



RAJIV GANDHI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF LAW, PUNJAB

(Established under Punjab Act No. 12 of 2006)

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National Conference on Reading Dystopias: Configuring Future in the Past and the Past in the Future

Department of English organized National Conference on Reading Dystopias. The inaugural session of the commenced with a gracious and intellectually resonant **Welcome Address** by *Prof. (Dr.) Jai S. Singh*, Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Punjab. Emphasizing the vital intersections between literature, law, and society, Dr. Singh underscored the value of critical literary inquiry, especially of dystopian texts, in interrogating contemporary socio-political structures.

Plenary Address was delivered by acclaimed journalist, novelist, and academic **Mr. Prayaag Akbar**, author of the celebrated novel *Leila*. Invoking the subversive phrase "*Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum*", Akbar deftly traced its etymological play and satirical invention, revealing how even a fictional Latin aphorism can become a symbol of defiance. He provocatively reflected on its classroom-like cadence, noting that such phrases, crafted to resemble mottos or rules, often evoke the figure of the teacher as the earliest enforcer of discipline. This reading opened a compelling avenue into how structures of power embed themselves in the mundane, through institutions that appear neutral or nurturing.

Akbar further expanded his discussion through readings of two contemporary dystopian novels, drawing parallels between speculative futures and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. He argued that dystopia is not always a far-off possibility but often a persistent condition, particularly for those already existing at the edges of systemic power. His address situated dystopian fiction as a vital genre through which political imaginaries and lived realities intersect.

Prof. (Dr.) Manju Jaidka, eminent scholar, former Chairperson of the Department of English at Panjab University, and Founder-President of MELOW in her plenary address talked on wide-ranging and lyrical reflection, and traced the genealogy of dystopian thought through canonical figures such as Dante, Milton, and Yeats, positioning dystopia as a literary form that transgresses, challenges, and reconfigures normative boundaries. Her intertextual approach brought a philosophical gravitas to the conversation, highlighting dystopia's role in exploring existential anxieties, moral ambiguity, and the perennial human yearning for transformation amidst despair. Her address eloquently demonstrated how dystopia functions both as critique and as a mode of radical hope.

The inaugural session set a powerful tone for the conference, laying the intellectual groundwork for a day of critical exploration and dynamic scholarly exchange.

The Conference offered a vibrant platform for interdisciplinary dialogue through three concurrent technical sessions held. Scholars and students from across the country, spanning Jodhpur, Greater Noida, Dehradun, Jammu, Noida, Patiala, and Kolkata, came together to interrogate dystopian imaginaries through lenses of gender, law,

The first session, chaired by Dr. Tanya Mander and moderated by Ms. Palak Singla and Ms. Vandana Sharma, focused on Indian Feminist Dystopias. It brought forth critical engagements with themes of



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surveillance, control, and resistance as articulated in both literary and socio-cultural contexts. Discussions ranged from gendered surveillance in *The Girl in the Glass Case*, and the normalization of bodily control in educational institutions, to questions of gender performativity in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* and maternal erasure in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. The session concluded with a powerful critique of liberal biopolitics in *Red Clocks*, exposing how ostensibly progressive frameworks may obscure deeper systems of control.

The second session, chaired by Dr. Chasul Phogat and moderated by Ms. Vandana Sharma, turned to the relationship between dystopian thought, environmental degradation, and legal frameworks. Presentations critically addressed the role of the essay as a form of resistance, the complicity of justice systems in perpetuating dystopian realities, and the gendered consequences of ecological crises. Texts such as *The Water Cure* and *The New Wilderness* were examined through an ecofeminist lens, while discussions also unpacked legal reform as illusory in the context of sexual violence and explored the dystopian framing of moral policing in contemporary Indian law.

Simultaneously, the third session chaired by Dr. Vibha Bhoot and moderated by Ms. Palak Singla explored dystopian representations in popular media. This panel offered a compelling shift to the digital and visual, analyzing how screen-based narratives engage with dystopian tropes. Papers examined the distortion of reality in the works of Philip K. Dick and William Gibson, feminist revolutions portrayed in digital media, recurring themes of control in cinematic dystopias, and environmental exploitation as presented in streaming documentaries.

Together, the three sessions demonstrated the depth and diversity of dystopian discourse, affirming the genre's enduring relevance in addressing contemporary anxieties. The deliberations laid a strong foundation for future discussions on the role of dystopian storytelling in critiquing structures of power and imagining alternative futures.

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