

## **The Politics of Hatred in Megha Majumdar's '*A Burning*'**

**Bincy P**, Research Scholar, Department of English and Communications, Dravidian University, Kuppam

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Article Received: 08/08/2023

Article Revised:07/09/2023

Article Accepted:10/09/2023

Published Online:12/09/2023

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.09.58

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### **Abstract**

Hate politics is taking a deadly turn in current India. Hatred is an extreme emotional dislike or hostility towards something that one considers bad, immoral, or dangerous. The outcome of this negative perception of the other can result in a desire to hurt, insult, or even kill the object of hatred. The unprivileged and the marginalized are often the victims of hatred in a society that runs according to the whims and fancies of the upper class. The novel *A Burning* by Megha Majumdar highlights the idea of power politics and depicts how the unprivileged are oppressed and cleverly silenced. This debut novel which revolves around the lives of three lives, is set in Kolkata and can be considered a critique of modern India.

**Keywords:** Hatred, Unprivileged, Marginalized, Power Politics, Religion.

Megha Majumdar's debut novel, *A Burning*, is a political fiction that explores the interconnected lives of the three central characters- Jivan, Lovely, and PT Sir after a terrorist attack. The novel highlights how the vulnerable and the unprivileged are silenced, and anything incompatible with the hegemonic groups is brutally suppressed. Hate politics, which is prevalent in society today, is one of the major ideas discussed in the novel. The terrifying hike in religious, caste-based, and communal violence points to the increasing polarization and oppression in India.

The three central characters of the novel see the world around them with much optimism and possibility. Jivan is a young Muslim girl who lives in Kolabagan slum. After her matriculation, she quits her studies and works for Pantaloons to support her parents. She was a girl who had lots of expectations from life, but a foolish act that she does with her new smartphone bought out of her first salary turns her life topsy-turvy. The novel begins just after a terrorist attack in which a train was set ablaze, and more than a hundred people were killed. While strolling through one of those social media feeds related to the attack, Jivan posts a simple question on the small glowing screen of her phone: "If the police didn't help the ordinary people like you and me if the police watched them die, doesn't that mean that the

government is also a terrorist?"(Majumdar 10)The days that followed had completely changed her life. She was charged with sedition and was tagged as a terrorist. Unfortunately, her religious status and the circumstantial pieces of evidence aid in her imprisonment and later her death. "She is a Muslim like the terrorists, was at the crime scene, had contact with an alleged recruiter on Facebook, and posted those damning comments. The media does the rest. A scapegoat is born" (Almond).

Lovely, a hijira who dreams of stardom, is the next character. Majumdar uses Lovely as a lens to portray the humiliations faced by transgenders in India who aspires for a bright future. The writer has crafted conversations of Lovely in the present continuous tense to distinguish her narrative from others. In spite of being a talented actress, she was never rewarded with roles that didn't match her talent. Lovely's talent as an actress was noticed by the outside world only after she became popular by her testimony at the court during Jivan's trials. Even though lovely wishes to save Jivan, when given a choice of her dream career against Jivan's life, she is forced to choose stardom with so much guilt. This points out the fact that assimilating to the highest ranks of society often requires compromising one's humanity and integrity (*Super Summary*).

The next character of the book is the unnamed PT Sir who rises from a mediocre school teacher to a powerful politician. Majumdar never painted this character as a villain, even though he engages in many immoral acts on behalf of the political party that he serves. He is a common man who ardently wishes for an air-conditioned office and luxuries, and when he understands joining the Jana Kalyan Party and Bimla Pal will reduce the distance towards his dreams, he does not even hesitate to give up his morality. The false testimonies that he gave in court on behalf of Bimla Pal and her party and pushing the petition for the fast execution of his former student Jivan clearly give us the intensity of moral degradation he had undergone.

*A Burning* is a critique of modern India. All the foul plays that happen in schools, government offices, and politics are clearly brought to light. All these places are highly corrupted so much so that people with money are rewarded while the underprivileged are despised. The novel provides instances where teachers promote those who pay them and are even ready to fill their answer sheets while ignoring others who fail to pay. By showing how Jivan and her mother were humiliated by the government official when they went to file a complaint against the scarcity of clean drinking water in the corporation office, Majumdar reflects on the discrimination faced by the marginalized even at places where they should be protected.

Even though the novel focuses on three characters, no heroic or villainous traits are given to any of the three. A close analysis of the novel reveals the fact that it is the society that labels somebody as an outcast and hails somebody else as a hero. Lovely, because of her identity as a transgender, is humiliated by everyone. "This hijra doesn't find any different compartment to hassle?" the peanut seller is hissing as if I do not have ears (Majumdar 11). When Brijesh, an electrician and Lovely's classmate at Debnath's acting class, insults Lovely,

saying, "I can't do this marriage scene with a half man" (Majumdar 13) during an artistic performance, Lovely is completely shattered. But she soon recovers, telling herself it is "garbage" and she is used to such insults. The strong willpower and determination towards her goal are clearly evident through such incidents. The guava seller whom Lovely meets every day on her way to acting class ignores her completely and considers her a nuisance even though she greets and talks with him.

But things change completely, and the whole society hails her when an amateur video of Lovely's acting class goes viral through WhatsApp. All the classmates, including Brijesh, cover her with compliments and thank her for the fortune she has brought them. The guava seller was ready to give her a guava for free, and Lovely showed her surprise, saying, "Every other day you are ignoring me, and today you are my best friend?" PT Sir, even though he dresses well and acts like a gentleman, his financial status pulls him back. He is not treated equally by his colleagues because he is a mere physical education teacher. This disrespect that he receives from the world around him forces him to give up even his morality when given a chance to climb the ladder of power and money.

Jivan, a poor Muslim girl who comes from a family that finds it difficult to meet both ends, was thrown behind bars for an anti-governmental post she shared on Facebook. The media celebrated Jivan's arrest with so many false allegations, but nobody cared to find the truth. The perils of social media trials and biased Indian journalism, which works in favor of the powerful and the dominated, are addressed strongly in the novel. The hate politics that work on the three characters can be analyzed at different levels. In the case of PT Sir, he was despised because of his financial status and his job as a physical education teacher.

"It is the one time in all the school year when he, this odd teacher who teaches not geography or mathematics or chemistry, not even home science, showcases his work. Well, he thinks meanly about himself, that is other than all the times he steps up during assembly to fix a malfunctioning microphone, the only man at this girls' school called on for handiwork."(Majumdar 29)

PT Sir represented that typical unsatisfied Indian who is fed up with his undignified job at the girls' school and yearns for the luxuries that powerful people enjoy. He believes that once he becomes rich and powerful, he will be respected by all those who despise him now. He got attracted to the Jana Kalyan Party and the politician Bimla Pal not because of the ideology that the party upholds but because he is allured by the power and money it will bring him.

The hatred that Lovely undergoes is because of her status as a hijira. She is ostracized by her family as well as society for something that she is not at all responsible for.

We all know what is happening to hijras who are displeasing the police, like Laddoo, our young hijra sister who was going to the police to report harassment from a constable and was herself put in the lockup. There she is staying for days and days. Many years ago, I would have been asking why this is happening. But now I know that there is no use asking

these questions. In life, many things are happening for no reason at all. You might be begging on the train and getting acid thrown on your face. You might be hiding in the women's compartment for safety and getting kicked by the ladies (Majumdar 57).

The writer clearly depicts her insulted soul when the Lovely is questioned by an interviewer why she is committed to acting, to which she replies that she has been performing all her life.

Jivan was a victim of hatred on two grounds- her religious background and her poverty. When her family was forcefully evicted and were made to live near a slum, they protested by throwing hand-made bombs made of urine and feces. The utter poverty and powerless situation of the poorest of the poor is clearly evident here. The way she was dragged to jail for something she was not aware of, her dreadful life in jail, and her hasty punishment clearly illustrate the fact that those who don't have power and money will always be kicked back and made to suffer. Also, the false conception of all Muslims as terrorists also leads her to jail. This religious hatred is a major problem that is still challenging for India. In one of the interludes of the novel, a Muslim family is brutally killed in the name of killing the holy cow (which later turns out to be a false allegation). Through this incident, the writer addresses the intensity of religious hatred prevalent in India.

Megha Majumdar is an Indian-born writer who grew up in Kolkata and is settled in the US now. *A Burning* is her debut novel which is a powerful political fiction addressing the injustices of contemporary India. The issues of class, gender, and religion that take place in a capitalist society are clearly addressed in the novel. Also, the failure of the judicial system, the perils of media trials, cow vigilantism, and transphobia are essayed powerfully by the writer. In all sense, the novel is a true reflection of the corrupted Indian society that rises at the expense of the poor and the powerless.

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