

Space, Purity, and the Panoptic State: A Socio-Political Reading of Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

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Abstract

This article presents a socio-political reading of critical analysis of Prayaag Akbar's debut dystopian novel, Leila (2017). Set in an unnamed, highly polarised near-future Indian metropolis in the late 2040s, the novel projects contemporary socio-political anxieties about communalism, class privilege, systemic surveillance, and environmental degradation onto a terrifyingly plausible canvas. The narrative follows Shalini, a grieving mother from an elite background, who embarks on a desperate sixteen-year quest to locate her missing daughter, Leila. Leila was forcibly abducted by a totalitarian regime known as the "Purity Council" because she was born to an interfaith couple. Using Michel Foucault's framework of panopticism alongside contemporary Marxist and posthumanist literary theories, this study considers how urban architecture is weaponised to enforce physical and psychological segregation. This article analyses the mechanisms of state control, represented by the thuggish "Repeaters" and the looming "Purity Pyramid," while critically unpacking the upper classes' complicity in their own eventual subjugation. This analysis shows that Leila serves not simply as speculative fiction, but as an urgent anthropological document and a prophetic warning. It exposes the weakness of democratic institutions when confronted by an obsessive politics of exclusion, resource scarcity, and institutionalised prejudice.

Keywords: Dystopia, Panopticism, Purity Council, Spatial Segregation, and Social Inequality

Submitted: 15.07.2026

Revised: 16.08.2026

Accepted: 21.08.2026

Published 02.10.2026

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Introduction:**Dystopia and the Socio-Political World of *Leila***

Dystopian fiction depicts a near-future world shaped by technology, threatened societies, government control, unfairness, and human suffering. Through the novel, authors warn readers about dystopian ideas. While the Western literary tradition has historically dominated the speculative genre through iconic masterworks by authors like George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Margaret Atwood, contemporary South Asian literature has increasingly turned toward speculative methods to unpack its own unique socio-political fractures. Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017) is regarded as a totalitarian and dystopian novel.

Prayaag Akbar is an Indian novelist and creative writer. He wrote two novels: *Leila* and *Mother India*. *Leila*, published in 2017, is a dystopian novel. *Mother India*, published in 2024, focuses on modern society. His novels reflect modern society's views and expectations. *Leila* won the Crossword Book Award (2018) and the Tata Literature Live! Award (2017). Prayaag Akbar included his personal childhood experience in this novel. His mother is a Christian, and his father is a Muslim. Society views them as criminals; they consider interreligious marriage a crime. The community and society completely ignored and isolated them. The author adds that this painful childhood experience is conveyed through the character Shalinini, a forty-three-year-old widow, who lost her husband and daughter in the middle of the raid.

Objectives and Aim:**Spatial Segregation and the Politics of Purity**

This article analyses the novel's dystopian space, society's definition of purity, and the panoptic state, a thorough study of the concept of the panopticon. By interrogating the Purity Council's totalitarian governance, the panoptic surveillance state, and the firmly rooted ironies of class privilege, this study shows how *Leila* charts the terrifying breakdown of a democratic collective into an "authoritarian system of physical and psychological walls" (Akbar 2).

The term "dystopia" is commonly associated with John Stuart Mill, who used the term "dys-topians" in a speech in the British House of Commons on 12 March 1868. Distinguishing it from "Utopian," which he described as something "too good to be practicable," Mill used "dys-topian" to refer to something "too bad to be practicable" (1517). This conception of dystopia provides a useful framework for understanding *Leila*, where political control is manifested through the regulation of space, resources, and social belonging. In *Leila*, one ruling party controls the entire city with common rules and regulations. The city is segregated and separated by caste, religion, and community. In the centre of the city, privileged people get pure water and air. Outside of the city, society is surrounded by low-caste people living in slum areas, where they get impure water and air. Slum residents inhale polluted air from industry. Around the slum, waste from privileged people is dumped. This spatial configuration operates as a lateralisation of Louis Dumont's socio-cultural concepts

of “purity and pollution, which historically underpinned the Indian caste system” (12). For the privileged, the regime plans to execute the sky-dome project. The sky-dome is designed to eliminate polluted air. They get massive amounts of pure air and water. The ruling party segregates the people and sets the system for who will deserve to live or not. They completely control the city, separating people through the hierarchy.

The second central concept examined in this article is ‘purity’. In the novel *Leila*, the authorised regime categorised the people from one to five. Suppose the privileged people are willing to go against the government’s rules. They are all sent to the purity or re-education camp. In the eyes of society, there is a purity camp. Inside the camp, they are mentally and physically abused. Every day, they have to obey the regime’s rules and regulations. The guards distribute the memory-erasing pill to erase all the memories they had before reaching the camp. This pill erases their memories and replaces them with new ideas. In this system, Shalini is labelled number five and spends sixteen years in the purity camp.

Analysis and Discussion:

The Purity Regime and the Disciplining of the Body

Shalini is Hindu, and her husband, Rizwan Chaudhary, is Muslim. They have a daughter named *Leila*. In the middle of the night, Repeaters raid her house. The Repeaters killed Rizwan and took away her daughter. In the novel, Shalini’s main goal is to reach her daughter in a surveillance-technology-based society. This challenge drives her to reach her daughter. In the purity camp, Shalini disobeys the guards and is sent to a labour camp. In the labour camp, she works as an enslaved person in privileged people’s houses. She cannot escape the government regime; slowly, she accepts the environment. She lives by the government’s rules and tries her best to find her daughter. Residents readily accept the surveillance of their private lives in exchange for the illusion of safety and “purity” within their walled domains.

Panopticism and the Architecture of Surveillance

Leila is a totalitarian dystopian novel in which one ruling party controls the city. In this article, the researcher uses the Panopticon concept to analyse the novel from the protagonist Shalini’s perspective. The word “Panopticon” was coined by Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher and social reformer. Jeremy Bentham designed it as a prison layout. It looks like a round building with a central tower. Prisoners sit in separate cells, while guards watch them from the centre of the tower. Prisoners thought their actions couldn’t be watched by everyone at once. “Power, through surveillance and punishment, suppresses individuals’ bodies and minds, maintaining social control and reinforcing its effects across networks, targeting the weak and marginalized” (Seo 35). The subject doesn’t know exactly when they are watched. Later, Michel Foucault popularised this concept. Michel Foucault, a French Philosopher, later used this concept in his book *Discipline and Punish*, published in 1975. It explains how modern society’s surveillance works in schools, offices,

hospitals, and public and private spaces.

Foucault's legal thoughts view the deep-level operation of power, summarise and criticise the historical vicissitudes from excruciation to imprisonment, and examine the power techniques and disciplinary strategies. They offer a unique analysis of power and panopticism, as well as a philosophical system and a method of pedigree that challenge the judiciary and have given us a way to break free from the fence of law and reconsider law and its application with broader perspectives from sociology (Li 103).

To induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So, to arrange things so that surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary. (201)

Surveillance, Discipline, and the Controlled City

Tom Moylan views dystopian narratives as "challenging cognitive maps of the given historical situation" (xii), using imagined societies to expose and critique the social and political conditions of the present. In *Leila*, Prayaag Akbar similarly constructs a dystopian city in which spatial segregation, caste hierarchy, and unequal access to essential resources reveal the consequences of a society governed by rigid notions of purity and exclusion.

This panoptic control, in *Leila*, is achieved through an advanced digital and physical surveillance network. The dystopian city controls her public and private life. The city monitors her every move. She can't live the life she wants. The government does not even permit people to speak loudly or laugh on the transport. They are restricted from living an entertaining life. The government banned music, dance, Western wear, swimming pools, and parties. In the city, everything is technologized; no one can escape from the regime. If anyone misbehaves in the city, the Repeaters monitor people with surveillance cameras. Only privileged people are permitted to enter the sectors and particular areas. If any low-community people try to enter the space, they will be killed or punished. Even privileged people who want to enter any other space need to scan. A chip is installed in every privileged person's hand; it works like a biometric. She worked as an enslaved person in the Sapna Tower residence. Sapna worked as a nanny in the Shalini house but now lives an elite life.

Class Privilege, Complicity, and Social Hierarchy

Shalini is shattered and shocked by Sapna's growth because she is from a lower community. Shalini's *Leila* lives a good life with Sapna in slum areas. In Sapna's house, Shalini searches *Leila's* entire house but doesn't find anything. In the middle of the raid, Shalini is taken away to a purity camp after Sapna and *Leila* leave the house. Sapna uses *Leila* and sends her to a re-education camp. Sapna married a government peon who has high contact with the powerful Council leader. Sapna's husband was from a lower community, but he worked as the Council leader's right-hand man. Sapna and her husband have the privilege of staying inside the sky-dome city. Through systematic drugging, psychological torture, and forced

labour, women who have violated social boundaries are conditioned to accept their guilt and “conform to traditional patriarchal expectations of purity” (Akbar 4).

Through Shalini’s journey, Akbar emphasises that the elite’s belief in their own immunity is an illusion. She suffers a lot without her husband and daughter.

Authenticity is associated with numerous benefits, including well-being, relationship satisfaction, and workplace engagement, sparking interest in its antecedents. Previous research has primarily concentrated on intraindividual factors like self-knowledge, self-awareness, and self-esteem. Complementing this perspective, we suggest that interpersonal factors also influence authenticity. Specifically, we propose that social status, defined as the respect and admiration received from others, enhances authenticity. (Bailey et al. 1850)

In the dystopian city, not only Shalini but many other characters struggle to live. Shalini has a purpose and a determined goal to tolerate the regime’s rules. Other characters in the novel accept the system. They have no hope of escaping from the surveillance system. They decide to live their lives with fear and anxiety. By ignoring the decline of democratic norms and the marginalisation of others, they actively “pave the way for their own ultimate subjugation” (Akbar 5).

Environmental Crisis and Authoritarian Control

Akbar illustrates a direct link between environmental degradation and totalitarian politics, explicitly charting how ecological crises systematically accelerate the breakdown of public empathy:

It seems that the phenomenon of political lying has not appeared in its intense and terrifying form as it has appeared in the contemporary world, especially among totalitarian movements and regimes. Among what distinguished the twentieth century was the emergence of totalitarian regimes, which constituted a new and fertile material for philosophical discussion of political lying and other related issues such as conspiracy, propaganda, violence, and destruction of truth... etc. (Bakr 60)

The scarcity of essential resources fuels social anxieties, prompting communities to isolate themselves behind walls to protect what little they have. The fear of ecological pollution transforms into an obsession with social purity. The state justifies its radical segregation measures as a necessary step for resource preservation and public safety (Akbar 114).

Memory, Re-Education, and the Triumph of the Panoptic State

Shalini, at the end of the novel, has a chance to meet her daughter inside the sky-dome city. She contacts a higher-level official council. The officer demands that she take a copy of the sky-dome blueprint. In return for the favour, she is granted access to enter the sky-dome city. In the climax, she confronts her daughter with great happiness. *Leila* is renamed Lakshmi after being separated from her parents. After the raid, she was sent to a re-education camp, where the guards gave her the memory-erasing pill. Because of this, she lost her memories of her parents. In the

camp, after erasing their memories, they trained the children to fit the system's rules. They became disciplined and obeyed the system's rules strictly. The moment she saw Shalini in the categorised uniform, she screamed and ran away. She was totally shattered and left the place. The systemised, authorised regime won.

Conclusion

Leila by Prayaag Akbar, which offers a culturally based critique of current social-political upheavals, is a noteworthy contribution to global dystopian writing. Akbar creates a future world that feels uncannily similar to the present by fusing aspects of speculative fiction with the unique realities of caste, religion, and class in India. The book acts as a cautionary tale about the negative effects of unbridled nationalism, societal division, and disregard for the environment. It pushes the reader to consider how systemic exclusion can destabilise an entire society, looking beyond their own immediate privileges.

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