that the novel draws an implicit parallel between the dynamics of social media and the dynamics of communal violence. Both operate through the rapid circulation of emotion - fear, anger, contempt - that bypasses the slower processes of rational deliberation. Both require a scapegoat: a figure upon whom collective anxiety can be projected and against whom collective aggression can be directed. In a city like Calcutta, with its long and painful history of communal riots, this parallel is not merely metaphorical. It is historical. The ease with which Jivan is identified as a terrorist is inseparable from the ease with which Muslim residents of Indian cities have historically been identified as threats. Social media did not invent this logic; it merely accelerated and democratised it.

Manuel Castells, in his study of social movements and digital networks, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (2012) argues that the internet has created what he calls "mass self-communication" - a form of communication that is simultaneously mass (reaching potentially millions) and self-directed (controlled by the individual sender). *A Burning* illustrates the dark underside of this development: mass self-communication, in conditions of inequality and communal prejudice, can become a weapon of mass accusation, in which the boundary between speech and violence is fatally blurred.

3. The Manufactured Terrorist: Islamophobia, Identity, and the Politics of Accusation

Central to the novel's critique is the question of who is rendered credible and who is rendered suspect in the new India that Majumdar depicts. Jivan is a Muslim. She is poor. She is a woman. She is from the slums. Each of these characteristics, in the social context the novel inhabits, operates as a mark of suspicion. Together, they constitute a profile so vulnerable to accusation that her guilt is, in some sense, assumed before any evidence is examined.

Majumdar is careful to show how Jivan's identity is constructed and weaponised by those who seek to use the terrorism accusation for political ends. The right-wing political party to which PT Sir attaches himself - a thinly veiled analogue of the Hindu nationalist organisations that have increasingly dominated Indian political life - needs a face for the attack. It needs the attack to confirm a narrative: that India is under threat from Muslim extremism, that the government must be strong, that those who question the state's response to terrorism are themselves complicit. Jivan, a Muslim woman from the slums with a careless Facebook comment to her name, is the perfect candidate.

The novel does not present Jivan as an idealised victim. She is intelligent, ambitious, and fiercely determined to escape the poverty that has defined her family's life for generations. She has taught herself English, found employment, and saved money to buy a smartphone. She is a figure of aspiration - someone who has absorbed the meritocratic promise of the new India

and is trying, against enormous odds, to make good on it. What makes her destruction so devastating is precisely that she is playing by the rules - and the rules destroy her anyway.

This is one of the novel's most trenchant political observations. In a society structured by inequality, playing by the rules is not a guarantee of protection; it is sometimes a guarantee of vulnerability. Jivan's very striving - her smartphone, her Facebook account, her engagement with public discourse - becomes the instrument of her downfall. The tools of citizenship and aspiration are turned against her. This is not an accident but a structural feature of the system Majumdar depicts: a system in which the marginalised are damned whether they remain invisible or whether they dare to speak.

The figure of the Muslim woman as terrorist is, of course, a deeply gendered construction. Jivan is accused in ways that draw on specific anxieties about Muslim female body and agency. The media's treatment of her constructs her as dangerous precisely because she does not conform to the image of the docile, apolitical Muslim woman. She has opinions. She expresses them publicly. She is, in this sense, doubly transgressive: she is Muslim in a Hindu-nationalist political climate, and she is a woman with a public voice in a patriarchal society. The accusation against her is thus not only legal but symbolic: it is an attempt to punish her for the audacity of existing publicly.

Calcutta provides an important historical context for this dynamic. The city has been the site of some of the most significant episodes of communal violence in Indian history, including the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946 and the riots that accompanied Partition. These histories haunt the novel's present. The ease with which Jivan's neighbours turn against her after her arrest is not simply a function of media manipulation; it is also a function of accumulated communal prejudice that the media succeeds in activating. The past and the present are in conversation, and together they constitute the lethal social logic that condemns Jivan before her trial has begun.

4. The Failure of Institutional Justice: Courts, Police, and the Machinery of Injustice

If social media constitutes the court of public opinion in *A Burning*, the novel's treatment of the formal legal system suggests that the two courts are not as different as one might hope. The police who arrest Jivan are not investigators; they are performers of justice - going through the motions of legal procedure while the outcome has already been determined by political necessity. The lawyers who represent Jivan are overworked, under-resourced, and operating within a system that was not designed to protect people like her.

Majumdar's portrayal of the prison where Jivan is held is particularly revealing. The prison is a world unto itself, governed by its own hierarchies and economies. The guards are corrupt, the conditions are brutal, and the legal processes that are supposed to protect the rights of prisoners are systematically ignored. Jivan's experiences in prison are presented not as aberrations but as the normal functioning of a system that treats the poor as disposable. The prison is, in this sense, a microcosm of the broader society: a space where power is exercised arbitrarily, where the powerless are punished for their powerlessness, and where the promise of justice is perpetually deferred.

The novel is particularly sharp in its treatment of the relationship between the formal justice system and political power. The right-wing party that PT Sir joins has direct influence over the prosecution of Jivan's case. Through PT Sir's false testimony - he claims that Jivan expressed sympathy for the terrorists before the attack - the political machinery of the party reaches into the courtroom and shapes the verdict. This is not presented as a dramatic conspiracy but as an almost routine exercise of power: the way things work in a society where political patronage and institutional corruption are structurally integrated.

Calcutta in the Age of Viral Outrage: Social Media, False Narratives, and Justice in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*

The judge who presides over Jivan's trial is not a villain in any simple sense; like so many of the novel's characters, he is a product of the system he inhabits. His verdict is shaped not only by the evidence presented to him - evidence corrupted by PT Sir's testimony and the media's construction of Jivan's guilt - but by the political climate in which he operates. To acquit Jivan would be an act of considerable institutional courage. The novel suggests that such courage is rare, not because judges are personally cowardly but because the system creates incentives that reward compliance and punish dissent.

Majumdar's treatment of institutional failure is inflected by a deep awareness of the class dimensions of justice in India. Jivan's inability to mount an effective legal defence is inseparable from her poverty. She cannot afford a skilled lawyer. She has no social connections that might bring her case to public attention in a sympathetic way. The novel is clear: justice in the system it depicts is not blind; it can see class, religion, and gender very clearly, and it responds to what it sees. This critique resonates with a long tradition of Indian writing about law and justice, from the works of Premchand to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Like Roy, Majumdar is interested in the ways that formal legal structures reproduce and entrench social hierarchies rather than disrupting them.

5. Calcutta as Character: The City as Semiotic Space

One of the most distinctive features of *A Burning* is the way in which Calcutta functions not merely as a setting but as a character - a presence with its own history, its own contradictions, and its own claims on the narrative. Majumdar's Calcutta is a city in the process of transformation: being remade by economic liberalisation, by the rise of digital culture, by the aggressive nationalism of the political moment, and by the persistent realities of poverty, communal tension, and infrastructural decay that no amount of transformation has managed to address.

The slum of Kolabagan, where Jivan and her parents live, is rendered with extraordinary physical specificity. Majumdar describes the monsoon rains, the muddy lanes, the makeshift homes, the smell of food cooking on communal stoves, the negotiations of daily life in conditions of extreme material scarcity. This specificity is not merely decorative; it is political. By making the slum vivid and particular, Majumdar refuses to allow it to function as mere backdrop or metaphor. The people who live there are real, their lives have texture and meaning, and their vulnerability to the operations of power is a function of specific material conditions, not of any abstract social force.

At the same time, Calcutta in the novel is a city of aspiration. Lovely, the hijra who dreams of becoming a film actress, inhabits a Calcutta that is opening up - a city where talent and determination might, against all odds, lead somewhere. Her acting classes, her performances, her relationship with her teacher Gobind - all speak to a Calcutta that contains, within its contradictions, genuine possibilities for individual transformation. The city is not simply a machine for producing suffering; it is also a place where people dream, create, and resist.

Yet the novel is also clear that these possibilities are distributed very unequally. PT Sir's Calcutta is a city of political opportunity - a place where joining the right party, performing the right loyalties, and being willing to sacrifice the right people can open doors that were previously closed. His trajectory is a dark mirror of the upward mobility that the new India promises: it is possible, but it requires the abandonment of ethics and the willingness to be complicit in injustice.

Majumdar's Calcutta is also a city haunted by its own history. The communal tensions the novel depicts are inseparable from the city's experience of Partition, of the riots of 1946

and 1950, and of the political struggles that have defined West Bengal for decades. The ease with which Jivan is constructed as a Muslim terrorist draws on this history - on the accumulated sediment of communal fear and prejudice that makes such constructions possible and persuasive. In this sense, Calcutta in *A Burning* is what cultural theorist, Homi Bhabha might call a “third space” in *The Location of Culture* (1994) - a space of ambivalence, hybridity, and conflict where different histories, identities, and narratives collide and compete.

The city’s geography also mirrors the novel’s social hierarchies. The slums where Jivan lives are physically and symbolically separated from the areas of middle-class comfort where PT Sir aspires to belong. Lovely occupies a liminal space - neither fully included in the city’s social life nor entirely excluded from it. These spatial divisions are reinforced by the novel’s plotting: the three characters rarely meet, and when they do, the encounters are charged with the power dynamics of the world they inhabit. Calcutta, in this sense, is not a unified community but a series of parallel worlds, each with its own rules, its own possibilities, and its own relationship to justice.

6. Complicity and Moral Cowardice: PT Sir, Lovely, and the Ethics of Bystanders

If Jivan is the novel’s moral centre - the figure of innocence destroyed by a corrupt system - PT Sir and Lovely represent something more uncomfortable: the moral choices made by ordinary people in the face of injustice. Their stories are studies in complicity, in the ways that individual moral failure intersects with structural forces to produce and sustain injustice.

PT Sir is, in many ways, the most disturbing figure of the novel. He is not a monster; he is a mediocre man with modest ambitions who makes a series of choices that, taken individually, might seem merely pragmatic, but that, taken together, amount to participation in murder. His decision to join the right-wing political party is motivated not by ideology but by opportunism: he wants advancement, recognition, a better salary, a sense of importance. The party offers these things in exchange for loyalty and obedience.

What makes PT Sir’s trajectory so chilling is its very ordinariness. He is not seduced by extremist ideology; he is seduced by the ordinary human desire for status and belonging. He watches the party’s cadres commit acts of violence and does not intervene, not because he approves but because he has made a calculation: that his advancement is worth more than his integrity. This calculation, Majumdar suggests, is not unusual; it is the calculation made by millions of people in societies where political power and institutional corruption are pervasive.

PT Sir’s false testimony against Jivan is the culmination of this moral deterioration. He knows the truth - he knows that Jivan did not express sympathy for terrorists before the attack - but he lies under oath because the party needs him to lie, and because the price of refusal is the loss of everything he has gained. In this moment, he becomes not merely a bystander to injustice but an active participant in it. His lie is the hinge upon which Jivan’s fate turns; without it, she might have been acquitted.

Lovely’s complicity is of a different kind, and it is in some ways more sympathetically rendered. She has the alibi that could save Jivan - she was with Jivan at the time of the attack - but to provide this alibi, she would have to appear in court as a witness, exposing herself to the violence and humiliation that hijra individuals routinely face in public institutions. She would also risk losing the acting career that she has, against enormous odds, begun to build.

Lovely’s decision not to testify is presented with real moral complexity. She is not simply selfish; she is genuinely terrified, and her fears are grounded in the brutal realities of transphobia in India. Her narrative sections, written in the vivid present progressive tense that Majumdar uses to distinguish her voice, are filled with a kind of desperate optimism - a determination to believe that her dreams are achievable, that the world can be navigated without

Calcutta in the Age of Viral Outrage: Social Media, False Narratives, and Justice in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*

total self-sacrifice. That this optimism comes at the cost of Jivan's life is the novel's most painful irony.

Together, PT Sir and Lovely embody what Hannah Arendt called the "banality of evil" in her political philosophy, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* - the insight that great injustices are not necessarily perpetrated by monstrous individuals but by ordinary people making ordinary choices within structures that reward complicity and punish resistance. Neither PT Sir nor Lovely is evil in any dramatic sense; both are responding, in ways that are psychologically comprehensible, to the pressures and incentives of the system they inhabit. But the cumulative effect of their choices is the judicial murder of an innocent woman. The culture of viral outrage that destroys Jivan is not maintained only by media moguls and corrupt politicians; it is maintained by the everyday moral choices of ordinary people who prioritise their own advancement or survival over their obligations to truth and justice.

7. Truth, Testimony, and the Politics of Narrative

A Burning is, among other things, a novel about storytelling - about who gets to tell stories, whose stories are believed, and what happens when the machinery of modern media is turned against the truth. Each of the novel's three narrative voices tells a different kind of story, and each story is shaped by the social position of its teller.

Jivan's narrative is the most urgent and the most constrained. She tells her story in prison, through letters, through court testimony - all of which are mediated by institutions that have already decided she is guilty. Her voice is clear and compelling, but it is a voice that the system is structured to ignore. This formal feature of the novel - the way Jivan's first-person narration is set against a social apparatus that refuses to hear her - enacts the very silencing it describes. We, the readers, hear Jivan; the world of the novel does not.

PT Sir's narrative is more ambiguous. He is not a reliable narrator of his own moral deterioration; he is capable of considerable self-deception, telling himself stories that justify his choices and minimise their consequences. His sections of the novel have a quality of wilful blindness: he sees what he needs to see and avoids what he cannot afford to acknowledge. This narrative self-deception mirrors the broader social phenomenon of moral disengagement - the psychological mechanisms that allow people to participate in injustice while maintaining a self-image of decency.

Lovely's narrative is the most formally distinctive and, in some ways, the most politically resonant. Her use of the present progressive tense - "I am standing", "I am singing", "I am hoping" - creates a sense of immediacy and fragility, of a life lived entirely in the moment because the future is too uncertain to plan for. Her voice is warm, funny, and intensely human, and it provides a tonal counterpoint to the novel's otherwise relentless grimness. But it also performs a political function: by making Lovely so vivid and likeable, Majumdar insists on the full humanity of a person who is routinely dehumanised by the society she inhabits.

The question of testimony - of what counts as credible speech in a court of law and in the court of public opinion - runs through all three narratives. Jivan's testimony is disbelieved because she is Muslim, poor, and already convicted in the media. PT Sir's testimony is believed because he is a respectable government employee and a member of a politically powerful organisation. Lovely's potential testimony is never given because she cannot risk appearing in court. The novel maps a hierarchy of credibility that is directly correlated with social position: the more marginalised a person is, the less likely their account of the truth will be accepted.

This critique of testimony resonates powerfully with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question: "Can the subaltern speak?". Jivan can speak - she speaks eloquently and with intelligence. But speaking is not enough when the structures of power have already determined

that her speech will not be heard. The novel suggests that the production of justice requires not only the speech of the marginalised but a fundamental transformation in the structures that determine whose speech counts.

8. The Novel as Social Critique: Majumdar in the Tradition of the Political Novel

A Burning belongs to a distinguished tradition of political novels that use fiction to interrogate the operations of power and injustice. Majumdar writes within a lineage that includes Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* - writers who understood that the novel form, with its capacity for empathy and its attention to the texture of individual lives, is uniquely suited to the exploration of systemic injustice.

Like Roy's *The God of Small Things*, *A Burning* is interested in the ways that the unwritten laws of society - the rules that regulate who can love, who can speak, who can be heard - are enforced not only by formal legal institutions but by the informal structures of social convention and communal prejudice. Like Morrison's work, it is animated by a commitment to making visible the lives of those whom the dominant culture prefers to render invisible. And like Hugo's *Les Misérables*, it understands that the law and justice are not the same thing, and that a society that equates them is one in which the most vulnerable will always be sacrificed.

What distinguishes Majumdar's novel from these predecessors is its engagement with the specific dynamics of the digital age. *A Burning* is, in a sense, the first major novel of the social media era in the Indian context - a work that takes seriously the ways in which digital platforms have transformed the operations of power, the production of public opinion, and the possibilities of justice. In doing so, it speaks not only to Indian readers but to readers everywhere who inhabit the same digital ecosystems and are subject to the same dynamics of viral outrage.

Majumdar's prose style is also worth noting. It is spare, precise, and deliberately understated - a style that trusts the reader to supply the emotional weight that the narrative withholds. This restraint is itself a political choice: in a culture of outrage and excess, the quietness of the novel's prose enacts a kind of counter-logic, insisting on the value of careful attention and nuanced understanding. The novel does not sensationalise the suffering it depicts; it illuminates it.

The novel's formal polyphony - its three interlocking voices - is also deeply significant. By giving equal narrative space to Jivan, PT Sir, and Lovely, Majumdar refuses the simplification that the media culture she critiques imposes. Each character is allowed complexity; each is allowed to be more than a symbol or a type. This is, in itself, a kind of political argument: an argument that justice requires the recognition of complexity, that the reduction of human beings to symbols or statistics is itself a form of injustice. In this sense, the novel's form is its politics: the act of writing three full, rounded, contradictory human beings into existence is a refusal of the dehumanisation that makes injustice possible.

9. Conclusion: Viral Outrage and the Burning City

In the final pages of *A Burning*, justice - in the formal sense - is done. The verdict is delivered, the sentence is pronounced, and the machinery of the state completes its work. But Majumdar leaves us with the overwhelming sense that what has occurred is not justice but its opposite: the systematic and deliberate destruction of an innocent life by a constellation of forces - social media, political opportunism, institutional corruption, and everyday moral cowardice - that are, in their combination, more powerful than any individual's capacity to resist them.

Jivan's fate is, in this sense, a product of the age of viral outrage - an age in which the

Calcutta in the Age of Viral Outrage: Social Media, False Narratives, and Justice in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*

speed of digital communication has outpaced the slower processes of deliberation and verification upon which justice depends; in which the algorithmic logic of social media platforms rewards emotional intensity over factual accuracy; and in which the political uses of communal fear and religious prejudice find in digital culture a powerful new instrument.

Calcutta, the burning city, is the perfect embodiment of this moment. It is a city with the historical depth to make visible the long roots of the injustice Majumdar depicts, and the contemporary specificity to make that injustice feel immediate and urgent. It is a city that contains, in its contradictions and its layered histories, both the worst and the best of what India has been and might become. The novel situates its politics in this specific geography because history of Calcutta - of Partition, of communal violence, of leftist idealism and rightist reaction, of extraordinary cultural creativity and grinding material want - makes visible the forces that operate everywhere but are sometimes too familiar to see.

A Burning ultimately insists that the answer to viral outrage is not more outrage but more truth - a commitment, costly and often dangerous, to seeing people as they are rather than as the media constructs them. This is, the novel acknowledges, a demanding ethical standard. PT Sir fails it; Lovely fails it. But the novel's existence - its careful, empathetic, politically serious engagement with the lives it depicts - is itself a refusal to participate in the culture of simplification and scapegoating that destroys Jivan.

In an age when the platforms, through which we communicate, are increasingly optimised for outrage rather than understanding, *A Burning* is both a diagnosis and a call to resistance. It asks us to attend to the human cost of viral outrage, to resist the seductive logic of the mob, and to remember that justice - real justice - requires something that social media cannot provide: the slow, difficult, morally demanding work of seeing the truth. Megha Majumdar's Calcutta burns. The question the novel leaves with us is whether we - its readers, its citizens, its scrollers and sharers and likers - are willing to do what it takes to put out the fire.

References

- Arendt, H. (1963). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. Viking Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the internet age*. Polity Press.
- Chakrabarti, P. (2020, June). A burning: A quiet, searing study. *The Indian Express*.
- Choi, S. (2020). Majumdar's new novel. *The New York Times*.
- Enjeti, A. (2020). A burning is a penetrating expose. *Star Tribune*.
- Fanon, F. (1961). *The wretched of the earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). Grove Press.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere*. MIT Press.
- Khair, T. (2020). An excellent novel and an impressive debut. *The Hindu*.
- Li, G. Z. (2020, June). Majumdar's powerful debut. *USA Today*.
- Majumdar, M. (2020). *A burning*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Morozov, E. (2011). *The net delusion: The dark side of internet freedom*. PublicAffairs.
- Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. Viking.
- Roy, A. (1997). *The god of small things*. IndiaInk.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.

Wood, J. (2020, June). A debut novel's immersive urgency. *The New Yorker*.

Bio- note

Mahananda Biswas is a doctoral research scholar in English at the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central University of Haryana, Mahendragarh, Haryana, India with a deep academic focus on the postcolonial novels (written in original English language) that deals with the city of Calcutta/Kolkata. He has qualified for Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) and eligibility for Assistant Professor in the National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) conducted by University Grants Commission. He has qualified State Eligibility Test (SET) in English as well as Central Teacher Eligibility Test (CTET) and State Teacher Eligibility Test. He taught English as a guest faculty for several years at Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India. He is a former student of University of Calcutta. His research area explores the representation of Calcutta in postcolonial English novels, examining how the city functions as more than a mere geographical backdrop. Calcutta — with its layered colonial history, its teeming subaltern life, and its unresolved tensions between tradition and modernity — emerges in postcolonial fiction as a dynamic site of memory, identity, and resistance. His study investigates how literary representations of Calcutta negotiate the legacies of British imperialism, partition, urban poverty, and cultural hybridity, ultimately revealing the city as a living palimpsest of postcolonial experience.

Email Id: mahananda.mb@gmail.com

