Climate Change, Urban Dystopia, and Unimagined Communities: Reading Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

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Abstract

In the recent years, anthropogenic climate change and its consequences have significantly shaped the literary imagination throughout the globe. Contemporary novelists have, often, dealt with the growing anxieties around environmental crisis through the literary mode of dystopia. In India also, a significant body of dystopian fictions with environmental concerns along with other issues is growing rapidly. Among these, Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017) introduces a ghastly vision of India depicting a multi-layered dystopian society amidst an ecological disaster. This article critically analyses Akbar's novel as an urban dystopia that emerges against "a climate-changed setting." It examines the novel's depiction of a utopian project of building a city based on purity of caste and community, and thus exposes the utopian vision's inherent dystopian tendencies. We also investigate the effect of climate change on vulnerable lives, based on Rob Nixon's idea of 'unimagined communities' and other relevant concepts.

Keywords: postcolonial dystopia, Indian dystopian fiction, climate change, urban dystopia, unimagined communities, environmental catastrophe

Introduction

In 2005, Lawrence Buell, while emphasizing the need for sophisticated "environmentality"[1] (literary and cultural texts' mode of serious engagement with environmental issues and concerns), predicted the most pressing question of twenty-first century would be "whether planetary life will remain viable for most of the earth's inhabitants without major changes in the way we live now."[2] What Buell recognized is a fast-growing anxiety around "the endangered state and uncertain fate of life on earth" in the Anthropocene.[3] Adam Trexler encapsulates these anxieties as follows.

> global temperatures are likely to rise between 3 and 5 degrees centigrade by 2100, leading to a number of predictable geophysical, biological, social, and economic outcomes. Droughts, tropical cyclones, heat waves, crop failures, forest diebacks and fires, floods,

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[1] Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 3.
[2] Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p. vi.
[3] Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p. vi.

> and erosion will become more extreme. Inadequate water supplies, malnutrition, diarrheal diseases, and infectious diseases will become more common. Flooding, drought, and water shortages will lead to mass migration and regional conflicts.[4]

The predicament of anthropogenic climate change and its consequences have, thus, shaped the literary imagination, and authors have deployed different strategies to represent the moments of recognition, from the years of "slow violence"[5] to our inability to realise the extent of climate change, "the great derangement."[6] Writers of climate fiction, in broader terms, adhere to two types of settings—"a recognisable, realist present (or very near future)" and "a futuristic climate-changed world" which "one could characterise as apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, or dystopian, depending on just how much this is premised on sudden disaster, its aftermath, or a prolonged state of decline."[7] Thus, very often, as critics have observed, the setting and the plot of human-induced climate fiction get juxtaposed "as one of a panoply of dystopian effects."[8] Drawing on Tom Moylan's formulation of "critical dystopia,"[9] Alexa Weik von Mossner terms the dystopian novel which represents ecological concerns as "critical eco-dystopia" which is "set in an uncertain future... imagines the harsh fates of humans who live in severely degraded environments and are forced to realize that their very existence is predicated on a set of ecological conditions that have been thrown out of balance."[10] Therefore, the contemporary novel's treatment of human-induced climate change and the dystopian imagination invites serious scholarly investigation.

In post-millennial Indian English literature, the genre of dystopian fiction is burgeoning rapidly. Contemporary Indian English writers are expressing their views and concerns on the current social, cultural, and political phenomena in India in their creative works via the narrative mode of dystopia. Mrinalini Chakravorty observes that "dystopia is the prevalent mode through which present-day novels from India grapple with the symptoms and conditions of 'millennial capitalism'."[11] E. Dawson Varughese remarks that "through different modes, stylistic preferences and forms, much of the post-2000 body of Indian speculative fiction engages with the dystopian mode. Some works are more obviously dystopian than others, but they all bring about a sense of

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[4] Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), p. 2.
[5] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 2.
[6] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2016), p. 12.
[7] Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra, "The Rise of the Climate Change Novel," in *Climate and Literature*, ed. Adeline Johns-Putra (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 234.
[8] Goodbody and Johns-Putra, "The Rise of Climate Change Novel," p. 233.
[9] Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), p. xv.
[10] Alexa Weik von Mossner, "The Moral Dilemma of Unsustainability: Eco-dystopian Fiction as Cultural Critique," in *Cultural Sustainability: Perspectives from Humanities and Social Sciences*, eds Torsten Meireis and Gabriele Rippl (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 194.
[11] Mrinalini Chakravorty, "Of Dystopias and Deliriums: The Millennial Novel in India," in *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, ed. Ulka Anjaria (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 267.

fear for the future, of what 'could be' and, indeed, of what might be (already)."[12] In this mode of creative expression, Prayaag Akbar is one of the most remarkable new voices, writers like Anil Menon, Samit Basu, Indra Sinha, Manjula Padmanabhan. Shortlisted for the Hindu Literary Prize in 2018, Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* is a prophetic vision of the world, that deals with the questions of identity, caste, religion and environment in a futuristic tale. It depicts a futuristic, multi-layered dystopian society under a totalitarian regime that seeks to create a utopian world based on 'purity' of caste and religion amid an ecological disaster.

Akbar's *Leila*, though, is essentially a political dystopia for it depicts a society under a totalitarian regime; it is also what Gregory Claeys calls an "environmental dystopia."[13] However, as Pramod K. Nayar argues, it is difficult to classify texts like *Leila* as being of one genre, for "any ecological disaster leads to political and economic chaos, alternate regimes and social violence."[14] It is true in the case of *Leila* as Akbar presents climate change and its effects as the primary force that drives the Repeaters, an extremist group with fanatic ideology, which forms the miniature of a totalitarian state. The depleting resources of nature—fresh air, the uncontaminated water, unpolluted land, and so on—become the bone of contention that fuels an aggressive political vendetta against the lower orders of society. The Council is the overshadowing presence of a totalitarian regime that spreads propaganda about purity of caste and community to deprive a certain section of society of their basic needs. The acute water crisis, the heatwaves, and the black grainy air are some of the features that characterise the demarcation of the city in *Leila*. In Akbar's dystopic vision, the ecological disaster, which is an extrapolation from the trends of the contemporary ecological crisis, brings catastrophe not only to nature, but also a dystopia for the majority of the population. As Nayar argues concerning the bleak visions of eco-dystopian novels:

> The world — both nature and culture — as we know it has become unsupportive of life. Here nature is no longer 'natural' due to human interventions, waste and rubbish pile high; people live in ghettos — also part of being the 'waste' of modern life — with a high degree of everyday violence and tyranny. The texts, in short, see the earth as dystopian.[15]

This article critically analyses Akbar's *Leila* as an urban dystopia emerging from a vision of "failed utopia," and the projection of vulnerable lives as "unimagined communities" amidst an ecological disaster, a concept propagated by Rob Nixon.[16]

[12] E. Dawson Varughese, "Post-Millennial Indian Dystopian Fiction: A Developing Canon of Precarity, (Im)purity and Ideas of India(nness)," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 44, no. 6 (2021), pp. 1041-1055.
[13] Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History, A Study of Modern Despotism, Its Antecedents, and Its Literary Diffractions* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 15.
[14] Pramod K. Nayar, *Ecoprecarity: Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 47.
[15] Nayar, *Ecoprecarity*, p. 47.
[16] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 150.

The Utopic Vision and the Wall

Critics have observed that "every successful conceptualization of utopia" has "as its Janus face a dystopia: one (wo)man's utopia is often another's dystopia, and vice versa."[17] From the time of its origin in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), the idea of utopia and dystopia have had an intimate relationship. The ideal state of Utopia reveals itself to be a colonial enterprise in which "peace and plenitude… seem to rest upon war, empire, and the ruthless suppression of others, or in other words, their dystopia."[18] The communal welfare state of Utopia characterized by its stability, security, and the standard of living, also exists at the expense of people's privacy, individuality, and freedom. It requires extraordinary regulation and surveillance of the people by the state as Claeys notes, "utopia appears to rely upon relentless transparency, the repression of variety, and the curtailment of privacy."[19] Similarly, the unnamed city in Akbar's *Leila* is rebuilt to create a utopia which turns out to be a social "nightmare."[20]

This unnamed city is made secure by constructing the sixty-foot-high wall around it. The wall represents the safety, security, and stability inside the city. Before the wall was constructed, we are informed, the society living in the city was ravished by the incidents of rampant crimes, kidnappings, and rapes. Thus, Mr Vijay, a senior official of The Council, justifies the significance of the wall for peace in the city as he comments, "We need the boundaries for peace. Businessmen kidnapped for ransom. Rapes. So many women raped all the time. Now such things only happen on the Outroads. Families can keep their women safe."[21] The wall is intertwined with the notion of one's safety, thus its presence in More's book as well as in other utopian texts is pivotal in forming the idea of utopia itself. The wall is also needed for the protection from the unwanted subjects, lawlessness, and the filth of the outside. In *Leila*, it becomes the defining boundary, a marker that separates the two opposite worlds—the Outroads and the City. Mr Vijay further emphasizes the importance of the wall, "the walls are important. We must have them. The whole city used to be like the Outroads. Lawless. Filthy. Dirt at your doorstep. People sitting on the roads. Into the gutters. The best people could not live like that anymore. We needed the walls."[22]

Fatima Vieira observes, "the most recognizable trait" of utopia is "its speculative discourse on a non-existent social organization which is better than the real society."[23] Therefore, utopia always exists in comparison to its predecessor, the earlier existing system. Hence, every utopia thrives on the idea of its present being better than how it used to be in the past. In *Leila*,

[17] Barnita Bagchi, *The Politics of the (Im)possible: Utopia and Dystopia Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Sage, 2012), pp. 2-3.
[18] Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, p. 16.
[19] Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, p. 17.
[20] Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 8.
[21] Prayaag Akbar, *Leila* (New Delhi: Simon & Schuster India, 2017), p. 174.
[22] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 173.
[23] Fatima Vieira, "The Concept of Utopia," in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 7.

Doctor Iyer from The Towers puts emphasis on this point in support of the Council's ideology of creating an ideal society by constructing the wall. He reiterates:

> Things were worse before the walls. People fought each other, burned each other. Not just about women. Over who will get government money. Who will get jobs. Fought over everything. We were like animals. With the walls we have order. We will finally have peace.[24]

In *Leila*, the chief of the Council, Mr Joshi, has this utopian zeal of reforming the existing society, and takes the responsibility for creating a society rooted in and characterized by a traditional ethos and the ancient Indian value-system. He, and his group of Repeaters, are driven by the idea of 'purity' of caste and community, which becomes the core ideology of this utopian city. They want to free themselves from the "ghastly visions" of "what-all people coming from everywhere. Where are they coming from? What they are eating?"[25] The need for regulation to keep order in the society is deemed necessary by The Council. As an ideologist of this utopian dream, Dr Iyer vows: "We will end these cycles of violence. Restore equilibrium. Order will be there, and purity."[26]

The version of Mr Joshi's utopian world insists on the flowering of an ancient Indian consciousness which is based on Indian social system of caste hierarchy, or a belief that everyone has his or her own place in society based upon his or her ancestry. The destabilization of this 'natural order' is considered as an act of violence and an attempt to create impurity in society. The cornerstone of this utopian society, like all other utopias, is the adherence to the idea of order which is implemented by Council Law. Mr Joshi's call for "making our land pure, ourselves pure, pure as the land of the ancients"[27] is firmly established by securing conformity as well as ostracizing the ones who "seem to crave for disorder" and who have "no respect for our oldest rules."[28] Here, the promise of "a place of order, discipline, clean and pure"[29] is influenced by and also embedded in seeing the past—the heritage, culture, and history—from a certain perspective. It takes the Vedic Age from ancient Indian history as role model, for it was supposedly in that age that purity prevailed in the society by strictly adhering to the Varna System:

> We must live according to our own great principles. Our history. Why must we live with compromise? Our purity has been perverted over the centuries. Centuries of rule by outsiders have led spiritual subjugation... We will once again find that purity, the purity that comes from order, from respect, from each of us remembering our communities. Our roles. What runs in our blood.[30]

[24] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 215.
[25] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 45.
[26] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 143.
[27] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 117.
[28] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 119.
[29] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 120.
[30] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 118.

Akbar observes that Indian society's obsession with lineal purity and demarcated living has echoes in the Europeans' understanding of racial purity.[31] However, progressive Western liberal ideas on this topic are vehemently opposed by Mr Joshi, whose utopian dream of a society based on purity of caste and community is foregrounded by that perception of caste which includes both *varna* (hierarchy based on division of labours) and *jati* (division of labourers into endogamous groups).[32] Akbar is more interested in portraying the obsession of caste-divisions based on *jati* than *varna*. The caste division based on the *varna* system has been fading and is determined today by economic and social positions. Thus, instead of clear separation of four castes, the division of high-castes (the top three groups) and low-castes (Shudras and the untouchables) has emerged. On the other hand, *jaat* or *jati* is "the caste identity," Akbar opines, "that every Indian is born with, the multifarious groupings of clans, tribes, communities and religions that comprise Indian society," and from which one cannot escape.[33] Mr Joshi's utopian city is split into different quarters based on this concept of *jati* or the caste identity.

The Dystopia and the Deviant

The utopian city in Akbar's novel *Leila*, just like More's *Utopia*, has some inherent dystopian elements in it. Therefore, it falls short of that "social dreaming"[34] which "imagines a good or significantly better society that provides a generally satisfactory and fulfilling life for most of its inhabitants."[35] The city not only has 'the Wall' around it, but also many more walls (named as Purity Walls) which split it into different quarters. The city is split following the strict social order of caste-hierarchy. Hence, there are not only Brahmin quarters or Kshatriya quarters and so on, but also many more divisions within the Brahmin quarters based on various lineages of Brahmins. The obsession with purity of caste and religion escalates so much that the city resembles a chain of ghettoes. To make sure that no transaction happens between any of the sectors in order to maintain purity, the city is under high surveillance by the Council. Then, there are the Repeaters, the thuggish group sponsored by the Council to keep watch over everything in the name of restoring order and peace in the city. They have the strange similarity with the Thought Police of Oceania in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), who create terror in the psyche of the people. The Repeaters are "a violent and oppressive force within the city's built environment" who act as the guardians of this segregated city to create "a dystopian sense of 'civility'."[36] As the

[31] Prayaag Akbar, "Caste Lives on, and on," *Aeon*, 20 April (2017). At: https://aeon.co/essays/how-india-deludes-itself-that-caste-discrimination-is-dead.
[32] B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2014), p. 233.
[33] Akbar, "Caste Lives on, and on".
[34] Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1994), pp. 1-37.
[35] Lyman Tower Sargent, '"The Problem of the 'Flawed Utopia': A Note on the Costs of Eutopia," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination,* eds Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 226.
[36] Varughese, "Post-Millennial Indian Dystopian Fiction," p. 1046.

Council takes over the city, "the Repeaters become instrumental in upholding the law of 'purity' by patrolling the split-city, keeping communities separate and pollutants away from what is deemed 'pure'."[37] The process of segregation based on the caste and religion reaches so far and deep into the human existence that even the dead body does not escape its share of hatred. Thus, at one point, we find that Riz's father's corpse is dug up from his graveyard for he was accused of not belonging to the same *biradaari,* the same *jaat.* Each rank of the people, while living as well as in death, in this city is determined and regulated with precision by the Council Law with only one goal in mind, "Purity for All."[38]

This horrific vision of a future-world by Akbar gives rise to the fear of the emergence of a totalitarian regime which Erica Gottilieb sees as the major component of the dystopian impulse:

> Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451,* Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* - all these works are political satires, projections of the fear that their writer's own society in the West... could be moving towards a type of totalitarian dictatorship already experienced as historical reality in the USSR and in Eastern and Central Europe.[39]

In this failed utopia then, Akbar envisions what happens to those who break the rule, the deviants who cross the line of purity. Akbar presents his protagonist Shalini, who engages herself in an inter-faith marriage, as a deviant in this hostile dystopian society. Through her journey from a housewife, who had a loving family and a rich household, to The Towers, in the Purity Camp as an 'impure' woman, Akbar prophesies a terrifying future, a dystopia that "places us directly in a dark and depressing reality."[40] To the Council, Shalini, a Hindu woman, by getting married to Riz, a Muslim, commits a blasphemous act and, therefore, gets her identity, position and secured life stripped away. Shalini and the other deviant women like her then must be 'purified' in the Purity Camp. The Towers is where "the Council keeps people who do not fit in, who broke their rules."[41] Conformity to the Council is the most important thing here. Like in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* conformity is achieved through Council Law as well as by conditioning lives through medication, pills and so on, which can be compared to the use of soma in Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Thus, Shalini exists inside the Tower as 'less human', with a diminished identity as she exclaims: "Papa was right. These walls diminish us. Make us something less than human."[42]

It becomes, then, the Council's responsibility to make these 'less humans' to walk the path of Purity. But the road on which Shalini walks every day in the Purity Camp itself resembles no less than a dystopia. Claeys reflects that the word 'dystopia' evokes disturbing images.[43] The

[37] Varughese, "Post-Millennial Indian Dystopian Fiction," p. 1046.
[38] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 36.
[39] Erica Gottilieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), pp. 7-8.
[40] Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash, "Introduction," *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 2.
[41]Akbar, *Leila*, p. 233.
[42] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 38.
[43] Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, p. 13.

images like "dense, growing pile of trash, festering peels, thick trickles of fluid, unidentifiable patches of white and yellow, bulging packets breached at the gut, oozing" or "soaked, blackened rag-like emanations, long as dupattas, fished out from blocked sewers by scavenger-caste men who dive in little chaddhis into manholes" portray a disturbingly familiar world as Shalini describes her surrounding in The Towers.[44] Thus, Akbar's vision of a world, in which pollution is in rise and environmental degradation is rampant, has the basis on the real-world happenings. David W. Sisk observes that the dystopias extrapolate from the present, when "it implies that this present results from utopian ideals."[45] In *Leila,* Akbar follows this strategy with an end in his mind. He sees the present as a 'failed utopia' and shatters all the flawed ideals, aspirations and optimisms flowering around it by exposing the vices beneath the surface. He extrapolates from the contemporary world and portrays an extreme version which turns out to be a dystopia. In this dystopian world, Akbar imagines 'the air so thick' that Shalini "could feel a sediment, something black and gritty settling" in her chest.[46] To the people living in the posh Brahmin quarters, this place seems to be 'another world' from the bygone days (implying the present in which the author lives), a non-existent world, as Riz imagines his friends would remark: "It's so filthy down here! I thought all this was over."[47]

In the highly-guarded walled city in *Leila,* the sense of individual security is an illusion for the deviants like Shalini and Riz. The people like Riz who dissent openly against the Council are taken to be the direct threats to the project of utopia and, therefore, must be eliminated to create terror in the rest of the population so that the spirit of free speech can be crushed down once and for all. On the other hand, Shalini is not even allowed to mourn the dead body of her husband as she conjectures that Riz's corpse "was likely burned and dumped in a gutter in the sand lands on the eastern edge of the city" along with hundreds of men "who spoke against the summer's madness."[48] The Repeaters, who are supposedly responsible for the protection of the people, become a threat to people like Shalini, who failed to protect her daughter from the Repeaters. A helpless mother like her at the end comes to the realization: "We didn't respect these walls, so they took her from me."[49] Her coming to this realization, or the rise of the conformity to the Council's ideals, is the exact goal of introducing the Purity Camp by the Council. Thus, at the end, Shalini no longer believes in ideas like, "what we put into the body is so personal, intrinsic to family, belief;" rather she now accepts that what happened to them, "it was inevitable...We invited trouble the way we lived... everything has an order, a place."[50] In Akbar's shattering vision, there is no individualism, but the terror of submission to one homogenous ideology of a totalitarian state.

[44] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 10.
[45] David W. Sisk, *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 6-7.
[46] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 6.
[47] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 11.
[48] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 23.
[49] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 5.
[50] Akbar, *Leila*, pp. 41, 256.

The Ecological Disaster and the Unimagined Communities

In the chartered city of *Leila*, two different worlds, one at the cost of another, exist. The Purity Wall demarcates these two contrasting worlds. The wall keeps the filth, the outcasts, and the slum-dwellers outside where they struggle to survive in the middle of an ecological disaster. This marginalized section of society living on the fringes is in constant struggle for their existence, materially as well as in the imagination of the nation-state. The existence of this section of people can easily be erased from the memory of the privileged classes living inside the wall in their respective privatopias. They are what Nixon calls the "unimagined communities"[51] of a nation-state. Nixon coined this term by alluding to Benedict Anderson's famous definition of a nation as "an imagined political community."[52] According to Anderson, "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."[53] Nixon suggests that the existence of certain communities can deliberately be unimagined based on the placement of the community, as in the case of building dams and other development projects. The project of utopia in Akbar's novel creates the Outroads as *unimaginable space* and the people of the Outroads as *unimagined communities*.

In *Leila*, the Outroads stands as the site of an ecological disaster. The images of the dumping grounds, the high piles of garbage, the rancid smells of waste or the "drums filled with thick red acid"[54] are mentioned throughout the novel. Shalini's journey in search of her daughter in the Outroads brings out the horrific conditions in which people live. She remarks: "The odour is unmistakable. It settles on your skin. Rub your thumb against the tips of your fingers and even with eyes closed you'll see black grains of the things that heavy this air."[55] The Outroads exists as the site of human-induced climate catastrophe as well as a place created by an "administered invisibility," what Nixon calls the effect of "spatial amnesia."[56] The community living outside the wall does not feature in the utopian dream of the city. Hence, the people of the Outroads "are physically unsettled and imaginatively removed, evacuated from place and time and thus uncoupled from the idea of both a national future and a national memory."[57]

It is the people living on the fringes who must bear the brunt of this ecological catastrophe. They are the unwanted people, impure and socially abject, as Nayar observes, "the production of waste in *Leila* is two-pronged: material waste and "wasted people."[58] Therefore, as the blazing heatwaves kindle the mountains of garbage beside the slums, the Council ensures cold air by

[51] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 150.
[52] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 6.
[53] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 6.
[54] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 233.
[55] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 211.
[56] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 151.
[57] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 151.
[58] Pramod K. Nayar, "Purity, Precarity and Power: Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*," in *Representations of Precarity in South Asian Literature in English*, ed. Om Prakash Dwivedi (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 141.

building the Skydome, the massive air conditioners for the wealthy inside the wall, but never cares what happens to the people on the Outroads. As Sapna from the East End Slum complains: "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? That's where the hot air is. Hotter than the sun."[59] Thus, in the landfills of the Outroads, the everlasting fire burns and engulfs the huts of the scavenger men and women, kills children, and leaves hundreds of families homeless. Akbar's shocking vision of a bleak future has a devastating basis on the real-world happenings and while predicting the future, he cannot depart from it. When Sapna from the slum expresses her protest against the discrimination they face, saying, "We share the tanker between all of us, didi. Each person gets two buckets. It's never enough. People are late to work because the lines are so long. They lose their jobs. Some women, the old ones, they get into fights."[60] Akbar is unmistakably referring to everyday plights of a certain section of people in this country.

In *Leila*, the concept of accessibility to resources is centered around one's *jati*, the caste-identity. The lower-caste people struggling for livelihood in the Outroads have no access to fresh air or plentiful water because their caste-identity is equated with the concept of inherent impurity. They, as the 'defiled beings', are the reason behind the construction of the Purity Walls. To keep the purity of the air inside the Walls, the Council must drive out the impure ones. "The emphasis on purity," Nayar notes, "results in the expulsion of wastes, whether these are effluents from the factories inside the sectors or unwanted people."[61] While the deviant women in the Purity Camp are treated as 'less human', the outcastes of this utopian city are not even 'human beings' to the people inside the wall. They are equated with the animals with whom they search for livelihood in the mountains of garbage and landfill. Sapna compares life in the Outroads with that of Shalini:

> The towers is where they put high-borns... the people that broke their rules... still they get big, big buildings. Toilet, fans, electricity, flush. Even when they break the rules, they're too good to be put out here with us. But us? Our crime is being born. We don't get anything. We don't deserve it.[62]

Hence, in the Outroads the concern is not about individual rights, freedom of choice or the sense of safety, but mere survival. The portrayal of people fighting for basic needs takes this novel from an imaginary tale of the future to present-day reality. Thus, Akbar makes a disturbing yet genuine parallel between the real world in which he inhabits and the imaginary world of the novel. The vision is of a ghastly dystopia, which is "a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society."[63]

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[59] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 236.
[60] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 113.
[61] Nayar, "Purity, Precarity and Power: Prayaag Akbar's Leila," p. 141.
[62] Akbar, *Leila*, p. 234.
[63] Gordin, Tilley and Prakash, "Introduction," *Utopia/Dystopia*, p. 1.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood points out that the specific function of dystopian novels "is to warn us of societies we do not wish to inhabit."[64] Erica Gottilieb, similarly, notes that the strategies of dystopian writers are "significantly the strategies of warning."[65] Dystopia provokes to reflect how "Zamiatin's One State, Huxley's World State, and Orwell's Oceania, each a hellscape from which the inhabitants can no longer return, so that we realize that the flaws of our own society may lead to for the next generations unless we try to eradicate these flaws today."[66] Similarly, Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*, in the narrative mode of dystopia, is a commentary on the contemporary real world and the things that are happening in it. It asks pertinent questions regarding man's exploitation of the environment and imagines the catastrophe that may occur if not checked in time. It also captures the extreme that could take place if caste-based discrimination and violence continue to exist as naturalized incidents. Further, it probes how far the dialogues of inter-faith/inter-caste marriage are sustainable in the context of the present Indian political scenario. In conclusion, it is a warning against the evils of fanatical religious fundamentalism and its ideology, as well as a caution against the corrupt, rotten institutions of contemporary society. Through its shocking vision, it captures our minds with a fear of 'what if this happens to me' to lead us to make the right choices today, here and now.

[64] Margaret Atwood, "The Heart Goes Last," *The Guardian*, 23 September (2015). At: www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/23/the-heart-goes-last-margaret-atwood-review- novel.
[65] Gottilieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, p. 4.
[66] Gottilieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, p. 4.