

Naked Bodies as Site of Social Change

By Srimoyee Mitra, M.A. student, York University

The question of agency is an integral component of contemporary Indian artist Nalini Malani's art practice. One of the most well-known and respected contemporary artists from India, Malani has exhibited her paintings, drawings, video-installations, and theatrical productions in some of the most important national and international venues. She is part of the international circuit of artists from the so-called "Third World" whose works have consistently been included by international curators, biennales, and museums across the globe. In 2007 alone, Malani opened two major solo exhibitions in Dublin and Chicago respectively. Curator Robert Storr selected the artist's work for the prestigious exhibition *Think with the Senses Feel with the Mind* at the 52nd Venice Biennale.

For her art practice, Malani draws from grand mythological narratives in India that are constantly renewed and retold in fresh forms to suit the relevant moments of history.¹ She pieces together stories of loss, survival, and continuity from a "minoritarian" perspective, in Homi Bhabha's terminology, in order to include the points of view of national minorities and global migrants.² She critically weaves these narratives from multiple histories, mythologies, rituals, personal fantasies, fiction, and memory. Moving back and forth between eras, cultural traditions between the East and West, tracing similarities, drawing comparisons, and building cross-cultural dialogues, Malani interrogates the structures of history and the assumptions and prejudices that they perpetuate.³ Refusing to portray the roles that have limited and restricted women from reaching their potential, Malani has recast the representation of women in Indian society over the last four decades.⁴ This paper will attempt to analyze and understand the *Nalini Malani Recent Work 2007* series, exhibited in her debut exhibition in Europe, at the Irish Museum of Modern Art from July to October 2007, within the framework of post-colonial contemporary India.

In the early-1990s India undertook economic reforms of liberalization, opening its economy to the world markets and international competition. The immediate consequences of the reforms resulted in exacerbating the social disparities between classes, castes, religious, cultural, and linguistic communities. The chaos and uncertainty during this period of transition ended in widespread violence across the country. The rise of the militant Hindu nationalism further amplified the violence.⁵ Their agenda of establishing a homogenous Hindu culture incited communal violence as the Hindu right wing party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), demolished a sixteenth-century mosque, claiming that the Hindu god Ram was born on the same piece of land on which the mosque stood.⁶ Mumbai was dramatically affected by the demolition of the mosque, as communal riots transformed the city into a war zone for weeks.

As violence raged in Malani's hometown, it altered her art practice irrevocably. The fundamentalist threat posed by the Hindu right wing transformed many art practices in India. Malani along with her colleagues Arpita Singh, Navjot Altaf,



Fig. 1. Nalini Malani, *Medea I*, 2006. Acrylic and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 183 x 122cm.

and Vivan Sundaram developed large-scale paintings, artist books, site-specific installations, and video works that expressed their anxiety about the rise of the Hindu right wing. It was also during this time that Malani's imaging of the female body changed. Comprehending the threat of cultural purity to women's liberties in contemporary India, Malani remounted the body of the *bharatiya nari* (Hindu woman) as a forceful critique of Hindu fundamentalism. She re-visited the grand narratives in

Indian myths such as the *Bhagvata Purana*, *Ramayana* that have constantly been renewed and retold in innovative forms to fit the relevant moments in history.⁷ The rape and pillage of women's bodies had been used to perpetuate and instigate communal violence in India in 1992 and again in 2002.⁸ She interweaves women's experiences of violence to retell the myths which constitute the fabric of India's cultural heritage.

Nalini Malani: Recent Work 2007 series presented mythic figures as diverse as Medea, Sita, Radha, Alice in Wonderland, and Akka Mahadevi from Indian and Western mythologies and fiction. Her use of myths strategically removes the idealized iconic figures from the propaganda of religion spread by the Hindu nationalists to include broader representations, which emphasize the intrinsically pluralistic nature of myths. In

her *Recent Works* series, Malani launches her critique of machismo violence and the appropriation of women's bodies in the communal riots within the Hindu nationalists' blatantly intolerant agenda, and repudiates their militant strategies that suppress women, religious minorities, lower-caste, poor, *adivasi* or indigenous populations.

In this paper, I will trace the strategies used by Malani to stage female subjectivity in her paintings. By depicting the mythical figures

after being raped and tortured, the female bodies in this series become symbolic of the violence inflicted on women during the communal riots in 1992 and particularly in 2002. Malani's public portrayal of the violated, female naked body not only acknowledges such atrocities, it also dignifies the female body. She does not portray the figures as victims, or shrivelled up with humiliation and shame. Rather these mythical women stand tall, and despite their injuries and deformations their naked bodies claim the space within the painting and thus retain the power to address the viewer directly. By inscribing the violence onto the bodies of well-known mythical figures, Malani alters the timeless myths irrevocably as she re-situates them within the contemporary moment. The myths are thus staged by the artist to voice the unacknowledged experiences of violence played out on women's bodies. Today I will analyze paintings on the mythical figures Medea and Sita to demonstrate the ways in which Malani presents the naked female body to advocate for justice and social change.

Medea I (2006)

For Malani, the myth of Medea is symbolic of the de-gendered and destroyed women survivors after the partition of India in 1947, and the communal riots of 1992 and 2002. In each outburst of violence, women were raped, abducted, and sometimes rejected by their own families as a consequence of the violation inflicted on them.⁹ In Greek mythology, *Medea* was the princess of Colchis

and a gifted alchemist who fell in love with Jason, the leader of the Argonauts. She abandoned her family and killed her brother in order to help Jason win the Golden Fleece of a ram, which brought wealth and power to its owner, and together they lived in exile in Corinth. Ultimately Jason betrayed Medea, leaving her for a younger, richer, more beautiful princess from Corinth. Medea, outraged and devastated, took a vow to avenge her betrayal. She did so by poisoning Jason's new bride and subsequently killing her own two sons to give Jason a taste of the pain he had caused her. Medea's myth has been understood as a symbol of irrational, female vengeance.¹⁰

Just as in the Greek myth, Malani's Medea, after being rejected and humiliated by her husband, rises as an unstoppable force to avenge her violation. In the painting, Malani's portrayal of Medea towers above the beholders and confronts them with her naked mutilated body. The strong, solid layers of paint with which Malani renders Medea's body in the acrylic and enamel reverse painting of *Medea I* (fig. 1) constitutes a powerfully defiant image. Medea's body is portrayed as bloody and mutilated. She is stark naked. She stands with her legs apart and her arms raised. Facing the audience, Medea's eyes are rolled back as if she is in the trance-like state of a zombie, which enables the viewer to survey her naked body repeatedly. A dark, reddish-black stain emerges from her naval and spills out through her vagina in the form of a phallus-like object, perhaps a rod, which has been used as a mechanism of torture. From the tip of the phallic-rod, the viewer's

gaze is drawn back up towards her eyes. The phallus-like object conveys the tools or manner of violation, rape, torture or abduction. The phallus and the scars on her body are plainly evident. Two delicate red tubes emerge from her body and connect two babies, one on each side are perched on her lap. She holds onto the cords in her hands, as the babies sit suspended from them. A human spine and smoke hover around her, floating in and out of a dotted backdrop that resembles a perforated screen or perhaps even, fishing net.

Malani's deft use of colour activates the beholders senses—the yellow-grey smoke emerges from her hands, trickling down to the spine in the bottom right corner. The muddy yellow along with Medea's bloody body introduces a sense of rot and decay. In India, red is an auspicious colour. It signifies fertility, abundance, marriage, lust, and desire, and, as such, is the colour worn by brides. Medea's right to celebrate her sensuality and desire as Jason's bride has been revoked. She has become the grotesque, rejected bride. Her body is portrayed as a gaping wound, whose raw flesh is smothered with red blood. Bold black outlines and shading of her amputated legs and arms are symbolic of the enormity of the pain that Jason has caused her. But she doesn't seem weakened by it. Rather, Malani's staging of Medea's figure is strong and grounded. While the pixelated backdrop, smoke, spine, and babies hover around her, her open body seems sturdy and self-assured. The powerful strokes and thick layers of red and black paint render an opacity and solidity to Medea's naked body that cannot be

eclipsed by her surroundings.

Malani's portrayal of Medea empowers the mythical figure's wounded naked body. She presents Medea as a survivor of violence, connecting the pain inflicted by Jason's betrayal with the perpetrators of Hindu nationalism and systemic communal violence in India. This violated yet mythical woman, symbolizes a moment of trauma. As Veena Das has noted, the act of remembering bodily pain transforms the experience from the surface to the depth of the body and metamorphoses the passivity of suffering into agency.¹¹ Likewise, the depiction of wounds, broken skin, and raw flesh on the surface of Medea's naked body symbolizes her transformation into an active agent.

Sita I (2006)

The Indian mythical figure of Sita has become highly politicized with the resurgence of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India. Sita, the consort of the Hindu right wing's favourite god, Ram (in whose name the fundamentalists demolished the sixteenth-century mosque in 1992 and massacred two thousand Muslims in 2002), epitomizes at once the witness, survivor, and critic of communal violence in India.

In Indian mythology, Sita is the daughter of the earth. She was found and raised by Janaka, the king of Mithila, on the annual ploughing ceremony. Sita married Rama, who won her hand with his prowess in the bow and arrow. The king of Ayodhya, Dasharath, Ram's father, was bound to an oath and exiled his



Fig. 2. Nalini Malani, *Sita I*, 2006. Acrylic and enamel reverse painting on mylar sheet, 183 x 122 cm.

son Ram to the forest for fourteen years. Sita abandoned her life of comfort to join Ram. In the forest, the shape-changing demon, Ravana,

abducted Sita when Rama and his brother Laxman were away hunting. Sita was taken prisoner in Ravana's land in Sri Lanka until Ram rescued her, aided by an army of monkeys and bears. Everlastingly, Ram triumphed over Ravana, annexed his kingdom of Sri Lanka and freed Sita. Yet, upon returning to Ayodhya, he publicly rejected Sita, implying that her prolonged captivity had sullied her chastity. To prove her purity, Sita undertook a trial by fire and emerged unscathed. Even though Agni, the fire god, vouched for her, she was asked to undertake the trial once again. At this point, Sita, insulted and betrayed, called upon her mother, the Earth, to take her away.¹²

Malani's *Sita I* (fig. 2) is a homage to Sita's rebellion. Levitating cross-legged in the middle of the painting, she is portrayed looking sideways at the human beings, animals, insects and organs below. Not defined concretely, the lower half of Sita's body stretches out and melds into the lively beings beneath her. Malani defines her torso and muscular arms with bold, jagged outlines. The figure's palms are open, evoking compassion and signalling to the figures in the margin beside her. Sita's beige and black body stands out from the dark, blue, dotted backdrop, as if illuminated. The emphatic, layered brush sits in contrast with the murky blue background and marks her space within the painting.

Malani's portrayal of Sita looking sideways, arms reaching out to her sides, draws the viewer's attention to the margins of the painting. Here another female figure with outstretched hand seems to push

herself away from a larger figure of a bald gentleman dressed in a suit. The man's attire indicates his comfortable position as a middle-class, perhaps of an office-going professional or government employee, or even as the bald, stubby leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). A red, bloody speech bubble escapes from his lips and his fingers bleed; this all indicates his involvement in propagating violence.

On the other side of the painting is a ghostly figure with open cavities for eyes, reaching towards Sita's split-open body. With stretched arms, the female figure courageously resists and seems to push herself away from the stream of blood pouring out of his hands. By pushing the figure to the margin, Malani seems to suggest that she would rather remain an outcast than to partake in the viscous spread of violence. The ghost-like figure on the other side seems to bravely confront the bald masculine figure with one amputated arm stretched

out. While the smaller figures signal the countless acts of resistance that women have waged across India for justice, Malani does not imbue the male figure with a sense of agency or power. Instead Sita's larger body towers above him and looks sideways at the woman on the periphery. By portraying her reaching out to the woman in the margin, Malani draws the viewer's attention to the protester and indicates the importance of dissent.

Malani's staging of *Sita I* portrays the role of witnessing violence acted upon Sita's body. Not only does she portray Sita naked, but splits open her stomach and pelvis to reveal a wide range of wild and lively organs, blood, insects, teeth and mucous floating below her. The dreary blue, textured backdrop accentuates the light, watery shades of red, black, pink and yellow innards, genitalia, and spine as they drip, slip out of her body and float around her. *Sita I* is portrayed bereft of any clothing,



Fig. 3. Bullu Raj, Manipur Protest, 2004, Manipur, India, *Imphal Free Press*.

finery or any object that might indicate that she is Ram's wife, belonging to a royal family. Instead her abject nakedness is symbolic of this mythic figure's total rejection of the roles of wife, mother, or queen that limited her autonomy. Malani's imaging of Sita's benevolent posture and the multitude of objects, creatures, and organisms connecting directly or indirectly to her naked skin induce a sense of lightness and cleansing. These objects, like extensions of her body, envelop Sita as Malani portrays her in her own place. The mythic figure is thus at ease and empowered.

As discussed in this section, Malani's compelling paintings of mythical figures evoke courage, defiance, anger, and pain. Her paintings elicit ways of coping with loss and displacement during riots and war. Battered bodies of Medea and Sita express and acknowledge violence against woman. Malani's staging of these bodies with decisive brush strokes, layers of paint, and as life-size, frontal figures confronts conservative forces with their nakedness. While the surfaces of the female figures might be split up and broken, their spirit and strength is symbolized by the organs, fetuses, and nerves which are alive, vibrant and energetic. Thus, Malani's portrayal of female body transforms the vulnerability of naked female body into a site of empowerment.

Of Desire and Dissent

The spirit of activism that has accompanied Malani throughout her life is played out in these paintings.

These works of art resonate with real life protests carried out by women, feminist organizations, and activists in contemporary, post-colonial India, where women have used their bodies to advocate for justice despite adversarial circumstances. There are many such examples, for instance a protest in the north-eastern region in India in the state of Manipur in 2004.¹³

Manipur is a marginalized region in the country, where the government has imposed the Armed Forces Special Powers Act that restricts the civil liberties of the public. In 2004 in Imphal, Manipur, a group of women activists organized a protest against the Indian army that would alter the position of women and shame the army for their monstrous crime of rape, torture, and murder of a 32-year-old woman. The army had suspected that this woman, named Thangjam Manorama, was linked with insurgent groups (fig. 3). On July 15, a group of women, all mothers, stepped out a van in front of the army headquarters carrying banners that read: "Indian army rape us," "Indian army take our flesh." As they reached the towering gates of the headquarters and stripped their clothes, they challenged the Indian army to rape them in broad daylight, rather than being cowards and raping Manipuri women in the middle of the night. This tragedy was at the helm of a series of brutal encounters between the army and civilians, where the former consistently resorted to blunt force to curb civilian discontent. Manorama's death caused an outcry among the masses, and, two days later, the shocking protest staged by these twelve naked mothers and fifty



Fig. 4. Coverage of the Manipur Protest, Tehelka, August 7, 2004.

clothed women so effectively shamed the Indian army that they moved their headquarters outside the city.

Protesting naked was a performative strategy used by Manipuri women to demand acknowledgement and recognition for the ongoing violation of human rights in Manipur. They acted out of a deep sense of violation to stop the ongoing reiterations of violence by the Indian army. The routine, planned but never rehearsed, involved the act of walking in front of the army headquarters and stripping as an act of defiance and total rejection of the Indian army's governance. The protest enabled the naked mothers to break out of their repetitive mundane lives and transcend the vulnerability and taboos of the sullied female body to one that is empowered and direct. This performative act liberated them from abiding by the restrictive gender roles in order to advocate social change and justice.

There is a striking resonance between the Manipuri women's real-life acts of dissent and Malani's paintings of mythological female figures. While the Manipuri women

wrestled the suppressive regime of the army, voicing their outrage on the streets of Imphal, Malani gives expression to female bodies in her paintings, which break the cultural amnesia of violence against women and pay homage to the ways that women have broken out of their moulds. The strength of a female-as-mother is an important component in the protest as well as Malani's art practice. The Manipuri women were all mothers, who challenged the army to rape them and not their daughters, beckoning them with their nakedness to secure justice for future generations of women beyond themselves. The inexorable force and fearlessness with which the Manipuri mothers protested was a manifestation of the deep grief wreaked on their society. Likewise, the presence of fetuses or half-formed babies in Malani's paintings can be understood as the artist's simultaneous rage and desire for a peaceful environment in which to raise future generations. The forceful gestures with which Malani renders her figures simultaneously dignifies and empowers brutally injured

women, survivors, and witnesses of violence to advocate justice and social change. Interestingly, the photographs of the protest that were published widely in newspapers across India (fig. 4) censored parts of the women's naked bodies with a black band or digital blurring. In this way, censorship contained the strength and shock of these images, reducing their courageous demonstration of defiance into an "immoral" or "profane" act. Within the contemporary art world, Malani's stylized representation of the female body escapes such forces of censorship. In her *Recent Works* series, Malani has successfully managed to bring her concerns of violence, injustice, and the inherent dignity of women's bodies to ever-wider audiences.

I have attempted to understand and analyze Nalini Malani's *Recent Works* within the framework of contemporary, post-colonial India. Malani has revised painting traditions and mythological imagery in order to cope with the anti-secular agenda and violence against women. Her presentation of the naked female body is distinctly political, as she rejects the forces of cultural purity and transforms these myths by re-situating the mythical women in contemporary India. By configuring the strength of diverse mythical figures in her *Recent Works 2007* series, she not only draws out the similarities and differences in the construction of women's myths, but also emphasizes the need for cross-cultural dialogue and exchange. Malani's staging of the mythological female continues to question the assumptions and erasures within

patriarchal histories in order to confront deep-rooted issues of injustice and loss.

Notes:

1. Johan Pijnappel, "Our Points of Reference, Ideas and Values are Not Confined by Man-made Borders," in *Nalini Malani*, ed. Johan Pijnappel (Milan & New York: Charta Books and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 40.
2. This perspective represents a desire to revise the customary components of citizenship and facilitate a discussion on the problems of inclusion, exclusion, dignity and repudiation. See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), xvi-xvii.
3. Chaitanya Sambrani, "Apocalypse Recalled: The Historical Discourse of Nalini Malani," in *Nalini Malani: Stories Retold*, ed. Johan Pijnappel (New York: Bose Pacia, 2004), 34.
4. Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000), 26.
5. The rise of Hindu nationalism has its roots in the early twentieth century, when Hindu freedom fighters like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a high caste Brahmin politician, defined India as a Hindu nation. He understood the Indian political community as united by geographical origin, racial connection, and a shared culture based on Sanskrit languages and "common laws and rights." Those who shared the traits formed the core majority community. Those who did not—Muslims, Christian, "tribals," etc.—were relegated to a secondary position. Savarkar along with another Brahmin, K. B. Hedgewar, founded the Rashtriya Swayamasevak Sangh (RSS – Association for National Volunteers). Members of this party were major supporters of and rioters during Partition. In the newly independent India, the Gandhian Congress Party and the secular nationalist leaders like Jawaharlal

Nehru had to consistently act to minimize and marginalize the influence of the Hindu nationalist leaders in the Indian democracy. The demolition of the mosque in 1992, marked the resurgence of Hindu nationalism in the mainstream politics in India. They reinvented themselves as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to appeal to pious, economically mobile Hindu men and women. See Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Hamish Hamilton), 160-161.

6. The revival of the notion of India as a Hindu nation was implemented by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a mechanism to unite the plenitude of castes and classes claiming that they were the “chosen party” to govern India in the 1990s. The demolition of the mosque as a symbolic act to further their “Indianization” manifesto to build “one people, one nation, one culture” is completely at odds with the heterogeneous, secular fabric of the nation, with multitudes of castes, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis, Buddhists, Jains, tribes, speakers of dozens of languages and thousands of dialects. The demolition triggered major riots across the subcontinent as it brought back memories of the heinous violence, especially between the Hindus and Muslims in 1947. When the independence of India resulted in partition of the landmass into three countries (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), there was widespread violence and the hostility between the communities, which has never been resolved. See Khilnani, 10-12, 28-29, 150-152.

7. Pijnappel, 40.

8. On February 27, 2002 several compartments of a train carrying Hindu passengers returning from Ayodhya, the site where the mosque was demolished in 1992, was burnt by some members of the Muslim community in the region of Godhra in Gujarat. The violence occurred after a confrontation between the Hindu nationalist party members and non-Hindus. Communal violence erupted from this occurrence and spread across the state of Gujarat. Muslim women and young girls were targeted during these riots and after two weeks of communal riots 2000 Muslims were allegedly killed. See Ashish Khetan, “Gujarat 2002: Rioters

and Conspirators,” *Tehelka –Independent News magazine*, 5 November 2007, 5.

9. Das, 74-75.

10. Carolyn Korsmeyer writes that Aristotle’s philosophy on femininity is evidence of the gross reduction of women’s ability: “Women are by nature less competent than men because their rational faculties are less able to govern their appetites and emotions.” See Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 32.

11. Das, 85.

12. Sambrani, *Nalini Malani*, 32.

13. Manipur is a north-eastern state in India. The north-eastern region has been politically volatile since the 1950s, when the independent princely states amalgamated into India. Since the 1980s the Indian government has enforced the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which gives unprecedented powers to the Indian army patrolling the region to curb any civil unrest. This Act has been at the centre of the discontent, as Manipuri people have been arrested and tortured without cause. The torture, rape and death of Thangjam Manorama is just one recent example of the corrupt, misuse of power by the Assam Rifles, the paramilitary force of the Indian Army. See Nitin Gokhale, “Why India is Losing Manipuri,” *Tehelka*, August 17, 2004, 10 – 11.

Response

Thank you Srimoyee, for a very interesting paper. I am particularly grateful to you for your description of the 2004 protests in Manipur; I believe it is always important to make connections between contemporary art practice and political and social realities on the ground, particularly in South Asia. It goes some way towards helping us appreciate the

emphasis on narrative and on the figure in much modern and contemporary Indian art, as well as the continued political engagement that marks something of the particular trajectory of Indian art, so I thank you for that contribution particularly.

I also appreciated how your topic lent itself to multiple applications of the theme for this symposium: *obsolete concepts*. There is, as you mentioned, the equation of “obsolete concepts” with the marginalized and silenced voices that Malani’s work seeks to give voice to. There is also the question of media: Malani’s use of an “obsolete medium” of reverse painting in order to interrogate the “obsolete concept” of its association with religious imagery, connecting instead to its once profane and erotic usage. And there is also the idea that the conventional iconography of these mythical women being obsolete in the face of Malani’s re-invention of them.

These different interpretations of “obsolete concepts” leads me to my first question. As you mentioned, Malani has been working very successfully and creatively with imagery of female body trauma since the early 1970s. Since that time, her work has sought ways to make women’s lives visible and to move from a victimized experience of pain to the transformation of pain into a space for agency. Could you therefore speak to the ways that you see Malani’s new work as addressing these issues differently, or in new ways, as compared to earlier works such as *Woman Destroyed* or *Signs of Depression*, both from the mid-1980s? And, if you see these new works as in fact doing the same or similar things as those older works,

do you think that this use of the traumatized female body as a vehicle for empowered feminism is itself at risk of being an obsolete concept in Malani’s work?

Secondly, I’m very pleased to see that one of the concerns I’d had, based on an earlier draft of this paper that I had the opportunity to read, has now been addressed; that is, you have made reference to Geeta Kapur’s seminal essay on Nalini Malani, “Body as Gesture: Women Artists at Work.” Originally I had wondered if the fact that you hadn’t referred to that essay in your earlier text was in fact a deliberate choice – if perhaps you were suggesting that Kapur’s omni-presence in contemporary South Asian art history and criticism is itself an obsolete concept that we should be moving away from. Although you have referred to Kapur in your final paper, I leave the question out there in case you would nevertheless like to address it.

And finally, I think your paper raises some interesting possibilities for the ways that contemporary critical interest in issues of embodiment could be enriched through an understanding of concepts of *darśan* or circumambulation. Could you perhaps speak a bit more on how you see these works as encouraging an embodied viewer?

- Adrienne Fast, Ph.D. student,
University of British Columbia