Populism and Precarity in Contemporary Indian Dystopian Fiction: Nayantara Sahgal's *When the Moon Shines by Day* and Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

DOLORES HERRERO
Universidad de Zaragoza
dherrero@unizar.es

Although dystopia has been an enduring trope in literature, it is now, however, that dystopian and apocalyptic fiction has become especially popular all over the world. The main aim of this article is to discuss how contemporary Indian fiction denounces the barbarity of contemporary Indian nationalism, in particular the policies enforced by a repressive Indian state where tradition and purity are valued above multiculturality, dialogue and equality. In order to do this, I focus on two internationally acclaimed novels, namely, Nayantara Sahgal's *When the Moon Shines by Day* (2017) and Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2018). In different but complementary ways, both dystopias draw a telling portrait of precarious times in contemporary India. Both novels also warn against the dangers of the fundamentalist version of Hindu nationalism and cultural censorship, at the same time as they bring to our attention the damage that a dominant minority can inflict on those situated at the bottom of the social ladder, who are thus condemned to live in inhuman conditions, as if they were less than nothing.

Keywords: utopia; dystopia; contemporary Indian fiction; precarity; populism; environmental damage

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Populismo y precariedad en la ficción india distópica contemporánea: *When the Moon Shines by Day* de Nayantara Sahgal y *Leila* de Prayaag Akbar

Si bien la distopía ha sido desde siempre un tema recurrente en la literatura, es ahora cuando la ficción distópica y apocalíptica se ha hecho especialmente popular a escala mundial.

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar cómo la ficción india contemporánea denuncia la barbarie del nacionalismo indio, en particular las políticas llevadas a cabo por un estado represivo en el que la tradición y la pureza están muy por encima de la multiculturalidad, el diálogo y la igualdad. Para ello, me centro en dos novelas de renombre internacional, a saber, *When the Moon Shines by Day* (2017), de Nayantara Sahgal, y *Leila* (2018), de Prayaag Akbar. De manera diferente pero complementaria, ambas distopías ofrecen un retrato crítico de la precariedad que impera en la India actual. Ambas novelas advierten del peligro del nacionalismo fundamentalista hindú y la censura cultural que este conlleva, a la vez que llaman la atención sobre el daño que una minoría dominante puede infligir sobre los que habitan en el escalafón más bajo de la sociedad, que son así condenados a vivir en condiciones inhumanas, como si fueran menos que nada.

Palabras clave: utopía; distopía; ficción india contemporánea; precariedad; populismo; daño ambiental

1. Introduction: The End of Utopia and the Advent of Dystopia

Although the word *utopia* can be said to have been coined in 1516 by Thomas More, when he used it as the title for the book that was to lay the foundations of this genre, the concept itself is much older. In fact, utopian traces can be found in many ancient writings, myths and fairy tales, which attests to humanity's eternal longing for a better place and a better life (Sargent 2010). *Utopia* comes from ancient Greek, in particular from the combination of *ou*—negative affix—and *topos*—"place"—so it literally means "a place that does not exist." With the passing of time, however, the term has been understood as both a "no place"—*outopia*—and a "good place"—*eutopia* (Abensour 2008, 406). Moreover, it might refer simultaneously to a good place and its opposite, namely, a negative utopia or *dystopia*—an alternative nonexistent/nondesired reality— another enduring trope in literature since human life has from its very origins been dominated by fears, either real or imagined. Further, somebody's utopia often implies and becomes somebody else's dystopia, which in the long run makes these two terms structurally inseparable (Claeys 2013, 20). Utopia's inevitable ambiguity, which has always characterised the genre, has also become one of its main strengths (Vieira 2010).

According to Gregory Claeys, it is often believed that the heyday of utopian speculation began in the sixteenth century and spanned nearly three centuries, to be replaced in the late nineteenth century by ever-growing pessimistic predictions on the human condition (2013, 20-21).[1] The nightmarish future scenario depicted in these latter works somehow materialised in twentieth-century totalitarianism and, soon afterwards, in worrying global issues such as the rise of populisms, ecological disasters of unprecedented dimensions and the global refugee crisis, among others. Nonetheless, it is a fact that what is nowadays strictly understood as literary utopia is in steady decline, whereas literary dystopias are undoubtedly taking the upper hand (see, among others, Walsh 1962; Jacoby 1999; Bauman 2002; Mazlish 2003; Castillo 2004). In Krishan Kumar's words, contemporary writers "no longer turn to the utopian form or genre for imagining a better or more perfect future [...]. The 'imagination of disaster' fares infinitely better, and this at least means that utopia's [...] alter ego, the dystopia, continues to flourish" (2010, 555). The ever-increasing popularity of dystopian and apocalyptic fiction has led many critics to conclude that we are living in a dystopian/postapocalyptic golden age.

2. Varieties of Dystopia

If utopias offer models that depict a society based upon equality, enhanced friendship and trust, dystopias alienate individuals from one another and destroy the social fabric by enforcing a number of disintegrating processes. In dystopias, as Julia Gerhard points out, "the concept of individuality is vanishing—personal life merges with the

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[1]   However, literary dystopia is not completely new, since it has its roots in Menippean satire. For more information on this, see Carter Kaplan (1999, 200).

social, human body and mind are appropriated according to the communal needs of the state" (2012, 101) and "not only the state and its police apparatus fulfil the role of 'disciplinary mechanisms,' regimenting the human body and permeating all layers of society, but ordinary people as well" (56). These common features notwithstanding, critics have distinguished several kinds of dystopia and have accordingly given them different labels. According to Sean Seeger and Daniel Davison-Vecchione, well-known critics such as Krishan Kumar (1987) and Fredric Jameson (2005), to name but two, have often equated dystopia with *antiutopia* (2019, 52-55). Kumar, who uses *antiutopia* in the place of the term *dystopia*, defines it as "a reaction largely to the socialist utopia of the nineteenth century and certain socialist practices in the twentieth century" (1987, viii), that is, as a model of society in which an attempt to accomplish a utopian project has been made, but whose results have turned out to be disastrous in some relevant respects. Not all dystopias, however, strive to warn about the authoritarian doctrinaire attitudes that lie at the core of utopian schemes. Jameson, for example, argues that some dystopias are, instead, the outcome of "a conviction about human nature itself, whose corruption and lust for power are inevitable, and not to be remedied by new social measures or programs" (2005, 198). Even more influential have been the theories put forward by Tom Moylan, for whom the genre of dystopia is an open form that straddles the impulses of utopia and antiutopia: "Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination" (2000, xi). Inspired by Menippean satire, dystopia, for Moylan, delves into "the causes and effects of social and ecological evil as systemic" (xii). This being said, he nonetheless distinguishes between dystopias and antiutopias. He regards antiutopias as closed worlds that disclose the negative inclinations of humanity and often end up in despair. On the other hand, dystopia looks for alternatives and solutions, however frail these may be. Moylan then introduces the concept of *critical dystopia*—also called *flawed utopia* by Lyman Tower Sargent (2003)—to signal the implicit utopic or redeeming qualities of a dystopian text. For Moylan, then, critical dystopias keep a utopian perspective that somehow strives to counter the worst dystopian scenarios (190). Although many other classifications have been put forward (see, among others, Atwood 2011; Claeys 2017; Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2019), it is clear that some of them have things in common, to the point that they may even overlap, and that other categories might also be thought of in the future. Without doubt, the most useful and all-encompassing labels, and thus the ones most used by critics, are antiutopia and critical dystopia, as they can easily encompass all different varieties.

Another important issue on which most academics agree is that of the different perspective that utopias and dystopias on the whole offer (Claeys 2013; Czigányik 2015; Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2019). Broadly speaking, utopias mainly deal

with social and political structures and are therefore less concerned with individual agency, whereas dystopias primarily focus on the helplessness of personal subjects against supraindividual forces (Czigányik 2015, 20-21). Furthermore, utopias follow a generic convention whereby they offer the perspective of a visitor or outsider, and rarely unravel a highly organised plot narrative with amply developed characters. More's *Utopia* ([1516] 2002), Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* ([1888] 2009) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* ([1890] 1994) could be given as examples. By contrast, dystopia is generally described from "the point of view of someone living under the regime in question and whose subjectivity has been shaped by that form of life" (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2019, 57). George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ([1949] 2014), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* ([1985] 1996) and Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan* ([2017] 2018), among other titles, might well illustrate this point. This is, no doubt, one of the reasons why most dystopias can have a rather more powerful effect on readers.

3. The "New" India: A Dystopian Country?

Narendra Modi, a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist volunteer organisation, is the first prime minister not from the Indian National Congress Party to have won two consecutive terms with a full majority. His accession to power in 2014, and by extension that of the BJP, has changed many things in the country, to the point that a considerable number of contemporary Indians feel rather alienated from the workings of the nation. This widespread sensation of severance has resulted in a feeling of helplessness that, in the opinion of scholars like Amit Chaudhuri, even exceeds that "felt during the suspension of civil liberties in the emergency of 1975 to 1977 and the political traumas that followed" (2019). The BJP government is paying more and more attention to the welfare of global capital and the constantly increasing implementation of its Hindu ethnonationalist agenda has led to much internal confrontation. As Pramod K. Nayar argues, homogenisation and cultural standardisation are promoted in the larger interests of the nation, which inexorably results in the rejection of ethnic, racial and cultural differences (2017).

Some of the many measures taken that have brought about this atmosphere deserve special mention: the economically disastrous demonetisation programme of 2016, in theory meant to stop corruption and encourage the use of e-cash and virtual banking; the implementation of CCTV camera security systems and Aadhar—the world's largest biometric ID system—whereby citizens must surrender all their personal data to the government; the abrogation of article 370 of the Indian constitution, which granted Kashmir special status on account of its contested history; the erosion of institutional independence, which is resulting in the progressive reduction of freedoms and rights; the initiation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the state of Assam, aimed

at expelling "foreigners" without the required documents, namely Muslim refugees from Bangladesh; the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA, 2019), which excludes Muslim refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and also the Tamils who have been living in India after fleeing the Sri Lankan genocide; and the construction of massive detention camps.[2] Protests and popular demonstrations against these measures have been brutally crushed by the police of states ruled by the BJP. The overall sociopolitical panorama paints such a bleak picture that, for citizens like Deya Bhattacharya, India has turned into a dystopian democracy:

> *Achhe din aane waale hain* (good days are coming) was the campaign slogan for the ruling party in 2014 in India—a promise of prosperity and economic growth, coupled with security, convenience, freedom from disorder. In retrospect, this statement of *achhe din* sounds suspiciously like a utopia gone wrong: where a good place ultimately becomes bad because like, in many dystopias, there was hope for a better world, but without regard for the human and environmental costs. (2019)

When the democratic ideals encapsulated by India's modern constitution are pitted against the revival and spread of Hindu fundamentalist nationalism (Banerjee 2009, 25), a serious sociopolitical crisis is inexorably bound to emerge. If, as Judith Butler affirms, the concept of precarity has come to name "the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks [...] becoming differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (2009, 25), it is quite accurate to use this term to describe the dystopian panorama that Nayantara Sahgal's *When the Moon Shines by Day* (2017) and Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2018) attempt to denounce by depicting comparable but slightly different dystopian scenarios.

4. Nayantara Sahgal's *When the Moon Shines by Day*: Critical Dystopia as *Retrotopia*

Although Sahgal belongs to one of the most influential families in the country— her uncle was Jawaharlal Nehru; her cousin, Indira Gandhi; and her mother, an ambassador to the United States—she has never had any qualms about unflinchingly criticising ascending Hindu nationalism and its subsequent curtailment of civil liberties. Among other things, this led her in 2016 to return her Sahitya Akademi Award as a protest against the ever-increasing intolerance in India in general and

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[2] The Citizenship Amendment Act was passed with a view to offering Indian citizenship to illegal migrants belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian religious minorities who had fled persecution in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan before December 2014. Muslims from those countries were not eligible. It was the first time that religion was overtly used as a criterion for citizenship under Indian law. For more information, see Nayar (2017), Deya Bhattacharya (2019), Chaudhuri (2019) and Divya Dwivedi and Shaj Mohan (2020). Daily reports on the abuses that these measures generate can also be found on the websites *Dalits Media Watch* and *Organization for Minorities of India*.

the Akademi's indifference to attacks against rationalist thinkers in particular. As Urmi Bhattacheryya explains, Sahgal has often denounced the orientation of the BJP and Modi for being anti-Indian, eminently fascist and not allowing any space for dissent (2017). *When the Moon Shines by Day*, in Sahgal's own words, "describes what is happening in India under our present political environment, which is alien to Indian values" (quoted in Bhattacheryya 2017). Set in what seems to be contemporary India, the novel depicts a country under a majoritarian regime that, having lost its democratic values and taken up religion as its one and only banner, violently enforces segregation and discrimination, thus condemning most of the population to utterly precarious living conditions. As is stated in the novel, "religion joined to nation is a marriage made in hell" (Saghal 2017, 20). Rehana, the main female character, is well aware of this. That is why she, in spite of her friends' warnings, remains committed to working with the Asians Against Torture NGO. To make matters worse, she sadly acknowledges how her father's books on medieval history are "gone from shop shelves, struck off curriculums and dropped from his publisher's list" (30), and how copies of *Unholy Love*, the novel written by Zamir, her rebellious Muslim friend and subsequent lover, are burnt (146). Rehana even bears witness to a bomb explosion at her friend Cyrus Batlivala's gallery on the opening day of an art show by a groundbreaking artist acquaintance of theirs. Art and knowledge are under the control of upper caste Hindu rulers, who want to impose their monolithic discourse as the country's irrefutable norm. Censorship is rampant, as only "holy art, healthy art, national art" (113-14) is allowed; books that dare to say things contrary to the official line are simply made to disappear "under the law against dangerous thoughts" (69); and art exhibitions by Muslim artists are vandalised. A governmental department called Directorate of Cultural Transformation (DCT) rules with an iron fist the ghettos in which minority non-Hindu communities are forced to live. Abdul, Rehana's young Muslim domestic servant, changes his name to Morari Lal to protect himself and his family's business in the bazaar (35). Muslims, now seen as outsiders, must wear a badge and live in far-off settlements that, like Zamir's, are every now and then subject to brutal massacres with absolute impunity, as the police forces first commit all sorts of atrocities and then do whatever it takes to blame the inhabitants of the ghetto (149-50). Suraj, Abdul's Dalit friend, suffers a much worse fate when a group of vigilantes savagely beat him to death on the street.[3] Another character, Kamlesh, a diplomat and writer, is officially degraded and persecuted on account of his pacifist views. As his editor explains to him, "being anti-war has always been dangerous. But now […] it's blasphemous. Your investigator says war has the sanction of our scripture" (127).

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[3]   Before independence, *Untouchable* was the term most commonly used to refer to a member of the lowest caste in India. This is no longer the case these days, especially among the members of this depressed community, who want to be called *Dalit* instead. In the article, *Dalit* is generally used, with *Untouchable* being reserved for preindependence contexts only.

In this suffocating scenario, Rehana and her three friends, Nandini, Aruna and Lily, meet once a week to discuss a book they choose individually and by turns. This book club becomes their haven of peace and civilisation in the midst of hell and, even more importantly, allows them to think of better and rather more empowering alternative scenarios. Living in a country in which "women trudge behind men […], they get killed before they are born, they are divorced at the drop of a hat" (55) and where being a patriotic Hindu implies having five or more pregnancies (51), a country in which Dalits are unwaveringly deprived of a life of dignity, these friends enjoy reading the impossible stories about a woman who has multiple lovers and orgasms (54-55) and a young Dalit man who wins the love of a goddess, who purifies and liberates him from the burden of untouchability (107-108). Rehana's German friend, Franz Rohner, has come to India to launch his new book. Haunted by his country's Nazi past—he and his wife were born in eugenic *Lebensborn* clinics—he warns them all of the dark future that awaits them. All revolutions, he claims, follow the same path—"once in power they are all the same" (23); they perpetrate purges and massacres, even against their fellow countrymen and women, in order to erase "the danger of thinking differently" (158). Contrary to what many people may think, he goes on to argue, "torture comes naturally to the human species and it begins at home" (25), and it seems that India, a country in which many have for a long time "grown up in freedom" (128), will be no exception. However, a final act of Dalit revenge—Dalits leave dead cows to rot on the lawn surrounding the building where the opening of a cultural week is to be held—together with Rehana's determination to keep on fighting for the rights of outcastes and asylum seekers in spite of all adversities, allow the novel to end on a fairly hopeful note. In this nightmarish scenario, there is still a small group of strong-willed individuals who refuse to surrender.

It is my contention that Sahgal's novel is a good example of critical dystopia, in particular of the kind that Zygmunt Bauman labelled as *retrotopia*. In his seminal book of the same title, Bauman analyses the status of utopia at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and interestingly shows how the longing for utopia has recently, and paradoxically, come to be directed backwards, that is, towards the past, and thus away from the future that was its main target decades before (2017, 1-12). According to this critic, the utopian impulse has in no way diminished or disappeared, but has been shockingly and detrimentally reinvested in versions of an idealised past, including that of a unified, coherent, homogenous and self-contained nation state that, it goes without saying, never actually existed (2017, 60-85).

When the Moon Shines by Day clearly denounces the supremacy and ever-increasing strength that Hindu nationalism—or "Hindutva," as the Sangh Parivar or coalition of Hindu nationalist parties in India prefers to call it—is currently acquiring in India. As Runa Das argues, in order to build up and protect the identity of Hindu India, it was quintessential to conceive of a Hindu nation that excludes the Other, that is, the non-Hindu (2006, 374-75). In other words, only Hindus belong to the Indian tradition,

which makes them the only legitimate inhabitants of Indian soil. This ideology is chiefly aimed at excluding Muslims but also other faiths—Jews, Christians and Buddhists, among others—that came from outside India, who are thus regarded as intruders who must be neutralised and ultimately expelled or eliminated. This argument is echoed by the Director of Cultural Transformation in the novel: "We cannot forget the pain of invasions, […] the Turks, Mongols, Mughals, foreigners who interrupted our Hindu history. You may say we are now engaged in wiping out that painful memory and returning our nation by all possible means to its racial and religious purity. Is that not plain justice? That is the cultural transformation we are bringing about" (Sahgal 2017, 66-67). He dreams of having a Hindu nation because "the time is good and ripe for it" (112). It is the outside threat posed by "foreigners" that Hindutvavadis like him exploit to reinforce their own ideology inside the country. However, as Bhimrao Ramji (aka Babasaheb) Ambedkar clearly stated in his polemical 1936 speech *Annihilation of Caste*, "Hindu society as such does not exist. It is only a collection of castes" ([1936] 2014, 242). In fact, the term *Hindu* had only been used before by the Mughals and the British, since the people who now described themselves as Hindus had always preferred to foreground their caste identity. The preference for this term only came about in the years prior to independence, when Hindu reformers started using it to work the miracle of making people who belonged to an impossibly diverse range of ethnicities, castes, tribes and religions part of a cohesive modern nation. Although conversion was by no means new, the threat of religious conversion was something Hindu reformers could not afford at that time. A large-scale exodus of Untouchables from the Hindu fold would have been catastrophic for the Hindu majority. That is why Hindu reformers strove to save Hinduism by winning the hearts and minds of Untouchables through their inclusion within the all-embracing category of *Hindu* (Roy 2014, 17-141). However, this never meant any real improvement in their lives and working conditions—once an Untouchable, always an Untouchable. Likewise, in Sahgal's novel the fate of Dalits is no better. Like the boy who, having dared to take somebody else's bicycle just for a joyride, is violently beaten and raped as a result (Sahgal 2017, 101), and Suraj's brutal killing on account of carrying an old leather suitcase (138-39), Dalits can be randomly lynched by angry mobs, who have no qualms about putting an end to their lives with gratuitous violence. It is making them suffer before they are killed that matters: "Alive one minute, dead the next, was not the purpose. It was the interval in between that punished" (141).

As Githa Hariharan concluded when reviewing Sahgal's novel, "it is not possible to live in the past [but] it is equally impossible to live in the present if the past does not tell us where we have come from and who we are" (2017). *When the Moon Shines by Day* becomes, to use Rehana's words, "a lie that makes us realise the truth" (109), because as Cyrus, the owner of the vandalised art gallery, affirms, "art is what kicks where it hurts" (61) and nothing can hurt more than acknowledging the end of the dream of the long-ago new independent nation—"an India that was an idea, ideal and reality […] built on its diversity […] [and] rooted in democracy (Hariharan

2017). Not only does Sahgal's novel denounce the unconditional vindication and retrieval of an allegedly original "pure" Hindu nation at the expense of a humane recognition of hybridity as being the main point on the Hindutva agenda, but it also insists that, in order to meet this objective, its agents are most willing to deploy every possible means. Their stifling orthodox Hindu utopia inexorably becomes the Other's nightmarish dystopia, and it is up to the few individuals who, like Rehana, still believe that "the miracle, as ever in history, was human help and workaday human love" (103), to become a beacon of hope in the middle of the fundamentalist storm. Franz asserts that most people wrongfully believe that revolutions come from the top, and further questions this view as follows: "So in a nutshell, are they not the man who mounts his woman with no please-may-I, gallops to glory, rolls off his mount and snores himself to sleep? And the woman? Ah, the woman! She lies awake plotting how to kill him" (46-47). As this simile suggests, it is the oppressed who, much to the surprise of those holding power, can unexpectedly instigate a revolution from below, either by challenging the system—the final act of surreptitious defence by the Dalits mentioned earlier—or by protecting its most "undesirable" victims— Rehana's activism. Finally, the fact that the most rebellious character happens to be a woman is by no means accidental. As Suparno Banerjee asserts, an element that characterises many Indian critical dystopias is "the primacy of the feminist approach" (2010, 112). In a country in which, as was argued before, women are so often treated as second-class citizens, critical dystopias like Sahgal's send out warnings about the lethal combination of political inaction and religious fundamentalism which, if uncontested, will play havoc with everybody's freedoms, but above all women's.

5. Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*: Critical Dystopia as *Homotopia*

The son of a Muslim editor and a Christian journalist, Indian journalist and novelist Akbar could be defined as a cultural hybrid. His debut novel, *Leila*, was on the shortlist for the Hindu Literary Prize and also won the Crossword Jury Prize and the Tata Literature First Book Award. As Akbar himself explained, his main aim in *Leila* was to bring to the fore the fact that, "in today's India, there are forces at work which are beyond our immediate control. There are huge, overarching political changes that can have personal ramifications, and can go on to devastate lives" (quoted in Ghatak 2017). In particular, he refers to the fundamentalist forces that have taken it upon themselves to decide what is good for society as a whole. Moreover, he felt the need to describe the alienating atmosphere of cities like Delhi and Mumbai: "In both cities, there exists a code that creates an isolated, insular experience. It's the housing societies in Mumbai, where food choices decide your eligibility to stay on rent, it's the gated, posh colonies in Delhi that have their own way of keeping people away" (quoted in Ghatak 2017).

Set in a big unnamed Indian city in the near future, *Leila* depicts a dystopian society constantly threatened by communal violence, identity politics and class warfare. In

Nandini Krishnan's words, the novel depicts "a bleak universe where hope is a speed bump. […] If it is futuristic, it invokes a future that is not too far way" (2017). The novel basically calls into question diversity, one of India's most precious assets: citizens are classified and confined within residential sectors strictly based on religious identity and are rigorously detached from one another. It is only the unconditional love of Shalini, a mother who refuses to give up her search for her missing daughter, that introduces a glimmer of hope for the future. Shalini, born to a Hindu family, marries Riz, a Muslim man, with whom she has a baby girl, Leila. Shalini bears witness to a gradual change in her community. Power is eventually concentrated in the hands of the Council, which insists on dividing people of different castes and religious affiliations into different living sectors, surrounded by walls that keep them "uncontaminated" and wholly apart from one another— no wonder the two main mottos in the novel are "Purity for All" and "Unity from Purity." The "repeaters" are the officers in charge of enforcing, with utmost violence if necessary, the Council's dictatorial principles across society. Following their marriage, Shalini and Riz move to the East End, the one and only place that still manages to stand apart from the dominant partition policy. While living here, Shalini has, notwithstanding her opposition to segregation, an uneasy relationship with Sapna, her housemaid. In spite of the sincere affection that Sapna always shows towards Leila, Shalini, who after all belongs to a complacent and often uncritical elite, does not allow her to kiss her daughter on account of their different social status and for fear of what people may say, thus making it clear, to rely on Keshava Guha's contention, that there is no "easy dichotomy between tribalism and cosmopolitanism" because it is cosmopolitans like Shalini who ultimately "enabled the rise of tribalism through their elitism and their cowardice" (2018). When Leila is three years old, Shalini becomes separated from her after a violent attack by the repeaters, during which Riz is beaten almost to death. Consequently, Shalini is confined within a Purity Camp, the place where women who dare to rebel against the irrational Council laws are taken and forced to accept and internalise their guilt. As was the case in Sahgal's novel and many other Indian critical dystopias (Banerjee 2010, 112), *Leila* also gives primacy to the feminist approach, as it is women who suffer the worst domestic and intracaste violence in India. However, although Shalini apparently ends up complying with the norms imposed on her, even to the point of blaming herself for what happened—"we didn't respect these walls, so they took her from me" (Akbar [2018] 2019, 6)—she refuses to forget her daughter, let alone abandon her quest to find her. When Shalini is about to lose hope, she desperately clings to the belief that, in spite of the passing of time, her daughter can still preserve some vague, but indelible, memories of her—"the blurred outline of a face. A tracery of scent. The weight of fingertips on her cheek. The warmth of her first cradle, [her] arms" (6). After sixteen long years of constant humiliation and suffering, which also involve working as a domestic servant for the dominant group, Shalini's search ends in the home of Sapna, her former maid, who now happens to be the wife of one of the authorities in the Political Sector, in charge of keeping all the

other sectors under its iron-fisted control. Sapna makes the most of the occasion to take revenge on Shalini: not only does she gloat over her former mistress's humiliation—before entering the precinct, she is made to fully undress to be carefully searched—but she also insists that Shalini is mistaking her daughter Lakshmi for Leila. The novel ends on an enigmatic note. The identity of Leila remains a mystery—it is impossible to know whether Sapna is telling the truth and Shalini must make do with this void inside, although it is also subtly suggested that she will never resign herself to the fate that the Council has programmed for her and will consequently go on looking for Leila.

Given its emphasis on enforced homogenisation as the main rule to preserve this segregationist regime, the society depicted in Akbar's novel might well be regarded as a good example of critical dystopia as *homotopia*, to rely on Anupama Mohan's term. This critic defines homotopias as "those visions of unified collectivity where an aggressively homogenising principle operates and where unity is a form of collective gathering of one or two coordinates (race/language/religion) and the deliberate repudiation of others. […] if utopia is the space for shared transformation and amelioration, then homotopia is its obverse because it foregrounds that such change is engineered for and by a few" (2012, 8-9). In this particular kind of dystopian society, it is the Others, that is, all of those who happen to be different from one's small community, that must be kept apart. Hence the Council's insistence on the building of more and more walls. In this regard, *Leila* also testifies to the ever-increasing proliferation of walls in today's world. After the fall of the Berlin wall, only eleven more remained. At present, though, their number has increased and is closer to seventy (El País 2017). Walls are put to different uses, serving mainly to refuse entry to those whose ideas and way of life can put their builders' to the test as well as to those who, having no means of survival, may ask for a small share of the economic wealth and resources of the host population. In the novel under discussion, intellectuals are deemed to be subversive, as they are accused of upholding Western values at the expense of Hindu ones: "These intellectuals […] show no care for our own values, how we have always lived. Don't go by these foreign ideas of what is right, what is wrong" (Akbar [2018] 2019, 44). Immigrants fare even worse; they are a scourge that must be completely eradicated: "What-all people coming from everywhere? Where are they coming from? […] Good people are getting angry. […] We can free ourselves, at last, from these ghastly visions" (45). As Shalini's father complains after he tries to fight against another sector's guards and, as a result, is beaten up and humiliated in front of his own daughter, "walls diminish us. Make us something less than human" (38). Walls separate those who deserve to lead a human life by placing them in "sectors" furnished with green lawns and beautiful avenues. The sectors are in turn interconnected by "flyroads" that guarantee that their inhabitants should never be in contact with the "slummers," the lowest castes who are forced to live amidst the filth and debris that the privileged sectors generate and conveniently discard. In keeping with Giorgio Agamben's biopolitics, the slummers could be labelled as bare life, that is, as life with no political status, no rights, who are

thus condemned to dwell in a state of permanent exclusion (1998). In other words, they may be physically alive, but are symbolically and politically dead. They are, to use Michel Agier's term, "the world's residual 'remnants,' dark, diseased and invisible," whose nonexistence is constantly pitted against "a clean, healthy and visible world" that makes sure that this partition is never questioned (2011, 4).

Sky domes have been built by the Council to protect the sectors from the filthy air that the slummers breathe, and it is the heat that they emit to the outer atmosphere to keep these sectors air conditioned that is responsible for the fires that devour the piles of garbage in the landfill sites where the slummers, withstanding extremely high temperatures and the scarcity of clean water, strive to survive. Not only are they denied any kind of assistance, but they are even blamed for causing the fires, and are accordingly beaten up by the repeaters as a punishment. The slummers are less than human and are thus deprived of any rights, even the right to exist.

Purity, the exclusive prerogative of those who live in sectors, has also fallen prey to a strict hierarchy. It goes without saying that the purest ones are the rulers, the members of the Council, who consequently live in a very special precinct, the Political Sector. Occupying a central position and protected from the rest by a sixty-feet-high wall, the Purity Wall, the Political Sector controls everything thanks to the one-hundred-feet Purity Tower erected right in the middle of it, which thus becomes a dystopian variation of Michel Foucault's panopticon (Anusudha and Sekhar 2019, 164), the circular model put forward by Jeremy Bentham for the building of eighteenth-century prisons, where prisoners were constantly observed from a central tower within which resided the power of the observer. A panopticon "reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions—to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide—it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two" (Foucault 1977, 200). Similarly, in *Leila* individuals lead a regimented life—they are constantly observed, disciplined and punished, trapped in visibility by the Council.

The Purity Tower, together with the Purity Camps, are two of the most powerful and repressive state apparatuses, to rely on Louis Althusser's well-known concept ([1970] 2014, 232-72), that the Council uses to "stabilise" those who dare to challenge their dominant ideology by depriving them of the most humane and important part of themselves. As Shalini puts it, "it is not something from me but something of me that has been taken. The part that could feel warmth, happiness, desire. Perhaps I have yielded something of myself" (Akbar [2018] 2019, 137). Among the means used to achieve this purpose, Dr. Iyer's pills are some of the most effective. When giving vent to their frustrations on top of the Anger Tower is not enough for them—it is only here that captive women can "shout. Abuse as [they] want, kick, scream" (149)—the women are given pills that, like the well-known *soma* in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* ([1932] 1998), induce sleep and grant some peace (19). Yet this does not come for free, as the price that must be paid, Shalini reports, is none other than complete alienation: "I remember only fragments. [...] the pills [...] left me in a muddle. Some

people have reported palpitations, night sweats, a sudden inability to breathe" (17). These pills, however, should not necessarily be taken as literal; for many Indian readers, it might also be clear that these drugs that stifle women's desires are nothing but doses of Indian mysticism that are spiritually administered by a guru—Dr. Iyer in this case.

These mechanisms can be rather coercive and efficient. However, as Althusser goes on to explain, the preservation of ruling class hegemony also depends on the enforcement of other mechanisms that, although nonviolent, can be even more persuasive—ideological state apparatuses, which function invisibly in the form of morals ([1970] 2014, 103-39, 232-72). They include educational and religious institutions, the family and different kinds of groups—cultural, political, legal—whose discourses are, without exception, dominated by the ruling ideology, which in this way turns people into subjects, that is, it controls them. Of all ideological state apparatuses, educational institutions are by far the most important—it is in schools that individuals are taught the "proper" ways to behave, talk, interact, think and act, and it is this that gradually conforms their imaginary relationships to their conditions of existence. In other words, the dominant ideology interpellates individuals as subjects, interpellation being here understood as the process of accepting ideology without any critical questioning or awareness. This is what Antonio Gramsci described as the process whereby civil society, understood as the public sphere in which ideas and beliefs are shaped, manufactures consent and legitimacy (1971). Whereas the political society in the novel rules through force, civil society rules through consent. In *Leila*, every single sector has its own school, where children are imbued with their community's caste, religious and cultural beliefs. In clear contrast to this, children from outside the walls end up in the so-called Council schools, in which they get "no visitors […] they learn only the Council's rules" (Akbar [2018] 2019, 195) and "abuse is rampant" because "no one cares about the children in these schools" (159). The East End Yellowstone school, the one Shalini chose for Leila, was "the final holdout, the last mixed school in the city" (105), the only one that still resisted segregation. As Shalini tries to explain to Naz, her brother-in-law who has just converted to the Council's segregationist policies and will soon betray them all, the East End is not, as he thinks, "a godless place" (78), but rather an enclave "quiet and green, with a serene, unruffled air [whose] residents had long ago decided against putting a sector wall" (79-80)—in a word, the only oasis of freedom in the Council's desert of bigotry. However, this will not last long, since this school and its location are increasingly demonised by the rulers for inculcating "no values, no respect for elders, no respect for our past" (91). In the end, each sector is allowed to establish their own norms and regulations, which means that purity implies different things in each of them. People are therefore misled into believing that they enjoy some freedom, while in fact they are simply consenting to the Council's agenda of perpetuating their power thanks to the compliance and complicity of those that they oppress and control. Moreover, the greed and thirst for power of those who, like Naz—Riz's brother— and Ashish—Sapna's husband—are not at all squeamish about betraying their own

relatives and making friends with the enemy in order to become part of the dominant establishment also contribute to enabling the rulers to rule. As Shalini concludes, it is the constant battle between the two parts of our human brain that is responsible for our ingrained egotism and fear of the Other: "One part of our brain is forever conceiving […] things that pull us together, while another part of our brain—the safety-first part […] is trying to keep us apart. It's telling us we're too close to one another, the world outside is too complex, too frightening. […] We haven't changed. We still think like animals" (256-57). And yet, the novel also makes it clear that things can be different, as love can lead a number of unique individuals to muster enough strength to overcome fear and fight for what they most want and believe in, even at the expense of defying the system and becoming, as is the case of Shalini, a "Baalini" or subversive witchlike figure (168). It is Shalini's unconditional motherly love alone that guides and impels her along the path of rebellion, while whispering in her ear, "[Leila] is calling me" (263).

6. Conclusion

The two novels discussed in this article can be seen as critical dystopias in which populism and precarity go hand in hand. *When the Moon Shines by Day* is a political dystopia that warns against the dangers of fundamentalist Hindu nationalism and cultural censorship. On its part, *Leila* brings to our attention the lethal consequences of intolerance and supremacist beliefs, which can only lead to impoverishing isolation, racism, xenophobia and, last but not least, boost the ruling elite's burning ambition to monopolise wealth and natural resources at the expense of their subalterns. Depressing as these scenarios may be, though, these two novels try to offer some kind of hope, as do most critical dystopias. As was argued before, deep down in their hearts Rehana and Shalini, the two female protagonists, refuse to surrender and are ready to go on fighting for what they want, risking their lives if necessary. In this kind of context, hope becomes a subversive force, "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" (Giroux 2004, 63). Although it is undeniable that the paradise promised by utopias has proved to be impossible to materialise and that nowadays we live much closer to dystopia than utopia, with the devastating consequences that this has for social coexistence, these two Indian novels strive to demonstrate that things can be different and that we humans are responsible for making such a difference come about. This no doubt corroborates the critical utopianism advocated by Bauman (2000, 2002; see also Bauman and Tester 2001). For this thinker, the advent of liquid modernity has meant the abandonment of the grandiose illusions and ambitions of the previous era, which he, by contrast, labels as solid modernity. Although contemporary liquid society no longer aims at controlling the present or improving the future, since it focuses instead on the formulation of hyperindividualised, short-term utopias, the utopian impulse still remains necessary. Utopia paves the way for critique and

change, but is never final; it prompts us to move in the right direction, but guarantees no specific destination. It is both imperative and uncertain. To use Michael Hviid Jacobsen's words by way of conclusion, "in times of uncertainty, as the present, utopia may be the first casualty, but it may also be our last hope" (2006, 339). Although it is a fact that the current sociopolitical situation in India, at present further aggravated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, does not give many Indian intellectuals any grounds for being sanguine about the future, these two novels seem to reaffirm the need to claim that the contemporary (in)human version of Indian reality is not the only one possible, and that it is up to each individual to imagine and make an effort to bring into existence alternatives to the populist, precarious present.[4]

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Dolores Herrero is Full Professor of English Literature in the Department of English and German
Philology at the University of Zaragoza, Spain. Her main interests are postcolonial literature and
cinema, on which she has published extensively. She was the editor of *Miscelánea: A Journal of English
and American Studies* from 1998 until 2006 and Secretary of EASA (European Association for Studies
on Australia) from 2011 until 2015.