

# Theorizing the Neighbor:

## *Arshinagar* and *Romeo and Juliet*

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### Abstract

Aparna Sen's 2015 film *Arshinagar* (*Town of Mirrors*) sets Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in a fictional town in contemporary India, establishing the primary bond between the young lovers as that of neighbors. In privileging place over character, the eponymous town over the protagonists, the film approaches *Romeo and Juliet* within the alternative framework of the neighborhood and the neighborly. I argue that the core characteristics of proximity and difference that define the conceptual categories of the neighbor and, by extension, the neighborhood, play out in the film at multiple levels, from its experimental blending of the proximate techniques of cinema and theater to its multilingual rhymed verse to its reevaluation of the political stakes of the nation. *Arshinagar* thus consistently plays with audience's expectations, walking a fine line between proximity and remoteness, between familiarity and strangeness — between the self and the other in the mirror. More broadly, I argue that the film's theorization of the neighbor/hood provides a productive springboard for the reconceptualization of the status of an adaptation, particularly within the field of Global Shakespeare, that moves beyond the individual genealogical relationship between "original" and "copy."

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Hailed as the first adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* in Bengali film, Aparna Sen's *Arshinagar* (2015) literally translates to "Town of Mirrors," a motif that is present in the film in its aesthetics and music, but perhaps most powerfully in the political message it seeks to convey. Mirror images, reflections that blend distortion with recognition, pepper the film, itself a blurry refracted version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Set in contemporary India, the eponymous town and the film draw their title from a Bengali Baul<sup>1</sup> song, "*Bari'r Kacche Arshi Nagar*" ("The Town of Mirrors Near My Home") said to have been composed by Lalon Fakir, a nineteenth-century Bengali Baul saint known for his religious tolerance and pluralism. Though the song, in itself, speaks of the deep spiritual relationship between Lalon and his guru, Siraj, *Arshinagar* deploys the song's central image of the neighbor — an invisible, familiar, yet unknown presence that has the ability to change one's life —

in its depiction of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to suggest the primacy of the neighborly bond. The film cuts from the young lovers' first encounter to a Baul performance of this song:

*Dhori dhori mone kori* (I feel, I feel I can hold him)  
*Dhora dey na more ekjon* (But he eludes my embrace)  
*Parshi boshot kore* (O he lives so near my place)  
*Ache barir kache arshinagar* (There's a Mirrorland beside my home)  
*Parshi boshot kore* (A neighbor lives near me...)  
*Ami ekdin naa... Dekhlam tare* (...whom never with my eyes I see)  
*Sei parshi jodi amay chhuto* (If this neighbor should ever touch me)  
*Tobe jomjatona dure jeto ekebare* (My hellish woes would forever flee.)<sup>2</sup>

In the song, *arshinagar* (the Mirrorland) and its inhabitant, *parshi* ("the neighbor"), both inaccessible to the singer, are suggestive of salvation — to touch the neighbor would mean liberation from pain. But this neighbor, resident in a Mirrorland, is an invisible reflection, at once suggesting that spiritual salvation is within oneself and asserting the impossibility of physical contact between the singer and the neighbor. While the song, which has a history and legacy independent of the film, has been interpreted as referring to everyman, a divine power, a soulmate, and the Great Neighbor, its use to mark the first meeting of the lovers underscores not just their location in the fictional Arshinagar — a Mirrorland so familiar to its viewers, that it may just be next door — but, significantly, the primary relationship between the Hindu Ronojoy Mitra (Rono) and the Muslim Zuleikha Khan (Julie).

Moments before the song, Julie, having realized to her shock that Rono is a Mitra, and therefore both a Hindu and the son of her father's business rival, refers to him as her *parshi* (neighbor), the only acceptably neutral term for their association. It is a word that Rono does not quite understand and, seeking translation and clarification, he asks Julie: "Parshi mane neigh-baar?" ("Parshi means neighbor?").<sup>3</sup> This establishes a name for their relationship, a name that is echoed in the Baul song, suggesting parallels and overlaps between neighborly love, divine love, and romantic love. Shakespeare's "two households both alike in dignity" (Prologue 1)<sup>4</sup> are, in this "Town of Mirrors," neighbors, reflections of each other, and intimately bound by this relationship. It is this intimate, yet tenuous, relationship between kinship and hostility, loyalty and distrust, that engenders both the inevitable violence and ultimate reconciliation at the end of the film.

While the figure of the neighbor is thus central to the film's political message and its interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*, I argue that the core characteristics of proximity and difference

that define the conceptual categories of the neighbor and, by extension, the neighborhood, play out in the film at multiple levels. Formally, *Arshinagar* modifies dominant filmic trends in Indian popular cinema by skirting the boundary between the proximate performance techniques of cinema and theater. This unexpected, and often uncomfortable, insertion of the theater into cinema — largely through the use of painted backdrops and the framing device of a puppet show — deliberately undermines the audience's expectations of a visually realistic film. Linguistically, *Arshinagar's* experimental, multilingual rhymed verse simultaneously establishes and dissolves the boundaries between neighboring languages, depicting both the interlingual *and* intralingual diversity that forms contemporary India's soundscape. Thematically, *Arshinagar* provides one instance of an alternative means of approaching the concerns of the nation via the neighborhood, rather than the cinematic family.<sup>5</sup> In it contemporary India can see itself: a society that is marked by underlying religious tension, differences that are manipulated for political gain and that can, with only the slightest of warnings, explode into large scale violence and destruction. In *Arshinagar*, thus, the neighbor — a liminal figure who embodies similarity and difference — and the neighborly — the ethical imperative and innate hostility that undergirds the relationship between neighbors — loom large as conceptual frameworks. More broadly, however, I suggest that these terms do not just provide a lens to read the film but also work as a productive concept for the field of Global Shakespeare, permitting us to highlight the comparative while resisting a return to the hierarchical.

### Global Shakespeare and the Neighborly

Over the past few decades, Global Shakespeare, both as an emerging field of academic criticism and as a subset of Shakespeare performance, has seen an exponential rise. The fortuitous overlap between the name of the building most frequently associated with Shakespeare — The Globe — and his increasing international visibility has afforded the term a poetic currency and a veneer of authenticity. But it is not without its complications, most prominently in the associations with globalization, cultural homogenization and neo-imperialism. Thus, despite the evident popularity of the term "Global Shakespeare" in college syllabi, conference panels, international festivals, and key words of academic journals, it remains one that is contested by members of the field, both in terms of what it means and more generally whether the term "global" should be used at all, with various alternatives — local, regional, foreign, worldwide, international, intercultural, and native, to name a few — being put forward over the years.<sup>6</sup>

Partly as a consequence of this battle over nomenclature, there has been an inadequate delineation of the parameters of "Global Shakespeare." Global Shakespeare names both a field of adaptations and a related critical orientation that frequently treats its objects of study as "centrifugal

departures from England to various [global] locations and centripetal returns" (Lei 2017, 14). Productions that fall into this category exhibit two characteristics: some connection with locales outside the established Anglo-American mainstream and the capacity to travel. In short, these productions are rooted in particularity and yet still possess the ability to traverse distances and differences of cultural, linguistic, and performative varieties. Unsurprisingly, this produces a skewed perception of the field as a whole, one whose parameters are determined by visibility. While these productions are by definition importantly dissimilar from the Shakespearean text, the dominant mode of analysis relies on the perception of these productions as discrete versions of Shakespeare that are always already read alongside the putative original. The label "Global Shakespeare," in its use of the singular, thus reflects this perceived centrality and stability of the Shakespearean text.

This mode of analysis draws on the status of an adaptation as derivative and secondary, situating the relationship between the two as unidirectional, hierarchical, and genealogical. Correspondingly, Shakespeare adaptations are broadly perceived either as an homage to the original, constitutive of the Benjaminian afterlife of the text, or as a corrective gesture bordering on cannibalism that draws on the Shakespeare but supplements or edits it. What remains understudied is the adaptation's paradoxical potential both to extend and end the afterlife of Shakespeare. The adaptation is fundamentally both similar and different, both comforting and threatening — qualities that are central to the theorization of the neighbor and predicated on one's orientation with respect to the object of study. Thus, instead of drawing on the adaptation's temporally secondary status to suggest a linear and hierarchical relationship between the "original" and the "adaptation" that is predicated on fidelity, conceiving of the relationship between the two as neighborly allows for a more pliable and multidirectional definition.

This conceptual figure — the neighbor — adds a third category to the friend/enemy dyad that structures ideologies of nationalism and has been the subject of recent sustained attention in the field of political theology because of the centrality of the injunction to neighborly love in Judeo-Christian doctrine.<sup>7</sup> Despite the pitfalls of applying these theoretical explorations to a context that does not derive explicitly and exclusively from the same theological foundations, it seems to me that the figure of the neighbor as one's reflection in the mirror — almost the same but not quite; familiar, yet inherently estranged — is crucial to our reception both of *Arshinagar's* political message and of its ontological status as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, particularly because of the connotations of existing in a common space. The neighbor traverses the divide between "familiarity and anonymity" and is that image of the self that can never be fully

known, one who is both "intimate *and* strange, both proximate *and* remote, both reassuring *and* threatening" (Edmondson 2011, 10).<sup>8</sup>

### Mirror Images: Cross Dressing in *Arshinagar*

It is this figure of the neighbor, as an amalgam of fear and familiarity, that marks both the beginning and end of Rono and Julie's relationship. The film's uses of Baul music, a mystic tradition that is known for transcending the division between Hindus and Muslims, bookend this relationship. The Baul songs appear when the possibility of Hindu-Muslim union blooms — the moment when the neighborly relationship slides towards the more intimate — and when that very possibility is torn apart — the moment when the neighborly relationship shifts into the antagonistic. The Mitra (Montague) and Khan (Capulet) families are competing over a bid that will demolish the Arshinagar slum to make way for a shopping mall. Fed up of trying to negotiate compensation for the slum dwellers, the powers that be set fire to the temple at the center of the slum to stoke communal hatred, thereby allowing for the slum to burn down at no cost to them and paving the way for the construction of the mall. As the violence intensifies, buildings burn, people are slaughtered on screen, and Baul music makes another appearance with the song "*Aami Aami Kore Barai*" ("All You Say is 'I' and 'Me'!") which speaks specifically to the ignorance bound up in a self-centered worldview. Aparna Sen, the film's director, has spoken of her primary motivation behind this film being a desire to depict the culture of intolerance and fear of the Other that has pervaded India, particularly following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the ensuing all-India Hindu-Muslim riots. The film appears to swing between an image of the neighbor as positive and life-changing, on the one hand, and terrifying and destructive on the other. In the prominent use of Baul music, which calls for a move beyond the material, and the depiction of the ease with which misrecognition results in fatality, Sen seems, instead, to be arguing for a deeper understanding of a shared and universal humanity in which the boundaries between neighbors are dissolved.

This vision of a shared and universal humanity is particularly pronounced in two mirrored moments of cross dressing, where the markers of religious and gendered identity are revealed to be external and fluid. These markers are easily shifted and exchanged, implying that the purportedly essential elements of one's social identity are necessarily superficial and ephemeral. Within *Arshinagar*'s color-coded visual aesthetic, the two protagonists largely appear in soft pastel shades, underscoring both their relative innocence and purity, while also disassociating them from their families who always appear in shades of red and black. The two encounters that bracket their love story, however, feature a different and deliberate costuming choice. At both their first meeting during an evening's entertainment at the Khan household, and their last, at a level crossing as they

attempt to escape the riots and elope, they each bear the markers not just of the other's gender, but also the other's faith — a sort of doubled cross-dressing.

Their first meeting takes place at the Khan residence, where preparations are underway for an evening's entertainment. Against her father's specified wishes, Julie is set to play a man in the evening's production, complete with a turban and moustache. Having heard about the play being put on by the girls of the Khan household, Rono has managed, along with his friends, to enter the house disguised as women in burqas. The black garment, immediately associated with Islam and often perceived as oppressive and restrictive towards women, paradoxically allows the men the freedom to cross over into the private quarters of the Khan house undeterred. In an effort to avoid meeting Parvez, a man she has already decided is too old for her, Julie grabs the arm of the nearest burqa-clad woman, believing her to be her aunt, dragging her into the bathroom. It is only in the bathroom that she realizes he is a man and a complete stranger. Revealing his identity, Rono begs her not to give him away and she eventually agrees. The film then cuts from their encounter in the bathroom — the slow removal of the veil, the moustache and the turban — to the Baul song, "*Bari'r Kacche Arshi Nagar*" ("The Town of Mirrors Near My Home"). When they first meet, therefore, and at the instant that they fall in love, Julie is dressed as a young Hindu boy and Rono has appropriated the attire of an older, conservative Muslim woman.

Their last encounter is similarly depicted. The riots that break out in Arshinagar impede their plans to elope. In order to get past the barricade on the street, Julie and Fati, her nurse, don the disguise of a young Hindu boy and his ailing mother. The markers of religious identity are overt: her *bindi* and bangles, his turban, the autorickshaw driver's holy thread. Waiting at the level crossing is Rono, once again in the disguise of a burqa-clad woman, a disguise that serves to both mask his religious identity and to hide his face. They see each other just as a train rushes past, obscuring their vision. In those few seconds, Julie is killed by a group of Muslim rioters passing on a truck. As Rono sits weeping over Julie's body, he too is slaughtered by rioters of his own faith. Thus, at both their first encounter and their last, they are at once both the same as, and the exact opposite of, each other — the very paradox that underpins the ontology of the neighbor.

### Locating *Arshinagar*: A Town of Mirrors

*Arshinagar*'s investment in idealism, in the values of empathy and unity, is coupled with a disavowal of realistic cinematic technique: a focus, in Sen's words, on the "real emotions and conflict" rather than the "everyday realism" prevalent in film (2017). This entailed drawing on theatrical devices like the framing device of the puppet show, rhyming dialogue, painted backdrops, stylized fight sequences and the repeated breaking of the fourth wall. A particularly

telling moment involves the slum dwellers staring directly into the camera during the song "*Kaala Paisa Wala*" ("Black Money People"), a song that critiques the upper classes' corruption and their exploitation of the lower classes. This is an indictment of the viewers, who are likely seated in malls built on the detritus of former slums, in the same cycle of exploitation. These theatrical devices make for a jarring juxtaposition with the very real and recognizable prejudice and violence that shapes the lives of the characters. It is paradoxically very difficult to get lost in the fiction of the film as we are constantly reminded that it is *not* real, and this awareness sharpens our ability to analyze, interpret, critique and reflect. This disavowal of realism is the literal realization of a Mirrorland that is both familiar, but at the same time intangible.

The film takes pains to establish *Arshinagar* as an unspecified location that is at once nowhere and everywhere, not real but at the same time not unknown (Sen 2017). The puppeteer-narrator, Reshma Bai, informs her audience at the outset: "*Koi bhi thakte pare, Bangal, Bihar, MP, Orissa*" ("It could be anywhere, West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa"<sup>9</sup>), underscoring the equivalence between *Arshinagar* and today's India. The film thus slips between concentric circles of geographic boundedness — the stage, the town, the neighborhood, the region, the country, and the universal or the abstract, its shifting registers making apparent the simultaneous universality and particularity of its narrative. The puppet show suggests that this tale is of a more universal nature, blending a fairytale quality with a privileging of place over character, of locality over personality, of *Arshinagar* over Rono and Julie. It is the very universality of the tale that serves to unmoor it from reality as, right before the scene shifts to the material reality of *Arshinagar*, Reshma Bai, the puppeteer, tells her gathered fairground audience that everyone has an "*arshinagar*" within themselves. She thereby moves *Arshinagar* from anywhere/everywhere to within the minds of the audience — a subjective interiority where they will see themselves reflected. The strong implication over here is that this production, this realization of an abstract "*arshinagar*," will ensure that the members of the audience see themselves reflected and will, hopefully, reflect on themselves.

The thematic and political concerns of *Arshinagar* thus suggest a move towards alienating the audience, particularly in the focus on the strange yet familiar neighborhood of the *Arshinagar* slum, rather than solely on the lives of the two wealthy protagonists. This eponymous slum is a neighborhood whose social, political, and religious life is saturated with mirrors. The teashop, a site for the latest gossip and news, has a large mirror on its back wall that reflects the rest of the set; the barber's shop across from it has several mirrors that are angled to reflect the narrow alleys weaving through the cramped slum; broken shards of glass cover the walls in makeshift designs;

and larger mirrors on the walls are covered in graffiti, all serving to reinforce the crowded and constricting atmosphere of the Arshinagar slum.

The mirrors are aesthetically crucial in depicting the film's climactic scene of violence, serving as a reminder of the distorted truths and the propagative and retributory nature of communal violence in contemporary India. For the residents of the Arshinagar slum, there is a predictability in their quotidian lives and a shared distaste for the wealthy Mitras and Khans, but at the slightest hint of religious turmoil, the differences between these neighbors are underscored. What is exposed here is the underside of community life, the convivial space of the *para* or neighborhood is flipped on its head, a situation described by a resident as "*Janam bhar chini jader tara aaj anjaan*" ("Those we've known all our lives have turned strangers overnight"). The mirrors in Arshinagar reflect the carnage, multiplying and blurring the turbulence while also appearing to trap the victims who can see the reflections of their attackers approaching but have no escape. The neighbors — attackers and victims — thus blur into one as the self appears to literally be annihilated by its reflection in the mirror. Mirrors thus appear frequently through the film and serve not just as a realization of the town's name but rather as a repeated materialization of the themes of distortion, reflection, repetition, and misrecognition that undergird the narrative by marking the border between the material and the immaterial, what is tangible and what is imagined.

*Arshinagar* thus consistently plays with audience's expectations, walking a fine line between proximity and remoteness, between familiarity and strangeness — between the self and the other in the mirror. It offers up mixtures, a blending of substance and shadow, of the quotidian and the fantastic, of reality and fiction, of the convivial and the distressing. Theater bleeds into film and the image in the mirror acquires substance. There is a constant crossing of borders, a pushing of boundaries, in language, identity and form. This is what the film forwards as its core ideology in its use of Baul music and overtly determined cross dressing. This is what the film embodies in its modes of performance, questioning how we might define a film, its language, and its genre.

### Star Crossed Lovers and Indian Popular Cinema

The figure of the neighbor and the space of the neighborhood are conspicuous as distinctive markers of *Arshinagar's* approach to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. However, to rely exclusively on this analysis would be to replicate a dominant mode of Global Shakespeare criticism where Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Arshinagar* are placed alongside each other and the changes or shifts from the former — presumed to be a stable text — are tabulated as if they occurred in a vacuum. I argue, instead, that the film's theorization of the neighbor/hood provides a productive



springboard for the reconceptualization of the status of an adaptation, particularly within the fundamentally adaptational field of Global Shakespeare.

*Arshinagar* is not the first Indian film to depict inter-religious love, communal violence, or riots. Nor it is the first Indian film to demonstrate a pertinent, if unattested likeness to *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>10</sup> However, in its combination of the two and because it self-consciously inserts itself into a national and global tradition of adapting *Romeo and Juliet* for film, it renders visible the modes, methods, and motivations of that process. Thus, considering *Arshinagar* as part of a neighborhood of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations allows for the acknowledgement of a constellation of influences rather than the limited and singular original/copy relationship.

*Romeo and Juliet* seems to be a play that is especially suited to Indian popular cinema: warring families, obstructive parents, young doomed love, quarrels, suicide — these features seem to be an intrinsic part of the typical Bollywood film. The earliest Indian cinematic adaptation was *Ambikapathy*, a 1937 Tamil film, and in the eighty years since, *Romeo and Juliet* has been a source text that Indian filmmakers have frequently turned to, though not always with acknowledgment, and that Indian filmgoers have frequently utilized as a framework or reference for interpreting these films. This is not to say, however, that every Indian film that seems, however tangentially, to adopt the story of the star-crossed lovers is ultimately indebted to Shakespeare. To start with, this would — given the manner in which the Indian film industry has functioned and continues to function — be impossible to prove. Equally, such a blanket claim would seriously undervalue the potential influences of other tales of star-crossed lovers in the Indian folk and mythic archives like *Laila and Majnu*, *Heer and Ranjha*, *Mirza and Sahiba*, *Sohni and Mahiwal*, which are frequently made into films as well.

I am arguing, however, for the existence of a category of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations in Indian cinema. These films, which straddle the line between familiarity and novelty, are neighbors — refracted, distorted, and repeated versions of each other — and have shaped the way in which young lovers are portrayed in Indian cinema. While the tragic story of a pair of star-crossed lovers has been a popular trope in Indian cinema, it has not previously been suggested that there is a distinct group of films constituting a field of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations. In making just such a suggestion, I do not want to forward a privileging of the Shakespearean text, but rather to open up avenues of comparative study by sketching the broad contours of this field. I want to demonstrate that these films share more than a common core narrative, specifically with respect to the choices made in the process of adaptation.

Shakespeare is figured in these films as that familiar yet distorted image in the mirror, as we recognize and grasp moments of direct translation, oblique citation, or vague echo. The references to the Shakespearean text within the dialogue or narrative of the film emphasize a link while also providing viewers with a discursive framework for interpretation. In other instances, these films are in direct conversation with other Indian or international filmic adaptations of the play, and thus their use of Shakespeare is filtered through these sources. From the 1970s onwards, there were several Indian films that had young doomed love as a central plotline, ranging from Raj Kapoor's tremendously successful *Bobby* (1973), which set up the romantic relationship between a wealthy Hindu boy and a poor Goan Christian girl; to K. Balachander's *Ek Dujhe Ke Liye (Made for Each Other)*, (1981), which set up the romantic relationship between a North Indian girl and a South Indian boy; to Mansoor Khan's *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak (From Judgement Day to Judgement Day)*, (1988) a landmark film that set up the romantic relationship between the children of two feuding Rajput families. There were also several films based on indigenous folk tales and legends that contained a similar story of star-crossed lovers, like the Punjabi tale of *Heer-Ranjha* (1970) and the Persian tale of *Laila Majnu* (1976). All these films, whether explicitly using the Shakespeare text or not, tried to distance themselves from the cultural cachet accompanying the Shakespeare label in an attempt to produce popular entertainment.

In a departure from this tradition, Habib Faisal's *Ishaqzaade (Rebellious Lovers)*, (2012); Manish Tiwary's *Issaq (Love)*, (2013); Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Goliyon Ki Ras Leela Ram-Leela (A Play of Bullets Ram-Leela)*, (2013); and Aparna Sen's *Arshinagar* (2015) all market themselves as adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* and specifically as local, contemporary, and modern retellings. One of the most recent iterations, a webseries called *Romil and Jugal* (2017), which reworks the central relationship as one between two gay men, brings together several of the elements that are present in other versions, particularly underscoring the overlaps between the "filminess" of Bollywood and a perceived melodramatic undercurrent in Shakespeare's love story. This contemporary trend of self-conscious references to Shakespeare in the paratextual materials accompanying the films is a product of the global expansion of Shakespeare's cultural capital beyond the exclusive purview of high-brow entertainment to include the popular. This accords a secondary and derivative status to these films, dismissing not just the presence of a range of other intertexts, but also papering over alternative relationships to Shakespeare.

This group of films is largely the product of the way in which the film industry functions in India. Remakes are extremely popular, and commercially successful films are often dubbed or remade in different languages in order to reach a wider or different audience. Box-office success is prized above originality and, as a consequence, filmmakers have few qualms about borrowing or

reusing material that has proven to be successful in a different context or at a different time. Thus, an equally rich archive for source material is to be found in other adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>11</sup> While contemporary Indian adaptations replicate successful narrative devices and tropes from other Indian films that may or may not have themselves been influenced, however tangentially, by *Romeo and Juliet*, they also draw prominently from three of the most internationally popular filmic versions of the play: Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), the film version of *West Side Story* (1961), and Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996).

*Arshinagar* forms a part of this "neighborhood" of films and is consciously in conversation with its aesthetic, linguistic, and narrative traditions. Perhaps most obviously, *Arshinagar* joins this field in its utilization and citation of films that preceded it, both in India and abroad. Rono is referred to at one point as "*ishaqzaade*" (rebellious lover), the title given to the most recent Hindi version of *Romeo and Juliet*. His guitar-playing motorbike-riding persona is reminiscent of Raj (the Romeo character) in *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*. The graffitied sets and the color-coded gangs (the Mitras in red and the Khans in black) are indisputably influenced by the sets and the portrayal of the gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, in *West Side Story* and, perhaps tangentially, by the Bollywood version *Josh* (2000). Luhrmann's imagery haunts the film too — our introduction to the different characters is accompanied by a voiceover; the massive buildings of the two enterprises, Mitra and Khan, mirror those of the Montagues and Capulets on Verona Beach; the endings of both films depict the two sets of grieving parents pulling up in black cars. The joint funeral at the end, with the bodies carried in on stretchers — each covered in the custom of their faith — recalls the ending of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>12</sup>

### Neighboring Tales

Embedded in *Arshinagar*'s flashbacks is another version of the same story: Rono's mother and Julie's father were once in love and planned to marry, with his mother going as far as agreeing to convert to Islam. Madhu and Sabir's failed romance is wrenched into the present of the film when we see, hidden in a safe, the scrap of paper Madhu has preserved for thirty years, containing the Hindi words: "*Mujhse shaadi karogi?*" ("Will you marry me?"). This is not just the title of a popular Hindi movie, but has become a line that is associated with Hindi popular cinema more broadly, an example of "filmi dialogue," further consolidating *Arshinagar*'s contiguous relationship with Hindi popular cinema.

According to Sen, this mirror relationship in the previous generation serves to demonstrate that nothing has changed in thirty years, that Hindu-Muslim relationships continue to be doomed to fail. There is, however, a difference. Madhu and Sabir buckle under parental pressure and the

present shows them in conventional marriages with members of their own community. Rono and Julie on the other hand, do manage to thwart their parents and consummate their relationship; it is communal violence that ultimately proves their greatest obstacle. The relationship between Madhu and Sabir is one demonized in popular depictions of love jihad — a conspiracy theory regarding an alleged activity undertaken by young Muslim men who feign love to non-Muslim women in an attempt to get them to convert, one that is symptomatic of the fear of losing the woman, as bearer of cultural and religious values, to the Other.<sup>13</sup> Conversion for Rono and Julie on the other hand, is never brought up — they discuss their dreams for the future, how they will make a living, what they will eat, even drawing out a floor plan of their first home, but religion is never mentioned. It only becomes significant when the riots begin, when they cannot escape from religious categorization and the possibility that they will be seen, perceived as a threat, and immediately eliminated.<sup>14</sup>

*Arshinagar* thus works out different trajectories for what is ostensibly the same story, simultaneously marking out points of convergence and divergence. These neighboring tales are distinct not merely because of a generational gap, but more importantly because of the mirrored gender roles. In Madhu and Sabir's doomed relationship, the film points to a configuration rarely depicted as successful in Indian *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations, in which the man is a social minority, i.e. Muslim, lower-class, or lower-caste. It is significant that Rono and Julie's relationship — the one at the center of the film and the one that we, as audience members, are meant to identify with — depicts the reverse of the love jihad dynamic. This is a plausible configuration, in which the Other can be assimilated into the dominant community simply because she is female, while the reverse is barely entertained. By including both, ultimately unsuccessful, configurations, *Arshinagar* encapsulates the dominant trend for depicting transgressive relationships in Indian popular cinema. These neighboring pairings invite markedly different responses, resulting in a restricted understanding of what a socially transgressive relationship in contemporary India can look like.

The field of Indian *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations in film thus provides us with a site for reimagining the conceptual and critical category of adaptation beyond one that relies exclusively on an individual genealogical relationship between "original" and "copy." The category of adaptation is, therefore, infinitely more complex, comprising multiple sources or intertexts and multiple avenues or modes of transformation. In Indian popular cinema, adaptation is thus a sedimentary layering of influence: a character from here, a trope from there, a line from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, an image from Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. To use Gerard Genette's terminology, there is no single hypotext or anterior text that the adaptation transforms (Genette 1997, 5).<sup>15</sup> It

may be more useful, in this instance, then to think of a web of hypotexts that exist in some relation to each other and to the adaptation — a neighborhood of texts.

Applying this model to critical work in the field of Global Shakespeare thus requires not just a decentering of the Shakespearean text but also cognizance of the neighboring texts whose traces, influences, reflections, and refractions may be observed in the adaptation. This reconceptualization shares the move towards "decentered multiplicity" forwarded in recent theorizations of the Shakespeare rhizome by such critics as Douglas M. Lanier and Alexa Alice Joubin (Lanier 2014, 28). The Shakespeare rhizome is a model that goes beyond the Shakespeare texts and "necessarily includes faithful and unfaithful adaptations, and adaptations of them, and adaptations of them" (Lanier 2014, 29). What this alternative model of the Shakespeare rhizome requires is for us to "conceive of our shared object of study...as the vast web of adaptations, allusions, and (re)productions that comprises the ever-changing cultural phenomenon we call 'Shakespeare'" (Lanier 2014, 29).

What the theorization of the neighbor and the neighborhood opens up instead is a space for considering the ethical charge both of our orientation as scholars and of the relationship(s) between these various "adaptations, allusions, and (re)productions." To conceive of these relationships as neighborly and to conceive of discrete groups as neighborhoods requires us to consider not just lines of influence, but also the paradoxical potential for proliferation and contraction. To analyze *Arshinagar* within the framework of a neighborhood of Indian *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations is then not just to disclose citational traces or lines of influence, but to consider how it neighbors these adaptations. In the following sections I focus on two elements of the film — its experimental use of language and its depiction of the nation — to demonstrate how *Arshinagar* both disturbs and preserves what constitutes an Indian adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*.

### Indian Popular Cinema and Neighboring Languages

While *Arshinagar* is the first Bengali filmic adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, it draws, as has been demonstrated above, on a long history of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations in Hindi popular cinema. Largely because of its reach in a country where a significant percentage of the population are illiterate, Hindi popular cinema performs what Benedict Anderson described as the role of print-language in imagining a national community, providing an awareness of "fellow viewers" (to adapt Anderson's term "fellow-readers") who are bound not necessarily by geography but by a shared set of prescribed values and beliefs. Partly as a product of this role, the language of Hindi popular cinema or "filmi dialogue" has become a form of national lingua franca that circulates outside of celluloid. On the other hand, Bengali cinema, like other regional cinemas, is marked

by its linguistic and corresponding geographical exclusivity. While Bengali cinema consciously shaped itself as a culturally superior contrast to the commercial "stunt-filled adventure – romance genres" of Hindi popular cinema, it has been increasingly influenced over the last few decades by the dominant *masala* Bollywood films and now it is largely only language that continues to separate Bengali popular cinema from its pan-Indian Hindi counterpart (Gooptu 2010, 31).

*Arshinagar* works in part to reflect this influence, but it also troubles the established separation between these neighboring languages, both of which derive from Sanskrit. Though Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* presents the Montagues and Capulets as inherently socially similar, there is a hint at a discernible distinction between the two families when Tybalt suggests he recognizes Romeo by the way he speaks: "This, by his voice, should be a Montague" (1.4.165-6). What is barely hinted at in *Romeo and Juliet* is amplified to become the defining feature of the soundscape of *Arshinagar*. Every character has a unique style of speaking, making them easily identifiable by their voices. At the most basic level, *Arshinagar*'s soundscape distinguishes the Mitras from the Khans. As a cultured Muslim family, the Khan's lexicon is peppered with words having Persian-Arabic roots. While some of these would be a standard part of the Muslim Bengali lexicon, others seem to be borrowed from Urdu. On the other hand, the Mitras largely use standard colloquial Bengali, relying on words with Sanskrit etymology. Thus, the religious identity of each family is further underscored by distinct lexicons; we know by their "voices" whether they are Muslim or Hindu.

In his seminal work on code-mixing in India, linguistics scholar Braj Kachru has suggested the code-switching (switching from one code or language to another) and code-mixing ("transferring linguistic units from one code to another") are "essentially used as communicative strategies with various motivations" (1978, 108; 111). He identifies three distinct types of code-mixing with respect to Hindi: Sanskritization, Persianization, and Englishization, with the former two associated with Hindu and Muslim identity respectively, and argues that one of the primary functions of these shifts and mixes of different codes is to "reveal or to conceal region, class and religion" (1978, 111). *Arshinagar* depicts these shifts and mixes with respect to Bengali where, as demonstrated above, a Persianized Bengali points to a Muslim identity, while a Sanskritized Bengali points to a Hindu identity.

Even within the Khan family, however, there are subtle distinctions. When Sabir Khan is convinced by his grandmother to come to the aid of Tayeb, whose hotheaded nature has landed him in jail, he says to his sister, "*Ei shob tumi ki bolchho appa, tumie bhalo jaano, / ragle pore na mumkin taar buke shamlano. / Dimaag taar ekdomi noi shoja. / Daadi-jaan aapni she bojhan*" ("What're you saying Sister! You know well / Tabbu's hot temper is impossible to quell! /

I've tried to reason with him in vain! / Grandma you explain!").<sup>16</sup> Sabir's fluent Bengali borrows a few words from Urdu. His grandmother, Daadi-jaan, on the other hand, speaks Urdu with a few words of accented Bengali sprinkled in. Convincing him to come to the aid of his sister, she says, "*Dekho Sabir, aurat-er kaun acche aar, baap, khasam noi bhai*" ("Look Sabir, who else is there for a woman...but father, husband, or brother?") The Khan family hails from the northern province of Awadh and in the speech patterns of the different generations we can trace their assimilation into the eastern state of Bengal.

In addition to Bengali and Hindi-Urdu, the film also incorporates a number of English words and phrases, resulting in a hybrid code referred to by the portmanteaux Benglish and Hinglish. These have generally been considered "a marker of modernization, socioeconomic position, and membership in an elite group" (Kachru 1978, 113) and have more recently been understood as "the aspirational language of the upwardly-mobile, vernacular [...] working classes" (Orsini 2015, 200). The latter instance is reflected in the interactions between the slum dwellers as they incorporate English words like "majority," to indicate political dominance, into their daily interactions. In a private conversation between Manik the teashop owner and his wife, who encourages him to consider the offer for his property to allow their son a better future, the words "offer," "teacher," "best," "school" and "English-medium" are all in English. At the other end of the spectrum, we have Rono — in all likelihood a product of this English-medium schooling — whose speech is peppered with English phrases like "Baby just wait!"; "Fusion is in!" These are, however, paradoxically not emblematic of upward social mobility or superior education, but are instead borrowed or absorbed from popular culture. Thus, the use of English in this film is multifaceted: ranging from quotidian life to popular culture to legal and political registers, it is largely determined by who is speaking it. The use of English thus simultaneously reflects the global dominance of the language and the film's imbrication in the local frictions of linguistic politics.

At its most complex iteration, code-mixing in *Arshinagar* involves all three languages within a single interaction, like Reshma Bai's introduction to the puppet show that forms the film's framing device:

*Accha aisi waisi kahaani na acche* (No ordinary tale this!)

*Eke bare bilayati qissa* (A foreign one!)

Sex-pee-yaar *Sahib ka*. (Written by Lord Shakespeare himself!)

[Onlooker: Sex?]

*Arre sex nahi baba* (No! No! Not sex!)

*Sala sab kuch te aajkaal lok sex dhunde* (People look only for sex these days!)

*Ami bolcchilam ki Sex-peeyar Sahib* (I'm talking about Shakespeare Sahib!)

Gi-rate writer! (Great writer!)

*Uska likha hua yeh qissa acche* (A tale written by him!)

*Vaise sex bhi acche thora bahaut.* (Well, sex is there too, in small doses)

Following what Reshma Bai is saying over here requires varying degrees of knowledge in all three languages, from certain words in English to the syntactical structures of Hindi-Urdu and Bengali.

In its use of multiple languages, *Arshinagar* allows us to conceive of language relations as neighborly as well. While being cognizant of the diachronic relations between languages that belong to the same Indo-European family, the film also allows us to take a synchronic perspective, reflecting the ways in which these languages continue to border, push, influence, shape and neighbor each other in contemporary India. The broad and diverse lexicon is balanced by the formal constraint of rhymed verse, with characters often completing each other's line-rhymes. The speaking styles of *Arshinagar*'s characters are thus not merely marked by differences, but ultimately come together to form a complete and coherent semantic whole. The shifting, or rather hybrid, linguistic registers of the global, the national and the local mirror a similar shifting of place that is central to *Arshinagar*'s privileging of location. Thus, *Arshinagar* does not merely complicate what constitutes an Indian filmic adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, but more broadly what counts as a Bengali film.

### The Nation as Neighborhood

Scholarly consensus has been that Indian popular cinema is intimately concerned with the nation and nationalism, often mapping the social, political, and historical concerns of national identity onto the cinematic family. The filmic adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* utilize one of the industry's core cinematic tropes — heterosexual, romantic, and transgressive love — in their exploration of this nation-as-family metaphor and function simultaneously as a barometer for dominant social concerns. The catalytic feud between the Montagues and the Capulets is set up within a specific framework of conflict ranging from class in *Bobby* (1973), to language in *Ek Dujhe Ke Liye* (*Made for Each Other*, 1981) to patriotic loyalty in *1942: A Love Story* (1994) to religion in *Ishaqzaade* (*Rebellious Lovers*, 2012). *Arshinagar* follows in this tradition by mapping the conflict between the two families onto contemporary religious strife between Hindus and Muslims.

However, while prior adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* that are concerned with "what it means to be 'Indian'" deal with the central category of the family whose homogeneity envelops and subsumes difference under a shared morality, *Arshinagar* uses the heterogeneous neighborhood as



its analogue for a state in turmoil (Dwyer 2014, 37). The town is a microcosm of Indian society: unmistakably diverse, its fragile unity under threat from the competing demands of religious and political allegiance, balancing a commitment to tradition with the advancing forces of modernity and development, and controlled by the rich and powerful. Gendered and religious identities take on different valences in this context where *both* difference *and* equivalence are apparent, and by moving from the implied ultimate reconciliation inherent in the category of the family to the profound ambivalence at the core of neighborly relations, *Arshinagar* provides us with a more provocative and productive mode of depicting and understanding the nation.

This is perhaps most evident in the figure of Tayeb (Tybalt). Tayeb is Rono's image in the mirror. Color-coded as his photo-negative, he resembles him not just in appearance but in his love for his cousin Julie. Though a permissible match for a conservative Muslim family, the volatile Tayeb is never presented as a viable marriage prospect, coded instead as a thug and outsider (Sen 2017). He embodies the figure of the neighbor — "that intimate other...with whom we can partially identify, but who displays a strange, potentially hostile desire — a death drive — that uncannily threatens the dream of community" (Edmondson 2011, 10).

If *Arshinagar* is a film about the Indian nation, Tayeb represents the limit case of citizenship. In his first appearance in the film, he is incited to violence by Monty (Mercutio) who seems to know just which buttons to press. Tayeb scoffs at the Mitra gang: "*Tau tora Mitter, amra holam Khan / Bahadur Shah'r ujir amar dadu'r dadu'r dadu*" ("Yet you are mere Mitras, while we are Khans sublime! / We are descendants of Bahadur Shah the Great"). Monty responds by taunting him: "*Khub bujechhi chandu / Na Shahrukh na Salman tobu 'ami Khan' / Tor baap chhilo refugee, podobi Akhtar / Adh pagla chani se chokhe, Unani daktar / Tui ki bhabe hothat holi Khan?*" ("Ah! Now we've got it straight! / Not Shahrukh, nor Salman, and yet he is a Khan! / Your dad was a refugee, surname Akhtar! / Half-crazy bleary-eyed a Unani doctor. / How come you suddenly turned Khan?")

Though Tayeb calls himself Khan and is frequently put to work by them to intimidate uncooperative sections of the town, he is never quite considered a full member of the family. He cannot escape the fact that he is dependent on his maternal relatives and that his father was an *Akhtar*, a refugee, presumably from neighboring Bangladesh. Though he boasts that his mother's family is descended from the retinue of Bahadur Shah, this claim to nobility does not hold much weight. His claims to the family and to the nation are through his mother and are therefore outweighed by his father's outsider status. Thus, Tayeb presents another productive site for the theorization of the neighbor. Though he is related to the Khans, his non-Indian lineage prevents his complete assimilation — both into the family and into the nation. He is the figure that both

"rattles" and "ratifies" the legitimate citizenship of Arshinagar's residents (Edmondson 2011, 10). The nation, in *Arshinagar*, is thus not merely a contained entity but rather one that acknowledges and excludes its neighbors.

*Arshinagar* is thus experimental not just in its use of language and its blending of film and theater; it also seeks to build on and complicate the nation-as-family metaphor that is so prevalent in Indian popular cinema. The figure of the neighbor and the space of the neighborhood are most pronounced in *Arshinagar*'s thematic and narrative components, but expanding this focus on the simultaneously proximate and different to the film's form, language, and genre allows us to conceive of the boundaries between cinema and theater, Bengali and Hindi, original and adaptation, Shakespeare and "Global Shakespeare" as pliable, porous, and reflective. Ultimately, what the film offers us is not just an alternative iteration of *Romeo and Juliet*, but, in its rich experimentation, a novel approach to the genre of adaptation itself.

### Notes

1. The Baul occupies a fundamentally ambiguous role within the Bengali imaginary. The word itself is usually glossed as "mad" and members of this syncretic religious sect, which draws on both Hinduism and Islam, reject orthodox religious practices. They are best known in popular culture for the orally transmitted popular Baul songs that celebrate spiritual freedom.
2. All transcriptions from the film are my own. Unless otherwise noted, I make use of the translations provided in the film's English subtitles. However, where necessary, I provide my own translation. This is because the film's subtitles seek to retain the effect of the rhymes present in the original and in doing so occasionally sacrifice conveying a more literal translation.
3. My translation.
4. Quotations from *Romeo and Juliet* are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, third edition (Shakespeare, 2015) and cited parenthetically by line number.
5. For studies on the overlap between the Indian nation and Indian popular cinema, see *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* by Sumita S. Chakravarty; *Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Contemporary India*, by Rachel Dwyer; *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India*, by Priya Jaikumar; and *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, by Jyotika Virdi.
6. A selection of books particularly concerned with nomenclature in the field of Global Shakespeare: *Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance*, edited by Dennis Kennedy; *World-wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance*, edited by Sonia Massai; *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations*, by

Thomas Cartelli; *Postcolonial Shakespeares*, edited by Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin; *Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage*, edited by Parmita Kapadia and Craig Dionne.

7. See *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*, by Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard for an extended discussion on the figure of the neighbor in the fields of critical theory and psychoanalysis.
8. In *The Neighboring Text*, George Edmondson analyzes three different texts dealing with the story of Troilus and Criseyde to forward this notion of a horizontal (as opposed to genealogical) relationship between texts within the context of psychoanalytic and medieval understandings of the figure of the neighbor.
9. My translation.
10. For a discussion on pertinent versus attested likenesses in Shakespeare adaptations see "Pertinent Likeness: Kurosawa's *The Bad Sleep Well* as a version of Shakespeare's Hamlet" by Ann Thompson and John O. Thompson.
11. Reviews of the Urdu 1947 *Romeo and Juliet* compare the performance of Nargis (who played Juliet) with that of Norma Shearer, who had played Juliet in an American movie (directed by George Cukor, 1936) a decade earlier. Given what we know of the functioning of the Indian film industry at that time, it's very likely that the Urdu version relied to a certain extent on the American film that preceded it.
12. In her talk, "Image as Text in *Arshinagar* (2015): A Bengali Experiment with Shakespeare" at the 2016 Indian Shakespeares on Screen conference, Koel Chatterjee listed these among several filmic citations in *Arshinagar*, arguing that this rich layering of references transformed the "image into text" for contemporary consumers of Shakespeare.
13. English language media frequently uses the Romeo-Juliet reference when reporting cases of honor killings and/or love jihad (also called Romeo jihad). In fact, the unpleasant connotations of the term "Romeo" form the primary meaning associated with the name in India, as it is frequently used to describe young men who make a practice of harassing women on the streets. The recent promotion of "Anti-Romeo squads" in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, ostensibly to protect the honor of women, draws on this connotation of the name.
14. In her paper, ""Shakespeare and Cultural Appropriation: The Case of Vishal Bhardwaj's Haider and Aparna Sen's *Arshinagar*,"" circulated at the Shakespeare and Cultural Appropriation Seminar at SAA 2019, Shormistha Panja also argues for an important distinction between the two inter-religious couples. She suggests that the difference between the two generations is a

product of encroaching globalization and capitalism that have rendered older ties — like those of family and religion — meaningless (Panja 2019).

15. Both Robert Stam and Linda Hutcheon in their work on adaptation theory use Gerard Genette's taxonomy of transtextuality, one that delineates the different types of relationships between texts, in order to point to the inherently palimpsestuous nature of adaptations.
16. For multilingual quotations, the use of underlined italics points to Hindi-Urdu, the use of italics points to Bengali, and the use of roman script points to English.

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