



## PRAYAAG AKBAR'S *LEILA* AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*: A STUDY ON DYSTOPIAN INTERSECTIONS

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*ABSTRACT.* The turbulent historical period we are currently going through seems to have stimulated the production and publication of an overflowing number of dystopian narratives, which gravitate around a wide array of different topics. The publication of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, now turned into one of the most successful TV shows of the decade, has become a link between Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell's pioneering works and the latest publications in the field, among which Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* stands as a most significant contribution. This paper, which is informed by the illuminating approaches of Atwood scholars and Indian dystopian theorists, will seek to trace a number of intersections between Atwood's masterpiece and Akbar's opera prima, focusing on the authors' takes on some of the tropes that build up the dystopian atmosphere of these novels. Thus, this article will primarily delve into the constraining effects of regimentation, especially for the female protagonists of these works, and the manipulation of the past, as they are the source of profoundly illuminating common grounds.

*Keywords:* Dystopia, totalitarianism, regimentation, past, Atwood, Akbar.

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***LEILA DE PRAYAAG AKBAR Y THE HANDMAID'S TALE DE MARGARET ATWOOD: UN ESTUDIO DE SUS INTERSECCIONES DISTÓPICAS***

*RESUMEN.* El momento histórico tan turbulento que vivimos en la actualidad parece haber estimulado la producción de un sinfín de narrativas distópicas, que giran en torno a una gran variedad de temas. La publicación de *The Handmaid's Tale* de Margaret Atwood, cuya versión televisiva se ha convertido en uno de los grandes éxitos de esta última década, se considera un nexo de unión entre las distopías clásicas de Zamyatin, Huxley y Orwell y las últimas novelas que se han editado en este campo, entre las que *Leila* de Prayaag Akbar destaca por su originalidad. El presente trabajo, que parte de algunos de los mejores estudios de la obra de Atwood y de la narrativa especulativa producida en India, trata de profundizar en las intersecciones que se pueden observar entre la obra maestra de la autora canadiense y la obra prima de Akbar. Este estudio analiza los tropos distópicos sobre los que se articulan las dos novelas, con especial interés en cuestiones relacionadas con la manipulación del pasado y la realidad constreñida y angustiada a la que se tienen que enfrentar las dos protagonistas.

*Palabras clave:* Distopía, totalitarismo, regimentación, pasado, Akbar, Atwood.

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Margaret Atwood started writing *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985, *HT* hereafter) in the spring of 1984. This apparently uneventful detail turns into a historically symbolical and literary landmark, if we approach it from a purely dystopian perspective. Those readers that had been captivated by George Orwell's masterpiece, among whom Atwood proudly includes herself, were deeply intrigued to figure out the extent to which his premonitions had actually come true in that special year. Many scholars and academics have consistently argued that the world Orwell builds up in his novel is strongly sustained on traumatic post-war side-effects, in which the aftermath of totalitarianism was still a heavy and unpalatable burden. It is this context of oppression, relentless surveillance, media manipulation and suffocating propaganda that enables Atwood to weave her novel into a long-standing tradition of male dystopian narratives, which trace back to Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and the above-mentioned *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), among others. In a very illuminating contribution to *The Guardian*, Atwood celebrates her indebtedness to Orwell's work, yet at the same time, tries to depart from some of the conventions that guided the English author: "Orwell became a direct model for me much later in my life – in the real 1984, the year in which I began writing a somewhat different dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*. By that time, I was 44, and I'd learned enough about real despotisms that I didn't need to rely on Orwell alone. The majority of dystopias – Orwell's included – have been written by men and the point of view has been male" (2013).

In the same way Orwell became an undeniable reference for Atwood, the Canadian novelist is now acknowledged as one of the most decisive figures for a new trend of dystopian writers. Together with Angela Carter, Ursula LeGuin, Zoë Fairbairns or Marge Piercy, Atwood emerges not only as a cornerstone in the field of speculative fiction that gravitates around gender issues, but also as a literary beacon for many writers – both male and female – who see her as a key inspiration for their works. Young dystopian authors like Louise O'Neill or Naomi Alderman have repeatedly declared the importance Atwood has had in their narratives and how *HT* has turned out to be one of their major thematic and stylistic influences. The imagery created for this novel, which has been recently reinvigorated by the extremely successful Hulu TV series, is an intrinsic part of a substantial number of current feminist movements, which take Atwood's dystopia as an epitome of the struggle for equality and women's rights. It goes without saying that the impact of *HT* is global, not only in literary terms, but also at a critical and commercial level. For this same reason, writing about such a canonical work and bringing up new and innovative readings appear to be really challenging endeavours. However, it seems that *HT* continues to produce a feeling of allure and fascination among the younger generations of writers, who still find it a source of very interesting discussions.

In this respect, Prayaag Akbar's debut novel *Leila* (2017) represents a major achievement in the context of Indian literature.<sup>1</sup> It seems that Akbar's work falls within a fruitful locus of Indian dystopian fiction that has addressed, and still does, a substantial array of gender issues. In this respect, Banerjee suggests that "while feminist texts like Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1990) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are crucial to the western tradition, such feminist works as Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997), Rimi B. Chatterjee's *Signal Red* (2005) and Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Generation 14* (2008) played a key role in foregrounding the dystopian future in Indian literature" (2020: 139). If Margaret Atwood is often seen as a cornerstone in dystopian fiction, Akbar's *Leila* is also framed within a very solid tradition of sci-fi and speculative narratives produced in India from the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Scholars like E. Dawson Varughese (2017, 2019), Debjani Sengupta (2019), Suparno Banerjee (2020) or Urvashi Kuhad (2021), among many others, have consistently studied the presence of the fantastic in a wide array of narratives written both in English or in any of the languages that are spoken in the country. These academics suggest that the relevance of these genres, among which they also include dystopia, comes directly from India's particular socio-political, economic, religious and, even, environmental idiosyncrasy.

The massive technological development the country has undergone has also triggered a major response in the literary realm, where writers like Leela Majumdar or Sukumar Ray have attempted to figure out ways to mingle India's traditional

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<sup>1</sup> *Leila* tells the story of Shalini, a woman and mother who witnesses how her life turns upside down when an ultra-fanatic government takes over and imposes a radicalized regime based on a suffocating socio-political *statu quo*. The novel recounts her desperate search of her daughter Leila, who is savagely kidnapped from her family and given away to an institution never to see her again.

mythology – what Dawson Varughese conceptualizes as “post-millennial mythology-inspired fiction” (2017: 10) – and a critical approach to these hugely transformed and occasionally turbulent contexts. As Sengupta argues: “Science is both a narrative of progress, a sign of modernity, but also a signifier of a space in which a critique of modernity can be articulated” (2019: 77). In her breakthrough volume *Science Fiction and Indian Women Writers: Exploring Radical Potentials* (2021), Urvasi Kuhad focuses quite extensively on Indian dystopia and its potential to explore controversial issues such as gender discrimination or female feticide, which happen to form an intrinsic part of Akbar’s discussion in *Leila*. The following pages try to demonstrate that this novel appears as a very relevant contribution in this tradition of Indian dystopian fiction that gravitates around such crucial and polemical questions as social stratification or environmental and gender issues. Taking all this into consideration, this paper seeks to delve into the intersections that can be traced between Atwood’s *HT* and Akbar’s *Leila*, mainly focusing on how both novels explore such dystopian tropes as the manipulation of the past and the evils of regimentation, in which *HT* and *Leila* find very fruitful common grounds.

The post-COVID-19 times we are currently going through have led many people to firmly state that we are living in a kind of global dystopia. Even though this literary sub-genre has always been relatively popular, the publication of new novels, the release of films and TV series and the celebration of academic events that revolve around dystopia have hugely increased in the last few years. At a time in which most of the ethical positions that we have – voluntarily or involuntarily – taken for granted are now in constant jeopardy, dystopian fiction has emerged as a fertile forum of political, economic, sociological, and even environmental debate. It is quite recurrent to come across conceptualizations of dystopia which approach it as the opposite of utopia and the idyllic implications that are associated to this type of societies. However, scholars such as Allan Weiss argue that the kind of totalitarian regimes portrayed in dystopia hide behind clear ambiguities and contradictions, which lead us to think that the differences between these two apparently antagonistic notions are not that obvious: “The common image of a dystopian society is that it is the exact opposite of a utopia; in the latter, people are generally happy, while in the former, they are miserable. Instead, the two genres mirror each other in many ways, particularly in that most residents of dystopias are happy or at the very least satisfied, and the (supposed) rebels are anomalies in their societies” (2009: 128).<sup>2</sup> Weiss’ words accurately respond to the reality that dystopian fiction usually captures, and which reinforces those ambiguities that were mentioned above. In this vein, Tom Moylan has also engaged in the debates that have gravitated around this opposition between utopia and dystopia, which he sees as somehow difficult to tackle. Moylan suggests that, even though the worlds depicted in these narratives seem to be usually captured in drastically different realities, there are times in which

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<sup>2</sup> In an illuminating article published in *The Guardian*, Atwood smartly blends these two terms in the so-called “ustopia,” because “each contains a latent version of the other” (2011).

there are more connections than we might initially expect.<sup>3</sup> This explains why it has been usually complex to establish clear-cut definitions of utopia, dystopia and other associated terms such as anti-utopia or satirical utopia.

If we look at works such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) or even Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, readers feel that those individuals who are trapped in these societies do usually normalize this kind of behaviours and show a complacent and conformist attitude, as they seem to accept that there is nothing that can possibly change their fate. Even those characters that could hint at some sort of heroism such as Winston Smith or Offred end up yielding to the merciless oppression of the Party and Gilead or even becoming tools that eventually perpetuate the authority of the socio-political echelons. The society that is presented in these narratives lives in a dormant, anaesthetized state, which prevents citizens from attempting to overthrow or simply question the *statu quo*. Most dystopian protagonists are caught in profound and often unresolved ethical and moral debates, which lead them either to just pursue survival or to shake the foundations of the system from a more contesting and combative attitude. In this respect, the goal of totalitarianism is, on the one hand, to encourage passivity and, on the other, to extirpate any source of countercriticism that might compromise its authority. With the aid of technology and surveillance, a deeply rooted network of informers, the pressure exerted by propaganda and the annihilation of personal identity through brainwashing and indoctrination, these regimes manage to sedate the population by means of fear and threats, which make people believe that they are living in the best conditions that could ever be.

From the publication of the first dystopias, punishment has been an intrinsic part of these narratives' most typical imagery. Political dissidence, ideological dissent and sexual deviance have been widely tackled in these novels as a response to the authors' particular historical reality. Bearing in mind the conceptual particularities around which dystopian fiction is usually articulated, it could be argued that these narratives are strongly founded on the events that inspired their writing. Even though some scholars like Alexandra Aldridge suggest that dystopia's near-future dimension might slightly detach it from the reality that nurtures these works, it seems that most of the above-mentioned authors used their stories as cautionary messages about the dangers of political, technological and scientific totalitarianism or, in the case of LeGuin, Atwood, O'Neill or Alderman, to denounce patriarchal oppression (1984: 7).<sup>4</sup> The following pages will attempt to delve precisely into *HT* and *Leila* as two

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<sup>3</sup> To this, Moylan adds: "Although all dystopian texts offer a detailed and pessimistic presentation of the very worst of social alternatives, some affiliate with a utopian tendency as they maintain a horizon of hope (or at least invite readings that do), while others only appear to be dystopian allies of Utopia as they retain an anti-utopian disposition that forecloses all transformative possibility" (2000: 147).

<sup>4</sup> In this sense, it is worth alluding to Glenn Negley and J. Max Patrick's groundbreaking study on utopia and dystopia, in which they point out that: "The author of a dystopia must have a mental picture of the reality which he is satirizing in the description of an imaginary country; and in the

dystopian works that prove to transcend the reality they portray, even to the extent of replicating it in the most verisimilar way. In this vein, the debates they engage with are extremely current today because the fictional scenarios they picture still reveal painful and shocking parallelisms with our own actual worlds.

## 1. THE HAUNTING GHOST OF THE PAST

The past and how it is (re)interpreted turns out to be one of the central concerns in dystopian fiction. If we approach this notion as a mechanism that can be used for manipulation, we can find that the past emerges as a battleground in which two opposing forces have repeatedly clashed. On the one hand, any dictatorial regime seeks to erase all traces of the period that preceded its takeover, while, on the other, certain individuals look forward to understanding and reviving a time in their lives that has been completely removed from their personal and collective memory. In dystopia, these long-gone days emerge as a concept that both parts need to (re)appropriate, because this will allow them to regain control over the narrative itself. One of the most meaningful slogans in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – “who controls the past, controls the future” – gives an idea of the need of totalitarianism to handle this temporal construct to its own benefit. Orwell's novel is profoundly concerned with the ways in which these regimes limit the access to history, purge the information that might be excessively revealing or compromising and recreate a reality that glorifies their own socio-political, economic or religious views. Following with the Orwellian imagery, Mr. Charrington's secret room emerges as a symbol that very tellingly illustrates how the attempts to explore and decipher the past prove to be viciously suffocated by the Party. Winston and Julia's furtive rendezvous are initially seen as a rebellion against the regime and an outburst of sexual freedom. What makes this underground spot appealing to them is precisely its celebration of the past, epitomised by a large catalogue of gadgets that are banned, and which Julia and Winston admire as rarities that are part of a time that is now long forgotten. It is precisely when they discover the existence of a hidden telescreen – a device that comes to represent the pernicious present they are trying to survive –, that they are captured, brainwashed and tortured.

All these Orwellian echoes are helpful to understand the role of the past in Atwood's *HT* and Akbar's *Leila*, as well as to establish relevant analogies among the three dystopias. The exploration of the past in these two novels is essential to figure out the personal and political dimensions of its two female protagonists, Offred and Shalini. As it was argued above, history has been a double-edged weapon, often caught in the centre of an endless and unresolved dispute that seeks to legitimise its control. In dictatorial scenarios like the ones portrayed in *HT* and *Leila*, the population is forced to become conformist and, even, hostile towards the time that preceded the establishment of the Republic of Gilead and the new ultra-conservative

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back of his mind, he must have a fairly clear concept of his ideal state. He describes this by antithesis, suggesting how life ought to be by depicting it as it ought not to be” (1952: 12).

regime that takes over in Akbar's near-future India. At a point in Atwood's work, Offred voices one of the most thought-provoking statements in the entire novel, which reveals the extent to which her notion of the past is no longer constructed upon her own memories: "A movie about the past is not the same as the past" (1985: 235). To this, Elisabeth Hansot adds that Offred takes for granted that her own experiences are mere reconstructions, which she cannot control anymore (1994: 61). Offred seems to be verbalizing an assumption that many dystopian narratives have shared, that is, the access to our annals is limited, coerced and, very often, distorted and manipulated. Would this justify why Offred and Shalini's own positioning with respect to their own history is complacent? In relation to this point, Stillman and Johnson point out that: "Offred exemplifies what not to do before Gilead consolidated its power. Offred ignored, romanticized, and accommodated. She was complacent about her own status and rights" (1994: 81).

However, the approach to the past in *HT* and *Leila* seems to be much more complex. Readers are occasionally confused by the ambiguous attitudes of these two characters, in the sense that we might expect their struggle to be far more contesting. There are moments in both novels in which Offred and Shalini's only connection with that time in which they were free are their respective daughters, Hannah and Leila, who were savagely disposed of their mothers when they were almost toddlers. After this traumatic event that marks them thereafter, their disengagement from their previous life is gradual and leads them to almost forget how they were before the *coup d'état* changed their existence forever. As it is very common in dystopia, this longing for the past is, sometimes, rather melancholic and idyllic, since characters like Shalini and Offred simply indulge in their belief that this time was far better, because there cannot be anything worse than the present. As Offred states: "When we think of the past it's the beautiful things we pick out. We want to believe it was all like that" (1985: 130). This selective recollection of memories is, precisely, what Shalini attempts to do after she is sent to the so-called "Purity Camp" to be reformed and disciplined by the authorities. *Leila*, just like *HT*, is full of flashbacks, which help the protagonist recall a city that was rich in vegetation and bright streets, in which peace seemed to prevail: "The treetops are different lustrous greens, gently swaying and leaning into one another. Even Ma is surprised by how many trees there are. I press my nose to the chilled glass. A toy city, overgrown with broccoli. Through the leaves you see houses, white or yellow, small rooms on their roofs" (2017: chapter 3).<sup>5</sup>

One of the main debates that underlies these novels is how feminism resonates in two societies in which women are used as either servants, slaves or reproductive

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<sup>5</sup> Even though *Leila* should not be labelled as an entirely ecofeminist novel, there are certainly many hints that point to the country's persistent and unbearable drought and how it affects the most downtrodden sectors of the population. In relation to this idea, Urvasi Kuhad notes that Indian sci-fi and dystopian authors have been particularly interested in exploring the dangerous effects that technological (ab)use might cause upon the environment (2021: 42). Perhaps, these environmental concerns could also strengthen the parallelisms between *Leila* and *HT*, which have also been approached from these ecofeminist perspectives in various studies (Cronan Rose 1991; Indu 2011).

vessels. In the case of Atwood's *HT*, these issues have been recurrently addressed, as they seem to be an integral part of a story that claims for women's rights and equality. Having said this, Offred's commitment with regard to the feminist movement has been often seen as rather dubious and vague, which again stresses her unresolved relationship with her past and, more particularly, with her mother.<sup>6</sup> While Offred emerges as a rather conformist and unquestioning individual, who was never very interested in empowering herself as a woman at those moments in which she still lived in a free society, her mother epitomizes the combative, rebellious and gender-conscious spirit, who has been frequently associated with the first wave of feminism. Offred's past is her mother's time and all that she represented in terms of the struggle against patriarchy, as Stillman and Johnson rightly contend (1994: 81). Even though Atwood's novel also unveils Offred's temperate criticism towards Gilead's totalitarian yoke against women, she often appears as a character that glorifies domesticity and motherhood: "The kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother" (1985: 47).<sup>7</sup>

Shalini, on the other hand, is captured at a time in which the former government is violently overthrown by a group of ultra-conservative fanatics, who end up turning the country into a regimented and compartmentalized nightmare. Just like in Atwood's *HT*, *Leila* also explores the past through a female character, who is disposed of her upper-middle class status, thrown away into the city's slums and treated as a slave by the new regime. Even though Shalini's background is that of an affluent woman, born into a well-off family and married to an influential man, the journey she has to go through evinces a great deal of parallelisms with Offred's. If we focus on how Shalini attempts to reconcile herself with her own past, we can see that her gender awareness is strongly determined by the social position she occupies. Her former life in a bubble of privileges and certain luxuries comes to an end when her husband is killed and her daughter Leila is taken to an institution, never to see her mother again. It is at this very moment, when Shalini is dragged into the most dispossessed and sordid existence, that she starts realizing what women are forced to endure in this new socio-political and religious context. Shalini, thus, is humbled by this dramatic turn of events and also encouraged to start a personal crusade, not only to reunite with her daughter and come to terms with her past, but also to reposition herself as a woman in a country in which they are

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<sup>6</sup> In this same vein, Dodson argues that: "Before the revolution she lived comfortably in the midst of the mainstream in Cambridge, never identifying with the cause of feminism, never noticing the struggles of American women who were less fortunate because of income or color, never taking seriously her activist friend Moira" (1997: 80-81).

<sup>7</sup> Both novels seem to be direct inheritors of those feminist dystopias that started to be published in the 1970s. In this respect, Jeanne Cortiel suggests that, just like *HT* and *Leila*, works such as Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1975) or Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) already point to issues like female reproduction, the objectification and appropriation of the female body and the progressive destruction of the environment that are thoroughly discussed by both Atwood and Akbar in their novels (2015: 156).



exploited for the sole benefit of the new ruling elite. As the following conversation with her husband reveals, Shalini is able to contest the male authority and to give that step forward Offred is rather hesitant to take: “‘Your wife.’ Now I was angry. ‘It’s your daughter’s birthday. Put that male ego aside for once’” (2017: chapter 5).

## 2. REGIMENTATION

Classical and contemporary dystopian writers have been very keen on exploring the effects of regimentation and how this strategy is strongly inspired by mechanisms of control and surveillance. Most societies that are described in this sort of narratives are rigidly compartmentalized, either physically by means of threatening walls and fences – as in the case of Akbar’s *Leila*, Roth’s *Divergent* or Collins’ *The Hunger Games* – or metaphorically – as Atwood masterfully achieves in *HT*. If we focus more particularly on feminist dystopia, this feeling of incarceration is accentuated even further, since many female characters are caught within the limitations that impose their own domestic environment and also go through experiences that coerce their freedom in more public realms. At this point, it is interesting to note Ildney Cavalcanti’s study on Suzy McKee’s Holdfast series, in which she very clearly refers to “oppression, materialized via spatial confinement” as one of the tropes that feminist dystopias more thoroughly explore (2015: 54). Both Atwood and Akbar seem to be inspired by the long standing tradition of classical dystopias in which this same feeling of entrapment contributed to reinforcing the idea that nobody can escape the confines of a totalitarian regime. Prior to Orwell and Huxley, who thoroughly explored the effects of regimentation in their novels, Thomas More and Yevgueny Zamyatin had already built up societies that also sought to endanger people’s individuality. As the following pages will attempt to demonstrate, *HT* and *Leila* emerge as most appropriate examples to illustrate how fences, walls and barbed wire should not only be taken as physical impediments that challenge the characters’ freedom and rights, but also as metaphorical symbols that heighten the idea that the regime is always watching.

Dystopia is strongly based on facts that are relatable and validated in our surrounding reality. It does not really matter whether we trace back to the so-called classical dystopias or if we look at more contemporary young adult narratives, the way these stories engage with the ongoing social, political, economic or religious circumstances proves to be one of their most appealing traits. Even though this is the time of globalisation and the apparent disappearance of borders and boundaries, we are currently witnessing how walls are profusely erected in most parts of the world.<sup>8</sup> The building of these walls responds to motivations closely connected with separation, blockade and isolation. Both classic and more contemporary dystopias revolve around these assumptions, in the sense that those citizens that are segregated or unable to communicate with each other are more easily disconnected and, thus, controlled. In

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<sup>8</sup> In relation to this idea, Herrero states that: “After the fall of the Berlin wall, only eleven more remained. At present, though, their number has increased and is closer to seventy” (2020: 225).

novels like *Leila*, for instance, this regimentation accurately portrays a painful reality in India and its caste system; in others like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Brave New World* or *The Handmaid's Tale*, the impossibility to break down these physical and mental barriers drive many of their characters to their inevitable surrender.<sup>9</sup> It seems, thus, that these dystopian regimes are driven by the Caesarean “divide and conquer” motto that has pervaded in most totalitarian states throughout history.

One of the first contacts readers have with Offred already hint at a suffocating feeling of entrapment and incarceration: “The guards weren’t allowed inside the building except when called, and we weren’t allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field, which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire” (1985: 4). Even though handmaids are made to believe that they can circulate freely around the streets of Gilead, their daily routes are not only pre-designed, but also tightly watched. One of the most shocking images in the novel is to see these women walking in twos, not because they enjoy their mutual company, but mainly because they are used as mechanisms of purely human surveillance. The contact of handmaids with an apparently free space is determined by the same regimentation they have to endure in their own homes. Any detour from their designated areas, which include the mandatory visit to the infamous Wall, is penalized as high treason. In this vein, Offred’s life of forced confinement, both indoors and outdoors, turns out to be a metonymic representation of Gilead’s panopticism, which the people contribute to sublimating with the use of such pernicious greetings as “Under his Eye.”<sup>10</sup> To this, Stephanie Barbé adds that Gileadeans are always monitored, either in the form in undercover police agents – the so-called “Eyes” – or through the use of formulaic expressions such as the one mentioned above (1990: 45).

The handmaids’ sense of entrapment is not only exerted by the Wives, Aunts and Commanders, but also through clothing, which in Atwood’s novel proves to be another source of division and compartmentalization. Beyond the social stratification that colours and garments actually represent in *HT*, women take for granted that regimentation sadly means a (self)imposed isolation and marginalisation, which force them to accept that they are no more than invisible, wandering spectres: “The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen” (1985: 8). No woman in Gilead – not even Wives or Aunts – can find the way to trespass these physical and imaginary boundaries that drag them into a state of utter oblivion. They are just a means for an end and when this end comes, the regime

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<sup>9</sup> Premonitory as it can be, bearing in mind that her article was published almost thirty years before *Leila* came out, Stephanie Barbé already established a very sound comparison between the Hindu caste system and Gilead’s socio-political regimentation: “The Republic of Gilead strikes us, not as a techno-dystopia, but as a reactionary step backwards in time, to a kind of government and lifestyle that resembles that of the Middle Ages-based on one part biblical patriarchy, one part Islamic militancy, and one part Hindu caste system” (1990: 40).

<sup>10</sup> This farewell formula is very revealing. On the one hand, Atwood clearly discloses how women are controlled by men at all times. On the other, the use of prepositions is also very meaningful and points to women’s subservient, inferior position with respect to men.

mercilessly gets rid of them. In this respect, both the streets and the houses become asphyxiating cages, where unauthorised speaking and social interaction are brutally punished. The atmosphere Atwood portrays in *HT* reinforces Gilead's unbearable social hierarchy, which is sustained on widening the gap between the upper echelons and the underdogs. While the former enjoy a life full of privileges and legal immunity, the latter suffer the side-effects of abusive practices such as normalised, systematic rapes – Ceremonies –, public executions and mass murders in the ruthless Salvagings and Particutions.

This eventually places Gileadeans in a limbo of misinformation and complete ignorance: “Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks” (1985: 23). This lack of knowledge, even about such basic details as the actual location of the city limits, has been a very recurrent dystopian trope. *HT* and *Leila* engage very accurately with how characters react to their own fenced existence. The two novels are set in places that are essentially limiting and coercive, both in a real and a symbolical sense. The protagonists seem to be always surrounded by elements that restrain their freedom and push them into completely confined spaces, which the authors associate with the presence of huge, threatening walls. As it was suggested above, *Leila's* near-future India digs into the reality behind the country's caste system and the social unrest it has historically brought about. In his illuminating study on Indian science fiction, Suparno Banerjee argues that most of the novels that are published in the period between 1995 and 2019 slightly depart from the conventions of the Indian sci-fi genre to explore more dystopian realms. In this vein, he points out how these contemporary publications are also questioning the framework of such utopian cornerstones in Indian literature as Rahul Sankrityayan's *Baisvee Sadi* (1924), in which the author portrays a society that “has also eradicated racial, religious, classist caste-based divisions. Every place and person of this future India is repeatedly characterised as clean and beautiful” (2020: 135).<sup>11</sup> The world Akbar recreates in his novel, however, is built up on the assumption that keeping the population in separated and uncommunicated sectors is the best mechanism to avoid an uprising that might potentially overthrow the regime, and also to prevent members of different castes from coexisting within the same realm.<sup>12</sup> When Shalini looks around, she is only able to see massive brick walls, which do not only represent her imprisoned state, but also her own dehumanised self: “These walls diminish us. Make us something less than human” (2017: chapter 3). Only when Shalini is literally thrown into the city slums and dispossessed of everything she previously had, she comes to feel the most cruel side of totalitarianism.

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<sup>11</sup> In this regard, Dawson Varughese also refers to Usha Narayanan's *Pradyumna: Son of Krishna* as a suitable example to illustrate how science fiction and dystopia can successfully approach the side-effects of this caste system (2019: 151).

<sup>12</sup> The racist undertones associated with this kind of caste systems are very acutely captured by Akbar: “A widow, living in a crumbling residential complex called the Towers. The Council decided we had to be kept out of the city. They said we might pollute the rest” (2017: chapter 1).

Everywhere she goes is delimited and supervised, any access to other compounds is forbidden and the possibility to reach out to her family is nothing but an unattainable chimera.<sup>13</sup> Her only purpose now is to survive in a place in which she can barely see the sun and the sky: “Some forty years after Purity One was erected there are no trees. The stunning canopy is gone. Now there are hundreds of walls, no one sure how many. Each wall is fifty-nine feet high and two feet thick, in agreement with Council law. They loop through and around the city, bigger than anything except the tallest buildings” (2017: chapter 3). Shalini’s descent into hell, which somehow resembles that of Offred, enables her to witness the appalling circumstances of the most dispossessed classes, which she was not aware of in her world of luxuries and commodities. Her endless wanderings around the city in a frantic attempt to find her daughter are constantly scrutinised by the inquisitive looks and questions of the so-called Repeaters, whose role in *Leila* echoes quite substantially that of the Eyes in Atwood’s *HT*. Both the Eyes and the Repeaters are two obvious sources of regimentation, as they are in charge of spying, informing, prosecuting and torturing those suspected of being involved in illicit activities against the regime.<sup>14</sup> From a “loose band of men, most in their twenties and thirties” (2017: chapter 4), who do not seem to be more than radical street agitators, they eventually become the government’s most effective instrument of control the moment they start wearing uniforms: “‘Oh yes, the Repeaters have uniforms now.’ Naz was by my side. ‘Is that what this is?’ I asked. ‘Seems like it. They look quite smart actually’” (2017: chapter 5).

Offred and Shalini are two characters accidentally trapped in sombre patriarchal states, whose basic aim is to bring back the most backward and medieval beliefs solely to justify the enslavement and exploitation of women. In this section, we have been alluding to how Atwood and Akbar anatomise the evils of regimentation and the response of their protagonists. If we focus more attentively on how these segregationist policies are a source of gender discrimination, there are two contexts that trigger a considerable number of parallelisms. Both *HT* and *Leila* portray societies in which brainwashing is key to silence people and to fill them with a distorted vision of their own reality. In the case of women, before they start undertaking the tasks they have been assigned, they are sent by force into various institutions in which they are taught, disciplined and moulded according to the dictates of the regime. Since she is a fertile woman and, thus, a reproductive asset for Gilead, Offred is dispatched to the so-called Red Centre, Aunt Lydia’s kingdom and the place where handmaids are prepared for the miserable life that awaits them. In Shalini’s case, once her husband is killed and her daughter taken away from her, she is moved to Purity Camp, where she joins other “fallen” women that the state

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<sup>13</sup> In this same vein, Nandini Krishnan states that: “*Leila* is, on the surface, a mother’s quest for her lost daughter, last seen on her third birthday. But it is also the story of the walls we build, in our cities and in our heads” (2017).

<sup>14</sup> These police corps are, indeed, very recurrent in dystopias, as Orwell’s clearly illustrates with the inner and outer party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In this case, Orwell proves the extent to which he was greatly inspired by police corps such as Hitler’s SS and Gestapo or Stalin’s NKVD.

needs to readjust. These two places emerge as the beginning of Offred and Shalini's no-return journey towards their fall into nothingness.

During her training at the Red Centre, Offred assumes that her fate is already written and unescapable, a fact that drives her into the state of complacency she shows along the novel. Even though she knows that she is destined to be a "two-legged womb" and the property of her Commander, she takes for granted that fighting to overturn this situation is doomed to fail. After the initial shock she goes through when she fully realises that she has been deprived of her freedom, her stay in the Red Centre prepares her for a void and predictable life. They are forced to believe that their days before Gilead were sinful, pernicious and mischievous, which the Aunts at the Centre take as a justification for their tortures: "Apart from these details, this could be a college guest room, for the less distinguished visitors; or a room in a rooming house, of former times, for ladies in reduced circumstances" (1985: 8).<sup>15</sup> When these women are released from the Centre, they experience a temporary sense of relief and freedom, which vanishes the moment they are assigned to their destination and start being object of systematic rapes, physical and psychological abuse.

In relation to this last point, the evolution of these two characters when they are sent to the Red Centre and Purity Camp goes parallel ways. From a dystopian standpoint, these places enable both Atwood and Akbar to introduce a wide-ranging number of tropes, which come to strengthen the anguishing atmosphere that permeates their novels. As it has been emphasised throughout this paper, in order to segregate the population, these regimes seek to control the body and mind of the people. Sometimes, they employ mechanisms – public hangings, group executions – that aim to set an example so that nobody dares to replicate rebellious or disobedient conducts. However, history reveals that dictatorial states have found more subtle and effective ways to induce fear and subjugation. In the case of Offred and Shalini, both women endure a severe process of brainwashing while they are imprisoned. As many other dystopian authors portrayed in their novels, these two characters are constantly sedated in order to keep them in a limbo of artificial peace and tranquillity, which reminds us very much of soma in Huxley's *Brave New World*. Dystopias have been particularly keen on exploring the aftermath of technological (ab)use and how humankind has excessively relied upon the utopian belief that this was a sign of progress and modernity. As Krishan Kumar rightly asserts, "the fear of science as the instrument of tyranny and mass conformity had to give way to a belief in its role as liberator and comucopian provider" (1987: 388-389). Huxley's narratives, in this respect, are perfect examples to illustrate the limits of scientific

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<sup>15</sup> In *Leila*, Akbar refers to a very similar situation, in which women are openly accused of dreaming to be free: "All of you? Ask the girls in your truck. The rest know. It's only you, women like you. You grew up thinking you are already abroad. Some TV-world you live in. That such things are your right. But see these girls you came with, girls from the lower sectors, ask them. They won't be surprised. They knew what they were doing when they chose to live this way, what risk they were taking" (2017: chapter 6).

ethics and how, even if the purpose is noble, everything could be perverted through the use of drugs.

When Shalini is sent to Purity Camp, she immediately realises that the guards want all women to surrender their own consciousness, so that their will is at their complete disposal. The pills they are forced to take daily do not only leave them in a kind of vegetative state, but gradually erase any memories they could have of their past: “But they work. This little pill will turn the mind from the vigils of the day, the memories we guard, the images we polish and protect and return to” (2017: chapter 2). As in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Fahrenheit 451*, Shalini’s dystopian India is founded on the idea that individuals must be a mere *tabula rasa*, which must be filled in only with the information that the government wants them to know. The aim is to turn people into a headless, numb herd, which even admits that a life under the regime’s totalitarian yoke is, indeed, a blessing. As an old woman sadly states in Atwood’s *HT*: “It’s high time somebody did something, said the woman behind the counter, at the store where I usually bought my cigarettes. It was on the corner, a newsstand chain: papers, candy, cigarettes. The woman was older, with gray hair; my mother’s generation” (1985: 174). In his very illuminating study on drug dystopias, John Hickman refers to the sedative effects of state pharmacology and the extent to which it becomes an essential tool to oppress and repress the citizenship (2009: 160-161). Just like Shalini assumes that programmed medication is part of her daily existence in Purity Camp and that she cannot do anything to avoid it, Offred also admits that “we were on some kind of pill or drug I think, they put it in the food, to keep us calm” (1985: 70). This imposed calmness, together with these characters’ encaged existence, are the two factors that nourish and reinforce the novels’ sense of suffocation, inescapability and regimentation.

## CONCLUSIONS

The impact of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the way it resonates in many contemporary dystopian novels open new paths for critical discussion and fruitful debates on the traumatic effects of totalitarianism, as Libby Falk has interestingly suggested (1991: 10-11). As this paper has attempted to demonstrate, the currency of this work allows for a wide ranging array of dystopian intersections. Among the many tropes these two novels delve into, it seems that the way the past can be manipulated and the pernicious effects of regimentation at a personal and societal level are the most significant ones. The two protagonists emerge as embodiments of the struggles that many people, especially women, have historically gone through at times of suffocating oppression. In *HT* and *Leila*, the past emerges as a mechanism at the disposal of totalitarian regimes, which seek to abduct it in order to justify the narrative they elaborate in the present. The two stories evince that the past turns out to be a locus that must be (re)appropriated, either by those who seek to remain in power at all costs or those who struggle to remember those moments in which freedom and democracy prevailed. In this respect, Offred and Shalini hold on to their memories in a desperate attempt to preserve the bond with

their daughters, symbolically portrayed as the last remnant of a time that is on the verge of vanishing. In this respect and closely connected with this need to control the past, Atwood and Akbar build up worlds that are strongly based on the regimented realities that many dystopian authors have recurrently recreated in their works. *HT* and *Leila* denounce the need to compartmentalize and divide for the sake of isolating and segregating the population. Through the use of clothes or simply by means of reproducing a society that echoes the caste system in India, both novelists reveal the stagnant paralysis that is imposed when individuals are forced to avoid contact – personal or public –, as it could jeopardise the foundations of the *statu quo*. All in all, this paper has attempted to discuss that, at a time in which many civil and human rights are at a dangerous stake, it seems that the insightful views of authors like Atwood and Akbar are more necessary than ever to understand both our current world and, more importantly, the consequences that our actions can eventually bring about.

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