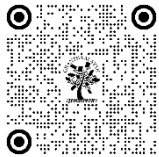


THE ENVIRONMENTAL COST OF DYSTOPIA: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF LEILA

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ABSTRACT

Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* constructs a dystopian imaginary where ecological degradation and authoritarian violence are deeply entwined. While critical discourse has primarily examined the novel through the lenses of caste, gender, and religious exclusion, this paper argues that the recurring motifs of toxic air, water scarcity, and sterilized landscapes reveal a material ecology of control through which authoritarian power is enacted. Shalini's longing for her daughter, coupled with her memories of a freer and greener past, emerges as an affective counter-discourse to the spatial and ecological violence of segregation walls and urban decay. Drawing on ecocritical theory, the analysis demonstrates how *Leila* dramatizes the inseparability of environmental collapse and social injustice, positioning ecological loss as both symptom and instrument of political domination. In doing so, the novel reveals the entanglement of environmental and socio-political crises, highlighting the necessity of ecocritical engagements with contemporary dystopian fiction in the context of climate emergency and authoritarianism.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Dystopian Fiction, Authoritarianism, Environmental Collapse, Social Injustice, Eco-Authoritarianism

1. INTRODUCTION

Leila, by Prayaag Akbar delves deeply into the persistent and troubling issues surrounding the caste system in India, an institution with a long, intricate history that continues to fuel violent and discriminatory practices. The novel takes the caste divisions to an extreme, depicting a dystopian society where physical walls are erected to keep different caste groups separated. Resources are hoarded and allocated exclusively for the upper castes, while the idea of "purity" in race and social standing is rigidly enforced. This tense, stratified society is seen through the eyes of Shalini, a mother who is devastated by the sudden and unexplained disappearance of her daughter, Leila. The tragedy occurs after Shalini is forcibly taken to a government-run reform camp. For years, she has secretly plotted to reunite with her daughter, living in constant fear and navigating the oppressive, conservative regime. At long last, Shalini's plans to escape and potentially find Leila are set into motion. The novel follows her perilous journey as she executes her plan while also reflecting on the horrific events that led to her current, desperate situation.

Leila is a powerful dystopian novel that envisions a fragmented future society marked by authoritarian rule, rigid segregation, and the collapse of communal harmony. Set in an unnamed Indian city, the narrative follows Shalini's desperate search for her missing daughter while navigating a world divided by towering walls, toxic hierarchies, and environmental decay. On the surface, *Leila* presents itself as a tale of political oppression and personal loss, but beneath this lies a sharp critique of how ecological destruction perpetuates dystopian orders.

This article argues that *Leila* critiques not only social and political oppression but also the environmental degradation that sustains such authoritarian systems. By exposing the intersections between ecological crisis and human oppression, Akbar's narrative pushes readers to confront the environmental costs of unchecked development, authoritarianism, and systemic segregation.

2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

The dystopian world of *Leila* emerges from anxieties deeply rooted in contemporary India's socio-political and ecological landscape. India's rapid urbanization has brought with it glaring contradictions: gleaming gated communities standing alongside sprawling slums, private access to clean resources contrasted with public scarcity, and developmental promises overshadowed by environmental collapse. This uneven growth has produced sharp ecological inequalities, where the affluent enjoy relative security in sanitized spaces while marginalized communities bear the brunt of pollution, waste, and climate vulnerabilities. Akbar's narrative transposes these realities into a future where authoritarian rule entrenches these disparities under the guise of order and purity.

Central to the novel is the symbolism of **walls and borders**, which serve as both physical and ecological boundaries. The towering walls that divide communities in *Leila* are not merely instruments of segregation based on caste, class, or religion; they also demarcate access to clean air, potable water, and unpolluted living spaces. These barriers highlight the intimate connection between social hierarchies and environmental privilege those inside enjoy relative safety and sanitation, while those outside are condemned to toxic environments and ecological precarity.

Environmental degradation forms the bleak backdrop of Akbar's dystopia. The **scarcity of clean water**, pervasive **air pollution**, and ineffective **waste management systems** mirror India's present ecological crises but are projected into a nightmarish extreme. Access to clean resources is carefully rationed, further weaponized by the ruling elite to control and discipline the masses. The novel thus suggests that dystopia is not only a matter of political authoritarianism but also of ecological apartheid, where the unequal distribution of environmental resources becomes a mechanism of domination

3. ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGERY IN LEILA

Scarcity and Pollution dominate the novel's setting. Polluted rivers, contaminated drinking water, and toxic air are more than incidental details; they serve as markers of systemic neglect and failed governance. The inability or unwillingness of authorities to maintain ecological health reinforces a world where survival itself becomes precarious, particularly for the marginalized. Scarcity of clean water is both a literal condition and a metaphor for the erosion of social trust and communal bonds. "Everyone avoids the streets as much as possible. It's just too filthy. Since the sectors collect their own civic taxes the common areas are untended, the piles of garbage spread further every day. The air feels black and gritty in your chest. Rubble from building the walls, the new homes, the flyroads lies in massive mounds all over the city." (Akbar 6)

The novel's portrayal of an **Urban Dystopia** captures the paradox of modern development. The ruling regime imposes an artificial order rigid laws, surveillance, segregation but beneath this facade lies profound environmental decay. Crumbling infrastructure, unchecked waste, and poisoned ecosystems expose the fragility of authoritarian visions of progress. The polished veneer of control masks the rot of systemic mismanagement.

The text also suggests a **Gendered Ecology**, where women bear disproportionate burdens of environmental scarcity. Shalini's struggles are not only maternal and personal but also ecological: she must navigate polluted streets, limited water access, and unsafe public spaces. This gendered dimension reflects how environmental crises often compound existing vulnerabilities, with marginalized women forced to carry the heaviest load of ecological injustice.

4. THE ENVIRONMENTAL COST OF AUTHORITARIANISM

In *Leila*, ecological destruction emerges not as an accidental consequence of dystopia but as an inevitable outcome of hierarchical societies. The rigid structures of caste, class, and authoritarian control create systems where the environment is exploited, degraded, and unevenly distributed to reinforce existing power imbalances. The novel demonstrates that environmental collapse does not affect all groups equally; rather, it is weaponized to sustain the privilege of the few while disciplining the many.

"It struck noon just as we made it to the traffic light at the end of the road. The dashboard display read high - fifties. Along the road, about halfway up the wall, a digital hoarding showed CGI images of a new residential complex inside the sector for Kamrupi Brahmins, completion date undetermined. Couples walking with prams along glittering emerald lawns. Indoor and outdoor pools. Private temple, fully modernised. Driving range simulators for golfers. Twenty - four - hour power backup, twenty - four - hour water. My eye was drawn to a movement underneath the hoarding, a glint of yellow blurred by the heat shimmers in the air". (Akbar 81)

This passage highlights how social divisions impact the way people experience the environment. The privileged can afford to craft and control their surroundings ensuring a stable and comfortable relationship with nature through technological means, power back-ups, and resource abundance. On the other hand, the underprivileged exist in a more volatile and unpredictable environment, one that is perhaps neglected or actively exploited by the system that serves the wealthy. The contrast between these two worlds illustrates how the environment itself becomes a marker of privilege, as those with wealth and status are able to shape the natural world according to their desires, while those who are marginalized are often at the mercy of an environment that is inhospitable or neglected. It also shows the environmental inequalities that exist between the privileged and the underprivileged, highlighting the way socio-economic systems shape and exploit both the natural and built environments.

The juxtaposition of the digital hoarding promoting an affluent lifestyle and the glint of yellow underneath the hoarding serves as a striking contrast between the lives of the privileged and the underprivileged. This moment in the text can be analyzed ecocritically to explore how the environment both physical and social is shaped by power dynamics, privilege, and inequality.

The environment itself becomes a tool of oppression. Access to clean water, breathable air, and safe living spaces is deliberately restricted, functioning as a form of social control. For those outside the walled enclaves, contaminated water, overcrowded spaces, and polluted surroundings are normalized, while the elite retreat into sanitized enclaves with guaranteed access to scarce resources. In this sense, ecological scarcity is not a shared human crisis but a manufactured inequality, sustaining authoritarian dominance by keeping populations dependent and divided.

Authoritarian governance in *Leila* also suppresses collective ecological responsibility. Instead of fostering shared stewardship of the environment, the regime centralizes control and directs resources to its chosen beneficiaries, thereby encouraging environmental privilege for the elite while displacing ecological burdens onto the marginalized. The dismantling of communal responsibility mirrors real-world failures where profit-driven development and private accumulation override environmental justice.

"We all saw the man was not quite a beggar, that he'd been driven mad by the violent heat. We left him sitting on the concrete divider of the road, his yellow kurta spread around him, head rocking, fingers gripping the back of his neck." (Akbar 83). The heat shimmers in the air imply a sense of disorientation and discomfort conditions that are prevalent for the underprivileged, who often face the harshest effects of environmental degradation and economic disparity. While the privileged are depicted as living in an air-conditioned, controlled environment, the underprivileged must contend with the heat and the physical realities of an environment that is not designed for them.

This dystopian vision resonates with contemporary gated communities and 'environmental apartheid'. Much like Akbar's fictional walls, urban India increasingly witnesses the privatization of basic ecological goods water, sanitation, green spaces while public infrastructures deteriorate. The rich buy their way into cleaner, safer environments, leaving the urban poor to survive amid waste and toxicity. By exaggerating these tendencies, *Leila* exposes how authoritarian systems thrive on ecological inequality and how dystopia is as much an environmental condition as it is a political one.

5. RESISTANCE AND HOPE

Although *Leila* presents a bleak vision of authoritarianism and ecological collapse, it also gestures however faintly, toward resistance and the possibility of renewal. Ecological resistance in the novel does not take the form of overt environmental activism but instead surfaces in moments of memory, longing, and personal resilience. These traces suggest that alternative ways of living, though suppressed, remain latent within dystopia.

One key motif is the **memory of a freer, greener past**. Shalini often recalls fragments of her earlier life, marked by open spaces, cleaner surroundings, and an atmosphere of relative freedom. These memories are not merely nostalgic but act as counterpoints to the present, reminding both protagonist and reader that the existing degraded state is neither

natural nor inevitable. The remembered environment thus becomes a site of quiet resistance, a reminder that human life need not be confined within walls and poisoned air.

Shalini's **longing for her daughter, Leila**, mirrors this ecological nostalgia. Her personal desire for reunion parallels a deeper yearning for balance, wholeness, and connection values destroyed by authoritarian and ecological collapse. The novel suggests that the search for Leila is also, symbolically, a search for a lost ecological harmony. In this sense, motherhood and ecology intersect: the protection of life, whether of a child or an environment, becomes an act of defiance against systems that thrive on fragmentation and destruction.

Moreover, small acts of solidarity between individuals who risk defying segregation, or who share scarce resources across boundaries hint at the persistence of alternative ecological ethics. These gestures may not overturn the authoritarian regime, but they plant the seeds of hope by asserting that compassion and collective care can survive even under dystopian conditions. Thus, while *Leila* emphasizes the crushing weight of authoritarian and ecological despair, it also affirms that memory, longing, and small-scale acts of care embody forms of resistance. Hope, in Akbar's dystopia, is not found in grand revolutions but in the quiet persistence of human and ecological bonds.

6. CONCLUSION

Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* illuminates the environmental costs of dystopia with striking clarity, revealing that authoritarian control is inseparable from ecological collapse. Through its portrayal of polluted environment, toxic air, and scarce water resources alongside rigid walls and social segregation, the novel demonstrates how ecological degradation sustains political oppression and shapes everyday life under authoritarianism. Environmental scarcity, in Akbar's vision, is not a neutral setting but a deliberate instrument of domination, reinforcing hierarchies of caste, class, and privilege. The manipulation of natural resources thus becomes a tool of discipline and exclusion, fragmenting communities and curtailing individual freedom. By entwining ecological crisis with authoritarian governance, *Leila* suggests that environmental collapse is both a consequence of unchecked political violence and a calculated strategy for its endurance.

The novel reminds us that **ecological degradation is never separate from social injustice** it sustains it. Those who are marginalized bear the brunt of polluted environments, while the privileged retreat into sanitized enclaves. In this way, *Leila* exposes how environmental inequality functions as a tool of authoritarian power, making dystopia not just a social or political condition but also an ecological one.

Such insights **emphasize** the urgency of ecocritical readings of dystopian literature in our present moment. As climate crisis deepens and authoritarian tendencies gain ground globally, works like *Leila* offer more than speculative fiction; they serve as cautionary mirrors, forcing us to confront the intertwined dangers of ecological neglect and political oppression. By situating *Leila* within ecocritical discourse, we recognize that to imagine or resist dystopia is also to reckon with the environmental costs of our current trajectories.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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