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Reclaiming the Gods: Postcolonial Identity and Iconographic Resistance in Indian Contemporary Art

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Presently a student at the Singapore American School, Ahan Mehra is an Indian-Singaporean student, artist, and researcher. He studies the intersection of art history, postcolonial studies, and cultural identity, focusing on how visual language subverts and reclaims dominant narratives. Ahan has exhibited his work internationally, including Art Capital 2025 in Paris, and collaborates with renowned artists and scholars throughout Asia and Europe. He founded the Mallawan Village Foundation, which aims to uplift underprivileged youth in rural India through art and digital education. His academic and creative work stems from deep social impact aspirations, a decolonial critique, and multidisciplinary intercultural engagement.

ABSTRACT

Building on primary sources and visual analysis, this article investigates how contemporary Indian artists M.F. Husain, Nalini Malani, and Atul Dodiya reclaim sacred iconography to contest colonial visual regimes and renegotiate national memory after 1947. Framed by Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space," it shows how devotional imagery becomes a hybrid arena where imperial exoticism and nationalist fixity are simultaneously unsettled. Husain's Cubist deities fracture Orientalist stereotypes and religious orthodoxy; Malani's immersive shadow-plays dissolve mythic heroines into moving witnesses of gendered trauma; Dodiya's shutter installations mix Gandhian symbolism with pop culture to expose the instability of historical myth-making. By foregrounding hybridity rather than cultural purity, these works reveal art's capacity to mediate rupture, recuperate subaltern voices, and open alternative futures for Indian identity. The study contributes to postcolonial art history by mapping strategies of visual resistance that link decolonisation with gender, religion, and modernism in South Asia today.

Keywords: *Postcolonial art; Indian contemporary art; sacred iconography; hybridity; third space; M.F. Husain; Nalini Malani; Atul Dodiya; decolonization; visual resistance.*

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INTRODUCTION

With the arrival of the colonial powers in India, British East India Company (pre-1858) and the British Crown (post-1858), the impact was not just political and economic. The impact started reshaping the nation's sense of taste and visual imagination. A systematic implementation of institutions across the newly British-dominated territories of the subcontinent had to reflect what was happening at the "center" of the Empire, throughout the "periphery"(Subrahmanyam, 2024). The imperative of following a classical Western education was followed by an imperative for local populations to be trained in Western art forms and techniques. British colonial administrators established schools like Sir J. J. School Or Arts in Bombay where they were grounded in the western styles and techniques of art: chiaroscuro, history painting, anatomical realism (Mitter, 2001), which kept them distant from the rich centuries-old heritage of traditional native traditions.

Prior to British involvement, the production of art in India functioned within a lively atelier system which transmitted learning from teacher to student and was based on guilds and religious sponsorship. This system supported an extensive range of imaging traditions, which included Pahari scrolls, Mughal miniature painting, temple mural painting, and folk iconography from various regions (Ray, 1999).

Indian art was systematically omitted and many times rejected as being inferior to European traditions. India's rich visual vocabularies, with their vast scope that extended from Mughal miniatures and temple mural paintings to folk iconography, were totally left out of the Colonial era. By referring to it as 'decorative', British colonial institutions created a perception of Indian art as an 'exotic' not as a legitimate 'fine art' tradition (Mitter, 2001). Aesthetic imperialism influenced a whole generation, and the majority of Indian artists internalized Eurocentric standards as superior and lost their own indigenous strong art traditions. (Kapur, 2000; Mitter, 2001).

The counter-reaction was offered by Abanindranath Tagore and the Bengal School of Art that he initiated. He introduced the revolutionary 'Swadeshi' values or the indigenous Indian themes and forms. Blending the techniques of Mughal painting and the Japanese wash techniques, the Bengal School offered a religious alternative to British materialism in portraying Indian mythology, history, and landscape in a different manner. Even this movement, however, was mediated by colonial forces—it reacted to British art on one level but it also modified its appeal for nationalist elites and Western orientalists (Guo, 2023).

After Indian independence, the fight for artistic freedom started for the new Indian artists. They had to divorce themselves from colonial legacy, claim their rich heritage, and create reinterpreted Indian art and the world art movements dominant in the world at that time. This is the period of Indian art history this paper looks into.

The paper asks how modern Indian artists reuse sacred images to challenge the ways Britain once pictured India and to speak for themselves after 1947. I look at M. F. Husain's large, story-filled paintings, where

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broken-up god figures mix Cubist shapes with village art; Nalini Malani's dark, moving projections, where goddess tales blend with women's pain and political protest; and Atul Dodiya's shop-front shutters and mixed-media pictures, which stitch together Gandhi and pop art. Using Homi Bhabha's idea of a "third space," I show that these mixes are not halfway copies but fresh spaces where myth, modern art, and memory meet to question what "India" means today. In doing so, the artists turn the sacred into something open and changing, not a fixed tradition.

BREAKING THE MOLD: HOW M.F. HUSAIN REIMAGINES HINDU GODS TO CHALLENGE OLD SYSTEMS

M.F. Husain's work reclaims sacred iconography by fracturing devotional images through Cubist modernism, confronting both colonial objectification and nationalist sanctification of Hindu deities.

Born in 1915 in Pandharpur, Maharashtra, M.F. Husain was self-trained through cinema hoardings and eventually gained prominence in Bombay's Progressive Artists' Group. He lived through colonial rule, Partition, and independence, and later went into self-exile after threats from Hindu nationalists over his controversial goddess paintings (Mitter, 2001), producing and exhibiting most of his later works in the United States.

In his work, Husain frequently reinterpreted goddesses like Saraswati, Durga, and Sita, shifting them from static, reverent poses to emotionally and politically charged figures. His formal strategy often relied on Cubism and expressionist distortion, breaking figures into geometric fragments to mirror psychological and political disintegration, and aligning Indian sacred imagery with the techniques of European modernism (Mitter, 2001).

By breaking the polished symmetry of Hindu iconography, Husain rejects the colonial portrayal of Indian art as decorative, exotic, and spiritually frozen. His work actively resists what Said called the "static tableau"; an imperial trope that renders colonized cultures visually inert (Said, 1978, p. 132). According to Homi Bhabha, hybridity emerges in the "third space," a cultural in-between where new identities are negotiated rather than inherited (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 37–39).These theoretical frameworks allow us to interpret Husain's paintings as more than aesthetic experiments, they become sites of cultural resistance, where sacred imagery is reworked to challenge both colonial exoticization and nationalist rigidity.

Indeed, Husain's use of Western Cubist forms to depict Indian gods situates his work in the third space—disrupting both the purity of devotional form and the elitism of Euro-American modernism. A clear example of this can be seen in his painting Sita in Ashok Vatika (2005) (Figure 1), where the fractured modernist style is used to reinterpret a deeply traditional subject from the Ramayana.

Figure 1
Untitled (Sita with the Golden Deer) (1991)

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Note. Maqbool Fida Husain (B. 1915), acrylic on canvas, 30 3/8 × 40 1/8 in. (77.3 × 102 cm). Christie's. Retrieved from Christie's website: https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5452510

The subject matter of *Sita in Ashok Vatika* (2005), an acrylic work on canvas, is well known across the Indian subcontinent: Sita, abducted in the Ramayana, waits in captivity for Rama. Here, Husain's Sita is neither meek nor idealized. She sits upright, framed by jagged brushstrokes and muted blues. Her fragmented limbs and intense gaze suggest resistance rather than victimhood. The Cubist disruption displaces sentimental piety, offering instead a postcolonial icon of female endurance.

In *Sita in Ashok Vatika*, the modernist idiom (Cubism) deconstructs Orientalist clichés of Hindu art as kitsch. Simultaneously, the epic figure of Sita destabilizes the Eurocentric idea that modernism is a Western invention—thus enacting a double inscription (Bhabha, 1994, p. 125) (citation for Bhabha's double inscription)

We may also turn to Spivak to understand the work not solely as a hybrid but as an expression of the so-called subaltern voice. Spivak asks, "Can the subaltern speak?" In Husain's work, the feminine subaltern speaks visually, but is interrupted by nationalist outrage. His Saraswati and Sita are powerful, fragmented, vocal—and silenced again by exile, which underscores the contested agency of sacred women in public discourse (Spivak, 1988, p. 287).

Indeed, while Husain was internationally acclaimed later in his career, back in India, he faced lawsuits and protests. Hindu right-wing groups accused him of blasphemy for his nude depictions of goddesses (The Hindu, 2006). His 2006 exile was symbolic of modern India's unresolved battle between secular art and religious nationalism. As India Today wrote, "In exile, Husain became more than a painter, he became the litmus test of artistic freedom in India" (India Today, 2007).

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In sum, Husain's fractured deities reclaim sacred iconography not as devotional relics but as complex visual sites of national struggle. His work exposes how Indian identity post-1947 is not just about continuity, but disruption and debate. If Husain's Cubist gods rupture sacred fixity, Nalini Malani's installations dissolve the sacred altogether, staging mythic women as flickering, multimedia witnesses to contemporary trauma.

TURNING MYTHS INTO PROTEST: NALINI MALANI GIVES EPIC WOMEN A NEW VOICE

Where Husain fractures divine form to challenge colonial and nationalist control, Malani disintegrates it entirely, projecting sacred female icons into transient media that resist both commodification and canonization (Said, 1994, p. 66).

Born in Karachi in 1946, Nalini Malani's family was displaced to Bombay during the Partition. She studied at the Sir J. J. School of Art and later, Cinématique Française in Paris thanks to a government scholarship. Her experience of statelessness and exile fuels the themes of trauma, gender, and myth which are recurring in her work, which she openly discusses (Malani, 2018).

Malani repeatedly uses the figures of mythical heroines across diverse pantheons; Sita, Draupadi, and Medea are recurring subjects whom she transforms into dynamic agents of resistance against patriarchal violence (*The Rebellion of the Dead*, Centre Pompidou, 2018) Going beyond two dimensionality, Malani's method combines shadow play, video projection, soundscapes, and, as is the case in Remembering Toba Tek Singh (1998-1999) (Figure 2) spinning mylar cylinders to produce immersive installations that reject the fixity of painted or sculptural forms. Her ephemeral media refuse the Orientalist museum impulse to freeze Indian culture into "timeless," collectible forms. Her moving projections destabilize the sacred gaze, dissolving any attempt to canonize or objectify (Said, 1978, p. 140).

Figure 2
Remembering Toba Tek Singh (1998–1999)

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Note. Nalini Malani, video installation, 20 minutes looped, sound; mixed media, dimensions variable. Produced with support from the Prince Claus Fund, The Netherlands. Retrieved from https://www.nalinimalani.com/.

Bhabha's third space of in-betweenness, where meanings are negotiated and power relations disrupted also applies here(Bhabha, 1994, p. 38). Indeed, Malani's multimedia work exists entirely in the third space, one that is projected, temporal, and hybrid as well. The work fuses digital technologies initially learned in the West with Indian epic sources to critique both cultural and gender oppression. (Malani, 2018; Ray, 2020).

In Sita/ Medea (2006) (Figure 3), a video shadow play on rotating mylar cylinders, the two heroines blur together across spinning surfaces, their names scrawled in red ink. The soundtrack whispers and screams. Sita is no longer the virtuous wife; she becomes witness, avenger, seer. Light becomes narrative and myth, indictment. Malani's fusion of Western media with Indian epic produces a double inscription here as well: projection technology destabilizes Orientalist museum display; Sita's rewritten story subverts Eurocentric assumptions of what counts as "universal" tragedy or feminine virtue.

Figure 3

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Sita/Medea 1 (2004)

Note. Nalini Malani, reverse painting: watercolor, acrylic, and enamel on mylar; 67 × 40½ in. (170.2 × 102.9 cm), signed. Source: MutualArt listing.

Spivak's subaltern speaks here in multiple registers: as moving image, sound, and ephemerality. Malani also embraces Mohanty's concept of strategic essentialism—using the mythic woman as a temporary identity to make visible structural injustice (Mohanty, 1988).

Celebrated globally, Malani has exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, Documenta, and the Tate. Yet some Indian critics accuse her of aesthetic excess or political overreach. Frieze called Sita/Medea "a masterclass in feminist unmasking" (Frieze, 2019), while others note that her refusal to create market-friendly commodities is itself a feminist refusal. Malani does not merely represent sacred women, she lets them unmake themselves and be remade as political actors. Her work challenges how gender, myth, and nationhood intersect in the postcolonial moment.

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While Malani dematerializes the sacred to center trauma and voice, her work raises urgent questions about how artists today might reclaim myth without reproducing its violence—a question that shapes the next section on global curation and identity.

REMEMBERING GANDHI DIFFERENTLY: DODIYA'S QUESTIONING OF NATIONAL MEMORY

Atul Dodiya reclaims national iconography by layering Gandhian imagery with personal and global references, challenging both mythologization and cultural erasure through a hybrid visual language. Where Husain fractures goddesses and Malani dissolves mythic women into shadow and sound, Dodiya's work focuses on remixing national memory through fragments, inviting viewers to reassemble Gandhi's image as part history, part myth.

Born in Mumbai in 1959, Atul Dodiya studied at the Sir J. J. School of Art and later at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Growing up amid economic shifts and communal tension, Dodiya developed a personal visual archive combining faith, history, and art history (Vadehra Art Gallery, 2015). In his work, Dodiya repeatedly revisits the figure of Mahatma Gandhi, layering his image with personal artifacts, pop culture, and his signature painterly techniques.

Dodiya works in what Claude Lévi Strauss called *bricolage,* the act of creating an object with what's at hand. (Lévi-Strauss, 1962) Using metal shutters, collage, watercolor, text, and appropriation to create politically charged, interactive compositions that force viewers to open and close the "archive" of national identity.

In his work, Dodiya resists the specific Orientalist construction of India as being either mystical or tragic. By interrupting devotional imagery with materialist commentary such as market tags and blood stains, he thus also effectively rejects the "static tableau" of postcolonial nostalgia (Said, 1978, p. 140). Bhabha's third space is also useful to read Dodiya's work,allowing new meanings to form between history and invention, reverence and critique (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 37–39).

In *Father* (1999) (Figure 4) for example, a composition of enamel and oil paints on metal shutters, Dodiya's use of industrial shutters with painted Gandhian scenes transforms spiritual iconography into fragmented, physical space. The viewer is forced to move, interpret, and engage with hybrid identity. The viewer is forced to move, interpret, and engage with hybrid identity. Even when the shutters are not physically operable, their presence suggests the potential for movement, concealment, and revelation—inviting reflection on how national memory is constantly being opened, closed, and reconfigured.

Figure 4
Father (1989)

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Note. Atul Dodiya (b. 1959), oil on canvas, 48 × 72 ⅛ in. (122 × 183.3 cm). From first solo exhibition, Gallery Chemould, Mumbai, 1989 (acquired from original gallery). Christie's. Retrieved from Christie's website: https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5452485

The shutters bear scenes of Gandhi spinning the charkha, giving speeches, and holding a child. Some shutters are locked, hiding parts of the narrative. Dodiya includes European painterly influences, subtly quoting artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Gerard Richter. The work becomes both a shrine and an interrogation booth. The modernist shutter installation of *Father* undermines the sacred stillness typically seen in Gandhian iconography. At the same time, Gandhi's presence, filtered through Indian historical myth, destabilizes Eurocentric assumptions about political icons.

Though less gendered than Malani's work, Dodiya's Gandhi reflects Spivak's subaltern paradox: Gandhi is both a symbol of the masses and an agent of erasure. His idealized image often silences dissent, and Dodiya reclaims that image with ambiguity but also humanity.

Dodiya's Gandhi paintings have appeared at major biennales and galleries. Critics admire his "intellectual wit and political restraint" (Tate Modern, 2020). Yet his subtle critique of nationalist myth-making has drawn discomfort in conservative circles, who expect Gandhi to remain untouched. (India Today, 2015).

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The fragmentary Gandhi depicted in *Father* refuses to be deified or discarded. His hybrid strategy brings sacred history into public dialogue where memory, myth, and critique are layered, not erased.

CONCLUSION

Indian contemporary art is more than a reflection of postcolonial identity—it is a crucible in which identity is actively forged, questioned, and reimagined. Through the reinterpretation of religious and cultural iconography, artists have reclaimed visual spaces once dominated by colonial narratives and have transformed them into sites of empowerment, resistance, and memory. M.F. Husain, Nalini Malani, and Atul Dodiya illustrate that iconography is not fixed; it can and should be developed as a living language which stays relevant for coming generations. Their works invite the audience to re-evaluate what is deemed sacred, what is political and what it means to belong somewhere. Instead of fusing modern imagery and global commentary with Indian traditions, they opted to reinvent India's cultural heritage. They show that Indian identity is not frozen or fragmented but rather alive, layered, and pulsating. As India continues to reinvent itself politically, spiritually, and culturally, its art will remain the necessary compass — not just pointing to the past, but also showing us how the sacred, the personal, and the political can inhabit the same canvas. In art, we do not just remember who we are — we reimagine who we want to be.

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