



A Study of Gender Performativity in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*

Abdul Qayyum Khaki¹

ABSTRACT

The present study explores gender performativity and identity issues through the perspectives of Queer Theory in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*. Judith Butler (1990) in *Gender Trouble* has given the concept that genders are not biologically fixed, they should be categorized based on their performativity. The close textual analysis of Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* shows how individuals can challenge their biological sex through performative acts and make their identity. Moreover, people have to face many issues due to their identity to come up with the social norms. Qualitative methodology and close textual analysis are used for exploratory research that explores Butler's conception of gender identity and performativity based on Queer Theory.

Key Words: Gender Performativity, Gender Discrimination, *A Burning*

¹ Lecturer at Punjab College Sargodha – (aq.khaki1985@gmail.com)





1. Introduction

The present study explores Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* through the perspectives of Queer Theory. Queer theory is a multidisciplinary field that arose in the United States in the 1990s and had a significant influence on third-wave feminism. At the turn of the twentieth century, the epithet ,queer, was used to denote non-heteronormative sexualities as well as to criticize homosexual and lesbian persons. Women's studies, feminist theory, gay and lesbian studies, as well as postmodern and poststructuralist ideas, have all influenced queer theory. Teresa de Lauretis used the term queer theory in 1991 to define a method of thought that pushed for a more flexible idea of identity rather than heterosexuality or binary gender categories.

Queer is frequently used as an umbrella phrase by and for people who are identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, intersex, and/or transgender, or by and for others who prefer the term over LGBTI tags. Depending on their color, class, personal experience, and generation, some people find the word insulting. The term ,queer, has recently been used to designate heterosexuals whose gender or sexuality do not fit to common assumptions. As a result, queer theory is a set of concepts that contends that identities, particularly those related to gender, sex, and/or sexuality, are neither fixed nor predictable. Queer theory is dedicated to criticizing and complicating earlier approaches to identity theory. Queer theory is a discourse model that destabilizes the assumptions and advantages of conventional heteronormative modes of study and everyday life by politicizing and acknowledging the fluidity and volatility of identities.

Michel Foucault's and Judith Butler's writings are frequently regarded as founding texts of queer theory. Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick were all influential early writers in the development of queer theory. Queer theory proponents say that it helps people accept and understand a more complex world. It offers scholars, activists, and others new ways of thinking and talking about identity that go beyond simple binaries, particularly in the fight against homophobia and transphobia or unjustified fear and hatred of homosexuals and homosexuality, and transsexuals, transsexuality, and transgender people, respectively. When physicians execute gender selection surgery on intersex children and GLBTIQ individuals are the victims of violence, for example. Gender identity disorder and gender corrective surgery are frequently studied using queer theory. (Giesecking, 2008, p. 737).





In her seminal book *The Second Sex*, while discussing the position of the weaker sex, the French philosopher Beauvoir (1949) raised the argument that despite the establishment of a welfare state based on universal ideals in France following World War II, women were still regarded as less knowledgeable than men and were forced to work more due to the internalization of domestic chores such as cleaning homes and caring for children. As a result, according to Beauvoir, women are molded to please men and do not have independent existences: they are immanent, which means they simply have a bodily presence and do not think as autonomous and free individuals. In this well-known quote, she conveys her thoughts: “One is not born but rather becomes a woman” (p. 267).

In her path-breaking book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1990) created a postmodernist understanding of gender, in accordance with the deconstructive ethos and in opposition to the traditional notion that genders are permanent categories by claiming that identity is performativity formed. Gender, according to Butler, is a social function that individuals perform and that society validates and accepts. Gender, according to Butler, is a continual performance that acquires new meaning with each repeated performance or citation, depending on the situation in which it happens. As a result, it resists fixities and universalities. Butler sees gender as provisional, changeable, contingent, and acted, refusing to accept fixed definitions. Essentialisms, fixed identities and meanings, and conceptions of authenticity, authority, universality, and objectivity are all rejected in this view. She says, “If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex,’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (p.7).

Megha Majumdar’s debut work *A Burning* was a literary sensation. The narrative style and current challenges in India have been commended in the work. PT Sir, Jivan, and Lovely are the primary characters. The story is set in a world where the legal system is broken, the media is merciless, and governmental power is mishandled. Before reaching the end objective, each character experiences disenchantment. Various governmental apparatuses oversee their life, and they operate following them. The characters in the story face different challenges. Lovely, a transgender, has to face the hatred of society. She determines to be a successful actress and



challenges her biological identity. She learns English and takes part in an acting class. Despite of the challenges, she sticks to her ideal and makes her mark as a female. She gets success through her performative acts. Jivan, who is a young Muslim girl, belongs to a poor family. She perishes to make her mark in society and her identity makes her a villain. Azad is another important character. He is a male but his relationship with Lovely makes him an outcast and he has to suffer a great deal.

The current research deals with Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* which represents the issues of gender identity and their roles in society. The work has been analyzed under the lens of queer theory to highlight the core issues of different genders and their identity based on performativity as mentioned by Judith Butler.

2. Literature Review

There is a lot to say about engaging with Queer Theory and using the analytical tools it offers to challenge some of the essentialist assumptions that underpin the ideas of a core identity or a natural, intrinsic, inborn person. Indeed, Queer Theory has helped to destabilize and dismantle several heterosexist conventions. One of the most appealing aspects of Queer Theory is that it aims to avoid the harmful essentialist connotations typically associated with the labels: heterosexuality, homosexuality, lesbian,, and gay (Makowski & Halperin, 1991). Because there is no subject and no explicit distinction drawn between these categories in Queer Theory, the ideas of personalized and segmented sexualities vanish. There is only discourse in Queer Theory (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994, p. 453).

Sadjadi and Hozhabri in their article *Gender, Performativity, and Agency in Virginia Woolf: A Butlerian Reading of Orlando* say that gender, performativity, and agency are all powerfully reflected in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. The Butlerian perspective on gender aligns well with the idea of gender and Woolf's groundbreaking approach toward femininity as fluid and ambiguous reality. Through acts, Sasha, Harry, and Orlando gain and display their gender identities. As a result, the performativity of gender has been demonstrated through a series of rituals, emphasizing the non-identity of sex and gender. Gender fluidity emphasizes the fact that it is socially and culturally formed and may change over time. The Butlerian agency has brought



attention to the consequences of defying the established rules. While the novel's themes are constituted in society but not defined, the process of signification allows for the potential of change.

While analyzing *A Burning*, James Woods (2020) in a review *A Debut Novel's Immersive Urgency* compares the novel's style to William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. We can sense the characters, breath as they stand at the very front of the stage in the novels, which has a similar sense of urgency. Majumdar, unlike Faulkner, utilizes only a few characters and the story moves in an arrow-like pattern. It all starts with a crime, then moves on to a bogus charge and incarceration, and last, a trial. The novel's plot is compelling, but the novel's compulsions are founded on an engaging present rather than a sliding succession. Her characters become vivid, vibrant, and eloquent when they begin to tell us about their lives. Within this tight-knit circle, Majumdar finds all of the materials she needs, progressively widening the novel's picture of Kolkatan and Indian society. Jivan, self-sufficient and brilliant, was on his way up: 'From a cabbage eater, I was becoming a chicken eater' he said. She worked as a Pantaloon shop assistant and had taken up a monthly payment plan on a smartphone. 'We feel like we're living at the bottom of a well, she says of the misfits in prison. 'We, re frogs,' says the narrator. Majumdar has a fondness for exploiting little details and fleeting interactions to nudge her stories towards larger themes. When Jivan is arrested, her mother visits her in the police station, and Majumdar's depiction of her approaching the guards – ,the stooped lady who came right up to them, her feet in bathroom slippers, - vividly shows the frailty that the mother herself does not understand (p.1-2).

James Woods, critique is frank in highlighting the writer's storytelling approach. He has also highlighted the poverty and helplessness of the community's underprivileged people. However, he neglects to discuss numerous other factors such as feminism, patriarchy, the influence of ideology, performativity, and so on.

Arin Keeble (2021) praises *A Burning* for its propulsive narrative, urgency, and foresight at this tough time in an essay titled *Aspiration Nation*. Although the book is undeniably deserving of such acclaim, these descriptions fall short of portraying the novel's intellectual and emotional depth. *A Burning* and Karan Mahajan's excellent *An Association of Small Bombs* (2016) both deal with the aftermath of a terrorist attack, family sorrow, Hindu nationalism, and government





corruption. Whereas Mahajan's vision of Narendra Modi's India is shaped by social media volatility and the contradictions of youthful optimism in the face of new forms of systemic violence and economic division, Majumdar's vision is shaped by social media uncertainty and the contradictions of youthful optimism in the face of new forms of systemic violence and economic division. With fresh and rigorous eyes, Majumdar picks up an old literary preoccupation: the nature of aspiration, in this thoroughly twenty-first-century setting.

The majority of reviews of Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* discuss poverty, politics, the plight of depressed people, the court system, the media, and other societal conventions, but no one has mentioned Butler's gender identity and performativity. The current researcher tries to fill the gap by applying Butler's Queer Theory to it.

3. Research Questions

This research answers the following questions:

1. How has the writer highlighted gender identity based on performativity in *A Burning*?
2. What are the core issues of distinct genders in *A Burning*?

4. Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The present research is qualitative and the textual analysis is done through the Queer Theory (1990) of Judith Butler, an American Philosopher. Queer theory is an appropriate framework that highlights gender identity and the issues faced by different gender in various cultures. Judith Butler's Queer theory emphasizes gender is based on performativity. It has nothing to do with nature. The performative issue, Butler brings up is easily recognized from the performance. Performative is not a choice to be made, whether consciously or unconsciously; rather, it is a continual action. "Acts, gestures", according to Butler's performative concept and it is the ,repetitious citations of sex and gender" (Craver & Chambers 2008, p. 43). Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* that establishing the meaning of the concept of "performativity" is problematic since it "might fluctuate with time". Butler, Jagger claims, tends to go farther by introducing the idea of performative, arguing that "the subject" is not only positioned in its "formation in history and culture", but is also "socially and culturally formed" (p. 36-7). According to Jagger, performativity





is founded on the speech act theory, but the subject's identity is shaped by "power and knowledge regimes typified by forced heterosexuality and phallogocentrism. As a result, it is a matter of social and political regulation" (Butler, 1990, p. 20).

For Butler, "performative speech acts are dynamic dialectic between the past, and present, the one that names and the one that is being named" (1990, p. 42). Butler also claims that speech is not devoid of performativity. Iterability is also a collection of standards via which the topic acquires the ability to be created. Butler, on the other hand, does not signify a single action; consequently, anything done by norms of sex is performative; this is why gender is more important to her than sex. When Butler writes that the category of sex is always reinscribed as gender; she implies performativity in the action of a gendered subject.

5. Data Analysis

The research analyses Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* from the perspective of Queer theory. The text centers around three main characters. Apparently, it seems that the novel has been written to highlight injustice, the rule of the elite, hypocrisy in the society, the role of media, and other social issues but a close look at the text provides a different perspective. The researcher is eager to analyze it using Queer Theory given by Judith Butler.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler says that the genders have no biological discrimination. They should be categorized on the basis of their performativity. In the chosen novel, Lovely is a transgender. She is considered an outcast in the society but through her behavior and performance, she proves herself not only a perfect woman but also a successful actress. Transgender people are regarded as aliens and treated as such. As a result of discrimination, they face a slew of other issues, including a lack of educational opportunities, lack of medical services, depression, unemployment, alcohol abuse, hormone pill abuse, and tobacco use, as well as issues surrounding adoption and marriage. Even though the Constitution mandates equality in all sectors, it is never enforced. Transgender people face persecution, abuse, and discrimination from all corners of society, whether it comes from their own family and friends or the entire public. The life of transgender people is a daily struggle since they are not welcomed anywhere and are humiliated as well as ostracized from society.



Lovely strives valiantly to maintain her individuality and existence. She behaves and acts like a woman throughout her life. She, like any other woman, wishes to obtain an education and advance in her career to compete in the world. She takes English lessons from Jivan, the novel's protagonist. She visits her daily and learns new things. She aspires to be successful in the society and to achieve well. Her unyielding ambition will demonstrate that she is not a transsexual who lives just to amuse people with various tricks and lacks willpower. Lovely is unique. She has got a goal in mind, and she is going for it.

Lovely's life is filled with obstacles at first. She has no particular identity but she vows to make her identity through her performative acts. In the beginning, She, like the rest of the hijra group, has had to endure a lot. Lovely and her hijra sisters, as well as their guru, were once humiliated embarrassingly when visiting a house to bless a baby. The door stays shut for a long period at first. After knocking and calling repeatedly, the mother and her infant step outside the door. The child is blessed by Lovely. The other hijras coax the child in the hope of receiving money. The mother, who looked worried, takes the child inside after a few times. Lovely and her pals wait outside for money, but they are even sadder and embarrassed when they hear the water nozzle open. They see that the mother washes the infant despite taking out some money. The mother's actions are representative of the overall public's anti-transgender mindset. They do not look like humans rather more like wild animals or something else. She has to deal with humiliation regularly. She needs to travel by train, and people stare at her in an odd way.

But, unlike other transgender people, she aspires to be a better person. She behaves differently in every situation, demonstrating that sex is not determined by birth but rather by performance. Lovely, like every other woman, wishes to marry Azad. Azad is the love of her life. They stay up all night talking to one other. They swear they'll never be apart. Lovely feels an intense attraction to him. She behaves as a wife would and expresses the same emotions. She is aware that the society does not approve of their relationship, but she refuses to back down. She is thoroughly loving her life with Azad. She says: 'He is pinching my cheek, and I am laughing even though it is hurting. I am feeling peaceful, like this thin mattress on the floor in our own luxury five-star hotel bed'. Her love affair with Azad completes her as a woman. Her biological gender is unimportant. Her acts reflect those of a young girl who is both ambitious and amorous.



Lovely aspires to be an actress someday. She enrolls in an acting class, just like any other ambitious young lady. She desires to perform in front of a large audience. Her acting teacher is Mr. Debnath. He compliments Lovely's abilities and encourages her to succeed. He asks Lovely to play the leading lady in his upcoming film. Her teacher goes on to say that he would like to sign Shah Rukh Khan as a Hero. Lovely is overjoyed to learn this. She had always hoped to work with Shah Rukh Khan in a film. She believed that all of her hard work would finally pay off, but that did not happen. Lovely never gave up and continued to work hard. She continues to perform in her acting class and remains focused on her objective. She gets to contact Mr. Jhunjhunwala, a casting director and requests that he put her in a film. Her acting coach encourages her.

Mr. Jhunjhunwala first pays no attention to Lovely, but her hard work and dedication pay off in the end. Her desire and performance persuade a film director that she is capable of great things. Her practicing videos become popular on social media, and everyone compliments her abilities. A film director casts her in the character of a mother in his film. As a result, she demonstrates that she is a flawless female by her abilities and performance. Her biological sex is irrelevant. What matters is her performance. She would not have been able to achieve her current level if she had not worked hard and demonstrated her abilities. She would have spent her life as any other transsexual person. She could have pleaded and wept her whole life away, but she chose the opposite path and showed her abilities. Her theatrical performances defined her as a genuine lady. She'd always be regarded as a heroine. Due to performativity, her biological identity has been altered.

As the story unfolds, the reader feels that different gender have to face so many challenges in their lives. They have to follow the trends of society. They do so to keep up with their identity. As mentioned earlier, Azad is in love with Lovely, a transgender. He wishes to spend his life with her and has no wish for children. As he is a born male, it is his societal duty to act like a male, marry and have children. Azad's brother visits their living place regularly and threatens both of them. Azad's family wishes him to live a normal life. Azad, like Lovely, is adamant on maintaining his relationship with Lovely. They make a promise to one other that they will never be apart for the rest of their lives. It is only after the repeated obstacles created by the society that Lovely begs Azad to marry someone else one day while they are sleeping together. She realizes that they have





no other choice. She says: ‘Everyone knows it is the way of the world, Azad’. The way of the world can never be overlooked. Azad has to accept the societal rule to prove his male identity. If he does not do so and spends his life with Lovely, he will be considered an outcast and never given respect.

Men are often regarded as domineering, and women are expected to obey them. Males have always believed that it is their right to treat women whatever they wish. They have complete moral, physical, and sexual dominion over them. The life of a female is usually full of difficulties and she enjoys no freedom. Jivan’s mother once went to a cheap evening market to get some food. Some individuals snatched her groceries, assaulted her, and verbally insulted her. They also sexually harassed her and groped her private areas. Her mother says to her: ‘Look how they scratched me, those savages’. She screams and weeps bitterly in desperation. Being a female, she does nothing except wailing and crying. Her gender allowed her to do the same. She was weak and could not resist. She cried: ‘They were touching me here, touching me here. Oh my girl, my gold, don’t make me tell you’. Males, on the other hand, experienced no such problems. They were unconcerned about being shunned or punished by society. They believed it was vital for them to act in this manner. They saw it as a part of their identity. They were afraid that if they didn’t act masculine, others would doubt their manhood.

During her childhood as a schoolchild, Jivan never shares anything with others. She behaves like a quiet youngster who remains absorbed in her own thoughts. She believes it is against gender conventions. She keeps the truth hidden from her instructor, PT Sir, who assists her by providing food. Her parents can not afford to feed her because she comes from a poor home. As a result, she occasionally passes out and becomes weaker by the day. PT Sir initially helps her but he proves to be a great exploiter at the end and takes advantage of her weakness. PT Sir believes that Jivan will obey his orders and do anything he desires, as do the majority of guys in society. When Jivan fails to meet his expectations, he seeks vengeance and assists the authorities in murdering her based on circumstantial evidence.

Ragini is a member of the Hijra family. Because of her transsexual gender, she, like many others, has to go through a lot. She has dental issues, but she is unable to go to the doctor as easily as others. She goes to the doctor when no one else is anticipated, and the doctor closes the door so





that no one else can know. Otherwise, he would have to face societal hostility, and no other patient would like to come to his clinic. Moreover, the doctor treats her with contempt. The doctor does not politely speak to her and attempts to persuade her out of the operation. He claims he does not have anesthetics out of hatred. He treats her as if she were an animal. Ragini is in a lot of pain and cries a lot. The doctor does not feel sympathy for her. On Lovely's request for some numbing drugs, the doctor becomes furious and scolds her, saying; 'You are doing the operation or me?' Despite his anguish, Ragini stays determined, but Lovely is disturbed by the proceedings. Ragini's mouth bleeds and the blood flows out. She appears to be dead due to much pain. She, on the other hand, does not succumb to the circumstances and, after a few seconds, opens her eyes. Eventually, she dies after a few days of agonizing pain. Her death does not mean any loss for the society because of her transgender identity. Because hijras are considered outcasts, no one cares for them. No one from the hijra family can complain or protest against the doctor. People even do not listen to them and keep them at length. Their identity proves a curse for them and they have only to yield against it.

6. Conclusion

Gender concerns and identity have unmistakably been depicted in *A Burning* through performativity. The above discussion clearly highlights the Butlerian notion that gender identity is based on performativity. Lovely is transsexual, but she does not put her faith in biological sex. She proves herself perfectly fit to be called a true woman. Her performative acts enable her to be classed as a woman. Like a virgin, she falls in love with Azad and wishes to marry him. She enrolls in acting classes and goes on to become a successful actress. She successfully plays the role of a mother in the film. Butler's interpretation of fluid gender proves entirely right here. Furthermore, all of the characters struggle in different ways due to their social identities. Azad must leave Lovely and conform to the societal norms to prove his masculine identity. Only because they are girls, Jivan and her mother exhibit little opposition and suffer the harsh actions of society. Ragini suffers because of her transsexual identity.

References

Beauvoir, D.S. (1997). *The second sex*. London: Vintage Classics.





- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble. feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York and London: Routledge
- Giesecking, J. (2008). Queer Theory. *Encyclopedia of social problems*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 737-8.
- Azim, M. U., Hussain, Z., Bhatti, A. M., Iqbal, M., & Chohan, M. (2017). Caught between the extremes: A comparative study of state owned news channel and a private news channel. *Hamdard Islamicus*, 40(2), 301-314.
- Huber, A. (2020). *Literary hub*. Retrieved from <https://bookmarks.reviews/reviews/all/a-burning/>
- Keeble, A. (2021). *Literary hub*. Retrieved from <https://bookmarks.reviews/reviews/all/a-burning/>
- Kitzinger, C. and Wilkinson, S. (19914). Virgin and Queers: Rehabilitating Heterosexuality. *Gender and society: Perspectives*, 8, 444-62.
- Makowski, J. F., & Halperin, D. M. (1991). One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love. *The Classical World*, 84(5), 407. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4350879>
- Sadjadi, B., & Hojabri, S. (2019). Gender, Performativity, and Agency in Virginia Woolf: A Butlerian Reading of Orlando. *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 22(4), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.5782/2223-2621.2019.22.4.5>
- Wood, J. (2020). *Literary hub*. Retrieved from <https://bookmarks.reviews/reviews/all/a-burning/>