



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol 11 No.2 June, 2026

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.11/No.2 June, 2026

Negotiating the Human in Dystopia: Interpellation and Solidarities at the Margins in Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

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Received- 30/05/2026, Revised-07/06/2026, Accepted-09/07/2026, Published-31/07/2026

Abstract: *Leila* (2017), Prayaag Akbar's dystopic novel can be viewed as a text where the state and nation have a faceoff. The power of the state machinery, which operates vertically, is opposed by the resistance mounted by individuals and horizontal solidarities forged between citizens. Akbar moves away from the ahistorical superstates of traditional western speculative fiction, by locating his novel in a hyper-local imaginary city in India. This is achieved primarily via imposition of sectarian walls and institutionalised "purity." The exploration is primarily elucidated through the functioning of the city's walls as Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses, indicating that they act not merely as physical barriers but as instruments of interpellation and subject formation. Akbar examines the boundaries of state control through Shalini, situating her character as a central locus of resistance; she consistently rejects complete interpellation or subjugation by the regime. Drawing on Judith Butler's notions of subject formation and Michel Foucault's analysis of visibility, the paper traces the small, often silent ways in which characters resist state control. These moments of ethical witnessing and quiet solidarity suggest the persistence of an ethical agency within the margins of a totalising system. Finally, by applying Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the Third Space to the child Leila's identity, this paper argues that the novel finds a form of intimate resistance in the refusal of fixed categories, showing how love and memory persist as counter-narratives to the state's demand for absolute purity.

Keywords: *Leila*, Prayaag Akbar, Interpellation, Third Space, Postcolonial Speculative Fiction, Indian English Dystopia.

Introduction

Speculative fiction (SF) as a literary space mounts a resistance against warped societal norms through its deliberate moorings away from realism and anchors itself in the realm of reimagination. It deploys a vast array of sub-genres such as science fiction (sci-fi), climate fiction (cli-fi), cyberpunk, and alternate history. If utopia is one extreme at

the end of a socio-political spectrum, where all is well beyond belief, then dystopia is the exact opposite on the other end, with the ills of present society extrapolated, magnified, and intensified. A dystopia essentially paints a picture of what could be in the absence of course correction at present. Dystopian fiction as a genre interrogates oppressive structures and the reconfiguration of communities.

Indian English Dystopia within the broader Speculative Fiction genre

Gregory Claeys traces the evolution of the genre from its psychological “prehistory” to its modern literary forms, defining it primarily through the proliferation of “enemy” categories and the emotion of fear (5). While the genre’s archetypal roots lie in ancient concepts of monstrosity and the Christian demonisation of heretics, Claeys identifies the 1790s anti-Jacobin reaction to the French Revolution as the true starting point for the modern literary revolt against collectivism (5). This trajectory culminated in the twentieth century—a period Claeys labels the “caveman’s century”—where authors like Aldous Huxley and George Orwell responded to the rise of “political religions” such as Nazism and Stalinism (4-5). Ultimately, the genre has shifted in the post-1950s era toward “post-totalitarian” concerns, moving away from centralised state despotism to address themes of environmental collapse and the total breakdown of social order (6).

Suparno Banerjee in his book *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* traces the trajectory of the dystopian genre in India as a by-product of the nation’s complex encounter with British colonialism and the subsequent evolution of the postcolonial state. Banerjee states that Indian SF emerged as a response to European colonial education and exposure, as an outcome of the “native experience with the inscrutable British” (21). Contours of Indian SF can be traced back to the nineteenth century “revolutionary future histories” (22). K. M. Chunder Dutt’s “A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945” (1835) is the foundational text which used a futuristic setting in India to depict a rebellion against British rule (23). The genre shifted toward the consolidation of SF in indigenous languages like Bangla, Hindi, and Tamil in the early twentieth century (31). Begum Rokeya’s *Sultana’s Dream* (1905), a “feminist utopia,” employed speculative setting to interrogate contemporary social norms (30). Around the same time, the classical “cognitive mode” of Euro-American SF began to blend with traditional Indian myths and folk tales (22). After independence there was a sudden surge in SF across several Indian languages, a period Banerjee describes as the “‘golden age’ of indigenous-language SF” (36). Mainly characterised by “nationalistic concerns,” these novels integrated science into the Indian identity and negotiated

the idea of the new nation (48). The trajectory has, since the late 1990s, moved away from nationalistic optimism toward a dominant mode of dystopian futures. Contemporary Indian dystopias are marked by a rigorous questioning of postcolonial identity, moving away from the dreams of independence to explore the failures and anxieties of the modern Indian state.

Banerjee states that *The Calcutta Chromosome* was a watershed moment, attracting both “popular and critical attention,” paving the way for a wave of “highly sophisticated SF works” by authors like Manjula Padmanabhan, Ruchir Joshi, and Vandana Singh. Globalisation owing to immigration has emerged as a key characteristic of 21st-century Indian English SF. Even though some of these authors are based in America, and their reach is global, the novels produced by the diaspora “retain a cultural trace that is distinctly Indian,” even as they engage with global themes and audiences (49). Indian English dystopian novels are rooted in specific cultural contexts, quite unlike the Western classics such as *We, Brave New World*, and *1984*, which portray ahistorical global superstates. This essentially makes the speculative threat feel imminent, domestic, and closer home. For instance, *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* by Sarnath Banerjee satirises Delhi's chaotic urban sprawl, *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan explores organ trafficking in a near-future Mumbai, and Sami Ahmad Khan's *Aliens in Delhi* uses the trope of extra-terrestrial invasion to satirise the bureaucratic entanglements. Similarly, *Leila* by Prayaag Akbar unfolds in an unnamed city in India, gripped by caste and religion based segregation. The narrative is rooted in the macrocosm of the nation-state. *Leila* serves as a case study for understanding how postcolonial theory can deconstruct these hyper-local dystopias, revealing the deeper anxieties regarding identity and state power that define the genre today.

Walls as a symbol of interpellation in *Leila*

Louis Althusser, in his examination of state power, contends that ideology operates by enlisting individuals and converting them into subjects via a process he designates as “interpellation or hailing” (174). He uses the common example of a police officer saying, “Hey, you there!” to show how this works. (174). For Althusser, when the individual turns around in response, they experience a “one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion” and essentially become a “subject” because they have realised that the hail was “really” directed at them (174). This change makes sure that the person “submits to the rules of the established order,” which turns them into a “docile” participant in the state's ideological framework (132-133).

Althusser asserts that the state's power is not concentrated in a single repressive structure but is spread across a variety of specialised institutions known as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). He enumerates these apparatuses, as the religious, the educational, the family, and the cultural ISAs. Unlike the unified Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), which operates via violence, whether physical or administrative, the ISAs are often part of the private domain and function primarily through insidious influence of ideology. These methods function in different combinations for the reproduction of the state's power, as it allows for the "hailing" of subjects across multiple facets of social and private life (143). Leela Gandhi connects postcolonial theory to Althusserian concepts primarily by framing the colonial encounter as a process of subject-formation. Gandhi uses the term "interpellates" to describe how colonial authority "violently" disrupts native spaces and identities (169). Gandhi draws on Sartre's reworking of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic and describes the process of "hailing" where the "Other's look fashions my body... sculpts it, produces it as it is" (17). This replicates Althusser's "hailing", where the subject recognises themselves through the state's gaze, carving a passive existence. Althusser's formulation of ideology, particularly the concepts of ISAs and interpellation, offers a lens to read *Leila*. In *Leila*, power operates through the coercion and violence of the Repeaters, the radicalised thugs the Council unleashes on the populace:

The Repeaters are a loose band of men, most in their twenties and thirties. They work for the Council, though at that time no one was sure how closely. They guard the communities, patrol the walls. Over the years they've built an ugly reputation... They are usually armed. Small incidents can turn suddenly deadly. (36)

The ideology is also built into how space is organised, in addition to the aggressive tactics. The walls restrict movement, put people in boxes, and render othering natural and inevitable.

The walls do more than separate people; they make an ideological order that makes people follow orders. *Leila* imagines a future Indian city where 59-foot-tall concrete walls divide the city into rigidly separated areas. Only people of a single caste or, if they are not Hindus, a single religion are allowed to live in each enclave. This guarantees that people only live with people who are like them. Akbar makes this separation real by giving these areas names based on the groups that live there, such as the Bohra Muslim Sector, the Yadav Sector, and the Jat Sector. The novel depicts a troubling vision of a society ruled by suspicion, surveillance, and through Shalini, a Hindu woman wed to Riz, a Muslim man. This makes sure that people only live with people who are like them.

Now there are hundreds of walls, no one sure how many. Each wall is fifty-nine feet high and two feet thick, in agreement with Council law....These walls diminish us. Make us something less than human. (25)

In her essay “Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All,” Judith Butler contends that subject formation constitutes a “guilty embrace of the law.” For Althusser’s concept of “interpellation” to operate, individuals must have an antecedent, fervent aspiration for social recognition, which is expressed through a willingness to embrace guilt. This process involves a reflexive “turning against oneself,” where conscience is formed through the internalisation of external authority. As a result, the subject is thrown into a paradox: one gains social identity only through submission. This “paradoxical simultaneity” ensures that one’s very existence is tied to the very power one might otherwise resist. Butler concludes her essay thus:

.... failure of interpellation might well undermine the capacity of the subject to ‘be’ in a self-identical sense, but it may well mark the path toward a more open, even more ethical, kind of being, one of or for the future. (26)

The Council employs a derogatory form of “hailing” to impose a submissive and vulnerable subjectivity on the women of the Tower. But Akbar gives Shalini a resistance to this interpellation that fits with Butler’s idea of the “bad subject.” Shalini’s refusal to “turn” toward the Council’s authoritative voice signifies her rejection of self-imposed guilt and the social identity they provide. The act of defiance cannot be described as a political struggle; rather, it is a way of maintaining the “unexhausted potentiality” discussed by Butler. Steeled by a higher affective purpose—the quest for her daughter, Leila—Shalini maintains a “more open... kind of being” (26) that the Council’s labels can neither capture nor control. Here’s an account through snippets from different points in the novel, illustrating Shalini’s interpellation and her resistance:

I am forty-three years old. A widow, living in a crumbling residential complex called the Towers. (14)

I stand and open out the middle finger of my right hand. Before anyone can notice, or at least object, I

follow it with the forefinger. Both fingers on my chest, smile around the room. ‘Purity for All,’ I say. (88)

In the chapter titled “Polar Night,” Shalini travels to the Political Sector to request a transfer from the Revenue Ministry to the Settlements. There, as a “Tower Woman,” she must will herself into a form of masturbatory violation at the hands of the Council’s Mr. Vijay. He greets her with open contempt, sneering at her origins in the towers. Conscious of her interpellated vulnerability, she acquiesces to the terms of her own degradation. Her response takes the form of a strained, performative flirtation:

I've been waiting so long. I've understood now, what you want from us Tower women. I want to help the sectors. Help the walls. (92)

Solidarities forged in the margins

At Purity Camp, Shalini learns that one of her fellow inmates has a secret habit. The inmate is interpellated as "Lady Police" by fellow inmates as she is largely withdrawn, silent, and moves with an air of purpose. Irritated by this difference, Shalini follows her one evening and discovers her purpose:

She awaited company. In front of her was a plate, a knife, a fork. Four place settings had been arranged. The flatware had been filched from the dining room. I should've been angry, because we faced shortages of everything at Camp. (17)

Despite the camp's scarcity, Shalini withholds judgment. Instead, she witnesses the inmate's gestures—nodding, smiling, turning toward the empty plates, murmuring to them, lifting a tumbler to her lips like a child at play. Shalini observes this ritual but never discloses it, and the "Lady Police" remains unaware that she has been seen. The imbalance is as powerful as it is heart-wrenching. The reality that emerges at this juncture is not one of solidarity or even empathy; rather, it is one of silent and solitary ethical witness. The choice that Shalini makes to maintain the sanctity of this secret elevates the act beyond mere watching. It is a form of witnessing that does not seek recognition or reciprocity, but instead preserves the fragile, imagined world the inmate has created within the constraints of surveillance and deprivation. The disciplinary power relies on making the subject visible while the authority (or those acting on its behalf) remains invisible or all-seeing. By witnessing the ritual and refusing to report it, Shalini disrupts the trap of visibility that Michel Foucault describes:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (202-203)

Through a Foucauldian lens, the Purity Camp operates through surveillance, normalisation, and internalised discipline. Visibility is meant to function as control. Yet it is subtly reworked. Shalini sees, but she does not expose. In a space structured to produce confession and denunciation, her silence disrupts the smooth functioning of disciplinary power. Even within such totalising control, interiority persists. Lady Police's private theatre of longing and Shalini's quiet refusal to betray her reveal that power can enforce uniformity, but it cannot entirely erase secrecy and ethical choice.

Another instance of solidarity in the grim dystopic setting takes place when on a chance encounter Shalini meets Roop, a twelve-year-old boy fleeing from his home. They meet on the “Outroads” which are considered particularly unsafe for women. The meeting is prompted by a shared state of fugitivity; both are hiding from the same regime of “Purity.” Roop has been forced to run because a neighbour reported his parents to the Council, divulging that his mother is from a “different sector”—a violation of the state’s strict anti-miscegenation and sectarian laws (18-19). Shalini, recognising the interpellation of the boy as a target of the state, brings him into her hiding spot. The occasion is defined by a grim, shared vulnerability.

I wanted to wrap him in my arms, keep him safe forever. (20)

Their solidarity acts as a “counter-conduct” against the state’s surveillance. What Foucault states is on point in this context:

There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised. (142)

Butler’s essay is equally telling to read this horizontal comradeship, however tenuous and fleeting, between the two ‘impure’ outcasts of this walled dystopic society. In their hiding spot, the two interpellated beings are no longer just targets of state’s violence, the two become defiant in their freedom to protect and be protected. Shalini’s desire to “keep him safe forever” is exactly the “ethical kind of being” Butler mentions. It is an impulse that exists *outside* of her role as a subject of the Towers. By protecting Roop, she is acting for a “future” that the Council’s “Purity” laws try to prevent.

Third Space of resistance to trauma

The deliberate ambiguity in the pronunciation of the child’s name—Leela or Laila—as noted by Akbar, immediately evokes Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of the Third Space in his essay “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Difference”. As the child of a Hindu mother and Muslim father, she occupies a liminal space that destabilises rigid communal categories; the name itself becomes a linguistic Third Space that refuses to be fully absorbed into one identity or the other.

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew. (143)

In a nation obsessed with purity and fixed identity, this kind of ambiguity proves threatening. Hybridity disturbs authoritarian nationalism by preventing the name from attaining “primordial unity,” revealing identity as a fabricated performance rather than an inherent truth. This lack of fixity extends into Shalini’s own fragmented consciousness. Her forced medication and the blurry line between hallucination and reality show that her mind is shaped by power. However, her husband’s occasional presence suggests that she is still alive in a psychic way, where imagination becomes a way to fight against erasure.

Most nights I could not sleep. After hours of fidgeting swallow down a blue and white capsule with a glass of water. Only then I would return to bed to wait under the fan...This little pill will turn the mind from the vigils of the day, the memories we guard, the images we polish and protect and return to. Leila’s wide, crooked smile. Riz holding me from behind in bed, safe as a swaddle. (15)

Shalini’s tenacity in seeking her child mirrors Bhabha’s notion of an “in-between” space of survival, wherein identity does not remain fixed but is constantly renegotiated. Her survival goes beyond mere persistence because it is an act of resistance. In a society that demands cold, clinical purity, her refusal to stop loving is the most radical thing about her. The novel closes with Shalini finally reaching the chance to find Leila, who has been adopted by her former ayah, Sapna. Though Sapna nonchalantly turns her away, Shalini shakily believes she has caught a glimpse of her long-lost daughter. The moment Shalini sees her daughter, the weight of authoritarian nationalism fades—if only for an instant before she is hauled away by the Repeaters.

On the first floor...there is a girl. Her mess of black curls lifts lightly in the wind.... Her nose is broad at the bridge. Eyes like dark emeralds. She has large, square incisors and skin the shade of butternut. She’s beautiful. Her smile crinkles her face at the cheeks, bracketing the almond tips of her lips with two majestic arrowheads. Double dimples, dimples unlike any other, dimples like my mother and I have. (134-135)

These moments function as counter-narratives that unsettle the seamless operation of disciplinary power, revealing that the humanities persist precisely in those spaces where the law seeks to erase them.

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