Dystopian Imaginary and Urban Spaces: A Reading of the Text and Screen Adaptation of Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

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Abstract

Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017) is a dystopian novel which underscores the Anthropocene and the resilience needed to navigate a dystopian landscape created by human agency. *Leila* is set in a future mirroring our contemporary reality, plagued by environmental degradation, systematic discrimination, climate change and constant surveillance. This paper is an attempt to study how Akbar builds upon known elements, akin to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, creating an exaggerated reality that pushes boundaries without crossing them. At the heart of this dystopian state, a totalitarian regime called the Purity Council, is a mother's quest to find her daughter. Shalini, the protagonist, persists in her search for her missing daughter Leila, resisting authority and thus becoming a metaphor for resilience and courage in a dehumanizing system. The non-linear narrative reveals the circumstances which lead to Shalini's separation from her young daughter. The paper will attempt a thematic study of the novel with the aim of uncovering the urban space that is transformed and repurposed to further the concept of purity and extremism. The novel stresses on climate change and its impact on human behaviour, where resource scarcity can exacerbate already existing inequalities and create monsters out of men. The paper will also attempt to analyse the 2019 screen adaptation of the novel by Netflix and discuss how this multi-layered narrative provides a commentary on the challenges of the Anthropocene in an Indian context. *Leila* will compel us to think that the hypothetical future reality is not much different from our present. For a story that extrapolates today's polarised society into a horrific reality, this looks very much like our own.

Keywords: reality, dystopia, urban space, surveillance, screen adaptation

I

The notion of the urban space has gained prominence in the last two decades both within and beyond dystopian studies. It refers to cityscapes usually characterised by a bleak and oppressive atmosphere, wherein elements of control, surveillance, and decay dominate and lurk behind a façade of utopia. Unlike the utopias of Thomas More, or even Francis Bacon, which depict perfectly hospitable societies, dystopian authors turn the air of the *polis* heavy with pollution, tinged with a lingering taste of metallic waste. This space is often represented by towering, monolithic buildings, casting long shadows that seem to envelop the entire city, making it vulnerable to environmental and political crises. In the context of the neoliberal global economy, it is important to acknowledge the historical significance of spatial policies while recognizing the profound connection between space and climate crisis in the Anthropocene era. Anthropocene, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty "is identified by the disastrous consequences, such as rising sea levels and devastation of ecological biodiversity that global warming has on the biosphere as a result of humans' propensity to enact as geological agents and thus eventually transforming the course of the planet" (Khilnani and Bhattacharjee127). Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017) examines and comments on the failures of the Indian nation-state, not only in its governmental capacities but also in its social and ecological aspects. The paper attempts to examine dystopian spaces made worse by the increasing climate crisis accelerated by anthropogenic tendencies. It further analyses the transformation and repurposing of urban space in order to maintain the homogenising tendencies of the fundamentalist regime depicted in the novel. The paper will also explore the portrayal of the cityscape in the screen adaptation of the novel.

Contemporary Anglophone Indian authors exhibit stark spatial divisions in their fiction, with affluent and exclusive areas juxtaposed against impoverished and marginalised neighbourhoods. The frame depicted by dystopian fiction as a sub-genre of speculative fiction focuses on the importance of the space, like the city, "as a symbol of the success of power in organising the new civilisation." (Rodríguez 86). Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space,* thinks space is inhabited by human consciousness rather than being an empty void (97). Space falls under the power of the dystopian metropolis, which insists on total obedience and conformity in its subjects and maintains a possible division between metropolis-periphery. In the analysis of urban spatiality, the hierarchical space "symbolise, posit and expose deepening inequalities and social class distinctions…" (Hewitt and Graham 923). In *Leila,* the architectural layout of the city reflects power hierarchies and class-based segregation. The representation of the various sectors divided by a sixty feet wall reflects the anxieties of uneven urbanisation and suggests that within layers of history of any "urban metropolis, are also layers of deep-rooted violence and inequity compounded through the ages" (Khilnani and Bhattacharjee 148). The protagonist observes the privileged elite

living luxurious lives behind high walls, while the less fortunate are banished to liminal spaces that encircle the walls.

II

Prayaag Akbar's fictionalised city in *Leila* reflects a post-apocalyptic political situation where human-beings have lost their humanity and are under a strict fundamentalist regime of authoritarian control. The society is organised into communities known as 'Purity' zones, and the narrative structure is mediated through the memory of the protagonist narrator, Shalini. The walled-off state is divided into distinct metropolitan sectors based on social and religious status; on the one hand the privileged few have access to modern infrastructure and basic amenities while on the other, the marginalised are relegated to the peripheral 'Outroads' marked by deep squalor. As the story progresses, the transformation of the fragmented and stratified cityscape becomes more prominent, as "intrusive surveillance is utilized to reinforce social segregation and sorting" (Kuldova178).

Reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Leila* presents a dystopian scenario where impenetrable barriers are constructed to confine and govern the residents of a fortified city. In Atwood's novel, which is also situated in a totalitarian and theocratic society, individuals have been deprived of all their rights. Throughout the narrative, the reader is provided with clues about how familiar urban landmarks have been repurposed to support the ambitions of the Republic of Gilead. For example, the Harvard Library is turned into a torture chamber, a high school gymnasium into a forced re-education centre for fertile women. Akbar's dystopia imagines an Indian society in which an authoritarian rule creates a hegemonic order of homogenisation disguised as 'Purity'. Here, the minorities are treated as undesirable or 'impure' beings who are meant to be disciplined and Othered.

Yi-Fu Tuan suggests that "a space is transformed into place through lived human experiences" (qtd. in Khilnani and Bhattacharjee 140). In the novel, Shalini moves from a familiar, secure place to an unfamiliar, unsettling space. The narrative also focuses on memory, where both the past and the future contribute to the displacement of a person from space to place. Henry Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1974) states that space has had a significant impact on contemporary society. His theory on urban spatiality explains that "urban phenomenon and urban space are not only a projection of social relationships but also a terrain on which various strategies clash" (qtd. in Shi and Zhu224). Lefebvre's conceptualisation of socio-spatial theory is based on Marxist principles, acknowledging the dominance of the ruling class in shaping spatial organisation. Edward W. Sojaunderscores Lefebvre's theory and explains "that 'space' instead of being an 'empty void' is always filled by politics, ideology and other forces" (qtd. in Khilnani and Bhattacharjee 231). The political institutions of *Leila* orchestrate in a way where people of other faiths are secluded (Tripathi 127). In the guise of securing morality through gated housing, the rich deprive the less

privileged from the basic needs of life which results in acute water shortages. The proliferation of toxic effluents adds to the misery of the slum dwellers. Fiskio points out how "cultural productions, such as speculative fiction, have the capacity not only to interrogate the mainstream environment, but also to express the complex relations of race, class, nation, and modernity" (13). The mobility between different sectors, whether it is physical or metaphorical, is restricted by one's birth (Khan 32). As an upper-caste Hindu from the Gupta sector, Shalini's marriage to a Muslim man Rizwan "Riz" from the Ashraf sector was considered controversial for both their families. They decided to dissociate themselves from the racial puritanism in their respective sectors by relocating to the East End, a sector that supposedly lived like the old times before the walls came about. No one bothered about the purity of its residents in the East End as long as they were economically well-off.

According to David Harvey, "Capitalism produces its own geography", where the essence of urban space undergoes continual transformation, growth, and expansion (qtd. in Shi and Zhu 224). In the novel, icons of global capitalist modernity such as the Skydome air conditioning system installed by the Council "privatises air and can even change seasons" (Rajput13) even when they run the risk of landfill fires in the slums. Khan states how the presence of a Skydome and select access to the use of flyways within the wall-guarded sectors results in class war in the novel (33):

When you build a roof you keep something outside. You put huge air conditioners, pumping cold air into each of the domes. Don't you know what happens behind an air conditioner, what comes out of its ass? … One hut caught fire, then another. Soon the whole road was burning. That's how they lost their homes. (Akbar 236)

Every high sector in the novel has a slum attached to it, where the "Slummers" (Akbar 4) collect the refuse left behind by the sector residents, thereby prompting Akbar to portray unequal urbanisation present in cities of the postcolonial nations.

In his analysis of future cities, Raymond Williams highlights the connection between urban planning and class segregation: "The sombre vision of man divided into brute labour and trivial consumption, and then of the city shaped physically to embody these worlds, is expressed again and again" (102). Apocalyptic eco-dystopian fiction is often set in urban spaces because cities become sites of widespread pollution, toxic emission and waste disposal. Shalini's movement in space from the part of the city where the rich lived at ease to the slums where the poorest inhaled the toxic air originating from the landfill fires intensifies the debate around the segregationist policies of the government. Shalini describes the mansions of the Officer's Circle within the 'political sector', with a well-mowed lawn, "a fountain and ice-blue pool and neat rows of potted palms. It looks inspired by the desert palaces: custard yellow, a vast domed cupola straddling the roof, elephants at its four corners with trunks uptwirled, filigreed sandstone

balconies" (Akbar 251-52). The peaceful atmosphere of the space within the sector walls is different from the heavily militarised look of the Slums, routinely patrolled by a gang of thugs known as the "Repeaters", a space "permanently threatened by warfare, identity politics, communaritarism, and violence" (Kuldova178). The characters' motivations are driven by self-interest; even Shalini's desire to find her biological offspring outweighs any revolutionary fervour to dismantle an oppressive system (Khan 34).

The circulation of water in the sectors is at a premium after the crisis as "every year the temperatures rose and the water condition worsened" (Akbar 86) where the groundwater level has nearly depleted. The water crisis led to people leaving the farms, highlighting the dangers of the Anthropocene era. Paul J. Crutzen (2002) used the term 'Anthropocene' to refer to the "human-dominated, geological epoch" (23). The urban wasteland outside the sector walls in the novel is brimming with large heaps of both organic and inorganic waste, contaminated sewage, animal remains, and various unidentifiable debris. The supply of pure water is controlled by the dominant sectors of the Council mostly consisting of upper-class Hindus in the political sector of Purity One (Tripathi 127). The head of the Council, Mr. Joshi, insists on protecting the people "from what-all goes on outside" (Akbar 50). Shalini and her husband Rizare relatively privileged as they decide to celebrate Leila's birthday around an artificial swimming pool when more than half the population is undergoing serious water shortages. Riz even offers a "preposterous bribe to the water officials so they would fill the pool" for the party (121). The kidnapping of Leila from her birthday henceforth sets the events of the novel in motion.

Shalini's class and elitism help hide her family behind the façade of apparent cosmopolitanism. When her daughter's *ayah* Sapna mentions that many of the slum areas have not received water in three years, she is dismissive and sceptical, as "they tend to magnify their woes, hoping for sympathy, some kind of handout" (Akbar 112). It is only when she is forced to roam the outskirts of the city in her firm determination to find Leila does she realise how her complicit upper middle-class attitude has quietly perpetuated the inequities that defined her society. She is consumed with guilt, alongside fear of self-recrimination and the pain of separation. The narrative becomes non-linear, with extended flashback sequences, as Shalini becomes a hostage to the whims of her memory. Throughout the narrative, Shalini attempts to "retain some sense of herself as a distinct individual differentiated from others, but that self breaks down" (Stillman and Johnson 73) eventually. She tries to hold on to aspects of her past life, as she gathers courage to search for Leila. She presents herself as cautious, fearful of the male custodians, and "knowing that to trust another means to risk one's own life" (74). After sixteen long years, Shalini finds herself in the house of Sapna, her daughter's former *ayah*, who is now married to one of the Council members and has adopted Leila. The novel concludes on an enigmatic note when Shalini is told that she has mistaken Sapna's biological daughter Lakshmi for Leila, insisting that

the "identity of Leila remains a mystery—it is impossible to know whether Sapna is telling the truth and Shalini must make do with this void inside, although it is also subtly suggested that she will never resign herself to the fate that the Council has programmed for her and will consequently go on looking for Leila" (Herrero 225). Shalini is aware that she has no modes of resistance against the Council, at least none that threaten the Council in any way: but against the Council's re-writing of history Shalini's courage comes from her memory of the past. The residential complex called the Towers becomes a site of refuge for the 'fallen' women, who seem to not fit within the adherents of puritanism assigned to them by the metanarrative of the Council. The only irony is that Shalini's status as a woman from a high sector protects her even in her banishment to the Towers when many women from the slums are left homeless from the landfill fires. Thus, *Leila* reveals the opportunism of both its left-leaning and liberal-minded characters, who are just as complicit as the right-wing conservatives in establishing the dystopian regime.

III

Cinematic representation of cities has played a significant role in shaping how Indian cities are perceived by the audience. The six-part series based on Akbar's eponymous novel premiered on 14 June 2019 on Netflix, directed by Deepta Mehta, Shankar Raman, and Pawan Kumar, starring Huma Qureshi in the lead. Despite deviating from the source text, the creators manage to retain the fundamental essence of Akbar's novel.

The visual imagery of the web series is enhanced by the scenes, providing viewers with a glimpse of the city (referred to as '*Āryāvarta'* in the series) as seen and felt by Shalini. With its usage of Sanskritised Hindi, Netflix's *Leila* is set in a quasi-fascist India in 2040, where water and fresh air have come to be regarded as luxuries. The slogan 'Purity for All' directly translates to '*Jai Aryavarta'*(land of the Aryans)in the series. Unlike Akbar who used words like 'Repeaters', 'Council', 'Towers', and 'Sectors' to invoke a vague sense of security, the directors' usage of Sanskritised words carries deep symbolism of the Puritan belief in the novel. Although the central focus of the adaptation is not on depicting a specific urban city in India, it cleverly includes various hints in the visual storytelling, indicating that the familiar spaces have either been obliterated or repurposed to promote the agenda of the new government. The viewer sees Shalini being taken away to a *shuddhikaran* (purity) camp including shots that show the vehicle's movement through places where the less privileged live. There is a scene where protestors and rioters are searching for water, providing an opportunity for Shalini to flee, only to be chased by a guard named Bhanu ["Episode 2" 4:35 – 39:02]. The introduction of Bhanu's character in the series as a leader of one of the rebel groups gives an insight into the counterforces within the *Aryavarta* regime that Akbar mentions only in passing. His character is centred on liberating the state by executing Operation *Unnati* (progress), a bombing mission targeting *Aryavarta*.

High walls erected all over the city keep the lower-class community called *doosh* (polluted)in extremely unhygienic conditions with access neither to clean air nor water. The hierarchy between *Aryavarta* and *bastis* (peripheral slums) is visible as only by shuddhikaran can a lower-class citizen attain purity (Chachra247). *Leila's* cinematography draws the viewers to the dystopian world depicted on the screen with its mountains of rubbish, polluted air, and acid rain. It highlights "the ability of walls to create conditions of absolute separation and exclusion" (Sioli 76) with the techno-modern world on one side and the deprived lot on the other side.

The intensely political and realistic representation of the contemporary nation-state in the series deals with the struggle of a dominant ruling class and the society's response to it. The head of the nation of *Aryavarta* is Joshi, a man-god who has replaced Gandhi as 'the father of the nation.' In a flashback scene, Shalini recounts the news of the demolition of the Taj Mahal, a symbol of Mughal rule. Shalini's husband Rizwan Chaudhary, a Muslim 'man' who married outside his religion, is murdered. The Hindu 'woman' Shalini is sent to a Purity camp where she undergoes a cleansing process or purification. Their mixed-breed child Leila, labelled '*Mischrit*' or 'Blended blood,' was deemed impure and was taken for a 'Project Balee' where children from inter-faith marriages are imprisoned and are later adopted by people of the state without any knowledge of their biological parents.

The cloudy visual palette of the web series is also symbolic. Shalini serves a device to unveil the atmosphere of the city. She chooses hideouts where the *Aryavarta* radio system is working in full swing. The transformation of the former urban landscape is evident as she runs through by-lanes that advertise slogans and remnants of the old order or what used to be India. The omnipresent portraits of the state leader Joshi, the "Bal Joshi" cartoons, the ominous *Aryavarta* chants and the silences of the apocalyptic world of grey skies are heightened. Furthermore, the insignia of the *Aryavarta*– a star-shaped tattoo on the hands of the citizens "is found on the cars, state buildings and other institutions hinting at how state becomes a repressive apparatus of a particular ideology" (Chachra 248)). This method, according to Althusser, is a repressive state apparatus in which, "the State is a 'machine' of repression, which enables the ruling classes to ensure their domination over the working" (Althusser 137). The symbols of technological advancement – such as internet access and security scans, are intertwined with the fundamental beliefs of the nation-state. Within the Purity camp, led by an upper-caste male figure, known as Dr Iyer, or Guru *Maa* (mother), women are classified based on their nature of marital choices. They are required to atone for their transgressions by willingly doing menial tasks like polishing shoes, cleaning, and "rolling over left-over food" (Chachra 249) of upper-caste men as a way of performing penance. Not conforming to the standards set in the camp can lead to various punishments such as being sent to the *shramkendra* (labour camp)or forced to tie the matrimonial knot with an animal or even death.

In *Aryavarta,* the growth of nationalistic fervour is maintained through a society organised along the lines of segregation and hierarchies. The urban landscape is dominated by the scarcity of water and other natural resources as it aims for a globalised modernity. Individuals bearing tattoos of *Aryavarta* are recognized as citizens of the state and are granted access to water, whereas others, such as the inhabitants of bastis, are considered outsiders and are only permitted to use contaminated leftover water. However, there are instances of rebellion which enhance the transgressions of the characters. In the series, Shalini negotiates with Bhanu to join the rebels as they plan the resistance through a bomb attack against the regime on the day of the Skydome inauguration in the hopes of freeing the citizenry from the fanatics. She agrees to be a mole at politician Rao's home in exchange for the rebels' help in locating Leila. Shalini bonds with the prisoners of the Purity camp where she tries to protect inmate Kanika's child from being taken away by the guardians of *Aryavarta.* Shalini and Rao (one of the imminent custodians of the state) bond over their admiration for the art and poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a political rebel whose works are banned in *Aryavarta.* This provides a dialectic understanding of the space where "transgressions [are] present both inside and outside the narrative of religious nationalism" (Chachra 257). Shalini builds a strong connection with two women from the labour camp in the Towers who agree to help her intercept sensitive information to the rebels. They try to take down Shalini's employer Mrs Dixit who is one of the engineers of the Skydome – an ambitious project that aims to surround the city with air-conditioned domes that would potentially lead to many innocent deaths.

The question of fidelity is one of the most important approaches for studying text to screen adaptation. Linda Hutcheon in *Theory of Adaptation* argues that "an adaptation is likely to be greeted as minor and subsidiary and certainly never as good as the 'original'" (xii). Robert Stam notes that, "the notion of fidelity is problematic for a number of reasons," particularly because "an adaptation is automatically different and original due to the change of medium" (55).Thomas Leitch contends that "It is much easier to dismiss adaptations as inevitably blurred mechanical reproductions of original works of art than to grapple with the thorny questions of just what constitutes originality and in what sense… popular novels are themselves less mechanically reproduced" (163). The adaptations use a source text as the basis for their work to create a new and authentic piece of art. Akbar's novel also caters to the demands of a different medium to produce a new original. The visual representation of the city in the series evokes the feeling of a prison: the quiet and peaceful streets, luxurious buildings, and opulent interiors are contrasted with grimy and rotten marginalised locales from the other side of the wall. Various instances of such spatial contrasts are seen as the viewer follows Shalini's journey along peaceful streets, with large, imposing buildings and well-manicured lawns, guarded by uniformed guards with machine guns, stretching to the locales on the peripheral Outroads. The scenic landscape within the city walls induces a false sense of security lurking behind a portentous awareness of violence and upheaval in the outside slums. At the same time, the series reinforces technological

advancements as a crucial plot device almost entirely missing from the source material. Shalini and her husband converse with her brother-in-law using a phone that opens up a projected image of the caller, while wristbands with memory chips, tattoos with photosensitive technology, use of drones, and closed-circuit tele-visuals track the movement of the citizens. These symbols of a failed technocratic state illustrate how unregulated technological innovations become a risk to the entire society.

IV

This paper has investigated the concept of purity and extremism that transcends specific religions or ideologies, shedding light on the exploitation inherent in various beliefs. *Leila* widens its scope by exploring these themes, making it more than a critique of a single sect or ideology. Prayaag Akbar speculates a fascist takeover of India ahead of an impending political transformation. The novel describes how Joshi took over the state after overthrowing the previous government and assuming power by orchestrating the blueprint of an entirely new order of social hierarchy whilst introducing new mechanisms for control. In many ways, Akbar's novel is a product of our time, of a post-millennial Indian society, in which the potentially destructive impact of neo-conservative religious trends runs amok. In a new order envisioned by Joshi's Council, spaces of old (be it urban or domestic) are transformed to fit people's new demands (Moldovan 118). The uncanny resemblances of such spaces with Indian cities like Mumbai or Delhi forces the reader to think about how spaces where "inescapable walls are erected to restrict and control inhabitants" result in its spatial transformation (Khilnani and Bhattacharjee 226). The paper locates the novel within a simultaneous discourse of climate change and misgovernance by those in power. The narrative explores the idea of urban spaces entangled around the dissemination of religious fundamentalism, a narrative structure akin to *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel also underscores the Anthropocene, and the resilience needed to navigate a landscape created by human agency. The depiction of various landmarks within the realm of urban space serves as a reminder for the readers and the viewers alike, that the characters "live in a controlled environment in which their lives are in the hands of brutal fanatics serving a ruthless" ideology (Moldovan 118). Furthermore, the Netflix series proved that an adaptation is contemporarily considered equally important as its source material, thus being "second without being secondary" (Hutcheon 9). The city is portrayed as a site of contrasts and exposes the hypocrisy at the core of a fundamentalist regime. The series, with a total of six episodes, has many unresolved questions in the finale, leaving viewers eager for a sequel to address all the lingering uncertainties. The primary message of the series is not about envisioning the future, but about acknowledging denial and ignorance that hinder acceptance of the current reality. The towering wall of the Hindu nation serves as a physical barrier that separates the poor from the rich, reflecting the segregationist mindset of the dominant class

towards the marginalised. For a story that extrapolates today's polarised society into a horrific reality, this looks very much like our own.

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