

Subaltern Silencing in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*: A Critical Re-Reading of Jivan's Marginalization

Yasir Rafiq Khan¹, Majid Ali Khan² and Fazal Ghufra^{3**}

Abstract

In recent years, contemporary South Asian fiction has increasingly foregrounded questions of voice, marginalization, and state power; within this context, Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* (2020) offers a compelling narrative of subaltern silencing in a neoliberal, digitally mediated society. Against this background, the present study critically re-reads the marginalization of Jivan, a poor Muslim woman whose attempt at political expression leads to criminalization and erasure. Accordingly, the primary objective of this research is to examine how intersecting structures of class, gender, religion, media discourse, and state authority operate to silence subaltern voices, while also assessing whether meaningful forms of resistance are possible within such hegemonic frameworks. To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis and informed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of the subaltern, supplemented by insights from postcolonial feminism and discourse theory. The findings reveal that Jivan's silencing is systematic rather than incidental, produced through overlapping mechanisms of economic precocity, gendered violence, communal othering, judicial coercion, and digital surveillance. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that subaltern speech—particularly when articulated through social media—is not merely ignored but actively re-coded as threat and sedition. Consequently, while moments of resistance and agency do emerge in fragmented and symbolic forms, they remain structurally constrained and ultimately ineffective. In conclusion, the study affirms Spivak's central thesis that the subaltern may speak but cannot be heard within dominant epistemic and institutional structures without distortion or suppression. Therefore, the paper recommends a critical rethinking of narratives surrounding free speech, digital democracy, and justice in contemporary societies, and calls for further interdisciplinary research that bridges literary studies with media studies, surveillance theory, and human rights discourse to better understand and challenge ongoing practices of subaltern silencing.

¹ Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) – Pakistan

^{2,3} University of Shangla, Alpurai, Shangla, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) – Pakistan

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Introduction

This study establishes the conceptual, theoretical, and contextual foundations of the subaltern framework to examine Jivan's marginalization and silencing in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* (2020). By outlining the historical and intellectual development of subalternity, marginalization, and resistance in postcolonial discourse, the chapter situates the study within contemporary debates on power, identity, and representation. Additionally, it presents the problem statement, research questions, objectives, significance, and scope of the research. Collectively, these elements provide a robust framework for analyzing how systemic structures silence subaltern voices in contemporary South Asian literature.

❖ Background of the Study

The concept of the subaltern has emerged as a central analytical lens in postcolonial studies, originating from the work of Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971). Gramsci employed the term to describe groups excluded from hegemonic structures of power—those whose voices are suppressed by political, social, and economic elites. Building on this foundation, scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha expanded the concept, arguing that subalterns are not merely oppressed but structurally prevented from speaking within dominant discourses (Spivak, 1988; Guha, 1983).

Historically, “subaltern” referred to lower-ranked military officers, symbolizing limited power and restricted agency. Over time, however, the term in postcolonial theory came to signify marginalized groups including peasants, women, religious minorities, and economically dispossessed communities (Ludden, 2003; McLeod, 2007). Correspondingly, the Subaltern Studies Group sought to rewrite Indian history from the standpoint of these silenced populations, challenging elite historiography and exposing the ideological operations of colonial texts (Hawthorn, 2000; Ashcroft et al., 2002).

Furthermore, Spivak's seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) highlights how entrenched power structures prevent marginalized subjects from achieving representational autonomy (Morton, 2003). In this context, literature functions as a critical site where subaltern experiences, agency, and silences can be examined. Therefore, focusing on Jivan's narrative in *A Burning* provides insight into the mechanisms through which systemic forces silence marginalized voices, as well as the broader legacies of colonialism and social stratification (Fanon, 1963; Bhabha, 1994).

❖ **Concept of Marginalization**

Marginalization refers to the systematic exclusion, disempowerment, and relegation of individuals or communities to the peripheries of social, economic, and political life (Hooks, 1984; Collins, 2000). It manifests through restricted access to resources, limited opportunities for participation, and denial of basic rights. In the case of Jivan, marginalization is multifaceted, encompassing economic vulnerability, religious discrimination, gendered oppression, and social invisibility.

Poverty, segregation, and discrimination reinforce these inequalities, producing cycles of vulnerability and diminished agency (UNDP, 2019). Additionally, Critical Race Theory demonstrates how institutions such as schools and legal systems systematically marginalize specific groups, reflecting embedded structural inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2009). Similarly, gendered marginalization constrains reproductive rights, political participation, and autonomy (Connell, 2012; UN Women, 2020). Religious minorities, such as Jivan, often face persecution and limited civic inclusion (Agrama, 2012; Massey & Denton, 1993). Economic marginalization persists due to historical exploitation and uneven development, particularly in postcolonial societies (Anand, 2021).

Consequently, the study of Jivan's marginalization illuminates how intersecting inequalities silence subaltern voices. In *A Burning*, Majumdar foregrounds these structural disparities through the lens of Jivan's lived experiences, making her story a compelling case for subaltern analysis.

Subaltern Silencing and Resistance

While the concept of resistance is important in subaltern studies, this research emphasizes the mechanisms that silence Jivan rather than her capacity for

resistance. Resistance broadly refers to attempts to contest oppressive systems, ranging from overt political action to everyday acts of defiance (Wolf, 1969; Scott, 1985; Guha, 1983). Post-structuralist scholarship, particularly Foucault (1978), highlights how power and resistance are mutually constitutive, operating within the same social frameworks (Mitchell, 1990; Abu-Lughod, 1990).

However, Jivan's narrative primarily illustrates systemic silencing: entrenched social, legal, and political structures limit her ability to assert agency. Spivak (2008) emphasizes that subalterns may attempt resistance, but structural constraints often prevent these acts from translating into meaningful autonomy. Contemporary forms of resistance, such as digital activism and community organizing (Tarrow, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012), are largely inaccessible to Jivan, reflecting the real-world constraints faced by marginalized individuals.

Thus, Jivan's story underscores the processes of subaltern silencing, illustrating how social and institutional forces systematically suppress marginalized voices.

Overview of the Novel *A Burning*

Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* (2020) is set in contemporary India and explores the intersections of class, religion, gender, and political power. The narrative revolves around three characters—Jivan, PT Sir, and Lovely. For this study, the primary focus is Jivan, whose experiences of marginalization and silencing serve as the central analytical lens.

The novel portrays the precarious realities of urban slum life, the vulnerabilities of minority communities, and the reproduction of inequality within legal and political systems. Jivan's wrongful accusation of terrorism exemplifies how state institutions perpetuate subaltern silencing. While Lovely's narrative illuminates her exclusion faced by hijras and PT Sir's trajectory highlights political complicity, Jivan's story most directly exposes the structural mechanisms that suppress subaltern voices, providing the focal point for this study (Valdez, 2021; Sehgal, 2020).

Although extensive scholarship addresses subalternity and marginalization, limited research examines how Jivan's subaltern identity in *A Burning* is systematically silenced. This study investigates the structural, social, and political forces that

suppress Jivan's voice and constrain her agency, offering a critical reading of subaltern silencing in contemporary Indian literature.

This study offers a focused examination of Jivan as a subaltern figure, contributing to the understanding of how contemporary literature depicts systemic silencing. By highlighting intersections of class, religion, gender, and politics, the research demonstrates how literary narratives illuminate real-world structures of oppression. Consequently, this study is valuable for scholars of postcolonial fiction, subaltern studies, South Asian literature, and cultural studies.

The research is limited to a textual analysis of Jivan's narrative in *A Burning*, focusing on subaltern silencing and marginalization. It does not include comparative analyses with other novels or broader political events. The study employs postcolonial and subaltern theoretical frameworks and does not incorporate sociological or quantitative data.

Review of the Literature

Scholars have long debated the conceptualization of the term subaltern. Foundational theorists such as Ranjit Guha (1989), Homi Bhabha (1994), Leela Gandhi (2019), and Gayatri Spivak (1988, 2007) have contributed significantly to its theoretical elaboration. Specifically, Bhabha's concepts of "mimicry" and "hybridity" describe the subaltern as a perpetually oppressed group constrained within hegemonic power structures (Bhabha, 1994). Similarly, Gandhi (2019) situates subaltern studies as a means to recover the voices of marginalized populations silenced within elite historiography. In addition, Guha (1989) asserts that subaltern studies aim to foster informed and systematic discussions of marginality, particularly within South Asian contexts. Building on these insights, Spivak (1988, 2007) foregrounds the intersection of gender and subalternity, emphasizing the historical and structural silencing of women. She contends that subalterns cannot fully express themselves within dominant discourses because entrenched social and cultural structures prevent meaningful representation (Zhang, 1999). Importantly, Spivak situates resistance within a framework that recognizes the subaltern's constrained agency, highlighting the subtle yet significant ways marginalized subjects negotiate oppression.

Furthermore, postcolonial scholarship is characterized by the tension between First World academic recognition and Third World subaltern experience. As Wang (2002) observes, scholars from formerly colonized societies gain prominence in Western institutions, yet this recognition often coexists with the very structures of power they critique. Consequently, post-colonialism reveals both the potential and limits of resistance within hegemonic systems, as it exposes the intersections of global capitalism, cultural production, and social marginalization.

Marginalization extends beyond economic deprivation to encompass social, cultural, and political exclusion (Hooks, 1984; Collins, 2000). Intersectionality provides a useful lens for understanding how overlapping factors such as class, gender, religion, and ethnicity intensify vulnerability (Seng et al., 2012). In *A Burning*, Jivan embodies multiple axes of marginalization, including economic precarity, religious minority status, and gendered oppression, reflecting the complex interplay of social hierarchies that constrain subaltern agency. Moreover, postcolonial feminist theorists, including Spivak (2007) and Mansoor (2016), emphasize that Third World women occupy a particularly precarious position, subjected to both patriarchal and colonial systems of domination. Similarly, Shirin Zubair (2016) highlights the ways institutionalized ideologies and sociopolitical discourses suppress feminist knowledge, further reinforcing the marginalization of women in non-Western contexts.

Resistance remains a central concern in subaltern studies, yet much scholarship emphasizes the structural mechanisms that inhibit effective action. Scott (1985) and Wolf (1969) note that everyday acts of resistance are often subtle, fragmentary, and invisible to dominant institutions. Spivak (1988) further underscores that systemic oppression frequently nullifies subaltern speech, rendering attempts at self-expression or resistance ineffective. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to Jivan, whose narrative in *A Burning* exemplifies the systematic silencing imposed by social, political, and legal institutions. In addition, recent scholarship explores the role of contemporary media and digital spaces in either facilitating or constraining subaltern expression. Hassan (2023) demonstrates that media narratives often exacerbate marginalization by amplifying biases, reinforcing stereotypes, and misrepresenting vulnerable communities. Similarly, Valdez (2021) and Adami (2022) highlight the influence of narrative techniques in shaping perceptions of marginalized voices, emphasizing the interplay between stylistic representation and social critique.

Numerous scholars have provided detailed analyses of Majumdar's *A Burning*, emphasizing its engagement with social inequality, political authoritarianism, and cultural marginalization. For instance, Majumder (2020) and Ahmad (2020) note that the novel foregrounds the struggles of characters from marginalized backgrounds, illustrating systemic oppression and state-sanctioned injustice. Similarly, Almond (2020) and Sehgal (2020) argue that Majumdar critiques societal corruption, communal tensions, and media manipulation, portraying the lived consequences of these structural inequalities. Further, Mohan (2021) and Avinash (2021) highlight narrative strategies, including multiple perspectives and temporal shifts, which deepen the reader's understanding of marginalization. Joshi and Vyas (2021) emphasize how the novel reflects broader socio-political dynamics in contemporary India, including tensions between aspiration and systemic barriers, while Valdez (2021) draws parallels between Majumdar's narrative and historical and contemporary policing, underscoring how subaltern voices are systematically constrained.

Moreover, Khaki (2022) and Lahiri (2022) underscore the significance of identity performance, gender norms, and global sociopolitical movements in shaping marginalized experiences. Mudgal (2024) situates Majumdar within a broader Asian diaspora context, exploring themes of cultural hybridity, displacement, and identity negotiation. Despite this substantial body of research, however, many studies primarily focus on the broader social and political contexts of the novel or its narrative techniques rather than providing an in-depth analysis of Jivan's specific marginalization as a subaltern figure. Therefore, there remains a critical need to examine how systemic structures silence her voice and constrain her agency within the novel.

While existing literature provides valuable insights into Majumdar's narrative, most studies either emphasize macro-level political critique or literary techniques, leaving the specific subaltern experiences of Jivan underexplored. There is limited analysis of the intersectional forces—class, gender, religion, and systemic power—that contribute to her silencing. Furthermore, scholarship rarely examines how Jivan negotiates, resists, or navigates these structures. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding the nuanced mechanisms of subaltern silencing and the broader implications of representation in contemporary Indian literature.

Methodology

Specifically, the study aims to critically analyze the marginalization of Jivan by applying Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theoretical concepts. By explaining the methodological approach, sources of data, analytical procedures, and theoretical underpinnings, this chapter ensures transparency, rigor, and validity in the research findings.

The study adopts a qualitative research design, which is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena, human behavior, and lived experiences in depth (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative methods allow for a detailed understanding of social and cultural issues without relying on numerical generalizations (Creswell, 2013). In this context, textual analysis is employed as the primary tool, enabling the researcher to critically examine the novel's content, including characters' actions, dialogues, monologues, and narrative descriptions, to uncover the nuances of subaltern experiences (Silverman, 2017). Furthermore, qualitative research facilitates the exploration of hidden meanings and social realities, thus providing a platform to understand the struggles of marginalized individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

❖ Sources of Data

The primary data for this research was derived from Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* (2020), published by Alfred A. Knopf, which provides the narrative context for analyzing Jivan's marginalization. Secondary data was collected from scholarly articles, books, and other academic sources discussing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity, marginalization, and resistance. These secondary sources enabled a critical engagement with the theoretical framework and offered insights into the broader discourse on subaltern studies.

❖ Method of Data Collection

The data collection process involved multiple stages. Initially, the novel was read thoroughly to understand the narrative, characters, and key events. Subsequently, the researcher reviewed relevant secondary literature on marginalization and resistance, with particular emphasis on Spivak's theoretical contributions. The researcher then selected pertinent textual elements from the novel, including dialogues, monologues, and character descriptions, focusing on the experiences of Jivan and other marginalized figures. This selection aimed to address the research

questions by highlighting how systemic structures in the novel perpetuate marginalization and limit agency. The careful selection of data ensured that the study remained focused on characters who exemplify subalternity within the literary framework.

❖ **Method of Data Analysis**

Following data collection, the study employed textual and thematic analysis to examine both primary and secondary sources through the lens of Spivak's theory of marginalization. Data were categorized according to factors influencing marginalization and the strategies employed by characters to resist oppression. Each character, particularly Jivan, was analyzed separately, allowing for a detailed exploration of their experiences, struggles, and responses within the context of structural inequalities. The analysis relied on critical interpretation rather than numerical evaluation, emphasizing theoretical insight and conceptual depth (Brydon, 2001). Moreover, the findings were systematically related to the research questions to ensure coherence and analytical rigor.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concepts of subalternity, marginalization, and resistance, which provide the analytical tools for understanding the experiences of the novel's characters. Spivak (2006, 2008) emphasizes how marginalized groups, particularly women in the Third World, are structurally silenced, often requiring intellectual mediation to articulate their experiences. Her framework examines the intersections of colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, and social hierarchies in shaping power dynamics and constraining agency. Specifically, Spivak highlights two critical dimensions of subalternity: the lack of access to the language and frameworks of dominant power, and the limited capacity for conscious resistance to systemic oppression (Spivak, 2006).

By applying Spivak's theory, the study critically examines Jivan's marginalization, exploring how social, political, and cultural structures constrain her agency and voice within the narrative. Furthermore, this framework enables the researcher to analyze the ethical and narrative responsibilities of literature in portraying marginalized experiences, emphasizing the role of storytelling in giving subaltern voices visibility and legitimacy (Spivak, 2006). Through this lens, the research contextualizes the struggles of marginalized characters within broader societal

pressures, revealing the intersections of class, gender, religion, and politics that shape their experiences. Ultimately, the study aims to uncover the resilience and agency of marginalized individuals as they navigate oppressive systems, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of subaltern silencing and resistance in contemporary literature.

Analysis/Discussion

This chapter critically examines subaltern silencing and marginalization in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* (2020) through the theoretical lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern. Drawing on close textual analysis, the discussion explores how Jivan's voice is systematically muted through intersecting structures of class, gender, religion, state power, media discourse, and political interference. At the same time, the chapter investigates whether acts of agency and resistance—however limited—can emerge within these oppressive frameworks. In this regard, the analysis is conceptually organized around two interconnected concerns: first, the mechanisms through which subaltern silencing operates, and second, the forms and limitations of resistance available to marginalized subjects. This organization directly corresponds to the study's research questions, particularly those examining how silencing is produced and whether the subaltern can meaningfully resist dominant power structures.

To begin with, social exclusion functions as a foundational mechanism through which Jivan is rendered subaltern. As Spivak (1988) argues, subalternity is not limited to economic deprivation alone; rather, it signifies a condition in which access to representation, recognition, and institutional responsiveness is structurally denied. This form of exclusion is vividly illustrated in Jivan's encounter at the water office, where her mother's attempt to raise the issue of clean water is abruptly interrupted by an official. As a result, Jivan feels diminished despite being as much a grown-up as anybody in that office (Majumdar, 2020, p. 140). Significantly, this episode demonstrates that institutions do not merely fail the subaltern; instead, they actively foreclose her speech by refusing to recognize it as legitimate. In a similar vein, Jivan's imprisonment further intensifies her social isolation. Her mother's repeated efforts to bring food—ultimately consumed by prison guards—highlight the subaltern's forced dependence on exploitative intermediaries, prompting the anguished question, Why are you cooking for the guards? (Majumdar, 2020, p. 73). Thus, confinement operates not only as physical

incarceration but also as symbolic erasure, severing Jivan from familial and social networks. As Spivak (1988) maintains, the subaltern does not inherently lack a voice; rather, her voice is systematically intercepted and redirected.

Moreover, gender-based discrimination significantly intensifies Jivan's marginalization by exposing her body to surveillance, violence, and moral judgment. Feminist theorists argue that patriarchal societies regulate women's bodies as sites of control and discipline (Kabeer, 1999; Spivak, 2007). This dynamic becomes evident during Jivan's arrest, when she is dragged from her home in her nightclothes, a moment that triggers immediate fear of sexual assault, A hand reached out of the dark and dragged me up in my nightie (Majumdar, 2020, p. 25). Rather than condemning state violence, social attention fixates on her clothing, revealing how gendered norms shift accountability away from institutions and onto women's bodies. Consequently, this episode aligns with Spivak's argument that Third World women experience double marginalization, silenced both as political subjects and as gendered bodies (Spivak, 2007). Furthermore, the sexual harassment Jivan faces in the police van exposes institutionalized misogyny, as she recalls, When a man raises his handcuffed hands to touch my breasts, I slap them away (Majumdar, 2020, p. 41). Crucially, her act of resistance is immediately suppressed when, the driver shouts at me to be quiet, demonstrating how patriarchal state power silences even embodied protest.

In addition to gendered violence, coercive state power plays a central role in transforming dissent into criminality. In *A Burning*, power operates through legal and political structures that recode subaltern speech as threat or sedition. As Spivak (1988) explains, the subaltern's voice is often dismissed as noise rather than recognized as political critique. This process is clearly visible in Jivan's prosecution, where her Facebook post questioning governmental failure—If the police didn't help ordinary people like you and me... is the government also a terrorist? (Majumdar, 2020, p. 16)—is weaponized as evidence of terrorism. Instead of engaging with her critique, the state reframes her words as treason. Moreover, her forced confession, obtained through torture—They forced me to sign. They were beating me (Majumdar, 2020, p. 34)—reveals the judiciary's complicity in silencing. As Mohanty (2003) cautions, ignoring local power hierarchy's risks obscuring how oppression is reproduced. In Jivan's case, legal discourse becomes an extension of political repression, confirming Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot speak within hegemonic systems because speech itself is criminalized.

Furthermore, economic marginalization deepens Jivan's vulnerability by denying her access to legal protection and social capital. Her reflection on wealthy boys speeding past the police van—Whom did I know? (Majumdar, 2020, p. 26)—highlights how class privilege shields elites while exposing the poor to unchecked state violence. Spivak (1999) critiques global capitalism for sustaining such inequalities, where wealth functions as insulation from accountability. Although Jivan's modest aspiration to own a smartphone initially appears as a form of agency—I was connected to a world bigger than this neighborhood (Majumdar, 2020, p. 53)—this connection ultimately accelerates her surveillance. Consequently, digital access becomes not a tool of empowerment but a mechanism of discipline, reinforcing the subaltern's vulnerability within neoliberal structures.

Alongside class and gender, religious identity emerges as a decisive axis of silencing in Jivan's narrative. As a poor Muslim woman, she is immediately framed as a suspect within a climate of communal othering, as media discourse declares, This Muslim woman is charged with assisting terrorists (Majumdar, 2020, p. 46). Such representations reinforce Islamophobic stereotypes and legitimize state violence. Spivak (1988) emphasizes that when identity is pre-scripted by dominant narratives, the subaltern is denied epistemic credibility. This injustice is succinctly captured by Lovely's observation, Only because she is a poor Muslim woman (Majumdar, 2020, p. 259). Thus, Jivan's religious identity itself becomes evidence against her, foreclosing any possibility of fair representation or justice.

Nevertheless, despite pervasive silencing, moments of resistance do emerge, albeit in constrained and fragmented forms. While Spivak remains skeptical of romanticized notions of resistance, she acknowledges that agency may appear in everyday, localized acts (Spivak, 1993). Jivan's insistence on her identity as a working woman—I work at Pantaloons (Majumdar, 2020, p. 25)—represents an attempt to reclaim narrative authority. However, these assertions fail to disrupt institutional power, underscoring the limitations of individual resistance. In contrast, Lovely embodies performative resistance through visibility and self-definition. Her declaration, Find me another woman in this whole city as truly woman as me (Majumdar, 2020, p. 17), challenges binary gender norms, while her strategy of reflecting shame back onto aggressors—I'm learning to reflect that shame back onto them (Majumdar, 2020, p. 121)—demonstrates subversive agency. Unlike Jivan, Lovely negotiates marginality through performance, humor, and presence; however, this resistance remains precarious and conditional.

Ultimately, despite these moments of agency, the novel affirms Spivak's grim conclusion that the subaltern's resistance does not guarantee audibility. Jivan's execution confirms that institutional power can absorb, neutralize, or annihilate dissent altogether. Thus, while resistance exists within *A Burning*, it does not translate into justice, reinforcing the tragic reality that the subaltern may struggle to speak, but is rarely allowed to be heard.

Findings / Results

Based on the analysis, the study yields the following findings:

- Jivan is systematically silenced through intersecting forces of class, gender, religion, media, and state power.
- Subaltern speech is criminalized, particularly when mediated through digital platforms.
- Gendered violence functions as both physical and symbolic silencing.
- Economic risk intensifies vulnerability, denying access to protection and representation.
- Acts of resistance exist but remain fragmented, symbolic, and ultimately ineffective.
- The novel validates Spivak's thesis that the subaltern cannot speak within hegemonic power structures without being distorted or erased.

The findings of this study demonstrate that Jivan's silencing in *A Burning* is not the result of a single oppressive force but rather the outcome of intersecting structures of class, gender, religion, media, and state power. Theoretically, this confirms Spivak's (1988) argument that subalternity is produced through layered systems of domination that collectively deny marginalized subjects access to representation. Jivan's poverty restricts her institutional visibility, her gender exposes her to bodily regulation and violence, and her Muslim identity subjects her to communal suspicion. When these factors converge within a coercive state apparatus and sensationalist media discourse, silencing becomes systemic rather than incidental. Thus, the study finds that marginalization in the novel operates through intersectionality, where oppression is intensified precisely because these forces do not act in isolation but reinforce one another.

This study, moreover, reveals that subaltern speech is actively criminalized, particularly when mediated through digital platforms. Jivan's Facebook post, rather

than functioning as a democratic act of expression, becomes incriminating evidence used against her. From a theoretical standpoint, this supports Spivak's claim that subaltern speech is often misrecognized or re-coded within hegemonic frameworks, transforming critique into threat. Additionally, this finding resonates with Foucault's notion of power-knowledge, where discourse is regulated by institutions that determine which forms of speech are permissible and which are punishable. Consequently, digital space in *A Burning* does not democratize voice; instead, it extends surveillance and state control, illustrating how neoliberal digital infrastructures further marginalize already vulnerable subjects.

Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that gendered violence functions simultaneously as physical harm and symbolic silencing. Jivan's arrest, harassment, and bodily exposure reveal how women's bodies become sites upon which power is exercised and meaning is inscribed. Theoretically, this aligns with Spivak's (2007) assertion that Third World women are doubly muted—first as subalterns and second as gendered subjects. Feminist theorists such as Kabeer (1999) further argue that patriarchal systems regulate women's bodies to maintain social order, a dynamic clearly reflected in the novel. Thus, the study finds that gendered violence does not merely accompany silencing; rather, it constitutes a primary mechanism through which silencing is enacted and normalized.

In addition, economic precarity emerges as a crucial factor that intensifies Jivan's vulnerability and forecloses access to justice. The study finds that poverty deprives Jivan of legal protection, social networks, and political leverage, rendering her disposable within the judicial system. Spivak's (1999) critique of global capitalism provides a useful framework here, as it explains how economic marginalization produces subjects who are visible only as problems, not as rights-bearing citizens. Without economic capital or influential connections, Jivan's voice carries no institutional weight, confirming that class hierarchy plays a decisive role in determining whose suffering is acknowledged and whose is ignored.

At the same time, the study identifies moments of resistance within the narrative, particularly through everyday assertions of identity and performative self-expression. Jivan's insistence on her working identity and Lovely's gender nonconformity suggest that agency is not entirely absent. However, these acts remain fragmented and symbolic, lacking the structural power necessary to effect change. Theoretically, this finding aligns with Spivak's (1993) cautious view of

resistance, which warns against romanticizing agency within oppressive systems. While such acts may offer personal affirmation, they fail to disrupt hegemonic power relations, revealing the limits of individual resistance in the absence of institutional transformation.

Ultimately, the findings affirm Spivak's central thesis that the subaltern cannot speak within hegemonic power structures without being distorted, appropriated, or erased. Jivan does speak—through social media, protest, and personal testimony—but her speech is systematically reinterpreted by dominant institutions as criminal, irrational, or dangerous. Her execution represents the final and most violent form of silencing, underscoring the ethical implication that subaltern voices are not merely unheard but actively suppressed. Therefore, the study concludes that *A Burning* serve as a powerful literary validation of Spivak's theoretical intervention, illustrating how contemporary political, digital, and media regimes continue to reproduce conditions in which the subaltern's voice is denied meaningful audibility.

Conclusion

This study set out to address a critical problem at the intersection of literature, power, and representation: the persistent silencing of subaltern voices within contemporary socio-political and institutional frameworks. Specifically, it examined how Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* (2020) dramatizes the marginalization of Jivan, a poor Muslim woman whose attempt at political expression results in criminalization and erasure. By re-reading the novel through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, the research sought to understand not only how silencing operates but also why resistance so often fails to secure justice for marginalized subjects. Thus, the central problem addressed in this study concerns the structural conditions that render subaltern speech unintelligible, misrecognized, or dangerous within hegemonic systems of power.

Building on this problem, the study's key findings reveal that Jivan's silencing is produced through the convergence of multiple forces, including class hierarchy, gendered violence, religious othering, media sensationalism, digital surveillance, and state coercion. More importantly, the analysis demonstrates that these forces do not operate independently; rather, they intersect to create a closed circuit of domination in which subaltern agency is continuously undermined. Furthermore, the study finds that digital platforms—often assumed to democratize voice—

function instead as extensions of surveillance and disciplinary power, transforming dissent into evidence of criminality. Consequently, the novel validates Spivak's theoretical claim that the subaltern may attempt to speak but cannot be heard within dominant epistemic and institutional structures without distortion or repression.

In light of these findings, the study carries significant theoretical and social implications. Theoretically, it reinforces the continued relevance of Spivak's intervention in understanding contemporary forms of subalternity, particularly in neoliberal and digitally mediated societies. At the same time, it extends postcolonial critique by illustrating how state power, media discourse, and technological infrastructures collaborate in producing new modes of silencing. Socially and ethically, the study invites readers to question dominant narratives of justice, democracy, and free speech by exposing how marginalized individuals are systematically denied credibility and protection. Therefore, *A Burning* emerges not merely as a literary text but as a critical commentary on the fragile position of subaltern subjects in modern nation-states.

Nevertheless, despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the analysis focuses primarily on a single literary text, which may restrict the generalizability of its conclusions across broader postcolonial contexts. Additionally, the study relies on textual and theoretical analysis rather than empirical data, limiting its ability to engage directly with lived experiences beyond the literary representation. Moreover, while Spivak's framework provides a powerful lens for examining silencing, it may underemphasize alternative forms of collective or grassroots resistance that operate outside institutional recognition.

Accordingly, future research may expand upon this study in several productive directions. Comparative analyses involving other contemporary South Asian or global postcolonial novels could further illuminate how subaltern silencing operates across different cultural and political contexts. Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches incorporating media studies, digital surveillance theory, or human rights discourse could deepen understanding of how technology reshapes the politics of voice and visibility. Finally, future scholarship might explore possibilities of collective resistance or counter-publics that challenge Spivak's pessimistic conclusion, thereby opening new debates on audibility and justice in subaltern studies.

In conclusion, this study affirms that *A Burning* offers a powerful and unsettling portrayal of how subaltern voices are systematically silenced in the name of security, nationalism, and order. Ultimately, Jivan's fate compels readers to confront an uncomfortable truth: in hegemonic systems, the failure is not that the subaltern does not speak, but that power refuses to listen. By foregrounding this ethical crisis, the study underscores the urgent need for critical re-evaluations of voice, justice, and responsibility in both literary studies and contemporary society.

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Correspondence:

Fazal Ghufan

fazalghufan@gmail.com
