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# Spaces of Exploitation and Resistance: A Postcolonial Ecofeminist and Phenomenological Reading of Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

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**Abstract**

Exploring literary representations of our ongoing ecological crisis from an ecofeminist perspective can unravel the role of "human-caused environmental change in the twin oppressions of women and of nature, driven by patriarchal power and ideologies" (Vakoch, 2021). A postcolonial ecofeminist focus recognizes that this twin oppression is "intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism" (Kaur, 2012, p. 384). This perspective may offer further invaluable insight. This paper applies a post-colonial ecofeminist and phenomenological approach. It focuses on the interconnected-ness of the climate crisis and the exploitation and oppression of nature and women by a patriarchal, totalitarian regime in Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017). The dystopian novel follows the protagonist-narrator, Shalini, on her physical and mental journey from a life of privilege to a punitive facility for women called Purity Camp. The story takes her through exploited and heavily polluted slums to the Purity Pyramid and Skydome, which epitomize totalitarian power. Through close reading of Shalini's phenomenological facticity and actions in these dominated and dominating spaces, this paper will analyze the portrayal of ecological and societal changes, subjugation, and resistance as manifested in the heroine's embodied and lived experience. It will argue that, while challenging the notion of exploiting nature and women in the name of 'purity,' Shalini constructs a self-identity as a feminist ecological citizen in a world that treats her as a slave.

**Keywords:** climate crisis, postcolonial ecofeminism, Indian science fiction, embodied and lived experience, space and identity

## Introduction

> It was hotter that summer than it'd been for a hundred years. Why do they tell us things like this? All over the city the trees sagged like broken men. Still no one followed the rules: the construction boom and the factories took the groundwater almost to zero. On TV they'd show clips of wailing Slum women, banging brass pots, dragging reporters by the wrist to the insides of dark huts. […] The young men interviewed didn't talk to the reporter. Instead they shouted directly at the camera […] asking why their families had been ignored so long. (Akbar, 2017, p. 54)

The above quotation from Indian author Prayaag Akbar's 2017 dystopian novel, *Leila*, is a palpable depiction of our ongoing climate crisis and its social implications, which have devastating effects on the underprivileged. Women, in particular, predominantly in the Third World, are often viewed as the primary victims of the consequences of environmental deterioration. Exploring literary representations of this phenomenon from an ecofeminist perspective entails focusing on the parallels between how the land and women are affected by such ecological and societal changes. An ecofeminist approach can thus unravel the role of "human-caused environmental change in the twin oppressions of women and of nature, driven by patriarchal power and ideologies" (Vakoch, 2021), and particularly how "women are exploited by patriarchal development attitude because of their close association with nature and dependency on it" (Patil, 2020, pp. 15–17), while a *postcolonial* ecofeminist focus, acknowledging that this twin oppression is "intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism" (Kaur, 2012, p. 384), may offer further invaluable insight.

Applying a postcolonial ecofeminist, as well as a phenomenological approach, the present paper focuses on the interconnectedness of the climate crisis and the exploitation–oppression of nature and women by a patriarchal, totalitarian regime in Akbar's *Leila*. The novel follows the protagonist-narrator, Shalini, on her physical and mental journey from a privileged life to a punitive facility for women called Purity Camp, through the exploited and heavily polluted slums to Purity Pyramid and Skydome, the epitome of the totalitarian power depicted. After a brief discussion of the theoretical background, my paper first investigates ecological and societal changes from a primarily postcolonial ecofeminist perspective, then examines the transformation of identity in this spatial and social context, expanding its theoretical focus to the phenomenological aspects of the characters' lived experience. Through the close reading of Shalini's phenomenological facticity, mental state, and actions in these dominated/dominating spaces, the paper will analyze the portrayal of ecological and societal changes, as well as subjugation and resistance,

as manifested in the heroine's embodied and lived experience. It shall argue that while challenging the notion of exploiting nature and women in the name of 'purity,' she constructs a self-identity as a feminist ecological citizen in a world that treats her as a slave.

## Theoretical Background and Literary Context

Ecofeminist novels, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), generally highlight the links between the domination of women and the domination of nature under patriarchy, while postcolonial ecofeminist fiction, such as Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (2020) examine how colonialism and imperialism have shaped and intensified both gender oppression and ecological exploitation, that is, they emphasize the triple yoke of patriarchy, ecological destruction and *colonialism*.

*The Handmaid's Tale*, in particular, has been noted as an inspiration for and displaying several similarities with Akbar's *Leila* (cf. Simonpillai, 2019; Yadav, 2024), on account of both novels being feminist dystopias describing patriarchal, fundamentalist totalitarian control, and having a female protagonist confined and constrained both physically and mentally. Most notably, Juan Agudo draws a comparison between Offred and Shalini in terms of their reaction to being torn apart from their children and relegated to a fenced existence in confined spaces, of their entrapment in oppressive patriarchal states that have come into being (partly) as a result of ecological deterioration and which use religion to justify the exploitation and enslavement of women, and points out similarities between their revolt against being silenced, brainwashed, disciplined and abused (2023, p. 29–32).

What Akbar's novel adds to Atwood's portrayal of a woman's lived experience in a patriarchal, exploitative regime—and to ecofeminist concerns in general—is a specific, though not highly emphasized, postcolonial aspect. *Leila* is a postcolonial ecofeminist novel, both due to its setting (postcolonial India) and its hints at the legacy of colonialism in the totalitarian society depicted. In this respect, it displays more similarities with Roy's *The God of Small Things* in its exploration of the lingering effects of casteism, colonialism, patriarchy, and hierarchical dualisms in a postcolonial society that exploits its people and the environment alike.

In light of the above, this paper presents a postcolonial ecofeminist reading of Akbar's novel. This approach relies on postcolonial ecofeminism, which blends the concerns of postcolonial feminism and ecocriticism. It posits that the material circumstances of Third World women shape their environmental interactions, and that women's oppression

and nature's exploitation are interlinked. Factors such as class, caste, and (neo-) colonialism also shape these dynamics, all of which Akbar acknowledges in his creation of dystopian spaces and society.

Indian ecofeminist activist Vandana Shiva blames the androcentric attitude for the dual exploitation and domination exerted in the name of 'development.' She claims that all development strategies, whether aiming at the market economy or colonization, are actually "maldevelopment." These strategies represent not progress, but a regressive and violent process by which women and nature are subjugated and abused (Shiva, 1988, p. 4). For Shiva, 'development' projects in postcolonial countries are equated with the civilizing mission of colonialism. Roy suggests that patriarchal structures justify their dominance through categorical or dualistic hierarchies, such as mind–body, male–female, spirit–matter, and culture–nature (Ahsan, 2016, p. 255). Patriarchal dominance maintains control through the repressive and ideological state apparatus. It posits women and other 'deviants' as the Other, to be exploited by the majority in postcolonial society. Postcolonial ecofeminism can also be seen as a response and resistance to patriarchal and (neo-)colonial societies' domination of territory and the body, which are equated with and viewed as political spaces (Mattar, 2024, p. 75). This domination leads to the oppressed and exploited individuals' complete lack of control over their living space and their bodies.

The postcolonial ecofeminist novel's concern with dominance and lack of control appears in both its discussion of space and society (the primary focus of the following section) and in its portrayal of the protagonist's lived, embodied experience. This, in turn, prompts a phenomenological approach to reading Akbar's novel (covered in "The Transformation of Identity"). My reading is phenomenological in two ways. First, it focuses on the protagonist's unique, subjective experience, drawing on Heideggerian phenomenology. Here, subjectivity as personal truth depends on one's cultural, social, and historical context. Second, it pays close attention to bodily and emotional experience. This follows Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology, which claims that the body fundamentally shapes human experience, perception, and emotion, and that human consciousness is inseparable from lived bodily experience. The most useful phenomenological terms for this research are embodied experience and facticity. In this paper, embodied experience refers to the notion that sensory perceptions of the body shape one's emotions and cognition. This is based on the idea that the lived body is the center of experience (Husserl, 1952) and that bodily experience cannot be separated from perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Phenomenological facticity refers to the inherent, unchangeable aspects of existence and the world that form the basis for all human experience.

It can be understood as the constraints of a given situation (Heidegger, 1962), but also as the condition for freedom (Sartre, 1956). For example, it has been argued that without facticity, freedom would have no basis, while facticity would have no meaning without freedom. I believe that understanding facticity and embodied experience is essential for grasping the individual experience behind the wider ecological–social phenomena portrayed in postcolonial ecofeminist fiction.

## Ecological and Societal Changes

Akbar's novel is set in the near future in an unnamed Indian city divided into sectors by 59-feet-high walls. The high sectors with their "wide, lovely avenues, […] fringed either side with a stripe of thick boskage, palm squirrels and macaques skittering through the leaves" (Akbar, 2017, p. 98) are reserved for the privileged, who have access to clean water and air. Outside their walls, the slums—the so-called Outroads—are "a noisome meld of human waste and rotting vegetables," characterised by "rancid smell," rats, "a dense, growing pile of trash," extreme temperature, and water shortage (Akbar, 2017, p. 97, 13). They are festering sites of an ecological disaster, where the Slummers live segregated, vulnerable, precarious lives, at the mercy of ecological and political forces. The inhabitants of the high sectors dump their litter and toxic waste on them, pollute their air, and take away their water; they use them as servants and treat them as abject, inferior subjects. They are oppressed and exploited in the name of purity in a society divided by caste. The novel may thus be read as a "critical eco-dystopia" which, according to Manoj Rajbanshi and Nagendra Kumar "imagines the harsh fates of humans who live in severely degraded environments and are forced to realize that their very existence is predicated on a set of ecological [and social] conditions that have been thrown out of balance" (2024, p. 79). It sheds light on the potentially devastating consequences of changes occurring in the world today, triggered and exacerbated by fear and self-interest. In Akbar's narrative, these are the very motivating forces behind the actions of the totalitarian regime led by the Council, with Skydome and Purity One being the primary tools and symbols of exploitation and oppression, encompassing both ecological and societal aspects.

Skydome is a gigantic air conditioner, a "techno utopian device" which, as Diya Rajput points out, ensures the "hierarchy of the provisions to citizens in the name of purity" (2022, p. 13): it provides clean water and cool, fresh air for the high sectors, while the heat it emits further increases the temperature and causes fires outside the sector walls. Purity One, a 60-feet-high wall around the political quarter, not only symbolizes power but also safeguards the "abundance" enabled by Skydome: it encloses a paradise which, with its clean, tree-lined avenues and lush gardens, "feels like a different city, a fathomless

distance from the place I live, on a mountaintop, perhaps, locked away. The political sector is the prototype. One by one, so I'm told, all the high sectors have begun to look like this" (Akbar, 2017, p. 98). Although the novel does not provide a detailed description of this transformation, it is mentioned that in the forty years since Purity One was erected, hundreds of other walls have been built, preserving nature inside, but leaving only barren land, water shortages, and filth outside. The changes Akbar describes clearly indicate that the ruling political elite and its privileged followers damage the environment for the Slummers to create their own ecotopia, an ecologically ideal place or situation, covering up actual ecocide, the destruction of nature by intentional or careless human action. It must also be noted that with its "colonial bungalows, the Ministries, the old Turkic gardens" (Akbar, 2017, p. 8), the exclusive space of the political sector is a testament to the legacy of colonial times as well. Although this is the only instance where the novel makes a direct reference to the colonial past, the fact that the colonial bungalows are located in the political sector and inhabited by the ruling class indicates that oppression may, in fact, continue in postcolonial India, with a mere shift in power from the hands of the colonizer to a handful of powerful men.

From a social perspective, both Purity One and Skydome are physical manifestations of the Council's 'divide and rule' strategy. This is highlighted by the wording of the Skydome advertisement: "Why share the air? PureSeal … outside impurities. 100% ClimaControl" (Akbar, 2017, p. 130). These words highlight the sanctity of the ideology of purity and the means by which it may be achieved. Spatial and societal division, exclusion, and dominance, and the abuse of nature and people are all emphasized. Interestingly, Skydome may have negative implications both for the outside and the inside. While the slums segregate the impure, the high sectors become a golden cage for their inhabitants. This perpetuates the importance of isolating themselves from "outside impurities"—the slum dwellers and the natural environment—on which they are, in fact, dependent. Each high sector has a slum attached to it, which provides space for waste disposal and serves the people living in that area. This means that the privileged life of those living in high sectors can only be maintained through exploitation and destruction. This is then justified by the need to preserve purity.

Purity One is "believed to have an inscrutable power" (Akbar, 2017, p. 8): it is the dividing line not only between ecotopia and ecocide but also between the ruling caste and the rest of society. It is the symbol of the totalitarian regime built on spatial and social division, segregating and imprisoning the privileged and the precarious alike: no one dares question or challenge its function and the position/space it confines them in.

The sector walls and the so-called flyroads connecting them above ground create an enormous maze. Citizens can get lost in it forever. Each person is enclosed in their own sector and the life it enables, excluded from the others. There is minimal trespassing allowed between the sectors, with no mobility whatsoever. Any transgression is severely punished. As the protagonist, Shalini, notes: "These walls diminish us. Make us something less than human" (Akbar, 2017, p. 30). The regime controls all life both spatially and mentally by denying the 'impure' any fundamental human right. It also keeps the 'pure,' privileged citizens secluded and under strict control.

The sectors and walls are also vital tools of the political propaganda of a utopian society and ecotopia. They were erected to symbolize and remind people of the order implemented by Council Law and preserved by their militia, the Repeaters. In narrative flashbacks, Shalini recalls the birth of the regime, when, as a response to the growing number of immigrants in the city and the unfolding ecological crisis, the head of the Council, Mr Joshi first voiced his political agenda: "making this city pure, pure as the cities of the ancients […] A place of order, discipline. Clean and pure" (Akbar, 2017, pp. 70–72). In order to reclaim their "rightful place at the top of the world," the citizens must obey the rules and pledge total allegiance by protecting "*our* walls, *our* women, the communities" (Akbar, 2017, pp. 71–72; my emphasis). The possessive pronoun indicates that the Council uses the "underprivileged population and climate crisis for political purposes" (Rajput, 2022, p. 12) since the slogan of the regime, "Purity for All" actually means securing conformity for the 'pure ones,' the governing class of privileged Hindu men and their families, and ostracizing the ones who "seem to crave for disorder" and who have "no respect for our oldest rules" (Akbar, 2017, p. 28, 71). Consequently, immigrants, Muslims, Slummers, and any transgressor, particularly women, are deprived of their basic needs and rights; they are viewed and treated as both polluted and polluting. The sectors segregate people based on religion and *jati* or caste identity. The identity of the lower castes (Shudras and untouchables) and anyone considered Other are equated with the notion of innate impurity: they are defiled, abject beings, waste thrown away like litter over the walls (Rajbanshi & Kumar, 2024, pp. 83, 87).

Another interesting aspect of this quotation is its inherent critique of Hindu nationalism as a direct consequence of the colonial past and the Partition of 1947. As noted by Šarūnas Paunksnis, the intention of Hindu nationalism to be as powerful as the colonial regime may be read as a sign of masculine anxiety, manifested in controlling and exploiting the bodies of women, as well as a strife for freedom, to debunk the colonial myth of Hindu weakness by demonstrating its strength through religious ideology, corporeal discipline and strict spatial politics (2023, pp. 45, 50–51), dividing society both literally and metaphorically.

In one of Shalini's visions, her husband, Riz, describes the sector system and segregated society as follows:

> That's what this city is like. I feel it all the time. Everyone tucked behind walls of their own making, stewing in a private shame, like I was that day. They can't come out into the open. Anyone who can afford it hides behind walls. They think they're doing it for security, for purity, but somewhere inside it's shame at their own greed. How they've made the rest of us live. That's why they're always secluding themselves, going higher and higher. They don't want to see what's on the ground. They don't want to see who lives here. (Akbar, 2017, p. 144)

The quotation draws attention to how segregation may become a double-edged sword, for the more they fear abjection, the more they exclude the impure; the more ashamed they feel for their actions, the more they turn a blind eye to their role in the wrongdoings; the more they try to protect themselves, the more isolated they become. Consequently, fear not only protects but also destroys them and their perfect, 'pure' world, since exclusion and exploitation have devastating social and ecological consequences: the slums increasingly experience and, at the same time, further increase the environmental catastrophe that the high sectors and the Council strive to solve by creating them.

The lived experience of spatial and social division depicted in Akbar's novel offers new insights into the cyclical process of climate change leading to societal changes, and social crisis aggravating the climate crisis, resulting in further and further transformations in the name of purity, which continually widen the gap between the privileged and the precarity, isolate and alienate the citizens, both solidify and intensify domination, oppression and exploitation. It is an irreversible process of destruction and demise, running in a loop—a vicious circle that is impossible to break.

## The Transformation of Identity

The sector that manages to remain autonomous and liberal for the longest is the East End. Here, "no one much bothered with the Council's indices of purity" (Akbar, 2017, p. 53). The protagonist, Shalini, lives in the East End with her Muslim husband, Riz, and their daughter, Leila. This changes after a brutal attack by the Repeaters, who presumably kill Riz and abduct Leila. Shalini has committed the crime of interfaith marriage and has wasted water at the pool party thrown for her daughter's third birthday. Instead of being expelled to the Slums or killed like other lawbreakers, Shalini is taken to Purity Camp, a punitive facility where 'deviant' women are to be 'purified.' Her punishment is masked as an act of generosity, offering her a second chance at re-integrating into society.

In fact, Shalini is treated as "less than human" (Akbar, 2017, p. 30), while the Slummers are the outcasts, perceived as not even 'human beings' by those in the privileged sectors. The totalitarian regime kidnaps, brainwashes, eliminates, and dehumanizes at will. This is all part of its systemic and structural injustice (Rajput, 2022, p. 9). It controls both men and women through psychological manipulation, corporeal discipline, and strict spatial politics, but the consequences differ significantly. Disobedient, rule-breaking men are killed and discarded; by contrast, women's bodies are claimed as a "property of the nation, so they are re-educated, enslaved, and moulded as per the wishes of the male ruling elite" (2023, p. 51). This illustrates the ecofeminist claim of the parallel oppression and exploitation of both nature and women. Land in the high sectors is technologically controlled and exploited for the exclusive benefit of a powerful few, while the slums and Outroads serve as landfills for society's waste and 'shame.' Ostracized and "re-educated" women are exploited as servants and still viewed as the "forbidden fruit" (Akbar, 2017, p. 122), their abuse satisfying the ruling men's hidden desires. Thus, both nature and women function as "commodities," victims of "a patriarchal need for dominance" (Shah et al., 2024, p. 3174).

Women's exploitation, oppression, and the concomitant changes that Shalini is forced to undergo are depicted in the narrative on three levels: the protagonist's body and mind, her social position and attitude thereto, as well as her subjectivity and agency—lost, revived, and constantly re-constructed. Her transformation both parallels the changes in the environment and society and is intricately intertwined with them; it is the result of and a reaction to totalitarian control.

Recalling her and thirteen other 'deviant' women's arrival at Purity Camp, Shalini describes the Repeaters' violent actions as follows:

> When the sun is up men remember their responsibility. At night they will do anything, as if their vileness, their desperation to possess, can only be seen in the day's glare. We were vulnerable—the loose, the ripe—choosing sex over family, over the wishes of the elders, the intentions of the community. Through the night the Repeaters had prodded us with their sticks, finding a fleshy thigh, a side of stomach, thrusting in the splintered end. (Akbar, 2017, p. 83)

The quotation depicts a misogynistic attitude and physical violence, with sexual abuse implied. It shows Shalini realizing that the Repeaters want the abducted women to surrender so they can fully control their bodies and minds (Agudo, 2023, p. 31). The words show how body and mind are linked in control and suggest that by treating these women

as lesser, the system makes them so. The aim is to purify them—meaning to subjugate them physically and psychologically. Dr Iyer, the head of the facility, says: "It's for you all. All of you, who sacrificed your purity. [...] Your last hope" (Akbar, 2017, p. 85). As part of the 're-education' program, the women slowly lose hope, a core part of humanity. Shalini notices this on the way to Purity Camp: "As the distance between us grew I began to feel a deep pressure in my shoulders, a resistance band, Leila, Leila holding on as they forced forward" (Akbar, 2017, p. 83). This physical pressure signals her longing to go home and be with her family, but also shows her realization that returning is impossible—bringing panic, fear, guilt, and the shame of failing as a mother and protector—a complex experience of forced separation.

The graphic image of Purity Camp that the protagonist paints likewise reveals that the lived experience of her abduction is deeply felt in the body: "When I first got there, I felt in pieces, ensnared by the wide, open fields with the lonely gabled sheds. A single step from the brink" (Akbar, 2017, p. 19). The embodied experience of fragmentation and entrapment, of distress and fear, is intensified by perceiving the camp as "a place apart, separate from everything else" where "any sign of outside existence […] seemed strange, unreal" (Akbar, 2017, p. 84). Forcefully removed from a life of privilege and thrown into that of subjugation, the changes Shalini experiences are so sudden and rapid that they are practically incomprehensible but clearly and deeply felt in the body. The cognitive and physical aspect of her very existence in Purity Camp may be interpreted as the embodied experience of her phenomenological facticity, which points to Heidegger's (1962) concept of "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), in a sense of being thrown into the world without any prior explanation and being alive within a fixed set of physical, spatial, and temporal possibilities. The heroine is confined in a space of abuse and control for an unknown length of time until she 'comes round.' She is 'purified' to re-enter the world as a useful, loyal citizen, serving the patriarchal, totalitarian regime.

The process of 'purification' is described as a forced transformation: "It is not something from me but something *of* me that has been taken. The part that could feel warmth, happiness, desire. Or is it that there is no they. It is *I* who have yielded something of myself" (Akbar, 2017, p. 82, my emphasis). As part of her re-education, Shalini is deprived of the ability to experience positive emotions. She is compelled to internalize the idea that her impurity and deviance pose a threat to her daughter's happiness and her wealthy friends' notion of home, which affects her mental state and sense of self. In the early days of her confinement, she experiences strong, sensitive feelings and embodied emotions. For instance, being separated from Leila feels like "physical hollowness" and a "numbing ache" (Akbar, 2017, pp. 89–90). Dr Iyer instructs her not to think too much and to put away

her anger unless she is on top of the so-called Anger Tower. There, she can "abuse, […] kick, scream" (Akbar, 2017, p. 89). What he gives her is only the illusion of freedom and choice. In reality, he mentally and physically controls her emotions, her body, and her very existence. Eventually, she feels that everything is "random, without real purpose. Like a balloon unstopped, zipping one corner to the other, every moment weaker, lesser" (Akbar, 2017, p. 95). Shalini's perception of being reduced by the experience, and of her existence in Purity Camp as uncertain and pointless, may be explained by Quentin Meillassoux's definition of facticity, which describes it as "the absence of reason for any reality; in other words, the impossibility of providing an ultimate ground for the existence of any being" (2014, p. 21).

To find purpose in their impossible existence, the women try to cope by "doing desperate little things so we could remember what was normal," but the Pill that Dr Iyer regularly gives them to "instill discipline" thwarts these attempts as it turns "the mind from the vigils of the day, the memories we guard, the images we polish and protect and return to" (Akbar, 2017, p. 20, 19, 18). The Pill thus serves as another tool for oppression: it is designed to control the bodies and minds of these women, to rob them of free will and memories—the essence of their humanity. Still, Shalini keeps remembering—even having visions of—her loved ones. She describes this cognitive and embodied experience as follows: "now everywhere there's a slow, warm tingle. I'm staring at something soft, something smooth, [...] I see there's no distance between my self and these folds of satin memory, we are one, the same." (Akbar, 2017, p. 18). The Pill may change her perception of the world around her, but it cannot diminish her emotions or erase her memories. This implies that although her existence in Purity Camp is incomprehensible and unjustifiable, it is also irreducible.

The protagonist challenges her facticity and control over her body and mind by holding on for the sake of her daughter. Furthermore, she finds reason and ground for existence in the community of women in Purity Camp, who are portrayed as tough, "strange and beautiful women with the courage to slash at every expectation" (Akbar, 2017, p. 91). Although these women come from diverse sectors and castes, they form alliances despite their differences, united by their shared experiences of oppression and resistance. Their 'transgressions' include interfaith and same-sex marriage or campaigning against the *khatna* (cutting the girl's genitals before puberty). With the support of this community, the heroine undergoes a mindset shift, realizing how negligent she was in her former privileged position, having turned a blind eye to the climate crisis and social inequality, as evidenced by her wasteful use of water and mistreatment of her maid, Sapna.

Over four months in Purity Camp, Shalini awakens to the reality and cruelty of the totalitarian regime and patriarchal oppression. She learns that restraining women's freedom and forcing them to become 'pure' means exploiting and marginalizing them, stripping away their sense of self and identity.

Sixteen years later, in the narrative present of the novel, the protagonist lives in Purity Tower with other 're-educated' women, since "the Council decided we had to be kept out of the city. They said we might pollute the rest. […] Here there were no sixty-foot walls. No sectors. Only scrubland and an empty horizon" (Akbar, 2017, p. 17). The spatial imagery reveals another aspect of the dual exploitation of women and nature. Although 'purified,' the so-called Tower widows are still treated as abject. They are symbolically equated with barren or polluted land. They no longer have any perspective or hope for revival, so they have no impetus to transgress or revolt. As she says, "The loneliness of these sixteen years is taking me out of myself. I will edge into a different state without realising" (Akbar, 2017, pp. 100–101). The changes she experiences stem from her subjugated position and her embodied sense of hopelessness. They are also induced by the Pill that Shalini still takes occasionally. Despite this, Shalini continues to have vivid memories of Leila and visions of Riz, especially when repeatedly visiting Purity One on her daughter's birthday, "[t]o ask her for forgiveness. We didn't respect these walls, so they took her from me. […] To her I am an emptiness, an ache she cannot understand but yearns to fill. No. I have left more, a glimmer at least. […] The warmth of her first cradle, my arms" (Akbar, 2017, p. 11). Her words suggest that she has internalized the guilt created by the Council's propaganda of purity. However, she also maintains an indestructible emotional and embodied connection with Leila. Against all odds, this connection keeps her hope alive that Leila is still alive, thus preserving her humanity.

Nevertheless, performing peon duties for the political sector, Shalini continues to be treated by the totalitarian regime as a slave. Her confined existence is an embodied experience of "suffocation, inescapability and regimentation" (Agudo, 2023, p. 32). However, the Council cannot fully control her emotions. Her determination to survive and to find Leila is fueled by love, hope, and anger. She interprets this drive as "My body reminding me that I had work, that I needed to go on" (Akbar, 2017, p. 90). Her unsuppressed, embodied emotions not only give her a sense of being alive; they also provide a profound connection to her inner self. They also propel her to continue her quest and transgression. Thrust into "the most dispossessed and sordid existence" and gradually realizing what women must endure under the regime, the heroine starts a personal crusade. She seeks to reunite with Leila and to "reposition herself as a woman in a country in which they

are exploited for the sole benefit of the new ruling elite" (Agudo, 2023, pp. 26–27). In this enclosed space and existence, Shalini carves out a sense of freedom for herself. Her present facticity does not limit this sense of freedom. It resonates with the Sartrean idea that one's values depend on one's facticity yet are still freely ascribed by the individual (cf. Sartre, 1956).

It is this very freedom, I believe, that makes the protagonist a representation of feminist ecological citizenship. Sherilyn MacGregor coined this term to denote "citizenship as a means of resistance" (2014, p. 629). As a servant in the political sector, Shalini manages to gain access to the Ministry of Settlement. She does so at the cost of allowing the Council official to pleasure himself while touching her breast—another example of the hypocrisy and totalitarian power of the 'pure' and privileged. By pretending conformity and submission, she enters the headquarters of the Council and the symbol of the regime, the Purity Pyramid. It is described as an "onyx monstrosity, winking and wavy like a mirage" (Akbar, 2017, p. 128). There, she can secretly find the address of her former maid, Sapna, now the wife of a Councilman. Sapna is believed to raise her daughter. Shalini thus transgresses, resists, and subverts in the hope of finding Leila. Her disobedience may be interpreted as "a capacity and practices that resist being normalised by institutional orders" and is "at the core of what constitutes 'acts of citizenship'" (Mattar, 2024, p. 88). Her feminist ecological citizenship lies in realizing her ecological responsibility and "acknowledging the legacy of sexual bias that continues to drive patriarchal society" (Wyman, 2020, p. 154). It is reflected in recognizing women's strength in oppressive situations and resisting the normalization of dehumanization. It also lies in carrying on, against all odds, despite the limitations of her facticity, with love and hope as her driving forces.

In the end, the protagonist finds Sapna. Sapna denies raising Leila and orders the Repeaters to drag Shalini away. Yet, Shalini manages to catch a glimpse of the girl and believes she has finally found her daughter. The novel ends with this 'recognition,' which symbolizes hope: "She's beautiful. […] Double dimples, dimples unlike any other, dimples like my mother and I have. […] She keeps making that gesture. She is calling me" (Akbar, 2017, p. 154). Although ambiguous, the ending demonstrates that hope motivates Shalini's perseverance and is central to her ability to resist dehumanizing control. Love and hope are portrayed as more potent than any form of oppression and as tools to combat exploitation. Hope, in this context, is not only a marker of the protagonist's irreducible humanity but also a subversive force. Henry A. Giroux defines it as "a discourse of critique and social transformation […] that provides the foundation for enabling human beings to learn about their potential as moral and civic agents" (2004, p. 63).

## Conclusion

Leila portrays a totalitarian regime where citizens are divided by caste, and nature and women are oppressed and exploited. It depicts the destruction of nature and the creation of spaces where the Other is violated and dehumanized in the name of purity. *Leila* is a poignant and frighteningly realistic literary representation of present-day ecological and societal changes, as well as their foreseeable consequences. However, it also offers a tiny ray of sun in this bleak future. Akbar's protagonist, despite being deprived of her social position, dignity, and freedom, still fights subjugation through acts of subversion and resistance. She is controlled, humiliated, and treated as Other, as abject, as less than human. Still, she constructs a self-identity as a feminist ecological citizen. She transforms her incomprehensible existence into the embodied experience of freedom and preserves her humanity through love and hope. The novel may be read as a warning or a cry for help, but also as a call to recognize our shared humanity and responsibility. It urges us to awaken to our capacity for generating positive changes.

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