

Class, Caste, and Nationalism in Contemporary Indian Dystopias: A Critical Study of Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

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  <https://doi.org/10.26572/tc2613612>

Reviewed and accepted version first published on October 5, 2026

Abstract: In Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*, the walls, purity laws, surveillance, and fear of the near-future India are a matrix of organized exclusion. This paper demonstrates that dystopia in the Indian context is not a mere dystopia of the state. However, also a dystopia of old social divisions sharpening under the new authoritarian regime; this paper explores the intersections of class, caste, and nationalism in the novel. This paper's argument is that *Leila* is powerful in that it frames the global dystopian form in the anxieties of India: caste hierarchy, communal division, gated urban privilege, environmental breakdown, and the political language of purity. The novel turns a personal tragedy into a political landscape of a divided country through Shalini's quest to find her daughter. Her travels through walls, camps, and spaces that are secured indicate that the state is not only a force but also a force that controls memory, intimacy, movement, labor, and reproductive life. This paper also suggests that class privilege in *Leila* is not a product of the system of oppression. The novel demonstrates how upper-class comfort contributes to the same sort of segregation that eventually consumes those who have benefited from it. Meanwhile, caste is the more fundamental principle of division, and nationalism provides moral backing to violence by declaring exclusion as protection and purity as public good. The paper also analyses the relationship between the bodies of women, ecological scarcity and surveillance technologies in sustaining this order.

Keywords: Indian Dystopia, Spatial Segregation, Purity Politics, Majoritarianism

Introduction

Dystopian fiction is a significant genre for thinking about crisis in modern Indian English writing. It enables writers to heighten the current tensions without losing social reality. Many Indian dystopias are not fantasy worlds, but rather those that are not far removed from familiar institutions, fears, and public discourse. They examine surveillance, communalism, inequality, environmental breakdown, and the erosion of civil liberty that feel uncomfortable because they sound so familiar. Recent critiques of Indian speculative fiction have pointed out that these are different from many dystopian works in the West in that they focus on community pressure, caste divisions, and collective memory as the main causes of social breakdown (Jain 235). Indian dystopian fiction, therefore, should not be read as a branch of a Western genre but as a formidable body of writing that has its own historical material.

In this genre, Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* is a significant title. In Akbar's novel, a future India is found to be a divided country with walled sectors where movement, intimacy and survival are governed by caste, religion and social rank. The novel has been called a dystopia by critics many times, but it is set in the Indian context and not just a generic futuristic nightmare. It is characterized by authoritarianism, purity politics, social segregation, and its most sinister aspect is the spread of gated housing, communal suspicion, unequal access to resources, and the policing of women's lives in urban India (Herrero 214). This is why *Leila* has garnered attention as a text that speaks to the world language of dystopia and distinctly Indian fears. The novel is set around the central figure of Shalini, a Hindu woman, who is married to Riz, a Muslim man, and their daughter Leila, who is kidnapped by the regime. She is searching for her child, and the novel's emotional architecture is created through her search, but this search is also the way in which the reader learns about the political order of Aryavarta. *Leila's* narrative has been noted by scholars for its ability to make the personal political, as Shalini's journey reveals the ways in which the authoritarian can impact autonomy, family and memory simultaneously (Bharatsinh and Rangani 5980). The emotional impact of the novel is due to this double movement: it is the story of a mother's grief and a study of a nation remade through violence.

This paper proposes that *Leila* is a critique of the intersection of class, caste and nationalism in the Indian dystopia of today. It is not a dystopian order that rests on one axis of oppression. Rather, Akbar demonstrates how caste hierarchy, class privilege, religious majoritarianism, gender discipline and ecological scarcity are interconnected. These structures are emotionally and morally articulated by nationalism. Class is what provides them with material form in segregated urban life. They have a strong sense of social hierarchy and segregation from Caste. In this respect, *Leila* is not only a portrait of oppression, but an illustration of the manner in which various powers reinforce each other. The larger body of scholarship on Indian feminist and postcolonial dystopias also lends some credence to such a reading. Recent studies have maintained that Indian dystopian fiction has a cross-cutting structure, where patriarchy operates through caste, class and religion, instead of as a distinct issue. This is particularly important to note for the novel *Leila*, as it illustrates how the body is the arena in which the limits of community are most fiercely contested by the female body. Sexuality, marriage, childbirth and motherhood are all politicized. The state is not just punishing dissent; it wants to control reproduction.

Meanwhile, class is the novel's focus for criticism. *Leila* does not think of oppression as a burden only for the poor, one that is placed on them by a distant ruling class. Instead, the novel suggests that elite urban life already has the seeds of dystopia

within. Before becoming state law, gated communities, selective housing, purity-based residence, and lifestyle segregation are demonstrated as normal practices. One critic observes that Akbar himself connected the novel to “already-dystopian cities”, particularly the insular codes of Delhi and Mumbai housing cultures (Kuldova). This is important because it means that the novel’s future is embedded in the social design of the present. Dystopia is not just a result of ideology; it is a product of urban ways of separation. The social order of the novel is, however, more deeply explained by Caste. In recent criticism of Indian literature, the study of caste is no longer regarded as a marginal or unimportant topic. Today it serves as a framework for literary representation, one that helps to define identity, opportunity, violence, and resistance (Rautela 61). *Leila* takes this turn into dystopian fiction. It takes caste logic to the extreme by institutionalizing social separation as architectural separation. Walls materialize hierarchy. Purity is a political slogan and a social technique. This creates a society where exclusion is not just informal or not acknowledged, but it is made visible, normalized and defended.

The third major force in this structure is nationalism. Nationalism in *Leila* is not a unifying force for a plural society. It makes belonging narrow, and only the pure are true citizens. The novel has been interpreted as a warning against fundamentalist Hindu nationalism, cultural censorship, and the destruction of multicultural democratic life. This is important because the violence in the novel is always justified as protection, renewal, and collective good. The national language is a sanitizing of cruelty. Purity becomes patriotism. Segregation becomes security. Submission becomes duty. Thus, this paper reads *Leila* with five connected concerns: dystopian form and Indian specificity; class and urban segregation; caste and purity politics; nationalism and authoritarian power; and finally, gender, ecology and the tenuous prospect of resistance. The central thesis of the whole is that Akbar’s novel is important because it demonstrates how a future authoritarian regime can emerge out of common prejudices already present in the current system. Thus, *Leila* is a warning through literature and a diagnosis through politics.

Dystopia in an Indian Key

First, *Leila* ought to be set in the broader context of modern dystopian fiction, but with an eye to its local uniqueness. While some critics have likened the novel to *1984* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* due to the surveillance, ideological control and oppression of genders, others have argued that its strength is its grounding in India’s own systems of caste, religion and communal division. This juxtaposition of the local and the global is one of the strengths of the novel. It is in a familiar genre, but it is a genre that answers Indian history. Recent scholarship on South Asian speculative fiction suggests that stories like *Leila* fall under a new “desi dystopian” genre that takes classic dystopian forms and applies them to anxieties, social hierarchies, and national debates that are uniquely South Asian. This is useful since it doesn’t allow the novel to be read as an attempt to copy Euro-American dystopia. Purity camps, caste-coded walls, interfaith punishment and ecological stress determine Akbar’s future. These are not borrowed decorations. They are the logic of the novel.

Another big asset of *Leila* is that it bridges the gap between future and present. Postcolonial dystopias have been criticized over and over again for not only warning of what might happen but revealing what is already happening (Kuldova). This is particularly evident in the built environment in Akbar’s case. The sector, the wall, the checkpoint and the controlled residential zone are futuristic, but they also have familiar urban forms of exclusion. The novel intensifies tendencies that are already apparent in

cities today in India. This realism is what makes the novel's dystopia more akin to escalation rather than fantasy. One such study on the text and screen adaptation notes that *Leila* offers a future that is similar to the present, characterised by environmental degradation, discrimination, surveillance, and climate anxiety. It's not just prediction. The focus is on recognition. The reader should recognize that the future is constructed out of the present social materials. So *Leila* is, in a sense, a critical dystopia. It doesn't create fear out of thin air. It collects all of the existing tensions, such as majoritarian politics, gated privilege, caste anxiety, control of women, and toxic urban life and refashions them into a coherent authoritarian system. The strength of the novel is that it demonstrates how fragmentation can be a nation project.

Class and the architecture of Segregation

Class is one of the most interesting aspects of *Leila*. The novel is not limited to a conception of class as difference in wealth. It demonstrates class as spatial power: power to live behind walls, to have access to purified air and water, to stay safe from the lives of others. In this respect, class is entrenched in the city. According to critics, Aryavarta is a society in which resources like clean water and fresh air are allocated based on hierarchy and in which urban sectors are a form of apartheid (Basumatary1778). This is an important finding, as it connects privilege to environment, rather than income. The novel also reveals the innocence of upper-class life. Shalini starts as a privileged woman who enjoys the good life in the city, but who is also a victim of the same order. One of the big readings of the novel suggests that elitism itself is a part of the production of the tribalism and segregation that finally devours her (Kuldova). This argument makes it difficult to make a simple moral distinction between oppressors and oppressed. The walls in *Leila*, then, are more than walls. They are the culmination of gated urban life. The sectors inhibit movement and interaction while also establishing psychological barriers and boundaries by establishing a sense of otherness (Mehta and Saraswat 371). This is significant because the regime is not only separating people materially; it is also teaching them to think in terms of separation as a natural state. The space of the classes turns into moral space. Being separated is to feel better. In this respect, the novel is linked to the broader examination of inequality in the modern Indian novel. The scholarship on class consciousness in contemporary Indian literature has contended that the colonial domination is not necessarily perpetrated by foreign rulers, but by the domestic elites, capitalists and the upper caste power. That insight is conveyed in *Leila's* social architecture. Oppression is within; it is domestic; it is normal. The walls are constructed by society against society.

Class is also intertwined with labor in the novel. When Shalini leaves her elite domestic existence for camp labour, her body is exposed to the exploitation of authoritarian systems. In *Leila*, the study reveals that the regime regulates everyday spaces, such as homes, schools, and camps, disciplines bodies, and regulates obedience. Labor in the novel is thus never just economic. It's educational and corrective. The system inculcates subservient attitudes through labour. Even the comfort to be found in *Leila* is exposed as ideological. The promise of order and protection is an economy of sorting that is quite brutal. The novel reveals the violence necessary for the maintenance of secure living, purified surroundings and managed spaces, which seem desirable from the inside. Akbar's attack on class is not only economic, but it is also moral. He inquires what kind of comfort requires exclusion, and what kind of city is required to enable such comfort.

Caste, Purity, and Social Reproduction

While class provides *Leila* with her architecture, caste provides her with a more historical logic. The novel takes caste segregation to the extreme, but makes it visible in walls, zones, and punishments. Critics point out that the book goes too far in its divisions of caste, with its notions of physical barriers between communities, and in its concentration on the socially privileged (Panmei and Lourembam1538). This literalization is important because it demonstrates that caste is not a private prejudice, but rather public infrastructure. This ideology is the one that structures this world: purity. *Leila* is not a symbolic language. It organizes marriage, settlement, movement, access to resources, and bodily control. The motto of the regime, "Purity for All", is a state policy of segregation based on fear and force, according to critics. The irony of that slogan is at the heart of the novel. It is universal in its language and radical in its exclusion. The one thing offered to all is not freedom, but a common discipline of separation.

The novel's punishment of interfaith and inter-community relations demonstrates the connection between caste and communal politics. Shalini is targeted because of her husband's religion. Her marriage turns into a social offence. Indian feminist dystopias such as *Leila* are, according to critics, characterized by this intersectional structure, in which gender oppression is used as a means of maintaining the caste and religious hierarchy (Vidhu 7). One of the most obvious connections between private and political life in the novel. The family turns into a border zone. Women's bodies are particularly at the heart of this system. In the novel *Leila*, the state regulates marriage, procreation, and motherhood because it considers women to be carriers of community purity. One study highlights the regime's control of women's bodies to prevent contamination from mixed marriages and to ensure "biological and moral control" (Mehta and Saraswat 371). This concept is the source of much of the horror in the novel. The female body is not just observed; it is nationalized. Purity camp is a significant place in the novel because of this. It is the place where ideology is made flesh. There, women are forced to do work, are watched, are brainwashed, and are given drugs to cross the caste and religious line. The camp is not just a prison. It is a social reproduction machine. It tries to create subjects that will assimilate the values of the regime.

This interpretation is reinforced by recent criticism which stresses that *Leila* illustrates the centrality of social reproductive spaces—domestic interiors, schools, camps, and homes—to authoritarian control (Unni). The state in the novel is powerful not just because it has weapons or laws, but because it intrudes into the spaces where life is reproduced every day. This is an important aspect to the novel's understanding of caste. Caste lives on, not just in the form of public discrimination, but in the structuring of intimacy, care, and inheritance. This facet of *Leila* is better understood in the broader literary scholarship. The contemporary study of Indian fiction suggests that caste is now symbolically foregrounded as a structural and living system. Another study also points out that the present Indian English literature is centered on caste, foregrounding resistance and revealing the extent of the influence of caste on opportunity and power. In the tradition of literature, *Leila* carries this idea forward into speculative fiction, demonstrating how caste can be futurized but without losing the historical context. That continuity is its dystopian power.

Nationalism, Majoritarianism, and the Authoritarian Nation

Nationalism is the other force that organizes the world of *Leila* morally, in addition to class and caste. The regime is not just a terror regime. It is presented as the protector of civilization, purity and national security. The novel has been called a

warning against a repressive state where tradition and purity are more important than multiculturalism, dialogue and equality. This represents the change in ideology from which the novel derives: the transformation of difference into danger and exclusion into virtue.

Leila's Aryavarta is a majoritarian and disciplinary country. It does not honor diversity. It demands sameness. One critic notes that the novel raises concerns about the increasing majoritarianism, communal polarization, and restriction of civil liberties in modern-day India. This is important because it indicates that the novel's nationalism is not a mere political concept. It is linked to identifiable democratic regression. Nationalism is the language in which anti-democratic practices are normalised. Propaganda and indoctrination also have a significant part in this process. In the adaptation criticism, the school children are seen chanting slogans like "Aryavarta is my mother" (Basumatary 1779), which indicates that they are being indoctrinated in a systematic way. Even if this detail is conveyed through an analysis of adaptation, it reflects a larger truth of the novel's political landscape: that the country is envisioned as sacred, maternal, and unquestionable. When nationalism gets into this affective register, then dissent is seen as an impurity, not disagreement. This can be understood with the help of a broader framework of Indian dystopian studies. The study of dystopian mass psychology holds that authoritarian regimes rely on the acceptance of extreme ideology, propaganda, and invented enemies by the masses, as well as on the power of the above (Tarachand and Gediya 248). *Leila* is a good example of this. It is the regime's success because society has already acquired a fear of mixture, outsiders and disorder. The state doesn't make those fears out of thin air. It magnifies and arms them.

This is the reason for the novel's nationalism being bound up with communal politics. *Leila* is often cited as a reaction to the fundamentalist Hindu nationalism and the violence it has sanctioned against minorities and those deemed to be lower in the social hierarchy. But the novel is not only an indictment of communal hatred. It reveals the way in which that hatred becomes policy. What walls, camps and purity codes seem to be is not prejudice but governance. The novel's authoritarianism is also technocratic. At the core of the regime is surveillance, biometric control, and social sorting. There is scholarship on postcolonial dystopia that suggests that *Leila* shows the confluence of governance by numbers, technological monitoring and re-established allegiances, revealing actual social dehumanization (Kuldova). This is important because the novel does not only depict nationalism as being in the past. It's modern, data-driven and infrastructural. It combines ancient prejudice with contemporary systems of control. Therefore, *Leila* presents nationalism not as collective freedom but as collective enclosure. It produces a nation of sectors, camps, and purified interiors. Its imagined unity is built upon organized exclusion. In this sense, Akbar's critique is severe: when nationalism fuses with caste and class hierarchy, the nation ceases to be a shared political home and becomes a managed prison.

Gender, Ecology, and Fragile Resistance

While this paper is on class, caste, and nationalism, one cannot really understand *Leila* without gender and ecology. These are not side themes. They are integral to the novel's social dynamics. *Leila* is a feminist dystopia, critics say, where women face medical monitoring, pharmaceuticals, sexual harassment, violence and forced labour (Unni). This is to be expected because Shalini's experience becomes the primary narrative lens. The reader observes the penetration of authoritarian power through her body and memory.

The maternal plot is particularly significant. The moral framework of the novel is Shalini's search for her missing daughter. This motherhood experience has been called the personal becoming political, as it reveals the ways in which dystopian systems fracture familial ties and individual autonomy. Motherhood is not simply glorified in the novel. It is politicized, violated and then made a source of stubborn resistance. These structures are exacerbated by environmental breakdown. The novel has been studied more and more, and it has been seen that the novel connects toxic air, water scarcity, climate stress, and urban decay to systems of domination. According to one ecocritical reading, environmental scarcity in the novel is not a mere background but a tool of governance, which buttresses caste, class and privilege. This is an important discovery. It demonstrates how the ecological crisis is distributed socially in *Leila*. Some breathe clean air; others live in toxic environments.

A posthumanist study also notes that Aryavarta's climate-controlled domes and purification technologies are artificial remedies to the ecological crisis, and increase social hierarchy and dehumanization. In the novel, technology, then, does not eradicate injustice. It sorts it out more effectively. Purification is not only environmental, but also social. The same regime that filters the air filters people. This ecological dimension reinforces the main argument of the paper. In *Leila*, class, caste and nationalism are not just ideological or legal systems. These are tangible structures that allocate access to water, air, safety and mobility. The environment is stratified. In such a world, survival is political from the start. However, the novel is not a despairing one. As scholars of Indian dystopian narratives grow more aware of the presence of such fragile and contingent forms of hope in these texts, they have begun to suggest that these often carry more hope for care, solidarity, and survival than they do for heroic revolution (Sharma and Verma 6). *Leila* fits this pattern. It is weak, unethical and partial. It shows in the mind, in the persistence of the mother, in the little things she does to help, in the refusal to take the regime in full. This is echoed in the novel's ecocritical work that shows how hope remains in the midst of small acts of solidarity and sharing, in memory and quiet care, rather than in great political changes. This is a crucial means of closing this novel's politics. Akbar's redemption is not easy. He does not, however, give up the human power of relation. Against walls, he places memory. He opposes purity with attachment. He sets up fragile connection against the nation of enclosure.

Conclusion

Leila by Prayaag Akbar is an important contemporary Indian dystopian novel as it exemplifies the possible ways in which class, caste and nationalism can combine to form an organised system of exclusion. Its imagined future is disturbing not because it is totally removed from reality but because it emanates from social practices and anxieties that already exist. The gated urban spaces, resource inequity, communal suspicion, caste hierarchy, environmental degradation and social purity become the pillars of an authoritarian nation. The novel demonstrates that these structures can not be analyzed in isolation. Class is the material architecture of segregation, especially in terms of unequal urban spaces and access to resources. The concept of caste offers a historical rationale for ranking, purity and social separation. This separation is justified in the name of the nation's security and social order and is expressed through the political discourse of nationalism. They create a system in which exclusion is normalised.

Meanwhile, *Leila* shows us how authoritarianism gets into private life. The political enters into the sphere of marriage, motherhood, sexuality, reproduction, memory and domestic relationships. Shalini's experience demonstrates that the state

can regulate people not only by law and surveillance but also by deciding whom they can love, where they can live and how their families can live.

Another achievement of Akbar's is to imbue the dystopian genre with a distinctly Indian social grammar. The novel is not just a copy of the conventions of Western dystopian fiction. Rather, it is a mixture of surveillance and authoritarianism, caste hierarchy, communal conflict, urban segregation, environmental inequality and the politics of purity. *Leila* is a strong example of the Indian dystopian imagination of the present day, thanks to this localization. The environmental aspect of the novel also highlights that social injustice and ecological issues are interlinked. The right to clean air, water, safety and controlled environments becomes another privilege. Technology is not a vehicle for justice: In an authoritarian system, it can organize and facilitate inequality. However, the story doesn't end on a downbeat note for Leila. The risk of resistance is low and unpredictable, but it can be remembered, cared for by its mother and attached to by humans. The regime can separate communities, control bodies, restrict movement and build walls, but it can't stop people wanting to connect. The novel *Leila* serves as a warning and a social diagnosis. The most important thing it has to say is that dystopian systems don't have to happen all at once. They can be built up over time through normalised prejudice, social segregation, unequal cities, ecological injustice and the normalisation of exclusion. Prayaag Akbar asks the reader to reflect on the walls that society imposes before they become impenetrable, as he does in developing the architecture of Aryavarta from these tendencies.

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