

## ***Beyond the Nation: Rasheed Araeen and the Art of Migration***

When London-based Pakistani artist Rasheed Araeen erected a series of billboards across London, the United States, and Germany in 1990, the work was met with violent results. In Cleveland, it was burned down; in London, the National Front vandalized it, writing: “What’s It All About, Bongo?”; and in Germany, it was attacked by neo-Nazis and defaced with a swastika. In still other places, it was attacked with metal instruments and graffitied in Urdu saying ‘white people are bastards.’ Each identical billboard consisted of an Oriental rug with Urdu script across the center. When translated it read: “White people are very good people. They have very white and soft skin. Their hair is golden and their eyes are blue. Their civilization is the best civilization. In their countries they live life with love and affection. And there is no racial discrimination whatsoever. White people are very good people.”

I argue that these billboards, titled *The Golden Verses*, functioned as a provocation, working to destabilize previously fixed notions of identity. Navigating the realities of immigration, Araeen’s work brings viewers face-to-face with the inequalities and fissures inherent to processes of globalization, giving visual expression to its ambivalent realities. Araeen deployed tropes of identity—such as the Oriental rug, calligraphic script, and idea of the civilized white man—that have pervaded colonial thought for centuries. In so doing, he confronted their illusory nature, questioning the implications of these assumed social hierarchies and revealing that western imperialism reinforces constructions of identity that continue to define the global world. This paper will argue that Araeen’s interventions not only challenge the way institutions approach art history, but also reveal the myriad ways Araeen sought to combat neo-colonialist ideology and confront the racist attitudes he experienced as an outsider living in London.



Rasheed Araeen, *The Golden Verses*, 1990, Artangel billboard project, Cleveland