

The Politics of Segregation in Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

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Abstract

The concept of identity is as much political as it is personal. Though exhaustive research has already been done on the notion of identity and its political entanglements, a conclusive stand on it has become nearly impossible. It varies in conjunction with the parameters of space and time. It is malleable and can be moulded into any form by the agents of the politically powerful. This paper will explore Prayaag Akbar's dystopian narrative Leila in order to examine the extent to which totalitarian regime overreach and contorts the identities of its inhabitants through the media of brutal force and digitized urban space. Citizens of dystopia under totalitarian government are usually given collective identities which are rigorously guarded by the State. The novel warns against a divided society where the sense of difference among people is used by governments to exercise control and even perpetuate hate towards certain groups by building physical and metaphorical walls between them. The paper also aims to identify and discuss the instances in which segregation is structured by the establishment in order to exercise their power and the strategies adopted to employ them. The ultimate aim of this analysis is to outline the various responses to such oppressive systems and to assess the significance of the genre in critiquing the age-old villain of humanity, casteism.

Keywords: Identity, caste, dystopia, urban space, walls

The concept of identity and its various nuances has long been studied, contested and negotiated; yet, to make a conclusive stand on it has become unlikely. This feature makes it a viable idea for research across space and time. Identity is fluid as it is defined "always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us" (Taylor 33). It is formed in relation to geography, faith, food, art, gender, race, language, interests and any number of additional possibilities. It reflects how we integrate cultural experiences into our sense of self, it shifts with us as we encounter new experiences, people and places.

The genre of dystopia gained momentum in the twenty-first century Indian writing in English. Apart from the sci-fi category, it stood high for its political and ideological entanglements. In a UGC Funded Minor Research Project conducted on the topic 'The Theme of Dystopia in Indian Fiction in English: An Exploration', Dr. Saurabh Bhattacharyya asserts

that the dystopian sensibility is one of the most potent and discussed issues in postmodern literary criticism (Bhattacharyya 2). Despite the futuristic mode, it has firmly located itself in the present realities. A dystopian narrative basically presents a conflict between the establishment and the individual in which the individual is pitted against the invincible forces of the establishment, which is most often political and administrative and individualism with individual liberty and autonomy both at the personal and institutional levels are at stake. Thus, a conflict is inevitable between the two ends, one representing the oppressive establishment with its media of control through coercion and hegemony and the other through the dystopian protagonist's recourse to the ways unsanctioned by the establishment. Most often technological and scientific development are seen as accessory to some kind of development-displacement paradigm and resisted by the forces that oppose the dystopia.

Prayaag Akbar's debut novel *Leila*, published in 2017, is set in a dystopian landscape which is not very far from the present time. Though the parameters of space and time are pushed further into the future, the events are so much happening now, particularly in the Indian milieu. Here, the dystopia operates through the hegemony of community/caste and the aggressive policies of segregation on the basis of 'purity'. The nation is in decline, clean air, portable water and security are at a premium. Climate change and crumbling infrastructure make life a challenge for all but the most privileged.

Caste is no more an archaic ritual system but a dynamic aspect of modern economies. Caste identities persist because of their advantages. It is found to be a complex institution, simultaneously weakened and revived by current economic and political forces. It contributes to persisting national, socio-economic and human capital disparities. The varied and contingent nature of caste has not prevented attempts at a unified conception. Some modelled caste in terms of three key effects: social separation, graded status and occupational specialization. Others distinguish different dimensions of caste. A hereditary dimension comes from caste as endogamous kin groups (jatis), restrictions on marriages, diet (eg., vegetarianism). The control of women's sexuality in social reproduction underlines the centrality of gender to how caste works. In its economic dimension, caste as a division of occupations with ascribed status and in its political dimension, caste constitutes systems of dominance and rule at local and regions levels. Finally, caste has an ideological dimension associated for example with ideas of purity and impurity. The most influential theorizations of caste have privileged the ideological.

In Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*, set in the near future in an unnamed city, the proximity of the events unfolding to contemporary reality instills the fear of precarious livelihood that is

about to come upon us. It clearly reflects the inner seams of rigid class and caste divisions in Indian society. The city in the novel is ravaged by the armed scrutiny of “loose band of men”, known as Repeaters, the saviours of a pure community who work for the Council. They make sure that the localities remain “self-enclosing”.

The society depicted in the novel makes constant efforts to build more and more boundaries between caste, class and gender. The narrative thus offers many nuances on what constitutes privilege and the layers of grey underneath it. Indian society deludes itself that caste discrimination is a thing of the past, yet it suffuses the nation, from top to bottom. The term ‘caste’ or *casta*, was attached to the social stratifications of India by 16th century Portuguese merchants: *casta* is Portuguese for race, or breed (from the Latin *castus*: chaste or pure). The new European arrivals saw in Indian society’s obsession with lineal purity and demarcated living an echo of their own understanding of racial purity. Louis Dumont described an unchanging, neatly segmented hierarchy, where everyone accepted their position, premised not on political power but on considerations of purity. Drawing on classical Hindu texts such as the *Manusmriti*, Dumont in effect described the *varna* system. But the system which was ordained in ancient India has diminished relevance today. *Jati* is the caste identity that every Indian is born with, the multifarious groupings of clans, tribes, communities and religions that comprise Indian society. Each *jati* is typically associated with a traditional job function, and some *jatis* are defined by religious variation or linguistic groupings. *Jati* is not limited to Hindus; Indian Muslims, Sikhs and Christians all hold to age-old sectarian identities, with prescribed rules and customs analogous to *jati*, within their larger belief system. Indian society is divided into thousands of these endogamous kinship groups and the bigger *jatis* are further subdivided, in accordance with observable differences in custom and rule.

The locale of the novel is an unnamed city crisscrossed by “flyroads”, from which cars descend only to make their way into gated sectors, protected by unscalable high walls. The sectors are strictly segregated by caste and community: “the Tamil Brahmin sector, Leuva Patel Residency, Bohra Muslim Zone, Catholic Commons, Kanyakubj Quarters, Sharif Muslimeen Precinct, Maithil Acres, Chitpavan Heights, Syrian Christian Co-op, Kodava Martials . . .”. This is a world in which all the possible divisions of caste, religion and class have been publicly embraced, each high “identity” zealously guarded and physically engraved into city’s architecture. Caste is no static pyramid. It’s a dynamic social organisation, both hierarchy and segmentation. *Leila* follows Shalini, an elite, well-to-do woman who marries Riz, a man from a different religion. In the dystopian universe portrayed in the novel, segregation is the only

constitution: the privileged live in walled cities that are categorised by community, religion, or caste. The elite prize here is “purity”, a vague form of political identity that they claim, preserve and extract through the militant violence of men known as “Repeaters”. After Shalini moves in with Riz, they shift to a society for “mixed” couples and she gives birth to Leila. On her third birthday, however, Leila disappears in the midst of a raid which also results in Riz’s death. In the aftermath, Shalini is ostracised to “The Towers”, a purity camp designed to resuscitate obedience for the need of “purity for all” in the “social rebels”.

The world of *Leila* is obsessed with the matrices of religion and caste. In the country, religion is an abreast identity, often the prefix of one’s lifetime. But beneath religion, there is a sophisticated mesh of caste, class, creed and community that often dictates functional realities. One’s identity then, is a pre-declared socio-political position at birth. Akbar writes about caste “Caste has proved itself a resolute, nimble institution surviving the dramatic political and economic transformations of three millennia. There is no question of it having disappeared from either the rural or urban context”. It’s this privilege of the upper-class Akbar unrelentingly attacks through Shalini in *Leila*. Shalini’s journey echoes the social deafness of most privileged men and women in India. People over-elaborate their progressiveness but remain blind to the segmentations that widen due to their choices.

In the book, Shalini refuses, initially, to register the decadence around her. Her father dies berating the inequality surrounding them, in vain. In a passage, she compliments the “fine system” that allows her boyfriend Riz to hire a 13 year old cook from the slums to cook kebabs for them, The couple move into the “East End”, a plush sector of the city where affluent liberals throng swimming pools and parties, while the world outside suffers from drought. Though Shalini is discomforted when told about the plight of her domestic help’s living conditions - no water for three years - she remains unchanged. Until tragedy comes knocking at her door. It’s only later, while mopping floors in exile that she is eventually forced to contemplate why she never cared enough to buy her maid a “long-handled broom”. Shalini is a stereotypical person living in a digitized city under technocratic setup. She never tries to fight against the system which she thought to be a task in vain. Her only aim is to ladder up her career so that she could get hold of the politically powerful. This intention is not merely to earn a living but specifically targeted to reach the Record Towers where the entire bulk of demographic details are kept. “the Slummers, wasn’t actually under the awning”. They are destined to sit in the scorching heat while the only provision granted to them was floor fans.

The novel *Leila* weaves together various strands of inequality still zealously followed in our society. It depicts how political structures utilize the matrices of caste, class, religion and gender to create a society to their advantage and to mould its citizens as mere puppets. It is about, to put in simple terms, a totalitarian regime obsessing over purity. The notion of purity is indefinite. Such abstract notions, just like beauty, are relative and cannot be labelled in definite terms.

Casteism is enmeshed and deeply ingrained in our subconscious. The author tactfully deals with the burning issues of contemporary society by pushing the events in the narrative to the future, though those are eerily familiar to present realities and thus, creating a dystopia nation where walls shine and citizens crumpled within. “Every attempt to create a pure bottom-up, emergent network to coordinate human affairs also facilitates some new hub that inevitably becomes a center of power, even if that was not the intent. The whole supposedly open system will contort itself to that Sovereign Server, creating a new form of centralised power.” (Lanier 2014).

As the events of the recent days have shown us, it is a privilege to be able to quarantine ourselves from the outside world. It is not the survival of the fittest, but the survival of the richest that seems imminent. There is something undeniably apocalyptic about the whole affair. It is difficult not to let our imagination run wild and imagine that maybe the world is ending. Perhaps not the world, but for some time at least, life as we have always known it has ceased to exist. *Leila* remains an important commentary on inequality, class and climate change in the Indian context.

References

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