

FRESH OFF THE PRESS

# An Ominous Incense

A Bengali debut novelist takes on our troubled political climate

MURSALIN MOSADDEQUE

There are two things that I believe are enough to make me lose my sanity during times of unrest—scrolling down my Facebook feed and the afternoon TV news. The characters in Megha Majumdar's new novel, *A Burning* (2020), become unavoidably embroiled in both.

Majumdar deftly conjures up a tense air while narrating the events following a terrorist attack. A Bengali Muslim woman (who is oddly named Jivan) takes the fall for the incident just because she had written a post on Facebook, and the pundits on TV news and the agitated social media mob pounce on her like hungry wolves.

It is not hard to see why this novel has created such buzz in the literary and publishing circles abroad. Megha Majumdar writes with a great sense of awareness and sensitivity and her focus on the dimensions of social and political ethos is commendable. However, the novel also has all the elements the Western audiences crave—a terrorist attack, a Muslim falsely blamed, misinterpreted social media posts, and token representations of oppressed minority groups. It almost feels like she is

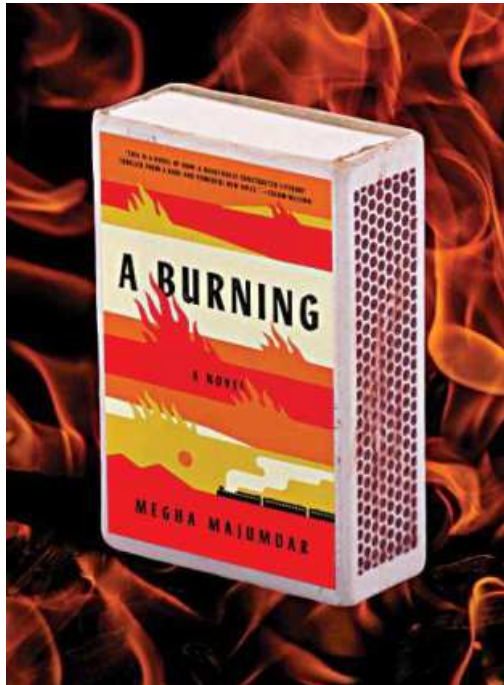


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what falls flat is how she attempts to render the diction of Lovely's speech with an odd caricature of broken English. "In this life, everybody is knowing how to give me shame. So I am learning how to reflect shame on them also."

Both Lovely and Jivan live in a slum. Literature and art often portray a one dimensional picture of people in the low socioeconomic class—though middle-class figures have complex persona and interpersonal dynamics, there is a banality of seeing only the poverty of these people from the surface. Majumdar's novel falls for a similar trope when Jivan is recounting her childhood to a journalist. But, inexplicably, she makes no mention of the discrimination she undoubtedly had to face while growing up as a woman and a Muslim in a patriarchal society where Hindus are the majority. The mass outcry against her seemingly comes only from their need to find a scapegoat and attempts at vilifying her are strangely unaffected by her gender or religion, in an otherwise polyphonic narrative.

The third notable character, with whom we are less likely to sympathise, doesn't get a name in the book. He is merely referred to as PT Sir—Jivan's physical education teacher from school. Despite his initial affections for Jivan, he gives false statement in court against her in the hope of gaining ranks in a political party where they don't blink twice when innocent Muslim families are butchered by cow vigilantes. His personal insecurities make him vulnerable to manipulation and his arc reflects how our individual derangements can affect facets of oppression on a grand scale.

The rise of right wing governments across the globe has made us wary of our future. Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* offers a gloomy account of this tumultuous world, where the vile like PT Sir ascend the stairs of power at the expense of the most vulnerable members of the society like Jivan. The novel's tone gives it a zealous fervor. It depicts life as it appears on the news—a bit dizzying and nauseating, but often inevitable.

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ticking boxes for a liberal audience who want to pat themselves on the back for having read this book. Yet, despite its adoration in the West, the novel takes place quite close to home for a Bengali reader such as myself. The eponymous "burning" takes place in a railway station in Kolkata.

Tension between Hindus and Muslims are nothing new in our subcontinent. It resulted in the anomalous partition in 1947 and the riots that ensued around that period. State-

sponsored pogroms in Gujarat have killed thousands of Muslims since then. The eviction of countless Hindus from their ancestral homes in Bangladesh have been supported or tolerated by ruling parties in the past. Majumdar's novel is brilliant in chalking out this nationalistic jingoism that is often associated with the oppression of a minority group. It skillfully addresses how the state is complicit in these acts of violence—Jivan is framed for sedition, her execution is hastened, and she becomes a victim of those playing for power. Her allegiance to the state is repeatedly questioned during the legal trial she has to face. While she is walking to the court one day, an angry voice from the mob yells, "Go back to Bangladesh."

Jivan's fate rests in the hands of another central character, Lovely, a member of the hijra community. Lovely exudes great personal resolve and strength. She is determined to be an actress despite facing constant ridicule and hardship. Majumdar depicts with great sensitivity how someone like Lovely faces discrimination and hatred in society, but

THE BOOK REPORT

# The club for every girl

Nostalgia, comfort, and the power of female friendships—when the show is as good as our favourite childhood book series

SHABABA IQBAL

I came across *Kristy's Great Idea*, the first book of Ann M Martin's *The Baby-Sitters Club* legacy, at 16, in my school's library in Qatar. Soon, I was borrowing more of them from the library and buying them from different bookstores. They were my own little secret—while fantasy fiction like *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Mortal Instruments* trended among readers my age, I was thrilled to find these 1980s' stories about middle-school girls living their independent lives, being empowered by friendship.

*The Baby-Sitters Club* books were published between 1986 and 2000, selling over 176 million copies worldwide. The series came as a welcome breather amidst horror-adventure fiction like *Goosebumps*, *Nancy Drew*, or *Hardy Boys*, set in the fictional town of Stonybrook, Connecticut, with seven friends Kristy, Claudia, Mary Anne, Stacey, Dawn,

and their predictable plots could only stretch my imagination so far, but there was a sense of comfort and familiarity that I felt in that universe filled with the nostalgia of pizza parties and sleepovers with friends. At 16, which I consider a formative year in my life, I could relate to the lessons and realisations that the girls had, and in understanding friendship, they were my constant, albeit younger, companions.

Netflix's adaptation of *The Baby-Sitters Club*, released on July 3, pulls off the tricky feat of setting this story in 2020, while staying true to all that avid fans loved about the book series. Much like the books, each instalment of the show revolves around and is narrated by a particular character. This lets each of the girls flesh out their individual stories and relationships. Small details from the analogue days enrich this adaptation—the baby-sitters still use



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Mallory, and Jessi. Books like *Sweet Valley Twins* were also offering similar glimpses into day-to-day middle-class American life, but *BSC* was special—Martin wanted her readers to see girls as assertive entrepreneurs and problem solvers at a time when there weren't many female protagonists as such, especially as young girls.

In the first book, Kristy gets the idea for a baby-sitting club from watching her mother struggling to find a sitter for her younger brother. Kristy and her friends love taking care of kids and a club would let them have fun and earn some money. And so, by identifying a demand in the market, Kristy sows the seeds of a successful enterprise. Claudia, the artist in the group, creates a logo. The girls meet in Claudia's room thrice a week, and use her private landline for bookings. They save money by making fliers and rely on peer referral from their best clients. Each of the girls also write in a journal after a babysitting job, taking notes on what worked, what didn't, and what could be improved. At the heart of *The Baby-Sitters Club* appeal lies this narrative about girls, aged between 11 and 13, managing their own finances, with their childhood innocence and enthusiasm still in place. It was this do-it-yourself agency that resonated with me and shaped my beliefs about hard work and responsibilities.

Even more valuable were the friendships that the girls forged. Martin created characters with varying backgrounds and family histories, who learned how to work through their differences and prioritise sisterhood. They encountered broken families, childhood diabetes, and the loss of a beloved grandmother. But their friendships and babysitting jobs helped each of them embrace these issues and were intertwined with who they were and who they became.

After my childhood best friend moved to Canada, over the years, we fell out of loop with each other's lives. The changes were tough to face. With time, I understood that we could still be friends even if we no longer had shared interests. I learned this from Kristy, when Claudia starts developing an interest in fashion and boys, and from Mary Anne, who realises she can be best friends with both Kristy and Dawn. I will not overstate the significance of the books; they were hardly an accurate depiction of reality,

a landline to schedule appointments and advertise through fliers instead of social media promotion, but all with believable explanations.

Showrunner Rachel Shukert understands that things like an overprotective father, a parent remarrying, divorce, and childhood illness are timeless motifs that are relevant across generations. Yet, the show updates the cultural landscape in which the narrative takes place. The community is more racially diverse: Japanese-American Claudia, once the sole non-white founding member of the club, is joined by Mary Anne, who is now Latina. As in the books, Stacey's move to Connecticut comes after she is diagnosed with juvenile diabetes, but it is spurred on by cyber bullying, as a video of her going into insulin shock goes viral around her school in Manhattan.

In a standout moment in the fourth episode, 'Mary Anne Saves the Day', based on the book of the same name, timid Mary Anne calls the hospital when a kid she is babysitting falls ill. The child in question is transgender, and Mary Anne stands up to the hospital staff for mis-gendering the young girl: "As you would see if you looked at her and not her chart, Bailey is not a boy. And by treating her like one [...], you're making her feel insignificant and humiliated. So, from here on out, please recognise her for who she is."

While Shukert tackles these serious issues—even showing, significantly, how delightful it can be when a young girl gets her first period and learns how to use a sanitary napkin with the help of her best friends—she also remembers that the smaller things, like redecorating bedrooms, fights with friends, and crushes on older boys, are just as valid.

Sadly, I had to leave my *The Baby-Sitters Club* collection behind when I moved back to Bangladesh from Qatar. I eventually caught up to the trendy books that people of my age read, but *The Baby-Sitters Club* occupies a significant space on my heart's shelf. At 27, as I reflect on how I found comfort and strength in those books, I am excited for a new generation to discover these young, charismatic girls through the show.

Shababa Iqbal is a trainee sub-editor of *Arts & Entertainment* and *Star Youth*, *The Daily Star*.

BOOK NEWS

# Sanctuaries lost for book lovers

EMRAN MAHFUZ, TRANSLATED BY TOWRIN ZAMAN

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit the knowledge centres of capital Dhaka. Many bookshops are slowly shutting down and publishing houses are struggling to survive. Amidst this crisis, writers and booklovers are seeking state patronage to help them survive.

The first hit came when Elephant Road's Dipanpur bookstore announced that they were closing down. Also shutting down are Katabon's Kobita Café and bookshops Moddhyoma, Nalonda, and Pencil in Banani.

According to the owners, the establishments have been closed for about four months because the pandemic forced book sales and earnings to plummet. Rents, salaries for employees, and other expenditures could no longer be borne.

"We did not expect that Dipanpur would see such a crisis," said founder Dr Razia Rahman Jolly. The bookshop was opened in memory of Faisal Arefin Dipan, a secular publisher killed by extremists. "We received unprecedented response when the news of us shutting down spread on social media. Now preparations are

underway for us to get back on our feet. An incentive by the Ministry of Culture is also in the process."

Kobita Café director poet Nahida Ashrafi said, "There is no point in staying open during this crisis. It has been closed for the past three months. I have decided to fully shut down Kobita Café after two months and have informed the owner of the space about our decision. But the decision can still be overturned. Everybody's cooperation is crucial. Only then we can see how far we can go."

Researcher and Director General of Bangladesh Museum, Faizul Latif Chowdhury shared his thoughts on how to save these institutions that have been invaluable in shaping the creative and intellectual palettes of Dhaka residents. "The government, just like their contribution to the textile sector, can pay special attention to the bookshops, keeping in mind the importance of our culture," he told *The Daily Star*. "One solution can be to buy books from the struggling bookshops and distributing them to private and public libraries. Another option could be to bear the costs of the bookshops for at least six months.



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

This will not only garner the government praises but also bring immense benefit to the literary and cultural society. The National Library can help them in this task."

Kobita Café and Dipanpur started their journey on a small scale, around four years ago. Gradually, both started operating as full-fledged bookstores. Both have several thousand books in their collection. They serve light snacks and there is an arrangement for

afternoon lunch, and a stage for regular programmes. Kobita Café in particular became popular among the literary fans of Dhaka for its art and literature-based events. Both bookshops started their work from a deep love of books.

Emran Mahfuz is a poet, writer, and editor of *Kaler Dhoni*. Towrin Zaman is a research consultant who writes in her spare time.

DS BOOKS DESK

After holding polls which closed on July 5, the Daily Star Book Club will be reading Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* starting Wednesday, July 15. Read-along rules, discussions, and a list of stores where the novel is available are all up on DS Books' social media pages.

Feel free to join the read-along by becoming a member of the Daily Star Book Club group on Facebook. To stay updated, follow the 'Daily Star Books' page on Facebook and @thedailystarbooks on Instagram! You can also email us at thedailystarbooks@gmail.com.



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