

Madakarani

The Screen Pleasures of the Sex Siren in Malayalam Cinema

In an iconic sequence from Milan Luthria's 2011 Bollywood film *The Dirty Picture*, the male lead, Surya Kant, berates the female lead, an actress named Reshma (who is later given the screen name Silk), calling her a "dirty secret." The fictional character of Reshma/Silk, played by Vidya Balan, was based on the real-life actress Silk Smitha, a popular South Indian dancer-turned-actress of the 1980s who died by suicide in 1996. Silk Smitha was a prominent presence in South Indian films made in the Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam film industries, and many of her films were also dubbed into Hindi. *The Dirty Picture* fictionalizes the life of this actress—a central figure in this book. In the scene described here, Surya Kant questions her status as an actress and attributes her popularity only to her sex appeal: "They all know you are not one of us . . . you are our nocturnal secret which no one will acknowledge in broad daylight." Handing her an award for the best actress, he whispers to Silk that she, too, will disappear like others who have aspired to stardom, and the audience will soon forget her. In using this exchange to sow the seeds of suspicion in Silk about her own career prospects, *The Dirty Picture* pronounces her active sexual life and ambition as the reason for her professional failure. Casting Silk as a sex siren by collating sensational fragments of gossip and speculative news, the film deviates from the historical accuracy expected of a biopic and marks her as a figure of corporeal excess and moral decline—the archetypal imagination of a soft-porn star.¹ *The Dirty Picture* demonstrates how the sex siren in Indian cinema also doubles as a discourse about a moral and professional decline in the film industry, especially with the influx of women from lower caste and class backgrounds who pushed the boundaries of middle-class social mores. The figure of the "extra"—women who ended up on film sets as

background actors—began appearing in mainstream Hindi films like *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (dir. Guru Dutt, 1959), *Khamosh* (dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 1985), *Rangeela* (dir. Ram Gopal Verma, 1995), and *Om Shanti Om* (dir. Farah Khan, 2007). What is inevitably left out of such narratives of extras is the impact that caste and class have on opportunities in an industry and a social context in which the normative precondition for a woman's success is fair skin. By organizing female extras into different types and classes based on their looks, and accordingly assigning different wage scales (a practice that continues to this day), those at the lowest level are often deprived of opportunities. The industry practice for dark-skinned characters is to darken the face of fair-skinned actors rather than cast actors who are dark-skinned. Categorizing female extras based on looks aligns with the premium placed on fair skin as a marker of social capital. This system is complicated by suppliers and contractors who play a mediating role in procuring on-screen labor, as they often demand unreasonably high commissions from meagerly paid extras.²

The history of Indian cinema is peppered with stories of gendered exclusion. Even in the silent film era, women in cinema were looked down upon with suspicion. Their absence in early cinema was tied to restrictions on women's participation in social life, as caste order and purity dictated their honor and respectability, and upper-caste women were subjected to the moral panic that demanded unconditional obedience to uphold caste purity.³ In the field of cinema, this exclusion can be seen in several instances, such as the Parsi community's discomfort with Bombay Talkies' employment of Parsi actresses in the 1930s; the physical and social violence against the Malayalam actress Rajamma, a.k.a. P. K. Rosy—who acted in the first Malayalam silent film, *Vigatakumaran* (dir. J. C. Daniel, 1928)—because of her lower-caste status; and the social boycott of Aideu Handique, the first woman to act in an Assamese film (*Joymoti*, dir. Jyotiprasad Agarwala, 1935), who lived most of her life in a hut until she was recognized in her old age by the government for her contribution to Assamese cinema.⁴ In this early period, women's aspirations for career mobility were viewed with suspicion. Women from courtesan backgrounds like Begum Akhtar, Jaddan Bai, and Fatima Begum were part of Bombay cinema and used their interest in music and dance to build their careers.⁵ Starlets, who come much later in this chronology, marshal long-standing anxieties about women's participation in the film industry and the moral uprightness that the industry demands from actresses as a precondition for their entry into it. In turn, popular discourse has presented the film industry as a morally suspect sphere in which quick profits matter more than ethical and artistic concerns. A 1988 article focused on starlets in *The Times of India* outlines the varying intensities within which male and female starlets are narrativized in Hindi cinema:

[An] aspiring woman star is always a butt of ridicule, fuel for the limitless libido, a perfect target of exploitation. The male on the other hand is pristine, he can do no wrong. His struggle to make it is even glorified. The tales of those boys who slept

on the pavement, ate *channa* for dinner, travelled ticketless in the local train are never-ending. If a starlet has to survive in a hole in the wall, she's as bad as sin.⁶

Discussions about women's entry into professional acting often conflated film work and prostitution. Even early on, film trade magazines reported the difficulty of finding actresses from "respectable" families, citing the influx of courtesans and *nautch* girls (temple dancers dedicated to a deity) from red-light districts as tarnishing the industry's reputation. Madhuja Mukherjee captures one such narrative in the singer Rattan Bai's exchange with the publicity manager of New Theatres Kolkata. When she confronted the studio about removing four of her song sequences from *Karwan-e-Hyat* (dir. Premankur Atorthy, 1935), the manager alluded to her erstwhile status as a performer in Calcutta's red-light district. Bai responds by outlining the history of performers from other red-light districts who participated in the film industry to counter the manager's suggestion that she was of an inferior status.⁷ The manager's remarks about Bai's background resonate with the delineation of different categories of prostitutes in Nripendra Kumar Basu and S. N. Sinha's 1933 book *The History of Prostitution*, outlined in Durba Mitra's history of Indian sexuality—*paricharika*, a maid who could possibly have a secret relationship with the male member of the family; *Kulata*, a married woman who secretly courts lovers to satisfy her lust; *Svairini*, who snubs her husband and entertains her lovers; and *Nati*, who lives by dancing and music, and entertains people of her choice for earning "extra."⁸ Thus, actresses were already perceived as part of the taxonomical categorization of "clandestine prostitutes" who navigate illicit sexual practices by their willingness to step outside strictly monogamous partnerships.

Such anxieties around the scandalous private lives of actresses diluting the respectability of the film industry find their match in the way the term *madakarani* encapsulated the tensions around women's sexual autonomy. *Madakarani* is used in the Malayalam language to describe a woman whose frank sexuality and readiness to use her body mark her as an unstable social figure. Derived from the Sanskrit root words *madam* or *madakatvam*, *madakarani* refers to unbridled desires that unsettle social mores and conventional expectations. As opposed to the Sanskrit loan word *premam* (love), a feeling that is associated with individuation and interiority, *madakatvam* ascribes a transitory and ephemeral nature to a relationship in which emotional intimacy and respect toward the female lover are lacking. Thus, the popular perception of the *madakarani* is pitched at the margins of heteronormative conjugality, framing her as a public woman over whose life the readers/viewers can lay claim.

In Malayalam soft-porn cinema of the 1990s, female leads were cast as *madakarani*, a label that symbolized both their narrative role and their professional distinction as second-tier contract laborers (as distinct from A-list female actors in mainstream cinema). Tied to the desire for upward mobility, the *madakarani*'s sexual labor renders her desirable as a sexual body and, simultaneously, an

object of social derision because of her perceived moral depravity and availability. The image of *madakarani* that was stamped on these women resonates with the term *veshya*, the Malayalam equivalent for prostitute (also found in many other Indian languages). The use of the term *madakarani* in relation to film actresses also imposed normative heterosexual standards on all women in the film business. Thus, the discursive construction of the *madakarani* is tied to visual and narrative practices that exceeded the films they acted in and constantly threatened the social codes of respectability.

This othering of the bodies of sex sirens is prominent in film journalism across time and space within India, some of which provides historical precedent for discourses around female actresses in the soft-porn industry. Although such film weeklies can be seen as engaging in a protracted effort to legitimize these actresses' contributions by highlighting the embodied risks they took, they also became machineries of normative control. In Malayalam film magazines of the 1940s, such as *Cinemavarika* and *Cinemamasika*, sensational news reports about actresses' moral decay and legal troubles often ran alongside short-form fiction narrated by an actress about her experience navigating the space of cinema. These included snippets of the compromises they had to make to maintain their career prospects. One news report that was published under the heading "Cinematokam" (Cinema world) in *Cinemamasika* reports the arrest of an actress in Bombay who was pimped by her stepfather for a day and her arrest by Bombay secret police under the Prostitution Prohibition Act.⁹ Film magazines often reported such perils they faced in the film industry through the discourse of prostitution and voiced concerns about whether the right kind of women were being accepted into it.¹⁰ The pressure on actresses to be recognized was amplified because of the presumed *veshyathvam* (sexual profligacy or "sluttiness") stamped on their public presence. *Cinemamasika*'s 1946 column on the secret lives of cinema stars compiled the divorce, marriage, and affairs of actresses in an effort to expose their unconventional lifestyles.¹¹ A 1948 report in *filmindia* detailed the case of an extra who was arrested by the Bombay Vigilance Police at a hotel in Juhu and the proceedings of a press conference convened by the secretary of the Indian Motion Picture Producers' Association to clear the air, as sex workers identifying as extras were seen as bad for the industry's reputation.¹² Speculating on the various means by which sex workers may have allegedly infiltrated the film industry, the report recommends that talent agencies follow transparent practices to filter out women with "doubtful credentials" to preserve the sanctity of acting as a profession.¹³ Such reports about desperate extras served as a warning to mainstream actresses (emblems of middle-class values) to avoid controversy.

We can imagine a gendered genealogy between these early cinema discourses and current attitudes toward *madakarani*. For instance, when the former soft-porn actress Shakeela was the featured guest at the launch for the mainstream film *Nalla Samayam* (Good time; dir. Omar Lulu, 2022), a mall in Kozhikode denied permission for the event on the grounds of "public safety," because another actress

had been subjected to sexual misbehavior by some men in the mall in the past, and the mall authorities wanted to have additional layers of security.¹⁴ Although wrapped in a veneer of protocol, the operating rationale was to rein in the public visibility of Shakeela's former soft-porn status by invoking women's safety as a general principle. Thus, over the years, the *madakarani* has become a symbolic marker of a morally dubious woman who can potentially endanger other, more "respectable" (usually middle-class, *savarna*) women. In this framing, the *madakarani* is a destroyer of heteronormativity—a gender-betrayer or a marriage-breaker. To some extent, the *madakarani*'s dangerous presence in such discourses rehearses the argument made against prostitution—the figure of the prostitute could spark men's sexual desire so much that any woman on the street could be subjected to sexual violence by being mistaken for one, or so the rhetoric goes.

Despite the soft-porn industry's hyper-visualization of actresses as symbols of sexual liberation, historical accounts documenting these women's lives and narratives are scarce. For a film historian tracing the conditions under which these women worked, this paucity of historical sources is a major problem. Dominant journalistic accounts and popular film writings are quick to dismiss their film work as an extension of sex work conditioned by economic hardships, a rhetoric that aligns with some feminist groups that refer to all sex workers as "trafficked women."¹⁵ For instance, the film magazine *Nana* published a series titled "Those Trapped in Redlight Streets," compiling testimonies of women who migrated to Kodambakkam in search of acting careers and ended up as sex workers.¹⁶ Anjali Arondekar's idea of abundance "that does not replace paucity with overflow, but rather unravels a set of questions that are fertile ground for producing and contesting our attachments to history writing" offers a heuristic for critically examining loss, marginality, and disenfranchisement as core ideas in the study of sexuality. Pursuing a similarly inspired idea of abundance, I turn to pages in film weeklies to attend to "both the efflorescence of the past and to attend to its strategic and active mobilization within the politics of the present."¹⁷ Through such materials, I trace the invisible labor of the women who participated in these films as extras, body doubles, and heroines in sexualized roles. Film weeklies catered to readers who saw these print materials as accessories to sexual thrills mediated via gossip columns, center spreads, and off-screen information about actresses. At the same time, these weeklies used an unenthusiastic and flat tone in detailing the production details of soft-porn films, which rarely went beyond the bare outlines. Thus, while the films were delegitimized as low grade and uncineematic in dominant film narratives, such shooting-floor reports paradoxically placed them as a significant, even legitimate part of the film industry. A 1989 article in *Film Mirror* alleged, for instance, that more than "mere acting" is demanded of extra actresses.¹⁸ In an industry marked by precarity, aspiring actresses often agree to unpaid opportunities in the form of initial acting commitments and photo shoots, with the hope that real work with remuneration will come with more experience and

visibility. The gray zone where unpaid work coexists with informal casting routines makes the film industry rife with exploitation and unsafe gendered labor arrangements that pressure aspiring actresses to “compromise.” In this space, the figure of the sex siren is more than a narrative presence on the film screen; she is a social manifestation of the complex relationships between gender and labor.

To examine such phenomena, I train a feminist historiographic lens on a body of films starring actresses who did not necessarily identify as feminist and tease out how being cast as *madakarani* limited their opportunities, and how debates on cine-labor address the repetitive bodily labor contributed by these actresses, extras, and background artists.¹⁹ A feminist approach to the *madakarani* necessitates looking critically at the mechanisms whereby these women *became madakarani*. These mechanisms are structured through what I call “screen pleasures”—a socio-sexual arrangement that denotes the gendered value-economy of the film industry, where aspirational mobility to cross class lines and caste origins is mediated by sexuality. As they animate the cinematic experience of fantasy, screen pleasures go beyond the representational dynamics captured on the physical screen and transpose them onto noncinematic contexts. They exceed the screen’s capabilities and become part of an extratextual fantasy that sparks desire even as the screen shields viewers from excess. As embodiments of screen pleasures, actresses who played *madakarani* and performed nonnormative sexual roles were consumed as fragmented rather than iconic images associated with “professional” actresses who managed to negotiate life and work without losing their social status.

Film magazines often bracketed the lives and careers of *madakarani* between the climaxes of screen pleasure and their sudden death by suicide or murder. In their reportage of *madakarani*’s deaths, film magazines rendered the actresses’ corpses and the audience’s posthumous memory of these actresses as objects of a forensic gaze. I look closely at the obituaries of three actresses—Vijayasree, Rani Padmini, and Silk Smitha—who were perceived as sex sirens in their time (although Vijayasree was a mainstream actress) and whose deaths were as contentious as their on-screen lives. Examining varied sources such as studio histories, film journalism, and yellow magazines (sensational or sexually suggestive magazines), I argue that the discourse of obscenity emerges as a larger framing device in film reportage that fixes the *madakarani* in cyclical narratives of visibility and decline. In fact, the very factors that contribute to the making of the figure of the *madakarani* were also seen to be the cause of her decline; these magazines foreground sex and sexuality not just as sources of pleasure but also as forces that threatened the previous “good standing” of these women when they entered the field of erotic films. In publicizing starlets’ identities through centerfolds and introductory columns, film journalists applauded them for their enterprising judgment while simultaneously deriding them and pronouncing verdicts on their careers. In time, such reportage led to a perception of the *madakarani* as not only an unacceptable form of the hetero-feminine but a symbol of an entire region’s “degenerate” film culture.

The Dirty Picture is a prime example of how the local image of the *madakarani* was mainstreamed by character stereotyping, as well as an entire form of cinematic practice that deviated from the seemingly “national” model of Bollywood. Following a formulaic Bollywood blueprint that includes song-and-dance sequences, a rags-to-riches plot of a small-town girl pursuing her dreams, and a narrative of heterosexual romance, *The Dirty Picture* brought great success to Vidya Balan, whose decision to play Silk Smitha was seen as a radical step, as other prominent actresses had refused to take the role. Not only did Balan win the National Film Award, but rave reviews also praised her performance, for example, as “an ode to cinema and the liberating power of sexuality. . . . As the two stories merge, one realizes it is the legend of Vidya Balan that is being created on-screen, as she takes the Silk-route to reinventing herself.”²⁰

The Dirty Picture was initially publicized in preproduction as a biopic of Smitha, but the production house, Balaji Telefilms, retracted the biopic elements it had used in publicity after Smitha’s family sued the filmmakers for defaming her memory and reducing her life to a series of sexualized images.²¹ Consequently, Luthria repitched the film, sidelining its biographical elements by saying that it was inspired by multiple actresses, including Smitha and starlets such as Disco Shanti and Polyester Padmini, who were a sensation in the 1980s Tamil cinema.²² Luthria’s justification that the film drew on the lives of the “breed of dusky women,” who, despite money and fame, led a “lonely life,” reinforced the stereotypical depiction of actresses who are cast in erotic roles as incapable of sustaining familial connections with lasting emotional bonds, and whose inability to maintain professional commitments in turn challenges their status as actresses.²³ The film’s reference to “South India” as a hotbed of erotic films led to debates about how Bollywood film appropriated regional cinemas and sensationalized Smitha as a starry-eyed dancer whose rise and fall made her an emblem not only for erotic films but for the region from which she hailed. Ashish Rajadhyaksha points to Bollywood’s centrality and industry dominance through the phrase “‘Bollywoodization’ of Hindi Cinema,” where “Bollywood” is used as an umbrella term to refer to the whole of Indian cinema, diluting the complexities of the country’s diverse linguistic and regional groups, which all have their own cinematic traditions.²⁴ The South Indian film fraternity alleged that Bollywood had co-opted the tragic life of a South Indian actress for commercial gain and reduced their film culture to stereotypes to suit the tastes and expectations of a national audience. Many South Indian film personalities who worked closely with Smitha expressed their disappointment with the Bollywood version, and some even went on to portray an “alternative” narrative of Smitha through films that drew inspiration from her life.²⁵ Vinu Chakravarthy, who cast Smitha in her debut film *Vandichakkaram* (1982), felt that Vidya Balan was miscast in *The Dirty Picture*, and he got into a public spat with Ekta Kapoor (the film’s producer of) about the narrative’s authenticity.²⁶



FIGURE 5. Cartoon by Unnamati Syama Sundar (2011) that exposes the silencing of caste in *The Dirty Picture*. Image courtesy Syama Sundar.

In her interrogation of caste and gender in India's film culture, Jenny Rowena argues that the real Silk Smitha's lower-caste status energized the vamp roles she enacted on-screen. Rowena sees the lack of attention to questions of caste within larger discourses about *The Dirty Picture* as normalizing *savarna* (upper-caste) aesthetics. She writes that it "allows the fair-skinned Tamil Brahmin (Vidya Balan), located within the Hindi film industry, to make use of the image of the dark-skinned South Indian actress. By silencing the caste issues involved, it helps her build her upper-caste heroine self over the subaltern vamphood of Silk Smitha."²⁷ A cartoon by Unnamati Syama Sundar themed on *The Dirty Picture*, which was shared on Facebook and later formed part of Rowena's article in *Dalit Web*, conveys this white-washing of Dalit experiences.²⁸ Syama Sundar's cartoons emerge from Ambedkarite politics and are critical of the left *savarna* complicity in sidelining Dalit concerns. Syama Sundar highlights the problematic formulation of women's sexual liberation in *The Dirty Picture*, which dilutes the social context of Dalit experiences and flattens variations in women's experiences and struggles (Fig. 5).

The Indian film industry does not, as *The Dirty Picture* presents it, function devoid of caste—a fact highlighted by Ambedkarite filmmakers such as Pa Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj, and Nagraj Manjule, who simultaneously denounce casteist images and use anti-caste aesthetics. Read alongside the politically mobilized art made by filmmakers conjoining the prisms of "justice with aesthetics," in which the caste body becomes a locus of power and resistance, Syama Sundar's sharp strokes from the Dalit-Bahujan perspective reveal the entitlement and endowments that

structure the nexus of cultural and social capital.²⁹ *Bahujan*, meaning “the majority of the people,” is used here to emphasize that caste is not solely a Dalit issue, and caste-bound practices abound in the day-to-day practices that affect the majority of the population.³⁰ Resonating with these politics, Syama Sundar’s cartoon exposes the flip side to the liberal humanist take on the film by pointing to the complicity of *savarna* interests in framing it as a narrative of individual liberation.

In explicitly drawing the viewer’s attention to the dehumanization of Dalit women implied in the reference to the “skinless” chicken that is hung in a meat shop, Syama Sundar’s cartoon makes us aware of the problematics in the liberal narratives around women’s sexual empowerment. In the panel, skinless chicken is a specialized product that is rated higher than the chicken with skin. If skin refers to a caste body, the “skinless” (casteless) body of Vidya Balan is rendered malleable enough to take up a variety of roles. Making a comparison with Smitha’s presence in the industry, which has been relegated to “skin show,” Syama Sundar’s cartoon points toward the capitalist logic of filmmaking, which creates specialized cultural forms like cabaret but refuses to give respect and dignity to the women who perform these roles by casting them as threats to bourgeoisie respectability. The power relationship between Balan and Smitha within the economy of the National Award is unequal. This unequal relationship—between an upper-caste (read casteless) body, and a caste-marked body whose status is erased in the space of cinematic narrative is analogous to Susan Gubar’s characterization of masquerade and impersonation in American culture. Gubar writes: “Racial impersonation and masquerading are a destiny imposed on colonized black people who must wear the white mask—of customs and values, of norms and languages, of aesthetic standards and religious ideologies—created and enforced by an alien civilization.”³¹ In this social hierarchy *some* bodies can legitimately masquerade as the “other” with little impact (white, in Gubar’s analysis, *savarna* in the Indian case), while any masquerade on the part of the oppressed is always a necessity for survival.

Vidya Balan enacted the life of Smitha, a lower-caste woman. Although Smitha’s “dusky skin” featured prominently in journalistic write-ups when she was alive, her caste origins never found space in these columns. Instead, the write-ups discussed her dance sequences through stereotyping and oversexualizing her body. But this marking of Smitha as a “casteless” body in cinematic and journalistic discourse is in corollary, the very condition that tills the ground for her consumption as a sexual fetish. (This kind of caste erasure is not casteless in the abolitionist sense but an extension of the caste prison.) In her discussion of *tamasha*, a traditional Dalit cultural performance branded as *ashlil* (vulgar) by Brahminical society, Shailaja Paik writes about the “sex-gender-caste complex” that conditions *tamasha* performers through a prism of surplus and sexual excess. This double detraction of value makes them bear the burden of being lowly, immoral, and dishonorable women who can never gain entry to respectable social position. Paik’s discussion of *manuski* (humanity or dignity) is relevant in our discussion of *madakarani* as well. What allows

the disposability of sex sirens as immoral and flippant is their reification as social subjects irremediably unworthy of humanity. Their very existence as “brazen, reckless, and rebellious—a desirable and dangerous woman on the loose” is conditioned by a sexual excess and surplus that make them sexually available and negated as the other.³² Smitha’s marginalization must be read in this light. Enacting eroticized dance sequences as a secondary artist further relegated her embodied labor to the status of inessential component for artistic value. Even in the discussions around the making of *The Dirty Picture*, Silk Smitha was less of a subject than a fetish-object to be molded to the needs of the box-office economy. Likewise, the film offers no inkling of the experiential or lived accounts of lower-caste actors struggling in a system in which caste-class nexus and contact networks create opportunities.

Thus, Smitha’s image has been posthumously co-opted and improvised to fit various narratives that emerge from the unequal terms that actresses must negotiate within a deeply patriarchal industry. It is ironic that in today’s digital proliferation of Malayalam film clips, Smitha’s name finds mention mostly as a sex siren or a “porn star” alongside later soft-porn actresses such as Shakeela, Reshma, Sindhu, and Maria, who came to the limelight well after Smitha’s death in 1996. The retrospective construction of Smitha as a soft-porn actress participates in and is produced by the same sociocultural dynamics that contribute to the construction of the *madakarani*. The figure of the sexualized woman with her unapologetic diva image has often countered the normative values and sexual mores that constitute the Indian middle-class value system.

THEORIZING THE FIGURE OF MADAKARANI

In her work on Bombay cinema, Ranjani Mazumdar describes “vamps” as symbols of wanton sexuality who occupy public spaces such as the nightclub or bar.³³ The *madakarani* is relatively distinct from this hypersexual, westernized imagination of the vamp. Instead, the *madakarani* encompasses a gamut of roles and relationships that defines the possibilities for sexual transgression within public imaginaries of sex. This includes situations that allow women to explore sexual refashioning and engage in open and candid relations with the opposite sex, or situations that suggest the possibility of intergenerational desire. In some instances, the use of exotic locations, such as the wilderness, or cabaret sequences racialize desire through access to othered bodies that rely on sexual pleasure. Whereas the vamp stands in stark contrast to the virtuous woman, the *madakarani* is a morally liminal figure whose very existence is marked by a replaceability that makes her an extension of the sex worker in the public imagination. A transactional value animates the *madakarani*’s exchanges, especially in the way she uses her identity as a public woman to convey her concerns and visibility. Her alliances are often temporary and her efforts to negotiate with the heteropatriarchy involve calculated moves to use the system to her advantage. The *madakarani* upsets social norms not through

selfishness or rampant individualism; rather, her actions break open the nexus of caste, class, and heterosexual structures that underlies patriarchy. Thus, the *mada-karani* becomes an image, a posture, and a representational trope, and some of these functions find reflection in soft-porn films even at the level of production. In a film industry in which wage gaps and unsafe working conditions persist, making gender equity impossible, the resistant force emblemized by the fictional *mada-karani* offers us an entry point to explore the complex terrain of gender relations that envelop this figure's depiction in Malayalam soft-porn cinema.

One early literary approach in Malayalam to incorporate erotic descriptions is the *manipravala sahityam* (a syncretic tradition of Sanskrit and Malayalam), which involved the penning of *achi charitam* (history of woman) through the description of the heroine's physical beauty, often interlaced with erotic undertones.³⁴ Thus, there is a prehistory to the *madakarani*, but the term as it is used in film magazine discourses encompasses an ensemble of imaginative strands associated with women and sexuality drawn from genres as diverse as *painkili* (sensational pulp fiction), *kambikathakal* (erotic stories circulated among male readers), and *rathikathakal* (write-ups in which anonymous women share their bedroom secrets). In some instances, the *madakarani* also emerges as a metonym for the film world and as a vital link connecting the textual worlds of *kambikathakal* and *rathikathakal*, both of which use a first-person narrative to share sexual experiences. Line drawings and illustrations detailing erotic encounters elucidate the narrative, while scene descriptions contribute to outlining the *madakarani*'s visual imagination. The illustrations that appeared as part of erotic stories were sometimes culled and reassembled as part of pornographic books. For instance, the illustrations that came with the *Chitrakarthika* had visually captivating line drawings that became the fulcrum around which the erotic stories were written (Fig. 6).

The circulation of *madakarani* in different genres manifests in public interest about the intimate lives of actresses verging on voyeurism, expressed in letters to the editor written by readers of film weeklies. Using vocabularies of consumption, these readers demand that magazines divulge the actresses' personal details to expose their purported double lives. In these accounts, actresses emerge as fragmented images alienated from their subjectivity, agency, and labor. The film industry generates commercial gain by galvanizing audiences' special rights over the film product (whether as song booklets sold during film screenings or other merchandise, such as posters), and viewers in turn extend their consumer privileges by commanding rights over images of and narratives about actresses as if they were themselves film paraphernalia. An extractive logic of getting the maximum benefit operates in this value-for-money argument, such that the spectator becomes the ultimate arbitrator of celebrity culture by acquiring a part, or the derivative (song booklet, merchandise), that is taken for the whole product, while the actresses are perceived as belonging to the public domain insofar as their film careers and market values rest on the support offered by viewers.

narratives that showcase women as keepers of secrets and spinners of mysteries, whose desires can be channeled for erotic spectacles. The narratives are simulated as having been written by women who are willing to share their sexual experiences with the reader, such that the columns make readers privy to the “deep desires and passions” that underlie their revelations.³⁵ The columns also feature confessional accounts that are assigned to fictitious sex workers. As opposed to the lack of interiority that animates other articles, these accounts use the sex workers’ experiences with different clients to reveal complex power dynamics, pleasure, and varying modes of public posturing.

Men’s magazines assume a moralistic register by foregrounding men as guardians and caretakers who are responsible for exposing skewed social realities. *Fire*, for instance, describes its journalistic function as emerging out of its need to intervene in “exposing atrocities against women, children & also men.”³⁶ Using exposure as its main organizing principle, *Fire* incorporates crime stories, erotic fiction, and centerfolds, placing women and their sexual pleasure as the cornerstone of its revelations.³⁷ Such popular discourse created a relay between the realm of screen pleasures and the audiences who consumed them, circulating not just through the space of the film theater but also in a peripheral network of print media such as gossip columns, yellow magazines, and centerfolds that kept the gendered mechanics of the film machinery at work outside the theater. The image of the *madakarani* was popularized not only by film actresses but also a multitude of aspiring young women who wanted to be on the screen. Print magazines and film weeklies became important dealers in this economy of screen pleasures, performing as an interface between Malayalam cinema’s diegetic and nondiegetic worlds.

FILM JOURNALISTS AS CAREER DEALERS

In the 1960s and 1970s, Kodambakkam was a bustling film production base for the South Indian language industries of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. Kodambakkam is in the city of Chennai (formerly Madras), the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu.³⁸ It is where South Indian film production began in the 1920s with R. Nataraja Mudaliar’s establishment of the India Film Company. With the relocation of Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam films to their regional bases in Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Trivandrum, respectively, in the 1980s and 1990s, Kodambakkam became a hub for glamour films and subsequently soft-porn production, while it simultaneously continued to serve mainstream Tamil cinema. In addition to large studios like A. V. M., Vijaya Vauhini, Gemini, and L. V. Prasad, a string of small studios like Kalpakam, Sarada, Uma, and Prakash catered to different clientele based on budget and shooting needs. The settlement around Kodambakkam, including the adjoining area of Saligramam, was dotted with one-room houses rented out to aspiring film artists at comparatively cheap rates. Production managers and agents supplying junior artists regularly visited these tenements in search of new faces. Freelance

journalists who contributed stories to film magazines like *Nana*, *Chitrabhumi*, *Cinerama*, *Cinemamasika*, and *Film* had minor celebrity clout among the film aspirants who came from various parts of South India looking for their big break.

Most of the Malayalam film-based magazines were centered in Kerala. They employed Madras correspondents who freelanced and procured photographers from shooting locations. Beginning in the late 1970s, these film magazines and their reporters began to change how they mediated narratives from Kodambakkam and increasingly used fictitious names. In the 1980s, columns in *Chithrabhumi* such as “Gossips Out” and “Karuppum Veluppam” (Black and white) recounted the latest news from production units in the form of caricatures and memorable quotations. The column “Nanaji Kanda Lokam” (The world Nanaji saw) in *Nana* was immensely popular, as it laid out the latest gossip from outdoor shooting units and details of private lives with little discretion. More than film-related news, the lives of artists and technicians who had come to Kodambakkam took center stage in these magazines. The magazines’ bargaining power grew so immense that some freelance reporters doubled as publicity agents and took on public relations work for production companies.³⁹ Many others who stuck to journalism strengthened their columns and became prime fixers in the industry by providing formulas for success to new entrants. The verdicts they offered in predicting actresses’ futures in their columns could make or break a newcomer’s career. In its October 1986 issue, *Nana* issued a call for submissions from aspiring actresses to be featured in the column “Puthumukham” (The new face), with an advertisement titled “Grab the opportunity that beckons you”:

If you have come to Madras with dreams to build a career in films, here is a golden opportunity for you. No one has made it big in Kodambakkam without the support of a helping hand or two. *Nana* is becoming a pioneer in the publishing front by extending its readers opportunities to live their dreams. Be the selected few to feature your profile in the newly launched column *Puthumukham* and change your destiny forever.⁴⁰

Being featured in this two-page profile promised to jump-start the career of a struggling actress. Alongside a full-page photograph, the feature would carry a page-length interview in which the actress could talk openly about her interests, even her willingness to act in roles that would involve intimacy. Photoshoots using contrasting images to showcase the range of roles the actresses were capable of portraying were integral to these columns. The informality and mundane ordinariness of these photographs undercut the authoritative voice of the journalist in the accompanying write-ups.⁴¹ While the aesthetic quality of these photographs varied, they were valued for their context-specific social function. For instance, *Nana*’s introductory article about an aspiring actress named Sreekala (Fig. 7) features two photographs accompanying the write-up. The hard lighting and strong shadows in these two images indicate that they were not taken in ideal studio conditions. The traces of domesticity that involuntarily make their way into the



FIGURE 7. Aspiring actress Sreekala in “Cinema Bhagyam Thedi Oru Nadi” (An actress in search of luck in films), *Nana* 8, no. 3 (1986): 13. Image courtesy Appan Thampuran Library.

frame—the actress’s frontal gaze, a cassette player, hard shadows—open the images up to varied interpretations that escape the photographer’s intent.⁴² In the first image, Sreekala has a relatively modern look in a swimsuit, an often-used strategy to showcase an actress’s willingness to take up “bold” roles that deviate from the traditional look that many of these women were used to in their relatively modest upbringings. In contrast, in the second image, Sreekala appears in a traditional outfit that imbues her with middle-class respectability.

Centerfolds in the film magazines showcased actresses in skimpy outfits, often showing off bare midribs or exposed thighs and cleavage. Avid film enthusiasts collected and displayed them. These center spreads did not always carry the names of the models, yet their appearance nevertheless provides a glimpse into their brief fame. For instance, one collector named Rarichan—a film buff in his late

seventies—told me that center spreads hold a special place in his personal archive. Referring to the collection he had amassed since the 1980s, Rarichan recounts: “I used to wonder what might have happened to these women who were featured in the centerfolds. Did any of them make it to the industry? Possibly not. I call these centerfolds ‘death warrants’ (*maranapatram*)—the last traces of their short-stints in the industry.”⁴³ Despite Rarichan’s suggestion that actresses introduced through tabloid columns like “Puthumukham” uniformly failed, not all of them ended up playing sexually charged roles. Although most of them could not make inroads in the industry, some managed to land supporting roles in average and low-budget films. Rarichan’s use of the phrase “death warrants” to signify the failed aspirations hidden in these center spreads draws our attention to how these actresses were irremediably relegated to the dustbin of history.

Given this emphasis on death, attention to the form of the obituary and the forensic gaze is productive. In fact, obituaries played a crucial role among the various genres that film magazines and weeklies used to showcase the lives of *madakarani*. One of my respondents who specialized in writing them explained, “Obituaries are not always eulogistic accounts; it can also be a move toward making the lost connections that were never uttered but was within the ambit of the known.”⁴⁴ Malayalam film magazines inventively used reportage of unnatural deaths to revisit the life and contributions of the deceased. Frequently, entire issues of a film weekly were dedicated to the memory of the person concerned and included remembrance columns written by technicians, actors, and crew members and stories that had gone unreported when the subject was alive.⁴⁵ The sensationalism of tabloid journalism focused intensely on the untimely deaths of the subjects. These “exclusive” columns were gleaned from gossip that made the rounds during the person’s life but had been screened from circulating as news stories. When the person died, these earlier protocols and informal agreements could be laid to rest. The ostensibly chaste genre of the obituary was used to fill in the gaps and fissures in the narrative of the person’s life. Their deaths were opportunities to entangle and air out their hitherto clandestine backroom dealings. Most of these obituaries reported natural deaths, except for the three actresses I examine in the next section: Rani Padmini, who was murdered in 1986, and Vijayasree and Silk Smitha, who committed suicide in 1974 and 1996, respectively.

THE OBITUARY GAZE

As a genre of biographical writing, obituaries, known as “obits” in the journalistic register, include industry insiders’ reminiscences about the deceased written immediately after the death of the subject. Obits are narratives, heavily drawing from the dead person’s life and contributions written for anyone who might not have much inkling about the subject’s personal life. They differ from “death notices,” which are short factual announcements of a death. Early obituaries often

included graphic descriptions of the death and obsessively recounted the circumstances surrounding it, reflecting a postmortem sensibility. The form of the obituary was refined over time, culminating in what Alden Whitman, a reporter for the *New York Times*, described as a “lively expression of personality and character [and] a well-focused snapshot, the fuller the length the better.”⁴⁶ Malayalam film reportage about the deaths of *madakarani* is firmly rooted in the obituary’s primal scene and revels in the exposition of sensational, gory, and illicit details. The deaths of actresses such as Rani Padmini, Vijayasree, and Silk Smitha exemplify this kind of reportage and its activation of the field of screen pleasures. Although the specific details of the actresses’ personal circumstances and deaths differ widely, they are bound in this intentional construction of these women as *madakarani*—something that molded their public images in both life and death.

The murder of Rani Padmini and her mother, Indira, in Chennai on October 15, 1986, set off a slew of reports couched in the language of evidence probing and forensics. Padmini debuted in *Katha Ariyathe* (dir. Mohan, 1981) and went on to act in almost fifty films across the Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu film industries. A rape sequence in *Sangharsham* (dir. P. G. Vishwambharan, 1981) launched her into the league of sex sirens and, after a point, she was typecast. Although Padmini had also acted in more “serious” films like *Parankimala* (dir. Bharatan, 1981) and *Thusharam* (dir. I. V. Sasi, 1981), posthumous reports almost completely neglected this work while focusing on allegations that she had acted in many “sex films.” Reports of the murder in these magazines ask the reader to partake in the task of solving the puzzle. Details of the developing investigation, twists and turns in witness testimonies, and photographs of police personnel working at the crime scene appeared in film magazines and newspapers alongside accounts of the actress’s backstory as she initially struggled to make her mark in the industry. While the reports in *Chitrabhumi* speculated on the mother-daughter duo’s means of amassing wealth, the issue of *Nana* devoted to the case carried a separate section outlining the possible implications of the actress’s off-screen life.

An article in *Chitrabhumi* carried photographs of Padmini, picked randomly from her photo shoots, and a detailed sketch of her house with the dimensions of the crime scene measured and marked out.⁴⁷ Other photographs captured policemen posing with the partially disintegrated bodies wrapped in palm mats, a close-up of the kitchen area from which the bodies were retrieved four days after the murder, the prime suspect as he was arrested in his hometown, and a list of objects recorded by the police. The article also carried details about the number of cuts on the victims’ bodies, the angle of the blows they received, the possible weapon, and a speculative sequence of events leading up to the murder, gathered from the investigation desk.

Another article in *Chitrabhumi* reconstructed the plausible chain of events preceding the murder by culling testimony from one of the suspects, Jabharaj, who was Padmini’s former driver.⁴⁸ The article states that Padmini was so secretive that

drivers, maids, and watchmen were never employed for more than three months at a stretch.⁴⁹ The article hinted at the secrecy involved in Padmini's interactions and that no one, including the broker who finalized the purchase of the house, had any knowledge that Padmini was an actress.⁵⁰ If *Chitrabhumi* reported only one version of the narrative given by Jabharaj, *Nana* went a step further, placing two versions of his story side by side and asking readers to draw their own conclusions from the "evidence" before them. *Nana* dedicated its November 1986 issue to unraveling the nuances and tying up the loose threads of the mysterious "case history" of Rani Padmini.⁵¹ The dissection of details included a brief biographic sketch of Padmini's mother Indira, an aspiring actress who had eloped when she was seventeen and who, according to this account, worked as a dubbing artist after acting prospects vanished.

By placing clues before the reading public, such magazines invited readers to be party to a metaphorical stripping, offering them the vicarious pleasures of voyeurism in solving the mystery. In conventions familiar to readers of pulp fiction, the columns were written like a detective story, with investigators assembling the clues. The obituary mode presented Rani Padmini as living a life of compromises, taking part in casting-couch practices in which sexual favors were traded for roles. The articles cast doubt on how Padmini amassed wealth, subtly suggesting that she could have been involved in sex work. Some of the articles in *Chitrabhumi* stressed that the men who supported female artists—managers, secretaries, or even distant relatives—protected them from life-threatening situations, thereby reiterating that such figures required paternalistic control.⁵²

The corpses were kept in the hospital for more than ten days after the autopsy, because no family member came forward to claim them, possibly because they feared being incriminated in the case. A crowd of onlookers thronged outside the window of the autopsy room in hopes of seeing Padmini's bare body, while only five people turned up for her funeral—members of the Malayalam Chalachitra Parishad, an actors' forum based in Madras, who were obligated to act in a "responsible" manner. The obsession with the sight of the dead body conjoins Rani Padmini's death with that of two other actresses, Vijayasree and Silk Smitha, as photographs of their corpses were also featured in film magazines, making them part of the social memory of their death.

Whereas Padmini's death was mired in conspiracy theories about her murder, Vijayasree's suicide and its subsequent reportage were entangled in a larger fight between two studios (Fig. 8). One of the leading Malayalam actresses of the 1970s, Vijayasree's sex appeal was exploited in almost all the films in which she acted. "Vijayashree's thighs were a favorite among audience; her presence in the poster meant that there would be rape sequences in the film," writes Kakkanadan from Abu Dhabi in a column in *Nana*.⁵³ Vijayasree debuted in Malayalam cinema in the 1969 film *Pooja Pushpam* (dir. Thikkurissi Sukumaran Nair), and by her third year of acting she averaged one movie release per month. Her suicide on March

THE DEATH OF AN ACTRESS

Was South Indian star Vijayashree poisoned or did she commit suicide?

Report filed from Madras by Selvi



ON March 17, the brilliant career of a beautiful 22-year-old promising Malayalee actress was cut short. Mystery surrounds the death of Vijayashree, who consumed insecticide at her residence. Small news items in the city dailies mentioned the event in a casual manner. It seemed as though she was too insignificant to be given any importance. But today the event has assumed sinister nuances, involving many people. Meanwhile, the city is rocked by rumours. It was believed that the rivalry between two studio owners in Kerala had created tension in Vijayashree's life.

She entered the film world when she was 16. Her first movie was *Sity*, and her last film was ironically titled *Jeevikan Marannu Poya Stree* (The woman who forgot to live). She played an excellent supporting role in this picture.

For the past few months the actress was troubled and frustrated. Professional jealousy and rivalry between film makers had entrapped her. There had been rivalry between the Kunchakko group and Merryland Subramaniam. She had acted for both. When Kunchakko's group warned her not to accept

FIGURE 8. A newspaper report on Vijayasree's death. Image courtesy National Film Archive of India.

17, 1974, came during a turbulent phase after she emerged as a controversial figure due to her trouble with the management of Udaya Studios, which the director-producer Kunchacko established as the first production studio in Kerala in 1947. Her departure from Udaya in 1973 to work with its rival Merryland Studios, owned by P. Subramanian, sparked negative publicity. The rivalry between Udaya and Merryland created open alliances and camps, dividing the allegiances of artists and technicians. In an exclusive interview for *Nana* in December 1973, Vijayasree let loose a tirade against Udaya's typecasting of her as a *madakarani*.⁵⁴ The scripts of Udaya productions, she alleged, incorporated erotic sequences with the sole purpose of bodily exposure, regardless of whether or not the narrative required them. Vijayasree accused Udaya of allowing shots of a wardrobe malfunction that occurred on the set of *Ponnapuramkotta* (dir. Kunchacko, 1973) to be used in the film's final cut without her permission. In a sequence shot near the waterfall,

a zoom lens captured her bare body in tantalizing detail without her knowledge, and she only discovered the existence of this footage when someone told her they had seen it during the editing of the film in the lab.

Udaya initially ignored her appeal to remove the shots but was forced to delete them when the censor board raised objections. However, by then, multiple versions of the cut sequences had begun circulating as *thundu* in India and the Gulf. In an effort to silence Vijayasree, Udaya enlisted her co-stars, including the actor Prem Nazir, to dissuade her from making public statements; these negotiations failed, however, and a public spat between the two stars ensued. Udaya then filed a defamation suit against Vijayasree and the senior staff of *Nana*, alleging that she made her claims against the studio for personal gain.⁵⁵ Udaya contended that *Nana* interfered on behalf of Vijayasree to tarnish its reputation and benefit its rival studio, Merryland, with whom they alleged *Nana* had maintained “more than cordial relations.”⁵⁶ The skirmishes between *Nana* and Udaya stemmed from the magazine’s unflattering reviews of *Ponnapuramkotta*, which openly critiqued the film’s display of sex and violence; rebuked Udaya for diluting the historical facts of the *Vadakkan Pattukal* (Northern ballads) on which the film was based; and stated, “rather than making trash like *Ponnapuramkotta*, it was better to engage in toddy business or prostitution.”⁵⁷ Enthusiastic film buffs produced a shot-by-shot analysis detailing bestiality in the film, where a chimpanzee (played by an actor in a chimp suit) was shown raping the supporting actress Vijayanirmala.⁵⁸

Amid this back-and-forth it became evident that reels had been inserted during the film’s exhibition, and this tampering with the prints blatantly violated censorship rules. The censor board deployed squads to theaters, mostly in the B-circuit, to identify any open display of the cut scenes, and action was taken against exhibitors for screening the extra reels and hefty fines were imposed on Udaya for misleading exhibitors into believing that the reels had been censored.⁵⁹ What was initially perceived as a one-off incident involving exhibitors inserting *thundu* to bolster Vijayasree’s sexual appeal soon catapulted into a debate about the studio’s unethical stance and lack of accountability when confronted with a leak of images that had been shot without the actress’s consent. When Vijayasree went public with her allegations, Udaya painted her as an ambitious go-getter who had problems adhering to the studio’s instructions and working with a team. As things spun out of control, Vijayasree had no choice but to agree to the conditions set by Udaya and retract her allegations. Vijayasree’s death came immediately after this, and the police’s haste in closing the case as a suicide roused suspicion of a murder cover-up. Vijayasree’s last letter was posthumously published in *Nana* in memory of her unyielding defiance. In it, she blames her inability to wear the *mulakka-cha* (traditional Malayali corset) in the song sequence in *Ponnapuramkotta* on her “outsider” status as a “Madrasī” (someone hailing from Madras, the capital of the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu).⁶⁰ The popular press gave a different twist to the “outsider” status Vijayasree mobilized to justify her innocence, framing it as

her tacit acceptance of her status as a *madakarani* and of the popular image of the *madakarani* as a transient figure who comes from “elsewhere,” has a short stint in the industry, and disappears. Whereas some of the readers’ letters published in *Nana* applauded Vijayasree for registering her grievances against Udaya, others blamed her for biting the hand that fed her, pointing to the support the actors Prem Nazi and K. P. Kottarakara had offered to help build her career. “If she has an allergy with clothes, why should the readers be subjected to the mess that comes out of it?,” wrote one such reader, Jayaraj from Bombay.⁶¹ In sum, the letters found fault with Vijayasree for asserting her rights to the image and her demands that the shots of her wardrobe malfunction be removed from circulation. Although Vijayasree was a mainstream actress and performed extensively before the soft-porn boom, this narrative strand links her to other actresses like Smitha and Shakeela who covertly and overtly exposed the duplicity of a system that castigated their excess but also shaped their career trajectory.

The last interview Vijayasree gave before her death was to *Nana* in December 1973. It is unclear whether her death was a result of the revelations published in this interview. By and large, the interview ended up as a premature obituary, laying the basic groundwork for what was to follow. It resembled the framing device used by obituary writers to use the backstory of the subject as a dress rehearsal for the writing of the real obituary. *Nana* took varied stances in its coverage of Vijayasree, mainly to reinforce its position as a vanguard film publication. Initially, the magazine stood by Vijayasree and actively mobilized support in her fight against a stronger opponent. At the same time, *Nana* was harsh in its criticism of the erotic sequences in *Ponnapuramkotta*. By taking a moral high ground, they presented her as a lost sheep that had to be brought back into the fold. This is evident in a cartoon of Vijayasree that appeared in *Nana* in 1973, after she recanted her initial statements. The cartoon taunted Vijayasree for refusing to take responsibility for her revelations. Showcasing a woman in underwear holding up a piece of cloth, the cartoon ran with the caption: “What do you want? An interview or a confession?”⁶² Although the cloth she was holding was seen as a reference to the *Ponnapuramkotta* controversy, *Nana*’s duplicitous stance is hard to miss, as for them she ultimately became a sex symbol because she allowed herself to be cast in such roles.

In this cartoon and in other texts, *Nana* peddled the notion that Vijayasree was a sex siren whose body played a transactional role in the visual economy of Malayalam cinema. This became clear in an autobiographical column by *Nana*’s chief editor, K. V. S. Elayath, published in 1987. The article’s opening lines referred to Vijayasree with the epithets *madakathidambu* (sexy siren) and “sex-bomb” (in English) and said she had cast a spell on young men.⁶³ The article spurned Udaya’s strategies of spinning off megahits by exposing Vijayasree’s buxom figure in salacious detail in bath and cabaret sequences. Elayath’s column presented Vijayasree’s sequences as superfluous shots included to ensure minimum returns

even for badly made films. It also censured distributors who were ready to give large advances to book the films, even in the preproduction phase, if they could be assured that Vijayasree had signed the contract. Thus, despite the support she was able to get from film publications, it ultimately boiled down to Vijayasree's need to rescue her image when faced with the explicit images. This conditioned the way Vijayasree is remembered even after her death only as a *madakarani*, and her protest against the inclusion of these images are scarcely discussed, even in accounts by those who seemingly wrote on her behalf.

The circumstances around Vijayasree's death are markedly similar to those of Silk Smitha, another "outsider" actress whose bodily presence was of value to film producers and who would become the subject of *The Dirty Picture*. Born into a Telugu family as Vijayalakshmi, Smitha entered the film industry as an assistant to a makeup artist. She made her debut in the role of a sex worker in the Malayalam film *Inayathedi* (In search of a partner; dir. Anthony Eastman, 1980). Inspired by Smita Patil, an actress prominent in the art cinema circuit, Anthony Eastman, the film's director, gave her the screen name "Smitha." She went on to act in more than 350 films across the South Indian film industries in the next seventeen years. According to several reports, Smitha had the most releases in the whole of South India in the years 1980 to 1985.⁶⁴ Her dance numbers were so popular that film tabloids celebrated her as the "South Indian Helen," referring to Helen, a Burma-born Indian actress famous in 1970s' Hindi cinema for her cabaret performances. Reminiscing on Smitha's popularity, film critic Paul Zacharia states that demand for Smitha's dance numbers was so high that the release of nearly completed films sometimes had to be delayed while filmmakers waited for her to become available to shoot dance sequences, and at other times films that had been shelved for want of distributors were released and became successful by incorporating a few Silk Smitha dance sequences.⁶⁵

In Malayalam cinema, Smitha's presence was not limited to dance numbers, and she had supporting roles in films starring prominent stars such as Mohanlal (*Spadikam* [Crystal], dir. Bhadran, 1995), Mammooty (*Adharvam* [The fourth Veda], dir. Dennis Joseph, 1989), and Suresh Gopi (*Miss Pamela*, dir. Chellappan, 1989). But many of the roles that Smitha played were variations on the *madakarani*, be it the sexually liberated women outside the heteronormative moral universe in films like *Rathilayam* (dir. P. Chandrakumar, 1983) and *Karimbana* (dir. I. V. Sasi, 1980), or the widowed woman looking for sexual pleasure elsewhere (*Layanam*, dir. Thulasidas, 1989) (Fig. 9). *Layanam* is a particularly important example for the kind of afterlife it has had as a "soft-porn" film and its repeated resurfacing in Indian public culture even now (see chapter 5). Directed by Thulasidas and co-produced by R. B. Choudary's Super Good Films and R. Mohan's GoodKnight Films in 1989, *Layanam* was a low-budget film made well before the soft-porn wave of the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, but became successful as a soft-porn film later on. Smitha was not a soft-porn actress per se, but the later soft-porn wave allowed



FIGURE 9. Publicity poster for the Hindi-dubbed version of *Layanam*, titled *Reshma Ki Jawani* (Reshma's story). Image courtesy National Film Archive of India.

her bold acting choices to be recast as soft-porn performances. In fact, both Das and Choudhary became prominent in the mainstream film fraternity, and *Layanam*'s soft-porn status did not impact their ability to make other films.

Layanam explores the blossoming intimacy between Archana (Smitha), a young widow, and Nandu (Prince), who is taken in to help her with the house. The film captures the hardships she has to navigate when her neighbors either make assumptions about her sexual availability or think of her sexual agency as something dangerous enough to unsettle familial stability. The casting of a relatively young hero as a sexual interest in the film broke with societal mores that held that sex must be between partners of relatively similar age range—used in other mainstream Malayalam films like *Rathinirvedam* (dir. Bharatan, 1978). On being asked what he told the neighbors who ask him about Archana's image, Nandu replies: "I told them that I am twenty-eight and you are eighteen," reversing their real ages in an attempt to subscribe to the societal expectations. Archana's poised appearance as a confident woman who must battle unwanted attention yet at the same time also look for a companion with whom she can share her dreams and desires is one of Smitha's best roles.

The film uses fantasy sequences as an expression of intimacy and courtship rituals, and the sequence ends with the viewers, intimating that it was a dream. One of the songs features an actor in blackface with a fair-skin dancer, highlighting the racialized imagination and fascination of white skin that colors the sexual

imagination in India. As opposed to the perceived expectation of soft-porn film as solely being about female desire, *Layanam* offers a backstory to situate Nandu's narrative of how he became homeless when he was falsely implicated for attempting to molest a distant relative, which led to his perpetual fear whenever he is courted by an older woman. In response, Archana says: "Not all women are like this." Anxieties about their age difference and the unconventionality of their relationship nevertheless recur throughout their interactions. Archana bursts into anger when Nandu jokingly refers to him wanting to settle down with a woman for a "normal family," and Nandu feels insecure when Archana's supposedly dead husband comes back after being released by the enemy during the war. The film ends with Nandu killing himself, while Archana dies when she accidentally falls from the stairs and is killed by a sharp spear-like object. This narrative of desire culminating in death mirrors the public perceptions about such intense feeling, which are encapsulated in the figure of the *madakarani*, in particular, and illicit love, in general.

During Silk Smitha's lifetime, writing about her was scarce, apart from tabloid columns reveling in gossip and columns accompanying centerfolds. Smitha was curt in her responses to journalists' questions and her outspoken demeanor irked columnists, who ensured that there were plenty of sensational reports about her in the tabloids. Many tales circulated about Smitha's bold comments about how the film industry discriminated against actresses who were labeled sex sirens by placing them on a lower rung of the hierarchy and separating them from other actresses, particularly leading ladies. However, by early 1995, the success formulas, including inserting erotic dances in films that had previously reaped profits, started to show diminishing returns. When leading ladies themselves took on roles as dancers, the market began to dwindle for the likes of Smitha. The fatal blow was dealt by Smitha's decision to try her luck in film production, which proved to be a disaster. By then, she was deep in debt, having borrowed money from film financiers at high interest rates. It is generally believed that Smitha's suicide in 1996 resulted from such financial and professional turmoil.⁶⁶

Responses to Smitha's death primarily took the form of remembrance columns that framed her death as an opportunity to look back at her life and career. *Chitrabhumi* published a special issue on Smitha, collating articles from various magazines about her rags-to-riches story and final exit from the scene. Smitha's death was also remembered in the 1997 publication of an anthology of poems titled *Vishudha Smitha* (Virtuous Smitha), edited by Shivakumar Kankol. The collection brought together nine poems that had appeared in different magazines in the wake of Smitha's death. Kankol frames his own poem, "A Post-Suicide Note," as Smitha's posthumous thoughts as her corpse awaits dissection on the postmortem table.⁶⁷ Here the poet takes on Smitha's persona and narrates her thoughts as a crowd swarms the mortuary to see her corpse. The refrain "But, still I do not hate anyone" acts as Smitha's gesture of reconciliation. The poem is signed "Smitha Chechi," the

way Smitha's memory would be recounted by her fans in the years to come. *Chechi* translates as elder sister, but here the word is used in a colloquial sense to mean an older woman to whom young men are sexually attracted.

The marketing of *The Dirty Picture*, though, cast Smitha's death in a different light, framing it as a biopic to authenticate Vidya Balan's makeover as Silk, as well as render it an homage to Smitha by timing the film's release to coincide with her birthday on December 2. By using Vidya Balan as a stand-in for the leading lady who can push against the hero-centric stardom that dictated Bollywood success, the film capitalized on Balan's willingness to take on the role of Smitha, which many top actresses had declined. Even in this early phase, every detail about Balan was publicized with great enthusiasm, from her selection for the lead role to her responses to the wardrobe (which included plunging necklines, midriff-baring tops, and butt pads), to her decision to put on more than twenty-six pounds to do justice to the role. But it was not a smooth ride for her; Balan was charged with obscenity for appearing in sexually suggestive poses in publicity banners. Newspapers ran columns with catchy headlines like "Silk Smitha of *The Dirty Picture* Booked for Obscenity," conflating her screen image with her actress persona.⁶⁸ Nampally Criminal Court in the state of Telangana ordered police to book Balan for posing in indecent photographs for the film posters and promotions for *The Dirty Picture*. Anti-obscenity protests overtook the film's release in many parts of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Thus, the film triggered interest in the lives of sex sirens, as demonstrated by the creation of fake Facebook profiles in the name of Silk Smitha. While some of these profiles remembered Smitha's life through her photographs and dance sequences, others became performative spaces in which Smitha competed with trendy new dancers like Katrina Kaif, Mallika Sherawat, and Malaika Arora Khan.

The commercial success of *The Dirty Picture* led to other films about Smitha's life that invited viewers to reinterpret it and the lives of other *madakarani*. Films based on Smitha's life that came in the wake of *The Dirty Picture* include the Kannada-language film titled *Dirty Picture: Silk Sakkath Maga* (dir. Trishul, Kannada, 2013) featuring Pakistani-origin actress Veena Malik; *Climax* (dir. Anil Kumar, Malayalam, 2013), which was also dubbed into Tamil as *Oru Nadigaiyin Diary* (An actress's diary); and *Gajjala Gurram* (dir. Anil Kumar, Telugu, 2013). Sana Khan, who starred in *Climax* as Supriya (the filmic equivalent of Smitha), had appeared in a controversial advertisement for a men's underwear brand that was banned by the government and provoked protests from women's organizations. The film's title nodded intertextually to the advertisement's narrative suggestion of a moment of orgasmic climax, reinforcing the designation of Smitha's presence in mainstream films as a sex symbol. In addition to using an actress associated with controversial depictions of sexuality, *Climax* paratextually foregrounded the personal relationship that Smitha had with the scriptwriter, Anthony Eastman, and dialogue writer, Kaloor Dennis. When Kaloor Dennis was asked whether *Climax*

can be seen as a part of the trend inaugurated by *The Dirty Picture*, he responded that it was in fact made to make amends to the injustice done to Smitha's image in *The Dirty Picture*.⁶⁹

The trailer of *Climax* interspersed images of Silk Smitha with shots from the film, accompanied by a female nondiegetic voiceover comparing Smitha to a firefly that has died prematurely. Although the subtitle announces the film to be "the true heart-rending story of an actress," it portrays Smitha's decision to end her life as the last resort of someone who has found that her calculations have been proven wrong, mostly due to her own bad decisions. The urge to "reveal" the "real Smitha" is apparent in the opening shot, which shows Supriya's dead body being removed from its grave.

The excavation of the corpse in *Climax* resonates with the forensic gaze underlying the obituaries of Smitha and Rani Padmini, as well as the photographs of their dead bodies that appeared in film journals. The deaths of these three actresses are marked by an obituary gaze—a postmortem sensibility that informs reporting on their deaths, as well as a narrative mode that fixes the memory of these actresses within a thanatological frame.⁷⁰ This specific sensibility and narrative mode insists that these actresses can only be remembered for their sensational deaths. As a process, a postmortem examination is distinct from the forensic one in that it records the history of the dead subject from the traces left behind on the corpse. Drawing from the information gathered from the crime scene investigation, forensic examination works through plausible scenarios that can elucidate what happened on the day of death. The penetrating gaze to capture the crime scene in these obituaries finds its inspiration in "the exchange principle" posited by the French forensic scientist Edmond Locard: "At every crime site the criminal takes something away and leaves something behind."⁷¹ Obituaries conjoin these two modes to narrate the evidence left by the dead body—what Christopher Hamlin characterizes as the urge to locate "recoverable signal among the noise."⁷²

This reading of clues is doubly complicated for actresses who enact sexual roles or who are cast as *madakarani*, as the sexual excesses of their on-screen life spill into public interest in their corpses. In this drama, the body of the *madakarani* becomes a mute object stripped of subjectivity and personhood. Images of her living and dead body overlap in a morbid yet sensual assemblage. This postmortem visuality brings together death, vision, and sexual excess in varying ways in the cases of Padmini, Vijayasree, and Smitha. For instance, Padmini's body had started to disintegrate by the time it was found four days after she was killed, but even that did not stop the photographer from capturing her remains, which were wrapped in a palm mat.

In her reading of autopsies as models for early cinema and a male gaze aimed at dead women, Giuliana Bruno posits an "epistemological relation between the cinematic eye and the anatomist's eye," in which the anatomical-analytical gaze "provides a model of perception, proleptically pointing towards film's visuality."

Bruno argues how the epistemology of the “visible invisible” lies at the basis of the language of film, which also doubles as a fascination for the woman’s body. This is seen in the way women were featured in medical representations of anatomy lessons, in which the cadaver functioned as a key to anatomical mysteries. Bruno concludes that this desire for female anatomy can be compared to how “film language develops as a form of anatomical ‘writing,’” whereby “cinema embodies the detective apparatus of dissection, the ‘cutting’ up and montage of parts, ‘the construction of the female body, the ideal object of desire, . . . synthesized by the viewer, as if inevitably, from the juxtaposition of part objects.” Thus, autopsies offered to film “a visual model of disclosure, enabling the possession of the female body and an uncovering of its secrets by way of unveiling.”⁷³

In line with this reasoning, the photograph of Vijayasree’s body, clad in a white cloth on the postmortem table, circulated as a memento mori, appearing on *Nana*’s front cover as a keepsake with which to remember her. It was widely reported that a rush of onlookers thronged Smitha’s house as her dead body was taken to Vijaya hospital. The postmortem sensibility of these obituary gazes laid these actresses’ bodies bare for public consumption. *Madakarani* like Padmini, Vijayasree, and Smitha remain in our memory as embodiments of sensuality. Their sensual roles define their lasting image. For these *madakarani*, death abruptly cut short their eventful lives, which were then recounted through the cold facts of forensics. This reportage portrays their sudden deaths as the only sensible, predictable outcome that these women could have expected in light of the lives they lived.

CONCLUSION

Whereas Padmini, Vijayasree, and Smitha were high-profile actresses, starlets who debuted and remained only briefly in the film industry before disappearing into oblivion were the focus of most write-ups and columns in Malayalam film magazines of the 1990s. Columns featuring disappeared starlets also produced a nostalgic thought process, in which writers in film magazines discussed unsuccessful attempts to experiment with film production in terms of themes, casting, and aesthetics. Phrases like *nirashajanakam* (hopelessness) and *nirbhagyam* (unfortunate) appeared as epitaphs for the deceased person. So-called remembrance columns included “Arangozhinja Tharanga!” (The actresses who have left the stage), a column in *Chitrabhumi* by O. Rajagopal, as well as “Classic Malayalam Films,” which detailed the production histories of these films. These articles used the evocative term “disappearance” (*apratyaksham*, *adrishyam*, or *maranju povuka*) to interrogate the actresses’ uncertain courses. The beginning of their publication in the 1990s coincided with a transitory phase in Malayalam cinema, when male superstars and their personas started to dictate box-office success.⁷⁴ The male star emerged as an independent producer of meaning, who by virtue of

his image mobilized the ingredients that would reap theatrical success. The rise of the male star affected the prospects of many films that did not feature renowned actors. The criteria used to grade theaters also affected film distributors, as they had to vie with each other to get their films into A-circuit theaters before they were exhibited at B- and C-center theaters.

The release of *The Dirty Picture* in 2011 triggered a similar boom in remembering starlets who, despite their efforts to succeed in the industry, had fallen off the grid. Columns like “Ormayile Nayikamar” (The actresses who are remembered) by Shijesh Naduvanoor in *Rashtradeepika Cinema* film weekly and “Malayalathile Classic Rathi Chitrangal” (Classic sex films in Malayalam) by K. N. Shaji Kumar in *Cinemamangalam* film weekly attempted to bring starlets back into the lime-light. These columns take on the genre of the obituary to underline the failures of starlets in their professional and personal lives. These attempts to incorporate starlets into the dominant narrative of Malayalam cinema were facilitated by films like *Naayika* (dir. Jayaraj, 2011), *Celluloid* (dir. Kamal, 2013), and *Vellaripravinte Changathi* (dir. Akku Akbar, 2011) that addressed the idea of “loss” (lost narratives, figures, objects).⁷⁵

The Malayalam film industry regularly saw influxes of actresses from other language industries—for instance, Swapna from Punjab and Poonam Das Gupta from Maharashtra, who had short but intense stints as *madakarani* in Malayalam cinema. Many of these starlets were abandoned in the cutting room and the only evidence of their existence seems to be limited to the columns of the film magazines, continuity albums, and center spreads. A prime example is Madhuri, who rose to fame with the 1984 film *Pavam Krooran* (dir. Rajasenan), in which she played Nimmy, a teenager who entices Damu, a sexually frustrated middle-aged servant, in a saga of sexual explorations. When her interest in Damu wanes, she refuses his advances to continue the relationship. Considering this a betrayal, Damu turns into a psychopath who murders sixteen-year-old girls. *Pavam Krooran* was a hit and dubbed into many languages. The Tamil version, *Kamini* (Attractive woman), circulated mostly as a soft-porn film, with liberal insertion of *thundu*. *Kamini*’s suggestive poster pulled crowds into theaters. In a 2013 column in *Rastradeepika Cinema*, Madhuri is described as someone whose repeated attempts to return to “good films” are marred by her debut, a debacle from which she never recovered.⁷⁶

The list of such starlets is endless and names such as Sharmila, Babita, Usha Rani, Surya, Satyakala, Kanaga Durga, Sreekala, Prameela, and Suparna are part of this obscure pantheon of actresses who could never break into successful mainstream films after their stint in sexualized roles. Like all categorizations, the label “starlet” is delimiting and marked by a selective inclusion. Accounts of Malayalam cinema rely on narratives about starlets’ unrealized aspirations and their lasting impression as failed actresses who withdrew before the right opportunity came along. The figure of the starlet has been framed in film journalism as

someone so desperate to make it that they can resort to exchanging favors, using their bodies as “their gambling ticket,” as one report puts it.⁷⁷ In Kodambakkam, stories of disappearance run alongside stories of resilience and other informal modes of making do—waiting for work, waiting for a break, and other informal trust-based arrangements. These modes of organizing life in the soft-porn industry arguably have older cinematic precedents, and Kodambakkam’s history, its spatial arrangements, and social life are important nodes in the history of the soft-porn genre.