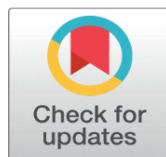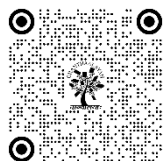# DYSTOPIA AND IDENTITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF LEILA AS SCIENCE FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Prayaag Akbar's Leila (2017) is a compelling addition to the canon of dystopian literature, weaving science fiction elements with socio-political critique. Set in a near-future India governed by an authoritarian regime, the novel explores themes of identity, surveillance, purity, and resistance. This paper critically examines Leila as a dystopian science fiction text, analyzing how Akbar uses speculative tropes to interrogate casteism, religious intolerance, and patriarchal control. The study positions Leila within the broader tradition of dystopian science fiction while emphasizing its unique engagement with Indian socio-cultural realities.

Keywords: Dystopia, Identity, Surveillance, Patriarchy, Resistance, Casteism, Science Fiction

1. INTRODUCTION

Leila presents a chilling vision of a divided society under the authoritarian rule of the Council, where segregation based on religion, caste, and class is strictly enforced. The protagonist, Shalini, navigates this oppressive world in search of her missing daughter. This section introduces the thematic core of the novel and highlights how it intersects dystopian fiction with a distinctively Indian context. The paper aims to explore how the novel uses conventions of science fiction and dystopia to comment on identity politics, systemic oppression, and the fragility of democratic institutions in a fragmented society. The broader aim is to demonstrate how Akbar's work contributes to the global discourse on dystopian literature while simultaneously engaging with India's historical and contemporary anxieties. It also addresses how the personal becomes political through Shalini's journey, showcasing the dystopia's effect on individual autonomy and familial bonds.

2. DYSTOPIA AND SCIENCE FICTION

Conceptual Framework Dystopian science fiction imagines alternative futures marked by oppression, dehumanization, and societal collapse. Tom Moylan identifies dystopias as "critical utopias" that extrapolate contemporary fears into futuristic settings, often to critique current ideologies. Margaret Atwood similarly emphasizes

that dystopias are not imaginative leaps but plausible extensions of existing trends. Akbar's *Leila* operates within this framework, drawing on elements of speculative fiction—such as environmental degradation, hyper-surveillance, and genetic purity—to paint a disturbing picture of a segregated society. The novel fuses these universal elements with distinctly Indian realities, such as caste hierarchies, communal divisions, and gendered violence, making it a culturally rooted dystopia that reflects both global and local crises. Furthermore, this framework allows us to examine *Leila* not only as a literary text but as a sociopolitical document that mirrors the anxieties of a transitioning democracy confronting the consequences of unchecked nationalism and religious orthodoxy.

3. SURVEILLANCE, CONTROL, AND THE STATE

The Council governs through an elaborate system of surveillance and control, reinforced by technology, militarization, and ideological indoctrination. Walls demarcate sectors based on communal identity, and biometric checkpoints monitor movement. The state's control extends to private life through purification camps and re-education centers. Shalini's journey is shaped by constant monitoring, illustrating the invasive power of the state. This section explores the mechanisms of authoritarian control in *Leila*, drawing parallels with Michel Foucault's concept of the panopticon and contemporary discourses on digital surveillance and biometric governance. The novel critiques how modern states can use technology to deepen divisions, stifle dissent, and normalize oppression under the guise of order and purity. Additionally, the omnipresence of digital tracking and the erasure of informal community life demonstrate how control permeates all aspects of identity, creating a society that is both isolated and indoctrinated. The Council's use of surveillance becomes a method of both visibility and erasure, where resistance is watched and punished, and conformity is rewarded.

4. IDENTITY, PURITY, AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

The Council's regime is obsessed with maintaining purity—both of bloodlines and ideology. Inter-faith and inter-caste marriages are criminalized, and children from such unions are separated from their parents. Shalini's fall from privilege to pariah reflects the brutal reconstitution of identity under authoritarian rule. The novel critiques the essentialization of identity and the weaponization of cultural and religious difference. This section examines how the rhetoric of purity becomes a tool for marginalization and violence. Drawing from sociological theories of identity construction, the analysis emphasizes how *Leila* reflects the persistent influence of caste, communalism, and nationalism in shaping personal and collective identities. Moreover, the novel highlights how identity is manipulated and enforced from above but experienced viscerally by individuals below, creating deep psychological trauma and internalized guilt, especially for women and children. This stratification is not only ideological but infrastructural—walls, checkpoints, and camps become physical manifestations of social divisions, embedding discrimination into the architecture of daily life.

5. GENDER AND PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION

Women in *Leila* are subject to rigid patriarchal control, with their roles confined to domesticity and reproduction. Shalini's transgression—marrying outside her religion—leads to her reclassification as impure and her subsequent confinement. The novel critiques how authoritarian regimes reinforce patriarchal norms, using women's bodies as symbols of national and communal honor. This section explores how gender operates as a site of control in the dystopian regime. It also highlights acts of female resistance, such as covert solidarity among women in purification camps and subversive maternal agency. Drawing from feminist theory, the analysis reveals how *Leila* situates women's oppression at the heart of dystopian experience while simultaneously celebrating their resilience. Moreover, the novel's treatment of reproductive politics—especially the Council's desire to control who can bear children and under what terms—evokes themes of biopolitics and reproductive justice. The systematic stripping of agency from women is paralleled by their gradual reclamation of voice, solidarity, and defiance. Shalini's search becomes a narrative of maternal resistance, echoing global dystopian heroines who challenge state power through love, memory, and survival.

6. RESISTANCE AND HOPE

Although *Leila* paints a grim picture, it also gestures toward resistance and the persistence of hope. Shalini's search for her daughter is emblematic of the human will to resist erasure and reclaim identity. Networks of dissent, hidden

alliances, and symbolic gestures of defiance suggest that authoritarian regimes cannot completely extinguish agency. This section analyzes the modes of resistance presented in the novel—from passive endurance to active subversion. Drawing on theorists like James C. Scott, who discusses the "weapons of the weak," the paper argues that *Leila* offers a nuanced vision of resistance that is both personal and political. Even amidst despair, the possibility of change and redemption remains alive. Beyond individual efforts, the novel presents a collective yearning for freedom, illustrated through underground movements and scattered yet persistent acts of rebellion. Shalini's memory of a more pluralistic past becomes itself an act of resistance, a refusal to accept the Council's enforced amnesia. In such a world, the preservation of memory, kinship, and truth becomes a radical act.

7. COMPARATIVE AND CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Leila can be fruitfully compared with other dystopian works like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and George Orwell's *1984*, particularly in its depiction of surveillance, ideological control, and gendered subjugation. However, Akbar's narrative is rooted in the Indian context, addressing specific social hierarchies like caste and religious intolerance. This section explores *Leila*'s contribution to the global genre of dystopia by emphasizing its local distinctiveness. It also situates the novel in contemporary Indian political discourse, reflecting anxieties over growing majoritarianism, communal polarization, and curtailments of civil liberties. The similarities between *Leila* and Atwood's Republic of Gilead are especially notable in terms of control over women's bodies, while Orwell's vision of totalitarianism echoes in the Council's omnipresent surveillance. Yet *Leila* is uniquely Indian in its evocation of Partition trauma, caste segregation, and the lingering shadow of colonial infrastructure. The novel becomes both a mirror and a cautionary tale for India's socio-political present and future.

8. CONCLUSION

Leila is a powerful dystopian science fiction novel that employs speculative storytelling to interrogate the social and political structures of contemporary India. Through its portrayal of surveillance, ideological purity, gendered control, and resistance, it offers a deeply unsettling vision of a future that echoes present concerns. Akbar blends the dystopian form with cultural specificity, using fiction as a means of political commentary. The novel critiques authoritarianism and the commodification of identity while asserting the enduring power of human agency. By drawing on both global dystopian tropes and indigenous socio-political realities, *Leila* exemplifies the potential of science fiction to function as both a mirror and a warning. It calls upon readers to recognize the fragility of democratic ideals and the importance of vigilance, empathy, and resistance in the face of rising totalitarianism. Ultimately, *Leila* serves not only as literature but as a wake-up call—a narrative that reaffirms the role of fiction in confronting harsh truths and preserving the human spirit amid forces of division and despair.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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