Localizing Romeo and Juliet: Ram-Leela, Female Agency and Indian Politics

Abstract

This essay explores *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela* (dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2013), a Bollywood adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, from a local/political and female-centred angle. Bhansali's *Romeo and Juliet* localises and provincialises *Romeo and Juliet* by situating it in Gujarat with recognisable traditional dance numbers, and considerably mythologises the hypotext[i] by the prioritization given to festivals and the parallels between the leading pair and well-known Hindu divinities. But, localisation is not exempt from problems in this film, for dance and Hindu myths are both markers of tension in modern-day India. The constant ambiguities they bring up inevitably point to the non-isomorphic flows that characterize the nation state. This tension also finds its niche in the depiction of women in the film. Bhansali's adaptation equally shows women that are oppressed – the girl in the item number and the widows (neither finding a Shakespearean counterpart) – women that are at one and the same time oppressed and resistant (Dhankor Baa/ Lady Capulet and Leela/Juliet) and some women showing signs of female agency at the end of the adaptation. National tensions find their complement in tensions that inform *Ram Leela* as an adaptation: this is a work that is both a Shakespearean adaptation and a Bollywood film, the two forms interacting with each other in a unique combination. *Ram-Leela* not only provides new understandings of *Romeo and Juliet* and, ultimately, Shakespeare, but also of the contingencies and complexities of modern-day India.

Keywords: Shakespeare, adaptation, Indian cinema, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Ram-Leela,* politics, female agency.

> *People, machinery, money, images, and ideas now follow increasingly non isomorphic paths; of course, at all periods in human history, there have been some disjunctures in the flows of these things, but the sheer speed, scale, and volume of each of these flows are now so great that the disjunctures have become central to the politics of global culture* (Appadurai 37)

"Contemporary India is unequivocally a creation of the modern world," claims Sunil Khilnani (5), with nationalism and democracy, the motors and ideas of modernity, having shaped the nation in profoundly transformative ways. The idea of a unified and united India was the wager of an educated élite, which aimed for homogeneity and a unifying ideology for their country. The current state of the country – identified as contradictory, fissured and discontinuous – differs considerably from the way it had been imagined by the fathers of the nation. The collapse of the Nehruvian consensus, the persistence of democracy – despite the different forms through which it is manifested – the uneven economic development, the rise of conservatism, together with a strong resistance to it or the emergence of regionalism are all part and parcel of the nation's modern life. The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – a right-wing political party in steady ascent since 1996, with a considerable Hindu character – should be added to these proliferating forces within India. In fact, the current Indian PM Narendra Modi is actually a member of the BJP, which proves the prominence of conservatism on a national level. *Goliyon ki Rasleela Ram-Leela* – the object of our study – is set in Ranjhor, in India's westernmost state in the northern region of Gujarat in modern-day society, albeit it is filmed on a set rather than on location. The film's political subconscious seems to be aligned with this pan-Indian nationalism, since "North Indian customs and the Hindi language constitute national identity" (Chakravarti 170). The location and the elements of Gujarati-ness shown in the adaptation (i.e a Gujarati dance called *garba raas*, typically associated with the

construction of Hindutva) are some of the instances of the disjunctures within modern-day India.

These forces are expressed in modern-day India on different levels, not only on a national one. For instance, the emergence of regionalism made the already convoluted panorama even more diffuse. In the 80s, regional demands were directed against the central state as a result of Indira Gandhi's government. Given that she had centralised all the powers and had ignored the regions, the result was a complete dissatisfaction on the part of the regions, together with a reinvigoration of regional politics after the breakdown of the federal arrangements. By the mid-1990s, the proliferation of regional parties was a fact, with twenty-eight of them. The assignation of greater power to regional governments incited greater competition, Khilnani talking about provincial sensibilities (146). Thus, there is an unavoidable existing tension and collision between region and centre, local power and central power, margin and mainstream. According to Linda Hutcheon, "[an adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context — a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum" (142). *Ram-Leela* is then framed within the tensions and conflicts that define the nation state. The exploration of dance and myth (markers of such tension in the film) exposes fault-lines in local-national ideologies, since locality is produced in globalized ways, transcending the local and the national and mostly aiming at transnational audiences.

But Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Ram Leela* is equally the product of a society in which there is a growing attention to women's voices. After the horrendous rape of a young woman in New Delhi by a gang that was covered by the media worldwide in 2012, films started to take a woman-centred approach. This precipitated a mandatory change to the tradition of passive, victimized and idealized women that had been part of the Indian screen for decades. According to Jyotika Virdi, "gender was mobilized as

a sign to unify the "Indian'" nation state; the woman was its "idealized insignia," (14) with the ensuing problems this idealization entailed. That *Ram-Leela* challenges misconceptions about female passivity is powerfully suggested when it conceives Shakespeare's almost non-existent Lady Capulet as the powerful and scary gangster Dhankor Baa, extremely aligned with Capulet. The addition of widows (the Mercutio/Tybalt characters Kanji and Meghji are married in Bhansali's adaptation) together with the seizure of power on the part of Leela/Juliet as the next 'don' (this is a gangster-centred community) equally showcase how the film works against type. Yet, despite considerable female agency present in the film, cracks and fissures always threaten to rupture any attempt at homogeneity, different representations along the axis of gender point up uneven and still evolving ideologies in the nation-state.

If these complexities are present in modern-day India, they can be found in adaptation. When *Ram Leela* was released, there was an explosion of *Romeo and Juliet* films. Given that the issue of intolerance in public discourse was strongly debated, especially due to the rise of Hindutva, *Romeo and Juliet* proved to be the perfect play to adapt politics and communal riots. *Ishaqzade* (dir. Habib Faisal, 2012)*, Issaq* (dir. Manish Tiwary, 2013), *Ram-Leela* (dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2013) and *Arshinagar* (dir. Aparna Sen, 2015) are all adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* produced between 2012 and 2015, spotlighting the efflorescence of interest in this particular play. Out of the four films, two of them (*Ishaqzaade* and *Arshinagar*) explore cross-communal lovers, one of them being Hindu and the other Muslim, hinting at the historical trauma in India *par excellance*, Partition and its aftermath, but also explicitly trying to challenge the incessant Islamophobia in the country, fostering cross-community building. *Issaq* is especially interested in Naxalism (the radical left-wing political party), which seems to take direct aim at the right-wing Hindu state. By

contrast, *Ram-Leela* seems to be aligned with the nationalist paradigm. The film refracts the insecurities about civic, regional and national identity, and explores them in depth. Thus, the contradictory depiction of women, the ambiguous allusions to the location, dance and Hindu mythology further end up buttressing the ongoing tensions within modern-day India.

National tensions find their complement in tensions that inform *Ram Leela* as an adaptation: this is a work that is both a Shakespearean adaptation and a Bollywood film, the two forms interacting with each other in a unique combination. As a Shakespearean adaptation, *Ram Leela* would be, following Robert Stam's terminology, a transformation of the source text, since it "offers characters simplified or trundled through new events" (Kidnie, 3); it is a dynamic process that manipulates thematic concerns, adds, but also cuts. For Stam, in a transformation, texts "generate other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin" (66). Like Stam, Linda Hutcheon equally claims an adaptation is engaged in a "double process of interpreting and then creating something new" (20). *Ram Leela's* engagement with the source text consists precisely in the generation of a new text, which transforms and recycles *Romeo and Juliet* at length. It Indianizes the Shakespearean characters, expands the narrative considerably (and the characters) and erases some male characters (like Friar Lawrence). Yet, *Ram Leela* is not just a Shakespearean adaptation, but a Bollywood Shakespearean adaptation.[ii] The adaptation of the literary source needs to accommodate Bollywood aesthetics and fit the demands of Indian audiences and culture, so the Shakespearean text is, for that reason, distinctively reworked. According to Tejaswini Ganti, there are three strategies of "Bollywoodization": inclusion of songs, addition of emotion and expansion of the narrative (77). *Ram Leela* incorporates all these demands to its reinterpretation of the

Shakespearean tragedy. However, Bhansali's take on *Romeo and Juliet* also needs to be analysed in terms of the role of adaptation *as a genre* in Bollywood cinema. Adaptations in Bollywood cinema are scarce and, when they emerge, they are usually unacknowledged, for their status varies considerably from the West (Krämer 251). Given their different status, "adaptations are never only adaptations but also, for example, comedies, melodramas, tragedies, musicals, fantasy, or masala films" (Krämer 255). All these features are incorporated into *Ram Leela*, the result being a mishmash of traditions and conventions. What this confirms is how *Ram Leela* as an adaptation develops in multiple versions, "laterally" rather than "vertically" (Hutcheon xii). *Ram Leela* should be then best approached in terms of a "rhizomatic interrelation" (Krämer 261); *Ram Leela* forces us to reconceive what Shakespeare means and demonstrates its multiplicity. As Lanier claims, we should not think of a Shakespearean adaptation "in single, privileged relation to a Shakespearean text but rather in a multiplicity of relations to an ever-changing aggregate of adaptations" (Lanier 35) and traditions. Via the discussions pursued in the contrasting sections of this article, this essay finally aims to highlight how *Ram Leela* creates a new text; Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* serves as a medium for a dialogue about the current nature of the Indian nation, and Shakespeare's imbrication with local and cultural processes of adaptation.

Localising *Romeo and Juliet*

Born in Gujarat, Sanjay Leela Bhansali has a predilection for the state, which is the setting of some of his films, such as *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999) and *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela* (2013). In particular, via the relocation from the northern city of Verona to the northern Indian state Gujarat, *Ram-Leela* foregrounds this specific location and reinforces local power dynamics throughout. In this vein, the film should be aligned with the new wave of Hindi films set in northern villages, promoting thus "small town nostalgia", an imaginary "Other' of the big city" (Kumar 61). The director is clearly invoking and cultivating signifiers of Gujarati-ness, such as the emphasis on religion, the importance attached to business, remoteness, or northerliness, among others; this would be the freight attached to Gujarat for a diverse Indian audience. And yet, the setting he shows, together with the elements of Gujarati-ness he describes are instances of the disjunctures within modern-day India.

Bhansali's adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* takes its first provincial turn in the title credits, when the director pays a tribute to Jhaverchand Meghani, a well-known Gujarati poet who wrote in the first half of the twentieth century. For Mahatma Gandhi, also a Gujarati, Jhaverchand Meghani was the National Poet *par excellance*. But what really stands out is his compromise with the freedom movement after the publication of his book entitled *Sinhudo*, in which he encouraged the Indian youth to take part in the struggles against the British Raj, being sentenced for two years in jail. Bhansali uses his song "Mor Bani Thangat Kare" ("My heart is dancing like a peacock") in the film to pay homage to this famous Gujarati figure.[iii] The narrative cleverly links the state of Gujarat to the nation leader, Mahatma Gandhi and to the national poet, hinting at the importance of Gujarat in the making of leaders and in the building of the nation. Likewise, the outset of the film equally shows a poster of the most celebrated Gujarati play to date (*Prit Piyu Ne Panetar*), which has been running for more than fifty years

in various theatres. From the beginning then, it seems *Ram-Leela* was conceived as a glorification of Gujarati culture.

The suggestions of Gujarat thrive in the film, with some additional sequences in the tourist-destination palaces of Rajasthan, but, curiously enough, the setting is a fictional town as opposed to a 'real' town in Gujarat, inevitably presenting a Bollywood image of the local. The design and narrative of *Ram-Leela* were influenced by the traditions, clothes and folk culture of houses in the Kutch region of Gujarat. For instance, the gorgeous brunette Leela/Juliet wears clothes – characterised by unusual colours, brocades and embroideries done by hand – that maintain the typical Gujarati village look, influenced by the old antique textiles used in the region of Kutch, with a contemporary touch (*Couture Rani* 1). Although her attire is always Gujarati, Leela shows her rebellious nature via her accessories: she does not cover her head (as a Gujarati woman would do) and wears her *dupatta* in a casual way.[iv] In contrast, the outfits of the muscled, tattooed and dark-haired Ram always have a more cosmopolitan touch, as a sign of his absence from the village for several years. The frequent shots with markets in the background were inspired by those in Gujarat. Interestingly, the Gujarat desert is significant in the story and has an essential dimension, for it is the place where Ram reveals his true feelings and emotions: the desert seems to be a participant in the evolution of his relationship with Leela. Crane shots of the Gujarati deserts appear after Ram's visit to the Sanera household and his first encounter with Leela. Ram is, at this point, eager to show his enthusiasm and joy. After the abduction of Leela, the camera zooms into a low-spirited Ram, who is even willing to take his own life by slashing his wrists. The importance of the desert is again stressed when Ram receives two dead peacocks before his meeting with Dhankor Baa, suggesting vanquished masculinity and a pair of lovers. Even the huge Sardar Patel statue (182

metres) commissioned by Narendra Modi seems to find a replica in the similar statues of iconic Hindu gods larger than life figures that are always part of the background of the dances in *Ram-Leela*. The gigantic statues of Lord Rama, Hanuman, Krishna and Kamadeva are so spectacular that the connection with the Sardar Patel statue is unavoidable, so the film immediately suggests an intimate relation between nationalism and Hinduism via its setting. From its outset, the film showcases that conservatism is inevitably in tension with localization, more so when the Gujarat in the film "is no region of the real world: it is a theme park fantasy version of O.G. Gujarat into which themes from Shakespeare have been stirred" (Chute 1).

Ram-Leela adds depth and insight into our understanding of Gujarat via the songs and dances as well. In fact, the film adds to the construction of Gujarat via the dances. For instance, as Asma Sayed notes, the first encounter between Ram and Leela "is set against the backdrop of a garba dance," (224) a folk dance of India linked to Gujarat, connected to Navratri festivities. The song entitled "Lahu Munh Lag Gaya" ("I have tasted blood on my lips") occurs during this first meeting while Holi is being celebrated. The ball in act 1, scene 5 cannot find a better transposition than during this first song/dance number, the Shakespearean text being Bollywoodized. The Shakespearean text is transformed via the incorporation of visual and musical metaphors. This garba dance consists of a group of men dressed in white and women with colourful outfits, which include ankle-length skirts with different layers (*lehengas*) typical of Gujarat – dancing in circles to rhythmic music in which drumming is involved. Once Ram and Leela have splashed colour on each other's faces, the backdrop dance comes to the foreground as the leading pair joins the number. Later on in the narrative, another Gujarati song "Nagade Sang Dhol Baaje" ("Along with the kettle-drum, drums are beating") also "features the garba style" (Marwah 196). This

song – maybe the most successful in the soundtrack – takes place during Navatri, half way through the film at a crucial moment in the narrative.[v] It is during this dancing number when Ram decides to visit Dhankor and Leela acts as a devout wife putting vermilion on his forehead and touching his feet, clearly defying her mother. But it is also during this song sequence that Dhankor is shot even as she also takes on the attributes of Ambe-ma (power). Set at the Saneras's place with an altar for Ambe-ma placed in the central position, men clad in white outfits and women dressed in red dance in concentric circles. They all move their arms and legs to the encompassing and rhythmic music of the drums and women twirl their skirts regularly. They all need to memorize set patterns of steps and, most importantly, keep the beat. Constant and ongoing high angle shots shed light on the visual beauty of the song and dance sequence. As a gesture to authenticity, the film director decided to bring garba dancers from Gujarat. Even the item number with Priyanka Chopra that celebrates the love between Ram and Leela "Ram Chahe Leela" ("Ram Desires Leela") brings another Gujarati tradition to the forefront by the inclusion of dohas (rhyming couplets) and chhands (quatrains) at the climax of the song (Sayed 224). Gujarati poetic forms are then inserted to foster the local flavour, to the extent of simplifying and even commodifying Indian culture.

Dance in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's adaptation is precisely another expression of tensions in modern-day India, since garba-raas has been increasingly used in relation to the construction of Hindutva. As Jessica Marie Falcone notes, "garba-raas is sometimes implicated in political debates in Gujarat through the vernacular of Hindu extremism" (51), since nationalists have frequently stated that garba-raas is one of the clearest markers for Hinduism. Closely associated with Navatri festivities and equally connected to the Hindu deities Radha and Krishna, the worlds of Hindu nationalism

and the garba-raas dance form are unfortunately intertwined. Given the link to Hindu imagery, garba-raas has been claimed to be inherently Hindu. Thus, in spite of the fact that garba-raas started as a Gujarati tradition, it ended up as a Hindu symbol to the extent that if other religious communities used it, Hindutva activists would strongly oppose it. As Jessica Marie Falcone notes, "the exercise of reifying Gujarati-ness and the politics of Hindu nationalism" (55) are closely related. After all, it was within Gujarati contexts where Hindutva re-emerged, after the terrible Gujarat riots between Hindus and Muslims in 2002, which began when a train carrying Hindu pilgrims (returning from Ram's birthplace) caught fire. In particular, the Bharatiya Janata Party leader (BJP) Narendra Modi was severely criticised for his handling of the issue, mainly characterised by his passivity with the anti-Muslim pogroms that had taken place (Bobbio 658). Furthermore, as Thea Buckley (9) points out, the geographical resetting not only invokes the Gujarat Riots of 2002, but also another historic communal conflict, such as the Partition of 1947 and accompanying bloodbath, Gujarat being the nearest state to the India-Pakistan border. Subsequently, these messages are simply shown as if they were part of the film's unconscious.

The state is then characterized by a strong Hindu tint, Hindu extremism. The release of the film was closely followed by elections, which became important especially after the Gujarati filmmaker publicly manifested his support for his fellow Gujarati right-wing political candidate Narendra Modi.

> Narendra Modi has something magical about him. I am enamoured by the nation being obsessed with him. The ability to have people follow you is important. Charisma is important. I like the fact that he has something to say and something to achieve and a practical agenda to follow. I need to be inspired. I need to follow you. I think he is astute and that is important for a leader (Guptal 1).

Surprisingly, this public declaration of devotion for Modi was made at the time the film was being released and promoted. In the aforementioned interview, Bhansali

frequently talks about the Gujarati ethos. But 2013 was also the year in which Narendra Modi commissioned the Sardar Patel statue – a huge Statue of Unity "twice the size of New York's Statue of Liberty" (19), which was going to be located in the capital of the Gujarat state, Ahmedabad. For the Hindu nationalist party, Sardar Patel has become an icon, since he persuaded the more than 550 states that existed during the colonial period to join the Indian union. For that reason, he was thought to be a leader of the Independence cause. Hindu nationalists even lament he never became Prime Minister since, in their opinion, had he been successful with his candidature, Kashmir would have been totally Indian. What these ideas suggest is the Hindu nationalists's attempt to sideline Jawaharlal Nehru, who always favoured and committed to a secular India, instead of a Hindu nation (Safi 19). The conflation of 'Indian' and 'Hindu' promoted by the Modi administration as well as the dismantling of the Nehruvian vision of India are part of the new image of India that is being fostered. The Gujarat location with all its associations to pan-Indian nationalism and Hindu fundamentalism showcases how the film reflects the contingencies of such a nation-state in flux. Hinduism and localism are in tension with each other, since curiously enough a religion has been appropriated by a region. The political context which *Ram Leela* negotiates prompts us to reimagine what is signified by Shakespeare, and how an adaptation is not always politically liberatory.

The local paradigm encountered in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's adaptation does not end with the setting, but achieves even more prominence through myth, which is one more symptom of tensions and instabilities in the country. The insertion of myth also signals the transformation of *Romeo and Juliet* to suit Indian audiences. Lucia Krämer supports the view that the paucity of adaptations in Bollywood cinema is related to the predilection for myths (254); Indians' preference for mythology sets

literary adaptation aside, according to Krämer. Given that *Ram Leela's* status as a Shakespearean adaptation is only one of many, as a Bollywood film, it abounds in intertextual references to Indian mythology. Mythology and Shakespeare exist in a rhizomatic relation, the other impacting on and informing the other. This emphasizes the multidimensionality of *Ram Leela*, for it does not only engage with the Shakespearean text, but "with the proliferating network of relations" (Lanier 36) that constitute Shakespeare or go beyond the Shakespearean rhizome. It is the film's realization of myth, in particular, that sparked controversy. To begin with, the film caused some dispute due to its title, *Ram-Leela*, which was said by Hindu activists to hint not only at the Lord Rama, the seventh avatar of Vishnu, but also at the festival 'Rasleela', associated with Lord Krishna. During the promotion campaign, the actress Deepika Padukone (Leela) faced public humiliation when she attended a function and a considerable number of attendees threw eggs and tomatoes at her. In addition, the director and leading couple also faced legal trouble because it was claimed the film promoted fierce enmity between real Gujarati communities Rabaris and Rajputs, which were also the film's families, Ram belonging to the Rabaris, whereas Leela is a Jadeja-Rajput young woman. However, the director had to change the names of the communities to Rajadi (previously Rabari) and Sanera (previously Jadeja) to avoid further conflicts and solve censorship problems. What irked the Rajputs was the romance between the heroine (the daughter of a Royal Jadeja family) and a Rabari (nomadic status) young man, which would be totally unacceptable for their community. The film equally faced trouble after its release. A local court issued arrest warrants against the filmmaker and well-known members of the cast, such as Deepika Padukone (Leela), Ranveer Singh (Ram) or Priyanka Chopra (as herself) on the grounds of irreparable harm towards the Hindu community. As may be imagined, to avoid legal

prosecution, the filmmaker always insisted on the "innocence" of the production, just being another adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. If Shakespeare helps articulate controversial political issues in India that would otherwise remain submerged, *Ram Leela* toys with religion via Shakespeare. The film, through adaptation, pushes Shakespeare in unexpected directions. In the former statement by Bhansali, the once colonial master paves the way for a safe option and a-political one because the work is deemed above and beyond the political.

But this connection between politics and myth is flagged up via the use of festivals, which are used to structure the film. Surprisingly, most of the love meetings tend to happen during these festivals with a violent frame, inevitably connecting passionate love, religion, and violence to the extent the film is considered to be full of sexual irreverence. Thus, the mixture of Hindu myths and modernity results in problematic outcomes. Ram and Leela meet during Holi, a Hindu festival that celebrates the beginning of spring, and tends to be associated with Radha and Krishna, since they coloured each other's faces when they met. After that, they became a couple. In the case of Ram and Leela, also after their brief encounter during Holi, they also become a couple. But the film's wide close-up and middle shot of the leading pair with guns kissing passionately on the lips at a religious festival like Holi clearly suggests this is not a traditional interpretation of the Hindu myths, but one that combines modernity and tradition. The next festival that is fully developed is Navatri, a Hindu holiday that symbolises the triumph of good over evil. This festival is dedicated to Durga (also called Ambe-ma), the mother goddess who represents power. As Laura Ammazzone notes, this goddess expresses a broad "spectrum of the female psyche" (XIV), since she goes beyond the simple dualistic pattern good/bad, and combines several contradictory features in her. In Sanjay Leela Bhansali's adaptation, Navatri

takes place half way through the film when Ram visits the Sanera's household, sees Leela and the latter confirms her love for him defying her mother. If Navatri is celebrated to highlight the power of Durga, the celebration in the film acts in the opposite direction for nowhere is Baa less powerful during the film that at this moment in which she actually becomes the goddess Amba-ma, when she is disobeyed and defied by her daughter and acolyte. Interestingly, a religious festival then is equally used to challenge the established order and emphasize transgressive love, as well as its inevitable association with violence. These two festivals prepare the audience for the last festival to be shown on screen, the Ramleela, performed annually on the Dusshera, a Hindu festival celebrated at the end of Navatri. In the film, the festival finishes with the actor playing Rama setting fire to the terrible demon and corrupt tyrant, Ravana. However, as Jonathan Gil Harris suggests, this Ramleela is just a "pretext for a wave of communal violence" because, instead of having a festival that dramatizes the victory of good over evil, the entire Rajadi clan is wiped out, even the Ram actor (88). The implication is that religious festivals are inevitably intermingled with violence. As in the other festivals, passion also overrules religion. With this religious background, the mutual homicide occurs, but characterised once again by overt and explicit passion, and even lust. The leading pair takes advantage of their last minutes and moments together to caress, touch, kiss and devour each other. Such is the case that their death is an act "of consummation devoutly to be wished"; it is the culmination of their desire (Chakravarti 667). Their suicide is also an erotic act, as the smiles on the faces as they are falling in slow motion reveal. Although the filmmaker makes use of Hindu myths and festivals, his reinterpretation and update of them - via the connection to violence and the power of desire – exposes fault-lines in local-national ideologies.

The disjunctures suggested in the film's realization of myth are bolstered by the combination of two different divinities in the two leads. Ram embodies the personality traits of Rama, the hero of *The Ramayana* and Krishna, one of the main characters in *The Mahabharata.* The differences between these two deities are striking because they represent various features that inevitably clash. From the outset of the film, Ram appears as a God, Rama, the hero from *The Ramayana,* with giant cutouts that confirm this association. The clearly adoring looks of the onlookers of Ram in the first song and dance sequence ("Tattad Tattad"), his exile for fourteen years, his return to the city and ensuing accession to the throne are only some of the parallels between both. [vi] By associating Ram with Rama, the hero is placed within a key narrative of valour and self-assertion. And yet, his bravery only seems to play second fiddle to love and lust, following in Krishna's footsteps (in the first part of his life). Like Krishna, he tends to be surrounded by women devotees, appears painted in blue or with blue accessories and ornaments. Besides, the peacock is equally part and parcel of Ram,[vii] and the main symbol in his relationship with Leela, as their conversations on and about peacocks, their symbiosis with the bird in song and dance sequences or even the *mise-en-scène* reveal. Curiously enough, the peacock is equally sexualized. Bearing all these different nuances in Ram's personality in mind, the film, in short, is professing that love is above conflicts and feuds, in keeping with Shakespeare's Romeo, "Here's much to do with hate, but more with love" (1.1.166). Ram is not interested in the ongoing battles between the Rajadis and the Saneras in the first half of the film, but in flirting and being loved, very much like a sexual predator, a Casanova, or Krishna himself. His first meeting with Leela characterised by the presence of a water pistol instead of a real gun clearly sheds light on his pacifist agenda. Even when he becomes the leader of the clan, his motto is his love for Leela and peace in the community instead of the fierce

enmity between communities.[viii] The "macho," lady-killer of the outset of the film paves the way for a pensive and thoughtful Romeo, but even more guided by his love for Leela. The transformation of Ram is striking, and he is distinguished by bringing together two mythic archetypes. The conjunction of the two mythic figures in Ram that combines modernity and tradition at the same time clearly signifies a reinterpretation of the myth that transcends the local and the national and aims to target at transnational markets.

Just like Ram incarnates two deities (Rama and Krishna) so does Leela: Radha, the lover of Krishna and Sita, wife of Rama. Both are contrasting models, in tension with each other, since "if Sita is chastity incarnate, Radha is sensuality incarnate" (Pauwels 13). While the first half of the film portrays an uninhibited Leela, yearning for sex (in keeping with Radha's personality), in the second half of the film Leela is characterized by her fidelity and loyalty towards Ram (like Sita towards Rama). Sexual voracity fills in the screen until Leela is kidnapped by one of her mother's acolytes, in keeping with Sita's abduction by Ravena, the king of demons. During this period, her devotion to her husband Ram is total. Even the *mise-en-scène* confirms this connection via a picture of Sita by Raja Ravi Varma, the well-known Indian Malayali artist, which is seen in the background during the scene in which Leela is talking to Rasila. The amalgamation of two divinities with antithetical roles in Leela suggests her navigation from one model to the next, resulting in ambiguities regarding the depiction of Hindu myths. The mythic paradigm gives the source text an interesting and new dimension. The combination of deities in *Ram-Leela* suggests an interpretation of the local, clearly targeted at transnational markets. According to Rajinder Kumar Dudrah, "Bollywood films are about spectacle, but also about a fantasy of India" (48). The reconfiguration of the local via dance and myth contributes significantly to the "idea of India" to express

and foster the nationalist paradigm for transnational audiences and global consumption, underscoring a particular shape of modernity: a neoliberal one combined with tradition. Hence, it produces locality in globalized ways.

Gendering Shakespeare in *Ram-Leela*

The representations of women in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film are the manifestations of a new Indian order unsure of how to articulate itself. Although women constantly fill the screen space, they are at the same time oppressed and resistant. Given that the conflicts between region and nation seem to be played out on women's bodies, the film further sheds light on the ambiguities within the gender discourse.

Ram-Leela offers an impression of women being oppressed via the display of an item number and the difficult situation of widows in the film. According to Tejaswini Ganti (77), expansion of the narrative is one of the strategies of "Bollywoodization." And this is precisely the case in *Ram Leela* since neither the item number nor the widows are part of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet.* The item number explores the intersection between nation and sexuality. Given that "the nation was produced as a heterosexual male" constructs his ego, sexed bodies comprise the nation, for they contribute to the nation's (male's) ego (Mayer 6). The representation of sexualized bodies in the item number is unavoidably a subject of debate, since the camera looks voyeuristically there: after all, the item number features a woman unrelated to the plot who sings and it is aimed at arousing the male gaze, for she is depicted as an erotic object in front of a plethora of men.[ix] Curiously enough, the song "Ram Chahe Leela" ("Ram Desires Leela") includes all the clichés that are supposed to be part of it. Priyanka Chopra is a female sex object wearing a two-piece white outfit mimicking actions of emerging from a bath, and that is the only role she performs in the entire film. The make-up and costume, the lighting, the shot-taking and the way the body is arranged with respect to the camera are instances of the objectification of the dancer. Her powerlessness can especially be observed through the constant fragmentation of her body. The camera frequently zooms into certain parts of the body selectively considered sexual: Chopra's eyes, lips, cleavage, buttocks, hips and hypersexualised

body movements so that she is the object of male gaze twice, for Ram as the viewer in the film and for the male audience that may be watching the film. As Bindu Nair claims, item dancers are frequently shot from a low angle, placing emphasis on particular body features (54). The misogynistic objectification of the woman reflects the wider prevalence of the male psyche. For Devasundaram, the celebration of the item number by national and diasporic audiences is a clear sign of 'Indianness; its almost compulsory inclusion in most Bollywood films makes the national and diasporic audiences long for it (45). Thus, the woman is identified as one of the images of the nation, this association being troublesome, to say the least.

Widows in India are bound to the worst of the oppressions. According to Hindu scripture, their options are rather limited and restricted: remarriage to the husband's younger brother, the horrendous ritual *sati* in which they would burn to death in the funeral pyre or an ashram or "widows' home" (Lehmann 438). The current situation is not very promising either. Although sati is fortunately out of the question, most of them still live in conditions of social, economic and cultural deprivation. Not being able to inherit money or property, they are considered "unwanted baggage" and inauspicious, and tend to be ostracised. The dearth of widows in popular Indian cinema is actually a fact, increasing their marginalisation, since they are not even given a voice on screen.[x] The vulnerability of widows permeates the film in the characters of Rasila (Leela's sister-in-law and confidant, Juliet's nurse) and Kesar (Meghji's widow). The deaths of their respective husbands leave them in a state of anxiety. Just like Rasila's face on seeing her husband's corpse reveals pain and fear for the near future, Kesar's expresses agony and anger when she approaches Ram for the first time after her husband's passing. Instead of finding an ally in their pursuit of peace, Ram appears as a living dead, leaving her completely devastated.

The consciousness of oppression reaches unprecedented limits towards the end of the film adaptation, in which women are sexually harassed and are regarded as the property of men and, even as the property of the respective communities. Rasila is trapped within the dominant discourses of her world when she visits the Rajadis household trying to find Ram and give him Leela's message. Her powerlessness is evident when all the Rajadi men without exception try to rape her, as if her body belonged to them. As women represent the 'purity' of the community/region, an attack on them becomes an attack on the community. For that reason, when Rasila is harassed, Dhankor Baa immediately replicates by arranging for the harassment of Kesar as an act of revenge. As Kesar goes to the river to fetch water, she is stalked by the Sanera men. The idea of the attack of a woman on the way to the pond or river should be traced back to the "panaghata/lila"(Pauwels 1-33). This myth mainly revolves around the dangers women can encounter on their way to the well, ranging from "milder annoyance to stalking" (Pauwels 2). Bhansali's adaptation departs from a common romantic interpretation of this myth, focusing on how women can be accosted. This episode equally explores the intersections between women's bodies and the community/region. The incident in which Kesar is assailed finishes with a close-up of a peacock, which represents Rama in this context, the implication being Kesar was rescued by Rama. This is in fact confirmed by him when he claims that "we (Rajadis) know how to protect our women." Thus, with this comment, regional identity is articulated, for women and their bodies become contested spaces again, and the protection of them involves the protection of a greater institution. The attempts of rape in Bhansali's adaptation symbolize an invasion of the Other's boundaries, "the occupation of the Other's symbolic space, property and territory" (Mayer 18). An attack on women becomes a

violation of the community and regional sovereignty, leaving them completely defenceless and at the mercy of patriarchy.

However, the film is more complicated than this since it offers a more nuanced view through the characters of Baa/Juliet's mother and Leela/Juliet, where women are at one and the same time oppressed and resistant. The narrative accords empowerment to Baa and Leela through the *mise-en-scène*. While the appearance of Juliet's mother is scarce, Dankhor Baa consistently fills the screen. In fact, she seems more powerful than the patriarch of the Rajadis/ Montagues, whose appearance is restricted to a few shots. Continuous close-ups, extreme close-ups and medium shots of the female don frequently appear to centre of her in the narrative. The *mise-en-scène* equally contributes to the overriding importance of Leela/Juliet, mainly via the constant use of extreme close-ups that are not dimly lit, unlike those of her mother. They emphasize her emotional engagement and psychic foregrounding, and the brightness indicates that the narrative treats her as a goddess. But the *mise-en-scène* also confirms *Ram Leela* is part of the Shakespearean rhizome. Leela's bedroom might be compared to the *mise-en-scène* used in Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, based at the same time on Zeffirelli's film, but also reminiscent of Kaikeyi's chamber, one of the three wives of King Dasharatha in the epic, *the Ramayana* (Mazo 29). Cinematography then favours a women-centred aesthetic.

The agency of visibility of both characters can also be seen in the power they are both given in the film adaptation because they are the 'dons' in their clan at different moments. Baa appears as the domineering matriarch of the Saneras; she holds the power, and uses it at her leisure. Like Juliet's father, she arranges a marriage for Leela, runs the 'business" of the clan characterised by corruption, makes all the relevant decisions, and kills when she deems necessary. After the attempt to murder Baa, the

Saneras clan is presided over Leela, but her motto is based on a pacifist agenda; her aim is not to fight with the Rajadis and achieve the longed for peace. The chiaroscuro medium-shot of Leela entering the room occupied solely by men highlights the seizure of power. When Leela's abilities as a leader are questioned, she claims: "men have never been necessary in this household", revealing the absence of men as well as the importance of women.

Baa and Leela interestingly step outside of tradition in their configuration, challenging the usual idealization of the mother and the traditional heroine respectively. The character of Dhankor Baa has been designed to challenge complacent and deified views of the mother. There was a mythification of the mother as an attempt to achieve unity and promote the nationalist rhetoric. As Anjali Ram claims, "woven through many cinematic texts is the synecdochic relationship between the purity/sanctity of women and the purity/sanctity of the nation" (Ram 18). Similarly, Leela moves away from the almost asexual, antiseptic representation of the heroine to become fully aware of her own sexuality and sexual drive and desire; she is the active bearer of the gaze instead of a passive object of the male gaze. Leela is a sexual "subject that articulates her sexuality through image, values, behaviour and desire" (Chatterji 180). Bhansali depicts Leela as reclaiming her body and sexual identity, so the film opens up the possibilities for women. Bhansali's Juliet wages her own feminist war when she constantly kisses Ram on the lips. Kissing on the lips is *per se* a risqué act on the Indian screen, but a woman taking the lead means going beyond norms and subverting the clichés. Thus, Bhansali's adaptation plays a critical variation on the relationship between nation-building and gender; women are figured in such a way as to call attention to their resistant capacities, and this is suggested in part via subjective camerawork.

The film also complicates and interrogates Baa and Leela's empowerment through Baa's approach to power and via Leela's transformation in the second half of the film; the tensions that are part of modern-day India are then being played out on them. Firstly, Leela's power is considerably reduced by the second half of the film adaptation via her connection to Sita (Panjwani 110). Sita's absolute faith in Rama – even when abducted by the demon king Ravana – remains intact, just like Leela's faith in Ram when being kept captive in her own household. That Leela is an avatar of Sita is also manifested via their actions, since both agree without protest to Rama/Ram's suggestions (banishment and mutual homicide) for the benefit of the community. And it is precisely this obedience what becomes problematic in the development of this character. The traces of freedom and power seem to vanish when Leela marries, undergoing a journey of identity that emphasizes a backwards evolution, from being a liberated uninhibited woman to a dutiful wife. By the same token, the film's elaboration of Baa's approach to power is also tricky. The matriarch of the Saneras clan is depicted as a cruel, violent and domineering woman, with no morality or ethics. The representation of Baa draws on the authoritarian political leader Indira Gandhi, with obvious political implications. Baa's violence reaches its peak when she cuts Leela's finger due to her unwillingness to marry the NRI (non-resident Indian) and comply with her orders and wishes. This ruthless, dictatorial and tyrannical government cannot but resemble the period of Emergency, the example of abuse of power *par excellance* (Prakash 166). Emergency was declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975 and was dissolved in 1977. Imposition of the Emergency period was done on the excuse that there was no unity and, above all, aimed to eradicate corruption and address inflation (Kaviraj 1697). Needless to say, the problem of corruption did not end, but increased significantly. The similarities between Baa and Indira Gandhi become even more explicit at the end of the

film adaptation. When Ram visits the Saneras household in the role of guest, the target seems to be him, until it changes towards Baa, who is finally shot by one of her own men aiming to gain more power. This mishap hints at Indira Gandhi's assassination, for she was murdered by her own men. If mother figures worked as symbols of unity and Pan-Indian consciousness, Dhankor Baa and Indira Gandhi embody a fissured, uneven nation, split into regional manifestations. Dhankor Baa is a symptom then of mixed, uneven contexts.

Interestingly, the film is more complex still as the ending approaches, since it showcases some women taking on signs of power, becoming ciphers for a new found speaking position that answers to a need to move on from current political dialogue. "Feminists have often struggled against the assumption that women are always in competition with each other, and emphasized the importance of friendship and female bonding and alliance", argues Novy (121). *Ram-Leela* builds on female bond through the intimate exchanges between Leela and Rasila, clearly emphasizing a woman-centred aesthetic. The narrative follows typical Bollywood conventions that "emphasize interpersonal relationships and their emotional conflicts" (Krämer 258). For instance, it is Rasila who encourages Leela to elope with Ram, even though Ram killed her husband. Unlike the Shakespearean text which ends on a negative note with the disappearance of the entire younger generation, the film offers hope in the shape of widows, and they also seem to work against type. In a scene that brings together ideas of sorority, Kesar appears in the Sanera household with her son Goli, risking her life and that of her son to fight for the desired peace between both communities. Rasila joins Kesar in her plea, the film emphasizing women's alliance again. It is women who restore order and peace in the community and, by extension, in the region. Interestingly,

the numerous ambiguities in the gender discourse assert the film's ideology, rendered in terms of disjuncture.

The ending mixes the local and gender considerably; women become deities in the end being given more agency. In the last shot-reverse-shot of Dhankor Baa, after being embraced by Goli (Meghji's son), she appears full of remorse, "fierce and indomitable, infinitely nurturing and compassionate" (Amazzano XXI), and truly becomes goddess Amba-ma, encountering the paradoxical nature of the deity. Just like Durga is a warrior goddess who combats evils that threaten peace, Dhankor Baa kills the acolyte that was hampering harmony. The film's ending equally clarifies and emphasizes Leela's active agency. Both Ram and Leela make a conscious decision to shoot each other to end the enmity and feuds of the Rajadis and Saneras. The last shots of the lovers present them as Radha and Krishna, placing the emphasis on desire, passion and lust until the end. Leela embodies the features of Radha, and recovers her rebellious nature at the end. Yet, this rebellion is inevitably associated with death. The film finishes with the Dusshera, which commemorates the victory of the Lord Rama over the demon Ravena. However, *Ram-Leela* achieves the victory of good over evil at the expense of a massacre of a whole clan. The film does not highlight the killing of the demon, but the veneration towards the couple that made possible reconciliation in the community, harking back to the source text. Crowds of people dressed in white accompany the coffins covered in red cloth in a long parade, clearly suggesting this amalgamation with the divinities. "A glooming peace" (5.3.305) seems to resonate at the end of *Ram-Leela*, in tune with Shakespeare's play. Just like in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the funeral fills the screen and individual decisions are played against the demands of society. And yet, *Ram Leela* goes beyond the source text in the *dénouement*, for the underlying principle of the sacrifice is related to the "fulfilment of

dharma, one's sacred duty" (Krämer 259). By expanding the female characters in relation to the source text, *Ram Leela* confirms the generation of a new text that intricately related to Indian culture and mythology, but also to other Shakespearean intertexts. Gendering Shakespeare in *Ram-Leela* provides new insights, but controversies abound.

Conclusion

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is updated by a cultural transposition that imbues the original play with new meanings and applications. The play is adapted differently in *Ram-Leela*, for it considerably expands the source text with various alterations. The location in a North-western state (Gujarat) as well as the replacement of Catholicism with Hinduism add an extra layer to the text in which politics is inevitably invoked due to the implications of such setting as well as the controversial use of Hindu myths. In its rewriting of them, the film not only expands the source text, but also goes beyond other Indian films, since religion is intimately associated with desire and violence. The film equally adds characters that are given more agency, such as the widows, but significantly erases some male roles, such as Friar Lawrence, Friar John and Capulet, and Montague is reduced to a couple of scenes. If Juliet seeks to erase Capulet and Montague as powerful authority figures in the famous "what's in a name speech?", these meaningful identities are completely wiped out in Bhansali's adaptation, and the patriarchal-religious intertext becomes women's territory, as the clandestine wedding between Ram and Leela (organised and carried out entirely by Leela) proves. But *Ram-Leela* not only provides new understandings of *Romeo and Juliet*, but also of the contingencies and complexities of modern-day India.

In a post-colonial situation such as that obtains in India in which Shakespeare was an "educational import" and a "signifier of the appurtenances of colonialism" (Burnett 277), it is really curious how the author has been so assimilated and adapted in the country that he seems pertinent to embody the tensions of modern-day India. In this sense, *Ram-Leela* departs from other Shakespearean projects such as Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *1942: A Love Story* (1994), in which Shakespeare still stands in for the colonial period and needs to vanish in the new independent India. This adaptation that includes a *Romeo and Juliet* play-within-the-film with the aim to win over a general belonging to the British Raj has to eliminate it when a call to nationalism is invoked by most part of the characters in the film. The complete erasure of the colonial discourse then adds a new dimension to Shakespeare on the Indian screen. Navigating between constant tensions and dichotomies, such as the region/nation boundaries, Bhansali's adaptation appears as a salutary example of this polyvalent, complex society in which not only *Ram-Leela,* but Shakespeare himself cannot be more transnational in scope. The malleability of Shakespeare can be seen once again, since *Romeo and Juliet* finds a 'home' in India in different formats, *Ram-Leela* being part of the Bollywood industry.

Distinctively, *Ram Leela* follows the conventions of Bollywood adaptation in its reworking of *Romeo and Juliet*, and also challenges the marketing of adaptation in Bollywood thanks to Shakespeare. Given that Hindi popular cinema appears on the whole not really book-centric, there are significant transformations in the literary sources so that the outcome tends to be quite different from the literary source. When Sanjay Leela Bhansali released his *Devdas* (2002), modelled on Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel, the film became "quite independent" (Krämer 254) from its source text. *Ram Leela* equally reworks and transforms the Shakespearean text, creating a new one "with no clear point of origin" (Stam 66). Yet, at the same time, the general

tendencies regarding the marketing of adaptation in Bollywood are contested in *Ram Leela.* In Bollywood cinema, "movies are not usually marketed through its source" (Krämer 255); they are not marketed as literary adaptations, but as star vehicles. Prior to *Ram Leela,* this was the common practice among Bollywood Shakespeares. The endless appropriations of *Romeo and Juliet,* such as *Bobby* (dir. Raj Kapoor, 1973) or *Qayamat se Qayamat Tak* (dir. Mansoor Khan, 1988), never referred to the literary source. The producers of *Angoor* (dir. 1982, based on *The Comedy of Errors*) consciously concealed the source since Shakespeare was a liability rather than an asset. In its acknowledgement of the Shakespearean text, *Ram Leela* departs from this tradition, and aims to imitate the success achieved by the auteur Vishal Bharadwaj with his marketed Shakespearean adaptations. In this sense, the film also aspires to the international market. This emphasizes there are several – and divergent – traditions at work in *Ram Leela,* and this also confirms *Ram Leela* as part of the larger "Shakespearean rhizome" (Lanier 29). *Ram Leela* connects with Shakespeare through prior Bollywood Shakespeares, but also through Bharadwaj's adaptations and even Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet*, as the *mise-en-scène* clearly shows. At the same time, *Ram Leela* follows the Bollywood mode and its conventions. Douglas Lanier argues that (re)producers of Shakespeare engage with an "inchoate and complex web of intervening adaptations" "that have little to do with the Shakespearean text" (Lanier 23). In this connection, the particularity of *Ram Leela* comes into focus since it showcases a crossing and criss-crossing of energies and forces. It foregrounds how the Shakespearean text is in transit, and highlights the manifold interrelations of *Ram Leela* to other media, Shakespearean intertexts and filmmaking styles.

And yet, these polyvalences cannot find a better niche than in the depiction of women in *Ram Leela*. The comments by Ravubha Vaghela, president of Rajput

Vidhyasabha, Gujarat, stating his community would be "willing to sacrifice their lives" (*Ahmedabad Mirror*) to defend and protect their women (referring to their portrayal in the film) find echoes in Ram, since he actually says the same to Dhankor Baa ("we know how to protect our women") in relation to the attempts of rape. These comments are revealing, since they connect reality with fiction and immediately put women at the heart of tension. Given that they are the "pride" of the community, and become the community, conflicts between region and nation are immediately played out on women's bodies. As Trivedi claims, "the female body has become a contested space, and familial, communal and national discourses all endeavour to construct and contain it in mutually contradictory ways" (38). The multiple tensions between the local and the global that Arjun Appadurai notes cannot be more present in *Ram-Leela*, which itself negotiates between the local and the transnational, tradition and modernity, nation and region, oppression and resistance, showing thus the complexities of the country.

Notes

[i] According to Gerard Genette, the hypotext is the source text, whereas the hypertext is the new text.

[ii] The term "Bollywood" is used in this essay to denote the Hindi comercial films produced from the 1990s onwards.

[iii] Similarly, Vishal Bhardwaj's latest movie (Haider, 2016) - based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – equally makes use of the poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, but with very different connotations. Faiz was a Pakistani leftist author and poet, shedding light on the political take of his adaptation from the beginning.

[iv] A *dupatta* is a long piece of cloth worn by women in South Asia.

[v] The soundtrack of most Indian movies tends to be commercially sold separate from the films.

[vi] In *The Ramayana,* Ram's father Dasaratha banishes his own son due to an unjust promise he had made to his favourite wife Kaikeyi, since she thought Rama's accession to the throne would have terrible consequences for her and her son.

[vii] Lord Krishna is frequently portrayed with a crown of peacock feathers. See P.Thankappan Nair, 93-170.

[viii] Although Leela's place has frequently been compared to the *mise-en-scène* used in Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, based at the same time on Zeffirelli's movie, it is in fact more reminiscent of Kaikeyi's chamber, one of the three wives of King Dasharatha in the epic, *the Ramayana*. See Mazo, 29.

[ix] See for instance Mishra (185-186) and Roy (35-50).

[x] Notwithstanding, there are exceptions, such as *Water* (2005).

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