

**Into the Abyss: Media and Despair in  
Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* (2020)**

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**Abstract:**

Nowadays, the fate of people can be determined by haphazardly sending a simple message through social media platforms. Media censorship has become a major tool used by many countries to control the people's narrative and guarantee their peace of mind. In Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*, media serves as a prominent element that illuminates the path to despair for the characters. The narrative highlights the influence and consequences of media in shaping public opinion, and counterfeiting the facts. The researcher argues that media's power, biases, and sensationalism can exacerbate social inequalities and drive systematic injustices. Depending on Marshall McLuhan's concept of Media ecology, and out of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw's study of agenda-setting theory, the research highlights probable negative effects of media tools and technology in shaping people's lives and directing them to the abyss of injustice.

In her debut novel, Majumdar discusses several societal issues including the conundrum of politics, the religious discrimination, the biased way of news reporting, and the people's use as scapegoats for claiming the peace of country. Although the story is set in India, it can happen anywhere in the world. The novel refers to the challenges faced by marginalized communities and the struggles they experience due to limited opportunities and systemic biases. Through the characters' experiences, the writer

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emphasizes the potential for social media and other media outlets to contribute to the abyss of loss and calls for a more accountable and fair media landscape.

**Keywords:** Megha Majumdar, *A Burning*, Indian Literature, Media ecology, Agenda-setting.

### ملخص

في أيامنا هذه، يمكن تحديد مصير الناس عن طريق إرسال رسالة بسيطة بشكل عشوائي عبر منصات التواصل الاجتماعي. أصبحت الرقابة على وسائل الإعلام أداة رئيسية تستخدمها العديد من البلدان للسيطرة على رواية الناس وضمن راحة البال. في رواية "حريق" للكاتبة الهندية ميغا ماجومدار، تعمل وسائل الإعلام كعنصر بارز يؤدي إلى هلاك بعض الشخصيات. وتسلب الرواية الضوء على تأثير وسائل الإعلام وعواقبها في تشكيل الرأي العام، وتزييف الحقائق. يقوم البحث بدراسة قوة وسائل الإعلام وتحيزها الذي يمكن أن يقود إلى تفاقم عدم المساواة الاجتماعية ويسبب الظلم الممنهج. استنادا على مفهوم مارشال ماكلوهان لبيئة الإعلام، ومن خلال دراسة ماكسويل ماكومبس ودونالد شو لنظرية وضع الأجندة، يسلط البحث الضوء على الآثار السلبية المحتملة لأدوات الإعلام والتكنولوجيا في تشكيل حياة الناس وتوجيههم إلى هاوية الظلم.

تناقش ماجومدار في روايتها الأولى، "حريق" العديد من القضايا المجتمعية بما في ذلك الفساد السياسي، والتمييز الديني، والطريقة المتحيزة في نقل الأخبار، واستخدام الناس ككبش فداء بزعم تحقيق سلام البلاد. بالرغم من أن القصة تدور

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أحداثها في الهند، إلا أنها يمكن أن تحدث في أي مكان في العالم. تشير الرواية إلى التحديات والصعوبات التي تواجهها المجتمعات المهمشة بسبب محدودية الفرص والتحديات الممنهجة من قبل سياسة الدولة. من خلال تجارب الشخصيات، تشير الكاتبة إلى إمكانية مساهمة وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي ووسائل الإعلام الأخرى في تدمير حياة الأشخاص وانقيادهم إلى طريق اللاعودة، كما تدعو الكاتبة إلى ضرورة بناء مشهد إعلامي أكثر مسؤولية وعدا.

### Introduction:

To live in a society that is overwhelmed with the dominance of different aspects of media means that you have to think about every action, behavior, or even a word you can write in public or privately. In present day, human life can not be imagined without using social media platforms or other media outlets. The relationship between media or other technological forms and the surrounding environment becomes deep and crucial. This relationship shapes and influences human perception, cognition, and social interactions.

Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* is one of the literary works that emphasize and handle the horrors of living in a society controlled by the chains of technology and media forms of communication. Majumdar presents a vivid depiction of contemporary Indian Society by examining the life experiences of three major characters. The events of the novel are set in Kolkata, India; the city in which Megha Majumdar grew up. She

then moved to Boston for college and now she is an editor of Catapult, an online literary magazine. Her objective in writing this debut novel is what she has witnessed from a turn in Indian society. By writing *A Burning*, Majumdar highlights the oppressed and discriminated way used by the governmental system to deal with the underprivileged groups, those who follow a different religion than Hinduism, and those who may oppose or object to the ruling system laws. Through narrating the way of living led by three poor characters whose goal in life is just to rise to middle-class category, Majumdar sketches the miserable challenges within a country that is deaf and blind to any right to freedom.

This research aims to highlight the role of social media platforms and news media organizations in shaping and determining the lives of the characters and the society as a whole with a reflection to contemporary Indian society. Through adopting the theory of media ecology proposed by Marshal McLuhan in 1964, and the agenda setting theory analyzed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1968, the effect of media on the society's environment is clearly developed.

### **Discussion:**

Marshall McLuhan is a Canadian philosopher and communication theorist who has made tremendous contributions to the field of media and its impacts. He discussed the relationship between the different forms of media and the

environment. His theory suggests that media can be apprehended ecologically. In this context, media refers to any kind of invented technology or medium that mediates between a human user and his/her environment, while the word ecology denotes the surrounding physical, biological, or social dimensions of human interactions. According to McLuhan, media is the technological tool or communication system through which humans can interact with others; hence, they intermedialize the physical, cultural, political, social, or economic environment. Therefore, "... the media or technologies that we use play a leading role in how and what we communicate, how we think, feel, and use our senses, and in our social organization, way of life, and world view" (Strate, 2004, p. 7).

Depending on the previous concept, "changes in technology alter the symbolic environment – the socially constructed, sensory world of meanings that in turn shapes our perceptions, experiences, attitudes, and behavior" (Griffen, 2012, p. 321). Thanks to Marshall McLuhan, the theory of media ecology has come to light. The term was formally introduced by Neil Postman in 1968, while the core of the theory and its effects were previously suggested by Marshall McLuhan in 1964. Following McLuhan's point of view, Postman introduced the principle of media ecology as he confirms that a medium is a kind of technology within which culture grows "...that is to say, it gives form to a culture's politics, social organization and habitual way

of thinking” (Postman, 2000, p. 10). The theory, therefore, focuses on the interaction between media, communication technologies, and the human environment. It also discusses the impacts of media tools on individuals and societies, and how they respond to them.

McLuhan’s most famous aphorism “the medium is the message” is perhaps the cornerstone of media ecology theory. According to McLuhan, the medium through which information is transmitted to people is more important than the content of the message itself. The medium has a greater impact on society and its culture than what the content indicates. McLuhan likens media to light. He observes that the electric light is being used for making brain surgery or setting up a night baseball match. Therefore, McLuhan states in his book *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (2013) that:

It could be argued that these activities are in some way the ‘content’ of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the point that ‘the medium is the message’ because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. (p. 15)

McLuhan suggests that the different means of media technologies such as television, radio, smartphones, the



internet ... etc., influence the overall stream of society in one way or another. “For any medium has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary” (McLuhan, 2013, p. 21). The same notion is asserted by Neil Postman when he confirms that: “We put the word ‘media’ in front of the word ‘ecology’ to suggest that we were not simply interested in media, but in the ways in which the interaction between media and human beings give a culture its character, and, one might say, help a culture to maintain symbolic balance” (Postman, 2000, p. 11).

Historically, McLuhan observes that there are four eras of communication that participate in shaping the human behavior and the society’s culture. The first era is the tribal age. It is the age before the invention of writing. In this age, people dealt with each other through making sounds. Oral language became the only means of communication among people. A group of people could gather and tell stories to each other without feeling bored. The second era is the age of literacy. It is also the age of inventing the phonetic alphabet. The invention of the phonetic alphabet is also connected to the tribal age as every letter stands for a specific sound. This fact led to the emergence of the written language and people could read and write. Hence, the dependence on orality began to decrease.

The third era is the printed age. Thanks to the invention of the movable type of printing press, a great number of books were printed. Therefore, information became easy to access and

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handwritten texts were replaced with printed ones. The fourth era is the electronic age. This era began with the invention of the telegraph. In this era, means of communication such as television, radio, telephone, telegraph ... etc. became more accessible and available for everyone at any time. This is why McLuhan refers to this age as the global village where people can return again to the first tribal age but with a little difference. Instead of depending on the sound and storytelling of the tribal age, sounds and messages in the electronic age can travel and reach anyone through different methods that gather people in what is called the global village.

Through reviewing McLuhan's observation of the different tools of communication over the ages, it is obvious that every new invention can change and determine the mainstream of people's lives and the society at large. "For the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (McLuhan, 2013, p. 15)

Although McLuhan died in 1980 and did not witness this contemporary age of internet, his theory of media provides a vital addition to understanding the influence of the internet over human consciousness and the society as a whole. His theory of media becomes a general view that encompasses the new age of the internet and social media. He does not consider media as just a tool for conveying content, but it is an environment that has a great social, political, and cultural effect. To McLuhan, "societies

have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication” (McLuhan, 2011, p. 23).

One of the contemporary fictional works that deal with the theory of media ecology is *A Burning*, a novel written by the Indian writer Megha Majumdar and published in June 2020. It is her debut novel that is set in contemporary Kolkata, India. The novel follows the interconnected stories of three marginalized characters whose wish in life is to rise to be a part of middle-class society. The main character in the novel is a young Muslim lady called Jivan. She lives with her parents in the slums. Through her character, the events show how media with its different means can penetrate people’s lives and determine their fate.

Jivan witnesses a terrorist incident that leads her life to a depressing end. When she returns home, she is caught by some posts and videos shared by different persons who comment on the tragedy that took the lives of more than a hundred people. Jivan’s desire for personal freedom makes her admire those people who can express their critical opinions freely without being feared by the country’s political body. “They were not afraid of making jokes. Whether it was about the police or the ministers, they had their fun, and wasn’t that freedom?” (Majumdar, 2020, p. 13)

In a moment of courage, Jivan decides to express her opinion by sharing a video and adding a caption in her own words on the famous social electronic application 'Facebook.' She writes a caption to criticize the government saying "Policemen paid by the government watched and did nothing while this innocent woman lost everything" (Majumdar, 2020, p. 14). The next day she adds "If the police did not help ordinary people like you and me, if the police watched them die, doesn't that mean, [she] wrote on Facebook, that the government is also a terrorist (Majumdar, 2020, p. 16)?"

After some hours of writing these posts, Jivan is mistakenly arrested for being the terrorist who threw flaming torches into the halted train and caused the death of numerous people. The protagonist's interest and her dire desire to send posts on Facebook besides her wish and anticipation to have many likes on her post reflect the deep effect of media platforms, particularly social media, on the contemporary society of India. On the other hand, the use of social media in the novel to be the trap of the protagonist's loss demonstrates the limitations of the ruling party and its desire to have a scapegoat that can put an end to public opinion.

According to Marshall McLuhan's concept of the medium as being the message, Jivan's use of social media as a means to express her opinion is more important than the content of her message. Without the existence of this kind of medium as an

effective tool of communication, the government could not know or reach the newsmaker. If the content of Jivan's post was written in a special letter or spoken on phone, she might not have been accused of being the attacker. Each era has its own effective type of media. So, depending on the four ages of media suggested by McLuhan, the electronic age is determined by using of the internet, smartphones, and social media platforms. Instead of finding clear evidence and seriously investigating the case to discover the real attacker, the power dynamics prefer to rely solely on social media as a means of seeking accountability. Facebook, as a medium of communication between the user and the surrounding environment, helps to spread misinformation, influence public opinion, and contribute later to the injustice and execution of the protagonist. Its effect on the user and society as a whole exceeds expectations and assures McLuhan's manifesto that the medium's influence is more important than what the content elucidates. The public response and the governmental reaction to Jivan's post in the novel reflect the polarized nature of contemporary media environments in which opinions are amplified and facts are falsified.

Jivan becomes the scapegoat of the government that failed in finding the real attacker and to get rid of a person who symbolizes tension in the country. Through the character of Jivan and the role of social media in ruining her life, the writer makes a parallel and a reflection of the fascist regime in contemporary

India. After the death of Mumbai rightwing founder Bal Thackeray in November 2012, the city went into a complete shutdown by order. As a kind of rejecting the regime's reaction, a woman wrote on Facebook criticizing the city shut down as every day many people die and nothing happens, and her friend liked her post. Consequently, both of them were arrested. Besides, the clinic of the girl's uncle had been attacked by the mob. Later in 2014 when the Hindu nationalist ruling party BJP (The Bharatiya Janata Party) came to power, numerous people were arrested for being anti-nationalist; whether by action or protest; whether online or offline.

Majumdar uses the arrest of Jivan for a Facebook post to consider "the realities of India, with its surge of nationalism and growing suppression of free speech" (Agrawal, 2020). Facebook, as an electronic medium, has become a successful tool for oppressed regimes to control and tighten the lives of peaceful people. This fact is greatly assured by McLuhan as he writes "It is the framework which changes with each new technology and not just the picture within the frame" (McLuhan, 1995, p. 270). Any new media can be a means of facilitation that makes life easier and comfortable for human beings, but at the same time, it imposes new rules that influence the total society. In the current work and in India in particular, social media is used by the regime to subdue and repress those who do not support the regime or follow another religion. In the case of Jivan, the police, the court, the press, and the media conclude that she is

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**201**

responsible for the terrorist attack. In addition, the court forces her to sign a confession of her fake crime. Therefore, “She is arrested and imprisoned for her ‘anti-national’ comment, her religious identity serving as ostensibly irrefutable evidence of her disloyalty to the Indian state” (Sastry, 2020).

Among the other terrible effects of media tools that the current novel exposes is the role of the mass media in influencing public opinion. This phenomenon is called the agenda-setting theory. The theory refers to the fact that the media sets a specific agenda for the public to follow or believe in. It considers the correspondence between the rate to which media reaches when covering a news or specific story and the extent of the people’s thought that this story is important. Agenda setting theory is a communication theory that holds the power of determining which topics should receive the demanded attention of people and how the narrative around these topics should be created. Hence, “The agenda-setting role of the news media is the transmission of issue salience from the media’s agenda to the public agenda” (McCombs & Guo, 2014, p. 252). Furthermore, the theory suggests that media outlets such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines .... etc., have an obvious control over the various news that are broadcasted to people. They choose the events or news they want to prioritize. In this way, they direct the public to follow their interest and own their point of view.

The concept of agenda-setting theory is mainly traced to Walter Lippmann in 1922 when he explored the effective role of mass media in shaping the setting of a specific image in the public's mind. He asserts in his book *Public Opinion* (1991) that “The only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event” (p. 13). Lippmann suggests that the mass media makes a link between the events that happen in the world and the images that are shaped in the minds of the public. As people have no ability to see these events in reality, they have pictures in their minds of the various events that happen around the world through news media organizations. Consequently, people's perceptions of what happens around them become a secondhand reality that emerges in favor of the media organizations. The media sets the agenda through various and simple means letting people make their sense of the world. Although these images may be incomplete or blurred, they become a reflection of the real environment.

The agenda-setting notion was then referred to by Bernard Cohen in 1963 in his book *The Press and Foreign Policy* in which he explores that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963, p. 13.). Later, the term was popularized by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw through their study of the impact of mass media on the voters' opinion during the American

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**203**



presidential campaign in Chapel Hill in 1968. “Their hypothesis was that the salience of these issues on the media’s agenda influenced the salience of the same issues on the public’s agenda” (McCombs & Guo, 2014, p. 251). McCombs and Shaw were the first to provide an empirical evidence for the theory and their experiment showed the power of mass media outlets in influencing the public’s opinion.

Through their survey research, McCombs and Shaw compared the public’s perceptions of the most important problems about which people care or think and the most important problems focused on by the news media. They found that “... those aspects of public affairs that are prominent in the news become prominent among the public, that is, there is a transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda” (Valenzuela & McCombs, 2019, p. 100). Through repeating the messages or news concerning political, social, economic, legal, or public affairs day after day, the media, whether it is a radio, TV channels, newspaper, or magazine, establishes a basic source for the audience to know about different issues and various topics without the need to search for the information deliberately.

In *A Burning*, the writer highlights the purpose of media and its impact on the characters and society. Through the novel, the media, represented in the TV. Channels, plays a pivotal role in shaping the public opinion, influencing the country’s political agenda, and affecting the lives of the miserable characters.

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According to the story of Jivan in the novel, the TV. Channels as well as the press succeed in escalating the matter and convincing the public that Jivan is the real accuser by counterfeiting the facts and affecting the reaction of the audience. This fact is explored through Jivan's words when she says "..., in a newspaper, I will see an artist's drawing of me appearing in court that morning. The sketch shows a woman with her hair in a braid. Her hands are cuffed but raised as in prayer or plea. This is a mistake. I was not in cuffs. Was I? (Majumdar, 2020, p. 43).

One way through which the media influences the public attention is through the use of attractive titles and headlines. These attractive titles are also used to generate interest towards a particular topic. To catch the attention of the audience towards the case of Jivan, the TV channels use a banner that flashes with the title 'Breaking News! Breaking News.' According to McCombs and Guo, there are two levels of media agenda-setting. The first level deals with how the media concentrates on a specific object or topic to raise the interest and attention of the public. At this level, the media studies the perception of the most important issues of the day and how the public reacts to them. The second level, on the other hand, decides what are the most important parts of the presented topic or issue that can influence the way of the public's thinking. At this level, the media considers certain attributes within the chosen subject and these attributes are emphasized to some degree and in particular ways

to influence the public's salience of this subject specifically (McCombs & Guo, 2014).

The issue of Jivan's accusation in the story is highly presented by the TV Channels and reporters who do their effort to collect information and take shots of the accuser and her family through their daily visits to the court. According to the first level of agenda setting, the media wants to prove that the crime has been covered and the attacker will be punished. It deals with the issue of arresting Jivan as a public opinion case and this asserts the fact that the media is one of the governmental tools that are used to suppress or prevent any form of objection or doubt. This kind of suppression is carried out through using a pervasive means, that is, the media organizations. This reality is confirmed by Walter Lippmann in his book *Public Opinion* (1991) where he states that "The key problem ... was that people take as facts not what is, but what they perceive to be facts, a counterfeit of reality or a 'pseudo-environment'" (p. xvi).

According to the second level of agenda setting, the TV news channels, after spreading the news of arresting the innocent attacker, broadcast some specific details about the accuser that urge the people's feelings and arouse their sense of anger. In the novel, one of the TV news channels announces "This Muslim woman is charged with assisting terrorists who plotted this heinous attack" (Majumdar, 2020, p. 55). Jivan is a young Muslim girl living in a Hindu nationalist society that always

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seeks to marginalize its Muslim citizens. The nationalist news media structures the public's notion of the most salient attributes of the issue, which is here the religion of the protagonist, to increase and direct the priority of the public towards what the media calls for. This fact is confirmed again when Lovely, a Higrā girl who was taught English by Jivan, says "This same society which is now screaming for the blood of innocent Jivan, only because she is a poor Muslim woman" (Majumdar, 2020, p. 341). Through highlighting this kind of religious intolerance and marginalization, the writer depicts the cage in which people are trapped by favor of the country's changing atmosphere. For this reason, "Majumdar offers her novel as a reassertion of the pluralism once at the heart of Indian democracy" (Bajekal, 2020).

In accordance with James W. Dearing and Everett M. Rogers, the agenda-setting process includes three types: the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda. The media agenda is interested in the importance of an issue on the mass media platforms. The public agenda cares for the important issues that occupy the public. The policy agenda, on the other hand, deals with issues that policymakers believe to be important or salient as a response to the media and public agendas. In *A Burning*, the media agenda is the prevailing type. The media agenda is determined by the numbers and repetition of news media about a specific topic. So, in *Communication Concepts 6: Agenda-Setting* (1996), James W. Dearing and Everett M. Rogers affirm

that “The number of news stories measures the relative salience of an issue of study on the media agenda” (p. 18).

Throughout the novel, the news media spotlights the issue of Jivan’s trial by spreading the news through different TV Channels. This kind of news repetition appears in the novel through some statements used by the character of PT Sir, a previous physical education teacher of Jivan, when he follows the news of Jivan’s arrest on TV. He goes from one channel to the other and each time the same news is broadcasted. It is mentioned in the novel that “PT Sir presses a button and the channel changes/ PT Sir presses a button and the channel flips again/ PT Sir watches until his eyes smart” (Majumdar, 2020, p. 55, 56 ). In addition, the media outlets in the novel use sensational headlines and exaggerations to capture public interest. They depict Jivan as a dangerous terrorist. Her face is plastered across newspapers and television screens. Consequently, people begin to recognize her on the streets, and it becomes difficult for her to assert her innocence or receive a fair treatment.

The fate of Jivan’s rescue from prison is dependent on the testimony of two other persons; Lovely and PT Sir. Both of them have dreams they strive to achieve in a country that neglects the rights of the poor, the unprivileged, and the marginalized. Jivan is used to teach Lovely English, bearing various books within her bag to fulfill this task. Hence, Lovely should testify about her relationship with Jivan and clarify the fact of Jivan’s simple and

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struggling life. Although Lovely is a third-gender girl, she aspires to be a famous actress. Lovely feels the suffering of the innocent Jivan, so she is eager to go to court and give her evidence. When she goes to witness for the first time in the court, Lovely describes the scene saying “The public is wanting blood. The media is wanting death. All around me, that is what people are saying. The public is killing her (Majumdar, 2020, p. 328). Through Lovely’s words, the effect of media on the public is evident. The goal of the media becomes the goal of the public.

Furthermore, the media succeeds in making a combination between the dream of Jivan to be out of jail and the dream of Lovely to be out of the degraded societal look as being one of the transgender people who face an extreme discrimination in almost all fields of life. Lovely aspires to be one of the movie stars in India. When she makes a demo video to be estimated by the casting director as a step toward having an acting role in a film, her video is shared through the WhatsApp application by her friends in the acting classes. Soon the video reaches the television channels and Lovely becomes a “terrorist sympathizer.” Many TV channels speak and discuss the relationship of the rising Hijra to the stairs of fame with the terrorist attacker. For example, one of the news channels broadcasts “many are questioning the fairness of Jivan’s trial, and Lovely’s courtroom performance has a lot to do with it. She is not a legal expert, or an investigator, of course, it is her passion which is getting attention. Stay with us as we will be joined by –”

(Majumdar, 2020, p. 354, 355). The repetition of this kind of news becomes a good point in the way of Lovely. She feels surprised that men on the TV discuss if she is right or foolish in defending Jivan. But from her point of view “at least they are all discussing me on what they are calling prime-time news” (Majumdar, 2020, p. 355).

Now, the case of Jivan’s trial transfers from the media agenda to the public agenda. The TV channels use their influence to sway the importance of the issue on the public agenda. The trial of Jivan becomes the desire of the public and any sympathy with her will be criticized by the public. According to Dearing and Rogers, “This salience on the media agenda tells viewers, readers, and listeners ‘what issues to think about’” (1996, p. 8). So, the public’s main issue of thinking starts to be the soon trial. For this reason, Lovely is told “Are you wanting to rise in the film world? Or are you wanting the public to see you as a person who is defending a terrorist” (Majumdar, 2020, p. 356, 357)? The trial brings Lovely closer to her dream as she becomes more known by favor of using her name many times on the news channels through discussing the cause of Jivan. Hence, Lovely is told by a famous actress who asked her for an acting role in her movie, “One concern that my team has is, we want to avoid bad publicity. Your testimony for the terrorist” (Majumdar, 2020, p. 428).

PT Sir is the second person whose testimony may rescue Jivan from being executed. He was a high school PE teacher and Jivan was one of his charity students. She left school after her class ten board exams. PT Sir is shocked to see Jivan's picture on the news screens. He has known that she was a poor and shy student who was excellent at sports. During her days at school, he tried to support and care for her. PT Sir feels bored with his life and job, and he aspires to change his life for the better. Soon he becomes a member of the right-wing political party of Bimala Pal, a politician and chief minister of the state by the novel's end.

PT Sir agrees to testify against people he does not know or see because the lack of evidence will let the criminals back out onto the streets. This is what Bimala Pal convinces him to do in exchange for a good amount of money. Although he knows that his perjury is something against morals and conscience, he is surprised that no one of the judges or courtroom clerks asks about his repeated appearance in the court. If there is a robbery, a domestic problem, or even a fight between two neighbors, PT Sir is found to testify against the sinner. He is convinced that even if the political party pays for the guards, the courtroom clerks, or the judges, it does not matter as long as the right outcome is achieved. He believes that he is doing the right thing being close to the clues of political power.

On the other hand, he uses his influence to control and manipulate people around him. When he is summoned to testify



at the trial of Jivan, PT Sir talks about his former relationship with her and that he “Never saw her again, until (he) saw her on TV. Maybe she got involved with criminal elements after leaving school” (Majumdar, 2020, p. 319). Later, when Jivan wants to make a mercy petition, Bimala Pal convinces PT Sir that it will be better to neglect this matter. Now the issue is constituted from being the core of the media to be the main core of the public again. The case of Jivan moves to be on the top of the public agenda. Bimala Pal tells PT Sir that “The public is unhappy that she is appealing for mercy and whatnot” (Majumdar, 2020, p. 421), and then she says “See what you can do about it? The court gave its verdict. The people want justice.” (Majumdar, 2020, p. 422). The public agenda is now the decisive power for the fate of Jivan. Even the powerful authorities and political representatives have to listen to the desires of the public.

Throughout the events of the novel, the process of agenda-setting follows its three stages. The media agenda prioritizes the issue of arresting the young Muslim woman to influence and capture the interest of the public. The case moves to be the focus of the public agenda thanks to the success achieved by the media agenda. For the policymakers and those holding sensitive and political positions, it is necessary to follow the desire of the people. They have to follow the public agenda in order to preserve their status. For this reason, Bimala Pal persuades PT Sir that Jivan’s mercy petition should be blocked to satisfy the

calls of the public. She tells him “Listen, this is a result we can deliver as soon as we take power. It will be a big victory for us” (Majumdar, 2020, p. 422).

PT Sir himself realizes that rising to power is dependent on the response to public opinion and its demands. He convinces himself saying “If the matter of the terrorist is resolved during their tenure, this government’s approval from the public will know no limits. They will have bought themselves time to implement other campaign promises” (Majumdar, 2020, p. 422). Being a member of the new government, PT Sir should refuse the petition of Jivan. He persuades her lawyer to hand him the mercy petition to expedite it, but in reality, it will be put in his office drawer. At this point, the policy agenda role comes to light. The policy agenda setting is emphasized by the influence of the public agenda policy. The public sentiment and demands play a significant role in shaping the policy agenda. Policymakers often take public opinion into account to maintain their supremacy, legitimacy, and response to the public. By this cunning way, they can guarantee the full obedience and conformity of the public. The development of the agenda process cycle in its three stages can be obviously stated by Dearing and Rogers where they confirm “Research on the agenda-setting process suggests that the relative salience of an issue on the media agenda determines how the public agenda is formed, which in turn influences which issues policymakers consider. Control of the choices available for

action is a manifestation of power. Policymakers only act on those issues that reach the top of the policy agenda” (1996, p. 8).

After the execution of Jivan, PT Sir appears to the public and through the microphone tells them that their demands have been carried out. Their long-awaited issue has been solved. He speaks to the people proudly “Have you ever seen a government so attentive to the will of the people? Have you ever seen a government which demands that the courts move with speed” (Majumdar, 2020, p. 459). PT Sir assures the public that the victory of good over evil is a clear signal of a political party that “listens to the public” (Majumdar, 2020, p. 459) and performs what it promises.

### **Conclusion:**

The story of *A Burning* is Majumdar’s portrayal of modern-day India. She depicts the influence of media with its various images on the miserable society. The media becomes a basic tool used by the ruling power to submit and censor people. In India, hundreds of citizens have been arrested for criticizing the Hindu nationalist policy of Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014 and a member of the BJP party, using their social media platforms. The writer presents the situation of a society heavily influenced by media and technology. The interconnected stories of the three characters examine the ways through which media and the repeated news cycle shape the public opinion and impact the pursuit of justice. Majumdar could

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develop a story whose characters experience a complex media landscape full of bigotry, bias, personal and political interests, and lack of information that influence the news media coverage.

The negative employment of media in the novel spotlights the corrupted nature of the country's ruling power as an integral part of the Indian social fabric. Jivan's trial reveals the fact that corruption and bigotry in the legal and political apparatus of the country can lead to the oppression and victimization of marginalized people. Just before her forged execution is carried out, Jivan tells the lawyer who informs her that her mercy petition was rejected that "The country needs someone to punish, ... And I am that person" (Majumdar, 2020, p. 444). The country will not find someone better than a Muslim lady to be punished for a crime she has no relation to.

Overall, *A Burning* presents a critical image of a society in which corruption is deeply rooted in various institutions leaving a bad impact on the lives and aspirations of individuals. The unconscious and indifferent use of social media together with the bias of journalists and other media outlets that are supposed to be the bastions of truth for the society, the fate of people becomes on shaky ground. The novel provides an incisive description of the challenges posed by endless corruption and the need for social change.

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