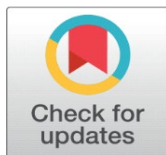


DYSTOPIAN OPPRESSION AND MATERNAL RESISTANCE IN LEILA (2019)

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ABSTRACT

Netflix's adaptation of *Leila*, based on Prayaag Akbar's novel, presents a haunting vision of a near-future India where religious authoritarianism and caste segregation dictate every aspect of life. This research explores how the series portrays oppression, surveillance, and resistance, particularly through the lens of maternal struggle. Using feminist literary theory and postcolonial critique, the study examines the dystopian world of Aryavarta and its mechanisms of control. It argues that *Leila* serves as both a warning and a reflection of contemporary societal anxieties. The research employs a comparative textual analysis methodology, examining the novel and its adaptation to assess narrative shifts and thematic emphasis.

Keywords: Dystopia, Feminism, Postcolonialism, Surveillance, Maternal Resistance

1. INTRODUCTION

Dystopian narratives often reflect contemporary fears, magnifying them into terrifying futures. We see here a future world of technology and the viewers often may carry a motif "to be scared of a future where human workers are not needed. Luddite objections could be made: that this march of progress is not at all desirable. I am drawn to make a pragmatist's objection: that this techno-dominance is a promise of a smooth, error-free future" (Pettinger, 2019). Netflix's *Leila* (2019), adapted from Prayaag Akbar's novel of the same name, and envisions an oppressive society where religious and caste divisions are rigidly enforced. Set in Aryavarta, a totalitarian Hindu state in 2050, the series follows Shalini, a privileged woman who faces dehumanization after marrying a Muslim man. When her husband is murdered and her daughter is taken, she embarks on a desperate journey to find her child. This article examines how *Leila* employs dystopian themes to critique authoritarianism, gender oppression, and religious extremism.

As Netflix's second major Indian dystopian series after *Ghoul* (2018), *Leila* builds on the platform's growing investment in politically engaged speculative fiction. While *Ghoul* focused on military surveillance and internalized fear, *Leila* constructs a more expansive narrative rooted in caste, climate catastrophe, and ethno-religious purity. Its release coincided with increasing concerns over state censorship, nationalist sentiment, and social inequality in India—making its thematic ambition both timely and contentious.

The series *Leila* (Juvekar, Mehta, Raman, & Kumar, 2019) compels viewers to engage with a speculative but deeply plausible future where purity is mandated and identity becomes a tool for institutional control. The story opens with a

deceptively peaceful family moment—Shalini, Rizwan, and their daughter Leila at a swimming pool—only to be shattered by a brutal state-sponsored attack, launching the narrative into chaos.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative textual analysis methodology, examining both Akbar's novel and its Netflix adaptation. Key differences are analyzed to understand how narrative and thematic emphases shift between the two versions. The study also applies feminist literary theory and postcolonial critique, drawing on thinkers such as Butler, Foucault, and Edward Said to explore themes of surveillance, gendered oppression, and religious extremism. The adaptation takes notable creative liberties—accelerating the pace of events, streamlining plotlines, and emphasizing spectacle over the novel's more meditative political commentary.

2.1. DYSTOPIAN SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF PURITY

Aryavarta, the fictional state in *Leila*, is built on rigid social hierarchies that dictate every citizen's role. The regime justifies oppression through an ideology of "purity," a concept that enforces racial and religious segregation. The state's obsession with purity manifests in forced labour camps like Vanita Mukti Kendra, where women who violate caste and religious boundaries are imprisoned. Here, they undergo brainwashing sessions to accept Aryavarta's doctrine. Such films "inform and constrain the imagination of political possibilities for responding to climate change" (Fiskio, 2012)

This purity-centered worldview extends to every aspect of life—basic resources like clean water and fresh air are distributed according to caste, and cities are partitioned into sealed sectors, creating a chillingly plausible apartheid system. Schoolchildren chant loyalty pledges like "Aryavarta is my mother," highlighting the regime's systemic indoctrination efforts. Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz says "US surrogate mothers as selfless and patriotic; and sensationalizes the conditions of surrogacy in India, positioning it as a solution to, rather than a symptom of, profound social and economic injustice under systems of global capital." (Natalie, 2013).

This world echoes real historical events, particularly Nazi Germany's racial purity laws and South Africa's apartheid policies. The categorization of individuals into groups such as *dwikarmi* and *panchkarmi* mirrors India's long-standing caste divisions. As Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics suggests, the state exerts control over bodies through discipline and surveillance, shaping who is considered a "pure" citizen and who is deemed expendable. Symbols of resistance and pluralism, such as portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, are hidden in fear, while images of Aryavarta's leader dominate public and private spaces—reflecting a complete ideological takeover.

2.2. MATERNAL RESISTANCE AND FEMINIST DYSTOPIAN DISCOURSE

Shalini's struggle to reunite with her daughter places *Leila* within the tradition of feminist dystopias. Much like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the series explores how patriarchal regimes control women's reproductive rights and identities. In Aryavarta, women are both defiled and dehumanized—expected to uphold religious purity while being stripped of autonomy. This duality is central to the early episodes, where women are exalted as cultural bearers but are simultaneously enslaved in "purity camps" like Vanita Mukti Kendra, enduring starvation, forced labour, and psychological manipulation.

Shalini's resistance is rooted in maternal determination. Her journey subverts the regime's expectation that women must conform to its doctrines. By escaping captivity, infiltrating labour camps, and challenging her oppressors, she disrupts Aryavarta's systems of control. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is relevant here—Shalini refuses to perform the submissive role assigned to her, instead reclaiming her agency through rebellion. Her resistance gains nuance through interactions with figures like Bhanu—a guard turned reluctant ally—who, like Shalini, must hide his defiance under a mask of obedience.

2.3. RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND SOCIAL ENGINEERING

The series starkly critiques religious authoritarianism. The government of Aryavarta controls its citizens through propaganda, strict caste divisions, and public spectacles, such as the holographic destruction of the Taj Mahal. The demolition of cultural symbols reflects the erasure of religious diversity and historical narratives, drawing parallels to

real-world nationalist movements that seek to rewrite history. A particularly striking scene features a silent audience watching this symbolic destruction unfold, met with patriotic chants—underscoring the psychological success of the regime’s indoctrination.

Children in Aryavarta are indoctrinated into loyalty through rituals, such as chanting "Aryavarta is my mother." The regime isolates mixed-heritage children like Leila, labelling them as threats to the state’s purity. These policies bear resemblance to fascist regimes of the past, which sought to mould young minds into unquestioning followers. The series hints at real-world political dynamics, with references to self-censorship by streaming platforms and avoidance of overtly controversial topics, reflecting the precarious position of art in authoritarian times.

Crucially, the dystopian society imagined in Leila is not an implausible fantasy but an extrapolation of present-day anxieties. In the words of Sagar Suri “As population grows and urbanisation rates increase at a fast pace, India like many countries around the world is facing a rapidly worsening water shortage situation” (Suri, 2018). For instance, as Aryavarta battles an environmental crisis, the series evokes real contemporary emergencies, such as the devastating water shortages in Chennai. This link between speculative fiction and real-world ecological collapse reinforces the urgency of its critique.

3. CONCLUSION

Leila offers a chilling vision of an authoritarian future that feels disturbingly plausible. Through its depiction of religious extremism, caste-based segregation, and gender oppression, the series serves as both a warning and a critique of real-world socio-political dynamics. Shalini’s defiance against Aryavarta’s totalitarian regime reinforces the power of resistance, particularly within feminist dystopian narratives. In the words of Sumanta Banerjee “It is a grotesque India, where memories of a mythical Utopia are being sought to be revived through actions which reproduce in reality its opposite - a monstrous Dystopia” (Banerjee, 2004)

Yet, the series' impact is paradoxical—it depicts horrifying injustices while catering to a privileged, insulated audience, which complicates its ability to effect meaningful reflection or change. As one wall graffiti in the series aptly asks: “Whose progress? Whose country?”—a question that Leila leaves hauntingly unresolved.

What ultimately distinguishes Leila is not only its dystopian imagination but the discomfort it generates. It is a series meant to disturb, unsettle, and provoke, not to entertain in conventional ways. Its claustrophobic atmosphere, driven by strong performances and symbolic imagery, leaves viewers with little solace. In an era of rising nationalism, environmental decay, and deepening social divides, Leila refuses to offer comfort—only confrontation.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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