Bodhi International Journal of
Research in Humanities, Arts and Science

Vol. 10 Special Issue 1 November 2025
E-ISSN: 2456-5571

Underexplored Feminist Dystopias in Contemporary Indian Speculative Fiction

Vidushi Vidhu
Assistant Professor, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab

Crossref doi
Open Access

Manuscript ID:
BIJ-SPL1-NOV25-MD-015

Subject: English

Received : 05.08.2025
Accepted : 22.08.2025
Published : 13.11.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si1.25.Nov015

Abstract

The genre of feminist dystopian fiction, globally dominated by Anglophone texts like Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, has provided a powerful vocabulary for critiquing patriarchal control. However, scholarly focus has largely remained on Western contexts, overlooking a burgeoning and culturally specific body of work from other regions. This paper addresses this critical gap by examining underexplored feminist dystopias within contemporary Indian speculative fiction. It argues that texts such as Prayaag Akbar's Leila (2017) and Manjula Padmanabhan's The Island of Lost Girls (2015) construct uniquely Indian dystopias where patriarchal oppression is inextricably linked with local anxieties surrounding caste, religion, and neo-liberal development. Through a close reading informed by postcolonial feminist theory and Foucault's concept of biopolitics, this paper demonstrates how these novels move beyond universalist critiques of patriarchy. They instead foreground an intersectional model of dystopia, where the female body becomes the primary site of state control, not just over gender, but over the purity of the community and the nation itself. By analyzing these narratives, we can decolonize our understanding of the feminist dystopian genre and recognize its potent function as a diagnostic tool for the socio-political fissures of contemporary India.

Keywords: feminist dystopia, indian speculative fiction, intersectionality, biopolitics, postcolonial feminism, prayaag akbar, manjula padmanabhan, caste

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a remarkable resurgence of dystopian fiction as a dominant cultural form, with feminist dystopias emerging as a particularly potent subgenre. Propelled by the enduring relevance of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1985) and amplified by contemporary works like Naomi Alderman's The Power (2016), the feminist dystopia has become a critical lens through which to analyze contemporary anxieties regarding bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, and systemic misogyny. However, the critical and popular canon of this genre remains overwhelmingly Western, predicated on a socio-political framework that, while powerful, does not fully encapsulate the matrix of oppressions faced by women globally.

In India, a nation grappling with the complex interplay of rapid modernization, religious nationalism, and deeply entrenched patriarchal and caste-based structures, speculative fiction has emerged as a vital space for social critique. While Indian Speculative Fiction (ISF) is gaining academic traction (see Banerjee, 2018; Chattopadhyay, 2020), its specifically feminist dystopian currents remain significantly underexplored. The critical discourse often subsumes gender into broader postcolonial

critiques or overlooks it in favour of analyses centred on mythology and technology.

This paper seeks to rectify this scholarly oversight. It posits that contemporary Indian feminist dystopias offer a crucial expansion of the genre's theoretical and political boundaries. By analyzing two exemplary yet under-theorized novels—Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* and Manjula Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls*—this research argues that Indian feminist dystopias are defined by their profound engagement with intersectionality. In these worlds, patriarchal control is not a monolithic force but a complex biopolitical apparatus that operates through the specific, localized vectors of caste, class, and religious identity. The female body is thus transformed into a contested territory where the future of the family, the community, and the nation is violently inscribed. This analysis will first situate the texts within the theoretical frameworks of feminist dystopia and Indian SF, before undertaking a close reading of each novel to unpack their unique contributions to the genre and their incisive commentary on the trajectory of modern India.

Literature Review: Theorizing an Indian Feminist Dystopia

To understand the unique contributions of Indian feminist dystopias, one must first bridge three distinct but overlapping fields of scholarship: the theory of feminist dystopia, the landscape of Indian Speculative Fiction, and the framework of postcolonial and intersectional feminism.

The Architecture of Feminist Dystopia

Dystopian literature traditionally functions as a critique of totalitarianism, technological overreach, or social conformity (Booker, 1994). Feminist dystopia refines this critique by identifying patriarchy as the foundational organizing principle of the oppressive society. As Sonya Lano and M. J. Devaney (2020) argue, these narratives "expose the ways in which patriarchal ideologies are embedded in social, political, and economic systems." The central themes revolve around the state's control over female bodies, particularly their reproductive capacities, the suppression of female knowledge and language, and the violent enforcement of rigid gender roles (Atwood, 1985). The female protagonist's journey is often one of awakening to her own subjugation and seeking agency in a world designed to deny it. While universally resonant, this model implicitly assumes a relatively homogenous experience of womanhood, a premise that postcolonial feminist thought has robustly challenged.

The Rise of Indian Speculative Fiction (ISF)

The lineage of Indian speculative and utopian writing can be traced back to early 20th-century works like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's pioneering feminist utopia Sultana's Dream (1905). However, the contemporary landscape is marked by a post-millennial surge in Anglophone novels that engage with global SF tropes while remaining deeply rooted in Indian realities. Scholars like Suparno Banerjee (2018) have noted ISF's preoccupation with "postcolonial temporalities," grappling with the legacies of colonialism, the pressures of globalization, and the failures of the nation-state. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay (2020) further highlights its engagement with indigenous traditions, mythologies, and a "subaltern futurism." Yet, within this broader scholarship, a sustained, gender-focused analysis of its dystopian strand is conspicuously absent. The critical focus tends to be on how ISF re-imagines the nation, with gender often treated as a secondary concern rather than a primary analytic category.

The Intersectional Imperative

The crucial theoretical lens for bridging this gap is intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe how overlapping identities-such as race, class, and gender—create compounded experiences of discrimination. Postcolonial feminists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) have long critiqued the tendency of Western feminism to produce a monolithic "Third World Woman," thereby erasing the specificities of her oppression. An intersectional approach to Indian feminist dystopias, therefore, insists that one cannot understand patriarchy in India without understanding

its co-constitution with the caste system, religious majoritarianism, and class hierarchies. This paper uses this intersectional framework to argue that the dystopias in *Leila* and *The Island of Lost Girls* are not simply about men controlling women; they are about a state apparatus that uses patriarchal control to enforce a much broader biopolitical project of social purification and national identity.

Analysis: Case Studies in Intersectional Dystopia

Purity, Segregation, and the Maternal Body in Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

Prayaag Akbar's Leila (2017) presents a near-future India where society has been fragmented into walled, segregated communities based on caste and creed. The protagonist, Shalini, is a privileged Hindu woman who is ostracized and sent to a "Purity Camp" for the crime of marrying a Muslim man. Her dystopian journey is a desperate search for her daughter, Leila, who was taken from her as a child.

While Leila can be read as a critique of rising religious intolerance and urban ghettoization, its core dystopian mechanism is profoundly feminist and intersectional. The state's power, under the aegis of the 'Council of Purity,' is not primarily enacted through overt political suppression but through the intimate realm of the family and the female body. Shalini's transgression is not political dissent but reproductive. Her body, by bearing the child of a mixed-faith union, becomes a site of national pollution. As Foucault (1978) theorized, biopower is the state's investment in managing the life of its population. In Leila, this biopower is laser-focused on preventing "impurity" at its source: the womb.

The novel's feminism is thus inseparable from its critique of caste and religious purity. Shalini's suffering is not simply because she is a woman, but because she is a woman who has violated the endogamous boundaries crucial to maintaining the patriarchal, upper-caste order. The Purity Camp, reminiscent of Atwood's Red Center, functions to "re-educate" women, but its lessons are not just about subservience to men, but subservience to the community's boundaries. The surveillance in this dystopia is also intersectional; it is the panoptic gaze of one's own community, enforcing purity from within. Shalini's quest for her daughter is therefore more than a maternal drama; it is a rebellion against a biopolitical state that defines personhood and citizenship through the control of female sexuality and reproduction.

Gendercide and the Logic of Surplus Women in Manjula Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls*

If Leila explores the qualitative control of female reproduction, Manjula Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015), a sequel to her play Harvest, investigates the quantitative. Padmanabhan extrapolates the real-world horror of female foeticide in India to its chilling, logical conclusion. In her dystopia, the gender ratio has become so skewed that women are a scarce and precious commodity. The protagonist, Meiji, is one of seven "Mothers" to a single "Head of Household," a grim parody of the polyandrous Draupadi myth.

The novel's central dystopian conceit is the titular island, a secret government-run sanctuary where "surplus" girls—those whose families could not or would not raise them—are kept in isolation. This island embodies a classic dystopian paradox: it is both a prison and a utopia. It is a prison that exiles women from society, rendering them "surplus" to the patriarchal economy. Simultaneously, it is a female-only utopia, a space free from male violence and control where women like Meiji can forge their own identities.

Padmanabhan's feminist critique operates on two levels. First, it is a ferocious indictment of a society that instrumentalizes women, reducing them to their reproductive function and economic value. The term "surplus" is key, echoing Marxist-feminist critiques of how women's labour and lives are devalued under capitalism and patriarchy. Second, the novel critiques the very idea of "protection" as a form of control. The island is created to "save" girls, but this salvation requires their complete erasure from the world. This powerfully mirrors real-world discourses where restrictions on women's freedom (e.g., dress codes, curfews) are justified in the name of their safety.

Unlike Leila's focus on religious purity, The Island of Lost Girls is rooted in a brutal socio-economic logic. The dystopia arises not from a new

ideology but from the hyper-acceleration of an existing patriarchal preference. Padmanabhan demonstrates how biopolitics can manifest not only in the management of purity but also in the cold, demographic management of life and death, turning the female population into a resource to be cultivated, culled, and controlled.

Discussion: Convergences and Divergences in Indian Feminist Dystopias

The analyses of *Leila* and *The Island of Lost Girls* reveal several converging themes that distinguish Indian feminist dystopias from their Western counterparts.

First is the centrality of the community over the state. While the state is the ultimate enforcer in both novels, the immediate source of oppression is the community—the caste/religious enclave in Leila and the patriarchal family unit in Island. This reflects a social reality in India where community and family norms often wield more power over an individual's life than the formal laws of the state.

Second is the explicitly intersectional nature of oppression. In these texts, gender is never a standalone category of analysis. The dystopian societies are built upon the violent policing of boundaries between communities, making the woman's body the primary border to be patrolled. This moves beyond the generalized patriarchy of The Handmaid's Tale to a more nuanced model where gendered oppression is the tool used to maintain a larger social hierarchy based on birth and belief.

Third is a critique of postcolonial modernity. These are not backward, pre-modern societies. Akbar's dystopia is one of high walls, advanced surveillance, and sanitized urban spaces. Padmanabhan's world involves sophisticated reproductive technologies and state-level demographic management. This suggests a powerful critique of the narrative of "development" in modern India, showing how technological and economic progress can be co-opted not to liberate, but to create more efficient systems of social and gendered control.

Conclusion

The underexplored feminist dystopias of contemporary Indian speculative fiction represent a vital and necessary expansion of the genre. As demonstrated through the works of Prayaag Akbar and Manjula Padmanabhan, these narratives de-center the Western experience and construct worlds where patriarchal biopolitics are inextricably fused with the enduring structures of caste, religion, and class. They reveal how the female body can become the ultimate theatre for a nation's anxieties about its identity, purity, and future. By reading these texts through an intersectional and postcolonial lens, we not only grant them the critical attention they deserve but also enrich our global understanding of dystopian fiction. They serve as a stark warning, illustrating that the path to dystopia is not always paved with jackboots and overt totalitarianism, but can also be laid, brick by insidious brick, through the policing of whom one can love, what children one can bear, and which lives are deemed valuable. Further research should extend this inquiry to regional language speculative fiction and explore how other axes of identity, such as queerness and disability, are represented within these emerging dystopian imaginaries, further mapping the complex terrain of social critique in 21st-century India.

References

Akbar, Prayaag. Leila. Simon & Schuster India, 2017.

Alderman, Naomi. The Power. Viking Press, 2016.

Atwood, Margaret. The Handmaid's Tale. McClelland and Stewart, 1985.

Banerjee, Suparno. Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity. University of Wales Press, 2018.

Booker, M. Keith. The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism. Greenwood Press, 1994.

Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva. "Indian Genre Fiction: Languages, Literatures, and Translations." Strange Horizons, 20 Aug. 2020.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." University of

Chicago Legal Forum, vol. 1989, no. 1, article 8, 1989, pp. 139-67.

Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction. Translated by Robert Hurley, Pantheon Books, 1978.

Hossain, Rokeya Sakhawat. Sultana's Dream. 1905.

Lano, Sonya, and M. J. Devaney. "Introduction: The Politics of Feminist Dystopian Fiction." The Politics of Feminist Dystopian Fiction, edited by Sonya Lano and M. J. Devaney, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 1-18.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." boundary 2, vol. 12/13, 1984, pp. 333-58.

Padmanabhan, Manjula. The Island of Lost Girls. Hachette India, 2015.