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Review of Rated A: Soft Porn Cinema and Mediations of Desire in India

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Abstract

This paper reviews the book *Rated A: Soft Porn Cinema and Mediations of Desire in India* by Darshana Sreedhar Mini.

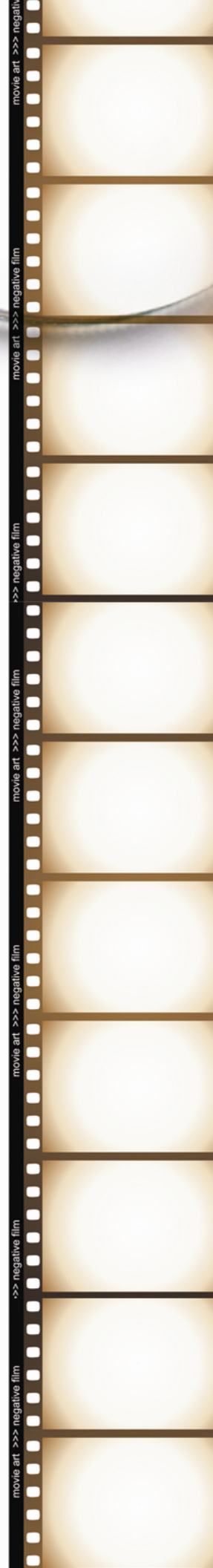
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Review of *Rated A: Soft Porn Cinema and Mediations of Desire in India*

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Academic foray into the field of Porn studies in the South Asian context has been steeply emerging courtesy of Darshana Sreedhar Mini's (sometimes co-authored with Anirban K Baishya) vast array of works on the soft-porn industry in India (Mini, 2017; Mini, 2019; Mini 2020; Mini & Baishya, 2024). A diligent academic, her recent monograph entitled *Rated A: Soft Porn Cinema and Mediations of Desire in India* is a timely intervention in the growing repertoire of soft porn studies in India that offers a comprehensive and insightful examination of the complex underbelly of Kerala's media landscape from the 1970s to the first decade of 2000s. Published in 2024 by the University of California Press as part of the 'Feminist Media Histories' series, Mini's book offers an in-depth examination of a genre that has thrived at the margins of Indian cinema. Mini's exploration begins with a historical overview of Malayalam soft-porn cinema, situating it within Kerala's unique socio-political milieu. Despite Kerala's progressive social indicators, such as high literacy rates and matrilineal traditions, the state remains rife with gender inequities and moral policing. Soft-porn cinema in Kerala emerged as an industrial form after the box-office failure of numerous mainstream films that compelled

exhibitors to establish alternative business arrangements with distributors and producers to remain viable, as it offered work to “lower-rung artists, technicians, below-the-line workers, distributors, and exhibitors” (p. 89-90). While Indian cinema in the 1990s is characterized by economic liberalization, globalization, and diasporic narratives reflecting a return to the roots, Darshana’s text offers an overlooked perspective of that decade, underscoring “how aspirations and desire blossom” underneath the shadow of these globalized mainstream narratives (p. 28). Darshana’s work interrogates the intricate realm of the Malayalam soft-porn cinema, a genre that grew out of a reaction to the stringent regulations and the complicated interplay between cultural norms and sexuality in Kerala. By drawing on Malayalam soft-porn’s nuanced negotiation of issues of gender, film production and distribution, labour practices, and the intricacies of the soft-porn imaginary in Kerala, Darshana astutely centralizes the ‘professional aspirations of the lower rungs of production units’ in a film industry that fails to offer “opportunities for social mobility to below-the-line personnel” (p. 7).

Darshana traces the origin of Malayalam soft-porn films to the proliferation of sexually charged print materials, both from Kerala and elsewhere in India, drawing inspiration from American exploitation cinema that was imported to India in the 1970s, a desire to shift beyond private spaces to explore sensational vernacular magazines combining genres like *kambikathakal* (stories of erect penis), and *rathikathakal* (stories of sex) that feature graphic

descriptions of experiential sexual encounters and narratives of sex lives of unnamed women. In addition to it, soft-porn films also drew heavily for their choice of character types and narrative patterning from sensational pulp fiction and vernacular pornographic literature known locally as *painkili*, penned by Malayalam writers like Pamman, Ayyaneth, and Rajan Chinankath.

Aligning with sex and porn-positive feminist scholars, Darshana employs a mixed-methods approach, coalescing ethnography, archival research, sociological perspectives, and textual and discourse analysis to interrogate the cultural history of the soft-porn industry in Kerala. Due to the absence of official archives that could preserve soft-porn materials, Darshana relies on *censored* scripts, newspaper cuttings, film weeklies, oral narratives, and fragmented archival records that include lobby cards, film posters, lab receipts, shooting-house booking forms, and continuity albums. Moreover, by meticulously drawing on materials such as “diaries, court cases, novels, letters, news items, videos, and testimonies by and about artists and technicians”, Darshana delineates the trajectory of soft porn from the 1990s to the late 2000s, emphasizing its transnational circulation, local and global aesthetic influences, and the professional and personal networks that facilitated its production and distribution circuits (p. 28).

One of the intriguing aspects of Darshana's text is her exploration of the figure of sex sirens or *madakarani*, a colloquial term for the sexually autonomous, voluptuous female lead in soft-porn films in Chapter 1. Situated in opposition to big-budget, mainstream stars, *madakarani* emerged as the new pin-up icons, catering to the fantasies of men in diverse spaces, including B-circuit cinemas and public restrooms. Their on-screen personas embodied transgressive sexual fantasies, contrasting with the notion of a morally upright Malayali woman. Darshana examines how the Bollywood film *The Dirty Picture* (2011), by invisibilizing caste and class politics, tends to conflate and perpetuate the image of *madakarani* with sensational fragments of gossip and speculative news, essentially excising the historical accuracy associated with biopics and marking "her as a figure of corporeal excess and moral decline – the archetypal imagination of a soft-porn star" (p. 31). *The Dirty Picture*, as Darshana argues, becomes an exemplar of how the localized figure 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" (p. 37). Second-tier contract labourers (as opposed to A-list actresses of mainstream cinema) like Silk Smitha, Sreekala, and Vijayasree were cast as *madakarani* who occupy a liminal space – for their sexual labour renders them desirable as a sexual body, while, at the same time, the image of sexually liberated women resonates with the term *veshya* (prostitute) that challenged the social codes of respectability. To add to it,

Malayalam film magazines like *Nana* and historical accounts conflate their film work “as an extension of sex work conditioned by economic hardships” (p. 35). Yet, as Darshana strategically delineates, the unapologetic figure of the *madakarani*, as portrayed by Silk Smitha among others, with her lower caste status and dusky skin tone, has often countered and threatened the normative and sexual mores that constitute the Indian middle-class value system that tend to constrict *respectable* women within the heteropatriarchal structure. While the portrayal of *madakarani* slowly died with the decline of soft-porn cinema in the late 2000s, the figure persists in contemporary media, contributing to what Darshana designates as a “soft-porn unconscious” (p. 164-165). This unconscious influences scandalous media publics, bridging the print era’s media dynamics to today’s digital 24/7 news channels.

Besides *madakarani*, Darshana astutely examines the star body of Shakeela in Chapter 3, whose popularity led to soft-porn films being dubbed as ‘Shakeela films’, inherently exposing the “sexual contradictions of Malayali society” (p. 95). As Darshana argues, the sexual *excess* of soft-porn films enables stars like Shakeela to address variegated constituencies of desire while simultaneously conflating their real selves with their on-screen personas. This precarious stardom is formed due to the amalgamation of “infrastructural routes, censorial regimes, and norms of social acceptance and permissiveness” (p. 96). Shakeela’s outsider status

in the Malayalam film industry, much like Vijayshree in the 1970s and Silk Smitha in the 1980s, led to her emblemizing an exotic, desirable, and yet objectified body, thereby signposting an overlapping of “social and industrial configurations of the time” (p. 97). In fact, Shakeela’s voluptuous physical features allowed her to be often paired with a much younger actor, which solidified “her public image as that of a sexually deprived middle-aged woman” (p. 101). Shakeela’s body, as such, embodies a “locus of excess that spilled out of the diegetic space of the narratives” and became a template of intergenerational erotica regularly featured in popular adult comic series such as *Savita Bhabhi* and *Velamma* (p. 102). Even after the decline of her soft-porn stardom, Shakeela’s star value as a soft-porn icon facilitated her to play a vital role as an information expert in sex education Tamil programs like *Antharangam* (Personal Intimacy, 2016) and *Samayal Mathiram* (Cooking tricks, 2016).

By examining the Malayalam soft-porn industry’s past and potential alternative paths, Darshana aptly presents an alternative approach that strengthens feminist historiography and offers a nuanced appraisal of media production and consumption. Although the text could have thoroughly engaged more with theoretical frameworks at a holistic level, this limitation does not diminish its scholarly contributions to the topic. The precision of Malayalam-to-English translations is praiseworthy, allowing access to a broader readership. Darshana’s text will serve as an indispensable source of knowledge for scholars of media studies, gender studies, stardom

studies, and cultural studies in years to come, offering profound reflections on sexuality, censorship, casteism, and labour practices in India. By investigating the critical imbrication of gender, media, and sexuality, Darshana's work opens up the potential for (re)thinking overlooked, non-mainstream, subcultural genres and their digital afterlives. As a result, Darshana's text could be situated alongside contemporary works on marginalized aspects of South Asian public culture and performative arts such as Farida Batool Syeda's *New Media, Masculinity and Mujra Dance in Pakistan* (2015), Ruth Vanita's *Dancing with the Nation: Courtesans in Bombay Cinema* (2017), and Niloy Basu's *Launda Dancer* (2019).

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