

## Nalini Malani, a Global Storyteller

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### Abstract

*Nalini Malani is an Indian contemporary artist who lives in Mumbai. Her work is constructed as a narrative that interweaves Eastern and Western mythologies and aesthetics forms to address interreligious violence in India, especially on women. Her emphasis on the feminine figure as a topos of violence, both received and produced, and as an ambivalent figure, both caring and destroying, locates her art within feminist discourses. Yet she claims to be beyond this linkage and to be using mythical images of Medea, Cassandra or Sita as images of conflicts and violence within human psyche, both feminine and masculine. This paper purports to present her work and the mechanisms of its reception in order to evaluate its potential cathartic role on collective consciousness regarding communal violence in India and elsewhere, both for and Indian and international audience, a function which she claims for her art.*

**Keywords:** *Nalini Malani; contemporary Indian art; Partition; mythology and art; feminism and art; Collective Unconscious; catharsis; chora; Julia Kristeva; the abject.*

Nalini was born in Karachi in 1946, a year prior to the partition between India and Pakistan that followed the independence from the British Empire. She went into exile to Calcutta in 1947 with her parents, and moved to Bombay in 1954. The Partition has marked her personality and her work as she “tried to make sense of the feelings of loss, exile and nostalgia” that have overshadowed her childhood.<sup>1</sup> Yet it was not until 1992, after the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu extremists, that interreligious violence became weaved into her work, indirectly through the performance *Medea*, after Heiner Muller’s play, and the works which derived therefrom; directly through a series of multimedia installations such as *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* of 1998, *Hamlet Machine*, 1999–2000, *Stains* 2000, *Unity in Diversity*, 2003, *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of pain*, 2005, and the recent – and haunting – *In Search of vanished blood*, 2012 (fig. 1).

The capacity of her works to woo audiences stems from three main elements. One is her

emphasis on the corporal and the local as vehicles for memories of sensations and emotions. The second is her painting technique, on reverse acrylic paper with acrylic and enamel, combined into installations with moving pictures, videos, and sound.

The third element is the content she uses, based on myths taken from both Indian and Western traditions, that address the mind through metaphors long established, playing with archaic patterns, to which she manages to give a contemporary relevance.



*Fig. 1. In Search of vanished blood, 2012, six channel video/shadow play with five rotating reverse painted Mylar cylinders, sound, 11 min., dimensions variable. © Malini Malani*

<sup>1</sup> Nalini Malani, “Unity in diversity”, *Nalini Malani*, [exhibition catalogue, Irish Museum of Modern Art, July–October 2007], Dublin, Irish Museum of Modern Art et Milan: Charta, 2007, p. 99. See also Johan Pijnappel (ed.), “Nalini Malani”, *Crossing Currents: Video Art and Cultural Identity*, [exh. cat. Lalit Kala Akademi New Delhi, 2004], Royal Netherlands Embassy publication, 2006, pp. 81–87, p. 82.

Thus Malani convenes multiple universes, combining text and images, present and past,

locality and globality into a kind of theatre in which facts are mixed with affects – anger and sorrow, fear and disgust, love and sacrifice – that relate to individual and collective life story. We shall examine successively the role of these three elements in the reception of Malani's works and its power, asserted by the artist, to assuage intercommunity hatred, by performing a catharsis.

### The role of the corporal and the local in Malani's work

Nalini displays a constant desire to link her work to a place, to the physical and to psychic sensations which inform peoples' experience of a place. In 1980 she participated with five male artists – Vivan Sundaram, Bhupen Khakkar, Jogen Chowdhury, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh and Sudhir Patwardhan – in the exhibition conceived by the critic Geeta Kapur's *Places for People*, which focused on the indigenous and the local, in an anti-modernist gesture.<sup>2</sup> It marked the first occurrence of Post-modern thought in India.<sup>3</sup> Malani contributed *His Life*, a series of eight paintings started in 1978, recounting the life of an ordinary man, his personal and professional relationships, asserting the importance of the collective in the construction of individual identity and the fragmentary nature of it, made of juxtapositions of distinct "me", built by others.

At the time, she herself lived and worked in the commercial district of Lohar Chawl, located near the docks, in South Mumbai. The vibrant location in which commercial activity is mixed with religious temples and service industry, will later inspire a series of monotypes, called *Lohar Shawl*, 1991, which, like an emotional map, superimpose various impressions from the bazaar, as if pressing on the inner world of the artist visual, olfactory, auditory sensations received from the colourful and noisy alleys. Emphasizing the link between the individual and the collective, Malani hereby manifests the importance of living communities, as well as of bodily sensations and emotions, in the construction of a particular memory. She says:

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.<sup>4</sup>

This dual – individual and social – construction of one's identity, although a priori universally shared,<sup>5</sup> appears in this quote as related specifically to Hindu culture in which the real and the imaginary, the past, present and the future, the individual and the collective are enmeshed, particularly through the concept of *karma*, according to which the body is the vehicle of successive lives, made of meetings, exchanges, dividers, accidents.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 2. *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, 1998, four channel, twelve monitor video installation, twelve in trunks. 20 min., sound, dimensions variable. © Malini Malani

After years of painting, Malani will turn to installations in 1998, with *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, (fig. 2), that plays precisely with this bodily, communal and mnemonic dimension. The installation consists of iron canteens containing small video screens, placed at the centre of a room, lined with large screens. On the small screens, archival images of the Partition show scenes of domestic life of refugees on the road of exile, including childbirth. They are dubbed by a voice telling the short story by the Pakistani writer Saadat Hasan Manto, of 1955, from which it borrows its title. The story tells the forced exodus of a patient of Lahore psychiatric hospital, a Sikh born in the town of Toba Tek Singh which the authorities have decided to send to an Indian psychiatric hospital, three years

<sup>2</sup> *Place for People*, exhibition Jehangir Art gallery, Bombay, 1980, Rabindra Bhavan, Delhi, 1981. Geeta Kapur presents the project on line <http://www.afterall.org/online/geeta-kapur-on-the-curatorial-in-india-part2>. (All websites mentioned in this text are active on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015).

<sup>3</sup> See Parvez Kabir, cited in Jyoti Dhar, "Nalini Malani, in the heart of darkness," *Art Asia Pacific*, N° 84, July–August 2013, pp. 57–63, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Nalini Malani cited in *ibid.*, p. 63. She also says that up to now her mother – who is 93 – recalls the sights, the smells, the food, and her house in Karachi (Nalini Malani in conversation with the author, May 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Regarding the link between collective and individual memory in the West, see Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective*, Paris: PUF, 1950.

<sup>6</sup> Malani is not a Hindu though, her mother being a Sikh and her father a Theosophist (Malani in Johan Pijnappel, *op. cit.*, p. 82).

after the Partition. Brought by bus to the frontier and asked to cross the no man's land to the other side, he refuses to choose side and lets himself die in the undisputed land. The domestic images in the canteens – an object associated to moving – oppose the “big story,” told by the large screens distributed around the room, showing images of international nuclear conflict: The explosion of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, US nuclear testing in the Pacific atolls, conflict in the Balkans. The work has been triggered by India's announcement of its possessing the nuclear bomb, a claim that Pakistan will make a few days later. Malani use of unrelated archival images eschews a direct commentary, underpinning the role of memories and rancour in new conflicts. Some images are blurred copies made with a VCR.

Between these displays, images shot by Malani show two women facing each other, one supposedly Indian and the other Pakistani. They are busy completing the same domestic task, the folding of a sari. As Malani explains, the display of the same learned gestures reveals their kinship beyond political and nationalist rift, as in this vast double exile, rapes and abductions were committed, women exchanged as spoils of war and symbols of power of each nation.<sup>7</sup>

With this narrative Malani wants to pay tribute to women that provide food and care for their families in wars and on the roads of exile, without being allowed to participate in the process of decision making. The allegory is transparent (perhaps too much): madness and death is on the side of history – decided by men – life and restraint on women side.<sup>8</sup>

The mosaic of images, some blurred, some clear, evokes memories, a mixed of emotions and recollections, of inner and collective images, and purports to “reconnect the collective consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> Geeta Kapur sees Malani's images as a transitional object by which the artist brings back the collectively repressed, like Melanie Klein

who used play to enter into dialogue with the unconscious of her young patients.<sup>10</sup>

In 2005 Malani returns to the theme of intercommunity violence with the video installation *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of pain*, which invites the viewer to confront the lie behind the noble and lovable image of the motherland, in view of recurrent interethnic attacks. On five large screens images of the Partition, followed by anti-Muslim attacks in Gujarat in 2002, alternate with the quiet faces of women engaged in domestic duties, archetypes of gentleness and compassion, combined with images of Hindu war divinities – such as Durga on her tiger. These images remind the viewer of the ambivalence of Hindu female deities, which are both protective and destructive, an ambivalence that Hindu fundamentalists, according to Malani, want erased, postulating that Hinduism is all peace while Islam is violent and the source of evil.<sup>11</sup> A burning mouth recalls the terrible deeds of the Gujarat incidents while the voice of a woman and a man are heard in succession, recalling the reactions of women abducted during the Partition and that of Indian parliamentarians who dismissed them:<sup>12</sup> The shrill, hysterical voice of the woman shouts, “Do you take me for a machine?” The male voice replies, with a “Nehru” tone, that “the honour of the state is at stake.”<sup>13</sup>

The title is inspired by an essay, “Language and body: transactions in construction of pain”, of 1996, by the anthropologist Veena Das, which questions the meaning of the abduction of women as markers of ethnic groups' relative power during the Partition.<sup>14</sup> Using a complex intertextuality, Malani's installation also refers indirectly to Rabindranath Tagore's novel *The Home and the World*, of 1916, which evokes the appropriation by the Indian nationalist movement of the divine status of women – regarded as the supreme deity Devi, mother of the world – and its transfer to the image of the nation,

<sup>7</sup> Four years later a reverse exchange was enforced, women being requested to return to their homeland, undergoing a second exile, tearing apart their family ties.

<sup>8</sup> Murtaza Vali, “Nalini Malani, her Cassandra Complex,” *Art Asia Pacific*, N° 63, May-June 2009, electronic version, online <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/63/HerCassandraComplexNaliniMalani>.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Johan Pijnappel, “Selected biography: Compulsions toward a filmic view,” Nalini Malani, Arjun Appadurai, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, et al., 2012, p. 60– 87, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> See Geeta Kapur, “Body as gesture: Indian women artists at work,” Vidya Dehejia (ed.), *Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art*, New Delhi: Kali for women, 1997, p. 166-197, p. 184.

<sup>11</sup> Nalini Malani, “Stories retold,” *Nalini Malani*, 2007, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Veena Das, “Language and body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 125, N° 1, “Social Suffering” (Winter 1996), p. 67–91, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Ella Mudie, “Disembodied Voices, Nalini Malani: Mother India, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney,” *The Aesthetica Blog*, accessible on line <http://aestheticamagazine.blogspot.fr/2012/02/disembodied-voices-nalini-malani-mother.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Das, “Language and body: transactions in the construction of pain,” *op. cit.*

deified as the “Great Mother”, “Mother India”. This equivalence, according to Tagore, permanently deprived women of their subjecthood.<sup>15</sup> For Malani the traditional and nationalist patriarchal discourse that associates women to divinities transforms them into emblem of fortitude but at the same time into objects of use, in both cases into “an inferior category of human beings without rights,”<sup>16</sup> which explains their use as war take.

Veena Das both underlines and further complexifies this transactional game in regard to the Partition, suggesting that the silence which the women abducted and later returned have maintained in regard to their suffering, is related to their self-espousing of this sacred role: “In the work of mourning in many societies it is the transactions between language and body, especially in the gendered division of labour, by which the antiphony of language and silence recreates the world in the face of tragic loss.”<sup>17</sup> According to Das the body of the reified Indian woman is the receptacle of violence, an object without rights, but also the mediator of a repair process, since women are, in traditional societies, in charge of lamentation rituals. They symbolically absorb pain through ritual songs. This idea of the female body as a site of “the transaction of pain” is expressed in the installation *Mother India*, through its title, yet Malani had previously explored this theme in a mesmerizing series called *Mutant*, of 1994–1996.

The latter consists in so called “mutant” bodies, sturdy female figures in black and white dye painted on milk carton paper. Some face the spectator in a position of offering, their arms extended and hands opened, or of threat, their sexual attributes undifferentiated: *Mutant II Series A*, of 1994, shows a masculine face over massive shoulders, its flat and hairy chest monstrosly echoing the black triangle of the pubic hair planted between its monumental thighs. The left hand is hidden in the back. The index and middle fingers of the raised right hand are covered with finger puppets. They seem to be moving to attract or distract an invisible subject, implicitly located to the right of the painting in the direction of its gaze. These monstrous figures, evoking violence and the abject, first appeared in her *Medea*’s projects around 1994. They were painted on milk cardboards to suggest tainted milk, and were related to undisclosed nuclear tests by the US in the Marshall

Islands, leading to malformations.<sup>18</sup> A new series called *Body as site–Mutant III series B* of 1996, shows among others a potent and violent maternal body, armed with a pistol, threatening the gentle figure of a child (fig. 3). The paintings have been washed away with milk by female performers at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asia-Pacific Triennial (Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia). This performance suggests a ritual cleaning/erasing of the abject painting.



Fig. 3. *Body as Site: Mutant III Series B*, of 1996, fabric dye painting and milk carton paper, 142 x 96 cm. © Malini Malani

Therefore the series conveys the topic of milk as an absorber of violence which is also staged in Malani’s installation *Stains*, 2000 (fig. 4).

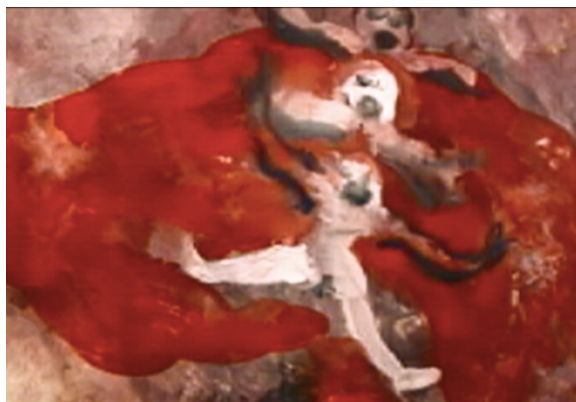


Fig. 4 *Stains*, 2000, stop motion animation video, colour, sound, 7. 50 min., dimensions variable. © Malini Malani

*Stains* consists of watercolours representing blood, bones, internal fluids (lymph, plasma), filmed

<sup>15</sup> Veena Das herself discusses Tagore’s novel in *ibid.*, p. 72 et seq.

<sup>16</sup> Nalini Malani, “Woman in myth,” *Nalini Malani, op. cit.*, 2007, p. 113.

<sup>17</sup> Das, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> See “Nalini Malani, Mutant series B,” in *The visual Library / The Legacy Project*, accessible on line [http://www.legacy-project.org/index.php?page=art\\_detail\\_large&artID=878&num=3](http://www.legacy-project.org/index.php?page=art_detail_large&artID=878&num=3).

and then projected by means of a video projector on a “screen” of milk in the form of a gigantic latex ball / breast. To see the images, the viewer must get inside of a circle that encloses the device. The title and the installation suggest both that milk cleanses the blood and that it is stained by it. Reducing the female body to a giant udder that washes violence, the work establishes a correspondence between woman and society, in which her role is, according to the traditional association with Devi, to cuddle and nourish. However, the blood that impregnates this enormous mass also suggests that this nurturing role is made at her expense, as testimonies of the Partition suggest: “What is there to be proud in a woman's body – everyday it is polluted by being consumed,” says a woman raped during the Partition.<sup>19</sup> The breast carries the memories of violence, which women keep within themselves, like a poison, in order to protect their families: “Just as a woman's body is made so that she can hide the faults of her husband deep within her, so she can drink all pain – take the stance of silence”<sup>20</sup>, says another. Malani proposes that the body of women sublimates horror, by turning it into a monstrous teat, tainted with the spirit of the dead.

These installations are the metaphor of the body as the locus of violence and a mean to erase this violence. We need to explore Malani's techniques and contents to understand how this process is carried out.

### The role of Malani's technique

Since the 1990s Malani has abandoned oil painting on canvas. She now paints with acrylic mixed with enamel on a transparent Mylar sheet, which she attaches to a canvas or folds into a circular lantern, placing the painted side on the inside. This demanding technique does not allow correction. She drops a pool of paint on the Mylar, then extends and refines it with the tip of the brush in order to build creatures out of it. Because the enamel is sticky, the shapes are often indistinct. They seem to float. The lack of perspective and bright colours are inspired by the *Kalighat* paintings – a Bengali tradition of popular religious imagery of Goddess Kali – in an attempt by the artist to connect the present and the past:

*Kalighat* is a very important moment in Indian art for me [...]. And for me to make my own

<sup>19</sup> Cited by Das, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

figure, but with a *Kalighat* stroke, I would like to make the viewer recall [...] the resonance of the past from that period in the nineteenth century, interjecting it into the present [...] These are the little things that I do [...]; you meander through it, like in a labyrinth [thanks to] the curiosity to understand why a figure has two heads and a tail.<sup>21</sup>

The paintings are sometimes combined with multiple sound and light effects, sometimes with videos. The projected images spread and move slowly onto the walls, floors and ceiling of the room, dominating the viewer who is immersed in the interplay of violent and redeeming images and sounds, and directly challenged by it. Malani thus constructs a multifaceted experience based on storytelling schemes that continues a popular oral and visual tradition, and purports to eschew class boundaries: “The paintings are like the pages of a book,”<sup>22</sup> says the artist emphasizing also the influence of traditional *Pat* Bengali painting, or *Patachira*, a succession of images on horizontal or vertical rolls, telling mythological or folkloric stories “like a comic book style.”<sup>23</sup> Using *Patachira* as well as *Kalighat* painting style she hopes to involve the average Indian, less as ease with contemporary art.<sup>24</sup> Yet she wants to challenge the storytelling, that has become “petrified”: “My idea is not only to retell the stories in a new form but also in new configurations.”<sup>25</sup>

The installation *In Search of Vanished Blood*, 2012, presented at Documenta 13, exemplifies this multimedia technique. Accompanied by the prosody of an Indian singer, followed by strident voices announcing prophecies, the Mylar cylinders project on the walls gigantic images of deities, as in Ajanta's caves. In a soundtrack made of collages, Malani combines oral excerpts from several sources: *In Search of Vanished Blood*, a poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, regarding the silence of women victims of the

<sup>21</sup> Malani in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in conversation with Nalini Malani,” Nalini Malani, Arjun Appadurai, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *et al.*, *Nalini Malani, In Search of vanished blood*, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, Cassel: Documenta and Museum Fridericianum Veranstaltungen, 2012, pp. 12–35, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> Vali, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Malani in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in conversation with Nalini Malani,” *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Johan Pijnappel, “Nalini Malani: Interview with Nalini Malani from the iCon India Catalogue produced for the Indian show at the 51 Venice Biennale,” accessible on line on the artist website, <http://www.nalinimalani.com/texts/venice.htm>.

Partition; *Cassandra*, a novel by a contemporary Austrian writer, Christa Wolf<sup>26</sup> and *Draupadi*, by Mahasweta Devi, 1988,<sup>27</sup> a short story about a Bengali raped by police while defending the land of her tribe against the appetite of British settlers. Draupadi is originally the name of a mythical figure of the epic *Mahabharata* (4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) that escapes rape thanks to the protection of Krishna. In Mahasweta Devi's short story she is an Aboriginal, of the tribe of Santal, arrested by Senanayak, the educated head of the local police, who reads anti-fascist journals. After being raped by her guards, she walks naked into Senanayak's office, like a monstrous apparition:

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time, Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid.<sup>28</sup>

According to Gayatri Spivak, Senanayak represents the complicity of the bourgeoisie at the service of the British Raj, as well as of herself, as a well-meaning intellectual who tends to ignore local realities:

When we wander out of our own academic and First-World enclosure, we share something like a relationship with Senanayak's doublethink. [...] For the rest of the world's women, the sense of whose personal micrology is difficult (though not impossible) for us to acquire, we fall back on a colonialist theory of most efficient information retrieval. [...] As I see their photographs in women's-studies journals or on book jackets – indeed, as I look in the glass – it is Senanayak with his anti-Fascist paperback that I behold.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly Malani seeks to plug the breach of indifference that has opened between the globalized Indian bourgeoisie, to which she belongs herself, and the popular classes, victims of ethnic violence as well as “abject poverty”, through mythical narratives.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Christa Wolf, *Cassandra, the Premise and the Story* [1984], Alain Lance and Renate Lance-Otterbein (trans.), Paris: Stock, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Mahasweta Devi, “Draupadi”, Gayatri Spivak (trans.) *Multitudes*, N° 29, February 2007, pp. 37–49, accessed online at <http://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2007-2-page-37.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Mahasweta Devi, “Draupadi”, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (intro. and transl.), *Multitudes*, N° 29, Feb. 2007, pp. 381–402, accessible on line <http://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2007-2-page-37.htm>, p. 402.

<sup>29</sup> Spivak, introduction to “Draupadi”, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 382.

<sup>30</sup> Vali, *op. cit.*

## Myth as interclass vocabulary

In an attempt to formulate a language “potentially shared” Malani uses mythical figures as myth is, she says, “a universal language [that] creates a bond with the viewer,” particularly in India where mythical narratives are performed everyday.<sup>31</sup> Yet she convokes exclusively female figures, taken from Indian and Western mythology: Medea, Cassandra, Sita, Raddha. In ancient and contemporary collective imagination they all represent abjection and folly, says Malani who uses those figures to address the violence of Indian society, but also all human beings transformed into “mutant” beings by violence.<sup>32</sup> Among these various appropriations, the figure of Medea is distinguished by its multiple occurrences.

### The Myth of Medea

Malani began working sporadically on Medea in 1974. Her first encounter with the Greek myth came through a stay in Paris where she attended the Sorbonne and visited the Louvre. But the myth of Medea became pregnant after 1993, when the actress and director Alaknanda Samarth presented the artist with the drama *Medea-material* by the German play writer Heiner Müller,<sup>33</sup> and invited Malani to paint the decor for her performance at the Max Mueller Bhavan Centre in Mumbai. Medea then became for Malani the metaphor of a destroyed woman.<sup>34</sup> The staging was followed by the installation *Medeaprojekt*, 1995–1996, that presented the different stages of Medea from high priestess in Colchide, to bride, to poisoner, through three successive dresses painted on mylar with bright colours.<sup>35</sup> On the walls, the *Mutant* series showed black naked bodies, of uncertain gender, covered with white gouache dots. The paintings combined with the dresses appear as the metaphor of the body inhabited by the poison of untold deeds, that cannot find any dwelling, as conceived by Müller: “I want to break humanity in two / And live in the empty middle

<sup>31</sup> Johan Pijnappel, “Nalini Malani: Interview with Nalini Malani from the iCon India Catalogue produced for the Indian show at the 51 Venice Biennale,” *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> Malani in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *op. cit.*, 2012, p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> Heiner Müller, *Despoiled Shore Medea-material Landscape with Argonauts* [1982], Dennis Redmond (transl.), 2002, accessible on line <http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/despoiled.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Malani, “Woman in myth,” in *Nalini Malani*, 2007, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>35</sup> Kamala Kapoor, and Amita Desai, (eds.), *Nalini Malani: Medeaprojekt*, Bombay, Max Mueller Bhavan, 1997.

I / No woman no man.”<sup>36</sup> They also echo the unspoken words of the women violated during the Partition evoked by Das above, a silence that keeps them in a twilight zone:

When women's bodies were made the passive witnesses of the disorder of the Partition in this manner, how did women mourn the loss of self and the world? [...]

Sometimes a woman would remember images of fleeing, but as one woman warned me, it was dangerous to remember. These memories were sometimes compared to poison that makes the inside of the woman dissolve, as a solid is dissolved in a powerful liquid (andar hi andar ghulja rahi h ai). At other times a woman would say that she is like a discarded exercise book in which the accounts of past relationships were kept – the body, a parchment of losses.<sup>37</sup>

The comparison with Medea fits the process of self-imposed alienation described by Das who says that the women “use the metaphor of pregnancy – hiding pain, giving it a home just like a child is given a home in the woman’s body [but with a difference, as] unlike the child, which the woman will be able to offer to the husband, this holding of the pain inside must never be allowed to be born.”<sup>38</sup> The proximity of the metaphors used by women facing actual events, reported by Das, with Malani’s installation underscores her capacity to transform literary texts into images, that then become metaphor for traumas of various kinds. This is indeed the power of myths, which the artwork emulates.

### The repair process in the work of Malani

In the work related to *Medea*, as in *Mother India*, *Stains*, and the *Mutant* series, Malani establishes a correspondence between the feminine and the sacred, both divine and monstrous. This form of female sanctity is present in Indian culture, as suggested by Veena Das, but Griselda Pollock also evokes Western occurrences such as the figure of Isis and the “Red cow” of the Bible.<sup>39</sup> Isis, the head

crowned with horns, is restorative. She picks up the pieces of the body of her husband Osiris, murdered and dismembered by his brother, thus becoming a deity of “restauration” of life. The Red cow is a figure linked to purifying sacrifices after a contact with the world of the dead.<sup>40</sup> It consists in spraying the subject with water mixed with the ashes of a sacrificed cow. This mixture is called *mei niddab*, a term that translates as “menstrual water” and “water of separation”.<sup>41</sup> Thus the ritual evokes the healing power of menstrual blood and the feminine in general.

Can we compare *Medea*, *Stains*, the *Mutant series* and the performance *Body as site*, to a ritual cleansing of death, like the ritual of the “Red cow”? Veena Das uses the Kristevan concept of “pregnancy” in regards to the role of women in purification processes,<sup>42</sup> and it may be appropriate to convoke this concept into the interpretation of Malani’s works, who quoted Kristeva’s essay *Experiencing the Phallus as Extraneous* in a recent exhibition at Kiran Nadar museum. Kristeva said:

The maternal body is in a position to transform the violence of eroticism [...] into tenderness. The maternal body is the frontier for that translation that permits a human being to live, to not become psychotic, to not die in solitude, but to live. This gives woman an enormous role, namely the destiny of humanity is in the hands of women.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless I find it more appropriate to refer to the concept of the amorphous, monstrous and archaic maternal body to which Kristeva refers in *The Revolution of Poetic Language* as the container of the subject before the subject, and which she compares to the Platonic *chora*.<sup>44</sup>

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feminine deities see Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35, 36.

<sup>42</sup> Das, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>43</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Experiencing the Phallus as extraneous, or Women’s twofold Oedipus complex”, in Griselda Pollock (guest ed.), “Julia Kristeva 1966–96: aesthetics, politics, ethics,” *Parallax*, N° 8, July–September 1998, p. 29–44, p. 41.

<sup>44</sup> Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1974, p. 22 *et seq.* The original text is: “Nous empruntons le terme de *chora* à Plato dans le *Timée* pour désigner une *articulation* toute provisoire, essentiellement mobile [incertaine et indéterminée que] nous distinguons [...] d’une *disposition* qui relève déjà de la représentation.”

<sup>36</sup> Nalini Malani quoting Heiner Muller, the artist website, accessible on line <http://www.nalinimalani.com/installations/Medea.htm>,

<sup>37</sup> Das, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>39</sup> Griselda Pollock, “Sacred cows: Wanderings in feminism, psychoanalysis and anthropology,” Griselda Pollock and Victoria Turvey Sauron (eds), *The Sacred and the Feminine, Imagination and Sexual Difference*, London, New York, I. B. Tauris, 2008, pp. 9–48, p. 29 et 30. Regarding the kinship between Greek and Indian

The *chora* is a period of uncertainty, “of rupture and linkage,” prior to “spatiality and temporality.”<sup>45</sup> “It predates and underlies figuration, thus specularization, and is only analogous to the vocal or kinesthetic rhythm.”<sup>46</sup> It is opposed to discourse (social, patriarchal) because “it is never fixed.”<sup>47</sup> The *chora* is time and place “without argument, without position”; Plato refers to it as “nurturing and maternal.”<sup>48</sup> Within it begins a structuring of the subject but an unstable, shifting structuring “that temporarily articulates discontinuities and reshuffles them constantly.”<sup>49</sup> It precedes the *cogito*<sup>50</sup> and the learning of language that aims to freeze the *cogito* and takes place in a “negative” process in a “detachment from the mother’s body” and a rejection of the “mobility of the *chora*.”<sup>51</sup>

The *chora* is the figure of the abject, because a return to this stage threatens the symbolic order of “the Law of the father” embedded in language, and the integrity of the subject.<sup>52</sup> This return may however be a purifier. Reopening the borders between the conscious and preconscious subject, it participates in a process of “purification”, says Kristeva.<sup>53</sup> It is a return to an indeterminate stage (especially sexually) of the ego that occurs during a process, be it ritual, psychoanalytic, or artistic, and allows a catharsis.<sup>54</sup> The mutant females of Malani, black bodies riddled with white dots, these asexual and threatening bodies, painted on milk cartons, and *Stains* can be understood as representation of the abject and the *chora*. Their “erasure” is akin to a “purifying” ritual that symbolically allows “a detachment from the mother’s body,” from the kingdom of the dead so as to regain life. Their symbolic efficiency prays on their resemblance with Western and Eastern ritual processes such as the Red cow, and also tantric practices related to Kali, an inner journey toward the indeterminate.<sup>55</sup>

Other works by Malani can also be understood as part of this return to a stage prior to language and *cogito*: In the series painting *Splitting the Other* a Medea-like female figure drags two dead children,

sometimes two brains, still attached by an umbilical cord, in a world populated by nightmarish figures: insects, larvae, monstrous animals. What is at stake, says Malani, is to trace the source of the “mutation,”<sup>56</sup> when Medea becomes a monster, and to erase her violence by internalizing it: “Death must be internalized to be erased,”<sup>57</sup> she says.

### Conclusion: The Cathartic effect of Malani’s works

At a recent conference entitled *From the affect or “The intense depth of the words,”*<sup>58</sup> Julia Kristeva states that the affect is a dynamic mechanism associated with impulses – “horror, pity, shame, disgust, shame, anger, anxiety, phobia, fear, hatred, violence, sensation of dying, grief, pain [...] but also joy, jubilation, tenderness, peace, pleasure, the exaltation.”<sup>59</sup> It arises outside of the realm of reason, thanks to the poetic process and allows “an overhaul of metaphysical categories” (body / soul, matter / mind, in / out, inside / outside). By promoting a return to the unconscious self, to an *id*, where the categories are cut into pieces, it allows a reassembling of the pieces in a different order.

Such a proposal seems to explain Malani’s process on which she writes (regarding *Stains*):

Body fluids, secretions, mucous, ooze, bubble and stain living tissue. These morph into humans that act ambiguously toward each other: loving, hating, killing each other. Finally the mass of bones that remain form a pair of bloody hands that seem to almost come together but instead a bomb pops out from between the palms and explodes. The death oozes bubbles out and is evacuated.<sup>60</sup>

The repair process conveyed by the work of art is distinct from the psychoanalytic treatment as it relates to an archaic and poetic order. A transfer seems to occur nevertheless between the image and the spectator, in which the emotion is replayed and amended. This transfer is understood in traditional Indian theatre, according to the theory of *rasa*, as a correspondence between the physical

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>52</sup> Kristeva, *Le Pouvoir de l’horreur*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1980, p. 24.

<sup>53</sup> Pollock, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>54</sup> Kristeva, *Le Pouvoir de l’horreur*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>55</sup> See Christine Vial Kayser, *Le Spirituel dans l’art d’Anish Kapoor*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013, p. 82 *et seq.*

<sup>56</sup> “Splitting the Other,” *Nalini Malani*, 2007, p. 125.

<sup>57</sup> See Payal Kapadia, *Cassandra’s Gift*, 2012, a film on Documenta 13, excerpt on line <http://vimeo.com/42065716>.

<sup>58</sup> Julia Kristeva, *De l’affect ou ‘L’intense profondeur des mots’*, Milan, Facoltà Teologica dell’Italia Settentrionale, 23–24 fév. 2010, accessible on line <http://www.kristeva.fr/de-l-affect.html>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Nalini Malani, the artist’s website <http://www.nalinimalani.com/video/stains.htm>.



manifestations of the eight major emotions, which the actors enact, and the spectator's emotional states. It takes place when the spectator's is in an appropriate mood, which depends both on him and on the potency of the staging.<sup>61</sup> Those *rasa*, or emotional experiences, are associated in pairs, one giving way to the other: love/laugh; value/wonder; anger/sorrow; distaste/fear.<sup>62</sup> In Malani's works two associations are highlighted: anger and sorrow, distaste and fear. We may understand her works according to the theory of *rasa* as healing the fear (of others) triggered by distaste, and an atonement of the sorrow brought about by anger and finally a sense of value linked to an experience of wonder (brought about the works themselves). The emotion of the spectator in view of the abject presented in the image seems to be absorbed into an interstitial space, the *no man's land* opened by violence and the prohibition of its public disclosing, which the object mediates.

The work reaches an international audience thanks to its sensitive portrayal of a wounded body and mind, its juxtaposition of violent and peaceful images, mediated by the shiny semi transparent painting or by the slowly moving images, evocative of internal fluids and of the way emotions slowly take form within percepts. The installations are staged in a performative way, combining images, rhythm and sounds with the displacement of the spectator. This aurality recreates the real while it transcends it into a mythical narrative that can involve the average Indian.<sup>63</sup> The enlarged and moving images accompanied by text read aloud, evoke the drama and contemporary trauma seen through the eyes of a frightened witness (the artist herself) but, according to Geeta Kapur, Malani even wants to escape her own body and mind in order to identify herself with the average man and woman, in a "desire of [collective] belonging."<sup>64</sup> Thus the work expresses a collective memory. It is therefore embedded in a triple Indian tradition: that of *Patachira*, a mythical, religious or folk narrative illustrated with pictures animated by the narrator, that of the theatre, in which emotions are elicited and reshuffled but also in that of the Indian

autobiography of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which the author expresses his/her feelings not as an individual caught in history, but as a privileged witness of a collective situation. In this tradition the narrator's individuality exists only as a member of a group, and his/her storytelling, according to Partha Chatterjee, is a kind of participation in the public space "as a show or performance".<sup>65</sup> Thus Malani's work is the expression of a collective voice. It both manifests and compensates symbolically the absence of collective acknowledgement of intercommunity violence in India.<sup>66</sup> It echoes Veena Das's proposal regarding mourning rituals conducted by women both in ancient Greece and in Punjab. Das distinguishes "good death" from bad "silent death", "without the support of loved ones," after which the spirit of the dead remains on earth as a ghost, unburied, whereas "the objectification of the sorrow" in the loved one – and in the community at large –<sup>67</sup> manifests the admission of loss. It thus provides a "substitute body" to the spirit of the dead that allows "the ghost to finally become an ancestor."<sup>68</sup> This mourning is done by women while men stand by, mute: "The task of mourning for the men was to hear this silence, to mold it by their presence."<sup>69</sup> Das adds:

It appears to me that just as women drank the pain so that life could continue, so men longed for an unheroic martyrdom by which they could invite the evil back upon themselves and humanize the enormous looming images of nation and sexuality.<sup>70</sup>

Malani's installations that manifest madness in the public space are imbued with this feminine quality of collective mourning that distinguishes her work from the individualistic and solitary literary work of Manto, that lead him to madness and suicide.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Voir Partha Chatterjee, *History in the Vernacular*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008, p. 420.

<sup>66</sup> Regarding the absence of a collective acknowledgement of the Partition in Indian collective psyche see Urvashi Butalia (ed.), *Partition: The Long Shadow*, New Delhi, London, Zubaan/Penguin, 2015, especially Sukeshi Kamra, "Engaging Traumatic Histories: The 1947 Partition of India in Collective Memory", ch. 8.

<sup>67</sup> "Instead, we begin to think of pain as asking for acknowledgment and recognition; denial of the other's pain is not about the failings of the intellect but the failings of the spirit. In the register of the imaginary, the pain of the other not only asks for a home in language but also seeks a home in the body." Das, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78–81.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87 et 89.

<sup>61</sup> Édith Parlier-Renault, "Les Rasa dans la sculpture et la peinture de l'Inde", in Véronique Alexandre Journeau and Christine Vial Kayser (eds.), *Notions esthétiques, la perception sensible organisée*, L'Harmattan, 2015, pp. 289–305, p. 289.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291; see also Ranjana Thapalyal, "Sringara Rasa," Griselda Pollock and Victoria Turvey-Sauron (eds.), p. 136.

<sup>63</sup> Malani in "Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in conversation with Nalini Malani," *op. cit.*, 2012, p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> Geeta Kapur, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

The inspiration of the artist stems from contemporary Indian history and culture but her work conveys a transnational vision of a *conatus*, a principle of collective life: that of a world dominated by the values feminine of empathy and imbued with a capacity of catharsis:

We are now in a non-brechtian state [and] the idea of alienation is not valid today. [...] at this moment we have to get into the Aristotelian argument of catharsis.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Malani in "Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in conversation with Nalini Malani," op. cit., p. 27-28.

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