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“Arshinagar: What’s in a Name?”

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Abstract: Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* in 1595, during a period when his mastery had been established in England with his sonnets, the performance of his best known comedies and a few history plays. This was the first tragedy and it seems the playwright had let his “gaiety fight[s] for long against sadness.... This was a time of light-hearted and brilliant maturity” (Legouis 130). In recent times, Indian directors have frequently used their creative skills coupled with cinematic art to retell great Shakespearean tales in an indigenous context. Aparna Sen’s *Arshinagar* (2015) adapted closely from *Romeo and Juliet* joins a string of movies based on this story. Aparna Sen has used many characteristic elements from the Indian social reality to relate her story to the historic Hindu Muslim conflict which lends itself quite perfectly to Shakespeare’s plot--especially in terms of bitter rivalry, love, murder, violence and bloodshed. It includes the contemporary Indian elements of corrupt politics and financial greed.

Keywords: Adaptations, cross-dressing, Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, Aparna Sen, Vishal Bharadwaj, pathos, tragedy, Mumbai, transcreation.

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In recent times, Indian directors have frequently used their creative skills coupled with cinematic art to retell great Shakespearean tales in an indigenous context. Vishal Bharadwaj's trilogy of *Maqbool* (2003)¹, *Omkara* (2006) and *Haider* (2014) made in Hindi have retold the tragedies of *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* with dark political innuendoes. Bengali directors have followed suit with *Last Lear* (2007) by Rituparno Ghosh featuring a story of the fast diminishing race of clowns against the life of a fading Shakespearean actor. Aparna Sen's *Arshinagar* (2015) adapted closely from *Romeo and Juliet* joins a string of movies based on this story. Bollywood has produced its own versions of the romantic tragedy in *Ishaaqzaade* by Habib Faisal (2012) which makes shocking changes where the hero rapes the heroine for revenge, but falls in love when the trigger happy families commit murder. In *Goliyon ki Raasleela—Ram-Leela* (2013), Sanjay Leela Bhansali lets opulence steal the show as he is wont to do when remaking famous stories. But one of the rival clans is led by a powerful matriarch and the costumes in black make a startling impact.

Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* in 1595, during a period when his mastery had been established in England with his sonnets, the performance of his best known comedies and a few history plays. This was the first tragedy and it seems the playwright had let his “gaiety fight[s] for long against sadness.... This was a time of light-hearted and brilliant maturity” (Legouis 130). Legouis further claims that characters from this play can be multiplied to produce a “very world of human beings who stand before the spectators with a living force” and he brings the words “animation” and “life” to define characters who are universally known today (130). Thus Sen redefines this plot, swinging it again between animation and life, merging contemporary reality into *Arshinagar*, an imagined land. It has claims to Shakespeare's England and his Italian Verona, but could also exist in Bengal or Bihar as the narrator of the “putul-nach”¹ affirms.

According to G.B. Shaw says Bryson, “Shakespeare was a wonderful teller of stories so long as someone else had told them first” (98). So the *Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* was borrowed from a poem written by Arthur Brooke in 1562, who had

¹ Puppet show with home-made dolls often seen at *melas* or fairs.

taken it from an Italian tale by Matteo Bandello. Thereafter, one of the best adaptations of Shakespeare's play happened when Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins turned the Broadway production of *West Side Story* into a film with music by Leonard Bernstein (1961). Aparna Sen's present day *Arshinagar* is greatly inspired by mages from this great musical which portrays the Jets and the Sharks warring for supremacy in upper Westside New York.

Remakes of *Romeo and Juliet* always fascinate Indian directors because doomed lovers facing the wrath of their traditional families is highly dramatic and not in the least unusual even today. In a country where arranged marriages are largely the norm, young people trying to transgress the barriers of class, caste and religion is frowned upon rather heavily. Hindu-Muslim lovers have been popular for ages, especially in movies which narrate the problematic partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Moneyed families against economically deprived individuals give rise to bitter love-feuds; some Dalit love stories and honour killings of recent caste battles bear similar tragic nuances of the *Romeo and Juliet* drama. Newspapers report the capture and killing of distressed lovers by jubilant family members who get off scot-free. Thus the Shakespearean pathos of the conclusion is not evident in *Ishaqzaade*, but is mitigated in *Goliyon ki Rasleela* where both families claim the young lovers who have died by their own hands.

Aparna Sen has used many of these characteristics to relate her story to the historic Hindu Muslim conflict which lends itself quite perfectly to Shakespeare's plot--especially in terms of bitter rivalry, love, murder, violence and bloodshed. It includes the contemporary Indian elements of corrupt politics and financial greed. Against this backdrop two parallel love stories are played out, set to a variety of music through which the lovers learn to appreciate each other's religious differences. Music is seen as an overall fortifying factor, a curative force. *Arshinagar* is indeed a musical based on gang-wars and mood-filled songs where Sen uses Baul and Sufi-Kawaali compositions to profess that a superior being resides within the loving heart of each individual, surpassing religious barriers. Sen mixes illusion and reality in her cinema for a myriad reflections. If one stops looking for the linear movement of this well-known tale, one can see the film as a collage of statements that never get stale because ground realities do not change but are mirrored in each succeeding generation.

Arshinagar is the “Mirrorland” that Parvathy Baul sings about in the last scene. It is the place where ideally everyone should belong. The title for the film is borrowed from a famous Baul-gaan by Lalan Shah Fakir of ‘East’ Bengal, and the woman-baul with her long flowing hair, gyrating and singing, gives a surrealistic touch that takes us back to imagining Nero who fiddled while Rome burned. The fire that is destroying the slum has been set alight by political goons who have brought canisters of kerosene there, and it can be doused only through co-existence. People seldom hear the words of such songs as they are busy quarrelling over identities that class, religion and power have wrought through time. Aparna Sen tells Namrata Joshi in an interview, “Sufism states that deep within, everyone is the same. Someone should tell the fundamentalists that even Advaita philosophy in Hinduism talks of oneness in all existence.”

The movie begins with a screen full of shattered mirror-glass in winking pieces of black and white which must produce an infinite number of images. On this floats pieces of brown paper carrying credits written with an ordinary felt pen. It looks so technically insignificant that it could have been produced in anybody’s home. Mirrors are rather important in terms of theatre because they reveal and draw parallels. The actors are as real or virtual as the audience cares to admit. Thus the puppeteer, dressed in bright Rajasthani clothes, who beckons people at the fair to her puppet-show can naturally fade into the ‘real’ world of the film where two families are warring over property. The storyteller herself becomes a character in the unfolding events. She is in fact the *sutradhar* or narrator, so very important in classical Indian theatre for holding the plot together. “Roopkatha ache...bilayeti kissa,” she says in sweetly broken Bengali that is often heard among domiciled Kolkata folks even today.²

The narrator plays several roles. She is Julie’s Nurse, Fatima and also a member of the *bustee*³ where much of the drama of Hindu-Muslim riots takes place. She thus wonders with a

² A fairy tale...a story from the western world. All translations from the script are done by the author as no subtitled version of the film was available.

³ Slum--very poor areas where communities co-exist, but are prone to violence.

hint of negative connotation, “Arshinagare nijeder chehara kakhono dekhechhen babulog?”⁴ And she introduces Rono who is a “gaane bajaane ka hero.”⁵ The scene shifts to Julie next who is getting a fashionable tattoo done on her back which is hardly acceptable in a *raisi* Muslim family,⁶ however modern they might be. The two fathers Sabir Khan and Bishwanath Mitter are ruthless rivals in the construction industry, grasping for power to wipe out the same *bustee* for it must give way to luxury flats that will make them richer.

The market place is peopled with Hindu and Muslim slum-dwellers, recognized by their simple, ethnic clothing. The motorbike gang that rides in, heedlessly spill the fruits of a vendor and lord it over the poor who can say nothing. Then there is a glimpse of the threatening Tayyab, whose mother is Julie’s Foofiejaan, her father’s sister and thus her grandmother, Dadijaan’s widowed daughter. The mother and son pair are an intrinsic yet dependent part of the Khan household. The violence, heightened probably by his insecure position in the family, is exhibited as Tayyab sharpens his flick-knife between his teeth. The first gang battle ends with the police siren and it is interesting to note the colours Sen uses to distinguish the two sides: Rono’s friends wear red and Tayyab’s people wear black. If the latter is the colour of evil, then the former is the colour of bloodshed. Of course, black represents the Islamic community more easily where the women wear black burkhas⁷ and the men are clad in dark suits.

Rono’s household too is seen in red—even the carpet on the stairs and the walls lined with bookshelves are painted in this colour. His mother wears a large red bindi,⁸ symbolizing a Bengali married woman. Yet her marriage is fraught with problems against which rises not just her profound love for her son, but also her sympathy for his unfortunate romance. She urges him

⁴ Have you ever seen your true selves in the City of Mirrors, gentlemen? Or does she mean, have you ever seen yourself as the persons you really are? [Script translations are by the author as the subtitled version of the film was not available.]

⁵ Fashionable singer.

⁶ Upper class--rich and traditional.

⁷ Ankle-length cape that is worn over other clothes with a head-dress and a veil to cover the face. Important disguise used her in place of the mask.

⁸ Vermilion dot worn on the forehead by married women in Hindu Bengali families.

to go away to his maternal uncle's place in Mumbai. Later in the film both Rono and his mother are seen wearing red and white to indicate their silent protest against the passionate hatred controlling the Mitters and the Khans. Actually thoughts of peace are accentuated throughout the tale as Julie's Dadijaan—a character created by Sen is a sheltering presence. She has provided her daughter and furious grandson with a home, offered a roof to her riot-stricken domestic servant, and facilitated her grand-daughter, Julie's escape to Tayyab's "kaatil."⁹ She is guided by simple motherliness for she is witness to her own son's life becoming "bekaar" because his love for a young Hindu maiden was thwarted in the past.¹⁰ Both Dadijaan and Sabir Khan display some weakness towards the other side because there is a star crossed lovers' tale from another generation being replayed here.

The director affirms that she tried to adhere as closely as possible to the movements in the Shakespearean play. Since the time she saw *West Side Story*, further images percolated in her mind for a similar musical adaptation. Her first clear experiment is with the names and she brings them quite close to the original ones. Thus Ronojoy shortened to Rono/Romeo is the young lover, and Julie/Juliet's full name is Zulekha Khan. Her cousin Tayyab is modelled upon Tybalt and Pervez replaces Count Paris as he comes to woo Julie from Dubai. Rono's friend Monty is the Mercutio who will be killed. Thus Rono will cast aside the goodness welling in him, to become a killer himself. The family names Montague and Capulet lend themselves through consonant sounds of 'em' and 'ka' to become Mitters and Khans. The Nurse is named Fatima as she must be Muslim to work in the Khan household. In the original play, Lord Capulet admits to his sadness that his daughter is the last of his line and we are reminded of that through Tayyab's psychotic frame of mind in this film too. He knows he cannot inherit as he is the fatherless son of a daughter in this household. His violence with Julie in the scene on the terrace could be incestuous feelings coupled with a passion for property and place. It would suit him just fine if Julie never married. He could rule the family mansion and business as her representative. Besides, marriages among first cousins are accepted by Muslims, so why negotiate a marriage

⁹ Murderer—in this case, Rono.

¹⁰ Useless

with Pervez? In the Indian context, he has more reasons to hate Rono who is a thorough interloper!

“Mimangsha koro,” says Dadijaan to her son, replaying the sentiment of Prince Escalus of Verona.¹¹ He too like the earlier Lord Capulet, realizes the dangers of Tayyab’s hotheaded ways, even as the political honcho warns him about his nephew who has wounded Sonny: “Age apni duwa karoon Allah mian’r kachhe/ Sonny jeno banche.”¹²

William Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* when he was at the zenith of his career and had already written his romantic comedies. It may have been inevitable that he wrote next a ‘romantic tragedy.’ It suffered fair criticism because the young lovers did not really have any tragic flaws necessary to Renaissance drama. Marguerite Alexander comments that the plot “relies too heavily on pathos at the expense of arousing the audience’s moral judgment—for who could see either of the lovers as in possession of a fatal flaw (beyond the impetuosity of young love) from which their tragedy might be felt inevitably to emanate?” (188). Of course, on a lighter note it may be said that Romeo’s flaw was that he was persistently falling in love with Capulet girls—the first being Rosaline for whom he entered the masked ball. Sen reflects the ball through a party where Julie’s father, Sabir Khan is entertaining his business associates. Julie is supposed to perform in a play, dressed as a mustachioed Hindu lad, sporting a large turban.

We are not sure why Rono clad in a *burkha* has wandered into the ‘andar mahal’ or women’s domain in the Khan residence. But he manages to drag Julie into the bathroom where they reveal their identities to each other. Julie’s cousin Tayyab who is knocking at the door is fobbed off by Julie’s complaints of “patla potty” or a runny stomach which is fairly disgusting, however much it is disguised in verse. If the 16th century Juliet seemed a very forward maiden, this Julie too lacks dignity. Why Sen should organise the lovers’ first meeting in the bathroom is a mystery unless she remembers that the lovers of *Ishde* also meet there.

The Shakespearean trope of cross dressing is thoroughly employed in Sen’s adaptation with Julie in a boy’s costume complementing Rono in *burkha* many a time. Whereas in the

¹¹ Find a solution.

¹² Request the Master, Allah for a boon/ That Sonny should recover soon.

original, a young boy would have been playing the part of Juliet at the masked ball, Julie Khan is about to act as a boy a conservative household. This does not seem very likely in the Muslim *khandani* tradition,¹³ but speaks more of the Tagorean family of the 19th century where many of the ladies did perform (Deb 110-116). Julie asks someone else to play her part which emphasises she now has a new role to play. When her mother comes knocking on the bathroom door, she has already allowed Rono to remove her turban and mustache. A brief conversation between mother and daughter follow through the closed bathroom door: “Dawai enechhi.../ Lagbe na Ammijan, dawai peye gechhi!”¹⁴

The stage is set for romance when Rono practices with his garage band and gets stuck in the composition of his new song. That the words “Baby, I love you” should end with “Jaan Kabool”¹⁵ makes a precursor for the fact that Julie who is no fan of rock music will come to hear her lover belting out this song to a packed audience. Ironically, in the early scenes of the movie when her grandmother is scolding Julie, she warns her that no one will do “nikaah” with her and perhaps they should be thankful the girl is not dating anyone.¹⁶

In Rono’s household too there is stress as his father obviously does not appreciate a modern, pony-tailed son who has no thought for the cut-throat business of property dealings. He is wasting his time with a guitar and singing. Rono’s over-indulgent mother seems scared of these money dealings and her black salwar suit almost makes her look as though she too is clad in a *burkha*. It is only when she is putting away bundles of notes into her locker that we realize her handling of a precious slip of paper—where a long time ago, Sabir Khan had asked her to marry him. She had almost taken the final step, even wanting to change her religion. However, her father, a fundamental Hindu wearing a rudraksha necklace about his neck, threatened to kill her and then himself if she tarnished the family honour. The story is told to Julie by her aunt

¹³ Elite.

¹⁴ ‘Tis medicine for you, I’ve brought./ I don’t need it anymore, Ammijaan, what I needed I have got.

¹⁵ Accept me, my life is yours. ‘Kabool,’ a significant word is used in the ‘Nikaah’ ceremony. It also means to confess and admit.

¹⁶ Islamic marriage ceremony.

when she is oiling her hair. Thus we see a trio of mothers, all unhappy, burdened with their emotions of unfulfilled marriages. Likewise, Julie will not find happiness either.

When the party is being planned in the Khan household, we realize that the guest who is expected from Dubai is seeking a plot of land and a bride. To the rich Pervez, both are property he is coming to India to acquire. When Tayyab rants about “Mittir der beta,”¹⁷ his uncle tells him to refrain from violence. He also tells Julie not to act as a boy in the play that will be performed. But the mirror shows Julie affixing the mustache which will be the disguise that she will again use when she goes to join Rono in the end. In fact, in that last meeting on the train tracks when presumably the train to Mumbai separates them at the level crossing, the young lovers are dressed as when they first met—he as a woman in a black burkha, and she a bespectacled Hindu lad in a turban and mustache.

As she falls to the bullet of a Muslim mob, Rono crosses over to hold the dying Julie in his arms for the last kiss. He removes her mustache and is shot in the back by a Hindu mob that can only see a person of the other community sitting beside the tracks. The tragic irony here is rather melodramatic—but the disguise explains why the mistaken shots are fired. Mindless murder replaces suicide while the lovers from the past, the parents of the murdered couple, come to the accident scene. They exchange the items treasured by their children—Rono’s red guitar and Julie’s notebook of verse with Rono’s picture in it. The funeral processions where the leaders momentarily exchange wordless condolences are again symbols of colour. Now it is black versus white, the colours of mourning for each community as they move in opposite directions—at peace too late. The fires from the riots in the slum have now been extinguished by rain as though to say that beyond human nature, physical nature plays a decisive part, and the screen blurs in cathartic harmony.

The fact that Rono is smitten at the party he gatecrashes becomes evident when he tells his friends, “Zulekha jadi kabool kore amay.”¹⁸ The word “kabool” comes back in the “Jaan Kabool” song which is also followed by their first date at the park where Julie sings him a

¹⁷ Son of the Mittir family...said in a derogatory fashion. Mitter is the anglicized pronunciation of Mitra or Mittir, in colloquial Bengali.

¹⁸ If only Julie will accept me...

“Kawaali.” That the scene should change to an illusory one of a group of Kawaals singing is a veritable parallel to the number of occasions when the Baul singer is depicted singing of the same priceless spiritual love. The movie runs in parallels—mirroring similarities and differences between characters, images and actions. They are equidistant on either side of the mirror—within and without.

The Nurse and the schoolmaster who help the young lovers in the end are a contrast to the bigoted Hindu priest with his “namaboli scarf” in the slums; he dreams of the new temple which the property dealers will build where he will be all powerful. Dadijaan is a benign parallel to Rono’s rigid grandfather who had decreed honour killing for his daughter, if she married a Muslim. The Minister who balances the power of both the Mitter and Khan builders has his own power games to play. The Mumbai dream-city where the lovers will escape and live their life of love is a tiny room that Rono sketches. It is superimposed against the terraces of Lucknow where kites are flying high. A young couple pledge their love there, across the barriers of religion. The *burkha*-clad Rono and the turbaned Julie, the Hindus and Muslims killing their own in their frenzy, the killing of Monty and Tayyab for hatred and revenge, a strangely empty sand-blown desert where the flick knife challenges the gun—all follow in binary opposition to each other. It is interesting to note that Sen with her passion for symbolism juxtaposes the same locals who were at one time anointed with *gangajal* or answered the *azaan* in peaceful coexistence in the Arshinagar slums, transforming into fearsome opponents in the rioting mob.¹⁹

The first sign of destruction in the slum comes early in the film when school children who were reciting the names of the Mughal emperors are seen fleeing from a demolition truck. The song and dance sequence which follows is completely Bollywood in movement, but indigenous clothing and ordinary folks replace extravagant costumes and item number groups. The narrator is seen in black leading the dance where Hindus and Muslims are in unison still: “... bolechhi ami, saala,/ Basti bhenge mall banabe Kaala paisawala!”²⁰

¹⁹ Holy water of the Hindus from the sacred River Ganges; Muslim call to prayer.

²⁰ You are bloody swindlers./ Destroying slums to construct malls, you black money racketeers.

Sen avoids the complex death-sequence of the young lovers in *Romeo and Juliet* entirely. In the conclusion, they do not even commit suicide but are killed. However, the previous action takes place in the chronological order of Shakespeare's play. The party and the lovers' first meeting is followed by the balcony scene where Rono, still in his *burkha* escapes Tayyab's ferocious dogs and climbs the drain-pipe into Julie's balcony. He overhears her singing of someone from Arshinagar, the background score for the film; she wishes she could meet that same person again. There is a pun in the song because the lover is also a spiritual being, as defined by both Sufis and Bauls.

In what he calls a "lyric tragedy," Ivor Brown suggests that the role of Juliet is "notoriously difficult; her portrayer must look like a child, and yet in the later scenes, have the acting range and capacity of an experienced 'star'" (174-5). Sen's Julie is a couple of years older than the fourteen year old Juliet of the movie by Franco Zeffirelli (1968), but they look pretty similar in their wide-eyed innocence. Between Rono and Julie's first kiss and the later consummation of their passion on the night Tayyab's death, Julie grows up very quickly to become much more assertive and aware of her destiny.

In keeping with the times, Julie writes her cell phone number on Rono's palm in the balcony scene so that they can message each other all night long. Fatima comes to tell her that her Ammijaan is calling her, and realizes what is happening. Thus, Fatima named after the Prophet's wife for her empathy, way-lays Rono when he is waiting for Julie at her music teacher's home. She wants to discover whether his intentions regarding her little one are honourable. They share a unifying smoke of cigarettes and Fatima affectionately calls Rono "Ishaqzaade" or child of love/young lover boy.

Arshinagar is Aparna Sen's first attempt at a musical. The film has almost a dozen songs in various modes--pop, rock, heavy metal, kawaali, sufi, baul and others. Her entire script including conversations among people are set in rhyme which is fairly new and experimental, attempted briefly by Satyajit Ray in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1992), and a little cautiously in the recent *Bhooter Bhabishyat* (2012). But unlike what Indian film critics say, Sen was probably most inspired by the musical *West Side Story*, where gang-wars lead to songs and dances, and switch-blades are very visible. The structure of rhyming couplets and rhythm is borrowed from

Shakespeare as he had large stretches of poetry interspersed with blank verse and colloquial conversations in *Romeo and Juliet*. The sonnet-dialogue of the first meeting of the lovers is unparalleled for meaning and imagery:

Rom. If I profane with my unworhiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

Jul. Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

Rom. Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

Jul. Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

Rom. O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

Jul. Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

Rom. Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.²¹ (1.v.91-105)

Bill Bryson confirms that Shakespeare employed the sonnet form “where a conversation between the two lovers is ingeniously (and movingly) rendered” (141). Although Sen uses couplets for her dialogues, they never quite reach the lyricism contained in the above sonnet which is full of saintly imagery that reverses sexual innuendoes into divine love. Derek Traversi commented on

²¹ All quotations from Shakespeare’s play are taken from *The Tudor Edition of The Complete Works*.

these youthful lovers who “declare their dedication in terms which combine lyrical intensity with conscious lyrical artifice” (284). Even when the Friar admonishes Romeo for forgetting Rosaline, it is in beautiful rhymed verse. Romeo defends himself with “Thou chid’st me oft, for loving Rosaline” and the Friar explains with a little play of words, “For doting, not for loving, pupil mine” (2.iii. 81-82). In contrast to Juliet’s famous line denying the coming of day, “it was the nightingale and not the lark” (3.v. 2), Julie in *Arshinagar* says far more prosaically: “sakal hoy ni ekhono.”²²

Although Sen uses rhyming couplets throughout her film, the language is predominantly colloquial. There are a good many swear words in the script and a thorough mix of tongues—English, Bengali and Hindi. In the horrifying scene where Tayyab brings Anushka (daughter of the Gupta’s) home after an ice-cream treat, he softly threatens them that he will buy their house. All the while he plays with his knife like a street ruffian. There is again a couplet between him and the little girl’s father: “Who the hell are you?/ Baithie na Guptaji, khafa hotey hain kyun?”²³ The scene rises to a crescendo because Tayyab hacks of Anushka’s mother’s hair with his flick-knife and the glass of water he requested from the little girl crashes in the background as she screams. One wonders whether he has come to frighten them out of their ancestral property in order to give it to Pervez? And why is he so ruthless with those not directly linked to the Mitters.

Rono and Julie communicate through music and when she sings her kawaali, she makes him rise and dance with her. There follows an illusory concert of a group of such musicians who look rather incongruous in the middle of a field. Moments later, when they are strolling through a Christian graveyard, a follower of Tayyab sees the lovers and reports them to his leader. Partha Chatterjee praises Sen for these mixes of reality and illusion because

It takes a lot of gumption to use painted backdrops in present-day cinema, but she does it with aplomb. The *Arshinagar* slum where *hoi polloi* live is an obvious cinema set. The indoor scenes in the Mitter residence have bookshelves and cupboards painted on flat screens. Most astonishingly, a thoroughly realist rooftop

²² It is not yet morning.

²³ Do sit down Mr. Gupta, why do you lose your cool?

scene in Lucknow is shot against a painted backdrop of domes and minarets, just as a fantasy scene of *Romeo and Juliet* on the seacoast in Bombay has painted high-rises.

When Tayyab searches his cousin's room and finds her notebook with Rono's picture, he immediately turns this over to his aunt. Almost simultaneously in a realistic parallel, Rono's mother finds pictures of Julie and her family pasted on her son's cupboard wall while she is tidying up his room. It must be tragic for her to discover that Julie is the daughter of her own long lost beloved, so she quietly urges her son to go away from what she knows will be the fury of the fathers. Through all these tension-ridden moments, a lack of lyricism in verse is made up by symbolism and profound questions. Thus Julie pensively asks, why is it that a Hindu marrying a Christian is accepted whereas Hindu-Muslim marriages are not?

Just as Julie's father had proposed to his sister's Hindu friend against the backdrop of a Muslim monument, Rono does the same with Julie. The stories of the star crossed lovers of two generations bind together seamlessly. Rono is ready to give up college to elope with Julie, and his mother tells him to return only when he can marry the girl he loves. As Rono sketches their room in Mumbai, they plan a life with the band where Julie too will sing: "Chhotto ekti kamra/sajiye nebo aamra."²⁴ In yet another mirror-image doomed desires, the storyteller dreams of international fame for her little puppet theatre: "Lekin sapna to sapna-i ache."²⁵ In the real world, other games will be played which she will continue to narrate.

The people of the *bustee* are tempted by dreams of shops in big malls, so certain couples think of defecting from their poverty-ridden lives. As the priest dreams of a bigger temple, the Muslims foretell the destruction of Arshinagar which is quite literally a virtual existence that can collapse any day. The fact that the slum is such a tinder box of human relationships waiting to explode is borne out by the *mandir-masjid* altercation where the Hindus tell the Muslims to go to Pakistan to build their *masjids* and the Muslims retaliate by asking whether India belongs solely

²⁴ We'll find a little room/ Which we will decorate soon.

²⁵ But dreams always remain dreams.

to them.²⁶ This perennial question has always remained unsolved because on the eastern border, refugees have continued to pour in, from before Independence upto the present times. The politicians remain on the sidelines and watch the fun. If the communities will destroy themselves and leave the land free for usurpation, why should they intervene?

When Rono comes to see his wounded friend in hospital, the latter complains about Khalid and Tayyab's goons. Rono does not wish to get drawn into this fight; his white shirt symbolizes peace when he assures Tayyab, "Larai korte ashini."²⁷ Tayyab mocks him with "Lover-boy" and "Playboy theke pucca sant,"²⁸ before he starts punching and hitting him with unreserved cruelty. Rono who is desperately trying to hold on to the change of heart he has experienced since falling in love, takes the bashing like a true Bollywood hero. But then the Mercutio incident happens!

"*Arshinagar* could have been a breath fresh air, but as you walk out of the theatre, you're not exactly sure if you've just watched Shakespearean drama, a musical or an abstract play. Take, for instance, this entire gang war, which is played out through a martial dance sequence. The surreal feel goes for a toss the moment a real dagger slashes a real throat at the end," says Upam Buzarbaruah. Indeed Sen has tried too hard to pack too much into too little of playing time. What helps in this 'City of Mirrors' is that those who watch the film already know the story. They have come to see what new techniques she has employed to tell an oft-told tale. Probably this final battle scene is more true to *West Side Story* where the Jets and Sharks meet under the highway. Tony arrives and tries to stop the fight between Bernardo and Diesel. But Bernardo provokes Tony, ridiculing his attempt at peace while Tony tries to keep his cool for the sake of Maria.

Thus as Monty prepares to shoot at Tayyab, the latter retaliates by knifing Monty in the stomach. Monty coolly smokes his last cigarette and dies, so that Rono rises to fury. The slow, circling movement of the gang leaders on this deserted stretch of land is the perfect setting for a

²⁶ Temples and mosques—a reminder of the destruction of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya perhaps and other debilitating riots in recent history.

²⁷ I haven't come to fight.

²⁸ From a playboy to an absolute Saint!

modern duel. Tayyab enjoys this last battle and warns others not to interfere. But Rono has the revolver and Tayyab only a knife. The bullet hits Tayyab squarely in the forehead. It is almost like a dance until Rono is hurt in the arm--and Tayyab falls dead. The friends pick up the wounded Rono in their red jeep and escape while Tayyab's mother descends like a dark cloud on her unfortunate son's inert body.

In the family home her Foofie lays the blame squarely upon Julie calling her a "chudail."²⁹ While her brother informs his daughter that a Hindu marriage is completely "namoomkeen," he makes his decision to marry her to Pervez.³⁰ He reminds her that Rono has killed a "rishtedaar"—a relative! Henceforth, Julie must be totally housebound.

The voice of reason reminds us "anek to holo ebar chokher badale chokh; / ebar ei hingsha bondho hok."³¹ The school-teacher binds Rono's wounds and promises him a plan of escape with Julie. Fatima will smuggle him into the mansion but he must return soon to the forest bungalow. The school-teacher replaces the Friar as in this plot rationality must come through education, not religion. So once again Rono enters Julie's home in a *burkha*--as Mariam the masseur for the scene in the bedchamber tinged with the desperation of parting the next morning.

There is little lyricism in their parting, but again a symbolism of colour takes precedence. Julie is in a white nightgown and Rono again in his black *burkha*. Julie's desperation is voiced in staccato phrases: "Danrao, jeo na, shono. / Keno mone hoy aar tomay dekhbo na kakhono."³² She wishes she could die at this moment just as Romeo had wished in the original play but they finally part with "Love you, meri jaan/ Love you too Khan." Rono addressing Julie by her surname, 'Khan' sounds affectionate as it breaks into a gender and religious divide.

²⁹ Witch.

³⁰ Unacceptable

³¹ An eye for an eye has been the norm for a long time now/ Indeed hate must stop so to peace we can bow.

³² Wait, don't go, listen./why do I feel I will never see you again?

As the bustee burns in the final scenes, the story teller is seen playing cards. Even the temple burns as the erstwhile priest watches. The minister on his cell phone talks about non-interference as religious sentiments may be hurt. Pervez talks about Arshinagar being “saaf” or clean at last which suits all the power-hungry people. These fires do not purge; they flame into more hatred. Parvathy Baul continues to sing on camera and in the background while the lovers move their plan into action.

In a final bit of cross-dressing denying both religion and gender, Dadijaan sends out her grand-daughter dressed as a turbaned Hindu lad. Fatima is taking her to her safety, disguised in a black saree and red *bindi*. The colours depicting the two sides begin to merge as the movie draws to its close. Rono appears on the other side of the level-crossing in a red jeep, a red backpack but still clad in his black *burkha*. As the train separates them, the goons appear—and the lovers are each killed by his/her own community. Rono picking up her body as she breathes her last is reminiscent of the Capulet vault. He removes her mustache and her spectacles, then takes out the sketch of their dream room in Mumbai. When he is shot, the paper signifying freedom from ugly religious hatred floats gently away. Rain, a symbol of mercy, douses the flames in a slum empty of its people.

After the meeting of the parents who are now entirely childless, the funeral processions cross. The forlorn story teller is seen packing her box of props sitting alone on a string-bed. She sees the sketch on the floor that was last in Rono’s hand.

Samuel Pepys records that he “saw ‘Romeo and Juliet’ the first time it was ever acted; but it is a play of itself the worst that ever I heard in my life, and the worst acted that ever I saw these people do” (March 1, 1662). *Arshinagar* too has received more flak than fame but it should not be categorized as commercial entertainment. The film should be remembered as an intellectual experiment merging literature, stagecraft, cinema and music—and televised to commemorate the 400th death anniversary of the Bard.

When Monojit Lahiri wonders whether this film is the “biggest disappointment” in Sen’s work so far, he also states: “It is not unusual for gifted, creatively-driven film makers to want to cut loose, breakaway and try a new genre, excited by an idea, thought, storyline or concept.”

Arshinagar presents a densely packed confrontation of charged emotions but is not quite similar at its core like Sen's earlier film *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer*. That was a well-blended tale of a Hindu-Muslim pair coming together under rather unusual circumstances. This one is not an unusual tale, but one which will be told again, similarly and frequently—in reality and on stage or cinema.

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