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NALINI MALANI'S *MEDEA PROJECT*:
GENDER AND NATIONHOOD IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIA

by

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Honors Thesis
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Abstract

In 1996, renowned contemporary Indian artist Nalini Malani embarked on what would become a decades-long project exploring the Greek myth of Medea as an embodiment of postcolonialism. Considering Medea's historical interpretations as a mistreated wife and a villainous mother, this thesis examines how Malani transforms Medea into a metaphor of resistance to British colonialism and anticolonial nationalism in post-Partition India. Against the backdrop of the 1947 Partition and subsequent political events relating nationhood with the female body, Malani negotiates Medea as an emancipatory figure who shifts essentialized notions of womanhood into more complex narratives of violence, subjectivity, and liberation.

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Introduction: Nalini Malani's *Medea Project* and the Postcolonial Condition

Since its conception in ancient Greek mythology, the story of Medea has been written and rewritten throughout the centuries to fit a plethora of cultural interpretations. The myth recounts the life of Medea, a princess from Colchis (present day Georgia) who encounters and falls in love with Jason, a mythological hero and leader of the Argonauts. Jason came to Colchis in search of the legendary Golden Fleece, and Medea agrees to help him recover it. They fall in love, return to Jason's home in Greece, marry, and have two children. However, Jason soon leaves her for Glauce, the daughter of the king of Corinth, to further his political ambitions. Angered by her husband's betrayal, Medea murders his new wife by gifting her a poisoned robe. In the controversial ending of this Greek tragedy, Medea enacts her revenge on Jason by also killing their two children, flying away in a chariot driven by dragons without paying for her crimes.

Starting with its classical origins in the Greek and Roman past, authors such as Euripides, Seneca, and others have explored the myth of Medea in literature, theatre, and the visual arts. Her story has been found on Roman sarcophagi, Pompeiian wall paintings, Renaissance marriage chests, and in eighteenth and nineteenth century European plays. Significantly, this interest in Medea continued into the twentieth century when it was politicized within post-colonial, feminist, and racial discourses. While oscillating between exotic princess, mistreated wife, and villainous mother, Medea eventually came to embody a powerful subaltern woman attempting to mediate her cultural heritage with dominant colonial powers. Among many artists and writers interpreting Medea within this postcolonial framework, renowned contemporary Indian artist Nalini Malani (b. 1946) stands out as one of the most radical and complex voices.

By the 1990's, Malani had already established herself as a versatile artist within both Indian and international modern and contemporary art movements. Working as an unapologetic feminist artist from post-Partition India, she has produced an impressive oeuvre of politically charged paintings, videos, installations, theatre productions, performances, painted books, and shadow plays. While scholarship on her work is limited, pivotal art historians and critical theorists such as Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Andreas Huyssen, Chaitanya Sambrani, and Arjun Appadurai have contributed to catalogues documenting her retrospectives *Splitting the Other (1992-2009)* and *The Rebellion of the Dead (1969-2018)*, as well as books exploring her exhibition in the *dOCUMENTA (13) (2012)* retrospective and many of her other solo exhibitions in museums around the world.

While spanning an expansive breadth of themes, Malani's work centers on mythology, the female body, and transnational politics. Reinterpreting the Greek myths of Cassandra and Medea, the Hindu goddesses Sita and Radha, and Alice from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Malani considers the harrowing experiences of women throughout the colonization, Partition, and independence of India. She combines conceptually and visually layered allusions to literature, film, and theatre with a complex use of medium and space, leaving ample room for scholars to theorize gendered violence through an innovative feminist visual lens. Art historian Mieke Bal, for instance, recently published extensive studies on Malani's narrative paintings and shadow play installations, such as *In Medias Res: Inside Nalini Malani's Shadow Plays (2016)* and "Stains against Violence: Nalini Malani's Strategies for Durational Looking" (2018). Bal critically explores how Malani intertwines myth and history to meditate on

contemporary injustices, employing a multiplicity of mediums and engaging viewers with intimate spaces of violence and oppression.¹

However, little scholarly work has paid specific attention to Malani's interest in Medea. Since the early 1990's, Malani has been consistently reinterpreting the myth of Medea, visualizing her as a mad-woman, a mutant, a mother, and an allegory of colonization, nationalism, gendered violence, and environmental destruction. Since its debut in a theatrical collaboration with Indian actress and theater director Alaknada Samarth in Paris in 1993, Malani's *Medea Project* has intricately explored Medea as a reaction to contemporary Indian politics, expanding significantly until today to include other mythologies and allusions to visceral political events. She included her *Medea Project* in a wide range of exhibitions, including her 1996 installation at the Max Mueller Bhavan in Mumbai, the 2007 exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, and her 2014 retrospective at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in New Delhi. Throughout these exhibitions, Medea acts as a powerful figure in Malani's exploration of histories of colonialism, postcolonialism, and nation-building. Malani's examination of the complex and conflicting subjecthood of Medea, as both the object and an agent of violence, turns her heroine into a salient embodiment of the postcolonial condition, existing in the intersections of nationalism and gendered violence.

Moreover, I argue Nalini Malani's interpretation of Medea exists as a critical examination of nation-building and history-telling within the postcolonial discourse. The notion of "nationhood," born out of the collective fight for postcolonial independence, has been a site of critique for post-colonial theorists. Among these, the Subaltern Studies Collective (SSC), which

¹ Mieke Bal, *In Medias Res: Inside Nalini Malani's Shadow Plays* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2016); Bal, "Stains against Violence: Nalini Malani's Strategies for Durational Looking," *Journal of Contemporary Painting* 4, no. 1 (January 2018).

rose to prominence in the 1980's as a group of South Asian scholars interested in theorizing a new approach to historiography, laid groundwork for the postcolonial re-examination of nationalist narratives. It's worth noting that in the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* (1982), historian Ranajit Guha's essay "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" argued for approaching history-telling from the perspective of the subaltern, accounting for the "politics of the people" and their contributions to the development of nationalism in postcolonial India.² In his pivotal book *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1994), political theorist Partha Chatterjee built on Guha's work by tracing a distinction between the spiritual and material dimensions of nationalism, pointing to how the nationalist imagination in India comprises of both a political materiality and a spiritual sphere represented through subaltern bodies.³ Similarly, historian Gyanendra Pandey's book *Routine Violence: Nation, Fragments, Histories* (2005) reveals the exclusion of ordinary people from the retelling of Partition and details nationalist projects aimed at creating collective amnesia regarding communal violence.⁴ Contributing to the Subaltern Studies Project, these scholars have waged crucial critiques of the reductive histories of Indian nationalism that focused solely on the political consciousness of the elites.

Postcolonial feminist theorists and writers, such as Gayatri Spivak, Mrinalini Sinha, and Veena Das, further complicated subaltern studies by considering how women were intricately tied to the project of nation building. Spivak's work, especially her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1983) and her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), explores the

² Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak (Oxford University Press, 1988), 40

³ Partha Chatterjee, "Whose Imagined Community?" in *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁴ Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006).

silenced figure of the subaltern woman in India's colonial and postcolonial history. She examines the postcolonial critic and subject within imperialist discourses, critiquing essentialist narratives that speak for the subaltern experience.⁵ Furthermore, both Sinha and Das present ethnographic and historical accounts of how women became sites to embody the debates of nationhood. Sinha's book *Gender and Nation* (2006) studies the relationship between gender and nationalism broadly, describing how women become bearers of both precolonial traditions and postcolonial violence.⁶ Das' book *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (2006) delves into theories of violence, gender, and subjectivity embedded in the everyday life of communities living in post-Partition India.⁷ She considers how the anxieties and desires of nationalist projects are continuously inscribed onto the female body.

These feminist examinations of gender and nationalism are particularly salient throughout postcolonial artistic and political programs that mobilized women as spiritual symbols of the nation. Malani has frequently turned to the iconography of *Bharat Mata*, or Mother India, as an example of this nationalist desire to superimpose the female body onto visualizations of the nation. Additionally, her many ruminations on Sita, a Hindu goddess popularized in the *Ramayana* as the loyal wife of king Rama, illustrates these simultaneous sites of divinity and violence that were obscured by hypermasculine nationalist propaganda interested in feminizing the nation. Malani's layered exploration of multiple mythologies and references allows her work to extend beyond the borders of a single nation, culture, and history, creating a powerful transnational visual language opposing the constraints of monolithic nationalist narratives.

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 1988; Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003).

⁶ Mrinalini Sinha, *Gender and Nation* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2006).

⁷ Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

Working within these postcolonial discourses, mythologies, and iconographic traditions, Malani's revival of Medea describes and subverts the relationship between the nation and the gendered body. Drawing on Greek mythology, Hinduism, and constructs of "nationhood," Malani reinterprets Medea as a postcolonial feminist heroine. By contextualizing the myth within histories of gendered violence in postcolonial India, I argue that Malani negotiates Medea's position as a liberatory body oscillating between subject and object, ultimately shifting essentialized notions of womanhood to more complex narratives of violence and subjectivity. Malani thus reimagines Medea as a metaphor of resistance to British colonialism, to Indian anti-colonial nationalism, and as an expression of gendered national trauma, memory, and healing in post-Partition India.

Chapter 1: Medea as Mother, Monster, and Heroine

In 1996, Malani showcased an exhibition at the Max Mueller Bhavan in Bombay (presently Mumbai, India). Entitled “Medea,” the exhibit originally debuted at the Johannesburg Biennale in 1995. The installation traced the story of Medea through German playwright Heiner Müller’s adaptation of the myth in his play, *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape with Argonauts* (1981). Exhibited in a small gallery, the show consisted of three hanging mylar robes coated in acrylic paint that mapped out Medea’s story in three parts—the *Alchemist’s Robe*, the *Bridal Robe*, and the *Robe of Vengeance*. Facing the robes was a wall with a large, blurred charcoal drawing of Medea punctured with eraser marks (Figure 1). Malani placed the *Robe of Vengeance* above a large pile of rocks encircled by a quote from Müller’s *Despoiled Shore*:

I want to break mankind apart in two
And live between the empty middle I
No man and no woman⁸

The quote, spoken by Medea to Jason in the first act of Müller’s play, recalls Müller’s unique adaptation of Medea as a character desperate to re-define herself beyond categories of gender and culture. Malani’s “Medea” exhibition is her first presentation of the Greek heroine, and Müller’s quote powerfully frames the installation as a radical, liberatory reinterpretation of the myth.

Upon entering, the exhibition space is dominated by three mylar robes hanging from the ceiling that recount the tragedy of Medea and trace her descent into madness. The first robe, the *Alchemist’s Robe*, describes the beginning of the play: Medea is a princess of Colchis (present day Georgia), an expert in alchemy, and she meets Jason, the Greek conqueror who came to

⁸ Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publ., 1992), 132.

Colchis seeking the mythological Golden Fleece (Figure 2). While lacking clear narration, this robe is the most visually coherent of the three—painted in thin layers of blended acrylic on mylar, the robe is coated in overwhelming saturated reds, oranges, and blues. In the top middle section of the robe there is a small image of Medea in front of a large skull-like shape. Malani painted vague depictions of small animals in the bottom corner, possibly alluding to Medea’s vibrant, flourishing home before Jason arrived.

The second robe, the *Bridal Robe*, narrates the challenges undertaken by both Medea and Jason to find the Golden Fleece (Figure 3). After causing mass disputes among the royal families of Colchis and killing her own brother, Medea helped Jason retrieve the fleece, married him, and traveled back to his home in Greece. This robe significantly diverts from the composition of the *Alchemist’s Robe*. It breaks up the vibrant reds and blues into small, fragmented shapes with no clear figures. The third robe, the *Robe of Vengeance*, alludes to Medea’s infamous descent into madness after Jason leaves her for a Greek princess (Figure 4). Displaced from her home and unable to return, Medea decides to kill Jason’s new wife with a poisoned robe and then murders her own two children out of vengeance. She painted this last robe expressively with swirling and disconnected brushstrokes. It compositionally mimics the colors of the first robe (though instead has muted the greens and blues), sharing the bright red paint coating most of the robe and revealing no signs of form or narration. By carefully deconstructing the compositional coherence of the *Alchemist’s Robe*, Malani visually charts Medea’s confused and violent transformation into a mother who kills her own children.

Historically, the narrative of Medea has been composed and analyzed through many different lenses of gender and power. The myth, especially Medea’s detrimental marriage to Jason and her final infanticide, has captured the attention of feminist scholars as they grapple

with Medea as a maternal, or anti-maternal, figure. Classics scholar Betine van zyl Smit, for instance, argues that countless feminist interpretations of the myth have constructed Medea as a victim of patriarchal and imperial institutions. In his original version, Euripides portrays Medea as a victim of Jason's infidelity and betrayal, and thus fosters sympathy in readers for her final actions.⁹ In her 1987 translation of the play, French novelist Marie Cardinal used the chorus of narrating women and Medea's nurse, who had originally been used to critique Medea's actions, as an emblem of female solidarity against the male characters of the play.¹⁰ She continually emphasized that Medea and other female characters in the play are seeking freedom from male domination.¹¹

During medieval and early modern periods, adaptations of the myth focused more on Medea's victimization within her marriage and less on her crime. In her essay "Medea as Paradigm of the Ideal Marriage" (2010), art historian Ekaterini Kepetzi notes some relevant examples in fifteenth century Italy, especially on Florentine marriage chests, or *cassoni*, which were decorated with stories from ancient mythology.¹² One *cassone* from the marriage of Lorenzo Tornabuoni and Giovanna degli Albizzi, attributed to Biagio d'Antonio, depicts scenes from Jason and Medea's wedding in the context of Florentine marriage rituals.¹³ *Cassoni* were traditionally used to hold the bride's belongings in the couple's bedroom and the paintings on the lid typically featured mythological scenes illustrating ideal marriages and behavior. In this context, Medea represented a loyal wife who left her home and family to ensure her husband's success while Jason acted as a sinful husband who abandoned her. In the *cassoni* tradition Medea

⁹ Betine Van Zyl Smit, "Medea the Feminist," *Acta Classica* 45 (2002): 105.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 106

¹² Ekaterini Kepetzi, "Changing Perceptions: Medea as Paradigm of the Ideal Marriage," in *Unbinding Medea* (Routledge, 2017), 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*

was thus often depicted as a victim driven to insanity by her unfaithful husband and her infanticide was a consequence of Jason's betrayal.¹⁴ Overall, it is evident that throughout European cultures in antiquity and the early modern period, many readings of Medea concentrated on her role as a wronged wife and distraught mother, blaming Jason for Medea's crimes and preserving her motherhood.

However, other interpretations of Medea have challenged her motherhood and portrayed her instead as a monstrous villain. In her book *Reproducing Rome: Motherhood in Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, and Statius* (2015), classicist Mairéad McAuley offers a careful reading of Roman philosopher Seneca's theatrical rendition of Medea from the first century. While Euripides represents Medea as a victim of patriarchal injustices, Seneca insists that Medea is a "raving mad woman" with no maternal feelings.¹⁵ This rejection of Medea's motherhood makes it difficult to assimilate her into modern feminist agendas. As McAuley states, "We prefer our infanticidal mothers to appear a bit less triumphant and a bit more oppressed."¹⁶ While Seneca's rendering of Medea is not particularly humanizing, his work presents Medea as a subversive and destructive character with significant power and agency and thus rejects her more constraining narratives as a victimized mother. Many subsequent works considered Medea's agency, rather than her victimhood, through more radical political perspectives.

Medea's complexity as both a victim and a powerful agent of destruction was re-addressed in the late twentieth century through a postcolonial perspective. While her act of infanticide had previously represented the consequences of her husband's infidelity or her deviant femininity, more contemporary iterations of the myth often stressed anti-colonial

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Mairéad McAuley, *Reproducing Rome: Motherhood in Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, and Statius* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), 208.

¹⁶ Ibid.

sentiments. Her murder was interpreted as a radical act of self-assertion against imperialist structures.¹⁷ Malani fully embraces this reading of Medea as a postcolonial heroine throughout her exhibition. By alluding to East German Heiner Müller's theatrical adaptation of the myth, she reveals how his fragmented and poetic version of *Medea* not only discloses the corrupt political reality of post-World War II East Berlin but also constructs Medea as a powerful heroine who overcomes her own colonization.

Müller's *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape with Argonauts* is divided into three parts: *Despoiled Shore*, *Medeamaterial*, and *Landscape with Argonauts*. The first part, set near Straussberg, describes a polluted lake filled with a mix of repulsive industrial and natural objects, including condoms, cigarettes, semen, spit, and vomit. The desolate landscape of Colchis/East Berlin surrounding the lake has been devastated by Greek colonizers/the Soviet Union.¹⁸ Jason courts Medea and convinces her to help him find the Golden Fleece and flee Colchis.¹⁹ At the end of the first act, Müller offers a striking image representing Jason's initial colonial influence over Medea. He writes: "On the ground however Medea the hacked-apart/Brother in her arms She who is skilled/In poisons."²⁰ In Euripides' original text, Medea had violently killed her brother to help Jason retrieve the Golden Fleece and escape Colchis. In Müller's interpretation, however, Medea tenderly cradles the brother she had killed, expressing her guilt and regret. Here, the Golden Fleece represents multiple themes in relation to Medea's remorse. In her work on radical interpretations of Greek tragedy, critical theorist Olga Kekis argues that the Golden Fleece is a symbol of Jason's imperial fantasy, an exotic treasure stolen from a foreign land. It

¹⁷ Olga Kekis, *Medea Adapted: The Subaltern Barbarian Speaks*, PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2009 (United Kingdom: University of Birmingham), 4.

¹⁸ Considering Müller was referring to World War II throughout the play, Colchis most likely represents war torn East Berlin while the Greek colonizers serve as the Soviet Union.

¹⁹ Kekis, *Medea Adapted*, 14.

²⁰ Müller, *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage*, 132.

further illustrates Medea's willingness to succumb "to the attractions of the culture of the colonizer."²¹ Medea killed her own brother to help Jason, and by gently holding him she acknowledges that she betrayed "her own native culture."²²

In the second part, Müller details a dialogue between Medea and Jason. Medea recognizes Jason's abandonment and discusses his betrayal in depth. Significantly, she struggles to understand her own identity before and after her meeting with Jason; at one point, she looks into a mirror and claims that the reflection is no longer hers.²³ As she slowly comes to terms with her past, she begins to describe her colonization by Jason: "My belongings the images of the defeated ones/The cries of the ones torn apart my property/Since I left Colchis my homeland/On your Trail of blood Blood of my kin."²⁴ While powerfully recounting her subjugation, she kills her children and, by doing so, denies Jason his fatherhood and legacy.

In *Medeamaterial*, Müller represents Medea's liberation from two perspectives. First, Medea accepts her treasonous past and Jason's crimes and at the same time emancipates herself from her past in order to have agency over her future. Second, she frees herself from Jason's control by killing her children "who are the results of her infiltration by the colonizer."²⁵ Rather than viewing Medea's infanticide as a representation of her depravity, Müller considers her children to be a symbol of her victimization; by killing them, she dismantles the institution that bore them. These two acts—first her awareness of her past and then her physical act of liberation—represent an important evolution in postcolonial discourses. As Irish playwright Seamus Heaney states, "[in postcolonial condition], the more people realize that their language

²¹ Ibid., 17

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 18

²⁴ Müller, *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage*, 132.

²⁵ Ibid., 20

and their culture are historically amassed possessions, the better.”²⁶ As the colonized seek to regain their land, culture, and institutions, they first must reconcile their past and name their oppressors, just as Medea did before killing the physical products of her subjugation.

Finally, in the last act of the play, *Landscape with Argonauts*, Müller returns to the wasteland landscape of *Despoiled Shore*. Jason, along with Müller’s collective “I” (which the playwright frequently uses in other works), treks through a bleak existence. Many scholars have interpreted this final act as a larger metaphor for Müller’s perception of the world after World War II and the Cold War. Writer and theater director Peter Campbell, for instance, considers Müller’s play as a representation of “[Müller’s] idea of the end of history,” highlighting the environmental, moral, and imperialist devastation proliferating the world Jason now lives in.²⁷

While Malani adopts Müller’s entire play as inspiration for her exhibition, she focused on the earlier mentioned quotation surrounding the *Robe of Vengeance* to frame her interpretation. These lines, spoken by Medea, construct her similarly to Seneca’s translation. She is no longer portrayed as a woman or a mother (or, as she said, “no man and no woman”) but instead becomes a hybridized mutant existing in an “empty middle.”²⁸ She wants to define herself within a void absent of gender, nationality, or culture, breaking down the structures defining her as Other. This quotation embodies Müller’s characterization of Medea as a destructive body residing between Jason’s and her own culture, no longer fitting into traditional frameworks of maternity and gender.

²⁶ Lorna Hardwick, "Greek Drama and Anti-Colonialism: Decolonizing Classics," in *Dionysus Since 69*, ed. Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Amanda Wrigley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 220.

²⁷ Peter A. Campbell, "Medea as Material: Heiner Müller, Myth, and Text," *Modern Drama* 51, no. 1 (2008): 100.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

This understanding of Medea is evident in Malani's large charcoal drawing *Medea as Mutant*, which faces the hanging robes in the exhibition (Figure 5). In the drawing, Medea's body is hazy and covered in small eraser marks. Unlike the robes that explicitly clothed her, the charcoal drawing is fleeting and malleable, disrobing and exposing her morphed body. The fading charcoal makes little visual allusion to her gender, and her arms and legs are crudely drawn. With this grotesque imagining of Medea's body, *Medea as Mutant* completes Medea's ephemeral transformation into the mutated figure from Müller's play, firmly rejecting her maternal identity and instead presenting her as a destructive force. Malani's *Medea as Mutant* realizes this transformation as a body outside our rational understanding of femininity and motherhood. This depiction is not only an intervention into previous feminist representations of Medea: Medea's mutilated body here comments on the violent and gendered national trauma following the Indian Partition.

Having lived through the Partition as a young girl, Malani frequently depicts the mass violence proliferating in postcolonial India. She was born in 1946, one year before India gained independence from Britain. In the span of two days, from August 14 to 15, the colony was separated into two regions: West Punjab and East Bengal became Pakistan, a Muslim majority country, and the other half, dominated by Hindus and Sikhs, became the country of India. More than twelve million people were displaced in the wake of the Partition, leading to a large refugee crisis, territorial disputes, and tremendous religious, ethnic, and sexual violence. Significantly, some of the most vicious acts of Partition violence were enacted on the female body. Nearly 100,000 women from both sides were mutilated, kidnapped, raped, and killed in service of national and religious ideologies. Their bodies were exchanged in a power struggle for territory

and religious dominance, and the remnants of this violence are painfully visceral and widespread.

Situated within this history, Malani's de-gendered and deformed *Medea as Mutant* is a powerful and chilling record of this continued mutilation. The viewer is confronted with her large scale, nakedness, and harsh charcoal outlines scratched into the wall. The drawing is violent, rough, and overwhelming, evoking the sites of trauma and pain covering Medea's body. Yet Malani's work also recognizes the tendency for history writing to ignore this aspect of the Partition. Scholars such as Gyanendra Pandey and Urvashi Butalia have famously examined the neglected histories of Partition. Pandey argues that historical writing is uncomfortable and uninterested in describing the deep trauma of Partition and subsequent violence, preferring purely political perspectives that highlight statistics over personal narratives.²⁹ In her book *The Other Side of Silence* (1998), Butalia claims that the "human dimensions" of history are given a "lesser status."³⁰ The violent details of the Partition are not recounted in history books but are privately "told and retold inside so many households in India and Pakistan."³¹ In accordance with the critiques of these revisionist histories, *Medea as Mutant* is unafraid to name the widespread gendered violence of Partition. Yet Medea is also covered in eraser marks, and parts of her body are smeared across the wall, offering an incomplete image of scars and smudges. *Medea as Mutant* recounts Partition by both recording and erasing violence. Medea becomes a site of communal gendered trauma, neglected histories, and continued violence in post-Partition India.

²⁹ Gyanendra Pandey, "The Prose of Otherness," in *Subaltern Studies*, ed. David Arnold and David Hardiman, vol. 8 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 205.

³⁰ Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 3

Chapter 2: Medea and Hindu Fundamentalism

While Malani's initial construction of Medea echoes the immediate aftermath of India's independence, she continues to reframe and reconsider Medea's body, mythology, and political significance amid India's rapidly changing postcolonial landscape. Since her meditation on the subject in the 1990s, Malani's fascination with Medea has persisted in contemporary exhibitions and ongoing projects, often alongside other mythological protagonists. In July 2007, the Irish Museum of Modern Art presented the exhibition *Nalini Malani: Recent Work*, which featured more violent depictions of her previous representations of Medea. Using acrylic paint instead of charcoal, her painting *Medea I* (2006) (Figure 6) depicts a naked and mutilated female body rendered in fleshy pink tones along with stark black shadows. The central figure of Medea holds two red tubes in her hands, each attached to a baby, seemingly referring to her own children. The umbilical cord-like tubes are no longer connected to her body but instead wrap through and around the heads of each child. She is set against a dotted backdrop with yellow smoke emerging above her and a disembodied yellow spine in the bottom right corner. While the entire composition is comprised of grotesque shapes and a muted color palette, perhaps the most disturbing element of the painting is the phallic-like object protruding from Medea's vagina, surrounded by stains of red and black paint. Building off her previous depictions of Medea, Malani's powerful rendering of her gaping wounds and nakedness is again reminiscent of communal gendered violence in post-Partition India. *Medea I*, however, can be considered a liberatory work as well as a harrowing image of rape and mutilation. Malani's Medea takes up

the canvas with strength, “grounded, sturdy, and self-assured.”³² She is not just a naked body subjected to violence but a fierce survivor symbolizing a moment of trauma.³³

While Malani’s earlier work began this process of constructing Medea as a postcolonial heroine, in this 2007 exhibition she places Medea alongside other mythological figures to explore her parallels with other narratives of gendered violence and betrayal. During the same year as she created *Medea I*, Malani produced *Sita I* (2006) (Figure 7). Painted with muted yellow and pink colors against a dotted background, Sita, a popular Hindu goddess, floats in the center and merges with human beings, animals, insects, and bodily organs that hover above and below her. Her stomach appears to be split open, with organs and a spine slipping out of her body.³⁴ Similarly to *Medea I*, Sita’s body is presented with a focus on her nakedness, mutilation, and the sense of a silent, calm power. Sita is iconographically complex in her own right, also resembling Medea’s appropriations throughout history. Her political relationship to Hinduism, communal gendered violence, and postcolonial India adds depth and perspective to Malani’s reconstructed narrative of Medea.

Sita was initially popularized in the *Ramayana*, an ancient Sanskrit epic composed of seven books attributed to the poet Valmiki. Dated between 200 BCE and 200 CE, the *Ramayana* is one of two major Sanskrit texts constituting the foundation of popular Hindu mythology, the other being the *Mahabharata*. The text has been a feature of multiple South and South-East Asian religions, including Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, and most popularly Hinduism.³⁵ The *Ramayana* tells the story of Prince Rama, son of Dashratha and the king of Ayodhya. The epic

³² Srimoyee Mitra, “Naked Bodies as Site of Social Change,” *WRECK: Graduate Journal of Art History, Visual Art, and Theory* 2, no. 2 (2008): 70

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 71

³⁵ Suvarna Variyar, “Saving Sita: The Ramayana and Gender Narratives in Postcolonial Hindu Nationalism” (dissertation, University of Sydney, 2018), 4

details Rama's adventures as a warrior prince and eventually king, focusing multiple books on his relationship with Sita, daughter of the earth. After winning her hand in a bow and arrow contest, Rama married Sita and attempted to take the throne. Dashratha's second wife, Kaikeyi, wanted her own son to be king and demanded that Rama be banished to the forest for fourteen years. Sita decided to follow Rama into exile but was kidnapped by the shape-changing demon Ravana and taken prisoner to Sri Lanka. Rama teamed up with the monkey god Hanuman to defeat Ravana and rescue Sita. After saving Sita, Rama feared she was unfaithful with Ravana and demanded she prove her innocence through a trial by fire (*Agni Pariksha*). In a frequently cited scene from the Yuddhakanda book of the *Ramayana*, Rama says to Sita in anger:

A suspicion has arisen with regard to your conduct . . . I'll have nothing more to do with you. Man of honor would indulge his passion so far as to take back a woman who has dwelled in the house of another? You have been taken into Ravana's lap, and he has looked lustfully at you. How can I, who boast of belonging to an illustrious lineage, reclaim you?³⁶

Sita proved her innocence, vouched for by the fire god Agni, and she and Rama returned to Ayodhya as king and queen. The people of the kingdom remained unconvinced of her chastity, however, and to ease their anger Rama banished a now pregnant Sita to the forest, where she gave birth to his children and raised them. The ending of the *Ramayana* has various interpretations, but in the most common narrative Rama tries to win Sita back after learning about his children. Still wary about her faithfulness, he insisted she endure another trial by fire. This time Sita refused, offended and humiliated by the request. She instead asked Mother Earth to swallow her into the earth if she has been faithful to Rama, and Mother Earth did so. In Sita's final scene she is engulfed by the ground and returned to her birthplace.

³⁶ H. P. Shastri, tran., *The Ramayana of Valmiki: Yuddha Kanda, Uttara Kanda* (London: Shanti Sadan, 1959), 335-36.

The central themes of the *Ramayana* compose an inherently political text that relies on gendered language to construct ideals of masculinity and femininity. Throughout the epic, the *Ramayana* shapes men as essential agents of action and women as passive, often unnamed figures.³⁷ Even Sita, a central protagonist, is often referred to as “wife” or “daughter,” thus prioritizing her relationship to Rama as her principal identity. The epic consistently highlights Sita’s loyalty to Rama, both in following him into exile and suffering the trial by fire, as her most celebrated trait. In contrast, the *Ramayana* constructs Rama as the ideal warrior, king, son, and husband through descriptions of his strength, leadership, honor, and virtue.³⁸ As the *Ramayana* was popularized, the figure of Rama served, and continues to serve, as a template of Hindu masculinity, specifically for the elite and ruling classes.³⁹ For instance, in the introduction to a translation of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, the early twentieth-century Sanskrit scholar P. P. S. Sastri wrote: “The Ramayana is a mirror of the highest ideals of Hindu culture and civilization. Herein described the ideal hero, Sri Ramachandra [Prince Rama] who is, not only the exemplar for all living and dutiful sons, but also who is the ideal husband and king.”⁴⁰ As evident in Sastri’s introduction, this description of Rama as the ideal man is significant beyond the confines of the epic: it has distinct political motives in relating Rama’s masculine strength to Hindu civilization more broadly.

Throughout history, single rulers and governments have used the masculine idealism of Rama to legitimize their authority. In ancient courts, emperors embarked on large-scale projects illustrating specific portions of the epic in temple architecture. The Papanatha temple, one of

³⁷ Variyar, “Saving Sita,” 72

³⁸ Ibid., 74

³⁹ Ibid., 73

⁴⁰ M. Hidayatullah, “Inaugural Address,” in *Asian Variations in Ramayana*, ed. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar (New Delhi, India: Sahitya Akademi, 2003), 27.

multiple Chalukyan temples in the Pattadakal complex in Karnataka, India, exemplifies the ancient political mobilization of the *Ramayana*. The Early Western Chalukya dynasty began in 534 AD and lasted for two hundred years; during the last few decades rulers endured threats from Rashtrakuta powers intending to overthrow them. Under this threat of dynastic collapse, the last three rulers (Vijayaditya, Vikramaditya II, and Kirtivarman II) commissioned a large temple project in which the entire *Ramayana* was carved into the outer walls of the Papanatha, depicting glorious battles and epic heroes.⁴¹ This rich temple commission linked the patron with Rama's actions, correlating his authority with a warrior hero idealized as a just, wise, and strong ruler.⁴² While the Papanatha temple is an especially legible project, this political tool was commonly employed by many rulers throughout South Asia, especially in illustrated manuscripts from the Mughal empire and miniatures patronized by nobles at the end of the sixteenth century.

Sita's role in politicizing the *Ramayana* parallels that of Rama: she is used to justify elite ownership of land and resources. Although Sita was not a particularly popular goddess before the *Ramayana*, her early manifestations began to construct a relationship between men, women, the sky, and the earth. Sita was initially considered to be the wife of Indra or Parjanya, both gods of rain and fertility, and she was born from the earth as the goddess of agricultural fertility. In early iterations of her story Sita needed to be awakened, or conceived, by the rain. A variation of the god of rain plowed the earth as a form of insemination, thus waking or birthing her.⁴³ This is revisualized in the *Ramayana*, where she is physically unearthed when her father, King Janaka, is plowing a field.⁴⁴ In both interpretations, Sita's birth story very clearly associates male power

⁴¹ Helen J. Wechsler, "Royal Legitimation: Ramayana Reliefs on the Papanatha Temple at Pattadakal," in *The Legend of Rama: Artistic Visions*, ed. Vidya Dehejia (Mumbai, India: Marg Publications, 1994), 27.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (University of California Press, 2008), 66.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 68

with cultivation of the earth. Relating Rama to the goddess of agricultural fertility purposefully constructs the narrative that kings promote fertility of the land.⁴⁵ The relationship between Sita and Rama is essential to these artistic and political projects legitimizing court rule, as it asserts that the interaction between kings, land, and resources is necessary for growth and abundance.⁴⁶

The gendered language of the *Ramayana* combined with the explicitly unequal marriage of Sita and Rama offers ample material to shape political and gendered narratives. When considering the importance of idealizing Rama and Sita's relationship to justify monarchical rule, Rama's eventual rejection of Sita has been a site of discomfort as it challenges Rama's place as a wise and just ruler. This discomfort is evident in multiple translations of the original *Ramayana*, including Tulsidas's popular retelling of the epic from the end of the sixteenth century. Tulsidas, a Hindu saint and poet, was thought to be a reincarnation of Valmiki, who translated the *Ramayana* into a vernacular dialect of Hindi, known as the epic *Ramcharitmanas*. Curiously, the *Ramcharitmanas* rejects the ending in which Rama insists Sita prove her innocence a second time. Instead, Rama and Sita sit together on the throne and enjoy the golden age of his reign.⁴⁷ This refusal to acknowledge Sita's rejection can be seen through visual representations of Tulsidas's final scene, such as the watercolor by Rajasthani artist Kama, *Rama and Sita enthroned in a pavilion, attended by Hanuman* (circa 1800) (Figure 8). In the painting, Rama and Sita share a loving embrace under a white pavilion while servants attend to them. This harmonious composition showcases the popularity of glossing over Sita's final scene, focusing instead on idealizing their marriage and benevolent rule of their kingdom.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 67

⁴⁶ Ibid., 68

⁴⁷ Linda Hess, "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 1 (January 1999): 4

Artistic interpretations of Sita's trial by fire further detail this discomfort by representing her pain seemingly inflicted by Rama. The trial by fire, or *agni pariksha*, is a critical scene as the first site of pain and betrayal Sita experiences, and it cannot be simply removed like her final episode. Sita's *agni pariksha* has actually been a highly popular scene to illustrate, most likely because it highlights her loyalty to her husband. For example, a cloth print from 1985 in the British Museum illustrates Sita and the fire god Agni standing inside a flame (Figure 9). Sita's eyes are closed, her hands are held together in prayer, and she appears calm and passive with no indication of pain. Interestingly, Rama appears to be reaching out to rescue her, restrained by a figure behind him. Not only does the print characterize Sita's *agni pariksha* as a peaceful prayer and sacrifice intended to prove her worth to her husband, but Rama is still presented as a hero attempting to save her. Such prints were popularized throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, and they demonstrate one of many ways Sita's physical and emotional pain has been reenvisioned or denied altogether.

Within this literary and artistic context, Malani's interpretation places Sita's pain and her betrayal in the center of her work. In *Sita I*, her nakedness prevents her from being defined by her role as wife or mother; she is not connected to Rama or the kingdom through her clothing or jewelry, and her body is instead a representation of grotesque violence and inner power. As is also seen in *Medea I*, Sita's body possesses a sense of quiet strength. Her palms lay open at her sides and the organs spilling from her body are energetic and alive.⁴⁸ Here Malani reveals the complexities of Sita's role in the *Ramayana*, refusing to lessen her pain and instead marking her body with the realities of her betrayal. Within the context of the *Ramayana*'s political history in ancient and medieval India, highlighting Sita's pain deprecates Rama, and subsequently the state,

⁴⁸ Mitra, "Naked Bodies," 73.

as a locus of power and just rule. In this space the similarities between Medea and Sita are revealed: both women were subject to pain and rejection by their more powerful husbands, and subsequent readings of their stories refused to hold Jason or Rama accountable for the suffering they caused. These interpretations silenced Medea's pain through her villainization as an infanticidal mother and denied Sita's pain by emphasizing her role as the ideal and loyal wife.

Malani's interest in paralleling the stories of Medea and Sita culminated in the acrylic painting *Sita/Medea* (2006) (Figure 10), which was featured in the same exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. In the painting, Medea and Sita stand facing each other in the upper right corner, connected by strings of red paint. Multiple figures float around the composition inside circles representing the poisoned Earth. The hermitlike figure represents either Ravana in disguise or Jason wrapped in the Golden Fleece.⁴⁹ Although none of the figures are clearly defined, the painting reveals the mythological overlaps between Medea's and Sita's stories. As art historian Jagtej Kaur Grewal maintains, both women are connected by their sacrifices, betrayals, and rejections.⁵⁰ Medea, a woman who left her homeland to help Jason, ultimately "exacts revenge not just upon her betrayer but also upon herself in the murder of her family and children."⁵¹ Likewise, Grewal suggests Sita occupies a comparable space of corporeal and emotional self-sacrifice, following Rama into exile "only to face rejection by him twice before returning to mother earth."⁵²

⁴⁹ Chaitanya Sambrani, "Apocalypse Recalled: The Recent Work of Nalini Malani," Nalini Malani, accessed October 29, 2019, <http://www.nalinimalani.com>.

⁵⁰ Jagtej Kaur Grewal, "Modern Indian Painting: The Presence of the Past," *Artistic Narration* 13, no. 1 (2017): 40

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

When considering Malani's previous interpretation of Medea as a reflection of the violent realities of the Partition, her representation of Sita similarly embodies these histories. Yet although Malani intends to weave both these Eastern and Western heroines into multifaceted narratives, in the context of religious violence her use of the *Ramayana* cannot be equated to her appropriation of Greek tragedies. Malani's reference to Sita has deeper post-Partition implications beyond paralleling Medea's resistance to gendered violence. The *Ramayana* continues to be a post-Partition tool of political propaganda, and Sita should be further contextualized in these postcolonial discourses.

Returning to *Sita I*, the central figure is looking sideways, drawing the viewers' attention to the right side of the composition. Below her right hand stands a small bald figure in a suit with a trail of blood emerging from his fingers. Slightly below him stands a much smaller female figure, seemingly pushing against the man with outstretched hands. Curator Srimoyee Mitra argues the male figure's dress "indicates his comfortable position" as a middle-class professional or government employee.⁵³ This figure can be interpreted as many government leaders throughout India's history, but considering Malani's interest in India's contemporary political conditions, Mitra claims he could convincingly represent a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Thus, the painting can be interpreted as a contemporary statement against Hindu fundamentalism and communal religious violence.⁵⁴ Malani became interested in the Hindu Right during its rise in the 1990s. As the Indian National Congress (INC) struggled to establish a secular identity for the postcolonial Indian state, Hindu fundamentalism gained support as an alternative narrative defining Indian identity.⁵⁵ The desire to consolidate a national identity under

⁵³ Mitra, "Naked Bodies," 72

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Variyar, "Saving Sita," 45

Hinduism was further amplified in reaction to the imperial presence of Christianity, Islam, globalization, and the perceived threat of Western cultural influences.⁵⁶ In opposition to the INC, the BJP was crucial to the popular rise of the Hindu Right. Approaching nationalism as an inherently militant project, the BJP emphasizes the continuity of Hindu culture and equates traditional India with Hinduism.⁵⁷

Scholars have established clear relationships between the rise of the Hindu Right and the popularization of the *Ramayana* in contemporary media and political rhetoric. South Asian studies professor Sheldon Pollock argues that the Hindu Right frequently uses the *Ramayana* to construct a “political imagination” in which its “imaginative instruments,” such as clear morals and straightforward characters, “[articulate] a range of political discourses.”⁵⁸ Following the traditions of kings legitimizing their rule by embodying Rama’s strength and virtue, the BJP has idealized the *Ramayana*’s kingdom as a reflection of India’s nationalist identity. Hindu right-wing groups use the *Ramayana* to frame Classical India as a golden age worth upholding—one of patriarchy, warrior-like strength, and nobility.⁵⁹ Interestingly, the BJP capitalized on the popular TV series *Ramayan* (1987–89), directed by Ramanand Sagar, to increase the legibility of the *Ramayana* beyond the Hindu canon and establish a cultural narrative. The show, which serialized stories from the *Ramayana*, included the highly masculine character of Rama, who gained attention in popular media. The BJP related Rama’s masculinity with the spirit of India’s leaders who wanted to protect the nation against Western and Islamic influences.⁶⁰ This affiliation was even more powerful considering Sita’s historical connections with land and

⁵⁶ Ibid., 26

⁵⁷ Ibid., 28

⁵⁸ Sheldon Pollock, “Ramayana and Political Imagination in India,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993): 262

⁵⁹ Variyar, “Saving Sita,” 28

⁶⁰ Ibid., 5

fertility, thus exemplifying the BJP's ownership over a feminized nation in need of a masculine hero. By claiming this Hindu text as the embodiment of postcolonial nationalism, the BJP initiated a project of systematically erasing difference and violating India's plural traditions.⁶¹

In this context, Malani's *Sita I* makes a clear connection between Sita, the *Ramayana*, and members of the BJP. The bald figure beside Sita has blood pouring from his fingers, thus conveying a more harrowing political statement that the BJP's messaging has had violent consequences. For instance, in October 1990 the president of the BJP, L. K. Advani, underwent a "chariot" procession in which he traveled in a Toyota truck from Gujarat to Ayodhya. During this trip, the BJP noted that a Mughal mosque, the Babri Masjid mosque, was built on Rama's alleged birth site in Ayodhya. Following a campaign by the BJP, in 1992 the mosque was violently destroyed by trained Hindu militants from extremist Hindu organizations.⁶² The demolition of this mosque resulted in more than two thousand deaths amid intense religious rioting. In 2002 in Gujarat, a train returning from Ayodhya was set on fire, killing fifty-eight Hindus. After Hindu fundamentalists blamed the fire on Muslim groups, more riots occurred, resulting in more than two thousand civilian deaths.⁶³

The significance of Ayodhya and Hindu extremism in both of these traumatic national events can be directly tied to the BJP's mobilization of the *Ramayana*, and Malani's *Sita I* responds to the violence of these riots and the provocative messaging of the BJP. She holds the BJP accountable by placing Sita, a victim of Rama and therefore a representation of citizens betrayed by the state, at the center of the painting. Read in this context, the small girl in *Sita I* next to the government employee exemplifies powerful action. Standing beside Sita's quiet

⁶¹ Sambrani, "Apocalypse Recalled," 2019, <http://www.nalinimalani.com>.

⁶² Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination," 261

⁶³ Variyar, "Saving Sita," 6

strength, she pushes against him, representing her sustained resistance to the Hindu Right and the violent consequences of their rhetoric.

Malani's interest in Sita is multifaceted. Like Medea, she represents the violence of the 1947 Partition but also of the many acts of state-perpetrated violence rooted in the political appropriation of her mythology. Malani's Sita resists the hypermasculine narratives presenting Rama as the spirit of Indian nationalism and instead refuses to deny her suffering while sustaining a resilient energy. When considering Malani's 2007 exhibition, as well as her canon of female mythological protagonists, the question still remains within a specific Indian context: why would Malani weave Western and Eastern sources together? Malani's engagement with Sita and the BJP partially illuminates why Medea is so essential to her project of showcasing political violence and rewriting oppressive state narratives. The Hindu Right has blurred history and myth to produce its own history telling, and Malani capitalizes on that language while extending beyond the dimensions of each story she retells. Through various iterations of multiple myths across nations, religions, and centuries, Malani claims a pluralism that religious fundamentalism actively seeks to destroy. While Sita offers a more culturally specific approach to these national disputes, Medea's intervention, and even simply her existence in these narratives, resists the imposed boundaries of postcolonial nationalism.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ It is worth noting that Malani's comparison of Eastern and Western mythology signifies inherent power imbalances between the Western canon and gendered violence in India. Western myth and literature have historically carried more institutionalized legitimacy through Eurocentric lenses of colonialism and dominance, and this asymmetry of power is present and not necessarily reconciled in Malani's comparison of Sita and Medea. This perspective is critical to consider and in need of further scholarship in the future.

Chapter 3: Medea and the Anticolonial Imaginary

Although Malani's reconstruction of Sita powerfully subverts the religious iconography of Hindu nationalism, her critique of dominant national narratives also extends to seemingly secular iconography. Amid decolonization efforts in which the state struggled to assert a singular or pluralistic identity, nationalist movements worked to deny the prevalence of gendered violence during and after the Partition. Once again using her band of unruly postcolonial heroines, Malani has described these post-Partition narratives and images that feminized the nation while ignoring the material realities of women. In 2005, she presented a video installation titled *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* (Figure 11). The installation consisted of five video projectors playing simultaneously in a dark room with two benches. Lasting five and a half minutes, the installation flashed videos that feature a nonlinear narrative and traced the "visual ancestry of the Indian nation."⁶⁵ It displayed images of the Indian flag, sacred cows with germs in their wombs, and fragments of the female body, as well as the voices of women screaming. Postcolonial scholar Alessandra Marino transcribed the audio accompanying the images:

First she asks: "Do I have two eyes, one nose, one mouth? Where are two eyes, one nose, one mouth?" Then adds: "Two eyes, one nose, one mouth and my bellies, I have two bellies and one has death in there." Women's language draws the outlines of a fragmented map of pain that rebels against the male voice of politics affirming: "Once the nation has back their women our pride will be restored." In response to the waving Indian flags filling the screens a woman screams: "I am dying at the border of a new nation carrying a bloody rag as my flag." In the end, images of death and ceremonies of mourning coexist with ruins and falling houses.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Chaitanya Sambrani, "Shadows, Reflections and Nightmare: The Art of Nalini Malani," in *Nalini Malani* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 35.

⁶⁶ Alessandra Marino, "Dismembering and Re-membering Mother India: Women's Trauma, Partition, and the Indian Nation," *Feminist Media Studies* 10, no. 2 (2010): 243.

Through these contrasting images and chilling voiceovers, the installation juxtaposed images of nation building, postcolonial independence, and the violence following the Partition. The installation references multiple sources describing and critiquing post-Partition culture, including Katherine Mayo's problematic book *Mother India* (1927) and Mehboob Khan's pivotal film *Mother India* (1957). Malani builds on sociologist Veena Das's ethnographic studies on Partition violence, referencing in her title the title of Das's essay "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain" (1997).

At first glance, Malani's *Mother India* installation is most clearly alluding to the iconography of Mother India, a visual interpretation of gendered Indian nationalism initially appearing in the nineteenth century. The earliest known depiction of Mother India comes from Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), a late colonial artist and prominent catalyst for modern Indian painting movements. His famous watercolor painting *Bharat Mata* (1905) (Figure 12) depicts a delicately painted Bengali woman draped in a light saffron-colored cloth with four arms. She holds the Vedas (a book of ancient Hindu scripture), bundles of rice, a white cloth, and prayer beads. Based in Hindu iconographic traditions, her four arms give her divine power and each item she holds is charged with sacred symbolism. The Vedas and beads evoke various prayer rituals, the rice symbolizes health and prosperity, and her white cloth connects to ideals of peace and knowledge. Her delicate and ethereal body stands at the edge of a lotus pond, surrounded by a warm and natural environment constructing her as a maternal and divine being. Tagore employed a wash technique, imbuing her floating body with soft colors and a glowing halo behind her head. Tagore was acutely aware that he was creating an icon for the new Indian nation, and this painting was reproduced and disseminated across anticolonial movements.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Kedar Vishwanathan, "Aesthetics, Nationalism, and the Image of Woman in Modern Indian Art," *Comparative Literature and Culture* 12, no. 2 (January 2010): 6.

Tagore was a strong supporter of the *swadeshi* movement that began in 1905 and aimed to remove the British Empire from power. His *Bharat Mata* was printed on placards during *swadeshi* rallies and revered by nationalists and reformists, ultimately serving as a new nationalist aesthetic connecting the motherly body to ideas of decolonization and nation building.

Such representations of the nation were part of a complex program of anticolonial nationalism. In his work on Indian nationalist history, political theorist Partha Chatterjee lays a framework to situate the iconography of Mother India. While dominant historical accounts claim Indian nationalism began in 1885 with the formation of the Indian National Congress, Chatterjee argues that it started earlier, during a period of rapid modernization between 1820 and 1870.⁶⁸ He divides this period into two phases. In the earlier phase, Indian reformers, such as the Brahmo Samaj group, supported colonial authorities in reforming traditional Indian institutions. This included educational, economic, and social reform stemming from Western Enlightenment ideals of self-governance and individualism. The latter phase was based in resisting the colonial state by developing an “essential” national cultural identity. This identity resisted colonial powers and cultivated an imagined nation that sustained through both a colonial and postcolonial nation. Chatterjee designates these phases as the material and spiritual domains of anticolonial nationalism and claims “the greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture.”⁶⁹

The image of Mother India became a site to embody these anticolonial sentiments, inscribing the spiritual and political domain onto the female body. This nationalist project began with institutionalized artistic programs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many popular sources of artistic production, including the Raja Ravi Varma Printing Press, the

⁶⁸ Chatterjee, “Whose Imagined Community?,” 6.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Calcutta Art Studio, and Bengali neo-traditionalist artists, created images of women combined with maps and other national emblems in order to “symbolically structure the nation.”⁷⁰ These were reproduced and circulated on calendar art, posters, pamphlets, newspapers, textbook illustrations, paintings, advertisements, and film. Indologist Sumathi Ramaswamy argues this general “kitsch” style was critical to cultivating a “shared visual vocabulary across regions and communities otherwise divided from each other.”⁷¹ The widely circulated image of Mother India was a far-reaching and successful artistic program supporting this national project.

A print from Calcutta, *Shaheed Bhagat Singh (Martyr Bhagat Singh)* (Figure 13), represents one such image that worked to turn the concept of the nation into a corporeal and consumable object. Created in the late 1940s, the chromolithograph depicts Mother India in the center, on top of a globe and holding the Indian flag in one hand. She stands alongside Bhagat Singh, a revolutionary who was hung by the British colonial state in 1931 for his acts of violence against British officers. Singh hands her his decapitated head and his blood flows onto the globe, presumably on parts of India. With one hand up, Mother India blesses him as he kneels before her. Ramaswamy claims this patriotic picture, one of many produced in Calcutta, aimed to “transform the national territory into a tangible and enduring object.”⁷² The print brings together a goddess-like emblem of the nation with an anticolonial martyr to powerfully prime viewers to sacrifice their bodies in service to the Indian nation. This image offers an embodiment of Chatterjee’s spiritual domain, especially in the context of the geographic mapping and ethnographic photography projects that marked India’s colonial period. In her analyses of *Shaheed Bhagat Singh*, Ramaswamy traces the history and intention of colonial geography. She

⁷⁰ Vishwanathan, “Aesthetics, Nationalism, and the Image of Woman,” 2.

⁷¹ Sumathi Ramaswamy, “Maps, Mother/Goddesses, and Martyrdom in Modern India,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 03 (2008): 828.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 820

argues that within the colonial project of writing the geography of India, mapping the country became abstract and rational, “emptied of fanciful inspiration and fabulous imagery.”⁷³ In British Indian schoolbooks, maps were modeled on the eighteenth-century British geographic traditions, utilizing mapping to make land “visually legible for rule and resource management.”⁷⁴

This colonial tool was extended to people and communities. In nineteenth-century British India, many colonial administrators supervised photography projects that aimed to measure and categorize their Indian subjects. In her exploration of colonial ethnographic practices and Indian performance art, feminist theorist Sharanya analyzes a specific photography project led by colonial administrator Maurice Vidal Portman in the Andaman Islands. Using anthropologist John Lamprey’s famous anthropometric grid, Portman photographed inhabitants of the islands against a monochrome checkered-board background. He noted the measurements, dress, and characteristics of each individual and compiled the data into statistical norms, developing a photographic archive of the colonial subject. As Sharanya notes, this was a “project of fear and subjugation that, like other tools of colonial dominance, emerged as a tightly controlled mode of production of the narrative of Otherness, and perpetuated the suppressive colonial gaze.”⁷⁵

In response to these colonial archives, Bangalore-based artist Pushpamala N. has famously deconstructed and critiqued ethnographic archetypes through her photo-performances. Working with British photographer Clare Arni, Pushpamala’s series *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs* (2000–2004) consists of more than 250 photographs divided into four sets: the Native Types, the Ethnographic Series, the Process Series, and the Popular Series. In each series, Pushpamala places herself within highly recognizable images from mass-

⁷³ Ibid., 828

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Sharanya, “An Eye for an Eye: the Hapticality of Collaborative Photo-Performance in Native Women of South India,” *Theatre Research International* 44, no. 02 (2019): 123.

produced posters, calendar art, paintings, film stills, and anthropological photographs. In her Ethnographic Series, she presents forty-five sepia-toned photographs in which she plays “powerfully on the subject-making of ‘the native.’”⁷⁶ She recreates the style, dress, and framing of these early anthropological studies and, by inserting herself into the print, reveals their constructed nature and inherent subjectivity (Figure 14). Sharanya argues Pushpamala “[casts] a gaze back on the gaze of the colonial camera,” troubling the construction of the native subject by revealing the “theatrical process” of building colonial archives.⁷⁷

While Pushpamala’s work creates a contemporary critique of this colonial historiography, prints like *Shaheed Bhagat Singh* offer their own anticolonial intervention into the anthropological mapping of both land and humans. By creatively intertwining the female body with a national map, nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists cleverly subverted the strictly mathematic and seemingly objective approaches to colonial mapping. A chromolithograph titled *Vande Mataram (I Revere the Mother)* (1937) (Figure 15) depicts the Bharat Mata dressed in the Indian flag that flows beyond her body and creates a vague yet recognizable geographic outline of India. The print does not adhere to mathematic or rational mapping rules and instead creatively intertwines tri-colored, flowing fabric with the female body to create a distinctly national shape. Interrupting the colonial map with the “anthropomorphic, the devotional, and the maternal” transforms colonial spaces into a spiritual domain, a site of sovereignty over the nation’s identity.⁷⁸

Both *Shaheed Bhagat Singh* and *Vande Mataram* point to a specific trend of appropriating Indian women as the object of this spiritual domain. The dichotomy between the

⁷⁶ Ibid., 121

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ramaswamy, “Maps, Mother/Goddesses, and Martyrdom in Modern India,” 828.

spiritual and material is distinctly gendered: the spiritual domain consists of Indian cultural traditions, and women were “embodiments of that inner spirituality which lay at the core of national identity,” essentially acting as guardians of tradition while nationalists modernized the material world.⁷⁹ India’s independence thus produced an intense national desire to “visualize Indian national territory by turning to the female form.”⁸⁰ By artistically combining the anthropomorphic–sacred form of the mother with a scientific–geographic map of the nation, essentially creating a “geo-body,” Mother India was constructed to feminize national territory and produce contradicting narratives of how nationalism and independence operate simultaneously.⁸¹ The artistic project divinizes and claims national ownership over the imagined female body, while at the same time the state abuses, oppresses, and silences women in the name of those same nationalist goals.

In addition to these widely circulated prints, Mother India was visualized through film. A canon of filmmaking grew out of India’s colonial period relating the image of the mother with land and soil, including Nitin Bose’s film *Deshar Mati* (“Motherland,” 1938) and Hanumappa M. Reddy’s film *Mathry Bhoomi* (“Motherland,” 1939). Within the national ideals of newly independent India, however, a new wave of cinema began directly connecting the mother and earth with nationhood, such as Mehboob Khan’s film *Mother India* (1957). The title of Malani’s *Mother India* installation specifically cites Khan’s film, which is considered one of the most popular classics in Indian cinema. The movie follows the life of an archetypal impoverished Indian woman who, despite her hardships, maintains a strict moral code and puts her community

⁷⁹ Mrinalini Sinha, “Reading *Mother India*: Empire, Nation, and the Female Voice,” *Journal of Women’s History* 6, no. 2 (1994): 7.

⁸⁰ Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2011), 7.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

above all else. *Mother India* quickly became a popular representation of the “new nation” and embodied “the generally accepted social and ethical consciousness of India.”⁸²

Filmed in the villages of Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh, the story follows the life of Radha (played by Nargis), who is the highly respected “mother” of her village. When her community asks her to inaugurate a new irrigation canal, Radha experiences flashbacks to all the moments that led her to become the village’s “mother.” She remembers her marriage to Shamu, a man who eventually lost both his arms in an accident and left Radha when he could no longer provide for her. Alone, Radha raised four children while working tirelessly in the field every day, protecting her children from floods and poverty and resisting the sexual advances of moneylenders. Eventually, her youngest son, Birju, grew resentful of his mother’s financial dependence on the moneylenders, especially Sukhilala. Birju violently attacked Sukhilala and set fire to the debt records, then later killed the moneylender and kidnapped his daughter, Rupa, on her wedding day. After he fled with Rupa, Radha ran after him and shot him from behind. Birju died in her arms, and the film then moved back to the present, where Radha watched her son’s blood flow into the newly inaugurated canal in her now peaceful village.⁸³

The film was produced in the context of India’s transition from a colony to a republic. The Indian National Congress (INC), led by India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, wanted to build a unifying national aesthetic and turned to cinema as a site to visualize and circulate its political rhetoric. Supported by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, filmmakers in the 1950s were encouraged by the INC to create empowering representations of the new nation.⁸⁴ Nehru was interested in constructing a modern national myth that situated

⁸² Brigitte Schulze, “The Cinematic Discovery of India: Mehboob’s Re-Invention of the Nation in *Mother India*,” *Social Scientist* 30, no. 9/10 (2002), 78.

⁸³ Mehboob Khan, *Mother India* (1957; Mumbai, India: Eros Entertainment, 2003), DVD.

⁸⁴ Schulze, “The Cinematic Discovery of India,” 72.

India's emerging modernity alongside the hard work of impoverished classes, idealizing the struggle of India's rural populations. The policies of Nehruvian socialism promised social and economic equity within a unified yet diverse nation-state, and film was frequently mobilized in an effort to propagate concepts of Indian tradition, collective strength, and modern progress, even when the INC's promises were often unfulfilled in rural India. Khan's film utilized the image of the ideal "Indian Woman" to represent Nehru's political vision and encourage submission to the nation-state.⁸⁵

The first scene of *Mother India* immediately evokes this national consciousness in a distinctly gendered context. In her old age, Radha lifts a handful of clay to her face and lets it crumble through her scarred hands. She crouches in a field with a tractor behind her, and the camera pans to show a village sprawling with cars, construction vehicles, high tension wires, and a construction site for the irrigation canal. At the village, a group of men wearing Gandhi caps (associating them with the INC) come to Radha and tell her: "Mother, your village is now provided with water and electricity."⁸⁶ In just this short scene, the men are the creators and controllers of this modern agricultural system, while Radha is connected to the earth and tradition. The subsequent flashbacks show her working in a field with other women, suffering through pregnancies and labor pain but never stopping. Similar to Chatterjee's spiritual and material domains, the film employs Radha as a spiritual symbol of a past India that is cherished throughout modernization. *Mother India* "celebrates the sweat and tears on which modern India has been built" while instilling the lower-class, traditional Indian woman as the heart of this modernity.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Ibid., 73

⁸⁶ Ibid., 81

⁸⁷ Ibid., 81

The final scene embodies the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the nation. Radha killed her own son—not unlike the end of Medea’s tragedy, but this time the act is framed as a self-sacrifice. Radha maintained her strict moral code even when faced with the immorality of her son, sacrificing him for the good of the community. She was not liberating herself but instead upholding an existing social order. In the final few minutes of the film Birju’s blood flows from Radha’s arms into the present, flowing into the clear water in the fields. Her act of murder is purified not as a crime but an essential sacrifice. In her detailed analysis of *Mother India*, film theorist Brigitte Schulze argues this last scene holds Radha as “the executor of a universal law,” thus “paving the way for a nation that is purified.”⁸⁸ Khan’s film presents an idealized India through the icon of the suffering woman. His conception of Mother India accompanied the widely circulated maps and prints that superimposed the female body with nationalist ideals.

The visualization of Mother India is part of a complex artistic and political program to claim anticolonial ownership over the nation while simultaneously denying spaces of inequity and gendered violence. Interpretations of Mother India in a global context complicate this reading, however, revealing how Indian women negotiated this iconography in their own political activism. Malani’s citation of “Mother India” referenced to visual programs but also the notorious book *Mother India* (1927), by American journalist Katherine Mayo. Working closely with British officials, Mayo argued against Indian self-rule by citing extreme gendered violence and the misogyny of glorified nationalism, an argument in line with feminist scholarship but in the context of imperialist propaganda. Mayo claimed that the very heart of Hindu culture was perverse and in need of Western reform. Nationalists and women’s movements were outraged by the book; it was widely disseminated across India and Britain and served as a catalyst for new

⁸⁸ Ibid., 84

discourses in liberal Indian feminist movements. Partially in response to Mayo's claims that Indian women needed to be rescued by Western culture, Indian feminist groups organized legislation such as the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 and the "Women's Charter" in 1927 that argued for equal pay, maternity benefits, divorce rights, and an ideological shift away from the growing Hindu Right.⁸⁹

These feminist movements put the colonial government in a difficult position, as the state wanted to uphold their promises of modernity and also present Indian women as oppressed and in need of Western intervention. Chatterjee's historical framework offers a gendered lens to view nationalist propaganda, but it risks minimizing the efforts of anticolonial and antinationalist feminist movements. Historian Mrinalini Sinha argues that it is critical to acknowledge the agency of women within anticolonial nationalism and not confine them to "derivative" gendered narratives. While Indian women were repeatedly designated to domestic roles of preserving tradition, there was a burgeoning discourse of Indian feminism in the early women's movement that attempted to disrupt "the gendered logic of Indian nationalism."⁹⁰ When considering both the iconography of Mother India and early feminist movements, it is clear that women are consistently negotiating violent, symbolic, and political appropriations of their bodies, finding powerful spaces of intervention while also suffering the realities of colonial and nationalist violence. Malani's installation is fragmented, her frames are superimposed onto each other, and in citing multiple allusions under the singular phrase "Mother India," she is drawing attention to the national and global complexities of how Indian women are seen and see themselves.

⁸⁹ Mrinalini Sinha, "Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late-Colonial India," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 629.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 625.

While Malani's *Mother India* installation carefully considers these complex discourses, she further interprets and memorializes nationalist violence by turning to Veena Das, whose work details the fragile and intimate relationship between violence and the ordinary, the collective and the individual, genre and personal stories. In her pivotal essay "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," Das breaks down the conflicting yet intricately connected practices of nation building and assault of the female body. Through detailed literary and sociological analyses, she describes how mourning situates itself in the language and bodies of women as they attempt to live with the remnants of this violence. Das begins her essay with the statement: "The very moment of the birth of India as a nation free from colonial domination was also the scene of unprecedented collective violence."⁹¹ Detailing the large-scale abduction and rape of women, Das offers a metaphor from philosopher Stanley Cavell to visualize how violence translates from the metaphysical to the everyday, moving from the national imaginary to the body and finally to the intimacies of daily life. Cavell describes a river flowing between two shores. One shore is distant, reminiscent of rape, abduction, and the "painful inscriptions of nationalist slogans on the bodies of women."⁹² The other, nearer shore is how loss flows into everyday life and how women must inhabit a world of perpetrators and violence. This closer shore ultimately represents women's "power to endure" and heal.⁹³ Das argues that when the two shores share a single frame, the question lingers: "Was it possible for women and men to take this image of healing and recreate that which died when the desire for nationalism and autonomy from colonial subjugation became metamorphosed into sexual violation?"⁹⁴

⁹¹ Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain." *Daedalus* 125, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 67.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 68

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 69

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Building on this question, Das argues that the process of decolonization constructed the female body as a surface on which nationalist anxieties and desires would be literally and figuratively inscribed. This is especially apparent in her discussion of the figure of the abducted woman, who she claims came to embody the anxieties of postcolonial social unrest. Based on government reports, during the Partition an estimated 100,000 women were raped and abducted from both sides. In an effort to navigate the aftermath of Partition violence, the government funded mass recovery projects that claimed to have recovered 12,000 women from India and 6,000 women from Pakistan by 1949.⁹⁵ According to Das, the figure of the abducted and recovered woman was used to cement the independent nation as an authoritative and masculine space. The abducted woman recalled violent Hindu–Muslim relations and thus “signaled the state of disorder” that dismantled the “orderly exchange of women.”⁹⁶ Recovery projects, then, authorized a “social and sexual contract” in which men could reestablish themselves as rational and “pure” protectors of the nation-state while also returning women to their families of origin, thus relegating them to domestic spaces and solidifying the authority of the husband/father.⁹⁷ Women’s bodies had to negotiate spaces of intimate and national violence while embodying the culture wars of men, symbolizing nationalist languages of tradition, hope, and freedom.

Directly drawing on Das’s writing, Malani’s *Mother India* installation offers a layered space in which to dissect this national amnesia related to the social reality of women in postcolonial India. By employing contrasting images of the nation and the female body, Malani emulates Das’s intertwined narratives of independence and material violence. Malani’s installation also includes the voices and screams of women constantly playing in the background,

⁹⁵ Veena Das and Veena Das, “The Figure of the Abducted Woman,” in *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 20.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

thus embodying the often nonsensical, mournful responses of emotionally wrought victims. This space of mourning and healing is later explored by Das, whose book *Life and Words* (2006) seeks to understand how, when confronted by visceral violence such as the Partition, women were able to make the world their own again. The rhetoric of mourning, of naming mutilation and fragmentation, becomes a site to break down the “fantasies of plenitude, purity, centrality, unity and mastery” that mark imperialist and nationalist narratives—the fragments of voices embody “the impossibility of such an imagination.”⁹⁸

Das roots her analysis in the notion that agency can come not from escaping the ordinary but descending into it.⁹⁹ Within the rhythms and routines of everyday life, the event, in whatever traumatic form it is remembered and sustained, intertwines into the intimacies of relationships, communities, and the subject’s voice. In her essay “The Act of Witnessing,” Das further explores this process of inhabiting a space marked by destruction, coining the term “poisonous knowledge” to define the ways violence seeps into the everyday.¹⁰⁰ Das states that “for women, the way out of poisonous knowledge was not through an ascent into godliness, but a descent into everyday life.”¹⁰¹ This quotation holds significance in the context of the iconography of Mother India, as it speaks specifically to the profound harms of turning the female body into an object of national consumption, worship, and “godliness.” Healing in the everyday is impeded by constructing the woman as a symbol of the nation that violated her.

Multiple facets of the nation-state worked tirelessly to define women within the fixed boundaries of citizenship, motherhood, sexuality, and divinity, containing her subjecthood in

⁹⁸ Veena Das and Veena Das, “The Event and the Everyday,” in *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 5.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7

¹⁰⁰ Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman, “Introduction,” in *Violence and Subjectivities*, ed. Mamphela Ramphele et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 10.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

conceptions of “nationhood.” While Malani’s *Mother India* installation opens up these discussions about the female subject and anticolonial nationalism, her depictions of Medea further mediate and subvert the confused relationship between the national imaginary and the material realities of gendered violence. Malani’s *Medea as Mutant* charcoal drawing (Figure 5), for instance, creates a version of Medea that is disrobed, mutilated, and slowly being erased from the wall. The puncture marks coating her figure make it impossible to inscribe the desires and anxieties of the nation onto her body. This destructive Medea rejects identification with the nationalistic qualities of Mother India and instead speaks to the thousands of women whose bodies continue to be a site of extreme violence.

Malani’s desire to mutilate Medea’s body is not unique to this project. Her interest in the female body as a “mutant” can be found throughout her entire portfolio, including her series *The Mutant* from the 1990s. Consisting of large-scale drawings depicting the metamorphosed female body as it suffers through traumatic events, these mutilated bodies, like Medea, are no longer men or women but spaces of national violence. A drawing from her series *Body as Site: Mutant II* (1994) (Figure 16) closely resembles the same composition and medium as *Medea as Mutant*. Using fabric dye, a similarly ephemeral medium, this work is also crudely drawn with wispy brush strokes and a thin grey background dissolving the borders of the body. By transcending gender, Malani is describing the dehumanized body subject to extreme violence as well as a body empowered by lack of a defined gender. While her *Mother India* video installation depicts the hypocrisies of nationalist narratives, *Body as Site: Mutant II* and *Medea as Mutant* more radically break down these heteronormative depictions of the nation. Malani refuses to treat Medea’s body as a woman or a mother. Instead, she features her as a mutant.

Malani's continued interest in the mutant body is reminiscent of feminist theorist Julia Kristeva's notions of abjection, a theoretical space where the subject and object can be negotiated on much different terms from nationalist visual languages. In her pivotal book *Powers of Horror* (1980), Kristeva explores the process of "abjection" as a subjective horror in which individuals are faced with their own corporeal reality. The abject refers to a breakdown between object and subject, between the self and other, where "meaning collapses"; abjection, a violent Othering, is "what disturbs identity, system, order."¹⁰² For Kristeva, the abject is visualized and confronted most often through the body and bodily fluids, such as vomit, open wounds, and corpses, where the boundaries between the defined self and the independent object are no longer distinct. As Kristeva explained:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.¹⁰³

Kristeva attempts to situate the abject within patriarchal institutions by exploring maternity and motherhood. She claims that a mother sacrifices her body to nurture her child as the child begins to distinguish the self from the mother, and eventually the child starts to turn to the Symbolic order, a Lacanian concept of the social world filled with language and conventions. The Symbolic order is represented by the father figure, and the mother is left to the realm of the discarded abject.

When considering Malani's *Medea as Mutant* on the basis of Kristeva's framework, Medea is both a destructive woman and an ambiguously mutilated body that embodies the abject.

4. ¹⁰² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982),

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 2

Her notorious infanticide disrupts the concepts of boundary, order, and law that separates humans from monsters. Moving from a doting wife and a mother to a killer and a liberatory heroine, Medea represents that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules”; she is “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”¹⁰⁴ The mutilated and punctured body of Medea illustrates a physical expression of abjection in which Malani represents the victimized woman as a subject, an object, and a space in between. Mother India, an embodiment of corporeal comfort and tradition, constructs the raped and mutilated woman as abject, as distinctly Othered within visual iconography of the independent nation. Amid historical accounts documenting death and destruction conceptually and statistically, Malani’s Medea represents the abused female body in her grotesque physicality. Her body becomes a confrontation with the materiality of death, a space where the meaning of the masculine and independent nation collapses.

Ultimately, while Malani’s visual engagement with the abject subverts these programs of maternal nation-building, it also creates a radical site of postcolonial identity (re)construction. In her analysis of the monstrous feminine, cultural critic Barbara Creed claims that “abjection is always ambiguous” and the function of the monstrous feminine body is “to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.”¹⁰⁵ The ambiguity of the abject body, its refusal to inhabit subject or object wholly, threatens the lingering borders and constructs of colonial power structures. Medea’s body is not contextualized within a map of the nation, but she is also not implicated into the ordinary and the everyday. Placed against a stark white background, she simultaneously represents a body, a myth, and a reality. Medea as a subject is ruptured and split open, creating a space for a new identity situated in both hybridity

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 4

¹⁰⁵ Barbara Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,” *Screen* 27, no. 1 (January 1986): 71.

and agency. As Kristeva aptly noted, “yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

Chapter 4: Medea as Myth, Memory, and Healing

Malani's construction of Medea is a powerful subversion of Indian nationalist narratives. When examining the violent postcolonial realities of women, her appropriation of mythological stories is also a site to reclaim colonial practices and begin a process of healing. Both Malani and Heiner Müller have narrated postcolonial liberation by grounding it in the reinterpretation of classical Greek mythology. In his essay "Western Classics, Indian Classics" (2007), postcolonial scholar Harish Trivedi argues that Western canonical literary works have been an essential feature in colonizing minds within colonial education systems. These imposed literary canons were particularly critical in shaping concepts of the Civilized and the Other, both justifying imperial rule and allowing Western literature to suppress other cultural heritages. He asks: "Would the experience of colonization have been the same without the classics?"¹⁰⁷ Within this context, the "refiguration of Greek drama" plays a significant transformative role as a potentially liberatory tool.¹⁰⁸ Müller and Malani's appropriation of Euripides' classic text acts as a distinct subversion of this colonial technology, suggesting that language and narratives can be reshaped to support postcolonial liberation. Trivedi leaves an important question worth considering alongside their work: "How do the classics now live on in the postcolonial consciousness and sensibilities of the former colonizers, as well as the colonized, while still serving their function as timeless texts?"¹⁰⁹

By focusing on myth to reflect Indian history and politics, Malani employs spaces of fiction and imagination to engage with trauma. As discussed previously, in her "Language and

¹⁰⁷ Harish Trivedi, "Western Classics, Indian Classics: Postcolonial Contestations," in *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds*, ed. Hardwick Lorna and Carol Gillespie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 187.

¹⁰⁸ Hardwick, "Greek Drama and Anti-Colonialism," 221.

¹⁰⁹ Trivedi, "Western Classics, Indian Classics," 187.

Body” essay Das explores the complex spaces of processing and mourning necessary for healing from Partition trauma. Significantly, she situates her analysis in the works of philosophers, poets, and novelists. She argues that “some realities need to be fictionalized before they can be apprehended,” and thus investigates the language of pain and trauma through works of fiction.¹¹⁰ Malani’s Medea becomes a site for this imaginative space where the mutilated female body can be constructed through mythology rather than historical reality. Her focus on mythology, fiction, and imagined women are expertly used to “generate detachment” from such indescribable trauma and give viewers a place to “contemplate the horror, become aware of it, and call it by its name.”¹¹¹ Malani’s mythical characters thus go beyond reimagining nationalist imagery and histories and become a space to mediate the relationship between pain and the female voice, ultimately offering a language of comprehension and healing for these silenced histories.

While the physical appropriation of Medea is rooted in a desire to challenge and heal from colonial oppressions, Malani’s work with myth should also be considered through the lens of memory politics. In her book *Violent Belongings*, postcolonial scholar Kavita Daiya argues for the importance of examining both History, or dominant national narratives, and Memory, or “non-disciplinary constructions of the past” located in subaltern voices.¹¹² The term *subaltern* was originally used by Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci to define populations who exist outside hegemonic power structures and have no voice in society. In South Asian scholarship, feminist critic and scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has been a pivotal voice in bringing subaltern studies into postcolonial discourses. In her revered essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

¹¹⁰ Das, “Language and Body,” 69.

¹¹¹ Doris Von Drathen, “The Continuous Flow of Living Presence,” in *Nalini Malani: Splitting the Other: Retrospective 1992-2009* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 31.

¹¹² Kavita Daiya, *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 38.

she offers fundamental arguments for seeking alternative voices to construct historical narratives. She argues that Western scholarship works tirelessly to preserve itself as a subject, and in the process it can only speak about the East through colonial discourses. Because of this, the answer to her core question (can the subaltern speak?) is no, not within Western systems of knowledge.¹¹³ Just as the South Asian subaltern woman is so often spoken for by Western discourses, she also cannot speak within her own state narratives. The distinction between memory and history in post-Partition India is ultimately a distinction between the subaltern experience and dominant state and colonial accounts.

Malani engages with the aesthetics of the subaltern subject and political memory through a multilayered use of medium, technique, and space. This is particularly evident in her shadow plays, innovative multimedia installations consisting of rotating cylinders hanging from the ceiling and projecting shadows on the wall. One of her most complex shadow plays, *In Search of Vanished Blood* (2012), combines dense iconographic and textual references with an immersive space and disjointed narratives, thus embodying the multiplicity of the subaltern woman. The eleven-minute installation consists of five mylar cylinders slowly spinning in the middle of the room (Figure 17). Malani painted in reverse inside the cylinders, and those painted images are projected onto the walls as shadows. Six video projections cut through the turning cylinders, oscillating between hiding or being hidden by the shadows. The projections are accompanied by a soundtrack of abstract sounds and spoken quotations mixed with the whispers of the viewers in the room. Viewers standing in the middle of the installation are immersed in visual and audio sensations, seeing flashing video fragments of the female body, blood, painted shadows of snakes and sari-clad women, a woman with a scorpion covering her mouth, shadows of the

¹¹³ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Hindu goddess Durga, and strobe lights pulsing across the walls, to name a few of the featured images.¹¹⁴

The installation is filled with innumerable literary, artistic, and historical references. The title cites the poem “In Search of Vanished Blood” (1965) by Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a tribute to the trauma of the 1947 Partition. The first few lines of the poem recall the lack of state accountability following the mass violence that was never officially memorialized in national monuments, museums, or public trials:

There’s no sign of blood, not anywhere.
I’ve searched everywhere.
The executioner’s hands are clean, his nails transparent.
The sleeves of each assassin are spotless.
No sign of blood: no trace of red,
Not on the edge of the knife, none on the point of the sword.
The ground is without stains, the ceiling white.
The blood which has disappeared without leaving a trace isn’t part of written history: who will
guide me to it?¹¹⁵

Malani combines a soundscape of lines from Heiner Müller’s interpretation of Hamlet’s Ophelia in his play *Hamletmachine* (1997), Spivak’s translation of Indian writer Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Draupadi,” and Samuel Beckett’s play *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958). The entire installation is inspired by novelist Christa Wolf’s feminist revision of the Greek myth of Cassandra. Malani’s references to Ophelia, Draupadi, and Cassandra are particularly important, as they point to three women whose voices have been silenced or ignored. Cassandra, daughter of the last king of Troy and a prophetess, predicted the fall of Troy but no one believed her. Draupadi is a heroine from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. In Devi’s short story Draupadi is reimagined as a female tribal insurgent from Bengal who was abducted and raped by police officers; the story highlighted

¹¹⁴ Virginia Allison Harbin, “Encounters in Excess: Transnational Feminisms in Contemporary Installation Art” (dissertation, Rutgers, 2017), 16.

¹¹⁵ Faiz Ahmed Faiz, “In Search of Vanished Blood,” trans. Agha Shahid Ali, Human Rights Library (University of Minnesota), accessed April 7, 2020, <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/edumat/IHRIP/circle/gc3a.htm>

Draupadi's double marginalization as both lower caste and a woman. Ophelia from *Hamlet* is driven mad after Hamlet murders her father, and she drowns in a river after suffering from grief and madness. Müller's reinterpretation of Ophelia in *Hamletmachine* gives her a voice in which she can speak back to the characters preoccupied with her body and potential desire.¹¹⁶ These sources represent only a fraction of the references in Malani's installation, and Mieke Bal argues that trying to fully describe the iconography is both "impossible" and "fruitless."¹¹⁷ The multiplicity of sources embodies Malani's mission to be in conversation with multifaceted subaltern voices.

Spivak argues the subaltern cannot speak but are spoken for, and Malani is faced with the implications of this in her work. How can she create an aesthetic of the subaltern experience without speaking for the subaltern woman? In her critiques of postcolonial scholarship, Spivak discusses the tensions between speaking for the subaltern woman and wanting to include her representation in postcolonial projects.¹¹⁸ The latter risks reinscribing her with a "doubly marginalized position" in which she once again cannot participate in the production of meaning.¹¹⁹ Spivak claims that "the substantive concern for the politics of the oppressed" often hides "a privileging of the intellectual," where academics essentialize the subaltern subject and "speak to . . . the historically muted subject."¹²⁰

In response to this critique, Malani uses an excess of referentiality to transcend the singular cultural and historical signifiers speaking for and embodying the subaltern experience. *In Search of Vanished Blood* combines multiple histories, literary interpretations, sensations, and imagery

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 19

¹¹⁷ Bal, *In Medias Res*, 90

¹¹⁸ Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 173

¹¹⁹ Harbin, "Encounters in Excess," 2.

¹²⁰ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 295.

to refuse instilling the subaltern body with any predetermined site of meaning. The viewer is faced with nonlinear, overwhelming visual and audio references that they will never fully parse through during the duration of the installation. Instead, the referential layering produces an “impossibility of a stable image or stable meaning” in which the viewer must “listen, rather than attempt to know, her experience.”¹²¹ She insists viewers engage with the subaltern voice even when she is beyond comprehension.¹²²

The space and medium of the installation create a physical encounter with subaltern memory and historical violence. In order to project the painted shadows and images on the wall, Malani uses Mylar cylinders with a glossy, transparent surface. They turn slowly, leaving viewers with just enough time to see the images without absorbing them fully; the viewer loses all temporal agency and must patiently wait for another turn.¹²³ The viewer is trapped in a “tension between the desire to understand and the difficulty of processing in time.”¹²⁴ As the glossy surface and continuous spinning make it impossible to grasp the breadth of painted images and shadows in their entirety, the cylinders parallel a history that neglects subaltern experiences and obscures the full narrative.

As the cylinders spin and reveal images of violence spanning centuries, countries, and cultures, they create a sense of repetitive time in which viewers are confronted with the “repetitive nature of violence.”¹²⁵ The Mylar’s glossy surface ensures that as viewers look into the cylinders, they also see their own reflection. Their shadows are projected onto the wall alongside the painted images, and thus viewers are implicated into the work and the repeated

¹²¹ Harbin, “Encounters in Excess,” 4.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 10

¹²³ Mieke Bal, “Stains against Violence,” 65.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 66

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

narratives of violence. Mieke Bal argues that here Malani creates a form of engagement that transcends passively viewing the Other. She states: “Once we recognize that it is impossible to see without being implicated, the entire system of thinking in ‘us’/‘them’ forms of othering collapses, and instead, the horizontal relationship between ‘I’ and ‘you’ comes into position.”¹²⁶

Malani’s multimedia installations use an excess of references, medium, and space to reflect an aesthetic of memory. Within this practice, Malani’s interest in reinterpreting Medea more clearly becomes an act of privileging memory and using it “as a filter of historical experience” from subaltern perspectives.¹²⁷ Just as memory is a “fluid, contingent” process, myth is inherently malleable.¹²⁸ Medea has occupied a multitude of different bodies and forms—she has been constructed and deconstructed, imagined and reimagined, from different individual and communal perspectives since her conception in 431 BC. Even the medium of charcoal, slowly fading and punctured with eraser marks in Malani’s *Medea as Mutant*, is an act of reproducing this subjective memory. Art historian Andreas Huyssen argues that Malani’s “alteration/oscillation between emergence and vanishing” creates the “very structure of political memory itself.”¹²⁹ She artistically emulates a structure of experience that is transitory, delicate, and often erased, and she does this from a fictionalized body that can inhabit multiple experiences and perspectives simultaneously, thus once again refusing to represent, essentialize, or engage with binaries.

While Malani’s engagement with the materiality of memory creates a language for repetitive violence, the politics of memory becomes more complicated when considering her

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Sambrani, "Shadows, Reflections and Nightmare," 29.

¹²⁸ Daiya, *Violent Belongings*, 30.

¹²⁹ Andreas Huyssen, "Shadow Plays as Medium of Memory," in *Nalini Malani, In Search of Vanished Blood*. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 51.

identity in postmemory discourses. Born in Karachi before it was part of Pakistan, Malani migrated to Mumbai, India, with her family shortly after the Partition. Because she was only a child during the aftermath, she joins an entire generation of women whose understanding of Partition violence is inherited through generational memories. This experience of collecting memories from past generations was explored by feminist theorist Marianne Hirsch in 1992 when she famously coined the term “postmemory.” In her groundbreaking book *The Generation of Postmemory: Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (2012), she defines postmemory as “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before.”¹³⁰ Hirsch argues that, through generational structures of transmission, children of Holocaust survivors viscerally remember and feel residual traumas. Their own memories are affected by the stories, photographs, and behaviors passed down to them, and the often incomprehensible and nonsensical experiences of trauma continue to thrive in present generations.¹³¹

Malani’s portfolio is an exemplar of the aesthetics of postmemory material practices, embracing the subjective spaces of memory while building fragile bridges between historical and contemporary traumas. Postmemory aesthetics embody a language of personal and communal histories. They interrogate how diaspora, memory, displacement, and hybridity produce works that listen to the voices of past generations and intervene with contemporary iterations of colonial and nationalist violence. Malani’s work in postmemory contexts allows her to meld Partition memories with contemporary politics. Her shadow plays, video installations, and paintings bring “to the present the gendered violence that was perpetrated” amid India’s

¹³⁰ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

independence while privileging historical stories, bodies, and memories.¹³² Ultimately, she builds on nonlinear narratives and chaotic imagery to explore the relational aspects of history and memory that thrive in the experiences of her own generation.¹³³

Malani's work with memory and violence joins a larger context of contemporary South Asian artists exploring their own histories of Partition (post)memory. Delhi-based artist Kriti Arora uses film to explore personal family memories that were passed down from her great-grandparents, who were displaced during the Partition. Her five-minute silent film *THIS or THAT? Or NEITHER?* (2005) (Figure 18) consists of black and white archival footage from the Partition of an overflowing passenger train. A grainy image of a woman on the train holding a white cloth reappears regularly, and Arora combines this with footage of herself waving a white fabric in a rhythmic fashion while creating an unknown object in an artist's studio space. Throughout the film, she enters into a dialogue with the archived memory of her great-grandparents, the art-making process, and herself as an autobiographical subject, thus delving into the experience of remembering Partition through familial memories.¹³⁴

Other contemporary feminist Indian artists are interrogating the continuity of Partition memory through the diaspora. U.S.-based artist Pritika Chowdhry's four-part installation project *Partition Memorial Project* (2007–9) shows how the “global flows of people, technologies, and knowledge” extend the nonlinear nature of Partition memory beyond the borders of India or Pakistan.¹³⁵ The multi-part installation *Queering Mother India, What the Body Remembers, Silent Waters, and Remembering the Crooked Line* includes clay and fiber sculptures evoking

¹³² Rajee Paña Jejisher Gill, *Partition and Postmemory in the Work of Kriti Arora and Sharlene Bomboat*, Master's thesis, Concordia University, 2014, 19.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 36

¹³⁵ Jacque Micieli-Voutsinas, “‘Subaltern’ Remembrances: Mapping Affective Approaches to Partition Memory,” *Social Transformations: Journal of the Global South* 1, no. 1 (January 2013): 30.

different Partition/post-Partition memories and embodiments of collective trauma. In what she calls “memory sculptures,” Chowdhry creates hand-drawn maps, sculptural fragments of bodies, photographs, and found objects to explore transnational cultural memory.¹³⁶ Other artists work with similar subject matter, such as Rina Banerjee and her poetic multimedia sculptures; Dayanita Singh’s photo books telling stories of fragmented identities; Hema Upadhyay’s autobiographic installations on alienation and loss; and Pushpamala N’s photography complicating narratives of gender, place, and history. Nalini Malani works in conversation with many of these contemporary South Asian artists, communally interrogating colonial histories, gendered violence, and subaltern memory.

Spivak argues that imperialist, nationalist, and anticolonial history-telling has aided in creating an archive that essentializes and silences the subaltern subject. These contemporary artistic voices offer an alternative archive, a “living archive,” that is always in-the-making, revising, critiquing, and creating space for new voices. The living archive is a collaborative project, “a repository of collective memory” that aims to both rewrite past discourses and create a nuanced understanding of the present.¹³⁷ Malani’s work within this living archive re-members, re-produces, and re-inscribes meaning to sites of memory. Positioning herself between myth, history, and contemporary violence, Malani’s art is perhaps best described by the structure of *in medias res*—to enter “in the middle of things.”¹³⁸ She refuses the comfort of a linear narrative, and in her exhibitions viewers are always placed in the middle of a space that is present and past, global and local, individual and collective. They are not looking *at* the world but are immersed *into* it.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 28

¹³⁷ Miranda Imperial, “A Living Archive: Women’s Absences and the Painterly (Re)Inscriptions of the Gendered Nation,” *Indialogs* 6 (February 2019): 119.

¹³⁸ Bal, *In Medias Res*, 19.

Malani's engagement with *in medias res* was particularly emphasized during her retrospective at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in New Delhi in 2014. Mieke Bal visited on the last day of the exhibition, and she recounts the astonishing experience of witnessing Malani's *Erasure Performance* (2014) (Figure 19). The middle room consisted of Malani's large *Medea as Mutant* charcoal drawing with a guard standing in front of it. Bal approached the drawing, and the guard politely asked that she step back and not ruin the delicate charcoal. After a short time in the third room, Bal returned to *Medea as Mutant* and was shocked to see the same guard slowly erasing the charcoal with an eraser, only minutes after protecting it. She asked what he was doing, and he only smiled and continued working. Bal carefully considers the many layers of significance in this act. The guard became a performance artist who erased what he has been professionally sworn to protect. His act of erasure was violent, directed toward a delicate and mutilated female body, but no matter how long he worked the charcoal was never completely erased—it left remnants of black dust on the white museum wall.¹³⁹ The performance constructed a narrative of the state, the museum, and subaltern body that completed Malani's 1996 *Medea Project*. Medea's erasure was as significant as her creation.

Bal returned to the entrance of the exhibit and noticed a wall text that said:

This is a tribute to the fresco artists of Nathdwara whose works are getting destroyed by our callousness. This manner of working is in identification with those artists. These works will be wiped off after 15 days just as theirs have been. It is hoped that the sadness is shared by others.

N. Malani, 5/92¹⁴⁰

Malani refers to the famous frescos painted on heritage sites in Nathdwara, a temple town in the western state of Rajasthan. As a result of modernization projects, the frescos were neglected by

¹³⁹ Mieke Bal, "In Medias Res: Visiting Nalini Malani's Retrospective Exhibition, New Delhi, 2014," *Qui Parle* 24, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 36.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

the state and destroyed in the span of fifteen days. Her *Erasure Performance* was enacted fifteen days after the New Delhi exhibition opened as an act of artistic solidarity with Nathdwara's loss. Malani's signature intentionally cites 1992, the year the World Hindu Council tore down the sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya and caused violent riots nationwide, as well as the year the Nathdwara paintings were destroyed. By erasing the *Medea as Mutant* drawing in the present, Malani bonded 1992 with 2014 and placed the viewer *in medias res*. As Bal recounts, "I was in the middle of the narrative's plot, in the middle of the space, in the middle of time. This in-the-middle prepared me for my part in the politics of this art."¹⁴¹ In this middle, Malani imbues the present with memories of the past and liberates viewers from their oppositional thinking between documenting history and engaging with the present.¹⁴² As Bal states: "Nothing is *past*—the past is con-temporary with the present."¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 35

¹⁴² Bal, *In Medias Res*, 179.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 34-35

Conclusion: Subverting and Liberating Subjecthood

In an interview in 2015 with curators Gayatri Sinha and Stuart Comer, Malani introduced herself by saying: “I am Nalini Malani, I am not a Hindu.”¹⁴⁴ While the room laughed with her, the statement resonated throughout the rest of the interview as she discussed her evolving practice and political engagements. Displaced from her home during Partition and raised by a Christian father and a Sikh mother amid the rise of the Hindu right, Malani has found herself in multiple spaces of alienation, loss, and resistance. Within a male-dominated field of established practices, she engages in multimedia feminist art-making and refuses the historical, national, and human-made borders separating literary and artistic traditions. Her identity and her practice are always in opposition. Malani maintains that her and her work’s “uprootedness is not always negative,” but that it “also comes with the affirmative possibilities of experiencing linkages” that create new places, languages, and meanings.¹⁴⁵

Malani carefully builds Medea as a multifaceted character who opens up space to experience these new sites of meaning. Medea’s uprootedness is situated in her resistance to subjecthood. She refuses the boundaries imposed after Partition that posited the female body as a site of simultaneous national pride and assault—she is not a mother, a goddess, an ordinary woman, or an image of the nation. She is not bound to a singular history or interpretation, instead joining a plethora of other mythologies, poems, plays, films, and artworks that construct entirely new notions of violence, subjectivity, and liberation. As Malani’s subject loses a sense of place, she can no longer be held within a nation-state as a citizen-subject in this history. Malani’s

¹⁴⁴ Stuart Comer, Nalini Malani, and Gayatri Sinha, “Partition is what we are living even now: A Conversation with Nalini Malani,” video file, *post (MoMA)*, June 18th, 2015, https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/600-Partition-is-what-we-are-living-even-now-a-conversation-with-nalini-malani

¹⁴⁵ Ritika Kochhar and Nalini Malani, “‘Uprootedness Is Not Always Negative’: Nalini Malani,” *The Theatre Times*, October 15, 2019, <https://thetheatretimes.com/uprootedness-is-not-always-negative-nalini-malani>

reinterpretation of Medea dismantles and critiques post-Partition Indian nationalism, the residual memory of violence, and the continued violation of the female body.

In the process of deconstructing and subverting Medea's subjecthood, Nalini Malani returns to the site of individual and national trauma and constructs a fluid, powerful, and grotesque product of subaltern memory. Medea is not meant to be understood, looked at, or spoken for. She is experienced. As she continuously recurs in Malani's exhibitions across the world, her body oscillates between past and present, history and memory, existence and erasure. Medea becomes part of the project of finding, in Malani's words, "a way of purging, of healing within art."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Nalini Malani, "Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in Conversation with Nalini Malani," interview by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Nalini Malani: In Search of Vanished Blood*, 2012, 35.

Illustrations

* Please note that I was unable to secure copy rights permissions for the illustrations. Therefore, I am including only a list of the images I am referring to in this Honors Thesis. Many of these images are available online.

Figure 1: Nalini Malani, *Medea*, 1996, mixed media installation, Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay, in Sean Kissane and Johan Pijnappel. *Nalini Malani*. Milano: Charta, 2007.



Figure 2: Nalini Malani, *Alchemist's Robe (detail from Medea)*, 1996, acrylic on mylar, Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay, accessed April 29, 2020, <http://www.nalinimalani.com/installations/Medea.htm>

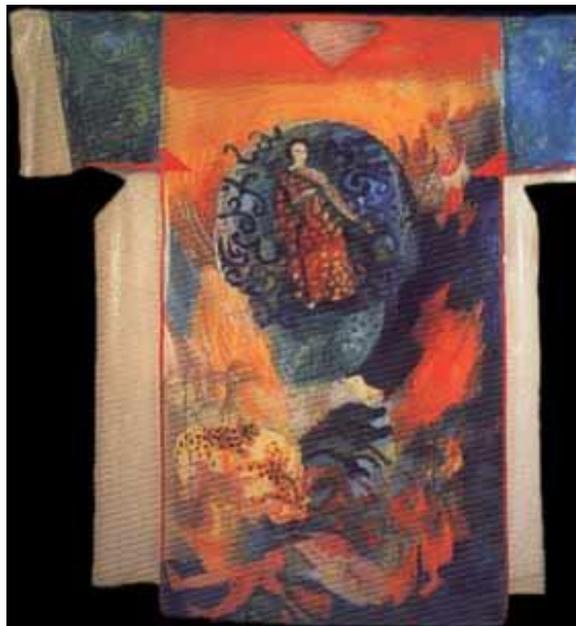


Figure 3: Nalini Malani, *Bridal Robe (Detail from Medea)*, 1996, acrylic on mylar, Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay, accessed April 29, 2020, <http://www.nalinimalani.com/installations/Medea.htm>



Figure 4: Nalini Malani, *Robe of Vengeance (Detail from Medea)*, 1996, acrylic on mylar, Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay, accessed April 29, 2020, <http://www.nalinimalani.com/installations/Medea.htm>



Figure 5: Nalini Malani, *Medea as Mutant (Detail from Medea)*, 1996, wall drawing with charcoal and gouache, Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay, in Sean Kissane and Johan Pijnappel. *Nalini Malani*. Milano: Charta, 2007.



Figure 6: Nalini Malani, *Medea I*, 2006, acrylic and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 183cm x 122cm, Irish Museum of Modern Art, in Srimoyee Mitra, "Naked Bodies as Site of Social Change." *WRECK: Graduate Journal of Art History, Visual Art, and Theory* (2008), 68.



Figure 7: Nalini Malani, *Sita I*, 2006, acrylic and enamel reverse painting on mylar sheet, 183cm x 122cm, Irish Museum of Modern Art, in Srimoyee Mitra, "Naked Bodies as Site of Social Change." *WRECK: Graduate Journal of Art History, Visual Art, and Theory* (2008), 71.



Figure 8: Kama, *Rama and Sita Enthroned in a Pavilion, Attended by Hanuman*, ca. 1800, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 24.7cm x 18.5cm, The San Diego Museum of Art, in Keta Patel, "Nalini Malani: Mythology, Memory, and Multiplicity in Contemporary Indian Art." Honors Thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 2019, 51.

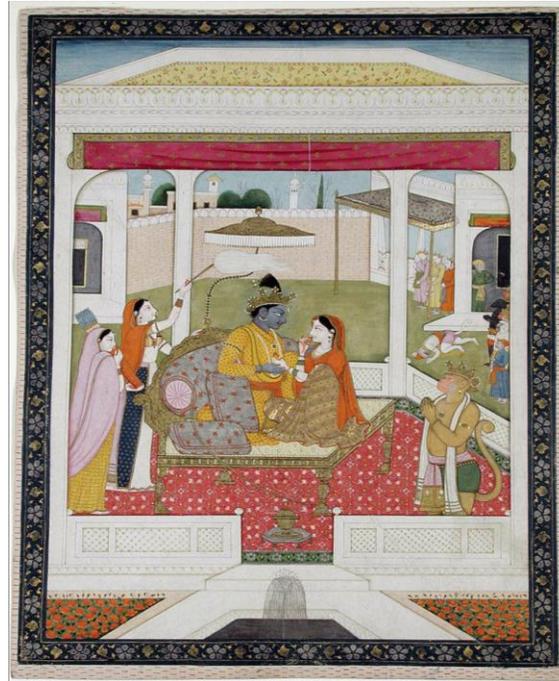


Figure 9: Unknown Artist, *Unknown Title*, 1985, lithograph on paper, 42cm x 31.5cm, British Museum, accessed April 29, 2020, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sita's_ordeal_by_fire.jpg

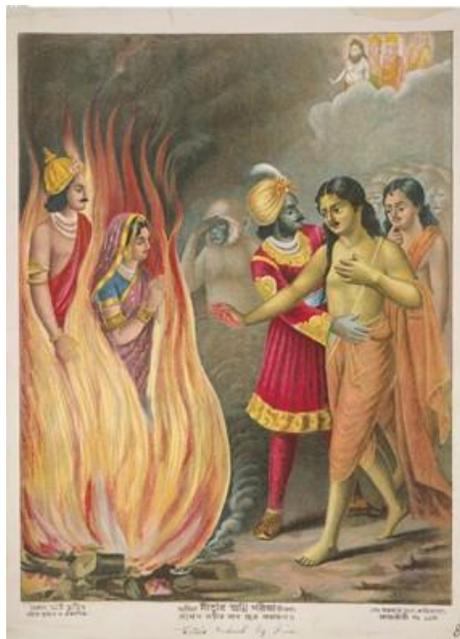


Figure 10: Nalini Malani, *Sita/Medea*, 2006, acrylic and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 183cm x 122cm, Irish Museum of Modern Art, in Keta Patel, “Nalini Malani: Mythology, Memory, and Multiplicity in Contemporary Indian Art.” Honors Thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 2019, 48.

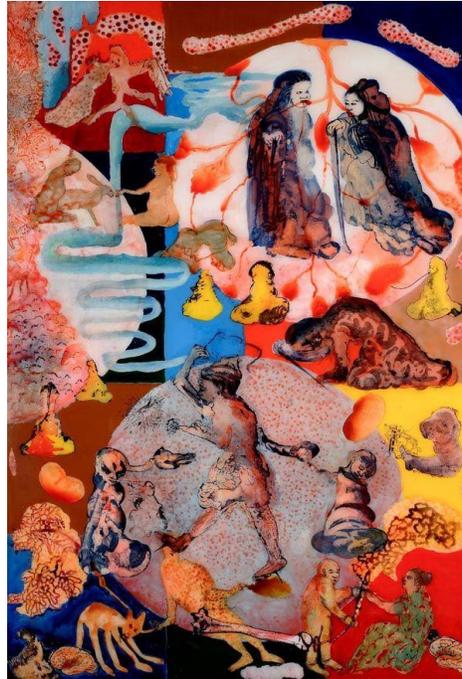


Figure 11: Nalini Malani, *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*, 2005, five channel video play, 5 1/2 minutes, 51st Venice Biennale, in Sean Kissane and Johan Pijnappel. *Nalini Malani*. Milano: Charta, 2007.



Figure 12: Abanindranath Tagore, *Bharat Mata*, 1905, watercolor, 10 1/2 x 6 inches, accessed April 29, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharat_Mata_\(painting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharat_Mata_(painting))

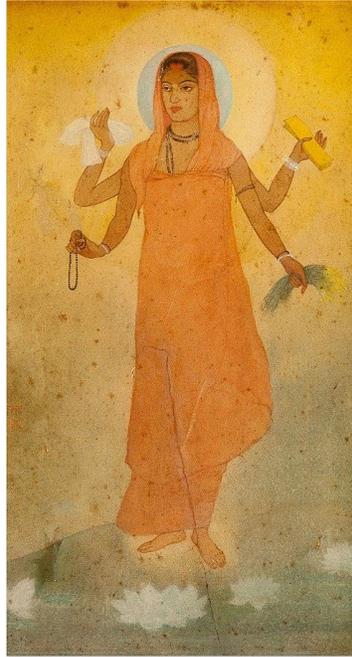


Figure 13: *Shaheed Bhagat Singh (Martyr Bhagat Singh)*, artist not known, late 1940s. Chromolithograph published by Rising Art Cottage, Calcutta. Courtesy of Christopher Pinney, University College London.



শহীদ ভগত সিং
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ভারত মাতার মুক্তি সাধনায়
শহীদ ভগত সিং

Shaheed Bhagat Singh

Figure 14: Pushpamala N., *The Ethnographic Series*, 2004. Sepia toned photograph, 9 x 12 inches, accessed April 29, 2020, <http://www.pushpamala.com/the-ethnographic-series/>



Figure 15: *Vande Mataram*, (*I praise thee, Mother*). Chromolithograph published by Rao Brothers, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, 1937. Painting of Mother India by P. S. Ramachandra Rao (Kind permission of Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger, Vienna).



Figure 16: Nalini Malani, *Body as Site: Mutant II*, 1994, fabric dye painting on milk carton, in Sean Kissane and Johan Pijnappel. *Nalini Malani*. Milano: Charta, 2007.



Figure 17: Nalini Malani, *In Search of Vanished Blood*, 2012, six screen projections, five rotating Mylar cylinders with watercolor. Video/shadow play view from The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Image courtesy of Nalini Malani. Accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.icaboston.org/exhibitions/nalini-malani-search-vanished-blood>



Figure 18: Kriti Arora. Still from *THIS or THAT? Or NEITHER?*. 2005. Silent, Black and White, 16mm film, 5:02 minutes. Veoh. Posted by “raghavsalooya,” 2008, <http://www.veoh.com/watch/v14701621cMRbG4je>.



Figure 19: Nalini Malani, *Erasure Performance*, 2014. Charcoal wall drawing erased on December 21st by security guard, 60 minutes, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi. Image courtesy of Nalini Malani and Mieke Bal.



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