



## Confused Auteurism: What Has Adoor Gopalakrishnan Got to Do With It?

Suranjan Ganguly, *The Films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan: A Cinema of Emancipation*. London and New York: Anthem Press, 2015. 178 pages.

### Book review by Parichay Patra

Since the disciplinary refashioning of film studies in India in the 1990s, an obsessive engagement with the national popular cinema, that is, Bollywood, is perceivable in the field. The Indian New Wave of the long 1970s<sup>1</sup> rarely features in cinema studies scholarship, and the scattered articles in anthologies and intermittent dissertations on the period fail to compensate for this inadequacy.<sup>2</sup> New Wave auteurs like Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani have recently attracted some scholarly attention. Pioneering Indian cinema scholar Ashish Rajadhyaksha has written on Kaul and edited selections of Shahani's writings, and Laleen Jayamanne, a film scholar at the University of Sydney, published the first book-length work on Shahani in English in 2015.<sup>3</sup> The Kerala triumvirate—namely Adoor Gopalakrishnan, John Abraham, and Govindan Aravindan—have not been so fortunate. Apart from writings from the film society days<sup>4</sup> that include Aruna Vasudev's pre-Film Studies work on the Indian New Wave (1986) and articles in *Deep Focus*, almost no scholarly work has been published on their films. The South Asian Cinema Foundation (henceforth SACF) brought out a collection of essays on and interviews with Adoor Gopalakrishnan, albeit most of the contributors writing for the volume belonged to the pre-Film Studies era (Joshi and Venkiteswaran 2006).<sup>5</sup> Because of the overwhelming presence of critics belonging to the pre-Film Studies school, new methodologies associated with the academic discipline of Film Studies have not been used in the book. In the absence of a canon, Suranjan Ganguly, who has been

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<sup>1</sup> The 1970s is an immensely important period in the study of Indian cinema and it is usually extended into the following decade, the reason why it is referred to as 'the long 1970s', the impact of which fades only with the advent of economic liberalization in the 90s.

<sup>2</sup> See Bhaskar (2013); Parikh (2010).

<sup>3</sup> See Rajadhyaksha (2009); Rajadhyaksa (2015); Jayamanne (2015).

<sup>4</sup> I am referring to the period when Film Studies was not established as a university discipline in India. Film societies used to publish journals and periodicals to offer a specific brand of non-academic film criticism. The first Film Studies department in India was set up at Jadavpur University in 1993.

<sup>5</sup> See also C. S. Venkiteswaran (2006: 27-32) and Maithili Rao (2006: 33-44) et al.

writing on Gopalakrishnan and his cinema for a considerable period of time (Ganguly 2008; Ganguly 2013), and who also contributed to the SACF volume (Ganguly 2006: 9-26), has come up with this rather unambitious monograph, the primary purpose of which is to introduce Adoor Gopalakrishnan to the West, or, more specifically, to the United States, where he resides and teaches European and Asian cinemas.

What is intriguing about the monograph is Ganguly's reliance on newspaper sources, scattered interviews published in not-so-well-known journals and film magazines as his research materials, as well as his insistence on representing Gopalakrishnan as an auteur. The sheer unavailability of Gopalakrishnan's work<sup>6</sup> is the primary reason of him being much less famous than his illustrious predecessors like Ray and Ghatak. Ganguly's book offers a brief outline of Gopalakrishnan's cinematic preoccupations, his engagement with dramatic arts and pre-cinematic performance forms like *Kathakali*,<sup>7</sup> an overview of politics in the South Indian state of Kerala and the film society movement, and a thematic appreciation of Gopalakrishnan's major films. Ganguly, who has previously published a monograph on Satyajit Ray, deliberately avoided a chronological unfolding of Gopalakrishnan's cinematic life. Instead, he has undertaken a journey through Gopalakrishnan's oeuvre in a (seemingly) idiosyncratic way that he claims serves his purpose of a thematic reading. But in reading the monograph, a number of questions can be raised. Namely:

1. What are Ganguly's methodologies and theoretical framework(s)? How successfully, effectively and consistently he has been able to employ them?
2. Ganguly claims to present a different, non-chronological way of reading the Adoor Gopalakrishnan oeuvre. Does his framework support his claim?
3. Does his monograph invite comparison with other works in the field? How does his writing style separate his monograph from others?

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<sup>6</sup> Only three of his films are available in digital format for the western audience, namely *Elippathayam (The Rat Trap)*, 1981), *Kathapurushan (Man of the Story)*, 1995), and *Nizhalkkuthu (Shadow Kill)*, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> *Kathakali* is an ancient folk performance form of Kerala. Gopalakrishnan's engagement with various folk and classical performance traditions is evident in his documentaries on them. He hails from a feudal family that used to be a patron of the *Kathakali* form, his acquaintance with it started in his childhood. He has made three documentaries on *Kathakali* performers, namely *Kalamandalam Ramankutty Nair* (2005), *Kalamandalam Gopi* (1998) and *Guru Chengannur* (1974).

4. How does or does not the monograph contribute to the larger domain of Indian Film Studies, studies on the Indian New Wave and on Malayalam cinema?

Ganguly's casual understanding and interpretation of auteur criticism seems problematic. With the resurgence of global art cinemas and the decline of culturalist critique in favour of aesthetic-philosophical approaches, "film authorship" is freed from the romanticism associated with the aura of the author and has been taken up as a research method in the world of film criticism once again. This rejuvenation of auteurism is distinct from previous definitions of auteur theory outlined by André Bazin, Pauline Kael, and Andrew Sarris. Adrian Martin, writing about Jacques Rivette's film trilogies, comments on the new auteurism:

What auteurs seek are the ways in which the films...successively, or in more displaced, circuitous patterns...answer, extend, invert, fulfil, critique, or even destroy each other. (Martin 2012: 115)

This articulation of auteurism is more about the "diverse networks" that auteur studies forms and less about the romantic notion of authorship. Significant instances of this practice, primarily found in French film criticism, include, as Martin suggests, "the sophisticated treatments of Alain Resnais by Francois Thomas or Jean-Louis Leurat and Suzanne Liandrat Guigues," Nicole Brenez's book on Abel Ferrara, and Chris Fujiwara's study of Jerry Lewis (Ibid). For the Anglophone reader, Leurat's article on Jean-Luc Godard might be useful. In that essay, Leurat consistently juxtaposes and associates one film with another, traversing the Godard canon with sufficient dexterity, with the possibility of multiplying "crossovers" endlessly, "indefinitely" (Leurat 1992: 24). Brenez's engagement with Ferrara, in translation, offers endless cross-generic games that Ferrara played, crisscrossing and shaping up a web of references (Brenez 2007). In her *Positif* article "Approche inhabituelle des corps: Bresson avec Jean Eustache, Philippe Garrel et Monte Hellman", Brenez studies Philippe Garrel, Jean Eustache, and Monte Hellman and, without reducing Bresson to a mere source of 'influence,' consistently finds her way back to Bresson through the myriad cinematic references (1996: 88-92). Ganguly, in his auteur study, does not engage with Gopalakrishnan's canon in a critical way, nor does he attempt to explore the curious ways in which a canon might conceal references to other

canons, other cinemas. Rather, he prefers an uncritical adulation and reiterating of broad thematic unities to a more nuanced understanding of the fissures within.

Ganguly's foray into Gopalakrishnan's oeuvre lacks a structural as well as a methodological explanation for the non-chronological selection of Gopalakrishnan's films. Instead, his work seems a sophisticated version of the tradition of film society criticism that was prevalent in India before the advent of the discipline of Film Studies. Terms like "sordid aspects of social reality," "humanism," "emancipation," "triumph of the individual," and "liberating vision about choosing life" are frequent in his writings. These terms are ambiguous and can mean different things in different contexts, therefore differ from terms generally associated with contemporary film studies and criticism.

Since most of Gopalakrishnan's films are not available commercially for the western audience, Ganguly's introduction proposes to offer an exegesis of them. Exegetical film criticism is an interesting way of looking at films, and scholars like Lesley Stern use this style effectively by remaining more concerned about the mimetic qualities of film criticism<sup>8</sup> and inserting esoteric philosophical texts into the body of writing. Ganguly, on the contrary, apparently believes that offering a not-so-subtle thematic description acts as exegesis. As such, detailed textual analyses or *mise en scène* analyses are not present in Ganguly's reading of films. Instead, what he does is mere description, without considering the connotations of description in film criticism. A visual narrative that is self-descriptive is difficult to write about, and a verbal re-description doesn't avoid the risk of redundancy.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, *The Films of Aduor Gopalakrishnan* invites comparison with similar research in the field. Jayamanne's *The Epic Cinema of Kumar Shahani*, also published in 2015, studies one of Gopalakrishnan's contemporaries and colleagues<sup>10</sup> at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) whose debut *Maya Darpan (Mirror*

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<sup>8</sup> By mimetic I mean a kind of film criticism that remains responsive to and reflects (verbally) the pace, rhyme, rhythm of the film it describes.

<sup>9</sup> For the problem of description in film criticism, see Clayton and Klevan (2011).

<sup>10</sup> New Wave auteurs formed a curious circuit around themselves. John Abraham assisted Mani Kaul in his debut *Uski Roti* (1969). Kaul wrote a now-lost article on Aravindan's *Thampu* (1978) that *Filmfare* rejected for its alleged incomprehensibility. Kaul reminisced

*of Illusion*, 1972) appeared the same year as Gopalakrishnan's *Swayamvaram* (*One's Own Choice*). Jayamanne, without resorting to thematic considerations of Shahani's films (which is almost impossible to do, given the avant-gardist nature of Shahani's cinema and writings), places Shahani within her larger framework of art history, cultural histories, architecture, anthropological studies, linguistic complexities, literary/mythical allusions, and the epic structure. Ganguly, with only scant references to Gopalakrishnan's interest in and use of *Kathakali* and other forms, never departs from his chosen method of thematization.

Finally, the aspect of Ganguly's analysis that is most troubling is his almost complete lack of engagement with other researchers within the larger field of Malayalam cinema or the Indian New Wave. Malayalam cinema's construction of identity is possible only through differences, as its literary culture, popular leftism, and middle class patronage stands out in contrast with cinemas of its neighbouring states. Gopalakrishnan's work needs to be placed within his regional, national, and transnational cinematic traditions, alongside his status as an auteur. Ganguly does not offer such a holistic understanding to his reader. His work seems completely ambivalent about other southern cinemas in the states that border Kerala. Scholarship on southern cinemas and their idiosyncrasies are not referred to, and Kerala's insularity and differences seem to be taken for granted. Moreover, contemporary researchers publishing in the field of Malayalam cinema, especially Ratheesh Radhakrishnan,<sup>11</sup> do not feature in his work at all. Nor does Ganguly access indigenous sources, primarily because of his unfamiliarity with Malayalam. His conception of the Indian New Wave in general or Malayalam New Wave in particular is problematic as well, as he makes unsupported claims of Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (*Seedling*, 1974) launching the New Wave in Bombay and makes no distinction between art cinema (*Kala*) and middle cinema (*Madhyavarthi*) in Malayalam. By grouping Aravindan and Abraham with M. T. Vasudevan Nair and K.

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about it in one of his *Times of India* articles after Aravindan's death. Gopalakrishnan published an intense yet brief Malayalam article on his memories of Kaul after his demise.

<sup>11</sup> One of Radhakrishnan's recent articles on *Swayamvaram* and two other 1970s Malayalam films by P. A. Becker and K. P. Kumaran examines the supposed realist destiny of Malayalam cinema (2014: 89-100). It is an unusual reading of Gopalakrishnan's debut that Ganguly could have referred to in his own work.

G. George, Ganguly blurs political and aesthetic demarcations, likely because of his lack of acquaintance with middle cinema and scholarship on the latter.<sup>12</sup>

The result, therefore, is a severely inadequately referenced and methodologically confused monograph which projects Adoor Gopalakrishnan as an auteur without a history and background, without associations with his Malayali contemporaries or FTII colleagues, without any engagement whatsoever with the other chapters of the film movement in other parts of the nation, or beyond it.

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<sup>12</sup> Middle cinema is situated somewhere between the arthouse and the popular, it imbibes traits from both, and appeals primarily to a middle-class audience, sharing an exhibition network and patterns with the popular. See Menon (2010: 105-121) for an adequate definition of middle cinema and a detailed gendered reading of two representative K. G. George films.

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