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Indian Caste System as a Living Dystopia: A Case Study of Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

Arathi S

MA Scholar

Department of English and Foreign Languages
Central University of Haryana, Mahendragarh

Abstract: The caste system poses a threat to humanity. A large section of society enjoys the privilege offered by the government, while some people are exploited in the name of caste. Therefore, for such people caste can be dystopic. In this paper, the researcher attempts to delve into the aspect of caste in Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* by analysing the segregation that the society undergoes in the novel. This shall be done along with a parallel comparison with other dystopian novels like *Brave New World, 1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. It will also focus on the issues prevalent in India such as atrocities based on caste and honor killings.

Index Terms - dystopia, dystopian fiction, caste system, caste discrimination

I. INTRODUCTION

Dystopia is world gone wrong. When man dreamt of an ideal land, precisely known as utopia, he never imagined things to go upside down. If utopia is a perfect and ideal land, dystopia is its opposite. It is defined by chaos, suffering, and destruction. The word 'dystopia' is derived from the Greek *dus* and *topos* which means a bad, faulty or an unfavourable place. The political parties and advancement in science and technology gave birth to barbarism, tyranny, and wars which bound humans in its clutches.

The concept of 'utopia' became popular with the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1551, wherein, the world was considered as an ideal place. However, in the nineteenth century, dystopian genre gained popularity and the notion of a paradise-like land was frowned upon. People were keener on learning the pros and cons of the utopian world. A dystopian setting, thus, might stand as evidence that a paradise-like society can be organised and have its own set of defects. According to the Cambridge dictionary, "dystopia is a very bad or unfair society in which there is a lot of suffering, especially an imaginary society in the future, after something terrible has happened" ("Dystopia").

Utopia and dystopia are imaginary lands wherein the former is a true paradise, and the latter is a land where things have gone wrong. Both are governed by systematic rules. The difference between them lies in the fact that a literary work has put forth either a negative or a positive conclusion to the utopian fantasy. As the years passed, the portrayal of the ideal land or paradise-like society began to touch upon its negative aspects. With the advent of authoritarian regimes, namely the October Revolution of 1917 that took place in Russia, Nazism in Germany, and the World War II, people were compelled to change the notions of an ideal and just world. Wars were so brutal that they spread its horror across the world that people became more doubtful if the

world would ever be a place worth living peacefully. The technological advancement witnessed the making of explosives and other deadly weapons which established a sense of fear and disillusionment in the world. Maria Varsam in her book *Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and its Others*, states, "...whereas utopia is a manifestation of desire and hope for a better world and an 'unalienated order' that upsets the status quo...dystopia delineates the crushing of hope and the displacement of desire for the purpose of upholding that status quo" (209).

The first dystopian novels that gained prominence in the twentieth century was Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984* which portray a world ahead in time and the one with its fascist approach shackle its people in its clutches. One can also observe the technological advancement which turns humans into mere robots. As people became more intrigued by this genre, writers from across the world started exploring it. Not only the British writers but Canadian writers like HG Wells and Margaret Atwood became prominent. Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a feminist dystopian fiction based on a place where women are made sex slaves in order to fulfil the needs of infertile families.

Different writers perceive the notion of dystopia in different ways. Some dwell on the socio-political scenario of society and seek to depict its possible bleak future. Thomas Moylan in his work, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, states the reason to write dystopian fiction:

Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the errors of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination. (XI)

II. Dystopia and caste

The most notable feature in dystopian fiction is the segregation of society. People are divided into sections based on their utility, power, and wealth. Right from Huxley's *Brave New World* to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, people are exploited for the same. Prayag Akbar's *Leila* has created a huge impact on the Indian readers as it depicts a city which is divided by enormous walls. The citizens belong to different sectors and are not permitted to mix with others. India, a country that keeps its motto of unity in diversity intact sees a contradictory situation in the novel. Here, the notion of purity is followed as against unity in diversity. As the society is divided into different sectors, people are not permitted to move from one sector to another, nor are they supposed to practise inter-caste and inter-religion marriages. This might have severe consequences as the 'repeaters' who are assigned to maintain the purity of the society either murder the family members for breaking the laws or separate them from their families. In order to maintain an organised society and strengthen the political system, the society in any dystopian fiction undergoes segregation. *Brave New World* being set in a futuristic society named the World State, follows a rigid caste system which precisely decides what the citizens can do and who they can interact with. The society is divided into sections named alpha, beta, gamma, delta, and epsilon. They are divided on the basis of their knowledge and efficiency, wherein the epsilons are considered the least efficient and are almost the outcasts.

Similar is the case in Orwell's *1984* in which the state of Oceania is divided into three parts namely the Inner party, the Outer party, and the proletariats. Here, the inner party is the absolute ruling class, the outer party the educated lot and the proletariats are the working class who are considered the outcasts. A society that has divisions certainly has conflict and rage. Even though in the novel, the first two parties do not necessarily see the distinctions, Orwell has pointed them out.

The much-celebrated novel by Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays Gilead, a state where the citizens as well as their slaves are segregated based on their occupation for which they are assigned different colours. The handmaids wear red coloured robes which symbolise fertility as they are supposed to produce babies for the commanders to whom they are assigned. The wives of the powerful commanders wear blue coloured dress which symbolises infertility. The marthas who look after all the household chores wear ash-grey coloured dress and the aunts, being the tutors of handmaids, wear brown coloured dress. The government (the men) of Gilead claim to have created the state to maintain order and equality in the society. Their notion is to give more freedom to women than they have taken away:

We've given them more than we have taken away, said the Commander. Think of the trouble they had before...don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin and or pumped their breasts with silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery. (231)

Segmentation forms the basis of Akbar's *Leila*, wherein people are divided into different sectors for maintaining the 'purity' of the country. Here too, people from the higher caste enjoy a luxurious life, while those from the lower ones remain poor and suffer. India is a country that holds intact its rituals and tradition, and the same is followed in the futuristic setting of the novel. People are considered pure only when they live according to the rules and follow their own community's customs. Those who do not follow them are said to be impure and consequently thrown out to suffer. The obsession with division in the society to maintain order and purity is evident when a politician named Joshi addresses to the public:

We must live according to our own great principles...Our purity has been perverted over the centuries. Centuries of rule by outsiders have led to spiritual subjugation. But the atrocities of this age can be combated. They are nothing but a passing phase. Our cultural roots are too firm, struck deeply into the spirit of immortality. We will once again find that purity that comes from order, from respect, from each of us remembering the communities. Our roles. What runs in our blood. (Akbar 118)

In the novel, the society is fragmented into sectors such as the Patel sector, Arora sector, Ashraf sector and so forth. Each of these sectors have their own educational institutions where they teach the respective rules and customs. The ones which seek the path of radicalism are abolished by the rulers for inculcating "no values, no respect for our elders, no respect for our past" (91). The sectors are divided by huge walls to prevent the mixing up of people and to keep diseases from the slums at bay. In the haste to maintain the society's apparent 'purity', the walls merely lead to creating rage amongst the people, "...the walls diminish us. Make us something less than human" (38). It is not an easy task to enter the sectors as "each sector had its own caste insignia, distinctive edges, signatures, backgrounds" (61). If any of the citizens tries to break the stereotype, they are separated from their families and sent to 'purity camps', a place where they are taught to maintain the tradition and customs of the country and then sent to the 'towers' where they are supposed to do all the menial works.

The peculiarity of *Leila*, despite being set in a futuristic Indian society, is that it clearly echoes the problems of contemporary times. The democratic rule in a country comes into question when people fail to obey the set rules and laws. Man created social hierarchy, precisely known as the caste system or *varna* system. This system of stratification is established to create an ordered society as is stated in *Manusmriti*, "...for the sake of the prosperity of the worlds He caused the Brahmana, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya and the Sudra to proceed from his mouth, his arms, his thighs, and his feet," (1-31). However, it becomes problematic when different groups overlap and restrict one another's progress. Moreover, it has become one of the primary reasons of exploitation and discrimination. In the run to create an ideal or utopic land, the seeds of casteism turned the society dystopic for some sections. Even today, when people are much ahead in time and technology, knowledge, and power, this hierarchy never fails to manifest in numerous ways. Atrocities in the name of caste are widely prevalent in the country even in the present time. B. R. Ambedkar, in his book, *Annihilation of Caste* states, "Caste system is a negative thing. It merely prohibits persons belonging to different castes from intermarrying. It is not a positive method of selecting which two among a given caste should marry" (Ambedkar 49). Akbar's novel depicts the repercussions that the protagonist and many others have had to face for breaking the caste stigma.

Getting married or even falling in love with a person from different caste was considered a sin or shame in the society. "It is a litany, a litany of our shame. There was a Muslim girl who'd run away with a Yadav boy. Elders from both communities sent gangs after them. A Yadav girl who'd run away with a Dalit boy. They made her watch as they force-fed him poison" (155).

Honor killings have been widely prevalent in India. So far, the country has witnessed some gruesome cases amongst which the murder of a couple from Karora village tops the list. The couple was force-fed pesticide and killed for marrying in the same *gotra* (clan). Likewise, a Dalit man from Tamil Nadu was stabbed to death for marrying an upper-caste woman, who was apparently from a politically powerful Thevar community of the state. The couple was followed by the woman's cousins and eventually, the man was attacked by sickles and matchets. Such killings are prevalent in rural parts of the country even to this day. However, they are often neglected or fail to come under the limelight.

The repercussions that one must face on breaking the rules of the state is horrendous. In the novel, the Council is stuck on to the old values so gravely that anyone who attempts to raise their voice against the established system ends up in purity camps until they acknowledge the importance of the age-old values and practices. Even children who are considered 'mixed' are taken away by the Council and put in homes, called the Council schools. "Hundreds of kids, no visitors. Where they learn only the Council's rules" (195).

The protagonist, Shalini, is dragged into the Council and consequently to the Towers for breaking the stereotype. Her life is fragmented due to the sole reason of non-conformity to the rules of the Council as she marries her Muslim lover. The repeaters beat her husband to death and snatch away her daughter about whom she has no information. Having taken a liberalist stance, Shalini and her husband fail to lead a peaceful life.

As opposed to a probability that might occur in near future, *Leila* portrays the current issues pertaining to caste and division. Likewise, it points out to the political system that makes such rigid divisions and related rules which deprives the individuals of their freedom and equality. The strict adherence to any rule or system is equally dangerous to the progress of a country that keeps its notions of tradition and egalitarianism high.

III. Conclusion

Even though dystopian fiction is becoming an eye-opener for readers, the issues pertaining to segmentation or caste division in this genre is rarely explored. At a time when exploitation based on caste difference is rising every day, it becomes a necessity to address the issues through such works.

Dystopia being the vision of a bleak future can sometimes caution the readers to the present times too. *Leila* can be called a modern day Indian dystopian fiction with a unique theme of holding on to the age-old tradition of the country which consequently results in the clash of tradition and modernity as it divides the citizens according to their caste. As the segregation persists, it becomes important to popularise such works and get an insight into the deeper and darker aspects of the political and traditional system of the country that stands as a warning about the consequences of rising religious, caste-based, and political extremity.

IV. REFERENCES

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