



IN THE HEART OF DARKNESS

Nalini Malani

BY JYOTI DHAR

“He blew up like a bomb,” Nalini Malani tells me, as she narrates the story of a child who was murdered during the atrocities of the 2002 Gujarat riots. During one of the worst incidents—the Naroda Patiya massacre on February 28—close to 100 people, including over 30 children, were killed by the raging, violent mobs coursing through the city of Ahmedabad. According to eyewitness accounts, crowds targeted and overpowered young Muslims, raping, stabbing and most often burning them by pouring kerosene either on their houses or directly into their mouths and then setting them ablaze. This last fate befell a six-year-old boy, an incident on which Malani based one of her most polemical yet affirmative works, *Unity in Diversity* (2003).

Born in Karachi in 1946, on the threshold of India’s defining political moment—the partition of the Indian subcontinent the following year—Malani is no stranger to communal violence and displacement. Based in Mumbai, the artist has lived through the communal riots in 1992 and 2002 and India’s testing of nuclear weapons in 1998, as well as the rise of Hindu fanaticism and the relentless sexual violence against women in recent years. For over four decades, these issues have informed Malani’s artistic practice as a painter of allegorical imagery who has increasingly incorporated performers, video and sound into her provocative installations. During the last 20 years, Malani has produced a defining series of vivid, multisensorial experiences that incorporate a signature theatrical aesthetic alongside a macabre subtext and a cast of mythical characters, as a way of responding to, negotiating with and partially memorializing these shocking sociopolitical events.

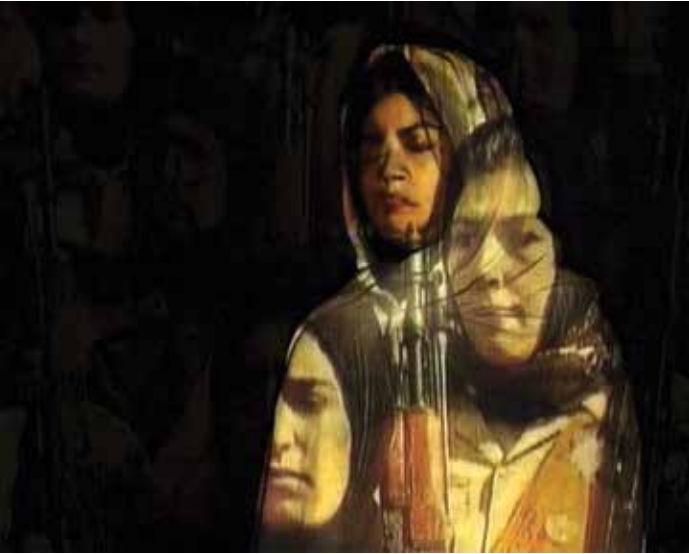
“I think 2002 was the worst thing that ever happened to this country,” she says of the Gujarat riots in particular. “It should not be forgotten. Political parties [in India] don’t want to commemorate it, as they may upset one community or another. The politicians here are not interested in the greater good.” Yet this was not always

the general perception of Indian politics, Malani notes, pointing to Jawaharlal Nehru’s belief, in the lead up to independence, that the new, autonomous India would achieve “unity in diversity.” Such notions of strength through harmony and solidarity have a long history in India, and can be seen in 19th-century artist Raja Ravi Varma’s famous painting *Galaxy of Musicians* (1889), which depicts 11 female musicians from different parts of the country playing together.

In *Unity in Diversity*—which the artist describes as a “video play”—Malani juxtaposes these two faces of India: the communal violence of the Gujarat riots and the cultural unity of Varma’s painting. The viewer enters a living-room setting, replete with crimson-red walls, Art Deco-style chairs and wall-fitted lamps, all evocative, as she says, of “upper-middle-class Bombay.” On one wall hang black-and-white archive photographs showing Jawaharlal Nehru, Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Mahatma Gandhi, either separately at major events, such as the Salt March in 1930, or together at important meetings. Each photograph signifies a key moment in the life of the nation. On an adjoining wall hangs a large gold frame that contains a video projection of *Galaxy of Musicians*. The painted female figures, initially static, slowly begin to move, march and finally take up arms over the course of the video’s seven-and-a-half minutes. Through Malani’s digital intervention, the harmonious musicians become a zealous army, standing up to the turbulence and aggression of their times. Later, a voice can be heard recounting the disturbing details of the six-year-old boy’s murder during the Gujarat riots.

Hope and despair coexist in *Unity in Diversity*. As the work unfolds, a notion evocative of Noam Chomsky’s ideas on conflict and criticism also surfaces—this piece is not about creating anarchy or changing the existing systems altogether; rather, it is a trenchant commentary on these systems, arguing that reform is possible

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through the willingness to challenge and confront iniquity, even when people feel powerless and atrocities are commonplace. *Unity in Diversity* perfectly encapsulates so much of what Malani’s practice and approach involve: sinister, fantastical imagery, theatrical staging, philosophical notions, references to violent, controversial, contemporary moments and, most significantly, poignantly emblematic female protagonists.

As a young woman, Malani faced a number of obstacles on her path to becoming an artist, many of which, paradoxically, were to augment her practice, sometimes decades later. When Malani approached her father in 1962 about her desire to enroll in the Sir Jamsetjee Jeejebhoy School of Art in Mumbai, commonly known as the Sir JJ School of Art, he refused to pay her fees. Undeterred, she began to frequent the offices and printing presses of the *Times of India*, observing some of its most talented illustrators and writers, then busy creating and exploring the identity of the new nation at a moment of optimism—the period often referred to as “*naya daur*” (“the new era”). Soon she was publishing her drawings in two Hindi magazines, *Dharmayug* and *Sarika*, both associated with the *Times*, and was earning enough to pay her own fees at the Sir JJ School of Art. It was here that Malani—learning from writers at the *Times*, who often took mythological tales as a starting point for their modern-day stories—became increasingly receptive to the open-ended possibilities of using myths as a narrative device.

While at art school from 1964 to 1969, some of Malani’s most informative and enriching experiences were at her first studio in the Bhulabhai Memorial Institute, Mumbai, which housed spaces for dancers, poets, musicians and senior artists. Malani would spend time interacting with artists from a range of disciplines, helping to make costumes and sets for theater directors at the institute. She also traveled extensively in her youth, gaining exposure to international cultures and literature through her father’s job with Air India at a time when this kind of access was uncommon—the references in her work ranged from classical Japanese painting and theater to Greek mythology, Marxist philosophy, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s anthropology and Chomsky’s works on structuralism. She was



(Previous spread)
REMEMBERING MAD MEG (detail), 2007–11, three projections, seven Lexan plastic cylinders, painted steel frames, light, motors, sound, dimensions variable.
Photo by Payal Kapadia. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, Paris.

(Opposite and this page)
UNITY IN DIVERSITY (detail), 2003, video play, with one projection in a golden frame in a crimson-colored living room with a series of vintage photographs of Nehru, Jinnah and Gandhi, sound, dimensions variable.
Photo by Johan Pijnappel. Courtesy the artist.



(This page)
SPLITTING THE OTHER (PANEL 9),
 2007, acrylic, ink, enamel on acrylic sheet,
 203.5 x 103.5 cm. Courtesy Nalini Malani.

(Opposite page, left)
MEDEAMATERIAL, 1993, video still of performer
 Alaknanda Samarth in the theater play, in front
 of the multipanel painting *Despoiled Shore*
 painted by Nalini Malani, at the Max Mueller
 Bhavan, Mumbai. Courtesy Nalini Malani.

(Opposite page, right)
MEDEAMATERIAL, 1993, video still of
 performer Alaknanda Samarth in the theater
 play, in front of a bandaged grand piano
 and the multipanel painting *Despoiled Shore*
 painted by Nalini Malani, at the Max Mueller
 Bhavan, Mumbai. Courtesy Nalini Malani.

exposed to the latter two writers during her time in Paris in the early 1970s, when she attended lectures at the Paris-Sorbonne University.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, Malani’s ethereal, emblematic paintings and drawings exemplified her investigations into philosophy, literature and myth. Well-known Hindu mythological characters and quirky Western literary figures—from Sita in the *Ramayana* and Radha in the *Mahabharata* to Alice in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*—would continue to provide an extensive lexicon for Malani to cross-reference, combine, re-create and use as points of departure when investigating contemporary issues in such later paintings as *Living in Alicetime* (2005–06) and *Splitting the Other* (2007). Significantly, other artists, including her contemporary Gulammohammed Sheikh and the modernist Maqbool Fida Husain, also dealt with myth and iconology during this period, but did not use the mythological female protagonist as a tool to ask probing questions of society in the same manner as Malani.

From 1980 to 1981, Malani took part in the seminal group show “Place for People,” cited by art historian Parvez Kabir as “the exhibition which signaled the transition from modernist to postmodernist art in India.” Held at the Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai, and the Rabindra Bhavan, Delhi, the show featured Malani along with five male artists: Vivan Sundaram, Sudhir Patwardhan, Jogen Chowdhury, Bhupen Khakhar and Gulammohammed Sheikh. Captured at the opening in a famous photograph, these artists—the generation that followed such abstract modernists as Syed Haider Raza, Vasudeo S. Gaitonde and Maqbool Fida Husain—shared common concerns (such as, Malani recalls, “How do we bring in the indigenous figure? How do we paint the local? How do we depict our streets?”); yet the degree of prominence accorded to each was often very different. “That photograph made me really sad,” remembers Malani. “One senior artist said to me, ‘This is very nice what you do, but finally you had better be a housewife’ . . . and I was only 20! It was a very bleak situation [for women].”

The experience prompted Malani to generate more discourse around “women in art” with her peers, and to initiate the all-women’s traveling exhibition “Through the Looking Glass” (1987–89), which showcased Malani’s work alongside that of her contemporaries Nilima Sheikh, Arpita Singh and Madhvi Parekh. “It was a very historic show,” she says. “We even had a catalog—people don’t understand how special that was for the time . . . We held five shows through India, carrying our babies on our hips.”

Although she does not classify herself as a feminist, Malani continues to address ingrained gender inequality, conceptualizing fictional narratives around women, while sometimes de-gendering her subjects and abstracting the notions of masculinity and femininity. India’s society and its art community remain predominantly “under the hegemony of the patriarchal system,” as Malani puts it, and the situation for women in art is still a challenging one. A recent example of this was the inaugural Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012, at which only six out of the nearly 90 artists invited were women. A seemingly compensatory women’s show entitled “Re-Picturing the Feminine: New and Hybrid Realities in the Artworld – A Survey of Indian and Australian Contemporary Female Artists” was held in the neighboring Gallery OED in Kochi. Malani, as an established figure on the international museum and biennial circuit, participated in both events.

It was in the early 1990s that Malani began to be recognized as a pioneer in the field of digital media. The decade proved a turning point in her career—in response to national politics and new theories emerging from the international art community, her pictorial surfaces began to take on new dimensions, while the range of her earlier influences became fully apparent.

Malani’s first multidisciplinary, experimental theater production, *Medeamaterial* (1993), drew on a range of such experiences, including the adapted mythology used at the *Times of India*, the theatrical sets at Bhulabhai and postmodern literature in Paris. The story of the production—which has since become something

of a myth among the Indian art fraternity, with many more people claiming to have seen it than is possible—began with a work called *City of Desires* (1992), in which Malani drew and painted the walls of Mumbai’s Gallery Chemould with life-size figures of women, enraged faces and stormy clouds, as well as covering the floor with red oxide powder. The installation was an expression of Malani’s despair at the failure to conserve an important 200-year-old, Jaipuri-style mural nearby. Her anger was amplified by recent proclamations by right-wing politicians such as LK Advani, who had launched his aggressively nationalistic nationwide tours, or “*rath yatras*,” in 1989, claiming to promote and protect Hindu culture, when in reality little practical action was being taken to save such examples of the country’s heritage.

Malani’s open, “studio-style” installation at Gallery Chemould commented on the hypocrisy of this cultural paradox, but also made another sociopolitical statement. As an interactive, noncommercial work, it was aimed at people of all classes, not just the usual gallery-goers. Most of the latter could not understand why the artwork was not for sale, and why Malani was adamant that it should be erased over time. However, when actress Alaknanda Samarth came to visit the installation, she insisted that the piece “required a performance,” launching a fruitful collaboration. Samarth introduced Malani to German playwright Heiner Müller’s interpretations of the mythological Greek figure Medea, and from there the idea was born for Malani and Samarth to produce a performative adaptation of Müller’s work.

The resulting theatrical piece, *Medeamaterial*, was staged as a live performance at the Max Mueller Bhavan, Mumbai, in 1993, after which it developed into many different installation versions, and was included in the first Johannesburg Biennale, “Africus” (1995), and in the exhibition “Medeaprojekt” in Mumbai (1996). For *Medeamaterial*, Malani fashioned a background set that incorporated an enormous figurative painting, and Samarth responded to this environment; their collaborative process took on the improvisational form of *jugalbandi* (a term used to describe

a duet in classical Indian music in which two performers respond in turn to each other’s melodies and beats). Also, and quite remarkably for the time, the play took on a nonlinear, fragmentary format, much like Müller’s original texts. The performance took place in three parts, each in a separate location—the audience started off on the streets, before the actress beckoned them into the gallery space, while the last segment took place in the auditorium. The play’s plot and narrative alluded to the Medea myth, as well as to speeches from contemporary Hindu nationalist campaigns.

Underlying *Medeamaterial*’s episodic, evolving production were several layered cultural concepts. In Müller’s version of the story, the alienated character of Medea is used to comment on various problems with consumerist capitalism in the modern world, such as the situation of Turkish migrant workers in Germany; in Malani’s version, Medea’s relationship with Jason and the killing of her own children were likened to the simultaneous proximity and hatred between India’s Hindu and Muslim communities. At the time *Medeamaterial* was being conceptualized and produced, the Babri Masjid riots of 1992—a shattering cultural and political event for India—shook the city of Mumbai to its core. Having been a tool to document her ephemeral performances, video now became a way for Malani to process these horrific events and continue her artistic practice in unsettling times.

Malani went on to realize, much as Louise Bourgeois also did in the 1990s, that video could provide a means to examine her obsessions and to experiment with alternative forms of reality. Having spent time abroad with seminal, innovative women artists such as Bourgeois, Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith, Malani went on to become one of the pioneers of video art in India. “Video gave me a way to transport my plays inexpensively with digital actors, as a ‘video play’ shown on multiscreen projections,” she says. As in her earlier paintings, the idea of “personhood” was significant for Malani, with the focus remaining on the body, whether as an implied presence through voice, a canvas on which she could project moving images, or a layer of still figurative imagery within her installations.



The overarching mood is not apocalyptic, cynical or nostalgic. There is always battle and confrontation, but also, somewhere, a belief in a possible “cleansing” or redemption.

Malani also consolidated her video practice with her passion for painting, often treating projection as a form of light, employing hand-painted imagery within her videos, or using the surfaces of transparent cylinders as pictorial planes. These cylinders are usually reverse-painted with figurations of deities, animals and women and hang like large rotating mobiles above the heads of the audience. The light emanating from Malani’s videos projects the images onto the walls of the installation. The first time she used these clear, rotating cylinders, now a signature of hers, was in a theater play entitled *The Job* (1996) at the National Centre for Performing Arts, Mumbai. The concept for the piece came from the tale of an Indian woman who, due to extreme poverty, disguised herself as a night watchman for four years so that she could continue the job of her dead husband. The piece drew heavily on German playwright Bertolt Brecht’s *The Job* (1933), which shares a similar story, and involved a woman performing alongside a series of small, transparent cisterns shifting up and down, producing a cyclic, rhythmic movement. This gave rise to something unexpected and illusory—intense, layered, moving shadows on the walls of the theater in Mumbai.

Malani experimented with “shadow plays” as a result, the first being *The Sacred and the Profane* (1999), at the exhibition “Private Mythologies” at the Japan Foundation, Toyko, in which revolving images of the Hindu deities Rama and Sita interlope. The cylinders played with the idea of cyclical time, but something more transient also emerged—something that could not be held and which disappeared if the viewer stepped into the light projection. The shadows created by Malani’s hand-painted, single-cell animation initially seemed like a secondary element, an afterthought even, but became one of the dominant features of the work.

Almost a decade later, Malani began to build on her diverse experiments with media, creating multitiered, experiential installations that effectively allowed the viewer to enter into her fantastical environments. Drawing on aspects and references from

writer Salman Rushdie, *The Mahabharata* and Goya’s “Disasters of War” series (1810–20), *Remembering Mad Meg* (2007–11) incorporates seven rotating cylinders painted in blues, reds and yellows hanging above the heads of the viewer, leaving shadowy traces superimposed on sepia-colored, projected video animations. In one of these projected images, the infamous figure of Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *Dulle Griet* (1562), also known as Mad Meg, appears—a helmet-clad woman wearing a long skirt and carrying a spear, as well as a basket of food and a frying pan, leading some kind of haphazard army toward Hell. She is as much unhinged as she is driven. Despite the nightmarish surroundings, she goes forth to, in Malani’s words, “cleanse the land of evil.”

One cannot help but feel that this decision to choose protagonists who have the drive to keep going, despite the odds, has a semi-autobiographical basis. As a child whose family was directly impacted by the traumatic events of the partition, forced to leave behind their home, community and livelihood in Karachi and emigrate to Kolkata, Malani grew up with stories of loss and landscapes of darkness, and witnessed the primal instinct for survival and renewal. Throughout her oeuvre there is an underlying emphasis on the real and the political expressed through fictional tools and chimerical visuals. However, the overarching mood is not apocalyptic, cynical or nostalgic. There is always battle and confrontation, but also, somewhere, a belief in a possible “cleansing” or redemption.

Over the years, Malani has also had a self-confessed obsession with the figure of Cassandra, the Greek mythological figure given the gift of prophecy but cursed so that nobody would believe her insights. Christa Wolf’s novel *Cassandra* (1984), which focuses on the eponymous protagonist’s untold story, and Mahasweta Devi’s story “Draupadi” (1988), in which the female character Draupadi from Hindu epic *The Mahabharata* is gang-raped by policemen in modern-day India, became, along with four other texts, the basis of

(Opposite page, top)
THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE (detail), 1999, shadow play with four rotating, reverse-painted Mylar cylinders, sound. Installed at Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 2004. Courtesy Art Gallery of Western Australia.

(Opposite page, bottom left and right)
REMEMBERING MAD MEG (detail), 2007–11, video/shadow play, with three stop-motion animations and seven reverse-painted rotating Lexan cylinders, sound. Installed at Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2011. Photo by Payal Kapadia. Courtesy the artist.





Malani's critically praised installation at Documenta 13. One of these additional texts, "Lahoo Ka Suragh" (1965), a poem in Urdu by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, provided the work's title: *In Search of Vanished Blood* (2012). As with Müller's version of Medea and Devi's adaptation of Draupadi, Malani takes contemporary versions of myths and finds innovative ways to adapt, appropriate and reassemble them, building a bridge between the audience and the story.

Malani created the experiential work in an immersive space chosen with Documenta 13 artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev three years earlier. Walking into the sunken room, viewers saw five rotating, transparent cylinders above their heads, each with painted figures on them drawn from Malani's lexicon of surreal, peculiar specimens. Eight-armed goddesses, autopsy instruments, creatures with protruding vertebrae, figures in fetal positions—some painted only in part, others with more detail—all projected shadows that overlapped with one another. If one could imagine a deconstructed, science-fiction version of the Buddhist, Hindu and Jain imageries in the famous Ajanta and Ellora Caves in Maharashtra, this was it. The siren-like, enticing sound of a female Indian vocalist gently soothed the audience, but, as the room darkened, this evolved into an authoritative voice reciting a forceful speech. The shadows became indistinct and only a projection of a white hand making gestures on a blackened wall could be seen. At one point you could hear screeching voices prophesying the future. At another, the darkness lifted, the previous ambience was restored and the shadows returned.

When asked about *In Search of Vanished Blood*, which is part of a larger series on which she has been working for the last three years, Malani explains that the story of Cassandra is a metaphor for what exists all around us. The impact of communal violence in India, the rising frustrations of the poor and the imbalance of gender are clear, yet measures are not being taken to solve these situations. We do not learn from our history or pay heed to our future. Malani's references to cycles of time, cultural memory and the failure to record important events (whether those of Indian contemporary art or those that have scarred the country's recent past) can be seen throughout her work. "Memory is what you are, past is in the present and in the future. Memory means the collective memory—memory of the race, memory of the community," she says. Whether addressing the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the Babri Masjid riots in 1992 or the Gujarat genocide in 2002, Malani asks the audience the same questions: "Who was the hero? Who was the victim? Where was this history written? Why hasn't it been recorded? Where has the blood gone?"

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(Opposite page)

IN SEARCH OF VANISHED BLOOD (detail), 2012, video/shadow play with six projections and five reverse-painted, rotating Mylar cylinders, sound. Installed at Documenta 13, Kassel, 2012. Photo by Payal Kapadia. Courtesy the artist.