

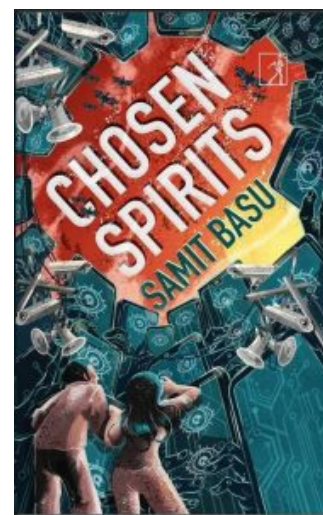
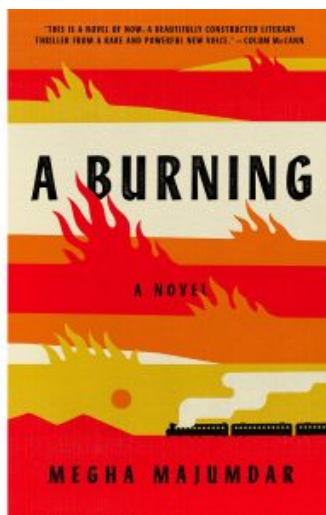
Feature Essay: Literary Work and Contemporary Crisis: On Two Novels Concerning India

In this feature essay, **Atreyee Majumder** reflects on literature's relationship with contemporary crises through reading two recent novels, **Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits*** and **Megha Majumdar's *A Burning***, which share a concern for the challenges facing India today.

Literary Work and Contemporary Crisis: On Two Novels Concerning India

***Chosen Spirits*. Samit Basu. Simon and Schuster. 2020.**

***A Burning*. Megha Majumdar. Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Random House. 2020.**



The idea of India has pervaded Anglophone literature for decades. One can populate a potted history of 'India' novels with works like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*. These literary works stem from an implicit concern with the state of things in India, or rather the health of the idea of India, besides situating a particular story in the nation's socio-historical canvas. I recently read and found myself pondering over two novels – *Chosen Spirits* by Samit Basu and *A Burning* by Megha Majumdar – both of which implicitly show a concern for the India question of today. This question emerges from the current political milieu which is a far cry from the ideals (equality, secularism, tolerance and so on) of India's originary moment, as enshrined in its originary document – the Constitution that came into effect in 1950. What will happen to the idea of India given the current developments? These two novels seem to emanate from contemporary crises, though *Chosen Spirits* is located in the future (around 2030), while *A Burning* is temporally unmarked. I use these two novels to mark out a conversation that literature has been having consistently with the question of the contemporary. I found myself asking: what is literature's relationship with contemporary crises? How does time (in this case, the contemporary) lend itself to narrative form beyond serving the purpose of creating the temporal backdrop for plot? This essay arises from a meditation on these questions.

Literature and the Contemporary

The literary author takes up the canvas of the contemporary as a central focus of her work, not only because it will quickly arouse the interest of the audience. That may be a consideration – people like to read about what is immediate. But such literary works provide a certain author-mediated continuity between the reading public and the current milieu. They seek various kinds of resolutions to quandaries of the present. These resolutions may be cathartic, hopeful or dystopic. But through them, the author inevitably emerges as a mediator in the struggles of the present, one who shows continuities, and in some cases ruptures, with the current time. The author arises not only as a sociological and historical documenter of the times, but as a conjurer who contains the power of offering release. If the contemporary is a cage we are all trapped in together, the author offers some terms of negotiation.

The author of the contemporary novel, I believe, also serves as a friend of the citizenry of the current time. Somewhat like a psychologist, offering alternate narratives for the same events, offering attention to the minutiae, offering empathy for those in pain. In addition, the author establishes, through literary production, a moral project. A project of catharsis in remembering what we knew to be true and good, and what has gone wrong in the present. The author may not always show her siding with the 'right' side of history in an obvious way; her setting up of comparative moral weight to narrative elements establishes a moral stage on which the author helps the audience in making collective judgment.

But first, a bit about the two contemporary novels I will be discussing. Basu's *Chosen Spirits* is squarely within the genre of speculative fiction, while Majumdar's *A Burning* is a realist novel, which although temporally unmarked, carries traces of the current Indian political milieu. The protagonist in *Chosen Spirits* is a 24-year-old woman, Joey, who is negotiating a post-conflict Delhi in 2030, layered with memories of the 2019 [Shaheen Bagh CAA/NRC protests](#) and a consequent clampdown on freedom of expression and assembly. Joey is a 'Reality Controller' in a world where influencers and their curated lives have heavy social and economic value. Joey's life progresses through a number of events – some within the folds of the reality manufacturing company of which she is production head, some outside in the city of Delhi where we see a strong class divide and the underclass in a state of frenzied anger at the powers-that-be.

Chosen Spirits maintains a definite continuity with the actual 2019 CAA/NRC protests in India against the religion-based reforms in citizenship law and the repression of this public dissent. Joey's parents are victims of that moment who, as a consequence, in 2030 have lost jobs and dignity and are ill-adjusted to the place of the future. The future is a place where you do not express dissent, definitely not openly in your home where there could be recording devices. One of the most interesting touches in the novel is the delicately woven normalcy of a technologically unfamiliar universe. A sure example of this is the voice of Narad (an advanced version of today's Siri), who carries out the dutiful conduct of specifying the biopsychological condition of Joey, suggesting therapeutic changes from time to time. Another interesting aspect in *Chosen Spirits* is the moral continuity of the liberal subject through to the 2030s – where Joey is compelled to keep her mouth shut, but feels the exact same genre of dislike for the state of things in her city, and presumably nation, as a left-liberal citizen of 2020, particularly in the wake of the nationwide CAA/NRC protests.

A Burning tracks the months following the Facebook-post-led arrest of Jivan, a young woman who works as a salesperson in the Pantaloons store in Kolkata; through her circumstances, we are increasingly led to infer that she and her family are Muslims. As Jivan's arrest, prison stint and trial progress on the charges of sedition for interacting online with a terrorist recruiter as well as aiding in a recent train-burning incident, two other characters emerge in the story whose lives get entangled in the main narrative. Lovely, a transgender woman, whose acting career gets a miraculous boost because of her impassioned testimony at Jivan's trial, and PT Sir, perhaps the most interesting character, a hapless physical education teacher in Jivan's school who grows his political ambition through a number of events and ends up as education secretary in the newly victorious Jana Kalyan Party's government. PT Sir's ambivalence at his former student Jivan's mercy petition, after initially being sympathetic to her plea of innocence, and the slow submergence of his guilt in the intoxication of newly held power, are perhaps the most real testimonies that this novel bears to the current condition of ordinary Indian people.



India: A Crisis Cauldron

India in 2020 is embroiled in multiple crises. The [Indian slice of the COVID-19](#) pandemic is looking quite acute as I write this essay. Yet, 2019-20 have been populated with a number of other crises – not only the aforementioned CAA/NRC protests, but also the [abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir](#) (negating the various special autonomies of Kashmir that were earlier granted), the [continuous internet shutdown](#) in Kashmir since August 2019 and the outbreak of [localised riots in February 2020 in Northeast Delhi](#). As the pandemic thickened in regions like Delhi, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, there appeared a deadly [cyclone Amphan](#) in Bengal, causing massive damage to life, livelihood and property, especially in the ecologically significant landscape of the Sundarbans on the coast of the Bay of Bengal. This was then compounded by [tension at the India-China borders in Ladakh](#), especially the Galwan Valley.

The crisis cauldron that is contemporary India is underlaid by the expanding liberal worry about a government run by the conservative Bharatiya Janata Party and its social wings (the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and others) that, over the course of two government terms, have openly alienated minorities of all kinds, especially Muslims. [The hateful rhetoric](#) has been coupled [with arrests of many well-known left-leaning activists](#) as well as many incidents of mobs lynching persons of Muslim or Dalit backgrounds for cow slaughter.

All this is to say that the crisis cauldron in India is now filled with ingredients that could directly lead to dystopian fiction. A brutal government, an unstable economy, a pandemic and other natural disasters, diplomatic crises and communal violence. Why should we worry about India? The answer would be: it is our country, we are its citizens, we mean well for the future of the country, we wish to pass down a certain ethical register of how India should be governed to our progeny. These answers add up for the case for protest and dissent. They don't quite add up to lead us to a particular form of artistic production.

So why should we be concerned for India in our artistic production? Let me venture into this question through a reading of the character of Joey in *Chosen Spirits* and the character of PT Sir in *A Burning* as the voices of concern for India. PT Sir gets closer and closer into the inner circle of the Jana Kalyan Party, and comes to participate in its rising ambition to win the imminent legislative assembly elections. PT Sir, whose birth name we do not know, goes to buy modern kitchen equipment with his wife after he joins the party at a considerably high salary. PT Sir's self-confidence increases significantly as he is no longer a bystander at public meetings, but a speaker and an organiser – an important man, a righthand man to the party honcho, Bimala Pal. There is a testament here to the life of the lower-middle classes in Kolkata, West Bengal, where the Communist Party had ruled for 33 years. Having a political party interact with the interstices of one's daily life is a mundane thing in Kolkata. Majumdar curates this closeness, this banal shoulder-rubbing with the forces of politics, with great precision.

PT Sir watches a devastating incident of communal violence. He musters the courage to voice his discomfort with such politics to Bimala Pal. He even considers resigning. But the opportunities offered by the party are too powerful to resist. His wavering conscience is much too real – a key voice of contemporary India, as evidenced by a large number of people, journalists and intellectuals included, who lost their conscience once the opportunity of personal enrichment presented itself through association with a party whose moral ideals one may find objectionable.

This rift between internal morality and outer action is the current, dominant voice of India. An alienation from laudable ideals encased in the constitution or morals emanating from architects of the nation like Gandhi and Nehru, coupled with co-option into the current apparatus of power, which seduces some with power and money, and forces others into a quiet acquiescence. This rift is the place of pain which the current voice of India expresses, I believe. The December/January CAA/NRC protests took up the challenge of [reading the idealistic Preamble of the Constitution in public](#), as a kind of rehearsal of a lost morality. PT Sir is the metonym, I believe, of this loss.

Joey, on the other hand, was only fourteen at the time of the CAA/NRC protests. 2020, our present, is a year she looks back on as the troubled times of her adolescence. There is veiled reference to a whole decade of violence in Delhi, including 'riots of 2026'. The control of authoritarianism is now nearly complete. There are recording devices everywhere. Life is punctuated by reality shows by influencers like Indi and Tara who dress their lives with fake relationships as 'flow'. Flow is the jargon for this new register of reality. It comes with its own technological hardware, including headgear. Joey constantly harbours an irritation in her inner voice at the world, and also herself. This irritation has a telling continuity with the current comportment of liberal citizens who find themselves without a meaningful course of action. Joey, though, grows up through all of this technological surveillance and indoctrination, and survives with a conscience that is unwavering. We see her initially as someone who is trying to get by keeping quiet, and cautioning her parents from time to time from talking politics, especially about the troubled past that they witnessed as younger adults. But it is clear in her head that the world around her is morally bankrupt. We see her in the end initiating herself into meaningful action after her encounter with Raja from the Cyber Bazaar underclass. Joey, too, on an optimistic note, could be the voice of India. One that is forced to play the war of positions, finding itself cornered from all ends in the current time and therefore turning silent, but harbouring an inner conscience that is strong and capable of meaningful action.

Through both characters, the authors express concern and investment in the ethical complex at the heart of the idea of India. The two characters speak as India of the present day, while the authors also speak with them. Basu excavates a sliver of hope at the very end; Majumdar damns the current arrangement of power that shapes India. While authorial concern for the contemporary disastrous state of things is not new (remember the literary legacy of George Orwell's *1984*), what is refreshing in these two novels is that this concern is voiced through the characters themselves in their negotiation of their circumstances and not spoken baldly as political commentary by the authors.



Time and The Novel

Raymond Williams, in the essay '[Realism and the Contemporary Novel](#)' (1958), makes a distinction between the 'social novel' and the 'personal novel'. The 'social novel' is one in which a farmer or a miner's primary function in the story is to show the typical life of a miner or a farmer. A key example of the 'individual novel' would be Virginia Woolf's [Mrs. Dalloway](#) or D.H. Lawrence's [Lady Chatterley's Lover](#) in which the dispositions, motives and actions of the protagonists (including the gamekeeper in the latter) are of greater importance than a demonstration of their social location.

Williams's distinction is useful until it isn't, when one can show that in some novels, the individual becomes a metonym of a larger entity, usually the nation or the society. In this way, *Chosen Spirits* and *A Burning* are neither social nor personal novels. The protagonists are symptoms of the anxieties of our time. The stories are personal, but the characters are not contained within the interiority of an individual only. Yes, they represent particular social brackets – more definitely in *A Burning*, where Jivan, PT Sir and Lovely are negotiating lives near the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, and Jivan is Muslim, while Joey and her friends come from a technologically savvy youth born out of the generation of middle and upper classes who lost jobs in the ugly events of the past ten years. Yet, these characters unfold not by reduction into socioeconomic units, but as expansions of the particular anxieties about justice and goodness in our time. Both novels ask an immensely ethical question – when and how will justice be delivered in our deeply unfair world? – and go on to resolve it through hope or dystopia.

Both novels are future-oriented. In *Chosen Spirits*, Basu locates the future as a mundane place with radically different technological arrangements, alongside ethical and political anxieties quite like our own time. Joey's cautious nature in the midst of all kinds of trouble around her is a clear symptom of our present, for which the future is an effective mirror. Even if *A Burning* is temporally unmarked, it ponders the possible extension of the Indian contemporary into the future. The future, further, is a trope through which Jivan's internality unfolds to the reader – she is constantly worried about her and her parents' futures. And so are Lovely and PT Sir, in different ways. Williams writes about the future-story:

The "future" device (usually only a device, for nearly always it is quite obviously contemporary society that is being written about) removes the ordinary tension between the chosen pattern and normal observation. Such novels as Brave New World, Nineteen Eighty-Four, Fahrenheit 242 [sic], are powerful social fiction, in which a pattern taken from contemporary society is materialized, as a whole, in another time or place. (Williams 1958, 23)

Williams shows the future to draw from the contemporary pattern. The future in such narratives, according to Williams, functions as a place of release from the current oppositions between a 'vile society' and a noble individual. This trope of opposition can be seen in both *Chosen Spirits* and *A Burning*. Both novels set up a generalised anxiety and disdain harboured by the protagonists about the state of the world. The difference is that Jivan is at the centre of a terror trial, fighting for life and dignity. And Joey, a successful Reality Controller, can afford the luxury of a thinly veiled and cautious disgust for the state of the nation and society around her. The future sits in both novels as a place of dumping the hope or despair of the central characters. PT Sir enters his office as an education secretary at the end of *A Burning*. He has been entirely co-opted into the new Jana Kalyan government; we don't see signs of his earlier conflicted conscience anymore. Joey makes a resolve at the end of *Chosen Spirits*, the nature of which is indeterminate. But through it, Basu turns dystopia on its head. The future becomes an exaltation to action.

Both novels keep time – like *taal*, in Hindustani classical music. Jivan's waiting in prison cells, making one hundred rotis and negotiating the petty authority of prison figures Americandi and Uma Madam marks the time of the novel in *A Burning*. The pattern of the temporally unmarked novel is to follow the mental temporality of Jivan. The novel spans for as long as Jivan waits. The quagmire of the trial, the prison, the newspaper reports calling her a terrorist, populate Jivan's mental landscape. But these are ingredients dressing the basic uncertainty of not knowing when and if she will get out of prison. Thus, Jivan emerges as a time-keeping device in the novel.

In *Chosen Spirits*, the biopsychological technological teller Narad (the name obviously taken from the character that serves as the conscience of the Hindu mythological world) is, as I see it, the time-keeping device. Narad narrates Joey's inner stress from time to time, and punctuates these observations with banal corrective suggestions, like 'play soothing music'. Narad marks the internal time of Joey. Joey is constantly running away from herself in some ways, but Narad serves as a useful, somewhat annoying, reminder of the temporality within Joey which maintains the rhythm of the progress of the story. Throughout the novel, Joey is usually irritated by Narad, as is the nature of time-keeping devices which reveal to us that a lot has happened while we were busy trying to respond to our circumstances. Narad reflects a kind of cosmological time, I believe, while Jivan reflects the lived anxieties of time, mainly through the trope of waiting.

Literary authors have long suggested to us what is right and what is wrong. Literary works have mirrored the problems in our current world, setting up an opposition between society and a morally upright protagonist struggling to make sense of it. As India wavers and alienates itself from its original moral project, we read the Preamble to our Constitution at protests as a reminder of these goals. All the while, some look over our shoulders to see if we are being watched or not, while risking the difficult path of meaningful moral action. The authors of *Chosen Spirits* and *A Burning* emerge as tellers of this symptom of our time. Basu and Majumdar emerge as crucial time-keepers for us.

Note: This feature essay gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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In-text Image One Credit: Paper boats in the shape of a heart at Shaheen Bagh protests, New Delhi, 15 Jan 2020 ([DM CCO](#)).
