

Waste and Women: A Posthumanist Reading of Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

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Abstract:

This paper examines Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* through the lens of posthumanism, exploring themes of environmental collapse, systemic oppression, and the erosion of individuality in a dystopian future. The novel portrays *Aryavarta*, a rigidly segregated society where caste, class, and religious identity dictate one's fate. The study highlights how posthumanist thought critiques anthropocentrism by interrogating the boundaries between humans, technology, and the environment. The research delves into *Aryavarta*'s technological advancements, such as climate-controlled domes, which exacerbate social hierarchies while offering artificial solutions to environmental crises. It also explores how surveillance, forced assimilation, and bio-political control in Purity Camps reflect posthumanist concerns about dehumanization and ideological programming. Drawing from theorists such as N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti, this paper argues that *Leila* presents a cautionary narrative where oppressive systems reduce individuals to informational entities, stripping them of agency and autonomy. Ultimately, this analysis situates *Leila* within the broader discourse of posthumanism, emphasizing the urgent need to rethink societal, ecological, and technological entanglements in contemporary dystopian fiction.

Keywords: *Leila*, environment, dystopia, individuality, societal decay, posthumanism.

The genre of dystopian fiction has mostly served as a fertile ground for critical inquiries, particularly through its engagement with posthumanist theory, as Shaheen argues that “the posthuman narrative is central to dystopia as it explores the limits of human identity, agency, and technological determinism” (Shaheen et. al. 338). Posthumanism challenges traditional human-centered perspectives, emphasizing the interconnectedness of humans, technology, and the environment. As Bradford observed that in “literature so far, the prospect of a posthuman future is invariably aligned with notions of dystopia” (155). This perspective underscores how dystopian narratives often serve as cautionary tales, reflecting societal anxieties about technological and environmental changes. In India, it finds its roots in films, like Satyajit Ray's Bengali movie *Hirak*



Rajar Deshe (1960), which critiques authoritarian regime. Other influential works such as *Shwaas* (2004), *Peepli Live* (2010), and *Ghoul* (2018) also reflect dystopian themes centered on social issues, political unrest, and economic disparity. These narratives highlight the posthumanist concerns of marginalized communities and the degradation of natural systems. As Bezrukov stated,

Dystopia [...] generates a special type of identity as the consequence of a deviation from anthropocentric principles, crises of national and cultural worldviews, and manifestations of social shifting in a posthumanist world. (52)

Beyond cinema, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) interrogates the intersections of gender, environment, and politics within a dystopian framework. Such narratives reflect the "mutation of dystopian identity in a posthumanist world" (Bezrukov 57), where traditional notions of identity are challenged and redefined. By engaging with posthumanism, these works not only reimagine the future but also question the constructs that define humanity and its entanglement with larger systems. They serve as speculative spaces to critique societal collapse, technological overreach, and environmental crises, urging a re-evaluation of humanity's role within a broader ecological and technological context.

Dystopian fiction often presents a frightening vision of the near future, offering critical reflections on societal collapse and systemic failures. The genre finds resonance with posthumanist theory, which critiques anthropocentrism and interrogates the boundaries between humans, technology, and the environment. As Lars Schmeink argues, "fictional posthumans, represented through the lens of sf [Science Fiction], laid the basis for a fruitful and engaging discourse on posthumanism" (34). This perspective shifts focus from reliance on technological replacements, such as robots or AI, to broader questions of interconnectedness between human and non-human agents. A posthuman world does not always need robots, artificial intelligence (AI), zombies, or cyborgs replacing humans, as Susen argued, "[t]he posthuman world [...] is constructed through the ontological intertwinement of human and non-human forces, whose spatiotemporal situatedness in the universe obliges us to explore subjects 'across multiple axes'" (4). Instead, posthumanist narratives often mix real and fictional dangers, exposing the fragile relationship between humans and the systems they inhabit. As Bayne defined,

Posthumanism is broadly concerned with the questioning of human exceptionalism and the foundational role of 'humanity' as it has been constructed in modernity. Rejecting any clarity of distinction between 'nature' and 'culture', it works against dualism and the binaries we have tended to draw on to define what it means to be human. (1)

These stories act as cautionary tales, offering speculative insights into the potential consequences of ignoring societal, environmental, and technological challenges. In recent years, dystopian narratives have expanded their scope to reflect diverse social, political, and environmental crises. For instance, India emerges as a critical locus for exploring posthumanist themes, where rampant pollution, systemic caste-based marginalization, and an increasingly polarized political landscape converge. This convergence reflects not only the dystopian imagination but also posthumanist concerns about the fragility and permeability of socio-environmental systems.

Here, Akbar's *Leila* stands out as a response to India's worsening environmental crises, where unmanageable waste, water scarcity, and toxic air form the backdrop of his dystopian vision. The novel connects these ecological issues with the social realities of caste-based segregation, reflecting how marginalized communities disproportionately bear the brunt of environmental degradation. Akbar also critiques the authoritarian tendencies of modern governance, where purity politics and surveillance further exacerbate inequalities. By drawing on real-world challenges, *Leila* presents a powerful allegory for contemporary India, highlighting the dire consequences of unchecked environmental destruction and systemic oppression.

The story of Akbar's debut novel takes us to the year 2047, exactly 100 years after India's independence on 15th August 1947. However, instead of showing India in future, it takes us to a fictional authoritarian state called *Aryavarta*. In this state, people are divided based on their caste, religion, and financial status. Minorities are treated as second-class citizens. One day, the government decides that all the *Mishrit* (mixed-blood) children, born to parents from both Hindu and Muslim communities, must be taken by the state and "Hinduisse" (Dixit) them. Leila is one such child, who was taken away by the authorities. The systemic dehumanization of individuals whose parents are from different faiths, labelled as "*Mishrits*," exemplifies the intersectional nature of oppression within *Aryavarta's* rigid societal structure. The social stigma and enforced segregation imposed upon hybrid identities serve to uphold, rather than challenge, the liberal humanist ideal of a 'pure' subject. By marginalizing those who embody hybridity, society reinforces traditional notions of purity and normalcy, thereby maintaining established power structures. As noted in "Liberal Humanism, Social Science, and the Discursive Legacy of the Human in English Education," the liberal humanist tradition often emphasizes a universal, rational subject, which can marginalize those who do not fit this ideal (Zaino 4).

The state's punitive measures against mixed-faith families, including abduction and re-education, serve as technologies of power that not only suppress dissent but also prompt critical reflections on posthumanism. By targeting 'impure' bodies, *Aryavarta's* regime compels a re-evaluation of human identity, pushing towards a posthuman perspective that critiques dehumanization and advocates for diverse approaches to understanding the self beyond traditional binaries. During this process, her father, Rizwan Ahmad, is brutally killed by the Repeaters, and her mother, Shalini Pathak, is sent to a "Purity Camp" (Akbar 143). In the Camp prisoners are forced to perform "purity exercises" (151) and cruel rituals. The camp "made [the prisoners] impure with their impure rule" (119). *Leila* portrays a dystopian society filled with discrimination, human suffering, and brutal inhumanity. Through Shalini's painful journey to find her daughter, the story highlights the harsh realities of marginalisation and cruelty in *Aryavarta*.

Rahul Verma draws comparisons between *Leila* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, highlighting their shared depiction of patriarchal oppression. He notes that *Leila* explores "a draconian, patriarchal state suppressing women and restricting their reproductive rights, [...] also include climate change" (Verma).

Similar to *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Leila* doesn't show anything inhuman that hasn't been done before in the country. The narrative of *Leila* recalls a similar operation of investigative journalism, such as Neha Dixit's article "Operation Beti Uthao," which exposed the horrifying case of 31 tribal girls trafficked from Assam by the *Sangh Parivar* with the intention to "Hinduisse" them, reflecting a

disturbing trend of religious and cultural manipulation through abduction (Dixit). This connection highlights the parallels between the fictional abduction of Leila and mixed-blood children and real-life incidents documented in contemporary journalism.

Similar to many other fictional dystopian places, *Aryavarta* is also technologically advanced, as the state built a “dome,” along with the walls to control the environment. As Shalini observes, “[t]he dome [...] keep the air at such a lovely temperature, like it has just finished raining and the wind is blowing” (Akbar 245). But at the same time, it struggles with environmental problems like garbage, air pollution, and the water crisis. These issues might reflect present-day challenges faced by metropolitan cities in India. For example, the problem of air pollution may reflect the situation in Delhi, the water crisis could reflect Bangalore, and the issue of garbage resonates with almost every city in the country. They suggest that the theme of pollution in the novel aligns with the lived realities of urban India, making the work socially and environmentally relevant. From a posthumanist perspective, *Aryavarta*’s technological achievements expose the ethical dilemmas of anthropocentric systems that prioritize technological supremacy over ecological balance.

In Prayaag Akbar’s *Leila*, the concept of purification manifests in multiple forms, notably through climate control and the treatment of prisoners. The artificial climate within *Aryavarta*’s dome is maintained by “[p]urifiers working day and night” (Akbar 245), symbolizing technological purification aimed at creating an ideal environment for the privileged. Concurrently, the narrative portrays the ‘purification’ of individuals deemed impure by the regime, particularly prisoners subjected to harsh conditions in purification camps. For instance, Shalini, the protagonist, is coerced to demonstrate her loyalty by executing fellow prisoners, a testament to the regime’s brutal methods of enforcing conformity (Tripathi 156–57). These dual forms of purification—environmental and social—underscore the regime’s reliance on technology and coercion to maintain control. This approach aligns with critiques of posthumanism that highlight the dangers of technological dominance. As noted in discussions on technological and posthuman zones, when technologies are perceived as not serving human interests or as threatening to control humans, they are often interpreted as dystopian forces (Rutsky). Furthermore, the narrative’s depiction of climate control through technology challenges the notion that posthumanism moves away from technological reliance (Johnson 85). In *Leila*, technology is not only central but also serves as a tool of oppression, exacerbating social hierarchies and ecological crises. This reflects concerns within posthumanist discourse about the uncritical embrace of technology and its potential to perpetuate existing power structures (85). In summary, *Leila* illustrates how technological advancements, under the guise of purification, can entrench social inequalities and environmental degradation, offering a critical perspective on the complex interplay between humans, technology, and the environment (85).

Aryavarta’s future depicts a society where the erasure of social and physical boundaries paradoxically intensifies oppression. Posthumanist thought reinforces this critique by emphasizing how dystopian systems replicate real-world patterns of domination, including patriarchal control over bodies and the exploitation of natural resources. Through Shalini’s struggle, *Leila* provides a nuanced exploration of these dynamics, prompting readers to reflect on the ethical dilemmas of posthumanist futures and their entanglement with ecological crises.

Of Surviving in A Purity Camp: The Inhuman Treatments Gave Birth to A Posthuman

Leila begins with Shalini, an upper-caste Hindu, who is accused of marrying a Muslim man, Riz. This so called ‘crime’ leads to Riz’s brutal killing by authorities, vividly captured as “[f]our men are carrying Riz. He stares at me, apology in dull eyes” (Akbar 136), as they take him away. Shalini is then forcibly taken to a Purity Camp, where the systemic dehumanisation begins. Braidotti highlights that “the posthuman predicament has more than its fair share of inhuman[e] moments” (16), similarly Hayles also emphasizes that the dissolution of boundaries between the embodied and disembodied, where human consciousness and informational patterns become interchangeable (Hayles 19). This theoretical lens is crucial in understanding how the Purity Camp operates, where bodies are not only controlled but chemically altered to conform to a state-mandated identity. This transformation reflects Hayles’s argument that “In the posthuman [society], there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism” (3).

Leila explores how the state employs bio-political and technological interventions to regulate, control, and erase the autonomy of prisoners in the Purity Camp. Braidotti contextualizes this within the framework of advanced capitalism and bio-genetic technologies, arguing that “the genetic code of living matter – ‘Life itself’ (Rose, 2007) – is the main capital” (Braidotti 16). In *Aryavarta*, prisoners are subjected to systematic erasure not through digital surveillance or cybernetic implants but through bio-chemical manipulation, environmental deprivation, and forced labour. The state’s technological dominance is evident in its use of chemically induced submission—prisoners are forced to take pills that alter their cognition. Shalini is forcibly introduced to the Purity Camp’s ideological and physical control, which strips her of autonomy. She reflects, “It is not something from me but something of me that has been taken. The part that could feel warmth, happiness, desire”. (Akbar 137) This incident shows how the state erases individual identity and humanity in an authoritarian dystopian society, aligns with the theory of posthumanism. In Shalini’s world, the authoritarian regime redefines people not as individual beings but as objects, who are meant to be controlled. Building upon this assertion of Braidotti, *Leila* illustrates how systemic dehumanization under authoritarian regimes can lead to the emergence of posthuman subjects. In the Purity Camp, prisoners are subjected to chemical manipulation, forced labour, and the erasure of individuality, stripping them of traditional markers of personhood and autonomy.

This aligns with Braidotti’s critique of necro-political economies, where life is commodified and controlled (Herbrechter 5). The regime’s reduction of individuals to mere biological entities collapses the boundary between human and non-human, reinforcing the posthuman condition (7). Shalini’s transformation within the Purity Camp exemplifies this shift, as her chemically altered state blurs the line between human agency and state-imposed control. Braidotti emphasizes the need for new frameworks to analyze such violent practices, underscoring the urgency to rethink human identity and agency within dystopian futures like *Aryavarta*. (9)

The purification rituals in *Aryavarta* are not merely religious; they are structured as a process of dehumanization. This logic manifests in *Leila* through forced physical labour, exposure to extreme environmental conditions, ritualized humiliation, and starvation. Beyond eating the leftovers of Brahmins, prisoners are subjected to forced manual labour, as seen in Shalini’s daily schedule:

Meals, group sessions with Iyer, Purity exercises, gardening duty, clean-up. I learnt to properly sweep a floor with a jhadoo, down on my haunches. Learnt not to be revolted by the stiff black rag they gave to mop the floor. (Akbar 151)

This mechanical repetition of tasks recalls the ideological conditioning of necropolitical states, where life itself is instrumentalized as a means of enforcing submission. And in *Leila*, purification rituals embody this cruelty by reducing prisoners to programmable, expendable bodies. This was an imposed servitude, where Shalini was “perform[ing] peon duties, take papers around, dust the desks, keep the appliances working. Tea for the senior officers. Open the triple-decker tiffin boxes, serve lunch, wash the plates and glasses and receptacles” (Akbar 24). This evokes a feeling of modern day slavery. This dehumanisation not only diminishes the individual’s identity but represents the embodiment of a posthuman state, where people are treated as tools within the larger machinery of *Aryavarta*’s oppressive regime. *Leila* invites a critical dialogue on purification, demonstrating how bodily manipulation, enforced rituals, and ideological conditioning contribute to the construction of the posthuman subject.

Shalini’s experience in the Purity Camp, where behavior and identities are regimented and controlled, echoes posthumanist concerns about biopower and the transformation of human beings into subjects of a larger machine-like societal order (Mandal). Which caused her mental health, and she had to start taking pills for that. By forcing Shalini and other prisoners to consume pills that alter their cognitive functions, *Aryavarta* effectively reduces them to informational entities—bodies whose behaviours, memories, and emotions are rewritten through biochemical intervention. The Purity Camp imposes strict behavioural norms and seeks to transform individuals, aligning with themes of bio-power and the transformation of identity in a controlled environment. As Akbar wrote:

I was introduced to the pills at Purity Camp. When I first got there I felt in pieces, a solitary step from the brink, ensnared by the wide, open fields with the lonely gabled sheds [...] The pills helped. There were other ways to cope. Many picked up odd little habits, anxious for routine [...] That’s what all of us were like at Camp. Doing desperate little things so we could remember what was normal. (21)

The pills given to Shalini at the Purity Camp serve as a potent symbol of the bio-political control exerted over individuals, directly impacting her mental state and eroding her sense of humanity. Shalini describes the pills represents bio-political control, where the state manipulates cognitive functions to enforce ideological submission, as Shalini observes: “I was introduced to the pills at Purity Camp. When I first got there I felt in pieces [...] The pills helped” (Akbar 21). However, this artificial regulation of her emotions blurs the line between her authentic self and the chemically induced calm, raising questions about her autonomy. She describes, “[t]he scything ache between my shoulders wanes, memories billow and contract, now everywhere there’s a slow, warm tingle” (19), indicating that her perception of time, pain, and memory has been artificially restructured. The pills in *Leila* do not remove memory entirely but distort its structure. This represents Shalini’s chemically controlled mind as a site of posthuman transformation, where memory, rather than being erased, is reformatted in accordance with state control.

The girls called her Lady Police. [...] Lady Police did not walk; she’d stride about the place. Every morning and evening, at about the same time, she would strike out from the dormitories,

past the playing fields, towards the scant groves that stood on the eastern edge of Camp. There was, always, something forward, something purposeful in her gait. (Akbar 22)

By saying this, Shalini highlights the moral policing at the Purity Camp by the Lady Police exemplifies a system where societal norms are enforced with such harsh indifference that individuality and humanity are erased. In *Leila*, the Lady Police's treatment of women reflects this dehumanisation: "That's what all of us were like at Camp. Doing desperate little things so we could remember what was normal" (21). The women at the Camp are demonstrates a systematic erasure of autonomy, where their bodies and identities are regulated by a bio-political system that prioritizes ideological conformity over human connection. This aligns with Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics, the "contemporary forms of subjugating life to the power of death (necropolitics) are deeply reconfiguring the relations between resistance, sacrifice, and terror" (Mbembe 92). The women in the camp are reduced to mere subjects of re-education, stripped of their agency, and forced into repetitive cycles of labour, surveillance, and psychological conditioning. As Hayles wrote,

The liberal humanist subject, constructed as a rational mind, possessed a body but was not usually represented as being a body. This erasure of embodiment is a feature common to both the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman. (5).

In *Leila*, Shalini vividly recounts the physical abuse she faced in the Camp, an environment designed to strip individuals of their dignity and humanity. In *Aryavarta*, prisoners are reduced to labouring bodies that function like machines, treated as disposable like experimental animals, and forced to merge with an environment that punishes them. Shalini's suffering encapsulates this posthuman condition: "Through the night the Repeaters had podded us with their sticks, finding a fleshy thigh, a side of stomach, thrusting in the splintered end" (Akbar 140). This brutal enforcement of pain aligns with Braidotti's observation that necropolitical states dismantle bodily autonomy, turning individuals into expendable biological entities. Shalini's chemically induced submission mirrors this process—her emotions, memories, and bodily autonomy are overridden by external control. Thus, the posthuman in *Leila* is not just a condition of technological transformation but a condition of forced adaptation under systemic oppression.

Braidotti discusses how global capitalism transforms both humans and non-humans into instruments of production, stating that the ecosystem itself is turned "into a planetary apparatus of production" (Braidotti 7). In *Leila*, *Aryavarta* operates under a similar logic, where prisoners' bodies become functional extensions of state ideology. By integrating forced labour, chemical submission, and environmental exposure into its purification process, the state reduces prisoners to mere components in its hierarchical system of power. Braidotti highlights how capitalism and necro-politics merge, ensuring "the material *destruction* of human bodies and populations" (9), which is evident in *Leila* as the impure are not just punished but systematically broken down into controllable entities.

Conclusion

Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* is a nuanced question of humanity's destructive relationship with the nature and its own societal structures. Through its exploration of environmental collapse, surveillance, and the marginalization of women, the novel pictured a harrowing picture of a dystopian future. As Wolfe observes, posthumanism "forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes

of human experience [...] and their [...] ethical implications" (xxv-xxvi). *Aryavarta's* obsession with purity, its rigid caste-based hierarchies, and the omnipresent Sector Walls serve as physical and ideological barriers that dehumanize and fragment identities. These systems represents the themes of Hayles's "informational patterns" (Hayles 61) that reduce humanity to data, stripping away individuality.

However, *Leila* also offers glimpses of resistance and renewal. The reclamation of waste by scavengers and Shalini's relentless journey to find her daughter highlight resilience in the face of systemic oppression. Braidotti's concept of a "relational ethics" (111) underscores this potential for interconnectedness, even amidst societal decay. Ultimately, *Leila* challenges readers to envision a posthuman future where decay and regeneration coexist, urging a rethinking of ecological and societal ethics in an increasingly fragmented world.

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