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## Articulating A Burning Issue Of Contemporary Condition In Megha Majumdar's Novel *A Burning*: A Critical Approach

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### ABSTRACT:

Megha Majumdar's debut novel *A Burning*, the winner of prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for best debut novel in the year 2021 by an Indian author, deals with real burning issues of contemporary India and for other political establishments that make an attempt to suppress the voices of minorities and deny equal rights for the marginalized section based on their imposed identities of class and gender. When the struggle of these people living in periphery is judged and controlled under biased public opinions or influences of religious fanaticism their lives become almost unbearable and their dreams are completely devastated. The novel through its polyphonic plot portrays the three characters from different backgrounds but their intertwined lives of both past and present in a tumultuous society that exposes their vulnerability and helplessness. The readers from the very beginning feel empathy towards such ordinary people who are so easily victimized, caught and convicted without giving much option to defend themselves and are forced to accept the manufactured misfortune as their fate that cannot be altered under the present prevailing situations.

**Keywords:** burning, marginalized, periphery, polyphonic, vulnerability

Megha Majumdar's novel *A Burning*, the winner of prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for best debut novel in the year 2021 by an Indian author, deals with real burning issues of contemporary India and for any political establishment that makes an attempt to suppress the

voices of minorities and denies equal rights for the marginalized section of society based on their imposed identities of class and gender. When the struggle of these people living in periphery is judged and controlled under biased public opinions or influences of religious fanaticism their lives become almost unbearable and their dreams are completely devastated. The novel through its polyphonic plot portrays the three characters from different backgrounds but their intertwined lives of both past and present in a tumultuous society that exposes

their vulnerability and helplessness. The readers from the very beginning feel empathy towards such ordinary people who are so easily victimized, caught and convicted without giving much option to defend themselves and are forced to accept the manufactured misfortune as their fate that cannot be altered under the present prevailing situations. The novel truly presents the ambition of three ordinary but dynamic characters – first Jivan, a young muslim girl living in a small ill-repaired apartment in govt housing complex at suburb of Kolkata with his ailing father and struggling mother started working as a saleswoman in a mall, posted something in social media against the government and got arrested as a co-accused of a terrorist attack in which a train was set ablaze while standing on platform and her alleged association with a terrorist recruitment organizer in social media; second Lovely, a so called hijra as her gender orientation is categorized devoted herself to learn acting despite all odds with her dream to be a movie star one day; the third one is PT sir, who felt dissatisfaction over his position as a physical training teacher in a private school, aspired to change his status of a middle class and fortunately when he got an opportunity he decided to build his career in politics in which he was entangled so much that he could not escape even after he wished to do so as he witnessed the darker realities of politics so closely.

With three perspectives the three characters though apparently look outsiders belong to the same society that not only shatters their aspirations but stripped of their fellow feeling and forced them instead to face one another with intolerable indifference in moments of crisis. So when they needed mutual support to overcome their problems they posed as strangers or behaved selfish to make the lives of other fellow citizens more miserable that somehow increased their inflictions and wretchedness.

The novel opens following the technique of *in medias res* at the middle of affairs took place in Jivan's life that completely led her to a world she could ever imagine just for posting something quite casually of her views on the train attack on social media. The house in the suburb she lives was knocked hard at the middle of night and then dragged in her casual night dress by two policewomen. The nature of Jivan's arrest and her subsequent undertrials reminds or alludes to the same kind of situations the character Josef K faces at the beginning of Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial* and in early plays of Harold Pinter about whom American critic Pauline Kael once commented that "Pinter's art is the art of taking away".

The intangible nature of menace after the arrest of Josef K, on the eve of his thirtieth birthday, for an unexplained crime that he is accused of and the subsequent proceedings in a mysterious court remains ambivalent and unrevealed. The imprisonment and its unexplained consequences prevail in order to expose the oppressiveness of an ominous mechanism as the protagonist gets closer to the court and its corrupt practices inside. It is a bold and emblematic to unravel the theme of intrusion and oppression, imprisonment and betrayal, fear and anxiety hidden in the psyche of the characters who struggle to face the contemporary world they inhabit.

The powerful image of 'taking away' primarily refers to a sense of displacement, a dislocation from something or someone's fixed settlement. It is through this symbolic act of dispossession of one's own territory that creates a sense of menacing fear for territorial execution. It also exercises disciplinary actions to ensure the installation of a power structure that operates through its diverse distributions of strategic elements to produce social and

political stability. Sometimes it tries to reintegrate into the prevalent system of those who have gone astray or have taken refuge to escape responsibilities that are imposed upon them.

The characters start telling their personal stories and gradually become more vital and vocal to address the prevailing problems, the fragility of a social system that turns into more intolerable particularly when it comes from the marginal section. Neither it agrees to adjust for the possibility of a diverse coexistence where all enjoy equal rights and think themselves as a collective entity. Consequently such a rigid system is at the verge of collapse or disintegration as nobody can fulfill their expectations rather ends his or her pursuit in failures and catastrophes. The author handles the plot deftly, building and preparing the readers towards its climax which is somehow shocking but inevitable that exposes the savage underneath the surface story. The impact of the novel upon the readers is so engaging and direct that they can easily identify or associate themselves with certain aspects or peculiar traits present in each of three characters and finally feel empathized for what culminates at the end.

The novel offers a piercing vision of the plight of an individual in a state where corruption is practiced in every institution, where violent bigotry and deceptions are adopted as

political tools, where social media becomes an apparatus for control and surveillance instead of

expressing someone's views freely and where seeking justice happens to be an impalpable utopia for the downtrodden. When an individual like Jivan tries to alter her destiny just to become a middle class and earn some respect for herself and her family, thinks it is her right to post her views on social media in equal capacity of her fellow citizens lands her in tremendous turmoil for which she is not only arrested and accused, but is tortured, betrayed and finally killed by the state. Jivan's life as presented poignantly in the novel is a story of double marginalization first being a minority who dares to criticize a majoritarian establishment and secondly as a woman her free will is denied, her aspirations are criminalized and strangled for sadistic pleasure within a patriarchy. Majumdar in her novel through an enigmatic depiction without any authorial intrusion casts light into an untrodden world we wish to ignore or keep safe distance but nonetheless we inhibit and must acknowledge.

The novel through its true and convincing characters delineates the fatal consequences of complacency and brings to the fore about prevailing inequalities and the failures of criminal

judiciary to deliver justice for the powerless. The characters of Lovely and PT sir and their

struggle, their testimonials incite to revisit our understanding of class and gender in both cases.

The physical landscape, the detail and vivid imagery of the city of Kolkata renders another scope for which the readers can easily rediscover and relate themselves. Besides the language used in the novel is so lively and focused that it gives a clear indication from the very beginning "you smell like a smoke" Jivan's mother commented about her daughter and it becomes more convincing when the phrases "phoo phoo" used for cooling faster the hot tea for drinking or "gheu gheu" as Jivan could hear from some stray dogs while strolling outside her home once late at night. The novel turns out to be very relevant in current political scenario for its reverberating theme and the captivating technique to exemplify the inherent message with great puissance.