

## **Dystopian Vision of Indian Society in Prayaag Akbar's *Leila***

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### **Abstract:**

As there are few dystopian novels about India, the present essay examines the dystopic vision of India in *Leila* (2017), a contemporary dystopian fiction in English by the journalist Prayaag Akbar (1982- ). By setting its narrative in an unidentified, unnamed near Indian future city in late 2040s, *Leila* presents a picture of future Indian society which is polarized greatly along the lines of caste, class, community and religion, and is governed with a new set of laws for order, peace and safety according to ancient custom by the Council from the panopticon of the Purity Pyramid with a motto 'Purity for All'. Though *Leila's* mystical imaginary city resembles a contemporary urban dwelling with modern infrastructure like flyroads, shopping malls and the Skydomes, its forceful division of communities into sectors or purity walls prohibits any human relationship, either in the form of love or marriage, beyond the laws of his/her community. Class inequalities in this city become visible in the novel's representation of the privileged class living in secure, comfortable private enclaves, and the scavenger community facing frequent problem of landfill fires in garbage mountains in East Slum. Their inevitable entry for menial works is restricted through checkpoints at city gates. The protagonist Shalini is punished for marrying with Riz against the law and imprisoned for purity exercises in the Purity Camp. Focussing on the text, the essay examines this dystopian vision of India which unfolds with the episode of Shalini's separation from her daughter Leila which set her on a long lonely sixteen years journey of quest for her daughter Leila that encounters her with the rigid laws of the Council and abusive treatment of violators through the Repeaters.

**Keywords:** dystopic vision, city, walls, community, laws, Council, class/caste inequalities, quest, love-marriage relations.

Among the few dystopian novels in India, *Leila* is an important contemporary dystopian novel and the maiden one written over the course of five years by the journalist Prayaag Akbar (1982-) and published by Simon and Schuster India in 2017. Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has been pointed out as a major influence on the novelist in composing *Leila* (Guha), though Akbar acknowledges JM Coetzee as most inspiration force in picturing dystopia in fiction. Akbar wished to write a novel from a feminist perspective and a novel like Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* (1982). The essay explores the dystopic vision of India in *Leila*. Written in eleven chapters in English, the plot of *Leila* is set in an unidentified, unnamed near Indian future city (in late 2040s) on the verge of environmental collapse. The novel's mystical imaginary city resembles any contemporary urban dwelling in India with modern infrastructure like flyovers, shopping malls and multiplexes. The city is crisscrossed by flyroads from which cars descend only to make their way into gated sectors, protected by high walls. The city is divided into sectors or walls which are green and leafy, with wide avenues and bungalows. The Skydomes are constructed above the sectors to keep them air-conditioned and air-purified. The sectors are also divided according to community, caste and religion. The sector walls segregate people of different castes, classes, communities and religions to maintain high identity and purity. This division into sectors or purity walls importantly prohibits any human relationship, either in the form of love or marriage, beyond the laws of community. The schools are also built and run sector-wise to discourage any intermixture even among children. Low caste servants cannot enter any sector without showing their identity proofs/cards and undergoing physical examination of their bodies. The city governed with a new set of laws for order, peace and safety according to ancient consciousness by the Council from the panopticon of the Purity Pyramid with a motto 'Purity for All'. The Council has employed vigilante thugs known as 'Repeaters' to enforce rules and regulations in society with use of violence. Law breakers in the city's sectors are sent to 'The Towers' outside the city and imprisoned for moral purification in Purity Camps.

The novel chooses the story of Shalini, first person female narrator and protagonist of *Leila*, belonging to Hindu community, to illustrate the harsh treatment and punishment given to the lawbreakers by the Council in this dystopian city of new rules about love and marriage. Shalini fell in love with Rizwan Chowdhury or Riz from their first meeting in a school bus while studying in Yellowstone School which grows upto her days of graduation in English honours.

After Riz's return from Oberlin college in America, with the mutual consent of their parents, the nikaah of Riz and Shalini takes place in eighty-year-old haveli (called Nizam's Abode) in the presence of maulvi "who would look the other way on conversion" (71). Shalini's father had passed away due to contracting emphysema a year before and her mother initially hesitated by offering reasons against this cross-cultural marriage. The marriage, as Shalini puts, was "complicated, our getting married. It wasn't against the law, but they made you feel like you'd done something terrible" (75). Later in the novel too, she writes: "In the years since our wedding I'd felt a rising irritation in myself when there was any talk of the Council, purity, the segregation they were determined upon. Usually, I wanted to shut it out" (114). When Shalini's father, after marriage with a woman from Wadhwa clan, was living in their ancestral house in Lakshmi Hill, her family had to evacuate the society due to caste and food rules changed and upheld by each community in the city: "We simply want to live with people who follow our own rules, from our own community" (40). The narrator comments on this change in city: "Purity came to have different meanings. Some people wanted no meat at all, some would eat only fish. In other areas Muslims were evicting anyone who drank alcohol or ate pork. Once a community had control, its society revived laws written by colony builders a hundred years ago, ensuring land could not be sold to those who did not belong" (41). After switching to a new house in the Arora Pavilion, when Shalini's father was stopped entry without permission by the Repeaters into the Patel sector while taking her on a tour to purity wall, he had shouted: "Who are you to tell me where I can go? [...] I go where I want! This is my city [...] Purity for all? Have you gone crazy, all of you? Who told you this was allowed? [...] That you could do this to my city?" (50) This was the first childhood encounter of Shalini with the Repeaters who had beaten her father: "After this day we stopped talking so much. The ease we'd shared all our lives seemed to evaporate. It wasn't all his fault. Maybe I avoided him too. Those guards handled him as if he was nothing more than a nuisance. I could no longer look at him in the way I once had, impervious, invulnerable. He probably saw that. Saw me. An ungrateful, unthinking daughter" (52). Even the television shows mirror the new dawn of segregation in the city: "Real estate listings have become matrimonials! Brahmin-only, Yadav-only, Parsi-only" (43-44). Mr Joshi, who is the chief of the Council which regulates city and on TV all the time, explains them: "These intellectuals think they know everything. But I know, I know, they are thinking only about Western values. They show no care for our own values, how we have always lived. Don't

go by these foreign ideas of what is right, what is wrong. This is our way of living. This is nothing wrong. It is the flowering of an ancient consciousness" (44). When Riz was also caught once by the Repeater while entering the Arora sector, he produced the forged id with the name 'Khushagra Arora' with the Pyramid watermark and the 'Purity for All' slogan on it made by the Yellowstone school peon Raju for twelve hundred rupees. Later he lamented it in front of Shalini: "I had to lie today about who I am, where I'm from. It's humiliating. I'm not ashamed! But I had to lie just so that . . . just for . . ." (63-64) Riz also showed his charm when the Repeaters suspected Naz for uttering the word 'Abbu': "Look, boy, what're you saying? You want my brother to show you? [...] Or you want me to show? I can also. But if my mother found out you had checked her boys at the gate to see if they were cut like . . . like some boys from madrasa . . . We would have to call her an ambulance, my friends" (62). After moving to the East End, Shalini and Riz are blessed with a daughter called Leila, for whom the caretaker Sapna from the East Slum of the city is appointed. When Shalini goes along with Sapna to see her boyfriend Ashish, the Man Friday of Mr. Joshi, at the rally for water scarcity problem in East Slum, she encounters Mr. Joshi offering a speech from a stage where are "seated rows of older men, some in formal suits, a couple of priests, imams, bishops in clashing vestments. Elders from the high sectors, representing the important communities" (115). Invoking them to be the inhabitants of the pure land and the land of the ancients, Mr. Joshi, for his utopia of land, insists on purity and ancient rules in the city, which are disrespected in the East End area of the city: "This is not our culture. [...] Our heritage. I have promised you the perfect home. A place of order, discipline, clean and pure. Those who do not obey our rules must feel the strength of our history. [...] Give me a chance. I will make us more [...] Each must protect our walls, our women, our communities. Make sure they cannot break our rules any more. Go forth and do our work. Once again we will reach the pinnacle of the world!" (120) Riz gets upset with the rules followed by his community: "It's all these new rules, Naz. I can't live like that and neither should Shal. No booze, no pork. Old men with nothing to do but count how many times a week you go to the mosque. They want to send her to Koran classes! Can you imagine? It's a joke" (79). Both Shalini and Riz want Leila to go the same Yellowstone school they went but Naz takes over the charge and quarrels with Shalini once over the matter: "What will happen to Leila? We are a society that needs order. Rules. We don't want her to mix with everyone. [...] What-all they teach there. No values, no respect for elders, no respect for our past. [...] She'll grow up with no

culture. Running around with boys from here and there. No sense of community. Is that what you want? (91-92)” Shalini brushes him off by saying: “She (Leila) has the best of everything. Look, no disrespect to Gazala. Your wife is beautiful. But I don’t want my daughter in a burqa. No one cares about these things here” (91). Over this, Naz replies angrily to Shalini: “Say what you want about Gazala. [...] She might not know as much about the world as you. But she knows our culture. She wouldn’t offer a guest a beer. Three in the afternoon! And if we had a little girl, at least Gazala would know where she was” (93). When Naz and Gazala are invited for a birthday party celebration, Riz gets angry and Shalini, in her alcoholic state, rebukes Naz again for lecturing her and repeating ‘bullshit that’s going on outside’. When Shalini discovers later that it was Naz who reports to the Council with photos of Riz and Shalini and Leila that a group of Repeaters came to attack the birthday party with lathis: “The clomp of the Repeaters’ boots, the shocked howls from my guests, the whip of lathis through the air, sometimes riffling the leaves, sometimes breaking the spines of the big bushes – all this happens in slow motion, as if home and garden and everyone in it is encased in amber” (130). The Repeaters appraise women for wasting water and not following rules. Shalini’s dressing style is compared to that of a hotel whore. Leila is abducted and Shalini is sent in a truck along with fourteen women to purity camp in Towers, the place where “the Council keeps people who don’t fit in. Who broke their rules” (233). Shalini would remain there for the next sixteen years for breaking the rule of falling in love. The utopian life Shalini imagined for Leila ends here: “It is not something from me but something of me that has been taken. The part that could feel warmth, happiness, desire. Perhaps I have yielded something of myself” (137). Shalini’s desires of making Leila lawyer and having another child, ‘a young boy, my laadla, my prince’ (182) collapse all together. Riz dies at age 28 same night after the fight with the Repeaters. Riz’s father’s corpse was dug up from the graveyard and sent back home in an ambulance as, he, being a Bareilvi Muslim, was accused, among many things, of worshipping in temples and disrespecting his zaat/biraadari. Like her father earlier, Shalini accuses him too now: “How could you, Riz? All of this is your fault. You did this. Had to be a tough man in front of your fucking friends, fight everyone. You couldn’t keep your mouth shut. Now I have to face all this alone. Sixteen years alone” (259). This sixteen-year long journey of solitude and quest for her daughter Leila encounters Shalini with the rigid laws of the Council and exposes her to the abusive treatment of violators by the Repeaters. The dystopian elements appear starkly into the novel from this moment onward.

The novel begins a year after the birthday party on the very day of Leila's birthday when Shalini and Riz, in Shalini's hallucinating state, come to offer candles at the Purity Wall. In chapter six 'Purity Camp', after visiting the Anger Tower, Shalini acquires a new strength and strong will power to quest for Leila who was "at the mercy of these delusionary men" (147). After Shalini's father's death, her mother had also carried a search for something. Shalini's quest is also shaped by pressing concerns of Indian society, in grip of totalitarian regime in this near future city of despisement. In Purity camp, Dr. Iyer considers the measures taken by the Council necessary for ending violence and restoring peace and order in the city and inquiring of Shalini's last period, gives a box of blue and white pills for peace. He explains that Leila would be a misfit in society in her parents' way of life but promises her to be raised properly. He accuses women for the state of disorder in society and considers Shalini's condition better than other thirteen women in camp: "It's only you, women like you. You grow up thinking you are already abroad. Some TV-world you live in. That such things are your right. But see these girls you came with, girls from different places, ask them. They won't be surprised. They knew what they were doing when they chose to live this way, what risk they were taking. They don't act so shocked, like you do. They know there are bigger things than themselves. Rules bigger than themselves" (149-150). Mr. Vijay, another functionary of the Council, also accuses Shalini of breaking the law of her society for carnal reasons and says: "When woman gives in to carnality [...] imagine if all women gave in. You know what will come? Utter confusion. Bedlam. We are a society that needs rules. Boundaries. The ancient lines are there for a reason" (172). He considers the creation of walls important because the city looked filthy and dirty but with the coming of new laws: "Everything so clean. Our network of flyroads known all over the world. From Singapore, America, everywhere they're coming to see it" (174). In addition to dirt, the walls, according to Mr. Vijay, became inevitable for peace and safety for following reasons: "Businessmen kidnapped for ransom. Rapes. So many women raped all the time. Now such things happen only on the Outroads. Families can keep their women safe. How many people used to die every festival? Remember? What food could be eaten. What dance could be done? Mischief-makers taking panga in each other's localities. Swords and sticks and guns coming out. A lower man running away with a woman from a good family. They'd burn his whole family, his home, land, everything. Now every community can do what they want. If you respect the walls there are no problems" (174-175). Ironically Mr. Vijay makes physical advances towards Shalini which

promise her transfer to the Ministry of Settlement to fulfil the quest of Leila. In the Towers, the women are made to engage in duties such as preparing meals, gardening, cleaning, group sessions and purity exercises in the camp. Shalini learns sweeping floor and through it, comes to understand the hardships of female servants in her husband's house: "At Camp they taught us how to look at things. To understand that everything has an order, a place" (256). Though she feels lonely, gradually she becomes accustomed with the camp life and confess her fault: "We were vulnerable – the loose, the ripe – choosing sex over family, over the wishes of the elders, the intentions of the community" (140). She did not respect the walls, therefore Leila was taken away from her at the age of three (6). The other women who found or did not find love outside or inside their community are too caught by the Repeaters and imprisoned in the Purity Camp: Prarthna from the Kayastha sector for lesbian marriage, Sonam from the Haryanvi Jat sector for falling in love with a boy from the same gotra, a Thevar girl Vasanthi for falling in love with a Dalit boy, a Muslim girl for eloping with a Yadav boy, a Yadav girl running away with a Dalit boy, and a Bowra Muslim college educated girl named Sana for remaining virgin and running a movement against the practice of khatna in her community. Shalini's school friend Dipanita can meet her only in a restaurant because her husband Atul, suspecting her of bringing in 'disease, filth, immorality' (182), does not want her in their house: "My existence now was a threat to their idea of home" (180). Dipanita, though sympathetic to Shalini's fate and personally unhappy due to Atul's affair, subscribes to the Repeaters and even raises her daughter Pari according to the rules of community: "Community is the most important thing nowadays. Those fancy ideas we had as children, of love and pleasure, adventure, those are bad words now. [...] We can't bring our children up like that. We have to be careful what the neighbours think" (203).

The conversation with Dipanita leads Shalini on her further quest for Leila to the Ministry of Settlement to check the address of Sapna in the records of East Slum. Shalini is confronted here with a different picture of city, outside its sectors or walls. The scavenger community of Sapna which occupies one festering lane, lives in Harnagar landfill, the biggest garbage mountain in East Slum area of the city where there is a problem of landfill fires due to the high concentration of methane thrown by the trash in the air: "Smoke from the conflagration is travelling across the city in thick white clouds that extend unbroken till the horizon. Residents of the sectors neighbouring the landfill complain of chronic pulmonary conditions, eye trouble. [...] A new layer has been added to the shroud of particulates over the city" (223). According to

Sapna, the Skydomes that are constructed for the air conditioning of the sectors, are the causes of fires due which many children have died and several families have become homeless, but the Repeaters catch hold of the scavengers for the problem and release them only after taking fifteen or twenty thousand rupees. Therefore, Sapna tells Shalini: “The Tower is where they put high-borns. Sfffllllt. The people that broke their rules. Sfffllllt. Still they get big, big buildings. Toilets, fans, electricity, flush. Even when they break the rules they’re too good to be put out here with us. But us? Our crime is being born. We don’t get anything. We don’t deserve it. (234)” The second Sapna, who lives in Officer’s Circle in the political sector of the city where the important members of the Council live in bungalows, has been raising Leila there after the night of abduction by the Repeaters as her own daughter by renaming her Lakshmi. Following a thorough physical examination, like the servants from the slum, and producing Sapna’s letter and name at the checkpoint, Shalini is allowed entry inside the gate. Sapna has elevated from slum to Officer’s circle due to Ashish’s work with Mr. Joshi and the Council. Shalini suspects Sapna of having taken Leila and wants her to hand over, but Sapna denies the charge, warns of the power of the Council and drives Shalini out by calling two Repeaters. In her struggle with the Repeaters, Shalini has a final glimpse of Leila: “The world absolutely still, no leaf or limb astir. Suddenly the silver glint of a window pulling open. On the first floor, framed in the perfect square, there is girl. [...] She’s beautiful. Her smile crinkles her face at the cheeks, bracketing the almond tips of her lips with two majestic arrowheads. Double dimples, dimples unlike any other, dimples like my mother and I have. What’s that she does now? She no longer looks out the window. Is she practising a tennis stroke? Is that a wave? She is swinging one brown arm, a white sleeve riding up her shoulder. She keeps making that gesture. She is calling me” (263).

Thus, Akbar’s *Leila* presents a dystopian picture of Indian society. The autobiographical aspects of *Leila*’s dystopian vision have also been pointed out by the novelist. It was shaped by Akbar’s experience of growing up as religious minority in Delhi and India. Akbar also came to understand the importance of the issue of class stratifications in Indian society in his Indian history class with History Professor Doug Haynes. Even his work as a journalist dealt with caste, class and politics. The story of *Leila* became much sharper due to the novelist’s reading about the social divisions and communal violence caused in India by ruling political party around the time of its composition. Akbar was also struck by the Supreme Court’s verdict in 2013 on the



issue of same-sex relationship and the dystopic image of the imam, the pundit and archbishop in the front page news covering of *Times of India* (Bhatia).

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