

INDELIBLE LALITA
a documentary film by Julie Mallozzi



Project Info

Producer/Director/Camera/Editor: Julie Mallozzi

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Film Website: www.indeliblelalita.com

Project Format: HD video, NTSC

Length: 71 minutes

Project Status: Fine Cut

Languages: English, Hindi, and French (with English subtitles)

Brief Synopsis

What happens to a woman's sense of self when her body changes beyond recognition?

Indelible Lalita is a poetic documentary about an Indian woman who completely loses her skin pigment as she migrates from Bombay to Paris to Montréal. Now 60 and appearing White, Lalita copes with her changing identity as she battles ovarian cancer, breast cancer, and heart failure. Grounded in her strong marriage and Hindu faith, she refuses to let her illness dampen her vibrancy. Lalita learns to let go of her body as the sign of her ethnicity and femininity – and ultimately realizes that her body is just a temporary vessel for her spirit.

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Credits

Producer/Director/Camera/Editing: Julie Mallozzi
Consulting Editor: Shondra Burke
Consulting Producer: Marie-Emmanuelle Hartness
Composer: Jorrit Dijkstra

Director Bio

Julie Mallozzi's films explore the fluidity of cultural identity and historical memory. Her work has won awards at festivals around the world and has screened in museums, universities, and on public television. Her debut film *Once Removed* tells the story of meeting her mother's family in China and learning about their involvement in China's complicated political history. Julie's recent film *Monkey Dance* reveals how traditional Cambodian dance helped three Cambodian-American teens navigate the minefields of urban adolescence. *Indelible Lalita* is her third full-length documentary.

Julie grew up with a Chinese-American mother and an Italian-American father in rural Ohio – where her family managed a Native American historical site for 20 years. She has been an active freelancer in Boston's lively documentary community, including working on several PBS programs, editing Ross McElwee's *In Paraguay*, and editing and producing *My Louisiana Love*. Julie received her BA from Harvard University and her MFA from San Francisco Art Institute. She has taught at Harvard University, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, and Boston University.

Longer Description

"I suppose that is the whole process of living... There's the wear and tear on so many levels, on your body and your psyche. And of course it leaves its indelible mark or its stamp on you." - Lalita Bharvani

Indelible Lalita tells the story of a woman whose body has been painfully transformed by ovarian cancer, breast cancer, heart failure, and a dramatic loss of skin pigment. Lalita Bharvani is beautiful – but her pale, scarred body reads as a record of her difficult life experiences.

As a child in Bombay in the 1950s, Lalita began to develop white patches on her leg, caused by a skin condition called vitiligo. Her mother worried that this “defect” would prevent Lalita from ever finding a good husband. With a desire to go away and not come back, Lalita left India to study in Paris. There she fell in love with Pierre, a French-Canadian student, and they married. After their neighbors mistook Lalita for an Arab and mistreated her, Lalita and Pierre decided to leave Paris and move to Montréal.

Despite a happy marriage, Lalita found life in North America lonely. Her solitude manifested itself physically at age 30 when ovarian cancer left her unable to bear children. Meanwhile, the cold air of Montréal accelerated Lalita's pigment loss. Within a year of arriving in Canada, her skin had become totally white.

Now 60, Lalita is fighting breast cancer and heart disease as her mother lives out her last days in India. Through these health crises, Lalita has somehow managed to find the joy in life. She has learned to let go of her body as the expression of her femininity and

ethnicity – and, ultimately, as the only vessel for her spirit.

Indelible Lalita poses many questions to the audience: How linked is one's identity to one's physical appearance? Is the body somehow imprinted, like a passport getting stamped, by the place where one lives? Can the body be read as a record of all that has transpired in the soul within?

Director's Statement

I first heard about Lalita from her niece Kusum in a class called *Tourists and Vagabonds* we were taking at San Francisco Art Institute's MFA program. On the first day of class, we were each asked to tell a vagabond story from our own life or from someone we knew. Kusum told of her aunt from India who had lost all of her skin pigment and now, living in Canada, was always mistaken for a white person. She said that when her Aunt Lalita travels back to India, cab drivers try to overcharge her, thinking she is a foreigner – which of course, she is in some ways.

I was intrigued by the idea of Lalita as a quintessential global citizen – someone who could “pass” in many different places but not really fit in anywhere. Having a mixed background myself, with a Chinese-American mother and an Italian-American father, I have enjoyed defying racial categories in the United States and blending in during my travels abroad. My family managed a Native American historical site during my childhood, and tourists often thought we were native; when I lived in Ecuador in my 20s, people thought I was Latin American; traveling in China, I was taken for an Uyghur from Xinjiang province. And sometimes I'm still surprised by my own family – I am married to a Dutchman, and we speak a funny mix of English and Dutch at home. My daughters are growing up in a very diverse neighborhood; seven languages are spoken in each of their classrooms. I think my own childhood would have been much different had I come of age with this kind of internationalism rather than the homogeneity of 1970s-80s rural Ohio. At that time, our family was the “diversity.”

So it was Lalita's skin condition, and the identity issues it created, that first attracted me to her story. I called her up and asked if she would be interested in participating in some kind of film project. Once we met and began filming, I realized that Lalita's body was actually in a state of continual transformation. The loss of her skin pigment, which had happened thirty years earlier, was just one of many changes that have affected her sense of who she is.

I began filming the medical appointments, diagnostics, and treatments that Lalita was undergoing. They were often visually striking, particularly the various types of scans and x-rays (digital imaging has certainly increased the colorfulness and precision in that field). I saw the drama in Lalita's present-day medical story, particularly when she was diagnosed with a recurrence of breast cancer, but I also saw complex symbolism in these images. In our interviews, Lalita expressed her story in terms of the metaphorical losses each of her illnesses had wrought: a loss of racial identity with vitiglio, a loss of womanhood with ovarian cancer, and a loss of youth with breast cancer and heart disease.

Despite suffering all of these illnesses, and several others the film doesn't delve into, Lalita never resorts to victimhood. She has a beautiful, resilient spirit and always finds a way to laugh at life. As we became friends, I wanted to understand that spark in her eyes, that quality that makes her *indelible* even if her skin pigment was not. So the film began to turn its attention to what makes Lalita who she is. What keeps her going in the face of hardship? Who is she, if she has lost the outward indicators of her ethnicity, her femininity, her youth?

What I have learned is that two things firmly ground Lalita. First, her strong relationships. She and Pierre, her Quebecois husband whom she met when they were both students in Paris, have a wonderful bond that has deepened over the years. Lalita is devoted to her family, despite their being spread over four continents in true diaspora fashion. She talks regularly to her siblings, and is very close to her nieces and nephews; she says this helps make up for her own lack of children. Lalita has close friends throughout the world who go back decades, and she makes a point of visiting them often.

Lalita's Hindu spirituality provides another inner point of focus amidst the swirl of bodily struggles. While she says that her routine of prayer and fasting began somewhat "as a lark" when she was young, her devotion to Shiva and Hanuman deepened as it seemed to provide positive results. After 30 years of living in the West with a Canadian man, she describes an evolving relationship to her faith. I admire Lalita's unique merging of Eastern and Western philosophies. She manages to embrace the calm acceptance of her Hindu background, rooted in a belief in reincarnation and the karmic cycle, while also actively pursuing her goals and her own health by seizing on the chance of "this one life" implied in the Western worldview.

Pierre, too, has been influenced by Lalita's culture. He has adopted several Indian habits, and has engaged in professional historical research in India. Pierre feels quite at home when they travel to India, and enjoys their growing circle of friends there. The couple hopes that when they retire, they can spend half of the year in India and half in Canada. Having recently beaten breast cancer and severe heart disease, Lalita keeps an amazingly positive attitude towards her health and her future.

For my part, I have grown a lot over the four years of making this piece. I have gained an understanding of the complex and evolving connections between the spirit and the body. I have developed as an artist, finding new ways of shooting that bring out the metaphoric potential in the imagery, new approaches to editing that do not rely on direct exposition, and new forms to present my work, such as the two-channel installation version of this piece. Most importantly, I have found the gift of friendship with an amazing woman and her thoughtful, generous husband. The process of creating *Indelible Lalita* with them has challenged me to contemplate in detail the meaning of a life. I hope the film engages viewers and invites them to make their own realizations about body, spirit, and identity.