

DIVINE PROMISE OR MORTAL BETRAYAL?: GENDERED AND RELIGIOUS PERFORMANCE(S) FROM THE LIFE OF SARADAMANI CHATTOPADHYAY

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the mechanisms of religious, hegemonic appropriation of the female body for the purpose of deification. Taking biographical instances from the life of Saradamani Chattopadhyay, wife of colonial Bengal's foremost mystic Sri Ramakrishna, this reading puts primary emphasis on the thematic use of the body as a tool and site of sanctification politics. Religious rites and rituals are not monolithically transcendental. They can be read as cultural performances where the gender question is inseparable. Using Judith Butler's theory of gender as a performance, this paper locates such performativity from Saradamani's ritualistic performances and examines the crucial role the body played in their enactment. Also, among the operations of such hegemonic, patriarchal, Hindu religious ideology that shaped and controlled Saradamani's identity, attempt is made to re-represent certain hagiographic accounts as acts of resistance on her part.

Keywords: gender, religion, body, performativity, liminality, ritual, identity, culture, hagiography, deification



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Religion has always been viewed in popular discourse as something transcendental and bearing the potential of offering solace to troubled souls. But the “gender critical turn” (Warne, qtd. in King 2) in religious studies has questioned such seemingly stable constructs and showed that “religion and gender are not simply two analogues which exist side by side and can be related to each other at the same level” (King 2). This question of embedded gender operates within the complex socio-cultural mosaic of any world religion in which the female body can hardly ever escape the patriarchal strategies of gender politics. Extensive works on the body in different religions have been done by historians and theologians who do not view the body separately from the gender question (Bynum, Coakley). Performance studies is another interdisciplinary approach that views the operations of bodily functions in the religious discourse as ‘performances’ and tries to read rites and rituals accordingly.

American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler (1956-) formulated her theory of gender as a performance where questions are asked about ‘given’ binary gender constructs and their hegemonic ‘bodily’ ‘performativity’. By performativity Butler views and challenges the bodily movements of any sex as culturally-determined performance, as gendered constructs and hence coerced. This paper tries to show from certain biographies of Saradamani Chattopadhyay (née Mukhopadhyay)(1853-1920), wife of colonial Bengal’s foremost mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) that how their life, which is depicted as a spiritually joyous whole, had different discursive trajectories resulting from the patriarchal, hegemonic ‘spirituality’ inflicted upon her. Issues and questions of the body in performing such a gendered role will be central to the argument. Various instances of performativity will be analyzed to understand how the hagiographic politics uses the body for the purpose of reconstruction of historical personage as an avatar.

Hagiographic literature on Sri Ramakrishna typically depicts Saradamani as the universal mother who led the religious movement after the mystic’s demise and became the emotional refuge to disciples and monks of the Ramakrishna order. These literatures cannot be ignored as mere hagiography as they are the most circulated ones in the popular discourse and have built up the construct of ‘Sarada Debi’ (goddess Sarada). As historian Sumit Sarkar points out:

Sarada Debi, Ramakrishna’s wife, was kept very much in the background in the saint’s lifetime.... After Ramakrishna’s death Sarada Debi became a major cult figure of the movement in her own right, revered as Sri Ma or Holy Mother.... Gender has to be not an afterthought, but at the very core of any understanding of Ramakrishna... (290).

The female counterpart of the guru has to be kept aside and cannot function alongside the male mystic. She remains the object of Sri Ramakrishna’s ritualistic practices that include complete distancing from the opposite sex while living together. Narasingha P Sil has likewise focused his biography of Saradamani on the different aspects of hardships that she had to face all along her life. In response to such works, this paper invests selective attention to tracing the roots of Saradamani’s deification within her corporeal tribulations. The question of Saradamani as the spiritual mother figure is unique as unlike the roles of Mother, Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual collaborator or Sister Nivedita who as enlightened individuals consciously initiated themselves into the religious paradigm, Saradamani was married to Sri Ramakrishna with a promise of ‘natural’ conjugal life which was subverted in her passive emergence as the *guru-patni* (wife of the master).

Although such binary constructs, of the passive female and the dominant male, have been challenged by Butler, in this case the primary framework of analysis has to be built upon such theoretical position, for Saradamani comes to the reader as a passive subject out of the complex rural (later urban), patriarchal, religious culture of colonial Bengal. The issue of passive performance of Saradamani as the *guru-patni* is pivotal to our analysis because in all her spiritual sayings she echoes her husband’s religious ideology. Butler uses the Derridean notion of citationality or iterability to show that it is one of the prominent markers of gender performance where the female sex gradually reverberates



and performs the hegemonic ideologies brought down to her in a capillary fashion. In this vein, gender “identity is itself a product of the performative process” (Loxley 125). Can it then be possible to construct a secular discursive identity of Saradamani from the available literature? This paper argues that such a discourse can be attempted in the instances of bodily ‘performances’ of Saradamani where her dissimulated sufferings build up a repository which is indeed not divine.

The performative aspects can be located from two phases in Saradamani’s life. The first phase spans from her marriage with Ramakrishna till the guru’s death in 1886 and the latter phase ranges from her emergence as the anchoring figure of the Ramakrishna movement to her demise. Throughout such analysis, Butler’s concept of performativity proves useful to demonstrate how in both these periods patriarchal gender politics exerted its hegemonic strategies to form the identity of Saradamani according to its requirement. But from her bodily suffering and verbally-expressed desires protrude certain possibilities of subversions of this very ‘spirituality’ of which she became a performer.

Born as Saradamani Mukhopadhyay on 22 December, 1853 at village Joyrambati in Bankura district, she was married to Sri Ramakrishna at the age of five in May 1859. She was seventeen years younger than Sri Ramakrishna. She is often viewed as a ‘natural’ victim of child marriage (Brahmachaitanya 7) permeating through all of the colonial Bengal. The most circulated myth of this asexual *hieros gamos* is that the mystic foretold his family members who were searching a bride for him that his bride was “marked with a straw” (“*kuto badha*”) at the house of certain Ramchandra Mukhopadhyay. “The expression ‘marked with a straw’ refers to a custom... to identify a particular fruit or vegetable for offering to his revered deity, a farmer would mark it by wrapping a straw around it so that it would not be picked up for sale at the local market” (Sen 79). This ‘given’ patriarchal hegemonic privilege of selecting a human being as an object emerges as the *modus operandi* throughout the construction of Saradamani’s identity. The following analysis locates the dynamics of such sexual politics of identity formation through the discourse of corporeality.

While pondering the issue of Saradamani’s corporeality from the perspective of performativity it can be mentioned that bodies are not passively made out of culture. Rather “bodies compose or order themselves in this performative process, and we cannot know or ‘experience’ corporeality except through these compositional procedures” (Loxley 119). According to Butler “the practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production” (Butler, *Bodies* 231). Issues of power exercised play a pivotal role in choreographing such compositions, which are in turn projected by patriarchy as normative. Similar gender strategies under the veneer of spiritual partnership tried to shape Saradamani’s identity. Her bodily sufferings work as ruptures in that discursive identity and lead us to her secular desires. By focusing on the aspects of corporeality it can thus be seen that “symbols and dogmas are accompanied by bodily transformations and regulations of diet, appearance, clothing, sexuality and movement; ideas of transcendence and sanctification are linked up with corporeal contrasts of defilement and decay” and when “gender is inserted in this type of approach, it becomes as complex, problematized and polysemic as the body” (Mikaelsson 309,310).

Many of Saradamani’s biographies describe at length how after their marriage Sri Ramakrishna prepared her from her very childhood for her future spiritual performances. In one such instance, we are informed that one day while her husband was preaching to the other country women at Kamarpukur she fell asleep listening to those spiritual and religious discussions (Gambhirananda 93). Saradamani was then fourteen years old. Her mind and body refused to stay awake to such spiritual theories which appeared quite relevant to other rural, aged women who were deeply exploited in their daily chores by the power operation of gender politics. The patriarchal religious program appropriates a teenager’s sleep with the pseudo-logic that had she not fallen asleep, had she listened to those words of Sri Ramakrishna, she would have entered the deepest state of *samadhi* which, in turn, might have affected her worldly *leela* (play) of a savior (Gambhirananda 93). Any authorized



biography of Saradamani will give us instances of such patriarchal subversions of the body in favor of its intended projection of a human being as a deity and denying rudimentary human rights to any individual.

How did Saradamani spend her time in Dakshineswar when her husband talked, laughed, sang, got into trances with his young and adult disciples? "Sarada Debi, Ramakrishna's wife, was kept very much in the background during the saint's lifetime, living in a tiny room, cooking and looking after her husband and talking to women devotees alone" (Sarkar 290). Cooking is one of the major activities that she was involved in all through her life. It might be 'mundane' in the spiritual discourse of a mystic but it did supply Ramakrishna and many of his young devotees the daily sustenance upon which their numerous rites of sadhana prospered. The privileged male luxury of selecting arbitrary spiritual rites that Sri Ramakrishna had at his disposal in his spiritual quest was never made available to Saradamani. Instead she was compelled to immerse herself in all sorts of household work that required a lot of bodily exploitation of the female labor. Swami Gamvirananda, the 11th president of Ramakrishna Math and Mission and one of the few comparatively balanced biographers of Saradamani, refers to the numerous instances of her cooking for others and various bodily hard works (Gamvirananda 97,102, 153). In fact, these instances of her bodily suffering do not present her conjugal life as a joyous whole. Even then, devotees tend to believe that her "body, precisely because it has endured so much suffering, is dev-sharir, divine" (Sarkar 342). Use of the female body as a site of such value-addition is one of the more prominent strategies of gender politics.

At Dakshineswar, Saradamani lived in a tiny octagonal room (nahabat) of merely fifty square feet (Gamvirananda 103). The door was 4'2" tall. She used to have multiple injuries on her forehead while getting in and out of the room. Her days had to start from the wee hours as she had to relieve herself by the Ganges because "no one had thought of providing a latrine to their women" (Sarkar 341). It was not possible to go out in the daylight. Saradamani recalled later that she had to hold her pressure and wait till night to relieve herself. This caused her severe illness later (Gamvirananda 62). This continence is the gender performance that Saradamani had to perform again and again in order to sustain herself. Unlike her religious performances these are more organic and integral to her long history of bodily sufferings.

During Ramakrishna's lifetime she played the role of a faithful maid who incessantly prepared food and looked after her husband and his disciples. Ramakrishna was not even aware of her needs and sufferings. Sometimes they met after two or three months' interval although they lived in the same temple complex. Only a few female devotees like Jogin-ma or Golap-ma were aware of the hardships she had to face. Spirituality and conjugality – both were external factors that operated to shape and construct Saradamani's identity. In the process of reacting to these factors Saradamani emerged with an ontological mosaic which is much more complex and fragmented than that of Sri Ramakrishna. Her husband was a fine performer of songs, tales, and anecdotes, and could manage to have a trajectory of life where he did not have to bother about the daily chores of life. His identity was not a construct of the parochial, patriarchal hegemony which worked to form the identity of Saradamani.

This identity-formation dynamics was completely at Sri Ramakrishna's disposal. He almost tailored and ordained Saradamani according to his spiritual and conjugal needs. Saradamani engaged herself in those repetitive performances like cooking, keeping herself in oblivion and silently undergoing bodily sufferings and hardships. Sri Ramakrishna had warned his disciples multiple times against "women-gold" ("*kamini-kanchan*") combination. He referred to the female body as full of blood, flesh and excrement. There are examples when a female devotee's pranam has caused burning sensation in his feet (Gupta 251). The female body to him was the ultimate obstacle in the path of spiritual practices. "There seems to have developed in him a deep fear of matter flowing out of one's body – and the orifices of women appeared enormous and frightening" (Sarkar 335). Saradamani prepared food for him according to his diet requirements as he had chronic dysentery. But she used to avoid that during her menstrual cycles. Now this periodical restriction is a



perfect example of the patriarchal power operation and even more of female gender performance. Such discourses of corporeality create such a power-dynamics that its subjects adapt themselves to an eternal self-slavery. According to Butler such social conventions produce the force of performativity by a “citational chain lived and believed at the level of the body” (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 155). As a rural, uneducated woman Saradamani could not but cite this abstinence as ‘natural’ and performed that arduously. And during those intervals Sri Ramakrishna would have to resort to temple *bhog* (sacred food) that further escalated his problem. So he devised the logic that it is the mind that is pure (“*suchi*”) or impure (“*a-suchi*”). Anything outside the mind is beyond any consideration for that matter. So Saradamani must cook for him (Gamvirananda 71). The female body which was so abhorrent to him for various reasons was re-placed within a dialectical episteme purely for the purpose of appropriating the female labor for his own cause – spiritual or conjugal, and this strategy remained an important element in Saradamani’s persona formation.

According to biographers and historians alike, Sri Ramakrishna never had any sexual relation with Saradamani but instead worshipped her as the divine mother when she was sixteen years of age (Sen 81). This act of subverting the wife as a holy figure loomed large in the later construct of the cult of Maa Sarada. This ritual is represented as one of the foremost testimonials of Ramakrishna’s revered attitude to the female sex. But Saradamani’s position as the passive recipient of the rite is also unmistakably present here. Not only is the conjugal expectation of a female partner within a marriage thwarted here, but this can also be viewed as her initiation to future performative rites with which she would engage herself.

Gods and goddesses keep on coming back to earth by taking birth as a human being to show the way of salvation to mankind – this is a recurring image in Hindu mythical, religious tradition (Parrinder 107). And here the human body is merely a tool through which the avatar performs her/his spiritual teachings. Corporeality is treated only as the medium through which highest stage of spirituality can be attained. The ‘body’ as a site of spiritual performance occupies a pivotal role in the spiritual practices of Sri Ramakrishna. Although he was an upper-caste Brahmin, resorting to ritualistic practices of subaltern religions like Kartabhaja and Nabarasik was never a hindrance for him. But he “found the free mixing of the sexes quite repulsive. His biographers record that while willingly undergoing the sixty-four forms of tantric practice then prevalent in Bengal he refused to adopt its most radical and subversive forms that involved the gravest social and cultural transgressions” (Sen 4). So the universality that is associated with his religious discourse can be questioned on the ground that his patriarchal, brahminic ideology for the body was a determining factor in choosing the spiritual rituals.

This essentialism was also imposed on Saradamani. He also expected and wanted Saradamani to think and treat her body likewise. He taught her to meditate and practice the *vajanas* (songs addressing the god). But the spiritual performances that were available in front of Saradamani’s eyes were that of her husband’s trance dancing and ecstatic unconsciousness (*bhav samadhi*). Sri Ramakrishna’s niece Lakshmimani was her companion in that small room at Dakshineswar. Her biography tells us that Saradamani was intrigued by the *prembhav* (ecstasy of love) of Gouri-maa and wanted to achieve and undergo such a psychic state. Such *bhav* involved public singing, trance dancing and momentary forgetfulness about bodily existence. When Sri Ramakrishna was informed about Saradamani’s desire he said:

সে কালীঘাটের মেয়ে। সে ওসব সহ্য করতে পারবে। কিন্তু তার পক্ষে গোপনে থাকা ভাল। স্ত্রীলোক ধীর নম্রভাবে থাকবে – লজ্জাই তার ধর্ম; নইলে লোকে তার নিন্দা করবে।

(“Gouri hails from Kalighat. She can endure all these. But she (Sarada) would do better to live in secrecy. A woman should be gentle and docile.... Demureness must be her characteristic. Otherwise people will censure her”; my trans.; Chattopadhyay 546).



Limiting and charting the territories of the female body according to the male construct of the ideal feminine thus determined the 'feminine' performances of Saradamani. Until Sri Ramakrishna's demise in 1886 all her performances are marked by this social iterability which is represented in the popular discourse as a joyous spiritual conjugality.

Once he asked Sarada whether she would put her body to proper spiritual use. And she replied,

“আমি মেয়েমানুষ আমি কি করতে পারি?”

(“I am only a woman, what can I do?”; my trans.; Gamvirananda 96). We shall see that all along her life she reminded herself and others that she is 'only' a “meyemanush” (woman). This is the social conditioning that she received and even after Ramakrishna's demise she had to perform the dual roles of the guru-patni who anchored the Ramakrishna movement and the “meyemanush” who had to work through her body to complete all familial duties. But her performances after 1886 began to shift more towards rites and bhavas in which she had seen her husband engaged. Foreground to such performativity can be traced back to certain incidents that took place during the mystic's lifetime.

Bhava Samadhi or a state of ecstasy was one of the foremost spiritual performances of Sri Ramakrishna. He used to enter such states from his childhood days and became a master of that during his practice of various spiritual rites with Totapuri and Bhairavi Brahmani. It was organic to his existence. But Saradamani never exhibited any flair for such performance before she came to Dakshineswar. Moreover, apart from Lakshminani, Sri Ramakrishna's niece, there were few female devotees who were close to Saradamani at Dakshineswar. One of them was Jogin-maa. She recalls:

মা যখন প্রথম দক্ষিণেশ্বরে আসেন তখন তিনি সংসারের বিশেষ কিছুই বুঝিতেন না এবং ভাব – টাব ও হইত না।

(“When mother first arrived at Dakshineswar she knew little about household chores and never did she have any ecstatic trance”; my trans.; *Sri Sri* 160)

Saradamani once requested her to ask Sri Ramakrishna that she wanted to have *dasha* (phase) of *bhava* (ecstasy). Confronted with her husband's ritualistic worshipping of her and other spiritual exercises, she could cite only those aspects of spirituality that were manifested through the body. Jogin-maa also informs that Sri Ramakrishna turned a stern face to such a request and when she returned to Saradamani she saw her busy in daily *puja* (worship) and

“খুব হাসিতেছেন – এই হাসিতেছেন, আবার একটু পরেই কাঁদিতেছেন”

(“laughing heavily – now laughing, after some time starts crying”; my trans.; Gamvirananda 90). This is a definitive citational gender act. The question whether she feigned it or not does not arise because every gender is “fabricated, rather than expressed” (Loxley 126). From here on the corporeality shifted for Saradamani from conjugality to spiritual abstraction.

French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-1990) talked about 'interpellation' in order to show the workings of dominant ideology in shaping the subject's identity (Loxley 130). In the process of interpellation, a subject responds to the hailing of the dominant ideology the way it wants her/him to respond. S/he takes up the discrete identity the ideology decides for her/him. Saradamani was also the subject of such dominant Hindu religious ideology which shaped and constructed her identity as the mother figure of the Ramakrishna movement. And her performances, which are a braided combination of gender and religiosity, are manifestations of the working of that hegemonic ideology. Conjugality did not give her the opportunity to experience motherhood on a corporeal base. Her thematic or spiritual



motherhood is a “discursive construction” (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 19) validated by the speech acts of primarily Sri Ramakrishna and afterwards that of the monks and disciples of Ramakrishna Mission. Much as a gender performative that becomes ‘natural’ in the act of being repeated and re-enacted, Saradamani also believed this hegemonic motherhood to be her real identity and performed accordingly in the later phase of her life.

Liminal performances refer to a transitional process through which an individual leaves the old self behind and emerges with a new identity. Anthropologist Victor Turner used the term to read rituals as liminal performances (Schechner 66). Official biographies of Saradamani describe Saradamani undergoing the *panchatapa* ritual to deal with the psychic upheaval that she was undergoing after the mystic’s demise. She did not have any knowledge about the ritual. A sage came in her dream, the biography tells us, and insisted on engaging herself in the ritual. Rituals “help people deal with difficult transitions... hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed or violate the norms of daily life” (Schechner 54). So it is possible to read rituals, sacred or secular, as performance. As we have discussed earlier all her performances had a dual context of conjugal desire and citational spirituality. This performance was born out of a personal (secular in that way) conflict with memory and a hegemonic expectation that demands the body to undergo a rite of passage. Before thinking whether the *panchatapa* ritual exerted any effect on Saradamani, we must note that this ritual required sitting amidst burning fire for seven days. An open space a ground was prepared and cow dung cakes were piled up to ignite five huge fires. Saradamani was at first taken aback but then went and sat at the center of the surrounding fire. Her biographer reports:

“অগ্নিমধ্যে প্রবেশ করিয়া শ্রীমা দেখিলেন উহা যেন তেজোহীন”

“upon entering the fire, Sri Maa discovered as if the fire was without any power”; my trans.; Gamvirananda 135). This went on for seven days. This episode is an instance of the appropriation of an evident bodily suffering as a transitional ritual that almost bears a realization of the divine on part of the suffered subject, in this case Saradamani. So, none of Saradamani’s performance – spiritual or conjugal – was bereft of bodily suffering and all of her performances were determined by an external gender power politics.

Diksha or mantradan is another rite of passage where the guru officially gives the disciple a *mantra* (chanting words in Sanskrit) to initiate her/him into the spiritual discourse or *sadhana*. Unlike Sri Ramakrishna who was well versed in religious texts, Saradamani could hardly read. For her spiritual practices only involved meditation and devotional singing. There was no way she could have known complex Sanskrit *mantras* and initiate devotees accordingly by giving them *diksha*. But after Ramakrishna’s death she claimed that her husband had given her darshan (divine glimpse) and ordered her to give *mantra* to a certain disciple. This sort of mimetic impulse of Saradamani to imitate her husband made the citational context for her spiritual performance but as we have noted earlier these religious performatives also had a liminal characteristic pertaining to her subaltern position as a female partner of a male guru.

When Saradamani was gradually subsumed into the cult of Maa Sarada, she used to meet and talk to many disciples and received their *pranam* just as her husband had done. But while Sri Ramakrishna’s ecstatic madness and shedding of clothes during his trance dancing and *bhava-samadhi* was highly celebrated among disciples, Saradamani had to sit for hours at one place covering herself with a shawl during hot summer days of Kolkata (Gamvirananda 156). This covering up of the female body is yet another feminine performance decided by the male, patriarchal religious ideology to which the subaltern has to surrender repetitively. The body is the dual site of performance for both the oppressor and the oppressed. And interestingly the identities of both the participants in such power equation are not static but fluid and



interchangeable. Once Saradamani was bought a winter wear by a monk of the Ramakrishna order. She accepted it with joy and even used it for three days. But on the fourth day she returned it saying,

“মেয়েমানুষের কি জামা পরতে আছে বাবা? তব তোমাদের মন রাখতে তিনদিন পরেছি”

(“Should a woman wear such dress? Even then I did that to make you people happy”; my trans.; Gamvirananda 186). Even when she is hailed as a spiritual leader, she is performing as the self-assigned flag-bearer of patriarchal normativity, indicating that patriarchy is not essentially male. It is the idea that operates in all social behaviors, which in turn express themselves as gendered performances.

Amidst such constructed, gendered performativity – represented as volitional spiritual enterprise – exist a few acts of resistance. When conjugal desires and simple wishes are sieved through the net of a monolithic politics of spirituality, such resistance may occur. Saradamani’s conjugality was always overshadowed by her husband’s spiritual program. Sexuality and childbearing were seen only as temptations which were to be conquered by the mystic. To validate such male choice of action, Sri Ramakrishna once was illustrating at length the impact of a male child’s death on its mother. After listening about the child’s death a couple of times Saradamani replied almost inaudibly:

“সবগুলোই কী আর মরে যাবে?”

(“will all the children die?”; my trans.; Gamvirananda 29). She could not resist the imposed spirituality, but she made the effort to question the impossible probability that her husband was talking about. She wanted to harbor the dream of a performance that she never got to enact. Another such resistance occurred regarding a linguistic question when Sri Ramakrishna indirectly wished that she might refrain from attending a program with him, as that would represent them as ordinary couple who were bound in bodily attraction. Saradamani obliged. When asked about the reason for her absence by other disciples, she analyzed his consent as not being “whole-hearted”

(“মন খুলে”).

She would have gone had he said “she must go”

(“সে নিশ্চয়ই যাবে”)

instead of saying “she can go if she desires to”

(“ওব ইচ্ছা হয় তো চলুক”)

(Gamvirananda 83). Such acts of resistance are hardly highlighted in the entire gamut of celebration that goes around Maa Sarada as these are secular, human desires that were hushed by the politics of spiritual leverage.

If the reactions of Sri Ramakrishna and Saradamani to bodily suffering are measured simultaneously, it must not go without notice that they occupy very different places. Sri Ramakrishna who always put attainment of god to be the highest goal of life viewed the body as something subordinate and secondary to the soul. While the mystic performed primarily through his words, Saradamani’s silent performances were grounded in bodily reality. Whenever there was any possibility of an ailment or a minute discomfort, he would become restless (Gupta 675,682,771,729,776-7). In



contrast to that, Saradamani showed remarkable perseverance and forbearance when dealing with tremendous pain. This tolerance elevates her beyond the mundane, whereas Sri Ramakrishna's attitude to bodily pain binds him to the level of corporeality he always wanted to transcend.

In her last days, Saradamani developed a tendency to distance herself from everybody and more importantly from her body. She used to say:

এ শরীর দিয়ে ঠাকুরের যা করবার ছিল শেষ হয়েছে।

("this body has finished the work that *thakur* (Sri Ramakrishna) wanted it to do"; my trans.; Gamvirananda 389)

Almost in the fashion of a Brechtian performer she creates an alienation from her body, which itself has been the site of all her performances. She has served the guru with her labor. She is revered more because she has 'nurtured and supported the male guru' (Bradley 2011:81). She is looked upon as the holy mother primarily for 'her nurturing qualities, which in turn makes her a symbolic mother' (Bradley 60). This symbolic motherhood is crucial from the perspective of gender performativity that Butler proposes and by which she problematizes the 'dominant gender ontology' (Loxley 141). Butler refers to the concept of drag act performed as part of gay culture where the figure of the 'drag queen' is the embodiment of the problematized gendered identity: "... the performer's outside performance – clothes, posture, intonation – is feminine, but that the inside, the body, is masculine; on the other hand, and at the same time, drag suggests that the body considered as outside is masculine, but the inner self, paradoxically unveiled by the clothes, is feminine" (125). Saradamani's symbolic motherhood makes her the spiritual drag who is the rhetorical mother outside and not the biological mother inside. She is the universal mother but on the personal ground she is childless.

The cult of Maa Sarada is not a monolithic, homogenous construct as it is made out to be. Rather the figure should be read as a complex site of hegemonic religious performance where issues of sexuality, conjugal void, religious coercion, and the construct of motherhood play vital interpretive roles. All of Saradamani's gendered performances are citational and flow from the man to whom she was married at the age of five. There used to hang over her bed a pot full of local fishes (*singi* – *heteropneustes fossilis*) whose movement did not let her sleep (Gamvirananda 62). She had to cook the fish for her husband who did not even meet her for couple of months. The only glimpse of him that she could manage to have was through the fences of her room while the mystic was busy in his mass dances of ecstasy (63). She recalled later that standing behind the fences for long hours caused her severe orthopedic pain. We don't know about her soul, but a fragmented, suffering body haunts her biographies instead of all the hagiographic appropriation. An analytically empathetic and historically located reading can open a vista for us to get closer to that corporeality, which in turn can make us realize that bodily sufferings are not necessarily transcendental.

About the Author

Amlan Guhathakurta is presently working on his M.Phil dissertation from the department of English, Visva Bharati University, India. His thesis is concerned with the politics of performance in *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* – one of the most celebrated anecdotal recordings of the mystic's sayings. Literature –religion interface constructs one of his significant theoretical positions. As an extension, religious studies and issues of secularism and atheism in literary discourse excite him. His area of interest ranges from modern English poetry to contemporary Indian writings in English. Operations of power and cultural politics in post colonial literature, especially in novelistic discourse also occupies his attention.



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