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Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Films

By Geetha Ramanathan

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A Review by Jane Fader, Wayne State University, USA

When the concept of the *auteur* was first introduced, it was rare to see a woman in the director's chair. As such, auteur theory has spurred a great deal of feminist criticism, intensified by the theory's relatively unquestioned universal acceptance. Disregarding the artistic efforts of those who occupied less recognized positions such as editor was a double-hit for women, who not only had their behind-the-scenes work overlooked, but also found the accredited position of director virtually inaccessible. Over time, women's successful struggles to obtain directorial positions have given rise to feminist notions of "women's film," and women's maintenance of directorial positions has resulted in exceptional bodies of cinematic work, thus allowing many possibilities to explore a gendered, politically motivated auteurship. Despite its title, Geetha Ramanathan's *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Films* is not concerned with these possibilities.

Drawing from Johnston and Cook, two early feminist film critics who argued that feminist auteurship was a discursive function rather than the authorial product of an individual, Ramanathan characterizes feminist auteurship as entailing "the impression of feminist authority, not necessarily that of the auteur herself, onscreen" (3). For Ramanathan, the auteur is merely a filter through which feminist ideology is sifted; mentioned by name only to "acknowledge the historical contribution of the woman author" (6). With a disengagement of the author, texts are situated in relation to other texts and organized thematically by their similar manipulations of cinematic techniques that function as enunciations of feminist theory. In other words, the author suffers yet another death at the hands of modernity and the auteur is refigured as a de-personified authoritative ideology. The film is refigured as a visual utterance, a woman-behind-the-curtain to whom we are asked to pay no attention, yet cannot escape.

Ramanathan's selection of texts rests on a unique balance of essentialism. Utilizing the word *feminist* to describe "the work of women filmmakers that is feminist" (6), Ramanathan defends her exclusion of texts directed by men and non-feminist texts directed by women with the meagre precedent that her choice to do so was "[h]otly contested" (6). National, cultural, and racial boundaries, on the other hand, do not exist as inhibitors to her selection. With only the slight glimmer of a centralizing Western conception of feminism, Ramanathan's knowledge of and sensibility to the difference embedded in internationality is one of the strong points of this study.

However, by organizing texts around cinematic enunciations as opposed to ethnic affiliation, *Feminist Auteurs* reaffirms the assumption of a universal film language and runs the risk of gender essentialism.

After praising Ramanathan's ethnically diverse approach, it would be irresponsible not to acknowledge that *Feminist Auteurs* is quite heterocentric. Although Ramanathan briefly mentions Judith Mayne's motion towards film authorship and lesbian representation, little space is devoted to bisexual or lesbian desire and representation. As the majority of the films covered are non-Western, it is obvious that Ramanathan made considerable efforts not to privilege Western films. The same cannot be said for films that explore sexual desire outside of heterosexuality. *Working Girls* (Lizzie Borden, 1986) features a lesbian couple, but Ramanathan's analysis of the relationship is as casual as Borden's representation of it. Ramanathan addresses homosexuality through only one other film: *Mädchen in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931). For this analysis, Ramanathan transforms heterosexual intimacy between women into a lesbian subtext. Although this is no doubt a subversive reading, the fact that there are no other instances of lesbian culture or representation in *Feminist Auteurs* reveals an overlooking that is easily nuanced by Ramanathan's strong globalist efforts. The book's heterocentricity is particularly apparent in the reading of *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1991), which does not so much as gesture towards the possibility that the two female characters Trula and Yellow Mary have a romantic relationship. Ramanathan's analysis argues for a black feminist overwriting of the epic genre and places Trula, who fights for Yellow Mary's acceptance in the community, as one of the film's three heroes. The failure to provide a substantial feminist critique of *Daughters of the Dust* by recognizing the possibility of a lesbian relationship crystallizes a failure to include films that directly address homosexuality in this study.

The notably international sample that is examined in *Feminist Auteurs* is limited to films "that construct feminist authority in the text by *refusing* certain modes of representation" (6). In six chapters, these refusals and their subsequent reconstructions are demonstrated through specific combinations of aesthetics, race, and genre; and subjectivity as it relates to gender, gaze, aurality, desire, and narrative. As previously mentioned, a unique aspect of this organization is its latent but strong gesture towards global feminism found in the omnipresence of Ramanathan's rejection of ethnic and national confines. A particularly good example of Ramanathan's attention to culture is found in the chapter, 'Aural Subjectivities.'

'Aural Subjectivities' analyzes films that challenge the "insistence on the visual as the singular path to the conferral of subjectivity in film" (109) by privileging aural over visual subjectivity. Ramanathan conducts a comparative analysis of *Danz—n* (Maria Novaro, 1991), *Angel of Fire* (Dana Rotberg, 1994), *The Silences of the Palace* (Moufida Tlatli, 1994), and *Sati* (Aparna Sen, 1989), in order to highlight feminist concerns regarding "the relationship between sound and the visual as understood through the narrative of the film" (139), and to spotlight the range of cinematic enunciations that enable culturally specific addresses of these concerns. *Danz—n*, titled after the traditional Mexican courting dance featured in the film, employs extra-diegetic music to "re-place the female protagonist's subjectivity outside of the cultural parameters indicted by Mexican film's placement of the female hero" (119), and emphasize the difficulties Mexican women face in finding and maintaining autonomy in romantic discourse, particularly "within the specific cultural parameters invoked by the *danz—n*, Mexico's plotting of romance" (119). *Sati*, on the other hand, centres upon an Indian

female protagonist whose muteness functions to signify her excessive interest in the visual. Subjectivity is thereby established according to the classic codes of Bollywood (modelled after the American studio system) but the narrative positions her muteness as a "pre-condition for the visual, or the knowable" (134). Both films problematize assumptions about subjectivity achieved through the visual, yet in culturally specific styles that render very different conclusions.

Each chapter of *Feminist Auteurs* follows a similar format and maintains the same level of international attention and sensitivity. In 'Genre Covers,' Ramanathan draws from narrative re-workings in four films to argue for a feminist genre. This feminist genre is characterised by radical alterations of established genres, raising "questions about the existing genre's relationship to women, so that it can never again be impervious to the claims of women" (108). 'Desire and Female Subjectivity' compares and contrasts three films that confront assumptions that female desire is expressed psychically by transgressing desire into the social. This shift, Ramanathan argues, is "vital to the discursive representation of female subjectivity in the social" (142). Under the persuasive scholarly spell of fascinating connections and ornate vocabulary, it is easy for one to forget the questionable and almost irrelevant presuppositions on which *Feminist Auteurs* is based.

Feminist Auteurs is a sophisticated example of comparative film and deep textual analysis. It admirably follows the progressive trend towards global feminism. However, Ramanathan's initial proposals are problematic. Even if her twist on the definition of auteur is not disputed, the relevance of the director is unclear and inconsistent. While womanhood is a necessary criteria in Ramanathan's study, the gendered relationship a director has with her films is never addressed. If the relationship between gender and directing is not important enough to continue to explore, why would it play a role in Ramanathan's sampling? Fortunately, issues raised in the introduction seem to exist outside of, and play inconsequential roles in, the rest of the study.

For a rich feminist analysis of Western and non-Western feminist films, Geetha Ramanathan's *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Films* is an excellent read. Unfortunately, as far as auteur studies go the book is simply not what its title suggests.

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Institute of Film & Television Studies, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK
E-Mail: scope@nottingham.ac.uk | Tel: +44 (0)115 951 4261 | Fax: +44 (0)115 951 4270

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