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Faults and Fault Lines

In the Cracks of a Dystopian City: The Fissures of Home in *Leila* (2017) by Prayaag Akbar

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In the Cracks of a Dystopian City: The Fissures of Home in *Leila* (2017) by Prayaag Akbar

Natacha Lasorak

- 1 In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write that “home does not preexist: it was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile centre, to organize a limited space” (1987, 311). What the term “home” designates becomes, in fact, more complicated than only a defined space, as cultural geographers have argued:

Home obviously means much more than a natural or physical setting. Especially, the term cannot be limited to a built place. A useful point of departure for understanding home may be not its material manifestation, but rather a concept: home is a unit of space organized mentally and materially to satisfy a people’s real and perceived basic biosocial needs and, beyond that, their higher aesthetic-political aspirations. (Tuan 1991, 102)

Yi-Fu Tuan is joined by a number of home studies critics who describe a space which is also “an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings” (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 2). However, the notion of home often relies on the insistence on boundaries that Deleuze and Guattari emphasize, be they the walls of a house or the frontiers of a homeland. What happens when these walls become overpowering, when they rise far higher than expected and give shape to other metaphorical boundaries between individuals?

- 2 This is the question that Prayaag Akbar seems to be asking in his first and only novel to date, *Leila*. Published in 2017, *Leila* is a piece of dystopian fiction set in the near future, in an unnamed Indian city; it was turned into a Netflix series in 2019.¹ The main protagonist and first-person narrator is a woman named Shalini, from a Hindu background, who has married Riz, her high school boyfriend, who comes from a Muslim family. Their daughter, the product of an interreligious union, gives her name to the novel.² Running parallel to this family story stands the evolution of the city as it splits into various sectors, along lines of so-called Purity set by an institution called the Council, and enforced by its militia, the Repeaters. If Shalini remembers a time when

there were no walls between neighbourhoods, in her lifetime she sees walls rising up to fifty-nine feet around almost every sector “in agreement with Council law” (Akbar 2019, 38), drawing limits between different communities of people—based on caste if they are Hindu, or on religion if they are not (Muslim, Catholic). These small-scale partitions cannot fail to bring to the readers’ minds the traumatic past of the 1947 Partition between India and Pakistan, based on religious lines, and the subsequent war between East and West Pakistan which led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971; these events have given rise to countless narratives of trauma. In *Leila*, religious sectarian violence (which peaked during Partition³ and still permeates Indian society⁴) is replaced by a rigid social structure which forbids transgressions and exogamy. Having broken these rules, Shalini’s own existence is dramatically transformed when a group of Repeaters come to take her daughter away during her third birthday party. Leila disappears, Riz is beaten (perhaps to death) and Shalini is sent to Purity Camp, outside the city, a type of rehabilitation centre for fallen women where she spends four months. She is then to live in the Towers, among other widows.⁵ Half of the novel traces her existence sixteen years after the event, as she desperately tries to find her missing daughter in a now completely dystopian society.

- 3 Critics have noted that Akbar’s novel is part of “a burgeoning body of post-2000 dystopian fiction from India” (Dawson Varughese 2021, 14). Indian literature in regional languages displays a tradition of speculative fiction which “shows a marked affinity towards exploring the relationship between humanity and the environment,” as Sami Ahmad Khan specifies (2019, 26). The Anglophone novel studied here similarly sets out to indict the destruction of the environment, as the pollution of air and water makes it even more difficult to inhabit the city. More generally, Mrinalini Chakravorty goes as far as to state that “[t]he contemporary Anglophone novel in India is decidedly dystopian. [...] [D]ystopia is the prevalent mode through which present-day novels from India grapple with the symptoms and conditions of ‘millennial capitalism’” (2015, 267). Novels such as *Animal’s People* (Indra Sinha, 2007), *Domechild* (Shiv Ramdas, 2013) or *Leila* repeatedly tackle political issues such as a concern for the environment, rampant islamophobia, and casteism.
- 4 It might seem paradoxical to analyse the concept of “home” in a dystopian novel, knowing that “dystopia” refers, according to Lyman Tower Sargent, to “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived” (1994, 9). The prefix dys- is meant to designate a “bad place,”⁶ which is hardly appropriate for the place of belonging, of security, that “home” is understood to be. *Leila* does question the ability to feel at home, depicting the dystopian transformations of a city which make reappropriating space difficult, particularly when territories are segmented between communities. The overpowering presence of the walls, creating small enclosed communities, underlines the need for a home while simultaneously emphasizing its exclusiveness. As Rosemary Marangoly George reminds us: “Homes are not about inclusions and wide open arms as much as they are about places carved out of closed doors, closed borders and screening apparatuses” (1999, 18). When Shalini is thrown out of her home and condemned to live in the Towers, she searches for the fissures in the system, the cracks in the walls, which would allow her to find her missing daughter. The notions of cracks, fissures or fault lines are particularly fertile when looking at a work of dystopian fiction which engages

with the overwhelmingly homogenising transformation of an inhabited city. *Leila* invites us to look both at the cracks and through the cracks, to question the validity of physical and metaphorical places that individuals are assigned. This article will question the possibility to find a home in the fissures of the dystopian city, be it a physical space or a home of the mind.

- 5 This essay will first follow the way the city is divided in the novel, as walls are built around neighbourhoods. These walls create enclaves which maintain a strict separation between communities, emphasizing the societal division of people which will be analysed in a second section. As the following section will show, however, the protagonist's forced exit from her own home sketches out the possibility of resisting the Council's walls, particularly in the way she uses her memory. I will temper the possibility of resistance in a fourth part, analysing whether hope is allowed to emerge through the cracks.

The cartography of a split city

- 6 Over the first half of the novel, the unnamed city in which Shalini lives is slowly but steadily transformed into a dystopian environment. This mutation is perceived as a slippage: the city does not become dystopian from one day to the next, but the Council literally takes its roots in the fissures of the urban community. If Shalini remembers a different time in which she did not live surrounded by walls, she recalls how they appeared progressively:

With the money for the flat my father bought a white stucco house in a neighbourhood that was bisected by a sewer. We left there within a year. The next one I hardly remember. Localities were self-enclosing. Papa seemed to age each time we moved. He suddenly looked beaten. He died, eleven years after we left his childhood home, without taking his evening walk again. I was angry, but now I'm glad. He went before the eternal order took root, found the fissures and crannies, pried the city apart like volcanic rock. (Akbar 2019, 43)

As the metaphor of the root establishes, the Council intrudes slowly, under the surface: it settles in the cracks ("fissures and crannies") of the urban space. The first neighbourhood mentioned is itself subdivided into two parts ("bisected"). The narrator's father's progressive collapse echoes that of the city; although his condition worsens progressively, Shalini "suddenly" acknowledges his fall. Similarly, the Council's policies materialise as walls, but before that, they were already present on television or in the strict neighbourhood vegetarian rules (which led a neighbour to check the contents of Shalini's family garbage). These small alterations of the characters' life conditions culminate with the construction of new walls.

- 7 The way the novel stages a reality which slowly turns dystopian led Nandini Krishnan to discuss the genre of *Leila*:

It might be tempting to classify *Leila* as dystopian or futuristic. But it is not quite a dystopia, rather an exploration of the ways in which power shifts — the rules change, but the corruption remains, with the beneficiaries and the victims swapping places. If it is futuristic, it invokes a future that is not too far away. (2017)

The proximity of the time represented in the novel and the contemporary readers' own reality create a subtle transformation; however, the protagonist's change of status leaves little doubt as to whether the novel qualifies as dystopia. It is clear from the start of the novel that Shalini has had to relinquish her upper-middle class life for a lower-

class status as she struggles alone in a hostile city. For Jennifer Robinson, “the slow incremental changes shaping the world of the protagonist [is] a common science fiction strategy to set dystopia in the near future.” (2010, 231) More specifically, the way the Council takes its roots in the cracks of the soil and thereby establishes a dystopian city, links *Leila* to the category of “concrete dystopias”, as Maria Varsam defines them: “concrete dystopia brings together the past and present, creating thus a continuum in time whereby historical reality is dystopian” (2003, 208). In other words, concrete dystopia develops from a situation which already existed in the past. Varsam specifies: “Concrete dystopias are those events that form the *material* basis for the content of dystopian fiction which have *inspired* the writer to warn of the potential for history to repeat itself” (2003, 209, original emphasis). According to Anusudha and Sekhar, the division of the society into its sectors, based on religion and caste, “echoes the post-colonial era in India” (2019, 165) and more particularly Partition, through which India and Pakistan were separated. In dwelling on the separation between Hindus and Muslims, of which Riz and Shalini’s marriage is a transgression, the novel enables us to read ghettoisation as small-scale Partitions.

- 8 Moreover, in *Leila*, the reinscription of religious and caste-based segregation is at the heart of the urbanising project, and follows ancient rules of urbanism, as Dawson Varughese remarks: “the Indian caste system historically gave birth to a distinct mode of urban planning” (2021, 6). The fictional city could be seen as an echo of the colonial city, but also of the gated colonies which have developed in Indian cities. Indeed, *Leila* is not only concerned with history repeating itself; it is also deeply embedded in what Chakravorty calls the “atrocities of the now” (2015, 272). Rather than turning towards the future, the novel is concerned with the repetition of the past and the present difficulties. As Prayaag Akbar himself remarks: “In both [Delhi and Mumbai], there exists a code that creates an isolated, insular experience. It’s the housing societies in Mumbai, where food choices decide your eligibility to stay on rent, it’s the gated, posh colonies in Delhi that have their own way of keeping people away” (in Ghatak 2017). The author highlights the fact that segregation has durably infiltrated the cities of present-day India, relying on communities of religion or class.
- 9 In *Leila*, every caste, every religion is partitioned, cordoned-off, as if sharing the same space or the same air could lead to pollution or conflict. An advertisement for domes set above sector walls invites the citizens to reflect: “Must Your Children Share Their Air?” (Akbar 2019, 163) The division, of course, is not complete as inhabitants of various sectors still rely on the cheaper work-force of poorer populations. As Shalini notices, “All the rich communities have a Slum roosted at their walls, where servants, sweepers and scavengers from the concomitant castes make their homes” (Akbar 2019, 186). The close proximity of the various populations is a sign of their interdependence; however, the spaces they inhabit are strictly divided. In the city imagined by the Council, segregation is the rule, claiming the relevance of the caste system and its spatial organisation.
- 10 The Council endeavours to split the city into different sectors, so that it becomes “an enormous maze” (Akbar 2019, 38), a labyrinth in which one cannot see the way out because walls are everywhere. The notion of verticality is essential to understand the function of buildings: the walls are fifty-nine feet high and the social order is clearly echoed by people’s place on a vertical scale. In Shalini’s childhood, neighbours who are richer inhabit a “manmade hill” (Akbar 2019, 58). To enter the sectors, servants use a

ground-floor gate while the rich inhabitants of these sectors use elevated roads (called Flyroads) which crisscross the sky from one settlement to another. Down below, at ground level, whoever walks on the pavement outside the settlements takes the risk of being covered in the grime that comes off the walls. A line clearly demarcates the groups of users of the urban space, which echoes a distinction that Michel de Certeau identifies in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. According to him, “To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp. [...] It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god” (de Certeau 1988, 92). De Certeau connects here panoptical and panoramic vision with power.⁷ On the other hand, “The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They [...] are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and things of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it” (1988, 93). In the context of the novel, the practitioners of the city are the ones who have fallen the lowest – tellingly, the beginning of the novel sees Shalini crouching on the ground, “face-front against the mud bank” (Akbar 2019, 31) as she hides from a group of Repeaters. Even before the Council has become all-powerful, therefore, lines of division have already appeared in the urban space, cracking it apart and separating people of different social classes and castes.

A divided society

- 11 In the city, everybody is assigned a specific place and when she is young, Shalini soon gets used to the walls, which become part of the landscape. In the first enclosed sector she inhabits with her parents, she describes a feeling of security, of being “tucked in” (Akbar 2019, 58). Later on, as she looks at the sectors from outside, she sees a friend’s home as a “nest” (202). On a different scale, the city thus provides “nests” for communities, in a Bachelardian sense: “A nest [...] is a precarious thing, and yet it sets us to *daydreaming of security*. [...] In a sort of naive way, we relive the instinct of the bird” (1994, 102–3). Yet in *The Poetics of Space*, the nest is a place to be left, come back to, whereas the Council sees it as a self-enclosing enclave in which to stay.
- 12 The walls are an obvious metaphor for the division of the population into different categories. Yet, if they seem to embody the negative forces of the Council, the protagonist’s relation to them is multifaceted, to say the least. Having married someone from a different religion, Shalini is, at first, eager to get away from the various sectors to live in one of the only neighbourhoods without walls, the East End. However, she still maintains barriers with people from other classes, as her relationship with household staff makes obvious. In a flashback, Shalini recounts how Sapna, her maid, first entered the house: “By the time I got there [the cook and Sapna]’d already been let in by the servant who answered the doorbell. [...] [T]here is some code they have between themselves, and an understanding of circumstances, both ours and their own” (Akbar 2019, 83). The narrator introduces a distinction between “they” and “us” which is never made explicit, but the reader comes to understand that “they” are the household staff, and “we” are the people who hire them. The line that is thus drawn between social classes is quite strong: when Shalini relates the story, the tense shifts from present perfect to present, to express a general truth (“there is some code they have between themselves”). The same shift is found in a later conversation, in which Shalini asks Sapna: “Three years? You haven’t had water for three years? I tried to

keep scepticism from my voice. They tend to magnify their woes, hoping for sympathy, some kind of payout” (112). The protagonist is used to regarding members of staff as unreliable, and expects a group solidarity among them, as a way to trick their employers. As is made clear in these passages, Shalini has her own lines of division between people and the cracks and flaws are obvious in the character herself: although she can mostly be read as a positive model in the novel, she is not immune to repeating patterns of domination on others, as she encloses Sapna in the walls of her caste. If the protagonist is quite willing to do away with religious distinctions when it comes to her marriage, she does not seem prepared to erase class and caste distinctions, and therefore undercuts any binary opposition between heroine and anti-heroine. Only when the roles switch, and Shalini comes begging to Sapna, who has risen well above her former station, does the protagonist see the error in her judgement: “I have misread Sapna. What thirst in her to improve, to learn our language, our ways” (Akbar 2019, 253). In this reflection, she still maintains the fissure between two worlds, opposing Sapna to a “we” (“our language, our ways”) which can only be read as a class or caste community.

- 13 Thus, the walls that the Council builds around communities somehow echo beliefs in class, caste and religion distinctions which are not shared by every character, but still hold true for many of them. Homes are enclaves separating communities, whose walls are designed to be impenetrable.

Through a chink: memory against the walls

- 14 As is not uncommon in dystopian fiction,⁸ the reader follows a protagonist who has to go *through* the cracks of a city which does not make space for diversity or freedom. When the Council discovers that Riz and Shalini are married despite their religious difference, the ‘cracks’ in the text are the cracks of *lathis* (the sticks with which the Indian police is usually armed) which can be heard when Riz is beaten up. In this context, it seems difficult to express any type of resistance, as even walking in wall-less areas becomes dangerous. As Dolores Herrero argues, *Leila*, in this sense, is “a good example of critical dystopia as *homotopia*” (2020, 225, original emphasis). According to Anupama Mohan, homotopias are:

those visions of unified collectivity where an aggressively homogenising principle operates and where unity is a form of collective gathering of one or two coordinates (race/language/religion) and the deliberate repudiation of others. [...] If utopia is the space for shared transformation and amelioration, then homotopia is its obverse because it foregrounds that such change is engineered for and by a few. (2012, 8–9)

Homotopia emphasizes the homogenisation of a totalitarian society which accepts no alterity, no hybridity, and fosters the idea of a superior race. In *Leila*, the homogenisation principle can only be escaped in the protagonist’s mind, for it seems to be the only place where it does not always apply. As the forces of the Council spread into every nook and cranny of the city, creating yet greater fissures between sectors, the urban transformations are denied as progress through the narrative process. For instance, the whole novel is constructed around flashbacks, starting with Leila’s nineteenth birthday and going back to Shalini’s own childhood and married life from the third chapter onwards. Only in the chapter entitled “Polar Night” (2019, 163) do the narrated and narrating times seem to align. The transformation of the city which takes

place over two decades is thus constantly interrupted, and flashbacks to a time before the kidnapping always emphasize the contrast with the lonely life that Shalini lives after the abduction.

15 Moreover, the narration is interrupted by visions which materialise as memories or ghosts in the story. Shalini's daughter, like the ghost of Riz, slips into the text, as if Shalini's own memory were cracking: "I sense from the way the mattress has rolled that Leila has climbed in. [...] I cast my leg about but there is only empty coolness" (Akbar 2019, 19–20). Shalini's imagination deceives her as she lives alone in the Towers, haunted by the loss of Leila. Before she enters Purity Camp, the protagonist has a vision of her daughter, interrupting the sequence of events. The vision is compelling, inevitable, and creates as it were a fissure in storytelling itself: "A vision comes. Leila walking on a broad, empty road. Her back is to me. I feel my panic rise. Thrust the sight away. But it returns, insistent, finding a chink to slink through like smoke" (140). The shortness of the first sentences emphasizes the immediacy of a vision which is painted in broad, quick strokes, the image imposing itself in the narrator's mind. In the last sentence, the commas, the accumulation of fricative consonants ("*chink to slink through like smoke*") and the consonance of the sound /k/ force the reader to slow down the speed of reading, creating a rupture in the rhythm of the passage. The power of the vision is reinforced as it intrudes in the narrator's mind, refusing to be put away. In Purity Camp, Shalini is given pills which blur her visions and artificially reduce their power. The protagonist's relation to the pills is ambivalent: they provide her comfort as she regularly takes one to overcome a crisis,⁹ but they also shut the past out of her mind. The pills prevent the return of the repressed, but by making memories difficult to retain, they also obstruct the formation of any collective sense of history. However, Shalini's visions never completely disappear and continue to give her the feeling that her home is elsewhere, for her family lives in her memory and imagination rather than in the Towers.

16 On entering Purity Camp, the doctor brings Shalini to the old ruin of a water tower, which he calls the Anger Tower: "Whenever things become too much. When you're remembering your daughter, your husband. You come up here. [...] Here you can do anything" (Akbar 2019, 149). In this delineated area, Shalini is given a brief access to a panoramic vision. It is deemed a place of release for the doctor, who suggests she can insult anyone, including himself, when she is there: domination could be briefly inverted to help discharge her anger, before going back down to a normative captivity.¹⁰ However, more than a false sense of power or compensation, the tower provides Shalini with solitude and clear-sightedness. Tellingly, the decaying Anger Tower is also one of the rare places in which Shalini can gain height: "a hundred feet up" (148); "we were above everything save the surrounding hills" (147). The place provides the protagonist with a strong sense of purpose:

It felt good to be in a breeze. Good also to be so close to the edge, the narrow, rotting parapet and wobbly railing and tremendous height. [...] My body reminding me that I had work, that I needed to go on. This place sharpened my senses, my mind, burnt a path through the shadows closing in. Much of the time at Camp I felt exhausted, but not here. To be a single step away from death made me feel alive. (150–51)

Significantly, it is at this very place that Shalini decides to start her own quest in search of her daughter. If earlier, the vision of Leila on the road had been compared to "smoke" intruding into Shalini's mind, here she relies on action and planning to keep

away the “shadows closing in.” While the memory of *Leila* had entered Shalini’s mind through a crack, here, the character decides to explore this fissure further to allow memories and anger to return, making room for a sense of agency, despite a powerful incentive to stay in line. The tower, which is full of cracks and whose steps are literally falling apart (147), comes to epitomise resistance to the overpowering reality and a sense of purpose as it also invites us to read *Leila* as a personal quest, and perhaps an investigation into the depths of the totalitarian regime. It becomes, metaphorically and if only for a short time, Shalini’s place in the city: unlike the apartment that she later inhabits, in which she has to pretend that she will stick to her place as a widow guilty of a past crime, the Anger Tower reorients her towards her future. Yet, this reading which emphasizes the character’s agency and invites us to see *Leila* as a hopeful novel in which Shalini can find a place needs to be qualified.

Hope through the cracks?

- 17 In dystopian fiction, hope is a crucial question, as Tom Moylan’s study emphasizes. In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000), he draws a distinction between utopian and anti-utopian dystopias. To him, anti-utopian dystopias “adhere to the insistence of the (usually conservative) argument that there is no alternative (and that seeking one is more dangerous than it’s worth)” (2000, xiii), while

those progressively inclined texts that refuse to settle for the status quo manage to explore positive utopian possibilities by way of their negative engagement with their brave new worlds. In the anti-utopian dystopia, the best that can happen is a recognition of the integrity of the individual even when the hegemonic power coercively and ideologically closes in; whereas in the utopian dystopia, a collective resistance is at least acknowledged, and sometimes a full-fledged opposition and even victory is achieved against the apparently impervious, tightly sutured system. (2000, xiii)

Moylan further notices that dystopian fiction works along a continuum “between utopian and anti-utopian positions: between texts that are emancipatory, militant, open, and ‘critical’ and those that are compensatory, resigned, and quite ‘anti-critical’” (2000, 188). How *Leila* chooses to tackle the question of hope is not easy to determine; for if the novel criticises the establishment of a regime that relies on racial and religious segregation, it does not exactly give rise to a collective resistance which would reclaim the city as home.

- 18 The first scene of the novel provides a powerful image of the resistance that is at stake. As she does every year, Shalini comes to the wall of Purity One, the political sector, to place two candles in the earth for her daughter’s birthday. This part of the wall has become a sort of sacred place, a heterotopia, so to speak. In “Of Other Spaces” Michel Foucault writes:

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks [*sic.*] or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. (1986, 26)

In this sense, all the sectors are heterotopic as they require specific checks and apply specific regulations on visitors for entry. The wall of Purity One, the most protected sector of all, embodies the very essence of the division of the city into sectors. It is not only sacred to Shalini and her ritual; people come to insert scraps of paper with prayers

written on them in the gaps between the bricks of the wall, ephemeral acts of a new kind of devotion.¹¹ It seems that usual rules do not apply, as the activity emphasizes the porosity of a barrier which supposedly protects the order in place, a wall which has been made to be completely impenetrable. Even more obviously and transgressively, in this area, individuals try to climb the wall. The climbers leave a red hand mark at the highest point they reach, before climbing down or letting themselves fall to be caught by the crowd of observers. This gesture is hopeful, as climbing the wall is a way to threaten the authority. Using the cracks between the bricks seems to say that barriers can be overcome; it is also a claim for territory, a reminder that no sector can be completely sealed off.

- 19 Yet, if hope is expressed in these attempts, these are resolutely individual attempts, meant to express physical force but without hope of ever reaching the other side. Collective resistance is extremely rare in *Leila*: Shalini's friends mostly refuse to see her after her fall, and she cannot bring herself to share her plans with anyone. On one occasion, she does tell a child who has just escaped from the Repeaters: "When they are fat and slow we will get revenge" (Akbar 2019, 29). This quote is one of the rare occurrences in the novel when "we" refers to an indefinite group,¹² which would encompass city-dwellers who struggle under the Council's rules. Nevertheless, this sentence falls a bit flat, as no sense of community ever emerges, even among the widows in the Towers for instance. Here, the Netflix show pulls away from the novel, allowing for connections to be made between individuals who try to go against the Council. In the series Shalini is even criticised for taking part in a resistance movement only to reach her own goal (finding her daughter), putting whole operations at risk. In the novel, however, there is ultimately no collective attempt at getting revenge, no common attempt at breaking the walls: "[*Leila's*] dystopia challenges the very possibility of any collective effort" writes Khan (2019, 34).
- 20 Shalini's complete inability to establish durable alliances with anyone except the ghost of her husband reflects a disenchanting closing-in on the individual. Her determination almost turns her into a tragic character, completely set on achieving her own goal, but unable to even see beyond a potential reunion with Leila. When Shalini recognises her daughter, it is unclear whether Leila sees her as well, but it is unlikely that she could recognise her mother, as she would have been raised to believe that she is Sapna's daughter. The fleeting moment of recognition is a detailed vignette which Shalini seems intent on committing to memory. Once this apex is reached, however, the novel ends abruptly, as if the quest had ended (although Shalini does not know whether she will ever see Leila again).
- 21 The gloom which prevails in the whole novel, which is only slightly lifted as it comes to an end, partakes of what Chakravorty calls the "hideous urgencies of the historical 'now'" (2015, 268): "[p]ostcolonial dystopias are most concerned with marking contemporary failures to imagine any future alternative that could sufficiently ameliorate the catastrophic present" (2015, 277). *Leila's* favouring of an individual quest over a collective enterprise is not a complete surprise; twentieth-century dystopias, as Gregory Claeys remarks, often portray "despotic collectivism associated with fascism and communism" (2017, 271). He underlines the strength of dystopian literature, which focuses on "the individual, emotional level experiences which, writ large, are meaningless when lost in the anonymity of historical narrative" (2017, 269). In *Leila*, individualism fits the prevalent neoliberal setting, but as the city falls apart, the novel

relies on a fascination for the mother-child relationship which turns the family into the only social unit worth fighting for.

- 22 If *Leila* gives hope, then, it is only through the perspective of Shalini's personal investigation, rather than in the potential disappearance of the Council, or the establishment of a community of resistance. Finding the cracks in the system, therefore, only means that Shalini might find Leila, not that she will fight against the established order or claim the city as her home. A physical and metaphorical place of belonging remains out of reach for the protagonist. Alone in a city, followed by ghosts, Shalini is unable to claim a territory, or make any attempt at breaking the walls. The frailty of her mind and memory barely provides her with a mental space to call her own. The novel further denies Shalini the possibility to find a home in community: her quest remains oddly apolitical, so that, while the novel seems to give a warning against processes of ghettoization, it does not quite free its readers from the sense that the future of the city and its inhabitants at large matters less than the individual quest.

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NOTES

1. The novel does not give a specific date, but the director of the Netflix series chose to set the story in 2047.
2. Incidentally, Prayaag Akbar's name is also marked by a double religious belonging: R. S. Anusudha and Arya Sekhar point out that Akbar has a Muslim father and a Christian mother (2019, 162).
3. Ananya Jahanara Kabir notes some of the consequences of Partition: "the summer of 1947 left around a million people dead and at least 75,000 women raped and abandoned; about 12 million people were displaced" (2013, 6).
4. One needs only think about the riots in Gujarat in 2002 and Muzaffarnagar in 2013 (Shaban, xxx).
5. This may remind us of the widow communities which have emerged in places such as Varanasi, Vrindavan, Mathura or Puri, where widows disowned by their families have sometimes found shelter, provided they follow certain rules (Bhattacharyya and Suman). In *Leila*, the widows similarly live in a community that is set apart from the rest of society.
6. According to Sargent, the term is a subcategory of "utopias," whose counterpart is the "eutopia": "The word *utopia* or *outopia* simply means *no* or *not place*. *Topos* means *place*; "u" or "ou" means "no" or "not." Thomas More, inventor of the word, punned on *eutopia* or *good place*, and we have since added *dystopia* or *bad place*" (1994, 5).
7. De Certeau evokes "a *panoptic practice*": "To be able to see (far into the distance) is to be able to predict, to run ahead of time by reading space" (1988, 36).
8. One may think of Georges Orwell's *1984* (1949), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), regarding which Akbar specifies that he is a great admirer (though in his view, what he writes is not "a gendered dystopia," which Atwood's novel is [Guha 2018]) or, more recently, Shiv Ramdas's *Domechild* (2013).
9. As Herrero remarks, the pills are similar to the *soma* tablets that characters ingest in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (2020, 226).
10. This place is almost carnivalesque, in the Bakhtinian sense of the term: "[t]he laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival" (Bakhtin 1984, 122–23). In the Anger Tower, the rules do not apply, which delineates a time and place for rule-breaking, all the better to maintain a strict regulation in the rest of the camp.
11. In some way, the fascination for the wall of Purity One may remind the reader of the conflict over the building of a Hindu temple in Ayodhya. Jackie Assayag recounts how bricks were consecrated in India and abroad for a temple to be built in lieu of the mosque that was destroyed in 1992 (following anti-Muslim protests): "all the bricks had the inscription *Shri Ram* on them and had been consecrated at a *Ramshilapuja* [blessing of Ram's bricks], an invented ceremony (if ever there was one), during which devotees prayed in the direction of Ayodhya, so that this town had become the Mecca of Hindutva!" (1998, 136). The rite in *Leila* may also bring to mind the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, a place of prayer considered holy.
12. In the first scene, at Purity One, "we" designates the protagonist and Riz's ghost; however, it never links the two protagonists to the mob of people who are looking at the climbers.

ABSTRACTS

Prayaag Akbar's first novel, *Leila* (2017), is a dystopian tale retracing the establishment of a totalitarian regime relying on the division of the urban space and community. The walls and partitions follow social and religious lines, yet cracks and fissures repeatedly appear, elaborating possibilities of hope and resistance. Analysing the spatiality of the dystopic city, this essay wonders whether it can remain a home.

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Mots-clés: Prayaag Akbar, home, dystopia, division, city

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