

## Shakespeare and Neoliberal Cultural Politics in *Arshinagar* (2015) and *Zulfiqar* (2016)

Subham Dutta

### Abstract

In the changing scenario of urban entertainment in the nineteenth century, Shakespeare was a crucial marker of modernity and cultural capital. The legacy continues even now. It can be indexed by a series of Shakespearean adaptations in recent Bengali cinema—Hrid *Majharey* (2014) dir. Ranjan Ghosh, *Arshinagar* (2015) dir. Aparna Sen, *Zulfiqar* (2016) dir. Srijit Mukherji, *Hemanta* (2016) dir. Anjan Dutta. In an article, Moinak Biswas argues how Bengali cinema, in recent times, with its narcissistic engagements with space, time, and aesthetics, has produced *Neo-Bhadralok cinema*. Juxtaposing the trends ushered in by neoliberalism with the ingrained *Bhadralok* sensibilities in Bengal, Biswas lays out the map of this *Neo-Bhadralok* cinema by foregrounding the specific ideological position it adheres to in its mediation of space (Biswas 2011). This paper argues that the cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare in Bengal (post-2010) engage with the ideological complexities of the *Neo-Bhadralok cinema* concerning *Arshinagar* and *Zulfiqar*. While *Arshinagar* by Aparna Sen is an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, Srijit adapts *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* together, locating them in the dark underbelly of Kolkata in *Zulfiqar*. These two films not only replicate the feudal chronotope of Shakespeare in a new form but also produce an intersectional cinematic space through the interplay of gender, culture, and religion. By reading these films closely and situating them in the contemporary sociocultural matrix, this paper seeks to ask an array of questions: what are the dominant tropes of representation in these two Shakespeare films? How do they re-contextualize Shakespeare in a Bengali sociocultural milieu? To what extent do they correspond to the changing cultural and political discourse of Bengali cinema representation? Why are these films important in the evolving trajectory of Shakespeare's representation in Indian cinema? Answering these questions, my essay seeks to chart a sociological territory of Shakespeare's representation in contemporary Bengali cinema, linking its representational and cultural politics with the pan-Indian scenario.

**Keywords:** Representation, Neo-Bhadralok, Ideology, Shakespeare, Adaptation, Bengali

This paper explores how *Arshinagar* (2015) and *Zulfiqar* (2016)—by Aparna Sen and Srijit Mukherji, respectively—recontextualize Shakespeare within the representational matrix of neoliberal Indian cinema. The global travel of Shakespeare and its (re)mediations across different cultural geographies contributed immensely to its “local habitations” through multiple forms of re-telling.<sup>1</sup> Every re-telling opens a site of alternative semiotic design and “referentiality”.<sup>2</sup> The thrust of this paper is to demonstrate how neoliberal cultural politics shape the production of alternative cinematic poetics in India—and how both *Arshinagar* and *Zulfiqar*—remain embedded within that paradigm.

### The Cultural Politics of Shakespearean Adaptation in India

Adaptation of Shakespeare in India shares a long history dating back to the eighteenth century. The ways in which Shakespeare became central to the cultural climate of Bengal—a space that was a hotbed of anti-colonial activity—have been part of a process of performative transculturation.<sup>3</sup> It has also been shown by different historians how the adaptation of Shakespeare within the Indian cultural milieu was marked by a process of writing back.<sup>4</sup> The politics of cinematic adaptations, however, followed a different aesthetic, cultural and epistemic trajectory—bringing to the fore issues of romance, revenge and dirty social realism.<sup>5</sup> Directors have re-deployed and re-claimed Shakespearean paradigms in the Indian contexts to narrate the journey of the nation, stripping it of its apparent epistemic linkage with the civilizing mission.<sup>6</sup>

While adapting Shakespeare for the big screen, Vishal Bhardwaj seems to have found in Shakespeare the underworld backdrop, however, with a human story.<sup>7</sup> On adapting *Zulfiqar* in the underworld of Calcutta, Srijit Mukherji also acknowledges why Shakespeare becomes the site of his re-interpretation in the combined adaptation of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*: “Obviously like Shakespeare, the characters, actions and emotions are larger than life. Shakespeare was a very mainstream playwright.”<sup>8</sup> For Aparna Sen, on the other hand, what epitomized the spirit of Shakespeare was “love in the middle of violence, and that is what *Romeo and Juliet* is.”<sup>9</sup> Sen, who watched both Zeffirelli’s and Luhrmann’s adaptations of the text, breathes new life into it by amalgamating it with the Baul philosophical tradition. Both the texts “transplant” into the changing cultural context of Bengal.<sup>10</sup> What seems to inform their urge to translate and adapt Shakespearean plays in a different cultural space four hundred years after his

death is the presence of an intimately human story in a world fraught with crises in different forms.

### **Situating *Zulfiqar* and *Arshinagar* within ‘Indian Shakespeares’**

A recent study offers an exhaustive list of Indian films in different languages that have engaged with the works of Shakespeare from *Champraj Hado* (1923)—a silent film text that adapted *Cymbeline*.<sup>11</sup> Recent filmmakers like Vishal Bhardwaj or Sanjay Leela Bhansali in films like *Maqbool*, *Haider* or *Ram Leela* have adapted Shakespeare differently in the Indian context being partly inspired by the trend of subversive, postmodernist adaptations of Shakespeare in the West, ushered in by people like Baz Luhrmann or Julie Taymor. Historically, Bengali cinema’s negotiation with Shakespeare has departed largely from Bollywood in terms of its choice of genre and cultural specificity. Bengal has mostly preferred spirited, light-hearted comedy in its domestication of Shakespeare through cinema. It is generally considered that Shakespeare made his first foray into Bengali film through *Saptapadi*.<sup>12</sup> It has a scene from Shakespeare’s *Othello* performed in the film. Subsequently, films like *Bhranti Bilas* (1963), *Srimati Bhayankari* (2001), *Hrid Majharey* (2014), *Arshinagar* (2015), *Zulfiqar* (2016) and *Hemanta* (2016) point towards Bengali cinema’s sustained engagement with Shakespeare. Filmmakers like Aparna Sen and Srijit Mukherji expand their cinematic vision to accommodate issues like forced land acquisition, drug peddling, mafia hierarchies, an indiscriminate play of power to hint at the changing political reality of Bengal. What this paper seeks to contend is that at one level, their films remain discursively located within the changing aesthetics of Shakespeare adaptation in India; at another, they are also governed by *neo-bhadralok cultural politics* that mark the neoliberal turn in contemporary Bengali cinema.<sup>13</sup>

### **Neoliberal Turn in Bengali Cinema**

Neoliberalism in India, post-1991, opened the gateway of consumerism, leading to the formation of the New Middle Class.<sup>14</sup> The Leftist government in Bengal adopted a staggered approach to neoliberalism.<sup>15</sup> Its impact on cinematic representation was slow and gradual.<sup>16</sup> A recent work by Spandan Bhattacharya and Anugyan Nag considers the ‘belated’ advent of the neoliberal trend in Bengali popular cinema, epitomized by diasporic locations, glamorous weddings, and the search for a social utopia that went on to the consolidation of the nationalist

ideology.<sup>17</sup> Films like *Challenge*, *Paran Jaaye Joliya Re*, and *Paaglu*, with the rise of a new Bengali middle-class hero, Dev (aka Deepak) Adhikari, versed in dance with a stout, masculine physique, go against the template of a soft-romantic prototype of a Bengali hero represented by Uttam Kumar or Prosenjit Chatterjee later on.

Filmmakers like Srijit Mukherji, Anik Dutta, and Mainak Bhaumik came up with their versions of urban Bengali cinema, which were cerebral, yet not completely isolated from the populist moorings, especially in their choice of contents, use of music and so on. Therefore, films like *Autograph*, *Baishey Srabon*, *Bhooter Bhobisyot*, and *Chotushkone* struck the chords of commercial success besides being critically acclaimed. Their (re)presentation of the city within the aesthetic imaginary of the urban middle-class high rises, shopping malls, and aesthetically projected home decors registers a sense of alienation, and urban anxiety, characteristic of what Moinak Biswas in an essay called “neo-bhadralok cinema”.<sup>18</sup> This urban anxiety resonates with the changing reality of class struggle hovering around land grabbing and urban development in Kolkata in *Mahanagar@Kolkata* (2010) by Suman Mukhopadhyay. Moinak Biswas’ *Sthaniya Sambaad* (2009) also records the cultural transition of the city and its attendant world orders, although on a different scale. The neoliberal turn in Bengali cinema can be encapsulated by “an inward-looking”, “often apolitical sketches”.<sup>19</sup> It is reinforced by an unrelenting sense of nostalgia for the bygone social order—demonstrated by films like *Bhooter Bhobisyot* (2012), *Apur Panchali* (2014), *Cinemawala* (2015) and *Open Tee Bioscope* (2014). Within this template of neoliberal cinema, it is interesting to look at the re-embedding of Shakespeare—Bengali bhadralok middle-class’ favourite cultural icon apart from Rabindranath Tagore.

### Cinematic Aesthetics and Neoliberalism

Historians like Moinak Biswas, Sarunas Paunksnis, and Gyan Prakash offer their insights into the relationship between the rise of neoliberalism and the changing aesthetics of Indian cinema.

Moinak Biswas, in the essay “Shahorer Chitralipi” (“The Vignettes of Life”, trans. mine) hints at the rise of a new form of naturalism in Indian film aesthetics in the neoliberal era. Biswas argues that two types of representation mark the neoliberal era in terms of the spatial aesthetics of Bengali cinema. Delving deeper into the representational politics of space, Biswas demonstrates how the neoliberal space is borne out of a disjunction between the narrative and its

concrete historical ‘referent’. It becomes instrumental to the production of a cinematic hyperreal. This emerging dislocation between space, time and history seems to strip the characters of their cultural moorings and inculcate a sense of anxiety and shelterlessness within them. Biswas argues how the disappearance of the welfare state, disintegration of social ties, and weakening of the socially secure national institutions contribute to the rise of a ‘shelterless’ subject in Bengali cinema.<sup>20</sup>

Sociologist Ashis Nandy also indicates the demise of selfhood in the changing times following Christopher Lasch: “When everyday life becomes an exercise in survival, selfhood becomes a kind of luxury ... Selfhood implies a personal history, family and a sense of place. Under siege, the self contracts to a defensive core, armed against adversity”.<sup>21</sup> The historian Gyan Prakash also addresses how the image of the modern city as a distinct, bounded entity lies shattered in the face of market-led globalization. He contends that neoliberalism ushered in a new aesthetic imaginary of the city space. Prakash argues how it opened up a site of “being enthralled and frightened”,<sup>22</sup> leading to a reconceptualization of the city space in terms of dystopic imagery.<sup>23</sup>

Sarunas Paunksnis, in a recent study on neoliberalism’s impact on the changing aesthetics of Indian cinema, demonstrates how this new aesthetic imaginary contributes to the rise of ‘dirty realism’. The dark aesthetics, he argues, constitute the development of a ‘noir’ genre in Indian cinema: “obsession with dark spaces and suffocating interiors is what marks the noir imaginary, but more than that, it signifies a transforming perception of the urban life as having a peculiar heart of darkness at its core.”<sup>24</sup> Ranjani Mazumdar also demonstrates how the disturbing impact of dark aesthetics—constantly teasing the globalized visual culture of brightness—sculpts a language of space that is dark, melancholic and dystopic. According to Mazumdar, this new language “re-configures the space and allows the spectators see something beyond their ‘habitual culture of seeing’”.<sup>25</sup> This departure from the habitual culture of seeing and the feeling of transitory space of life fleeing by—generates what Paunksnis calls “uncanny”.<sup>26</sup>

From the above discussion, it becomes evident that the cultural politics of neoliberalism impact the aesthetic registers of visual representation. The representational gets informed by a search for familiarity in a divided world—forging a concomitance between the material and the

mental space. Through an inquiry into *Zulfiqar* and *Arshinagar*, this paper will try to understand how these films emerge from the cultural politics of the times.

### ***Romeo and Juliet in Arshinagar***

Aparna Sen locates the story of “Two households, both alike in dignity,”<sup>27</sup> not in Verona, but in a semi-fictional space Arshinagar. The Mitras and the Khans—the business tycoons of the town, instead of the Montagues and Capulets, govern Arshinagar. The narrative departs from the convention of formal social realism in storytelling by offering a different aesthetic structure that juxtaposes the noirish cinematic light with the theatrical rhythmicality in language. About the naming of the film from a popular Baul song, Sen comments:

In Lalon’s songs it actually refers to *Shiraj* ... ‘*Shiraj Lalon eksaathe roy lokkho jojon dure*’ [Shiraj and Lalon remain together although a million miles apart]. So the *murshid* and the *chela* exist in the same space but far away. But it can also be interpreted as ‘*porshi*’, whom you have never seen—as somebody you perceive as the other but who is not actually the other.<sup>28</sup>

This dichotomy between nearness and distance remains instrumental to *Arshinagar*. By constantly referring to the presence between the neighboring “other”—*porshi*, and the socially situated self—the narrative brings to the fore an idea where the self and the other remain indissolubly attached.

Aparna Sen adapts Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* within the changing cultural climate overwrought by neoliberal forces, urban angst, precarity, narcissism, and religious bigotry. In Sen’s adaptation, the feudal Verona, where Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is set, is replaced by the quasi-fictional “Arshinagar” (A city of mirrors). Elizabeth Frazer argues “The romantic world of Verona, also, reverberates with the political crisis of London, fraught by these streaks of self-subversive power struggles.”<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, Sen’s *Arshinagar*, despite its imaginary layer, reverberates the political tensions of neoliberal Calcutta.

The narrator, puppeteer Reshma Bai of the story, is a storyteller and a character within the story. Her shifting identities, and ambivalence in terms of location, recurring identification and disidentification with the space of Arshinagar produce a Brechtian estrangement effect—bringing a theatrical effect within the cinematic space. Reshma’s defamiliarized spectacle of Arshinagar amalgamates the elements of a Bollywood potboiler—drama, song, romance and

sex—being rooted within the social space it stems from. *Arshinagar* re-invokes the folk world of puppet dance, and Baul, forms that gradually lose their importance due to neoliberal cultural amnesia, and re-integrates them as an organizing device of the narrative. The cinematic narration opens a site where the ancient and modern forms of puppetry, Baul, theatre and cinema engage in a dialogue.

The drug business of the Khan and Mitra families outside the façade of the real estate business lays bare the corrupt influence of global capital—the sheen of the glamorous urban exterior and the dark underbelly that shapes it. While the Tybalt and Benvolio characters, Tayeb Khan and Banty, struggle over the possession of *Arshinagar*, Romeo, Rawno Mitra, played by Dev Adhikari, remains “bound more than a madman is” to music.<sup>30</sup> Juliet, Zulekha, the Khan family’s youngest girl, falls in love with Rawno as soon as they meet inside a bathroom in their cross-dressed incognitos. The narrative of the film integrates the issues of class and religious divides in which the space remains enmeshed.

Sen’s transposition of the story in the context of a Hindu-Muslim love affair, although it resonates with a social consciousness that shapes her cinematic vision, is not particularly novel. In her article, Paromita Chakravarti refers to Utpal Dutt’s *jatra* adaptation *Bhuli Nai Priya*, which was also modelled on the same theme. Despite the charged backdrop of religious and class conflicts, “the underlying theme of the film (‘antornihito bhab’) is not much different from ‘*Mr and Mrs Iyer*’, which talks about love between two young people under extraordinary circumstances.”<sup>31</sup> Being understandably disconcerted by the “communal enmity ever since the demolishing of the Babri Masjid”,<sup>32</sup> Sen perhaps adopted the Shakespearean text where love overrides religion. What seems to have prompted Sen to choose this story was perhaps an idea of telling the stories of two lovers within a neoliberal social architecture.

Sen’s gesturing towards a new order becomes prominent through the delineation of a new social era with the changing cultural and visual signs. The presence of Dadijaan, Tayeb’s Royal Enfield bike, Khan’s alliance with Parvez, a businessman from Dubai, and their choice of him as the potential groom for their daughter Zulekha, or Rawno’s affinity towards Band culture or Zulekha’s tattoo of wings carefully imprinted on her back emblematic of a transgressive desire to go beyond the social orthodoxy presents the Khan household as an interstitial space where tradition and modernity coalesce. Sen’s narrative locates the dialectic between the Khan and the

Mitra family by representing them in different lights. It is hinted that the “Khans” actually have a solid socio-cultural legacy of a Muslim family when Tayeb says: “*Bahadur Shahr Ujir amar dadur dadur dadu*”.<sup>33</sup> Taarini Mookherjee quite pertinently argues that despite his unflinching loyalty to the family, he remains an ‘other’ within it: “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.”<sup>34</sup> The refugee history of his father seems to hang precariously over the identity of Tayeb in the film.

Dadijaan’s accent represents a fusion of Hindustani Urdu and Bengali, setting her apart from the other characters in the household.<sup>35</sup> It contrasts with the nouveau riche Hindu family of the Mitras, who were quite “crass”<sup>36</sup> with their capitalistic greed for power. Zulekha’s adherence to the ancient qawwali tradition and Rawno’s obsession with the emerging band culture also project this cultural divide between the two families. Despite the cultural divides and differences in historical lineages, both families lock horns in a ruthlessly corporate neoliberal world.

The neoliberal town of Arshinagar, dominated by the land mafia and the gang lords, remains steeped in crime, lawlessness and anarchy. The culture of real estate business also comes as a significant fallout of neoliberal capital transfusion and the emergence of a new middle class that aestheticizes the signs of old order and ugliness. Jisha Menon, in her recent work, connects this to the rise of an “entrepreneurial subjectivity” in new India that normalizes aspiration as a “vertical striving”.<sup>37</sup> While the Khans and the Mitras represent this aspirational class with their hegemonic desires, the resistance from the working class unravels a site of political opposition. The song ‘*Kala Paisa Wala*’ stages a protest against the corrupt land mafias in unambiguous terms. With religious, class, and cultural divides, Arshinagar emerges as a neoliberal heterotopia with spaces of resistance and subversion.

Sen’s narrative charts how the contingencies of the neoliberal world impact the fate of the two lovers. In the original text, the two lovers kill themselves; however, in Aparna Sen’s text, the “pitiful sight”<sup>38</sup> of their self-slaughter is replaced by their accidental murders by some religious bigots. The two lovers’ search for anonymity in the bathroom or in cross-dressing carries a strong political message. Although their resistance to the social gaze gives them some agency against the social divide, ironically, this search for anonymity catapults them to their deaths. The

film ventures into the tremendous neoliberal paradox by portraying that the class division that the neoliberal capitalists seek to eradicate eventually works as its weapon to further the religious divide, eventually killing their offspring. The narrative denudes how religion in the film works to a self-subversive effect and also ironically re-affirms its core philosophical tenets about the indivisibility between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’—dissolving their stable binaries at which Sen hints in the interview.

*Arshinagar* demonstrates how love erupts and perishes in the transformed neoliberal world, borne out of the contradictory pulls of urban liberalism, class conflict and religious bigotry. Sen’s shift of focus to *Arshinagar* from the titular characters of *Romeo and Juliet* seems to be deliberate in highlighting the social conditions, the individuals remain susceptible. Shormishtha Panja quite aptly comments: “Sen creates a fabric of dense topical allusions that brings to the fore an India rapidly being extinguished by the forces of money and political power, a new post-liberalization, almost globalized India that dazzles but denies equality and equity”.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Julius Caesar Meets Antony and Cleopatra in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Kolkata***

*Zulfiqar*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, transports the text to a crime universe in Kolkata. The trailer of Mukherji’s text led to controversies related to different forms of “otherization” as the trailer showed Kidderpore as a cultural space different from the mainstream Calcutta with a political structure. The trailer opens with a blood-stained image of Bengali cultural icon Rabindranath Tagore, offering a culture shock to the Bengali intelligentsia.

In Srijit’s adaptation, Caesar is not a “gentle”<sup>40</sup> lord, but a hypermasculine gang lord. The re-embedding of Shakespeare within a dark social underbelly of a crime universe may not be particularly novel in the context of Indian cinema, as Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Maqbool* reveals. Srijit’s text is the first Bengali movie to locate Shakespeare within a crime universe. By looking at the disturbing social milieu of Kolkata, Srijit’s film departs from the conventional representation of Calcutta as a city of joy, culture and nostalgia. The narrative begins starkly with the image of Tony Braganza’s broken leg, where Tony is heard to pronounce: “It is a game about the food chain, Man,” departing from the feudal underpinnings of Shakespeare’s Rome.<sup>41</sup>

From the outset, the narrative follows a game-like structure that permeates throughout. This game of food chain, replete with the animal imagery of hawks, grasshoppers and rats,

indicates the presence of an increasingly susceptible food chain, altering the epistemic hierarchy of man. Srijit follows a Shakespearean technique of setting the texture of the film in the first sequence. It sets the tone for the entire film narrative offering an entry point to a violent, hierarchically-laden universe of death, despair and doom. In its title credit, Srijit's film pays tribute to Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*. By doing so, it not only acknowledges the resonance of Puzo's text in the transcreated chronotope of Shakespeare but also establishes an intertextual relationship with the genre of crime thriller, cutting across generic differences.

Metonymically, the overabundance of animal imagery puts up the picture of a dismembered social fabric that emerges at the intersection of class and religious conflict. The glittering exterior of Calcutta juxtaposed against its dark interior becomes emblematic of the schizophrenic split intrinsic to a neoliberal urbanscape. Such a depiction is reinforced by the commentary of Laltu Das, a police officer who narrates the story of this dock area, both as an outsider and insider to it. By charting an intricate history of crime in the Kidderpore dock area, Mukherji's narrative (re)invents a dystopian universe of crime in Kidderpore that, although being interpellated within the structure of the outside world, retains its autonomy as a separate cultural space. In an incisive article, Paromita Chakravarti demonstrates how *Zulfiqar* straddles the reflections of the two Kolkatas within a single narrative by creating a "dystopic aesthetics" of the city.<sup>42</sup> However, what remains disturbing about *Zulfiqar* is the (re)presentation of Kidderpore in a particular light overlooking its cosmopolitan history. The narrative of *Zulfiqar* does not embody the space of Kidderpore intrinsically, as pointed out by Nadira Khatun.<sup>43</sup>

The film follows an intradiegetic narration by using the figure of Laltu Das (Lepidus), the police officer, who tells the story of this dock area to the new officer in charge. Laltu recalls from memory the incidents of a string of crimes that this space remains haunted by, mapping out the space for the new officer. Instead of austerity, Laltu's voice texture and body language seem to be drenched in a great deal of sympathy for Zulfiqar Ahmed, the gangster leader of this area. Subsequently, when Laltu is seen to be a part of the world of the syndicate that Zulfiqar runs, it becomes clear how the world of Zulfiqar thrives. This proximity between the administrative world and the world underneath offers an ironic counter-narrative of the neoliberal shining India that nestles into the dark, abysmal alleyways of crime.

Interestingly, this duality points towards a schizophrenic split between the aesthetic exterior and a fraught interior that a neoliberal city space inhabits. This split gets reflected further in the phantasmagoric vision of Karishma Ahmed, where the urban “uncanny” intrudes into the individual consciousness, blurring the gap between the experiential topography of the city and its historical referent.

Zulfiqar, the eponymous hero of the text, with his larger-than-life presence, emerges as the fulcrum of the text. Interestingly the military campaigns of Caesar are here transported to a feud between the mafia gang lords in the play. Zulfiqar’s abduction by the rival group and his heroic defiance of them distinctly reverberate to Caesar’s heroic return from Pompey in Shakespeare’s play. However, the individual heroics that Caesar epitomizes remain unmatched by Zulfiqar Ahmed because of the network of the syndicate in which he remains implicated. Thus, the narrative establishes the plot’s primary tension between the overarching presence of a larger-than-life individual and the presence of a syndicate system, counter-intuitive to this.

The film starkly depicts a conflict between hegemonic masculinity and the rhizomatic structures of organized crime.

While Antony and Cleopatra’s original text brings to the fore a political conflict between Rome and Egypt, Srijit’s text omits it by re-embedding Egypt to a “Blue Nile” bar. The film explores the Blue Nile Bar’s fraught relationship with the syndicate. At the time of Zulfiqar, while it appeared as a site of support and sustenance after his death, the equation changes, and it emerges as a space of power lust and treachery. The songs in Zulfiqar like ‘*Kothin Osukh*’, ‘*Kothin Shomoy*’, ‘*Ajana Kalo Bhoy*’ (Difficult disease, hard times and unknown dark fear) or ‘*Bhenge Chure Jaay Amader Ghar Bari*’ (Our homes get shattered)—generate a sense of uncanny urban anxiety with the production of spaces of darkness, power struggle and violence.

Mukherji’s film, belonging to the genre of gangster film traditions in India, shows the images of social vulnerability in a neoliberal era. Locating Shakespeare within the gang wars perhaps becomes a convenient way of looking at the internecine strife in a neoliberal space one is trapped in. Without looking at the national cultural politics intrinsic to the Shakespearean texts, Mukherji localizes Shakespeare and demonstrates how the regional fields of power with their various entanglements—spell the death of an individual-centric order. The murder of Zulfiqar or the suicides of Markaz and Rani may remain in conformity with Shakespearean texts written in a

different cultural chronotope; however, their destinies are marked by a set of changing social conditions that govern the new era and produce a precarious subject. Interestingly, the visual politics of *Zulfiqar* resonate with Moinak Biswas' claim about the latent desire to find a 'home' in the age-old, familiar social habitats as opposed to the newly evolving chaotic landscapes of neoliberalism.<sup>44</sup>

### ***Arshinagar* and *Zulfiqar*: The Emergence of a Neoliberal Shelterless Subject**

Be it the fate of the gang lord *Zulfiqar* Ahmed or the two lovers Rawno and Zulekha, both *Arshinagar* and *Zulfiqar* foreground the narratives of insecurity and social precarity. The emergence of a "shelterless" subjectivity Biswas dwells on in his essay becomes evident in these representations. Their individual agency is juxtaposed against the social determinism of a neoliberal world order. Both the films explore an aesthetic of darkness, characteristic of neoliberal cinema, drawing on the underbellies of crime. The shift of focus from the utopian representation of city spaces, explored by many neoliberal filmmakers, towards a dystopian world of gang war, rowdyism and ruffianism, falls within the paradigm of 'dirty realism'.

It is interesting that in their positionality of narrative space and time both *Arshinagar* and *Zulfiqar* maintain a distance. Despite an apparent slant towards historical and social awareness, both the narratives construct a discursive space around neoliberal Kolkata without any historical referent. In Aparna Sen's narrative, the ambiguous presence of Reshma Bai, and her constant reminder of the fictionality of the setting of *Arshinagar* leads to a neo-romantic mystification of the urban underbelly of *Arshinagar*.

In the case of Srijit Mukherji's film, an identical function is performed by the police officer Laltu Das, and the entire narrative of *Zulfiqar* is mapped from his perspective foreclosing the possibility of narrative multiplicity. As a corollary, the representational space, in both films, projects the urban uncanny in a displaced manner without directly engaging with it. In other words, the tales of violence are relegated to a field<sup>45</sup> that remains outside their social habitats. Such disjunction between the habitat and the field is deliberate, and their mediation through Shakespeare leads to another form of romanticizing around the desolate noir aesthetics of crime and violence.

Paromita Chakravarti, in her essay, argues that representation in *Arshinagar* and *Zulfiqar* remains "distinct from and critical of westernized colonial modernity which shapes the

*bhadralok* reception of Shakespeare and the construction of Bengali identity and the Bengali urban cinema based on it”.<sup>46</sup> However, I argue here that both film directors remain unconsciously interpellated within the *Bhadralok social structure*. From their choice of Shakespeare to their building of a noir imaginary around the city space harbour a nostalgic desire to hold onto the longstanding cultural tradition of the bygone era of order and harmony.

Shakespeare remains a favourite repository for these directors to demonstrate the collapse of social fabric not just because of the stories centering around the conflict between individual agency and the rigidly stratified social order, but because of Shakespeare’s longstanding legacy as a global cultural icon. The cultural capital associated with Shakespeare seems to inform the political unconscious of such neoliberal representational aesthetic that these directors represent. If we look at the recent filmography of Aparna Sen or Srijit Mukherji, they mostly bask in nostalgia for the bygone world order. Be it *Autograph*, *Iti Mrinalini*, *Chotushkone*, or *Gaynar Baksho*, one factor is common—the engagement with the past in a romantic manner. In that sequence, a film like *Zulfiqar* or *Arshinagar* marks a stylized difference. The directors try to portray or sometimes create an exaggerated reality that apparently falls outside the purview of the *Bhadralok* comfort zone. However, their refuge within the Shakespearean texts to describe an urban dystopia implicates them within the western-educated urban *Bhadralok cultural milieu* that they, very consciously, seem to eschew at least for one film. The representational spaces in *Arshinagar* and *Zulfiqar* thus remain locked in an unresolved tension between the representational space and their historical underpinnings.

## **Conclusion**

Both *Arshinagar* and *Zulfiqar* remain embedded within the neoliberal aesthetic template of urban insecurity, precarity and anarchy. It is interesting to look at how neoliberalism shapes their productions and works through them. The constant meanderings of the camera between the high rises, shopping malls, and the old familiar locations of slums or marginal spaces open an uncanny site where the past and the present remain locked in irresolvable conflict. This dialectical representation of space seems to be governed by neoliberal politics which, to gloss over the unruliness of the present seems to repose on the politics of nostalgia, evident through the other films of Aparna Sen and Srijit Mukherji.

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<sup>1</sup> See Trivedi and Chakravarti, Introduction, *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas*.

<sup>2</sup> See Trivedi, "'Filmi' Shakespeare" 38.

<sup>3</sup> See Suddhaseel Sen, *Shakespeare in the World* 182.

<sup>4</sup> See Bagchi; Chatterjee; Guha.

<sup>5</sup> See Paunksnis, "India Darkly."

<sup>6</sup> See Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*, Introduction; and Harrison, *Our Civilizing Mission*, Introduction.

<sup>7</sup> See Bhardwaj and Tyrewala vi.

<sup>8</sup> Mukherji, "Kolkata Underworld."

<sup>9</sup> Sen, "Interview with Aparna Sen" 305.

<sup>10</sup> See Hutcheon 150.

<sup>11</sup> See Trivedi and Chakravarti, Introduction, *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas*.

<sup>12</sup> See Chakrabarty 255.

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- <sup>13</sup> See Biswas, “Neo-Bhadralok Darpan.”
- <sup>14</sup> See Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class*.
- <sup>15</sup> See Das, “Producing Local Neoliberalism in a Leftist Regime.”
- <sup>16</sup> See Kapur 2010; Sathe 2020; Chatterjee 2022.
- <sup>17</sup> See Nag and Bhattacharya, *Tollygunge to Tollywood*.
- <sup>18</sup> See Biswas, “Neo-Bhadralok Darpan.”
- <sup>19</sup> See Bose and Chakravarty, “Kolkata Turning.”
- <sup>20</sup> See Biswas, “Shahorer Chitralipi.”
- <sup>21</sup> Qtd. in Nandy xxii.
- <sup>22</sup> Prakash 4.
- <sup>23</sup> See Prakash 4.
- <sup>24</sup> Paunksnis, *Dark Fear, Eerie Cities*.
- <sup>25</sup> Mazumdar 101.
- <sup>26</sup> Paunksnis, *Dark Fear, Eerie Cities* 102.
- <sup>27</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* 67.
- <sup>28</sup> Sen, “Interview with Aparna Sen” 308.
- <sup>29</sup> See Frazer, “Violence and Political Authority.”
- <sup>30</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* 81.
- <sup>31</sup> Sen, “Aparna Sen’s Next ‘Arshinagar.’”
- <sup>32</sup> Sen, “Interview with Aparna Sen” 308.
- <sup>33</sup> Sen, “Interview with Aparna Sen” 312.
- <sup>34</sup> Mookherjee 38.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Sen, “Interview with Aparna Sen” 313.
- <sup>37</sup> Menon 7.
- <sup>38</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* 181.
- <sup>39</sup> Panja 579.
- <sup>40</sup> Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* 129.
- <sup>41</sup> *Zulfiqar*, directed by Srijit Mukherji.
- <sup>42</sup> Chakravarti, “Globalizing the City” 122.
- <sup>43</sup> See Khatun.
- <sup>44</sup> Biswas, “Shahorer Chitralipi” 228.
- <sup>45</sup> On field and habitus, see Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*.
- <sup>46</sup> Chakravarti, “Globalizing the City” 124.