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Leila: Exposing the Borders Within

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Leila (2019)

Television series

Created by (adaptated by) Urmi Juvekar

Directed by Deepa Mehta, Shanker Raman,
and Pawan Kumar

Original language: Hindi

Available on **Netflix**

Six episodes, released June 2019

More information at **IMDB**

The research literature on borders (Border Studies) revolutionizes the way we study and engage with borders. The border commonly denotes a line of division marking the territorial limits of a nation-state. Inside the borders, theoretically, is a nation. The nation, according to Anderson, is an “imagined community” (1983). In legal terms, a nation-state implies homogeneity of social, cultural and political spaces. Such theoretical and legal interpretations of nation-states are misleading and far from the objective ground reality. It is difficult to identify a country in the world that doesn’t have citizens of a different faith, belief and cultural practices. Albeit, there are political parties committed to converting the imagined community into a reality. These are generally right-wing ultra-nationalist parties that purposely ignore or erase the presence of different communities within a country. The political agenda amounts to depriving minorities of constitutional rights and rendering them second-class citizens or worse. The world has seen atrocities along these lines countless times, including against Jews in Germany under the rule of Nazis and more recently under the brutality of the Taliban in Afghanistan, to name just two examples.



Border Studies disputes that there are no lines inside a country. There are several invisible borders and boundaries in the nation-state too often ignored by International Relations and Political Science scholars (Tripathi 2015). Border Studies is also open to studying borders and boundaries through different mediums, including film (television series, documentaries, movies) (Staudt 2018).

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Today, Netflix is a primary source of entertainment, and there are numerous shows on this online platform that involve compelling socio-political issues. One such series that is liable to draw the attention of Border Studies is *Leila*, a Hindi-language series directed by Deepa Mehta, Shanker Raman and Pawan Kumar. The series is based on Prayaag Akbar’s English-language dystopian novel and began streaming online in June 2019. It is a story of a struggling mother in search of her daughter Leila.

The political plot of *Leila* is about a future authoritarian regime where people of other faiths are outlawed. The progressive citizens of society have been put in different camps/reform centres for ‘purification’. This is where Leila’s mother Shalini is kept after being arrested from her house on the pretext of wasting water. The real reason for her arrest was different. Shalini, an upper-caste Hindu, married a Muslim, and interfaith marriages are immoral in the land of Aryavarta, which was established on the principle of racial purity. Moreover water is regarded as a rare resource in Aryavarta and the supply of pure water is controlled by the dominant political group consisting of upper caste Hindus.

Shalini’s desperation to escape the purification camp to meet her daughter is shown in the first episode. She is asked to prove her loyalty by killing two prisoners of the purification camp. However, she refuses to push the button to kill and consequently is sent to a labour camp. There Shalini meets a guard named Bhanu who is actually a rebel. With the help of Bhanu, Shalini finally reaches the house of the top leadership of Aryavarta, Mr. Rao, where she starts working as a housemaid. Bhanu asks her to collect more information on operation Skydome—a dream project for the privileged few of Aryavarta. Skydome is basically a giant air conditioner that refines and cools the climate within its perimeter while expelling hot air to surrounding areas, so communities not covered by the system bear the environmental costs. Shalini helps Bhanu learn more about the sinister project. Finally, Shalini, along with Mr. Rao, arrive at the core of project Skydome, where she meets her daughter. To the shock of Shalini, her daughter Leila refuses to recognize her and instead calls Aryavarta her mother.

This series shows how a fundamentalist political group creates borders amongst humans based on caste and religion. The government and people legally sanction these borders and no one can cross them without state’s permission. The internal borders are even stricter, more

impermissible, securitised and authoritarian than the international borders. Every border has a specific function, “separates the wanted from unwanted, the imagined barbarians from the civilized, and the global rich from global poor” (Hountum 2012, 405). Borders in this regard are “fabricated truth” (Hountum 2012, 405). This is precisely illustrated in *Leila*—internal borders with particular exclusionary political functions.

The series also portrays a society under extremist rule. There is a suspension of human rights, and everything is determined by race/religion. The first season of *Leila* left an impact on viewers particularly of India which recently saw a rise of religious fundamentalism. There is a strong socio-political message in the series that has six episodes in this season. It is about discrimination, deprivation, and patriarchy. All the top positions of Aryavarta are filled by male leaders, and women are to serve as loyal companions both in family life and the political arena. Thus, there are borders within borders. One salient border is the wall that separates the dominant political section from people of other religions and beliefs. Inside this powerful section, women are depicted in subordinate political positions. In this regard, the fight of Shalini becomes more profound, as a progressive, secular and strong woman fights against a range of political barriers. The first season ends with a question about how Shalini will react to the situation where she is standing with a powerful weapon, given to her by the rebel Bhanu, to detonate and eradicate the leadership of Aryavarta—with her daughter among them. Needless to say, viewers eagerly await the second season of the series, which has not yet been confirmed.

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