



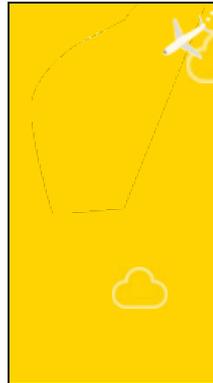
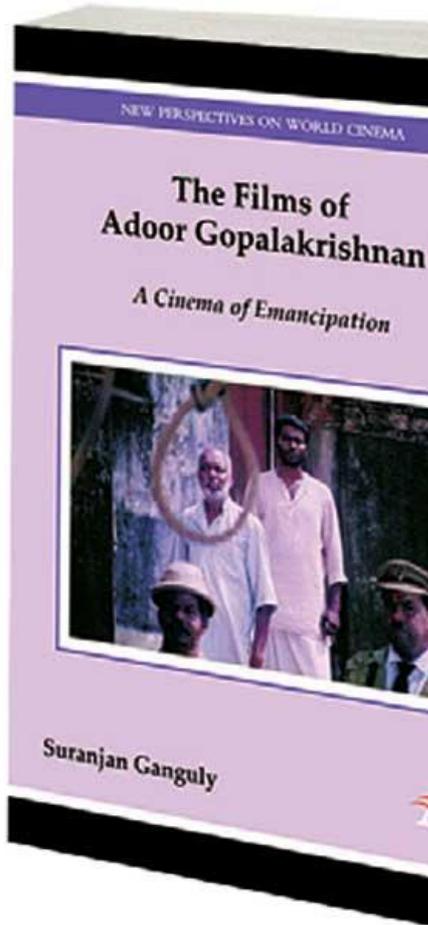
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BOOKS

24 June 2016

# Auteur's Odyssey



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by  
**Gautaman Bhaskaran** (/author/gautaman-  
bhaskaran)

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This book fills a vacuum as the art of a pioneer of the Indian New Wave gets a scholarly treatment

The Films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan: A Cinema of Emancipation | Suranjan Ganguly | Anthem Press India | Pages 166 | Rs 499

SADLY, WHILE WE have had a host of publications on Bollywood and its stars, there have been very few books on even master directors or celebrated actors of South Indian cinema, certainly not in the English language. If one is right, there is no comprehensive book on legends like G Aravindan, John Abraham or Girish Kasaravalli—to name just three. It was only in 2010 that my book, a full-fledged biography of Adoor Gopalakrishnan, his life and cinema, was published. This was the first detailed written work on him in any language. In a scenario such as this, Suranjan Ganguly's tome—on Adoor the director and 11 of his movies—is to be welcomed, and the volume of 166 pages appears like a wonderful companion to the biography.

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Admittedly, Ganguly's work—which is poorly produced with rank black and white photographs and uncomfortably small print—is not for the lay reader. It is a highly academic work, written in a scholarly language that will appeal to a researcher or a film student interested in Adoor's cinema. Ganguly analyses each of Adoor's 11 movies (he has just completed his 12th called *Pinneyum*, or 'Once Again', a film he is doing after an



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**BY THE  
AUTHOR**

eight-year gap) in eight chapters, and this he does with detailed deconstruction and riveting descriptions of plots and themes. In the chapter, ‘The Domain of Inertia: *Elippathayam* and the Crisis of Masculinity,’ the author explains how the 1981 movie ‘features men in the grip of a moral and existential crisis’. Ganguly talks about the decaying social order in Kerala (which Adoor grew up watching) and how men like Unni—the protagonist of *Elippathayam* (‘Rat Trap’) —who refuse to move with the times find themselves trapped like rodents.

Writing about *Vidheyam* (‘The Servile’, 1993)—undoubtedly Adoor’s most violent and perhaps the only one so—Ganguly graphically compares the relationship between a master and a slave, between Mammooty’s Bhaskara Patelar, a powerful landlord, and Thommie, a poor Christian farmer. Scenes of Thommie being humiliated are heartrending, and the humiliation goes to the extent of Patelar raping the ‘slave’s’ wife, Omana. In the final frames of the film, we see how Patelar is haunted by guilt and fear, and has to sink into a relationship where, in a reversal of roles, the master becomes the slave and the slave the master, or just about. At least, what we see is an equal relationship when the two even share food.

In another engrossing chapter, we see how Adoor plays with the imaginary and the real. Three of his movies have been discussed here: *Mathilukal* (‘The Walls’), *Nizhalkuthu* (‘Shadow Kill’) and *Anantaram* (‘Monologue’). Basheer (played by Mammooty), a freedom-fighter, finds one fine morning that he has company on the other side of his high jail wall—when he hears the voice of a woman prisoner, Narayani. Adoor never shows her, but in a deft weave of words, takes us on a romantic—even erotic— journey of Basheer and Narayani. Imagination also comes into focus in *Nizhalkuthu*, where the hangman of the erstwhile Travancore state in pre- Independence India is wracked by guilt when he is ordered by the prince to carry out an execution. The hangman is sure that the convict is innocent, and in a rare narrative of this sort, Adoor



#### MORE IN THIS SECTION



**a**

A photograph of an ADAMO Analogue watch. The watch has a black face with white hands and hour markers, and a brown leather strap. The ADAMO logo is visible on the watch face.

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paints a picture of extreme guilt. But the hangman is also one who gives life. He burns the rope which is used to snuff out lives as part of a healing process.

*Anantaram* talks about a hallucinating college student who sees his own lover in his sister-in-law. Adoor's last two films, *Naalu Pennungal* ('Four Women') and *Oru Pennum Randaanum* ('A Climate for Crime') are studies of women's woes and dilemmas. Describing these women as 'those in the doorway', Ganguly explains how while they have been losing power even in Kerala's matrilineal communities, men have been gaining ascendancy.



Adoor is one of the few auteurs and pioneers of New Indian Cinema in the 1970s—along with Aravindan, Shyam Benegal and Girish Kasaravalli. And his admirers must have been worried after he seemed to have stopped making films in 2008. Well, now that he has completed his twelfth title, *Pinneyum*, there is a sense of relief, and it seems like oxygen in Adoor land.

**(Gautaman Bhaskaran is the author of *Adoor Gopalakrishnan: A Life in Cinema*)**

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