

POETRY

Poetry of Nirmalendu Goon

TRANSLATED BY FAKRUL ALAM

(Swadhinata, Ei Shobodota Kibhabe Amader Holo)

How Freedom Became Our Own Word

A poem is about to be written;
Millions of excited, rebellious, impatient listeners
Waited for the happening
From dawn in the park's open field a sea of people
has been wondering—
“When will the Poet show up?”

This Children's Park didn't exist that day
This garden beautified with flowers and trees
didn't exist that day
This languid drab evening didn't exist that day
So how was that particular evening?
How were the Children's Park, benches, its trees,
flowers and garden
In this park that is at the heart of Dhaka city that
day?

I know dark hands strove to erase all memories of
that day
Thus it is I can see in this adverse poet-less
expanse today
A poet set up against a poet
A field set up against a field
An evening set up against an evening
A park set up against a park
A March set up against amarch....

“O child of the coming age”, O poet of the future
Swaying on the Children's Park colorful swings
You'll come to know all one day
It's with you in mind I leave behind this tale of
that greatest of evenings!
On that day this park looked completely different
It neither had this park nor this garden full of
flowers—nothing of the kind!
Only, as a slice of an unbroken sky can be, the
horizon was flooded that day
The vast grass-covered field wasthen lush green, so
very lush green!
The lush green dear to our hearts and our beloved
freedom had melded
With a vast grass-covered green field that day!

Wrapping foreheads and wrists in red-cotton cloth
To this field had come rushing workers from
metal foundries
Ploughs and yokes on shouldershad come
swarming bare-bodied farmers
With weapons snatched from policemen had
come radiant youths!
With death in their fists and dreams in their eyes

had come middle, lower middle-class people
Andsad-eyed clerks, women, old people, whores,
vagrants as well
And children like you who had assembled to
gather fallen leaves
A poem was to be recited—people waited eagerly
for him—
“When will the poet show up?” “When will he be
here?”

“After centuries, centuries of struggles,
With the resolute gait of a Rabindranath
The poet came next and stood on the people's
stage
In the twinkling of an eye and in sparkling light
water buoyed a vessel
As the heart began to sway a sea of people felt a
tide coming their way
All doors had opened; who could suppress that
thunderous voice?
Making the sun-lit people's stage tremble, the poet
read out his immortal poem—
“The struggle this timeis for our freedom
The struggle this time is for independence!”

From then on “freedom” became our own word!



Now that It's August Cry Out in Sorrow

Now that it's August, cry out in sorrow Bengalis!

I know you weren't allowed to mourn for a long,
long time
I know, hapless Bengalis, you weren't able to cry
at all
For twenty-one long years, but you can do so now!
Cry your hearts out now for the time to mourn
has come
Clear the debt of sorrow you've piled up for over
two decades
In tears that can flow completely freely now!

With the tears of pent-up passion released from
your hearts
Let Bengal's delta be flooded and swept away.
Most people have no idea how striking shared
tears
Can look on them. Let everyone know that truth
now.
Like crickets chirping soulfully across earth
Let your clamorous cries pervade and overwhelm
it.
Cry out soulfully, making earth quiver with your
cries!

Citizens of an ill-fated country's horn of happiness
Cry out now like a hungry baby deprived of milk
Cry out now like a lonely sister grieving for a lost
brother
Cry out now like a dear daughter wailing for her
dead father
Cry out now like poor people who've lost all in
ruinous floods
Cry out now like a mother who has just birthed a
still-born child
Cry out now like a wailing old man who has just
buried his own son,
Returned home, and is flailing helplessly on his
courtyard floor.
You couldn't mourn when you wanted to but cry
out now
And let go of your pent up and till now impotent
anger and pain!

After twenty-one years the sun called Mujib has
burst through
Clouds and now blazes in Bengal's skies again.
Not in celebration
But with funeral cries greet him now. Cry,
Bengalis, cry!

Like the immaculate juice oozing out of an
uprooted baat tree
Let tears ooze out of your eyes and flow down
your face
Like the warm juice of a date palm tree that has
been tapped
Let the tears pent up in your bosom trickle down
to its earthly urn.

Twenty-one years have gone by and August has
come again
August is the cruelest month
August is the month of mourning, soaked in sin,
harsh, cruel
Free it from its sins with overflowing tears!

Fakrul Alam is UGC Professor, Department of English,
University of Dhaka.

I'm Not Here to Shed Blood this Day

TRANSLATED BY HOSSAIN AHMED ARIF ELAHI

Like everyone else present here, I, too am so fond of roses,
Yesterday while passing by the Racecourse ground, a rose from the bushes
Entreated me to speak of Sheikh Mujib in my poems.
I'm here to speak of him.

A blood-spattered brick dislodged from the Shahid Minar
Implored me yesterday to speak of Sheikh Mujib in my poems.
I'm here to speak of him.

Like everyone else present here, I'm also fond of the palash flowers.
While passing by the Samakal office, a newly-bloomed palash
Yesterday whispered in my ear,
Telling me to speak of Sheikh Mujib in my poems.
I'm here to speak of him.

The interactive fountain at the ShabbaghAvenueurged me
To speak of Sheikh Mujib in my poems.
I'm here to speak of him.

Like everyone else gathered here, I'm partial to dreams;
A dauntless dream that I encounteredat theend of last night
Pleaded with me to speak of Sheikh Mujib in my poems.
I'm here to speak of him.

Let the mourners crowding in this spring at the foot of the Banyan tree be
witness,
Let the tender krishnachurabuds that dried before blooming
Be the keen audience, the black cuckoo of approaching dusk shall know;
The sacred soil under my feet, my witness
This day I commit myself to theappeals of the rose,
This day I respond to the palash's solicitation,
This day I stand by that dream's desire.

I'm not here to shed blood this day
I'm here to speak of my love for him.

Hossain Ahmed Arif Elahi is a Professor of English at Cox's Bazar Government
College.



Star

REVIEWS

A Burning: Good Books Are Hard to Read

Megha Majumdar. ISBN:9780525658696. Penguin Hamish Hamilton, 2020.

REVIEWED BY SHAKIL RABBI

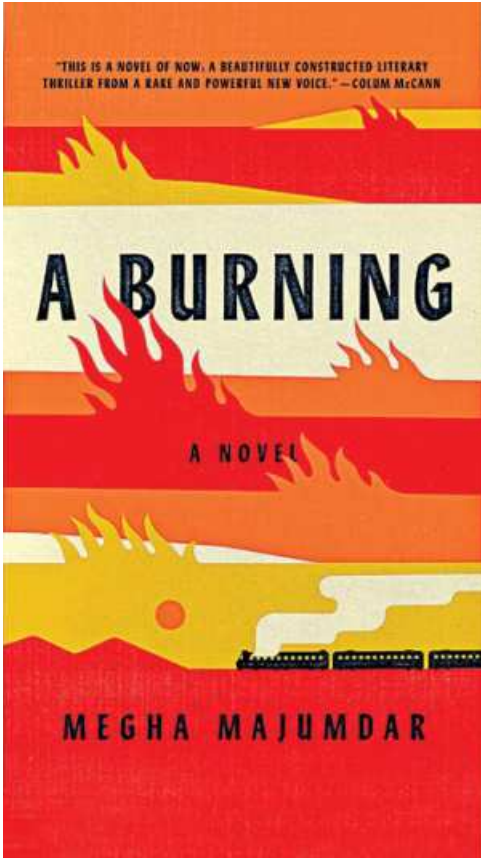
Good books – even as they are arresting – are often hard to read. This is not because they are difficult in themselves so much because oftheir content. Human societies are callous and viscous; cruelty, greed, and selfishnessaremanifest across the world, and one purpose of stories is topicture this layout. This makes for hard truths, often, and this is what I mean when I say good books are hard to read. It is also in such terms I read *A Burning* (Alfred A Knopf, 2020, p. 293), the debut novel by Megha Majumdar, a thoroughly good book.It is hard to readprecisely because it accurately delineates with bleakness and compassion contemporary India. It is a story of prejudice and selfishness, as they are tied to everyday aspirations, and the ghosts such acts of calculations let loose in India today.

The novel centers around the stories of three people in a city in West Bengal, clearly Kolkata even though the city is not named. The first protagonist is Jivan, a Muslim girl, charged with terrorism in connection to an attack on a train at the Kolabagan Station, close to the slum where she lives with her parents. The second is Lovely, a hijra, dreaming of being an actress, and whom Jivan sometimes tutors in English. The third is PT Sir, a physical education instructor at the all-girls school Jivan attended,an ancillary teaching staff who becomes involved with the rising Hindu nationalist party in the state. Each of the threecharacters represents a different thread in the tapestry of India – the idea of rising to the middle class, the idea of becoming a star, and the idea of becoming a political leader. Their storiesplay out in

the complex context of current-day Indian life, widespread anti-Muslim violence and inequality, the undeniable cult and power of celebrity, and the victimization of all those who are notHindu men.

It begins with Jivan posting a comment on Facebook calling the government “terrorists” – late at night when most of our most careless mistakes are made. She is arrested the next day and charged with being part of the terrorist attack on the train, with the government using details of her Facebook conversations with someone they claim is a terrorist recruiter as evidence against her. Because she is poor and Muslim, Jivanis afforded no leeway and is quickly sucked into the opaque legal system that she cannot afford to navigate. Her hopes of freedom rest on her telling her lifstory to a news reporter, which she believes will accrue public support, and the facts of the day in question, provided by Lovely, whom she was taking books to at the time of the attack.

As the book barrels forward through Jivan's story, it also narrativizes the lives of Lovely and PT Sir at the same time. Each of the two, one could read, as characterizing certain figurations of appeal in the ideological spectrum: the liberal and the conservative. Lovely navigates the cruel life of a hijra in Kolkata, trying to make money through blessings and begging, and paying most of it to go to acting lessons. She hopes that she will become a famous film actress, and in that way give voice to the loss she lives with because of who she is, a hijra who is poor and cannot ever have children and a family. PT Sir, aligning with the rising status quo of



Hindu nationalism, rises quickly within the new political party. He hopes to make more of himself in life and believes in making society better, especially in improving the apathetic circumstances of schooling. He comes to be represented as a politician who provides an authentic voice of the people;

written as particularly effective because he can delude himself about the cynical nature of political parties, wrapping themselves in high-minded rhetoric of nationalism and social responsibility. How these figures end up impacting Jivan's story is the immediate thread of the novel, but Majumdar's art as a writer is to flesh out all three characters' trajectories in evocate thematic significance to contemporary India.

Stylistically speaking, *A Burning* is compulsively readable. It is told in short chapters, written in economic prose, alternating perspectives and foci on characters. Majumdar seems to be a skilled writer who knows our short attention spansintimately and recognizes the needto move briskly to appeal to our constraints. This compositional approachhas become increasingly popular in recent years, with accomplished practitioners not necessarily losing out on the craft of storytelling in the process. In my college writing classes, for example, I often assign Trevor Noah's memoir, *Born a Crime*, precisely because it communicates complex issues inconcise,terse chapters.I have found that my students can read the book more effectively because the chapters are so short, which helps them get through sections in one sitting and so actually helps them read better. I believe this is to be the same for *A Burning*. I read it quickly, within a few days, largely because I was able to get through individual chapters in one sittingsince each ran four to five pages at their longest. *A Burning* unfurls so much of itself in showing the moments making up its story precisely and incisively, enabling the

subtlety of the meaning and consequencesof events tooonlybecome fully apparent as the narrative progresses and the events accumulate. It reads, in some ways, like a mystery-thriller, but this genre-identity belies its real significance as a great piece of fiction by a tremendous new writer.

In its bleakness and pathos, *A Burning* is evocative of *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. There are clear parallels with this book and the Roy classic; both are powerful debut novels highlighting how badly Indian society treats its least. Whereas in Roy's novel, violence upon the Dalit community is highlighted, in *A Burning*, the scapegoats *du jour* are shown to be the Muslims, the “beef-eaters.” Both can be read as fatalistic (a hallmark of Indian fiction), but both also flesh out how others' choices over their own lives act upon ourselves—even as their consequences remain largely unknown and hidden from ourdirect perception. Majumdar, like Roy, can humanize our vulnerabilities as they are connected to our corruptions, and this makes her novel resonate beyond the political to what makes the essence of our personhood. Fostering empathyis often provided as a rationalizedfunction of all goodbooks and Majumdar, in *Burning*, makes a powerful new claim on this terrain. It is a story of urgency, told urgently, and that needs to be read urgently.

Shakil Rabbi is an Assistant Professor, Department of Language, Literature, and Cultural Studies, Bowie State University, Maryland, USA.