



A PANOPTIC PERSPECTIVE ON PRAYAAG AKBAR'S *LEILA*

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Submission Date: 06.03.2025

Acceptance Date: 24.03.2025

ABSTRACT

The present study aims to analyse Prayaag Akbar's novel *Leila* from the panoptic perspective. The concept of panopticism can be explored in various ways. The term "panopticism," derived from Michel Foucault's theories, refers to a social theory derived from the ideas of the Panopticon, a design for a prison by Jeremy Bentham that allows a single guard to observe all inmates without them being able to tell whether they are being watched. This idea has been extended to discuss how surveillance, control, and societal norms influence behaviour in broader contexts, including political and social structures.

In "*Leila*," the dystopian setting reflects a society engaged in constant surveillance and control, echoing the panoptic structures. The novel portrays a future world where citizens are monitored by a totalitarian regime, emphasizing the loss of privacy and individuality. The central character's search for her missing daughter within this oppressive environment raises questions of authority, power, and the impact of ubiquitous surveillance on personal relationships and freedoms.

Keywords: Panopticism, surveillance, control, societal norms, dystopian setting, totalitarian regime, oppressive environment.

The state in *Leila* exercises control over individuals through pervasive surveillance. Citizens live in fear of being watched, which modifies their behaviour and choices. This omnipresent oversight symbolizes the panoptic gaze, where power is internalized by the individuals due to the constant possibility of being observed.

The novel explores how societal norms enforced by the regime create a culture of conformity. Individuals strive to adhere to governmental expectations to avoid punishment or social ostracism. This reflects Foucault's notion of how power operates not just through force but through the shaping of desires and thoughts.

The protagonist's journey represents a resistance to the homogenization of identity imposed by the regime. Her search for her daughter signifies an assertion of personal agency within a panoptically governed society. This tension between individuality and the demands of a collective identity highlights the struggle against oppressive surveillance systems.

The effects of surveillance on the psyche can also be examined in the novel. Characters may experience paranoia, anxiety, and isolation, which are consequences of living under constant observation. This psychological dimension underscores Foucault's argument about the ways in which power influences not just actions but thoughts.

In the novel *Leila* by Prayaag Akbar, the dystopian vision of India is brought to life through a grim portrayal of a future society marked by extreme division and regulation. Set in the late 2040s, the story unfolds in an unnamed urban landscape that reflects modernity yet is deeply entrenched in ancient customs and authoritarian governance. The city's ruling Council implements a strict set of laws aimed at maintaining "order, peace, and safety," encapsulated in its motto, "Purity for All." This slogan underpins a society that prioritizes caste, religion, and community purity over basic human relations and freedoms.

The urban environment, with its fly roads, shopping malls, and technological advancements like Skydomes, contrasts starkly with the reality of social stratification that the inhabitants face. The community is bifurcated into sectors, or "purity walls," which serve as physical and symbolic barriers preventing inter-community interaction. This segregation reflects the novel's commentary on the contemporary issues of caste and class divisions within modern India. The privileged classes inhabit secure enclaves, removed from the struggles of the marginalized, who endure dire living conditions and systemic exploitation, exemplified by the East Slum, where scavengers confront environmental hazards and socio-economic exclusion.

The protagonist, Shalini, becomes a victim of this oppressive regime when her love for Riz leads her to defy the Council's laws, resulting in her punishment and separation from her daughter, Leila. This painful separation sparks a sixteen-year quest marked by loneliness and resilience, as Shalini navigates a society that punishes those who dare to transgress its rigid boundaries. The narrative poignantly explores themes of motherhood, loss, and the impact of societal norms on personal agency. The experience of Shalini highlights the psychological and emotional toll of living in a world where human connections are forbidden by the edicts of a starkly divided society.

Akbar's *Leila* thus stands as a cautionary tale that engages with issues of identity, belonging, and the perils of extremism in a society that prioritizes purity above all else. Through Shalini's journey, the novel critiques the consequences of an increasingly authoritarian state and raises profound questions about the nature of love, freedom, and what it means to be human in a world that seeks to impose artificial boundaries on our relationships. Ultimately, the narrative serves as a reflection on contemporary India and a warning of the potential futures that might arise from the persistent inequalities and divides that characterize the present.

In *Leila*, Prayaag Akbar employs a rich tapestry of themes that invites readers to engage deeply with the dystopian vision he paints of future India. The stark social realities articulated through Shalini's narrative not only highlight the individual's struggle against systemic oppression but also serve as a microcosm of broader societal issues such as intolerance, xenophobia, and the erosion of civil liberties.

At the center of the novel's governance is the Council, a shadowy authority embodying both bureaucratic control and moral policing. Operating from the metaphorical and literal heights of the Purity Pyramid, the Council represents a hierarchy where adherence to archaic values is maintained at all costs. The imposition of a social order based on purity signifies a regression into a time where caste and community dictated one's place in society, mirroring real-life concerns about rising fundamentalism and socio-political fragmentation in contemporary India. By establishing a rigid legal framework that penalizes any form of cross-community association, the Council instils a culture of fear and mistrust among the populace, effectively imprisoning them within their identities.

The narrative starkly underscores the emotional consequences of living in a world devoid of empathy and human connection. Shalini's love for Riz becomes a profound act of rebellion, a longing for a connection that transcends the oppressive boundaries imposed by society.

The ramifications of their union echo throughout the text, exploring the devastating impact of state-sanctioned barriers on personal relationships. The agonizing separation from her daughter Leila serves as a poignant focal point, illustrating motherhood's complexity in a dystopian landscape. Shalini's quest symbolizes the struggle against a society that seeks to dehumanize individuals by reducing them to mere representatives of their communities.

The novel does not shy away from addressing the dire class disparities inherent to this future society. The juxtaposition of the well-to-do living in comfort and security against the backdrop of the East Slum—where residents must contend with environmental degradation and governmental neglect—serves as a critique of persistent economic inequality. The garbage mountains in East Slum, with their landfill fires, become emblematic of societal decay, reflecting how marginalized communities are often left to bear the brunt of governmental apathy. This condition becomes even more pressing, as it is indicative of real-world issues concerning environmental justice in India, where slum dwellers frequently suffer the consequences of policies that favour urban development at the expense of vulnerable communities.

Memory plays a crucial role in the narrative, serving as a vehicle for both Shalini's journey and a means of preserving the past. As she traverses the unforgiving landscape of her society, her memories of a time before the Council's iron grip reflect an essential human yearning for a lost world where community and love triumphed over division. The trauma of separation and loss that Shalini endures creates a haunting backdrop, illustrating how personal histories intertwine with collective trauma in a society that has lost its way.

Despite the pervasive despair etched throughout the narrative, *Leila* also signals the possibility of hope and resistance. Shalini's unwavering determination to reunite with her daughter exemplifies the human spirit's resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity. The author weaves elements of rebellion within the text's fabric, suggesting that even in the most dystopian circumstances, the quest for love, connection, and justice remains a powerful motivator for change. As Shalini's story unfolds, it becomes increasingly evident that the fight against oppressive structures is not just an individual struggle but a collective endeavour that can unite communities against injustice.

Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* emerges as a multifaceted exploration of a dystopian future that serves as both a reflection and critique of contemporary Indian society.

By delving into themes of purity, community, class inequality, memory, and resilience, the novel raises essential questions about identity, the nature of freedom, and the complex tapestry of human relationships in the face of societal divisions. Ultimately, it challenges readers to reflect on their own society and the potential consequences of allowing intolerance and division to dictate the terms of coexistence. In doing so, *Leila* stands as a compelling and thought-provoking work that resonates with contemporary issues, making it a significant addition to the landscape of dystopian literature in India.

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