

PRAYAAG AKBAR'S *LEILA* AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF TUSSELE OF THE HUMANE TO SURVIVE IN A REIGN OF SUB-HUMANS

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Abstract:

Amoral human minds establish solid lines of distinction between the superior and inferior for asserting self-prominence. Humanistic values have been overshadowed by the eminence of materialistic profits in the current era. This paper examines how the contemporary world of human-subhuman encounters is depicted in Prayaag Akbar's debut novel, Leila. The author, being a renowned journalist in India, has entwined reality with the fictitious world of his novel. The paper also validates the existence of inequity in the social realm of the novel through the application of Marxist literary criticism. Michael Foucault's theory of Panopticism and the Social dominance theory of Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto are also discussed in context to the novel. Segmentation of people based on religion and caste and alienation of those with divergent and rational thoughts signify a society of subhuman supremacy in Leila. Through the realistic depiction of the torments of submissive people, the paper also attempts to unveil the necessity to fight against the irrationality in the world and to defend for the basic human rights of oneself and others. Thus, live and let live.

Keywords: *Hegemony, Human rights, Ideology, Moral consciousness, Power.*

Obsession with power shrinks humanity to a subhuman level by ebbing away the spirit of brotherhood. Moral degradation and utmost prominence for one's own self have made the contemporary society an arduous place to live in. Proclamation of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 Dec. 1948 was the aftermath of the brutal killings of the Second World War ("Universal declaration of human rights"). Though the Universal Declaration of Human Rights envisages a world of equality, freedom and secularism; it is frequently violated in the modern reign of sub-humans. According to Robin. G. Collingwood, "Art is community's medicine for that worst disease of the mind, the corruption of consciousness" (Blackburn). Prayaag Akbar, a journalist based on Mumbai, India, in his debut novel *Leila*, thus enunciates a cure for fundamentalism and vigilantism by portraying their adverse impact on our future and discloses a darker world that the well-off society willingly neglects. His novel is not a reproof of a particular political body or a specific community, but a forewarning of a dusky future if the necessity of a moral conscience is neglected. As a novelist, he succeeds in engendering empathy in the minds of readers: a vehement emotion that unites the whole humanity to raise their voice for the victims of human rights violations.

Prayaag Akbar, son of M.J. Akbar, a Muslim, and Mallika Joseph Akbar, a Christian, has encompassed ideas of secularism in his novel by depicting the atrocious cruelties of the dominant groups to preserve endogamy. His life in the city of Mumbai and Delhi has also enabled *Leila* to become a social and realistic novel. The intense hope of a mother to find her missing daughter, amidst a world where religion and caste embodies one's real identity, persists throughout the novel. Shalini, who was born to a Hindu family, marries Riz, a Muslim and gives birth to Leila. She also witnesses a swift change in her community,

with the sector walls dividing people of different castes and the governing power in the hands of "Council" members (1). The council employs a group of people, called "repeaters" (23) to enforce their authoritarian principles in the society, with the aid of physical violence. Shalini and Riz move to "east end" (63) after their marriage, where the residents live without the partition of sector walls. Shalini's relationship with her home maid, Sapna also delineates suppression of the weak by the powerful, in the modern era. Shalini gets separated from Leila, her three year old daughter, after an attack from the repeaters, during which Riz gets fatally wounded. They enslave Shalini in "purity camp" (14) where women who have rebelled against the irrational laws of community are imprisoned and forced to accept their guilt. The sham purity camp fails to impair the purest motherly love in Shalini and her quest to find her daughter, for which she herself forcibly accepts the norms of the society. The humane in her thus struggles to survive in a bigoted world. After sixteen years of endurance of inhumane treatment, her journey to find Leila ends in her old home maid Sapna, who at present lives a life of authority in the political sector. Sapna blames Shalini for mistaking her daughter Lakshmi for Leila. Thus the identity of Leila remains as an enigma to the readers, who are unable to comprehend whether Lakshmi is Leila or not and the novel ends with the same void: the absence of Leila in Shalini's life, as in the beginning (Krishnan).

Marxist theory that originated in the nineteenth century England with the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels can be appertained to Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*. Prejudice based on race, class and gender is universal and still prevails in the contemporary ultra-modern world. Marxist cultural theory empowers the readers to acknowledge and annihilate the subhuman and to revitalize the humane. According to Pramod K. Nair:

It [Marxist theory] is one of the most political forms of cultural theory because (i) it links art with actual conditions within a particular culture and (ii) it sees forms of art not as some special realm but intimately linked to the existing power relations within a particular culture. (122)

The theory helps to unveil the violation of human rights in *Leila*, by those who are obliged to maintain them in a society. Capitalist and labour class of the industrialization era is analogous to the dominant (the council) and the subservient (common people) in *Leila*. Inequity in the conduct of the high and middle class towards the "slummers" (3) in the novel also reciprocates the dark side of real India, where the human rights become a mere offering to the people based on their class and caste.

The council standardizes their ideologies by fostering a fear of physical humiliation and alienation in common people. This assertive and continual domination of the council culminates in the unconscious acceptance of these violations as permissible, in the minds of the oppressed. In Marxist criticism, this "ideology" or "false consciousness" is the "twist of reality" whereby the oppressed are oblivious to their rights and regard the sovereignty of the sub-humans as "pre-ordained" (Nayar 130). The sixty feet high wall that enfolds the political sector is considered as the "purity wall" in *Leila*. Shalini says, "People come here to pray and plead" (1). Thus irrational suppositions embed the mind of people due to the incessant domination. The ironical purity assigned to the wall by the council unveils the efforts to naturalize their ideologies and make people presume that a concealed purity is engulfed in these walls, which when revered bestows contentment in life. Purity walls: the only sector wall that is pure and clean thus exemplifies the authority of the council. Even Shalini has begun to believe in the power of purity walls. She blames herself for not respecting the purity wall and considers it as the cause of misfortunes in her life; but these adversities were in reality inflicted by the council for her being a non-conformist. Ideologies of the council get imprinted in the subconscious minds of the people with a continuous forbearance. Naz, Riz's brother who has helped Riz to enter Shalini's sector with a duplicate id proof and has even defended for Riz against the tough repeaters becomes the cause of Riz's death and Shalini's plight. His credulity and greed have replaced the righteousness with a subhuman. He has denied his three year old innocent nephew the warmth of her mother's love for the sake of an unethically ordered society. In the novel, subversive women,

who have dissented from the irrational majority, are confined to “purity camps” (14). A peculiar kind of pill, which imprisons their sensible mind in a world of illusions, are taken by these women, thus submitting themselves to the standards of the council by instilling insanity instead of rebellion. But the illusionary world of Shalini becomes devoured by her love for Leila and thus strengthens her to survive and endure the amoral attitudes of the dominant sub-humans.

Michael Foucault's theory of Panopticism that expounds the discipline imposed on a society through a panopticon model of surveillance mirrors the supervision of the council over the fragmented city from the political sector in *Leila*. The panopticon model was proposed by Jeremy Bentham for the eighteenth century prisons, whereby the prisoners separated from each other, in a circular prison, was being continuously observed from a central tower (Mason). The power resides with the observer in the tower, as the council in the novel. Individuals are denied of freedom and are forced to act according to the norms of the council. The “purity pyramid” (168), which is hundred feet tall, in the middle of the political sector is akin to the central tower in a panopticon. Thus the common people in *Leila* parallel the prisoners and thereby live a life of naturalized oppression.

Ideas of fallacious benefits mould a majority of human minds in *Leila* to accept the unethicality of authoritative sub-humans as intuitive and thus the novel expounds the term “interpellation,” invented by Louis Althusser, a Marxist theorist, which can be defined as “the process of consenting to ideology, accepting it and not being aware of it” (Nayar 135). He also propounded the significance of “ideological state apparatuses”: schools, family, media, religious institutions, etc., in the internalization of the dominant's ideologies by the submissive (134). In *Leila*, even the educational system has fallen into the impact of various communities. Each of them has been affiliated to a particular sector. Every sector has their own schools, in which children share the commonality of caste. Shalini decides to get an admission for Leila in the Yellowstone school, the only school which is free from communal influences and the “last mixed school in the city” (80). The ideal education that enables children to mingle with 'the others' receives the contempt of majority and is blamed for propagating valueless and cultureless ideas that are against the norms of the council.

Dearth of rational thinking and moral consciousness has led to the subhuman hegemony in *Leila*. Antonio Gramsci popularized the term “hegemony” that explicates the “unequal power relations” in a society, whereby the dominant class impose their authority over the weak with their consent (Nayar 130). Thus hegemony is the silent acquiescence of oppression by the oppressed. In the novel, the Repeaters who guard the sector walls claim that they are protecting people of each sector from the grossness outside: from the “filth in air. In character” (40). These groups of people, who enact according to the council's principles, are unaware of their own unconscionable conducts and thus believe and make others believe that welfare of the society is the priority of the council. The council has never framed strict and homogeneous rules for individuals; instead they have divided the society into segments and have given every sector the freedom to formulate their own regulations. Thus the concept of purity becomes different for different sections. For Muslim sectors, it is associated with the abomination of alcohol and pork meat, for some other sectors consumption of any kind of meat is considered as impure, while some others give an exemption from impurity only to the fish eaters; and those with divergent notions are completely dissociated from these communities. This avers the council's agenda of creating communal disparities with the abetment of feigned liberty to the local.

The social dominance theory by Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto elucidates the Varna system mentioned in *Manusmriti*, an ancient religious text of Hinduism. In accordance with the theory, social hierarchy includes three stratification systems and the social context in *Leila* parallels with the third system:

An arbitrary-set system in which socially constructed categories are hierarchically arranged. These arbitrary sets may be constructed to associate power and legitimacy with

social categories like race, caste, social class, religion, or any other group distinction that human interaction is capable of constructing. (Langué 418-419)

Thus the dominant culture in the novel exploits the ancient Indian culture of caste divisions to fractionize the whole society. The oppressed are tactfully deprived of the vigor to fight for a common cause through this splintering. Joshi, a council spokesperson symbolizes the sector division as “flowering of an ancient consciousness” (Akbar 36). He considers a society with no community divisions as the result of spiritual degradation and negligence of cultural roots. These communal divisions culminate in insularity and caste discriminations. Prejudice against the minority community is internalized by the privileged groups. Even Shalini, a woman of rational thoughts was never free from this prejudice, and is evident through her conduct towards Sapna, her home maid. Her inability to remember Sapna's surname despite their long relationship, forbidding Sapna to kiss Leila in the furtherance of propriety and her egregious mannerisms towards Sapna merely to relieve her own anguish; depicts the subhuman in the subconscious mind of people. But Shalini, unlike others, feels guilty for her amorality and yearns for the restoration of the humane. But Sapna, even after being settled in the political sector, follows these consistent conventions of society: she even says to Shalini, “See when Chotu [servant] comes back. We also follow the rules. It's tradition, isn't it? No one's fault” (198). Servants of low caste community are only allowed to enter a sector after the examination of their physical body, where they are ordered to strip down their clothes by the repeaters; thereby shattering their dignity as a human being. They confront both physical as well as mental humiliation for their predestined fate: for being born to a marginalized community. In *Leila*, people living in slums are held culpable for the fire in the vast stretches of landfill sites. Slummers, who have their abode near these garbage mountains and lead a life risked by these fires, are beaten up by the repeaters for the ruination they are unaware of. These fires are the aftermath of construction of the sky domes that emit heat to the outer atmosphere to keep the sectors air-conditioned. Thus, those who are responsible for the destructions humiliate and criticize the sufferers with an arrogance of being born in a superior caste. Thus caste and money determines the rights of a human being in *Leila*. Image of a peon “dark and small, arms held together in silent imploration” (78) facing the repeaters, typifies the inferiority assigned to the lower class people. Even the societal motto, “Purity for All” (40), connotes the prominence of caste and religion over the basic human rights. Purity as a concept is associated only with those who reside in sectors and the slummers or people of low castes are forsaken. Every sector is protected from the filth of the streets with fifty nine inch tall sector walls and numerous flyroads to travel. Flyroads enable them to willingly neglect the sufferings of the slummers who are forced to live amidst the debris from these sectors. Even sky-domes are erected by the council to protect the sectors from the filthy air that the low caste community breathes. Only the lower sector people occupy the streets and travel by the clammy out roads which are engulfed with garbage thrown away from the trash-towers of these different sectors:

It's the rancid smell, and the rats, big as cats, scuttling out from the garbage and scampering hairily over your feet....Festering peels, thick trickles of fluid, unidentifiable patches of white and yellow, bulging polythene packets breached at the gut, oozing. Soaked, blackened rag like emanations, long as dupattas, fished out from blocked sewers by scavenger-caste men who dive in little chaddhis into manholes. (8)

In *Leila*, Division of the society into various fragments based on religion and caste with huge sector walls echoes the post-colonial era in India. Pre-independence India witnessed the bifurcation of nation. Rights of the people to reside in their homeland became contingent on the religion to which they were born. In *Leila*, Shalini's father says, “These walls diminish us. Make us something less than human” (31). Shalini reckons the diversification of sector walls as an outspread of “malignancy” all over the city (64). The council has divided the city into various fragments and the right to reside is based on one's birth. Shalini's night walks till morning, after her tedious days, symbolize her confrontation with psychological trauma from the strained conformity to unethical principles. Her night walks are accompanied with mongrels, a

kind of mixed-breed dogs, who are even assigned with territories: "one at a time the dogs turned back to their territory" (21). Every other human acquaintances of Shalini lack the compassion and tenderness of these mongrels, thus signifying a world where the subhuman encapsulates most humans and the animals concretize the humane.

Representation of landscapes as aesthetic is a mode through which art veils the dismayed social context. According to Pramod K. Nair, "concepts of beauty and taste invariably mask questions of power—who decides what is beautiful? - and class where particular forms and styles become established as standards" (146). In the novel, filthy slums and unbearable extreme heat are presented as an antithesis to the environment inside the sectors. The sector's "glittering emerald lawns" (81), beautiful avenues, orderly planted boscajes with squirrels and macaques playing amongst them; have not offered a peaceful temperament; instead they have escalated the existential angst of the people outside these sectors in the minds of readers.

Power becomes the only factor that aids in the transformation of inferiority to supremacy in *Leila*. Ashish, boyfriend of Sapna, works for Joshi, a council member. The council has given a sham promise to resolve the water scarcity to the people of Sapna's colony. Though Ashish pretends as a representative of the struggles of the slummers, he eventually exploits his association with the council for his personal welfare, thus finally settling in the renowned political sector with his family. Thus the council that perpetuates power with the aid of ideologies enwrapped in pretentious benefits for the common people becomes analogous to Ashish who has dissimulated his egocentric attitude beneath the service for his colony. Thus the weak and helpless are always in agony due to their domination and utilization by the sub-humans. Helplessness of the ordinary people in the reign of sub-humans is depicted in the novel, not only through the unequal power relation but also through the miserable and unendurable environment with extreme temperature and acute water scarcity. Though the video clips in television have unveiled the wretched conditions: "slum women with pots to collect water, lean children who "breathed in jerky, rapid gulps and cried without tears" (67); middle and high class enjoyed a luxurious life with their money and power. They pay bribe for the limited supplies and thereby unjustly take away the vital natural resources as their own, which is affirmed by an advertisement of the Kamrupi Brahmin's new residential complex with "twenty-four-hours power backup, twenty-four-hour water" (81).

Ghettoization based on religion and caste in *Leila* is explicit through the need to acquire prior permission to enter another sector, thus avows the violation of freedom of movement for individuals. Shalini's father demurs against the repeaters for the breach of his rights: "Who are you to tell me where I can go? . . . I go where I want! This is my city" (40), but he gets brutally beaten up by them; hence every protest is silenced with physical violence. Agony of physical violence and his family commitment to endow them with a survivable atmosphere instead of the filthiness in the slum forces him to conform to the idea of sector divisions and finds an abode in the arora sector. Thus deviant behaviors in individuals are curbed by the council with the assistance of power, as Riz, who has been murdered by the repeaters for defending Leila. Shalini says that the authority might have abandoned his corpse in the city's eastern edge, where "hundreds of men were left there, those who spoke against the summer's madness" (19). Others are made silent with instilling fear and are compelled to live the life of a coward. Shalini even after being traumatized with Leila's loss was not able to safeguard Roop, a helpless young boy, separated from his father and mother who belong to different sectors and chased by the repeaters. This affirms the tussle of the individuals, who have demolished the conceptual barriers of religion, caste and class for the standards of humanity, to exist in the social realm of violations of basic human rights.

Women who reside in the purity camps are the victims of ruthless violations of human rights. Inter caste and inter religious marriages have ended up with honor killings, where the women are forced to witness the death of their partners by family members. These women are then abandoned by the family and live a life of servitude in the purity camps until they accept their so-called sins. Intolerance towards

homosexuality and even rational education has resulted in their enslavement. Sana, a young educated woman, who has stood against her sector's unjustifiable custom of cutting the girl's genital before puberty, came to the camp herself when the insular community began to offend her family. "East end," where the people have repudiated the sector walls is considered as "godless" by other communities (63). Marriage of Riz and Shalini, an inter-religion marriage, though is not against law; the society has made them feel it as a misdeed. Legal formalities have taken several months to be completed. Even after marriage, they are denied a peaceful life by the bigoted communities, who accept only the binary oppositions and have a parochial attitude towards the amalgamated facets. Thus, individuals with discordant thoughts and beliefs are marginalized and estranged from the society.

Stick figures of people holding their hands together, made by the children in East End, represents a world of unity in spite of caste and religious differences. A sudden shift of plot from the warmth of unity to the violence of the mob or repeaters in East End signifies the hostile environment of violations that annihilates humanity for the supremacy of sub-humans. Their slogan, "unity from purity" (74) devalues the notion of unity from love. Women from purity camps, after several months of enslavement, are taken to the "towers" (14), and are offered with peon jobs in various establishments. A trivial act of setting up badminton court in the tower and fraternizing among themselves indicates the implicit faith of these tower women to rebuild their lives in the midst of despotism and also unveils human's instinctive disinclination to accept subjugation. Sixteen years of separation from Leila has not effaced her memories from Shalini. Her quest to find her daughter engulfs the murky social background in the novel with an ardent hope. Shalini's sanguinity becomes the breath of her life. She pleads to Dipanti, one of her friends for a single photo of Leila, after being released from the purity camp. She fears of a future where her memories fail to remember the appearance of her own child. The heart rendering agony of a mother discloses the iniquitous principles retaining in the society and the humane is also kept alive throughout the novel with Shalini's indomitable motherly love:

To her I am emptiness, an ache she cannot understand but yearns to fill. No. I have left more, a glimmer at least. The blurred outline of a face. A tracery of scent. The weight of fingertips on her cheek. The warmth of her first cradle, my arms. (5)

Though the ending of Prayaag Akbar's novel *Leila* elucidates the concept of "learned helplessness" (Nolen), put forth by Martin Seligman, where the victims of oppression become incapable of relieving themselves from the hostile circumstances, as Shalini who has failed in her journey to regain her Leila; the novel also instills a dread in the readers on the impact of sub-humanistic traits that eradicates the humane or the moral conscience from human kind. The low caste community or the slummers in *Leila* are tormented by the violation of their right for equity, while the residents of east side suffer the breach of freedom of expression and a life of liberty. Their ideas and beliefs are shattered by the council through iniquity, with an aim to purify the city. Human rights violations in the contemporary India, as the detention centers in Assam where the foreigners are enslaved and several ruthless killings of the minority class in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh gets echoed in the novel, thus "locates not only the text and author within a social context, but also the readers" (Nayar 127). The need of the hour is to become aware of the woes of our fellow beings and unite to fight against injustice or discrimination by defending our rights. *Leila*, an open-ended novel, triggers hope and optimism with an assumption of Shalini to continue her struggle to regain Leila, by overpowering the reign of sub-humans through her tenacity and moral righteousness; as Maya Angelou, in her poem "Still I Rise" says, "You may shoot me with your words, / You may cut me with your eyes, / You may kill me with your hatefulness, / But still, like air, I'll rise" ("Still I Rise by Maya Angelou").

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