AMBIGUOUS JULIETS, OR NEVER HAVE I EVER. . . WRITTEN JUST OVER 2000 WORDS ABOUT LESS THAN A SECOND OF SHAKESPEARE ON SCREEN

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Abstract: This note identifies characters in Mindy Kaling and Lang Fisher's streaming teen television series *Never Have I Ever* (2021) as "ambiguous Juliets," based on the lead character's momentary framing with a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* before a climactic balcony or window-scene.

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Never Have I Ever (cited henceforth as *NHIE*)*,* created by Mindy Kaling and Lang Fisher for the streaming platform Netflix and based on some of Kaling's own experiences as a South Indian American teen in the United States, breaks new ground in the representation of minority American girlhood on screen. *NHIE* stars the engaging Maitreyi Ramakrishnan as Devi Vishwakumar, a passionate, willful, unpopular, self-described high-school "nerd" who is trying to process the sudden death of her beloved father Mohan (Sendhil Ramamurthy, appearing in flashbacks and dream sequences)–who always called her his "perfect girl"—and to tolerate her long-suffering, demanding, grief-stricken mother Nalini (Poorna Jagannathan). Former tennis star John McEnroe—Mohan's favorite sports personality—narrates events in voice-over as himself with bemusement, compassion, and impatience. The series wittily extends and conforms to the popular conventions of high school streaming television, including an obligatory episode that subtly appropriates *Romeo and Juliet*.

Critics praise *NHIE*'s nuanced representation of girlhood and particularly the way it explodes stereotypes surrounding Asian American and minority teens (Kalitra 2020; Joshi 2020; McFarland 2020). This refusal to stereotype extends, I will argue, to the show's glancing use of Shakespeare. Teen dramas use Shakespeare and the study of Shakespeare in high school—however restrictedly or parodically quoted—as a kind of shorthand (Balizet 2020). As Ariane Balizet has pointed out in her recent *Shakespeare and Girls' Studies*, on the one hand Shakespeare appears in teen dramas of the 1990s and 2000s in order to legitimize adolescent love, rebellion, or identity formation, even as the academic study of Shakespeare in television shows aimed at teenage girls presents such study as an obstacle to girls' intellectual achievement and self-actualization

(2020). On the other hand, Balizet concludes, more recent teen-oriented Shakespeare-themed web series allow new gender and sexual identities to emerge and become validated, expanding what it means to be a "girl" (2020). We can read *NHIE* as part of this trend in that it expands the category of American teenage girlhood to include racial, ethnic, and sexual minority Americans such as Devi and her friends. *NHIE* expands the story of American adolescence, I will argue, in part by self-consciously minimizing Shakespeare's intertextual role in the teen drama even as it registers the lead characters as ambiguous Juliets who conform to neither the standard high school cliques nor to the conventions of teenage love and heteroerotic romance that popular television (mistakenly) attributes to Shakespeare's play.

Conventions of US teen television drama, many of which also appear in Shakespeare teen dramas (Klett 2008; Lanier 2017) include the protagonist's character growth (the "coming-of-age narrative"), often through the unwelcome consequences from rash or misguided actions. *Romeo and Juliet* becomes an intertextual archetype for romantic missteps (Keam 2006). Conversations with wise elders often facilitate these characters' emotional development, in *NHIE*'s case through sessions with Dr. Jamie Ryan (Niecy Nash), Devi's straight-talking but compassionate therapist — another teen television trope. Other teen television traditions involve a culture of gossip and rumor, often causing heartbreak ("friend drama"); first love and first sexual experience ("love drama"); parental conflict ("parent drama"); good-looking characters, usually male, appearing shirtless on camera ("fan service"). The shows often include at least one climactic scene in the following venues: a high-school dance; a student presentation, usually in English class or a school play (this is often where Shakespeare appears); a rowdy house party; a car; and regularly set scenes in: the protagonist's bedroom (Desmet 2019); the dining room, over an argumentative family dinner; or the girls' restroom at school.

A recent study suggests that minority teens in multiethnic US high schools are perceived by their white peers as belonging to a lower-status ethnic clique (Crabbe et al. 2019). As identified by high school graduates, current US high school groupings, listed according to the status attributed to them by the study's subjects, comprise: "Populars" (wealthy, party-loving, insouciant adolescents with indulgent parents); "Jocks" (athletes); "Good-Ats" (all-rounders); "Fine Arts kids" (theatre, drama or chorus enthusiasts); "Brains" (anxious, studious teens with parents perceived to be demanding); "Floaters" (free spirits who move among groups at will); "Normals" (those excluded from groups to which they might wish to belong, or avoiding any groups by choice); and the grudgingly accepted "Druggie/Stoners," because they procure illicit substances for parties. Ranked equally, at the bottom of the hierarchy, "Racial-Ethnic Groups" encompass racially homogenous units within multiethnic high schools; "Emo/Goth" teens are thought by their peers to be at higher risk of self-harm or of harming others; and "Anime/Manga" kids are called "outlandish" and ostracized by the Populars and Jocks (Crabbe et al. 2019).

At the same time, *NHIE* shows students moving among these groups and expressing multiple identities, making it harder to stereotype these adolescents according to the peer-groups of earlier teen dramas such

as *Mean Girls*, *Heathers*, *Gossip Girls*, *Teen Wolf*, *Pretty Little Liars*, and so on. Not coincidentally, those earlier teen dramas tended to include nonwhite characters only as sidekicks rather than stars, to such an extent that the popular website *TVTropes* offers an alternative definition of the genre as "Pretty White Kids With Problems" (2021).

In *NHIE,* in contrast, the young cast includes not only Devi and her older cousin Kamala (Richa Moorjani) but also Devi's best friends, Chinese American drama kid and fashion maven Eleanor Wong (Ramona Young); Afro-Latina, queer, robotics nerd Fabiola (Lee Rodriguez); and (in season 2) Indian Muslim American, unintellectual Aneesa Qureshi (Megan Suri). Devi's developing love-interests include Paxton Hall-Yoshida (Darren Barnett), a Japanese American swim jock who stuns his history teacher with a top-notch report on the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II, and Jewish American Brain Ben Gross (Jaren Lewison), whose parents shower him with wealth instead of the attention he craves. Devi's teachers include not only the ultra-woke Mr. Shapiro (Adam Shapiro), who literally weeps as he confesses his own White privilege in his "Facing History" class, but also the wise-cracking South-Indian-origin English teacher Mr. Kulkarni (Utkarsh Ambudkar), who invites Devi's cousin Kamala, about to enter an arranged marriage with the handsome and charismatic Prashant (Rushi Kota), to the drunken karaoke enjoyed by the teachers while they are supposed to be chaperoning the Winter Dance.

And *NHIE* plays with convention in its Shakespeare arc (episodes 9 and 10). The first references are unacknowledged and manifest as a transmedia element—the balcony scene—that, as Balz Engler has argued in *Borrowers and Lenders* and I have argued elsewhere, owes almost as much to world folklore as to Shakespeare (Engler 2018; Iyengar 2017). Paxton climbs up to Devi's window to "hook up" or kiss and embrace her secretly, doing so for several hours over successive nights but refusing to acknowledge her publicly in high school or to invite her to the upcoming Winter Dance. Devi's widowed grandmother Nalini (Ranjita Chakravarty) becomes a de facto Nurse-chaperone during these encounters, with Devi enquiring anxiously in one instance just how long her grandmother has been standing at the door.

Juliet's anguished "O sweet my mother, cast me not away" (3.5.208) becomes analogous to Devi's heartbroken cry when her mother Nalini inadvertently reiterates the insulting epithet cast at Devi by her classmates: "Crazy Devi." Just as, "cast . . . away," Juliet feels as though she has no choice but to agree to Friar Lawrence's dangerous plan, so Devi feels as though her behavior has rendered her worthless, and that she deserves no better than Paxton's contemptuous, clandestine kisses. Juliet-like, Devi decides to own her love and ask Paxton herself, only to be rejected by him publicly and, shamefacedly, to agree again to a hidden relationship.

NHIE snubs and flirts with Shakespearean appropriation in its refusal to include an acknowledged great Shakespearean set-piece—speech, acknowledged adaptation, or school play—or to develop *Romeo and Juliet* beyond the window visits as part of its romance plot. In contrast, much of an entire episode is devot-

ed to *The Great Gatsby*, as the students prepare in teams for a mock trial in which Devi, compelled to act the part of Daisy Buchanan, is found guilty of Jay Gatsby's death. Are Devi's and Paxton's balcony scenes appropriations of Shakespeare at all, or rather what we have learnt to call "Almost Shakespeare" (Keller 2004)?

But a brief shot—only two seconds long, if that—acknowledges the conversation between the show's romance plot and *Romeo and Juliet*. The book that Devi is reading when she agrees to hook up secretly with Paxton after his public rejection of her is *Romeo and Juliet* (season 2, episode 10, minute 12). Paxton enters at the window to say that although he likes Devi, he is too humiliated by her previous behavior to acknowledge their relationship in public: "We either do this in secret or not at all." The following scene shows Devi concealing from her friends the "pathetic" fact that she has agreed to Paxton's demands before the girls are interrupted by Nalini and Nirmala enthusiastically preparing an elaborate dinner for the parents of Prashant, Kamala's boyfriend, in anticipation of his proposing marriage. No-one but Kamala herself is aware of Kamala's own mixed feelings about matrimony.

Suddenly we are encountering what Linda Hutcheon defined as the pleasure of adaptation—"repetition with difference" (2013, 142)—as we realize that both Devi and Kamala are ambiguous Juliets. Devi is ready to "lay [her] fortunes at [the] feet" (2.2.149) of her window-scaling wooer, but knows that this young man will not offer her the commitment that Juliet demanded. Kamala dreads her arranged marriage —even though she enjoys dating the attractive, kind, and funny Prashant, another "man of wax" (1.3.81) —but dare not contravene her aunt, her parents, and her grandmother. (It is unclear whether Kamala is Devi's cousin on her mother's or her late father's side and whether Nirmala is her grandmother or just another elder to whom Kamala feels bound to pay respect.) The only other—even more glancing—shot of Shakespeare's play-text shows that Devi has reached the beginning of act 3, arguably the turning point in the tragedy, the brawl in which Romeo attempts to intercede between Tybalt and Mercutio and which ends with the deaths of both young fighters and the banishment of Romeo.

Our twenty-first-century Indian American Juliets, Devi and Kamala, however, avoid the fate of Shakespeare's heroine. Visited in a dream by her father, Devi breaks up with Paxton—and I will not spoil the season finale by telling you what happens next in their story. Kamala flees the planned engagement dinner before the dessert course, taking refuge with Mr. Kulkarni and the drunken, singing teachers. Season 3 will show us whether she will return to Prashant/Paris or whether Mr. Kulkarni will turn out to be her Romeo, acknowledged or not.

Fig 1. Devi reads *Romeo and Juliet* before agreeing (again) to hook up secretly with Paxton. Screen Capture, Netflix, NHIE, season 2, episode 10, minute 12.

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