

Writing the Divine: Reading the *Kathamrita* text(s) as a Performance

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'And this blank page where my fingers move'¹

Abstract

Performance studies as a critical perspective views and analyses any human act as a performance. No act, thus, can remain innocent on its own. Such analysis resists any homogenising attempt employed to nullify politically loaded, planned and enacted performances; and brings out their inner dynamics, dialectics and dichotomies without any bias. *Kathamrita* is primarily a printed text that holds within its corpus both the orally transmitted knowledge of the guru and its written depiction by the scriptocentric recipient author. The essay views the author of the *Kathamrita* as a performer by attempting an exploration of the narrative strategies employed by him to 'construct' the text. The politics of mediation plays a crucial role in this creation which itself becomes a performance in that process. Following a brief outline of the history of the work's publication, this paper explores how the text itself becomes an act of narratorial performativity where the author function does not remain an innocent recorder of the guru's daily events but also builds up a repository of autobiographical elements. From the point of view of narratology, the essay tries to find the nuanced moments in the narrative that can establish the text as a conglomerating point of time, memory, desire and representation of the author himself. Also, certain critique of the text like that of Sen and Kripal are taken up to provide alternative readings from the perspective of performance theory.

Keywords: *performance theory, author, text, narratology, memory, time.*

Any attempt at a critical reappraisal of Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886), the Hindu mystic of colonial Bengal must begin by addressing an elementary question- how do millions of Bengalis encounter the sage? Among the numerous culturally accessible modes of representation, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (henceforth *Kathamrita*) has long established its

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prominence. The stories that are told by Sri Ramakrishna in *Kathamrita* have a timeless appeal to millions of Bengalis. The aura of a spiritual personality never comes in the way of enjoying those tales. So the average middle class Bengalis' tryst with Sri Ramakrishna is equally on the level of secular textuality as religiosity. To read *Kathamrita* simply as a literary text has been a quite common practice among the readers of that cross section of society. The popularity of *Kathamrita* among the readers has been unparalleled till date. What is it that makes the text so widely accepted and discussed among devotees, common readers and scholars alike for no less than one hundred and ten years? As a text, it is not merely a case of hagiography entailing excessive praise of the guru through the five volumes. Rather, as historian Sumit Sarkar feels that 'the *Kathamrita* reveals the presence of certain fairly self-conscious authorial strategies.'²

These two words 'self-conscious' and 'strategies' open up the possibilities of reading the text(s) of *Kathamrita* as a textual performance. *Kathamrita* is primarily a printed text. There has been debate within the very paradigm of performance studies as to what qualifies as a 'text' that will be taken up as a subject of study. An Ethnographer like Dwight Conquergood feels that too much 'scriptocentrism' has coerced and erased other forms of knowing 'rooted in embodied experience, orality, and local contingencies'³ and prefers 'the view from the ground' instead of 'view from above' — a hegemony that western academia exercises over its 'other'. On the other hand Richard Schechner is rather lenient in including printed texts as an object of examination within the critical episteme of performance studies.⁴ *Kathamrita*, I feel, qualifies as such a 'text' that holds within its corpus both the orally transmitted knowledge and experiences that Conquergood talks about; and also the performative aspects of ritual, dramaturgy and religion which has been the area that Schechner asserts in his works. According to Marco De Marinis:

From a semiotic standpoint, the term /text/ designates not only coherent and complete series of linguistic statements, whether oral or written, but also every unit of discourse, whether verbal, nonverbal, or mixed, that results from the coexistence of several codes.... Clearly, therefore, even the units known as performances can be considered as texts, and can thus become the object of textual analysis[...].⁵

Kathamrita is a reservoir of the dual performative discourses of the mystic and the author of the text who trigger a tension by their coexistence. And I want to argue that *Kathamrita*, other than being a text in hagiography, is one such site of performances where multiple conscious/subconscious 'behaviours' as performances come and merge to build a discourse on spiritual, social and authorial performativity.

Mahendranath Gupta (1854-1932) (henceforth M.) was a household disciple of the mystic. He first came in contact with Sri Ramakrishna in 1882 and gradually became one of his foremost devotees. He developed a habit of regularly taking down in his diaries whatever he had heard from the mystic. From these entries, M. developed *Kathamrita* — a collection of the mystic's sayings in five volumes. In this ambitious project Gupta captured with stenographic precision events, anecdotes, religious discussions, songs and yogic trances of the mystic ranging 'from 26 February 1882 to 10 May 1887.'⁶ Aldous Huxley felt that 'No other saint has had so able and indefatigable Boswell.'⁷

This paper attempts to view the creation of such a text as a textual performance and the author as a performer behind it by looking into the history of its publication, narratological strategies employed by the author and issues of authorial performativity. Here 'the concept of performativity ... refers to the narrator's agency or the act of presentation and to the pragmatic context of this act.'⁸ The methodology includes a focus on the myth-making process, employment of the source materials procured by the author and their hagiographic appropriation by applying rhetorical and sometimes philological critique of the text.

Before the publication of all the five volumes of *Kathamrita*, M. wrote a twenty pages pamphlet under the name of 'Sadhu Mahindranath Gupta' entitled *A Leaf from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1892).⁹ But this 'booklet together with the manuscript copies of the *Kathamrita* are now untraceable' and for that reason it is hard to 'collate and compare Gupta's diary notes with his *Kathamrita* transcriptions and the transcriptions themselves with the printed work.'¹⁰ It must be noted that M. had previously published chapters of *Kathamrita* in different newspapers and magazines 'such as *Udbodhan*, *Tattwamanjari*, *Anusandhan*, *Arati*, *Alochona*, *Utsaha*, *Rishi*, *Janmabhumi*, *Navya Bharat*, *Punya*, *Pradip*, *Prabasi*, *Prayas*, *Bamabodhini*, *Sahitya*, *Sahitya Samhita*, and *Hindu Patrika*. M. then

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arranged those chapters in a chronological order' before the final publication.¹¹

What is evident from this brief publication chronology is the fact that an enormous amount of arrangement, restructuring and editorial effort went into the making of this voluminous text(s). The man whose word M. captures in his text was a historical personality. His catalogue of the mystic's sayings is almost a chronicle that brings to us the contemporary time and conflicts between different ideologies of spirituality, religion, science, knowledge and numerous philosophical debates. As Hayden White states 'the minimal form of historical sequence is the genre of 'chronicle'. The chronicle is open-ended, beginning and ending in an apparently quite random manner.¹² This essay attempts to bring out a series of performative narratorial devices, employed by M., which can establish the *Kathamrita* text(s) as a conscious exercise in representation, temporality and religious performativity that is beyond mere hagiographic enterprise.

In *Kathamrita*, mediation is the principal narrative mode that M. takes to narrate the incidents and preaching of the mystic that he felt were needed to be narrated. For that purpose, he depended heavily on three classes of evidences. These were — 'Direct and Recorded on the same day', 'Direct but unrecorded at the time of the Master' and 'hearsay and unrecorded at the time of the Master.'¹³ At the beginning of each of the five volumes of *Kathamrita* the reader is reminded of these three classes of 'evidences' that M. relied on to build his narrative. Narrative mediation is a sort of representation which 'is the function of intellectual activities that run in parallel and across three dimensions: ' "perception", "reflection", "mediation".'¹⁴ M.'s syntagmatic arrangements and well-planned narrative structure are the outcomes of this threefold process. M. as a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna constructs a narrative that will re-present his guru's message and philosophy to the broader audience. Any representation with such a semiotic continuum

... reduces the complexity of its reference domain to the carrying capacity of senders and receivers. By the same token it also adds a specific type of semiotic and performative surplus value.¹⁵

In our discussion regarding M.'s narrative discourse in *Kathamrita*, his authorial performativity is that surplus value that comes to us as the text(s) itself. Any historiographic enquiry regarding the authenticity of M.'s

narration should not occupy our attention as 'mediacy is triggered by a complex interaction of epistemological and rhetorical constraints.'¹⁶ Rather, we should read *Kathamrita* 'as a performative sequence made up partly of observations and reflections, and partly of utterances.'¹⁷

M. planned each volume of *Kathamrita* with chapter divisions, subsections and appendices. All the chapters are arranged chronologically. But the first volume differs in one aspect along this line of arrangement. The first chapter describes at length the Dakshineswar temple and its surrounding in the fashion of a novelist mapping before the readers the setting of a fiction. Before taking the readers to the guru, he is charting the proper setting to place the mystic. It is no wonder that M. has advised the posterity about the importance of an apposite background to place the source material of a narrative properly within it:

খুব ভাল background তৈরি করে এসব কথা অপরকে দিতে হয়, নইলে দাম কমে যায়।

In order to present these words to others you have to make a very good background, otherwise the value lessens.¹⁸

While describing the setting, M. does not merely state the architectural designs and inanimate objects per se but makes them a part of the religious discourse by connecting the mystic with these objects:

দেওয়ালের একপার্শ্বে চামর ঝুলিতেছে। ভগবান শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ ঐ চামর লইয়া কতবার মাকে ব্যজন করিয়াছেন।

There hangs from the wall a cāmara (sacred fan). How many times has Lord Sri Ramakrishna fanned the Universal Mother with that.¹⁹

এই পঞ্চবটীর পাদমূলে বসিয়া পরমহংসদেব অনেক সাধনা করিয়াছিলেন...

Paramahansadēba was engaged in prolonged, arduous sādhanā under this pañcabatī (banyan trees)...²⁰

He names a secular thing and immediately transforms that to a religious mytheme. These mythemes, according to Lévi-Strauss, are the 'gross constituent units'²¹ of the larger structure of a myth and operate in the equivalent manner of a phoneme. More importantly, he points out:

... the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but bundles of such relations and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning.²²

The 'sacred fan' and the 'pañcabatī' are such mythemes, which through M.'s authorial strategy, contribute together to the mythical construct of Sri Ramakrishna. M. thus transforms the profane into sacred

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with his narratorial representation and without any evident authorial intrusion. Sen observes:

This is a section where history and hagiography are delicately enmeshed. Reading this several years after the passing away of the saint, the reader will no doubt be gripped by the historic value of these sites; the Master's bedroom and the bathing-ghat, the icon of the goddess whom the saint so deeply revered and the spot where he received his numerous visitors and engaged them in enthralling conversation. At the same time it is possible, at least for the devoted, to pass from history into sacred time. It is as though these several structures become important only as they are consecrated by some sacred presence.²³

What he performs here is less a hagiographic appropriation and more an authorial function on the plane of textual performativity. He not only transforms the profane into sacred but also creates a separate chronotope for the devotees of Ramakrishna that Sen talks about. The temple building of Dakshineswar is invested with the power to take the devotees into a different paradigm of religiosity when the guru existed and for them still exists. Temporality appears to be a crucial factor that M. takes into consideration. The entire narrative mode of *Kathamrita* is orchestrated around this key aspect of which an initial glimpse is given here.

In the mediation process, the tool of selection plays a crucial role. In the same introductory section quoted above, M. also talks about the *nahabata*, a hexagonal small building, where Saradamani Chattopadhyay (née Mukhopadhyay) (1853-1920), wife of Sri Ramakrishna lived: 'নহবতের নীচের ঘরে তাঁহার স্বর্গীয়া পরমারাধ্যা বৃদ্ধা মাতাঠাকুরানী ও পরে শ্রীশ্রীমা থাকিতেন। ('Beneath the nahabata lived His most revered aged mother and later the Holy Mother.')²⁴ In the entire first subsection of the first chapter of *Kathamrita* (vol. 1), Saradamani is mentioned only once. While *Kathamrita* is full of speeches of numerous persons, she is not given a single utterance. In the entire corpus of *Kathamrita*, keeping with the guru's warning of staying away from women, M. as a faithful disciple makes it a point not to mention in detail any female devotee. Again, the tool of this selective representation is words. We are only given a trace of Saradamani. A 'trace is a present absence, or an absent presence, a sign of something that was present in the past, and is now only a present as a shadowy mark of non-presence.'²⁵ And

Saradamani is also given here only a passing reference. The next time the reader comes across a mention of Saradamani is on 7 March 1885, almost after an interval of three years:

শ্রীশ্রীমা নহবতে আজকাল থাকছেন। তিনি মাঝে মাঝে ঠাকুরবাড়িতে আসিয়া থাকেন— শ্রী রামকৃষ্ণের সেবার জন্য।

The Holy Mother nowadays is in the nahabata. She seldom comes and stays in the temple premises also to look after Sri Ramakrishna.²⁶

She is given a mention here because she has served the guru with her labour. She is revered more because she has 'nurtured and supported the male guru.'²⁷ Through his textual discourse, M. is exerting his authorial power to represent a sexually monolithic spiritual paradigm which is echoed in Susan Sniader Lanser's observation that 'texts, like bodies, perform sex, gender and sexuality.'²⁸

As this account of the temple premises and sacred spots related with the mystic ends, the author takes the reader to the first glimpse of Sri Ramakrishna amidst the disciples and we have there the first footnote of *Kathamrita*. The text of *Kathamrita* is meticulously annotated with footnotes and comments and this is where it resists the ontology of a hagiography. In his study of *Kathamrita*, historian Sumit Sarkar draws our attention to the fact that:

Quotations from high-Hindu sacred texts (shastras) (emphasis original) and references to abstract religious and philosophical doctrines embellish the *Kathamrita* as chapter headings and footnotes in obvious stylistic contrast to Ramakrishna's own colloquial idiom.²⁹

Besides this observation, it must also be added that as an urban, English educated individual in colonial Calcutta, M. has a problematic authorial existence. He is mediating through text the words of such a religious figure, who was completely against the printed text as a source of information and moreover, knowledge:

বই পড়ে কি জানবে?...বই পড়ে ঠিক অনুভব হয় না।

What can you know through books? You can't feel it through the books.³⁰

অনেকে মনে করে, বই না পড়ে বুঝি জ্ঞান হয় না, বিদ্যা হয় না। কিন্তু পড়ার চেয়ে শুনা ভাল, শুন্যর চেয়ে দেখা ভাল।

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Some think that we can't have wisdom or knowledge without reading books. But listening is better than reading, seeing is better than listening.³¹

These are some of the many dogmatic pronouncements of Sri Ramakrishna against the printed texts that build up a part of the body of words that are credited to him. M. has a dual liminality here. First, as an individual with knowledge of western philosophy he is oscillating between his epistemological coordinates and the guru's dogmatic preaching. And secondly, he is paying his homage to his master through a medium, i.e. texts, which the mystic does not approve of:

আমার নাম কাগজে প্রকাশ কর কেন? বই লিখে, খবরের কাগজে লিখে,
কারুকে বড়ো করা যায় না।

Why print my name on papers? None can be made great through
books and newspapers.³²

M. tried to replicate an oral discourse, which is also rural, via an urban, written discourse. On the level of narrativity, we are getting the narration of a narration which according to Wolf Schmid is the 'story of narration (Erzählegesichte)'. This "story of narration" usually remains a fragment, but in some cases it offers a great many details and may even take precedence over the story proper.³³ That is the case here with M. His fragmented reflections scattered among the direct speeches of Sri Ramakrishna build together a discourse on M. himself.

The reader is introduced to a brief episodic dialogue between Sri Ramakrishna and M. in their second meeting. Sri Ramakrishna's apathy for books gets manifested in this interaction which acts as a forerunner to all such doctrinal utterances of the mystic that will follow in the coming chapters of *Kathamrita*:

তিনি জ্ঞান কাহাকে বলে, অজ্ঞান কাহাকে বলে, এখন জানেন না। এখন এই পর্যন্ত জানিতেন যে, লেখাপড়া শিখিলে ও বই পড়িতে পারিলে জ্ঞান হয়। এই ভ্রম পরে দূর হইয়াছিল।

He doesn't know now what is wisdom and what is ignorance. Till this moment he was of the opinion that knowledge is in studies and reading books. This misconception was later dispelled.³⁴

The diegetic narration within the compass of three sentences is given a temporal framing across a tripartite past ('জানিতেন') — present ('জানেন') —

future ('পরে') syntax. The dual narrator - disciple role of M. points first to the 'ignorance' of the representative disciple self and its waning away in order to validate the guru's anti-scriptural principles. As a narrator, he is referring to the analeptic events/interior perceptions ('জানিতেন') to connect them to the proleptic results/guru's predictions ('দূর হইয়াছিল'). A few sentences later, the narrator tells us that the truth his guru talks of is beyond the episteme of institutional academics; one cannot realise and make others grasp the truth along the line of empiricism:

একি অঙ্কশাস্ত্র, না ইতিহাস, না সাহিত্য যে পরকে বুঝাব? এ যে ঈশ্বরতত্ত্ব!

Is it mathematical science, or history, or literature that can be taught to others? This is the theory of god!³⁵

He will further suspend all forms of dialectical dialogue and conflict from the narrative in order to create the grand narrative of *Kathamrita*: 'ঠাকুরের সহিত তাঁহার এই প্রথম ও শেষ তর্ক' ('This is his first ever debate with Thākura and the last one also!').³⁶ But is it so? Almost the majority of *Kathamrita* is composed of Sri Ramakrishna's words. We see him engaged in dialogue with his disciples and other personalities. Although M. is seemingly narrating the guru's words, he makes enough space in the narrative for his own reflections. We can classify till this point four types of such narratorial detours where the persona of M. is hidden behind the words it speaks. The first one is the interrogative utterances through which he actually seeks the guru's divine wisdom and revelation of truth: 'ঈশ্বরকে কি দর্শন করা যায়?' ('Can we see god?').³⁷ This is M.'s first question to Sri Ramakrishna and many more will follow. The second class of questions rather suggests than asks or seeks any spiritual truth. Questioning makes up the majority of M's utterances in *Kathamrita*. He asks a question only to put emphasis on the guru's spiritual performances and their emancipatory effects. Even when he asserts that as a disciple, he does that through interrogational suggestion and this is the second feature of his authorial representation:

ঠাকুর কি বলিতেছেন যে দেহ বিনশ্বর, থাকিবে না?

Is Thākura saying that this body will decay, it won't last?³⁸

এই অদ্ভুত ভাবান্তরের নাম কি সমাধি?

Is this strange change of state called samādhi?³⁹

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ভাবিতেছেন বিবেক বৈরাগ্য মানে কি কামিনী-কাঞ্চন ত্যাগ?

[M.] is thinking whether renunciation is initiated by abandonment of women and property?⁴⁰

As the narrative progresses, the frequency of this rhetorical questioning increases.⁴¹

The third type of narratological strategy involves M. himself. There are passages in *Kathamrita* where he reflects upon his own tribulations and the effects of the guru's words on him:

মণি ভাবতে ভাবতে যাচ্ছেন, “সত্য সত্যই কি ঈশ্বর মানুষদেহ ধারণ ক’রে আসেন? তবে অবতার কি সত্য? অনন্ত ঈশ্বর চৌদ্দ পোয়া মানুষ কি করে হবেন? অনন্ত কি সান্ত হয়? বিচার তো অনেক হল। কি বুঝলাম, বিচারের দ্বারা কিছুই বুঝলাম না।”

Mani is pondering upon the issue on the go, “Does god descend upon this world in human body? Is the avatāra then true? How can the infinite god shrink into a handful of flesh? Much evaluation has been done. What have I realised, nothing by applying logic!”⁴²

The conflict of a representative bhadralōka educated in western mode of education during Bengal Renaissance in colonial Calcutta is acknowledging the 'shortcoming' of his discipline; but what should not go unnoticed is the fact that even after announcing his last debate much earlier in the text, he is still presenting a proposition (god in human body) and an opposite (the infinite in a finite body) to that. The traces of his western episteme remain very much evident in all his rhetorical questions.

A few passages later, the reader encounters another passage where M. reflects through the persona of Mani (one of Mahendranath's narratorial camouflages like M., Mohinimohana, Master, Englishman) on the superiority of faith over knowledge but with ample references to western myths:

বিচার থাক। জ্ঞান চচ্চরি করে কি আর একটি Faust হতে হবে? আবার কি গভীর রজনীমধ্যে বাতায়ন পথে চন্দ্রকিরণ আসবে, আর Faust নাকি একাকী ঘরের মধ্যে হয় কিছু জানিতে পারিলাম না, সায়েন্স ফিলসফি বৃথা অধ্যয়ন করিলাম, এই জীবনে থিক্! এই বলিয়া বিশ্বের শিশি লইয়া আত্মহত্যা করিতে বসিবে? না, আর একজন Alastor –এর মত অজ্ঞানের বোঝা বইতে না পেয়ে শিলাখণ্ডের উপর মাথা রেখে মৃত্যুর অপেক্ষা করিবে!

Suspend all reasoning. Do I have to become another Faust with all this mishmash of knowledge? Will the moonbeam again come through the window in the dead of night, and the lonely Faust, saying, “Alas! I remain ignorant and confined in this room. I have studied science and philosophy

in vain, shame on this life!” would arrange to commit suicide with a vial of poison? Or will he, like another Alastor, unable to bear the burden of ignorance put his head on the rocks and wait for death?⁴³

Such a passage from a Hindu hagiographical text with two references to Faust and Alastor, while dealing with the issues of impassionate knowledge and existential crisis, within a couple of sentences, show that the narratorial voice speaking here has not been able to completely leave behind his cognitive inclination towards western myths and philosophy. Like a braided narrative there are two separate linguistic trails with varying philosophical point of view that overlap each other all through *Kathamrita*. M. leads the reader to his guru's spiritual discourse through his paradigm of western myths. He might be doing this to create a contrast in order to prioritise the theological paradigm of the mystic, but his reference point always unmistakably remains different branches of western mythology.

The fourth narrative strategy deals with his use of multiple personas to initiate personal monologues. These personas are referred to as 'M.', 'Môhinimôhana', 'Master', 'Englishman' and 'Mani'. When a reflective monologue appears in the narrative or the reader is given a dialogue between only M. and Sri Ramakrishna, the persona of 'Mani' takes the place of 'Master', 'M.' or 'Englishman'.

Kathamrita is replete with stories that Sri Ramakrishna tells his disciples as examples in order to illustrate his spiritual mission. And they are repeated more than once in different volumes of *Kathamrita*.⁴⁴ One such story deals with the importance of organic knowledge as opposed to memorising the printed words:

একজন চিঠি লিখেছিল। চিঠিখানি পড়া হয় নাই, হারিয়ে গেল। তখন সকলে মিলে খঁজতে লাগল। যখন চিঠিখানি পাওয়া গেল, পরে দেখলে পাঁচ সের সন্দেশ পাঠাবে আর একখানা কাপড় পাঠাবে। তখড় চিঠিটা ফেলে দিলে, আর পাঁচ সের সন্দেশ আর একখানা কাপড়ের জোগাড় করতে লাগল। তেমনি শাস্ত্রের সার জেনে নিয়ে আর বই পড়বার কি দরকার?

Someone wrote a letter. It was left unread and got lost. Then all started looking for it. When it was found, it read “Send enough sweets and one dress”. The letter was then thrown aside, and (s/he) started arranging the sweets and dress. Likewise, what need is there to read books once you know the essence of the Scriptures?⁴⁵

Sri Ramakrishna here stresses memory while M. writes through

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stenographic fidelity. The mystic focuses on the power of retention but the disciple depends on recorded events. So, we have here a guru-disciple collaborative textuality where the guru's emphasis on the core strength of memorising is upheld by the writing skill of the disciple's hagiographic project. *Kathamrita* becomes the final projection or elaboration of a spiritual mnemonic tool articulated by the stenographic patience and ambition of M.

John Frow in his *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity* (1997) proposes two ways through which the connection between memory and writing can be understood. According to Frow, we can trace the relationship between these two categories through 'retrieval' and 'textuality'.⁴⁶ In the second mode, as opposed to retrieval, meaning is constituted retroactively and repeatedly....Memory, in this instance, is no longer related to the past as a form of truth but as a form of desire.⁴⁷ The truth that M. desires is in the words that Sri Ramakrishna speaks. It is by means of his textually performative mediation that his desires do not follow the fate of Faust or Alastor. What M. took down as his diary notes were beyond hagiographic mnemonics and in his writing process they emerged as representation. *Kathamrita* becomes the site of interaction between memory and desire as memory is 'crucially, concerned with holding up for comparison present and past experiences; far from simply reproducing an image of one's past, remembering represents a process of reflection upon it.'⁴⁸ M. also depended heavily on his memory to write *Kathamrita* as is evident from the second and third classes of evidence. So his textual performance is both a written and a memory based project – a liminal performance in logocentrism.

Moreover the technique of elaborating a mnemonic note into a subsection is a common authorial strategy adopted by M. His diary notes show that there are no complete direct speeches either of the guru or any other character (see Fig. 1). Rather, brief summary of the mystic's exchange with others are taken down. The sequences of dialogues are separated by 'scene(s)' which are numerically arranged. These materials are then worked upon by M.'s narratorial intervention. While recording one of Sri Ramakrishna's messages, he jotted only one expression – 'কামারশালের লোহা' ('iron in a smithy') and from:

... those two words, M. wrote the words of the Master: "Why shouldn't it be

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possible for a householder to give his mind to God? But the truth is that he no longer has his mind with him....But, alas, the mind has been mortgaged - mortgaged to 'woman and gold'. So it is necessary for him to be constantly to live in the company of holy men.... The iron becomes red in the forge of a smithy. Take it out and it becomes black as before. Therefore the iron must be heated every now and then.⁴⁹

Apart from the linguistic amplification, it is important to note the discursive pattern through which M. presents the mystic's words. At first a problem (householder's theistic limitation) is posited which is followed by the reason (inclination towards women and gold) and the solution (cohabitation with holy men). This triad is then elaborated through a metaphor that further simplifies it for the larger audience. There are a few moments in *Kathamrita* where M. tells his guru a story. In one such instance he follows the same threefold pattern that has just been demonstrated.⁵⁰ So, in different ways M. is echoing and reiterating his guru's speech discourse. This becomes more evident in his use of metaphors where like the guru he simplifies a concept with an added use of metaphor.

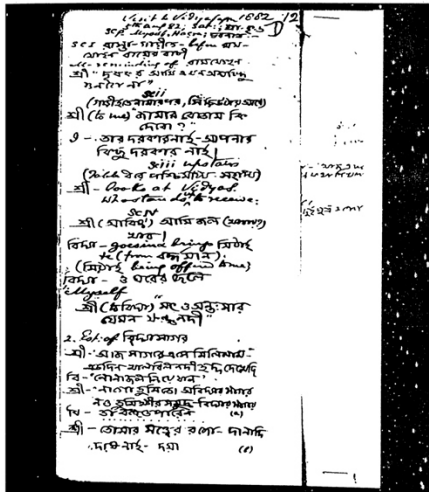


Fig.1. A page from M.'s diary with short notes and scene divisions from: Swami Chetananda, *Mahendranath Gupta (M.): The Recorder of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2011), p. 256.

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Sen is against such views that focus more on the mediation aspect of M. without putting ample attention on the self-effacement factor that we have mentioned briefly at the beginning. He feels that M. 'hides behind several names... and even as an author, he either resorts to pseudonyms or else does not sign his full name.'⁵¹ What Sen 'tend[s] to ignore', I want to argue, is not the self-effacement but the evident omnipresence of the author in each page of the text. In *Kathamrita*, M. presents his own self through many selves like 'Master', 'Mani', 'Englishman' and so on. Whenever he is among other disciples and the spiritual discussions are such that address a larger audience, he slips into the persona of 'Master'. The word 'Mani', to denote M., appears only when the crisis is rather personal and the guru exclusively addresses M. alone.⁵² Moreover, most of M's interior monologues are narrated by the persona of Mani. Even if the mediation aspect is set aside, the primary question remains why a disciple would take so many persona in order to hide himself and make that act of hiding so public. His use of three or more identities does not efface him, rather makes his presence more pronounced in the text. There is no other character in *Kathamrita* who is accorded this privilege of multiple narratorial voices like him. If M's only aim is to present the nectarine words of the guru to present and future devotees, it seems quite incongruous to give so much importance to the process of hiding of his own self.

However, in his support of the self-erasure of M., Sen draws our attention to another fact that from 'the second edition [of *Kathamrita*] onwards, the name 'Mahendra' was dropped as also the entire subtitle.'⁵³ The first edition of the text had the name Mahendra within square brackets after the initial M. and removal of the name in the second edition, Sen feels, provides enough evidence for the authorial self-effacement. At the same time he is aware of the fact that:

The *Kathamrita*, it must be noted, still carries a curious ambivalence; it is both 'Sri Ma kathita' [as narrated by Mahendranath Gupta] and 'Srimukhkathita' [as narrated by Sri Ramakrishna].⁵⁴

In his first argument regarding the use of the letter 'M.' instead of Mahendranath, Sen seems to be missing an aspect of M.'s authorial strategy. If we arrange the names of other devotees of Sri Ramakrishna who wrote about him, the list will be like this: Keshab Chandra Sen

(*Paramahansa dēbēra Ukti* [1878]), Suresh Chandra Dutta (*Paramhansa Ramakrishna Dēbēra Ukti* [1884]), Ramchandra Dutta (*Sri Sri Rāmakrishnadēbēra Jībanabrttanta* [1934]), Sri M. (*Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* [1905-32]). For a reader the most unusual name in this list has to be M. which is also the easiest to remember among other regular Bengali names. The 'M.' always will make the readers more curious to know who the man is behind this cryptic nomenclature. Therefore, dropping 'Mahendranath' for 'M.' is always a strategically viable option for the author. Today some devotees may forget who wrote *Leelaprsanga*. But the mere mention of *Kathamrita* brings to the lips 'Sri Ma' or 'M.' The title and the author are connected in an inseparable way from each other by the use of this mnemonic nomenclature. M. does just the opposite of what he attempts in the text of *Kathamrita* where he transforms mnemonic notes into a complete text. And here, he inverts his own name into a mnemonic in order to be more relevant to the readers. He is M. only in the title page the only place for an author to register her/his name and he appropriates the space to the fullest for his purpose. And we as readers never again come across the mention of 'M.' in the body of the text. Far from being erased, the name of M. is grafted deep within the cultural paradigm of Bengalis.

The ambivalence regarding the dual narration of *Kathamrita*, simultaneously by the guru and the disciple, is apparently problematic. According to Sen's translation 'kathita' becomes 'narrated'. But we must remember that Sri Ramakrishna is the primary source of the text and M. is just a narratorial agent through which the guru's words are transmitted to the disciples. The Bengali 'kathita' means direct narration which is attributed here to the guru. If M. is really intent on reporting the guru's words, he could have easily used the word 'barnita' that means 'to describe' bearing in itself the imprint of a secondary/indirect narration. How can it be then assumed that self-effacement is of utmost importance to M.? By attaching the same verb with two narratorial voices, differing in amplitude, M. tries to ensure that *Kathamrita* may well narrate the guru's words, but it is nevertheless his own creation and he claims his authorial position in it, consciously. There is no ambivalence in that.

Each volume of *Kathamrita* is divided into chapters (‘খণ্ড’) which are organised in small sections (‘পরিচ্ছেদ’). M. makes it a point to mention the

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date at the beginning of every first section of each chapter. Such temporal fidelity in a spiritual text is surprising. But it fits well if the entire narrative is seen as an authorial discourse in autobiography. *Kathamrita* is no less about M. himself than it is about his guru. His arrangement of these dates contributes significantly to his narratorial performance. M. 'tampers with the temporal order so as to make a story better in telling than in the experiencing.'⁵⁵ The years (1882-1887) are not chronologically arranged through the volumes. Rather, M. plans each volume in such a manner that any reader going through whichever volume will come across all the years that deal with the mystic (see table 1). When there are three or more diary entries with consecutive dates, M. splits that between two volumes, for example the entries for 18, 19 and 20 October, 1884 are set as the twentieth and twelfth chapters in the second and first volume respectively while the last one becomes the twenty-first chapter of the second volume.

Table 1.

Temporal entries according to chapters in *Kathamrita*.

| YEAR | VOL. 1 | VOL. 2 | VOL.3 | VOL.4 | VOL.5 |
|------|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------|---------------------------------------|
| 1882 | 4 | 1 | 3 | - | 3 |
| 1883 | 5 | 11 | 4 | 9 | 10 |
| 1884 | 4 | 10 | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| 1885 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 9 | 3 |
| 1886 | - | 2 | 4 | 2 | |
| 1887 | Appendix 1 (9May) | Appendix 1 (7-9 May) | Appendix 1 (25 March) | | - |
| | | | | | 6 Appendices (1884, 1881[4], 1882) |

Moreover, if M. has at his disposal enough material for a day, he would include the first half of the day in one volume and the latter half in another. 28 November, 1883 is one such date when Sri Ramakrishna went to visit an

ailing Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884), the famous Brahmo leader. The first section of the ninth chapter begins:

ইংরাজী ২৮শে নভেম্বর, ১৮৮৩ খৃষ্টাব্দ। আজ বেলা ৪টা ৫টার সময় শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ শ্রীযুক্ত কেশবচন্দ্র সেনের কমল কুটার নামক বাটীতে গিয়াছিলেন ! কেশব পীড়িত, শীঘ্রই মর্ত্যধাম ত্যাগ করিয়া যাইবেন। কেশবকে দেখিয়া রাত্রি ৭টার পর মাথাঘসা গলিতে শ্রীযুক্ত জয়গোপালের বাটীতে কয়েকটি ভক্ত সঙ্গে ঠাকুর আগমন করিয়াছেন।

28 November, 1883. Today Sri Ramakrishna went to meet Sri Keshab Chandra Sen at about four or five in the evening! Keshab is unwell, may soon pass away. After visiting him, Thākura has now come to the home of Sri Joygopal at Māthaghasā Lane with a few devotees after seven at night.⁵⁶

The reader is not given the details of their meeting here. From four in the evening the narrative takes a three hour shift to another setting. These three hours are described in detail in the tenth chapter of the second volume where the narrative begins with 'one disciple' ('একটি ভক্ত'), another self of M.:

...২৮শে নভেম্বর, ১৮৮৩ খ্রীষ্টাব্দ, বুধবার। আজ একটি ভক্ত কমল কুটারের (Lily Cottage) ফটকের পূর্বধারের ফুটপাথে পায়চারি করিতেছেন।

... 28 November, 1883, Wednesday. Today a devotee is wandering on the footpath on the eastern side of the main gate of Lily Cottage.⁵⁷

Temporality, thus, becomes a key issue in M's performative exercise in textuality. It is only through his narrated time that we can experience the events in *Kathamrita*. As West-Pavlov puts it 'experienced time as narrated time will always be contained within an all-encompassing cosmological time and thus will remain unable to comprehend it.'⁵⁸ There have been different perspectives regarding M.'s arrangement of his material in this way. All of them are speculations as M. himself had never said anything about such pattern. Chatterjee feels that 'it would not have mattered in the least if the materials had been arranged differently.'⁵⁹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, the author of the much controversial *Kali's Child* (1995), who tries to bring out the homo-erotic manifestations of the mystic traced in his tantric credentials, is of the opinion that M. arranged his material in such a pattern to hide the homo-erotic secrets of his master. There are small sections in *Kathamrita* that M. describes as 'গুহ্যকথা' ('secret talks'). They are predominantly erotic metaphors describing the ritualistic exercises and

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experiences of Sri Ramakrishna during his days of *sādhānā*. According to Kripal, in putting them across the five volumes, M. creates 'an interesting "blossoming" pattern':

The five volumes, in other words, are structured, around a secret or, to be more precise, around Gupta's attempt to simultaneously reveal and conceal Ramakrishna's secrets. The secrets are there, but they are "hidden" well within the innermost twists and turns of a five-volume spiral. The result is reluctant text, whose volumes "blossom," or perhaps better, "spiral" unconsciously into the heart of a Tantric secret.⁶⁰

Here the 'blossoming' refers to the multi-petalled lotus that works like a tongue to activate the *kundalinī* (the hidden seat of spiritual energy in the human body) of the mystic in an erotic fashion.⁶¹ Kripal feels that arranging the text otherwise would not have given M. the opportunity to push the 'tantric secrets' into the later volumes and presenting the opening volumes as rather innocuous.

Sen is rather indulgent towards M. regarding his portrayal of the erotic dimension of the mystic. According to Sen:

... if his [M.'s] mediation in this matter is actually what it is made out to be, the *Kathamrita* would have been more guarded in its disclosures of seemingly erotic talk between Ramakrishna and his male devotees.⁶²

Contrary to both these views, I would like to suggest that M. is performing here the obvious which is rather simple. It is true that Sri Ramakrishna did undergo tantric rituals and other biographies like Ramchandra Dutta's have more detailed account of that phase than *Kathamrita*. But, that M. has planned all the volumes only to ensure the textual unfolding of an erotic discourse in the manner of a metaphorical lotus seems almost metafictional and partly true. A five-volume text cannot logically plan its chronology around a single idea like this. Sen is also right in saying that M. is not all that economical in narrating the erotic exchanges between the mystic and his disciples. But that does not answer the question as to why he introduces the first secret talk in volume two and more such in the next one instead of introducing them in the opening volume. I would like to suggest that M. is performing 'like' a faithful custodian of secrets. By marking these passages separately as 'secret talks' and refusing to present

them in the first volume, he deliberately enhances their attraction to the readers. Had he really wanted to hide them, as Kripal suggests, he would have never underlined their secrecy so conspicuously or written about them at all. The fact that he decides to present them to his readers, shows his inclination towards projecting himself as the sole custodian of hidden episodes disclosed by the guru only to him.

But M. not only performs on the textual praxis. He, alongside other disciples and devotees, also builds up the very cult of Sri Ramakrishna as an avatara. In *Kathamrita*, M. repeatedly reminds the mystic about his stature of an avatara. Sri Ramakrishna was a spectacle to his devotees and disciples. He was no less than a performer to his audience. For them it was his *lila* or divine play. The author of *Kathamrita* even goes the distance to interpret his fatal disease as celestial performance:

মণি-নানা রকম খেলা-আপনার রোগ পর্যন্ত খেলার মধ্যে। এই রোগ হয়েছে বলে
এখানে নূতন নূতন ভক্ত আসছে।

Mani: Numerous forms of play even your ailment is a play. New devotees are flocking here because of this disease.⁶⁴

M. not only remains present everywhere in *Kathamrita*, but also ensures that the halo behind the central character of his text never goes out. M. is simultaneously constructing two myths here one is of the guru and the other is of himself. We cannot possibly think of Sri Ramakrishna without *Kathamrita* and the text without referring to M.

But the most crucial narrative device that M. employs is the use of present simple or more effectively the present progressive tense in depicting any action in *Kathamrita*. If we look at the last sentence of each volume, and by 'last' I refer to the sentences belonging to the main chapters ('খণ্ড') and not the appendices, it will be easier to put forth the argument:

ঠাকুর শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণ আনন্দে বালকের ন্যায় হাসিতেছেন।

Thākura Sri Ramakrishna, in joy, is smiling like a boy. (255; vol. 1)

মণি সমস্ত শুনিলেন।

Mani has listened to everything. (243; vol. 2)

ঠাকুর মণিকে পায়ে হাত বুলাইয়া দিতে বলিতেছেন ও হাওয়া করিতে বলিতেছেন।

Thākura is asking Mani to lightly move his hand over his legs and fan him. (265; vol. 3)

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সকলের হাস্য।

Everyone laughs. (294; vol. 4)

তখন আবার নাচতে লাগলাম।

...then I again started dancing. (153; vol. 5)

Although I have chosen the sentences from the main body of text of the respective volumes, the entries from even the appendices would have brought out the same result. If read in context, all the above references bear a sense of immediacy about them. Christopher Isherwood marked this aspect of *Kathamrita* to be its most important characteristic:

If I had to use one single word to describe the atmosphere of the Gospel narrative, it would be the word *Now...* (emphasis original).⁶⁵

This comment, if seen from the point of view of conscious narrative performance, talks about a significant temporal effect that the narrative produces. Years later, when a reader will go through these sentences, s/he will be able to access the events as something taking place in front of their eyes and not from the pages of some defunct ecclesiastical text. M. ensures that the guru remains very much alive in his text as a temporal entity. And in that process, he secures the same fate for his own creation.

There is a lot of hagiographic appropriation on the part of M. in portraying and constructing the figure of Sri Ramakrishna. But within that discourse, he makes his presence felt through his tools of much proclaimed 'self-effacement'. The letter 'M.' becomes a dialectical authorial identity. It is very much absent as well as present. As Andrew Bennett reminds us that the author's name according to Foucault 'is not "just a proper name like the rest", rather it is a "paradoxical singularity."⁶⁶ If the performative elements, that M. employs to build his oeuvre, are deconstructed we can get closer to the space that Foucault talked about:

... we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers.⁶⁷

M. once referred to the mystic as the 'hole in the wall'⁶⁸ through which he can view the never ending horizon otherwise hindered by the bricks. He is also among the people who waited for the Paramahansa to experience his spiritual performances. The guru might be the 'hole' in the wall but the

disciple is the curtain puller who 'uncovers' the mystic's performances to the larger audience in their search for redemption and perhaps resurrection. He is the performer who plans and presents the phenomenon of Sri Ramakrishna for the readers. The mediation is self-conscious yet it opens newer vista leading to the guru whose performance makes up the body of this performative offering known as *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*.

Endnotes:

- 1 Ted Hughes, 'The Thought Fox', *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, ed. Michel Roberts (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 385.
- 2 Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1997), p. 286.
- 3 Dwight Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles : Performance, Ethnography, Praxis* (United States of America: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 33.
- 4 Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.
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- 6 Swami Chetanananda, *Mahendranath Gupta (M.): The Recorder of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2011), p. 236.
- 7 Swami Nikhilananda, 'Foreward', *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. vi.
- 8 Ute Berns, 'Performativity', *Handbook of Narratology*, eds. Peter Hühn et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), p. 378.
- 9 Chetanananda, *Mahendranath Gupta*, p. 236.
- 10 Amiya P. Sen, *Three Essays on Sri Ramakrishna and His Times* (Shimla: IAS, 2001), p. 27.
- 11 Chetanananda, *Mahendranath Gupta*, p. 238.
- 12 Quoted in Russell West-Pavlov, *Temporalities* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), p. 85.
- 13 Mahendranath Gupta, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (2010; Repr.Kolkata: Udbodhan Karyalaya, 2019), vol. 1.
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- 15 Meister and Schönert, 'The DNS of Mediacy', p. 11.
- 16 Meister and Schönert, 'The DNS of Mediacy', p. 11.
- 17 Meister and Schönert, 'The DNS of Mediacy', p. 22.
- 18 All the translations from Bengali *Kathamrita* and *Śrīma Darśana*, if not mentioned, are mine. Only those names, places and concepts have been

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transcribed which are not in wider circulation. For ascribing diacritical marks to Romanised fonts, ISO 15919:2001 standardisation has been followed.

- 19 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol. 1, p. 10.
- 20 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 12.
- 21 Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth', *The Journal of American Folklore* 270 (1955):428-444, 431. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/536768. Accessed 23.09.2020.
- 22 Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth', p. 431.
- 23 Sen, *Three Essays on Sri Ramakrishna and His Times* (Shimla: IAS, 2001), p. 40.
- 24 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 12.
- 25 Russell West-Pavlov, *Temporalities* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), p. 93.
- 26 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.3, p. 115.
- 27 Tamsin Bradley, *Religion and Gender in the Developing World: Faith -Based Organizations and Feminism in India* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 81.
- 28 Quoted in Berns, 'Performativity', p.380.
- 29 Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, p. 287.
- 30 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 170.
- 31 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 216.
- 32 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.5, p. 224.
- 33 Quoted in Berns, 'Performativity', p.378.
- 34 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 19.
- 35 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 19.
- 36 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 21.
- 37 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 23.
- 38 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 39.
- 39 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 83.
- 40 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.2, p. 11.
- 41 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.2, p.17, 35, 44, 57, 69, 81, 89, 96, 123; vol. 3, p. 4, 17, 42, 48, 80, 85, 119; vol. 5, p. 205, p. 208.
- 42 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 205.
- 43 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 206.
- 44 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.5, p. 285.
- 45 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.5, p. 132.
- 46 Quoted in Anne Whitehead, *Memory* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), pp. 48-49.
- 47 Whitehead, *Memory*, p. 49.
- 48 Whitehead, *Memory*, p. 52.
- 49 Chetanananda, *Mahendranath Gupta*, p. 238.
- 50 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.3, p. 211.
- 51 Sen, *Three Essays*, p. 42.

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- 52 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.3, p. 10, p.58, p.66, p.81, p.89, p.93.
- 53 Sen, *Three Essays*, p. 43.
- 54 Sen, *Three Essays*, p. 43.
- 55 West-Pavlov, *Temporalities*, p. 90.
- 56 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.1, p. 211.
- 57 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.2, p. 70.
- 58 West-Pavlov, *Temporalities*, p. 10.
- 59 ParthaChatterjee, 'A Religion of Urban Domesticity: Sri Ramakrishna and the Calcutta Middle Class', *Subaltern StudiesVII*, eds. ParthaChatterjee et al. (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1992), p. 46.
- 60 Jeffrey J Kripal, 'Kālī's Tongue and Ramakrishna: 'Biting the Tongue' of the Tantric Tradition', *History of Religions* 2 (1994): 152-189, 179. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1062986. Accessed 23.09.2020.
- 61 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.4, p. 238.
- 62 Sen, *Three Essays*, p. 44.
- 63 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.3, p. 27, 34, 47, 48, 211.
- 64 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.4, p. 271.
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- 66 Quoted in Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), p. 22.
- 67 Quoted in Bennett, *The Author*, p. 20.
- 68 Gupta, *Kathamrita*, vol.3, p. 211.