

cinema



* Vidya Balan hams her way through her impersonation of sultry Silk Smitha (left) in *The Dirty Picture*.

Truth or dare?

'Silk' Smitha vamped it up with abandon in Indian films, but even *The Dirty Picture* doesn't do justice to the sordidness of her life off-screen, writes

Gautaman Bhaskaran

Silk Smitha may not have travelled from the log cabin to White House, but she certainly journeyed from a thatched hut to a big bungalow. Beyond this, she slipped as smoothly as silk from fact to fantasy, so what if it all lay in the eyes of the beholder.

Born in mortifying poverty in a village near Eluru in Andhra Pradesh, Smitha's buxom body drew men to her, often men with dubious credentials, outright cads. A school dropout who did not go beyond the fourth grade, she was forced into a marriage with a bullock-cart driver by her family that was clearly at its wit's end, because of "male nuisance".

But Smitha's marriage broke down very soon, when she ran away to what was then Madras, stars in her eyes and a dream in her heart. Working as a maid in

a starlet's house there, Smitha graduated to being a make-up artist. (I remember from my Calcutta days a beautiful woman, who swept and swabbed floors in the home of an actress when she was spotted by a producer, and she went on to become a good performer herself in Bengali and Hindi cinema).

It is not very clear how Smitha's first role in a Malayalam movie, *Inaye Theedi* (1979), came about, but it was her second screen appearance in the Tamil work, *Vandi Chakaram*, directed by Vinu Chakravarthi, that got talked about. But for all wrong reasons.

Her pout, her curves and her bold role as a girl running a liquor shop in *Vandi Chakaram* helped her reach the skies. She was called 'Silk' in the film. The label stuck after the film topped the box-office charts. In real terms, she was a dancer, who had no

qualms about stripping to the bare essentials and getting into numbers that were absolutely unaesthetic and even plain vulgar.

Smitha wiggled her way through a 17-year career, through 450 movies in all the southern Indian languages and Hindi. She never became an actress, though, largely remaining a dancing character that women despised and never wanted their boyfriends or husbands to watch, that parents hoped their own daughters would never become.

Paradoxically, Smitha was part of several celebrated films, like *Sakala Kala Vallavan*, *MoonDRAM Pirai* and *Layanam* among others. But her own roles were largely vampish, catering to the hooting and whistling male frontbenchers. She was that dirty dancer which producers felt would get them their numbers. There was one work of hers that I remember,

Alaigal Oyvathillai, where she was fully clothed. But it did not work, for she had far gone into being Silk the Siren.

Smitha was one grand example of Indian cinema's lack of imaginative foresight. Call it sheer lethargy or cowardice, she was never allowed to step outside the bar, never encouraged to take off her cabaret costume (and don others), never asked to get out of titillating illusion. She got her producers money, and gave her audiences a thrill. It has been said movies gasping for breath found themselves up and running when a dance of Smitha's was inserted.

Fame and fortune, however, did not fetch the poor rustic girl from Andhra peace or joy. Sick of being Silk in an existence that swung crazily between dream and nightmare, she tried producing films, lost money and, finally, her very will to live. She was found hanging. Was it suicide or murder? Nobody knows, and Smitha joined a list of women, from Marilyn Monroe to award-winning Tamil actress Shoba to others later whose deaths have remained a mystery.

Curiously, Smitha died when she was shooting a Tamil television serial, essaying a character who drowns in a bathtub, raising doubts about whether it was suicide or murder.

Whatever it be, Smitha died hanging from a ceiling fan. Did she use a piece of silk to smother out her life, the silk that had once promised her heaven on earth?

It is this Silken mess that Milan Luthria portrays — or purportedly so, with his denials flying fast and

furious now — in *The Dirty Picture*. Vidya Balan turns saucy in it — from the petite and lovelorn lass in *Parineeta*, from a woman with a psychiatric problem in *Bhool Bhulaiyaa*, to a doting mother in *Paa*, to a schemer in *Ishqiya* and to a suffering sister in *No One killed Jessica*.

As much as Balan is a great artist, she disappointed me as Smitha. I found her too animated, often overdoing her bit. Yes, she had the courage and conviction to dare and bare. But it all seemed like a wasted effort. *The Dirty Picture* may or may not have been a biopic, but it was scripted unconvincingly and appeared to thrive on exaggerated situations, an exasperating bane of Indian cinema.

I would not know whether poor Smitha (the real one that is) danced on the bonnet of a car to get her married boyfriend jealous, even while trying to catch the eye of his younger brother, but Balan's Silk indulges into such farfetched, difficult-to-believe acts. And would a girl going to meet the parents of her man dress so provocatively? Luthria's work is peppered with such stuff forcing me to suspect that the helmer was desperate to grab eyeballs.

In the end, *The Dirty Picture* is so shallow that Silk herself may have been shamed by some of Luthria's crowd-pleasing tricks. And Balan does little to tilt the balance to a semblance of sanity.

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