a broader impasse in seeing and negotiating the formative schisms of regional modernity, be they gendered, temporal, ethnic, or, more likely, all three. These images of visual irreconcilability experienced by Malays onscreen also allegorized the dissolution of interethnic relations in Malaysia. Malay nationalists, the film suggests, could not "see" their way past the modern powers of either women or the Chinese Malaysians who formed a majority in Singapore.

This juxtaposition of gender and ethnopolitics signaled the emergence of an anomaly in the region's cinemas, as well as among the political, economic, and cultural ecosystems in which they were embedded. The particular, vernacular modernist "glue" with which other Southeast Asian nations were held together onscreen and off—ethnic and political splits, undecided matrifocality and all—had ceased to stick in Singapore. In this context, Malaysia can be seen as a test case for the limits of archipelagic representation. *Sayang si Buta* was in fact one of the last films ever made by the Singapore studios responsible for Malaysia's dominant position among the region's archipelago of film production and circulation. Not coincidentally, its release in 1965 corresponded with Malaysia and Singapore's final, unmendable geopolitical split into separate nations along clear ethnic lines.[6]

As I mentioned in chapter 2, the ethnopolitical "mutilation" of Malaysia and Singapore also imposed a long period of cinematic blindness. With the departure of Malay audiences and talent from Singapore, its major studios (Shaw Brothers Malay Films and Cathay Keris) quickly ceased production. Filmmaking in the city-state did not begin to recover until the 1990s. In post-1965 Malaysia, things were almost as bleak: while viewership expanded and filmmaking was not completely halted, the industry in Kuala Lumpur imported 95 percent of its films from abroad until the early 1980s. With local production at a tiny fraction of Singaporean golden-age levels, Indonesian-made films were positioned as "substitute" Malay fare (Frymus 2022:66). This helped set the stage, I suggest, for the eventual return of the matrifocal gaze in Malaysia.

THE MATRIFOCAL GAZE AS GLOBAL ANOMALY?

Notably, the factors and pressures leading to the separation of Malaysia and Singapore and the severe drop in film production that followed did not at the same time accomplish elite Malay (or Chinese) projects of moving toward more stable, singular modes of self-representation. Formerly "disobedient" national cinemas did not reform; they simply stopped making films for a while. With moribund or nearly catatonic industries, the fates of both nations' cinemas, and especially Malaysia's, speak to the particular, historically embedded strength of the region's brand of vernacular modernism: a seeming global anomaly that structures looking in ways that denaturalize homogeneous, patriarchal modern visual regimes. Departing from this, for Singapore and Malaysia, resulted in a temporary cinematic eclipse.

Perhaps the closest points of comparison for the matrifocal gaze in popular Western cinemas would thus be other anomalies like the 1968 French *Barbarella* (dir. Roger Vadim), in which a female protagonist's pleasure drives the narrative and "the male look finds no surrogate" (Young 2018:40).[7] In fact, the film's closest approximation of masculine heroics is found in a male angel who is also blind. Yet *Barbarella* is set in a distant, mostly utopian, future where human reproduction is mechanized and families have ceased to exist. Its radically lowbrow aesthetics and vision of gender parity are still a far cry from Southeast Asian efforts to locate a feminized visual regime in the historical endurance of traditional, matrifocal family structures. But what of modern girls and boys, or women and men, in still other global-vernacular modernist traditions, such as Indian popular cinemas, that are similarly "anomalous" vis-à-vis the self-enclosed, naturalist structures of classical Western narrative films? Might we find a more productive point of comparison in the politics of gender and modern visuality there?

As Ravi Vasudevan shows, popular Hindi "social" films of the 1950s also engaged globalization via fragmented transnational appropriations and recombinations of form and reference—conventions similar to those I have linked to the matrifocal gaze in Southeast Asia. If we look backward in time to the formation of vernacular modernist aesthetics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the similarities only increase. As we saw in chapter 2, Hindi (and other Indian) films also developed "horizontally" through contact and convergence with older, live forms of entertainment. In this case, as Vasudevan and others show, the Parsi-language vernacular theaters that toured India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played an especially key role. This reveals an even more specific link to Southeast Asia, because *wayang Parsi*, as Parsi theater was called there, also came to Malaya via Indian migrant workers in the nineteenth century. After establishing itself in Penang, it became a key inspiration and source for Malayan and Indonesian vernacular theaters like stambul and bangsawan—forms that, as we have seen, exerted a profound influence on the regional cinematic conventions that followed them.

In India, Parsi theater's diverse and loudly displayed global and local mix of sources and references likewise anticipated and informed "the geographical reach of Hindi cinema and its hybrid structure" (Vasudevan 1989:30). The genre-bending, "omnibus 'musical tragi-comedy' form" (Vasudevan 1989:30) deployed by Parsi and other traveling theaters was also inherited by early Indian filmmakers, who used it to transform Hindi movies into a non-Western global institution and "nodal point of the . . . 1960s" (Sunya 2022:15). In the context of my analysis, this common, formative relation to live theatrical forms of vernacular modernism helps to explain the various similarities in Indian and Southeast Asian cinematic conventions and attitudes toward globalization. But does the open nature of Hindi film aesthetics, which more often resolve narrative and formal tensions in the end, also allow visual and narrative spaces for dynamic female characters to emerge?

Vasudevan argues that in blockbuster Hindi "social films," Indian women onscreen were often positioned as figures who "set limits to the image of modernity" (1993:65). This is especially true of "the mother's iconic presence," which exerts a "gravitational pull . . . over the very process of narration" (1993:67). As in my analysis of *Tiga Dara*, *Ibu Mertuaku*, and other regional films, the result is a particular, emergent mode of representation where it is "difficult to separate out 'traditional' from 'modern' address" (Vasudevan 1993:65). This initially sounds promising. A brief analysis of the Hindi film *Deedar* (*Vision*, dir. Nitin Bose, 1951) will help to highlight what is similar in the positioning of central female characters in Hindi and Southeast Asian popular films in the 1950s. Yet it will also point to deeper issues that I argue make gender representation very different—perhaps ultimately incompatible—across South and Southeast Asian cinemas. As its title suggests, *Deedar* points to a further thematic parallel between Indian and Malaysian films, this time in cinematic representations of vision and blindness around issues of gender.

The plot of *Deedar* contains a number of striking similarities with P. Ramlee's *Ibu Mertuaku* specifically. Like Ramlee's Kassim Selamat, the protagonist of *Deedar*, Shamu (Dilip Kumar), is in love with a young woman, Mala (Nargis), whose family disapproves of him and aims to keep them apart. The class differences in this case are starker, as Shamu is the son of a lower-caste servant who lives with Mala's family, and his illicit affection for her is the reason that they are separated early in the film. As in *Ibu Mertuaku*, Shamu is sad during the separation and becomes blind, although the official cause in this case is a storm. Shamu also eventually comes to work as a singer, and through his music, he makes the acquaintance of a young, idealistic eye doctor (Ashok Kumar). Impressed with Shamu's spirit, the doctor offers to cure Shamu and restore his sight. In one of the film's closer anticipations of the narrative written for *Ibu Mertuaku* a decade later, when Shamu regains his vision, he suddenly sees that the object of his heart's desire, the now adult Mala, is engaged to the doctor who cured his blindness.

This point of convergence between the films is striking but leads us to the most significant distinctions: the doctor in this case appears to be a true blue socialist-modernist. He agrees that his love for Mala does not rise to the level of Shamu's "worship" of her and insists that Shamu marry Mala in his stead. An even more telling contrast with Ramlee's film is that the matrifocal figure of Nyonya Mansoor is here replaced with a patriarch—the stern figure of Mala's father (Murad). Mala's mother is largely absent, and it is the father whose closely calculated manipulations derail the impending intercaste marriage. The result, as the reader may already have guessed, is that like Kassim Selamat, grief-stricken Shamu puts out his own eyes, this time with the doctor's fancy fountain pen. Barnard's conclusion that modern cures for blindness in Malaysian films reveal that "the world that accompanied this technology was one that was unbearable" (2005:452) could also be applied here. But even while *Ibu Mertuaku* was, in a certain way, gesturing

FIGURE 15. The actress Nargis as Mala is positioned above the action throughout much of *Deedar*. The result is an aloof, rather than grounded and active, female character.

negatively toward the more staunchly patriarchal (and ethnonationalist) ideals embedded in the oncoming split between Singapore and Malaysia, in *Deedar*, the result of blindness is basically the reverse.

Contrasting sharply with the active, romantic Sabariah, Mala, Shamu's love interest, has from the beginning remained mostly in the background and clueless as to Shamu's feelings for her. She has no inkling of, or role in, the dramatic goings-on among the three male characters—Shamu, her father, and the doctor—which the film shows to have determined *her* fate. Curiously, at the end, Mala is shown descending a lavish staircase in a setting that closely resembles Nyonya Mansoor's matrifocal home. But Mala's positioning "above" other characters seems mainly an expression of her pervasive aloofness toward her own and others' interests and fates (fig. 15). She is only vaguely disturbed when she hears that Shamu, her childhood friend, has suddenly put out his own eyes and left for good. Her wrinkled brow soon shifts to a dutiful smile at the now unimpeded prospect of her own "proper" marriage to the young doctor. Here, she is again positioned towering over her wealthy fiancé in a way that recalls the Southeast Asian matrifocal gaze. But in this case, I contend that Mala's visible elevation mainly indicates a symbolic pedestal that confers little practical agency.

Vasudevan concurs. In a separate article dealing with the same set of 1950s social films, he complicates the idea of women's cinematic images "setting the limits" of modern national identity. They do so, he argues, mainly as part of an iconic relation to an idealized, desexualized, and heavily overdetermined "pure" mother- or goddess-like figure—one whose ostensibly elevated status is most often "inscribed as a figure subordinated to a narcissistic male structure of desire" (1989:36). The other side of this female archetype is constituted by women whom proper society is defined against: those attached to "the world of vamp and villain, counter pointed to the realm of morality and romantic love" (Vasudevan 1993:66). In this context, the presence of a more subversive "good" woman such as Nargis's rebellious lawyer in Raj Kapoor's famous *Awaara* (*The Vagabond*, 1951), or of the actress Padmini's

dialectical combination of wholesomeness, intelligence, and active (armed) rebellion in *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai* (*The Land Through Which the Ganga Flows*, Karmakar, 1960) can be said to be anomalies in the broader conventions of Hindi social films.

Even in the independently produced, explicitly radical work of Bengali writer-director Satyajit Ray, the traditional feminine power embedded in the figure of the *nabeena*, or "new woman" (echoing Hansen's star-crossed "modern girl"), is treated in a way that resonates more closely with *Barbarella* than it does with Southeast Asian variants: as something that can only be expressed in a distant future. As Keya Ganguly argues, in Ray's films from the 1960s to the 1980s, the *nabeena*, while frequently a central element, is represented in traumatic terms as "not yet conceivable in the world except as catastrophic, disastrous, or monstrous" (2010:44). In relation to historical trauma and to Malaysia, specifically, India does share the same former colonizer (England) and bears a further, catastrophic similarity in its process of nation formation around independence in 1947, a decade before Malaysia's. British India, too, was quickly and violently broken apart into two new nations, India and Pakistan, over a perceived inability to acknowledge and accommodate embedded differences between opposing groups, in this case Hindus and Muslims.

In India, however, postpartition nationalist pressures on cinema did not result in decades of cinematic vacuum as they did in Malaysia and Singapore. I have also argued that despite Malaysian cinema's eventual move toward more rigid, "realistic" patriarchal cinematic conventions, it remained, until the end, mainly under the sway of the matrifocal, however negatively defined. Recall that even wayward, modern Annie in *Sayang si Buta* is punished by fate and not a man's decision, while it is the actions of men who directly determine the lives of Shamu and Mala in *Deedar*. Malaysian cinema would become what I position as an anomaly within a larger anomaly: Southeast Asia's vernacular modernist traditions, to which the approach of Malaysia's films would eventually return. The relation of an event like the splitting of a newly minted nation, therefore, however momentous, appears insufficient as a singular determinant of the nature of domestic or regional representation.

HISTORIES MADE BY WOMEN AND MEN

If we look backward past independence and pay closer attention to the nature of live vernacular theaters in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—media that I position as critical influences on the development of Southeast Asian and Indian cinemas—a key distinction reveals itself. The difference, I suggest, anticipates the gap in gender representation between the two. In Indian Parsi theaters, unlike forms such as bangsawan and stambul in Malaysia and Indonesia, female characters were almost exclusively played by men. As Kathryn Hansen (1999)