

June 2013

New Locations for Discursive Agency: The Story of Anandamai Ma

Mary Ann Cain

Indiana University-Purdue University, cain@ipfw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Other Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cain, Mary Ann (2013) "New Locations for Discursive Agency: The Story of Anandamai Ma," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 6 , Article 2.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl69iib>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol6/iss1/2>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

New Locations for Discursive Agency: The Story of Anandamai Ma

Cover Page Footnote

Mary Ann Cain is an Associate Professor of English at Indiana University-Purdue University, Fort Wayne where she teaches creative writing, rhetoric and composition, and women's studies. She is the author of *Revisioning Writers' Talk: Gender and Culture in Acts of Composing* (SUNY 1995), articles in *CCC*, *Dialogue*, *Composition Studies*, among others, and numerous works of fiction in literary journals.

New Locations for Discursive Agency: The Story of Anandamai Ma

Mary Ann Cain

An Indian woman known as Anandamai Ma roamed the villages, towns, and cities of north India for most of the 20th century and was considered by her many followers to be an *avatara*: a divine incarnation in human form. Thousands were attracted to her not simply for her miracles, wisdom, or intellectual brilliance, but because of the sheer power of her presence, what is known in the Hindu tradition as *darshan*. Kamala Nehru, wife of the first Indian prime minister, and her daughter, Indira Gandhi, were among the more visible devotees. Although most of her followers came from her home state of Bengal, many westerners from around the world also found their way to her side. Her devotees continue to maintain ashrams in the United States, Australia, France, and elsewhere even after her death in 1982. One devotee included the son of a wealthy corporate magnate from Oklahoma whose transcriptions and translations of Anandamai Ma's teachings, as well as other books, videos, and documents about her, are archived in Harvard University's Andover Library. For a woman who was largely uneducated, owned few personal possessions, spoke only Indian languages, had no home, no children, and, for most of her life, no husband, this kind of widespread reverence is remarkable. Compared to other Indian contemporaries such as Vivekananda and Paramhansa Yogananda, who made it their mission to link eastern and western spiritual traditions, Anandamai Ma made this link without any ambitions or explicit mission in mind, thus making her influence upon western consciousness all the more remarkable.

Various accounts of her life written by devotees, both Indian and Western, illustrate the paradoxical relationship between her human form and her divine Self, re-presenting her individual agency in a way that significantly complicates Western understandings of that concept. Such a complication is particularly significant within the context of postmodernism and the seeming paralysis of agency it has projected into many areas of scholarship, including literacy studies. While postmodern scholarship has undertaken rigorous critiques of the systems of power by which subjects of literacy, namely those who don't possess it, are shaped and excluded, the question of how to stop reproducing the historically violent and oppressive effects of those exclusions continues.

Mary Ann Cain is an Associate Professor of English at Indiana University-Purdue University, Fort Wayne where she teaches creative writing, rhetoric and composition, and women's studies. She is the author of Revisioning Writers' Talk: Gender and Culture in Acts of Composing (SUNY 1995), articles in CCC, Dialogue, Composition Studies, among others, and numerous works of fiction in literary journals.

This paper aims to relocate our relationship to modes of knowledge that fall outside of Western rationalism and conceptual thought and thus relocate our understanding of agency, while simultaneously working against the discourses that constrain such re-locations. Anandamai Ma represents a different mode of knowledge, one that both embodies and yet challenges distinctions between the real and imaginary through her paradoxical agency as both a human and divine subject. Thus, her story is useful in not only locating spaces in between western and eastern discourses of agency, but also in creating new discourses through which we may finally listen to what is otherwise cast as imaginary or “unreal” within the hierarchies of our current conceptual mappings.

I have written this paper in the form of a metadiscursive performance of the perceived reciprocity between these different modes of knowledge, modes that, within the framework of western rationalism, are often cast within a gendered hierarchy of “real” and “mythical” or “imaginary.” Feminist geographer Gillian Rose has characterized this distinction between real and non-real space in geography as “a performance of power, and of masculinist power in particular” (58). Like Rose’s work, my paper will perform a feminist deconstruction of that distinction by disturbing the “monotone” of the academic voice, “that monotone that’s also a monologue” (Rose 61). The paper appears as three distinct discourses, as represented by three different type fonts. Because of the two-dimensional limits of printed text, these discourses appear as linear rather than in the three-dimensional space of *layered* text. The reader thus must imagine each discourse appearing simultaneously in a shared spatial relationship to the others rather than situated only linearly on the page.

The first discourse is written in the genre of a personal reflective essay in which I consider my relationship to my research “subject,” Anandamai Ma, and the discursive space I claim as the narrator and interpreter of her story. The second discourse is written in the genre of scholarly discourse, discussing the apparent contradictions that function paradoxically within the stories of Anandamai Ma’s life, in particular accounts of her physical body, and analyzes them through Luce Irigaray’s framework of the imaginary. The third and final discourse is written as a third-person account of a Western traveler to Varanasi, India, one of the many sites of ashrams and temples throughout India dedicated to Anandamai Ma. Each of the sections in this second discourse is written in the form of a microfiction, a form that concentrates on a particular shift or turn in the perception of a subject.

By layering these discourses and shifting between genres and voices, I wish to enact a dialogue between the “real” and “unreal” discourses which embody different modes of knowing, borrowing from Rose’s discussion of Irigaray’s use of the imaginary. According to Rose,

Irigaray resists what she sees as the closure of the conceptual by insisting upon the dialogic nature of her texts—her diverse modes of engagement with her reader—so her work itself is imaginary, explicitly relational [. . .]. [Thus] Irigaray uses the term ‘imaginary’ to refuse the distinction between concept and practice. (65)

In its refusal to adhere to a monologue, in its shifting genres and layered form, the body of this text, just like the body of Anandamai Ma, contains spaces from which to listen “otherwise,” spaces necessary for the development of discourses that do not reproduce violence and oppression in relation to their subjects.

Who are You? How about You?

“Who are you? is probably the most relevant question to ask of a text [. . .]. The answer would be: How about you?” Can we find common ground? talk? love? create something together? What is there around us and between us that allows this?” (Irigaray qtd. in Rose 61)

For six sweltering weeks in the summer of 1994, I research the life of Anandamai Ma in Varanasi, India. Varanasi is a Hindu holy city, much in the way that Jerusalem functions for Jews and Christians. It is a pilgrimage site of major significance, unlike any other place in India. According to its residents, it is the oldest, continuously inhabited city in the world. It is also in the second poorest state in the country, and so the pilgrimage trade is a significant part of the local economy, as it has been for centuries. Few outsiders come with any other interests in mind, and the merchants, vendors, and other touts roaming the bathing ghats along the sacred Ganges River are well aware of this.

Most of the Westerners who come are tourists or scholars. I place myself in the latter category, since I am here on a grant. Scholar, not tourist, although personal pleasures such as a boat ride on the Ganges or shopping the bazaar for gifts, or wandering the crowded, winding streets are part of this first trip to India. But definitely not a pilgrim.

Yet when I begin to inquire about Anandamai Ma, two assumptions shape the attitudes of my informants: either I am a devotee of Ma or a political advocate hoping to expose the corruption and exploitation of ashrams (such as the one built here in Ma’s name). Neither of these assumptions include my own. Instead, I tell myself that I want to locate Anandamai Ma within that in-between place between the “real” and “unreal,” between her divinity as simply a metaphor to something closer to, but not necessarily the same as, the “reality” behind that metaphor.

I quickly discover that my research doesn’t make much sense to anyone who can help me because I don’t make sense. Who are you? they ask. Everyone wants to know, from the stone carver I sit with every morning at the bathing ghat, to professors at Banaras Hindu University, hotel clerks, tea sellers, and college students on break. I’m a woman, but where’s my husband, and don’t I have any children? I’m an English professor who teaches writing, but I want to write about a Hindu saint? I’m a feminist, but I am respectful towards ashrams? That question, Who are you?, becomes harder and harder to answer until at last I begin to think I don’t really know myself who, in this context, I am or even am supposed to be.

Representing the Unrepresentable: Relocating Paradox

Irigaray has written that the key to demolishing the binary contradictions that structure our systems of knowledge is to seek other, impossible truths outside of those contradictions; what cannot be represented, what is silent, what cannot be known directly through the conceptual. Her own writing enacts a performance of resistance to the conceptual as well as a challenge to the genres that support it. The paradox she presents us is how to represent the unrepresentable—in this case, the knowledge that exists beyond the conceptual, in the dialogic space between what is “real” and “unreal” within current conceptual frameworks.

Within the context of the paradoxical, power is not simply an effect of competing conceptual systems in a struggle for dominance, as postmodern theory tends to claim. Instead, power is the result of a dialogue between modes of knowledge, which find their representation in socio-symbolic forms such as paradox. Born into the Hindu tradition, Anandamai Ma herself is an embodiment of paradoxical agency. Stories surrounding Anandamai Ma’s life illustrate the paradoxical nature of her agency and as a result, shift the ground of the postmodern crisis from one of endless contradiction and negation to one of apparent contradictions which are ultimately dialogically connected through forms of paradox.

The space for re-forming agency, then, begins within conceptual contradictions between “real” and “unreal” modes of knowledge. Within a dialogical framework, the apparent contradictions between these forms of knowledge generate spaces in which a dialogical relationship might find form. Such spaces are what Irigaray calls the imaginary. Rose explains this term as “a series of refusals of dichotomies [. . .] between the social and the symbolic, or the real and the imagined, or the real and the textual, or between the bodily and the cultural, or between agency and structure” (Rose 66). The spaces between conceptual representation thus complicate the concepts that have generated the contradiction.

Renunciation

In Varanasi, India, the summer heat is so intense that she cannot lift herself from the floor where she has been sprawled, washcloth across her forehead, for hours. The flat she is renting has windows, but the air outside is even more stifling than within, so the windows remain closed during the day. Overhead fans bring no relief because the daily power outage, lasting up to eight hours a day, is in effect. Instead, the fans hang motionless overhead like dead dragonflies, stiff and unmoving.

Every day the landlord stops by to reassure her that the air conditioner is on its way. “Tomorrow,” he says, and with each tomorrow, the heat lays her flat on her back on the floor, eking out whatever coolness the stone surface will relinquish. Every evening he comes by and says the same thing, and every evening, weak and tired from the heat, diarrhea, dehydration, and most of all, frustration, she believes him. She has no strength to move out and live somewhere else. She has no strength to move at all.

Every day, the large, airy house that he has built as his family’s future dwelling seems more and more like a prison to her. A prisoner of the heat, she

finds herself subject to the whims of this warden-landlord upon whom she depends for her freedom. A prisoner of her body, unable to drink even a sip of tap water without risking illness, disease, and death, she is a product of modern "progress." Yet she cannot raise herself from the floor to get what she needs: cool air, pure water, power that works 24 hours a day.

This body is not hers. It belongs to its creators. She is sickened by its dependence upon what she cannot control.

Writing the Other

Bernhard Waldenfels writes that our efforts to represent the Other "should be understood not as something at which our saying and doing aims, but as something from which it starts" (43). In other words, we begin with what we don't know, what is not clear, and what is not part of our conceptual knowledge. We begin from a space of unknowing.

Like Elizabeth Hallstrom, the author of an unpublished dissertation about Anandamai Ma, I, too, first encountered Ma quite by accident, without knowing who she was or how she had lived. Hallstrom writes,

One crisp fall morning in October 1987, while studying in the Andover Library at Harvard Divinity School, I went to look for something in a small room used to catalogue rare books. On a table in the middle of the room I saw [an] enormous stack of books, photos, tapes and films. On the front of one of the books I saw an extraordinary picture, a picture of a hauntingly beautiful woman. I was drawn to open the book, only to discover that this woman was the famous Hindu saint, Anandamayi Ma, whom I had heard about on my trip to India in 1978. (2)

My encounters with Anandamai Ma began with a similar chance encounter. I first happened upon a photo of her, a striking young woman, about 1984. Without any knowledge of who she was or her significance to others, I became intrigued by her portrayal in the classic *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda. Yogananda was a contemporary of Ma and a fellow Bengali who, like Ma, is also considered an avatar by his devotees. Ma is only one of two or three women "saints" he chronicles in his travels throughout India. As I found out in later readings, Ma is part of a long tradition of Hindu women regarded as living deities, but it is a tradition shrouded in much mystery and certainly not, until the last 20 or so years, one familiar to most Westerners.

It is her face, full of smiling mischief, her hands posed demurely on the shoulder of Yogananda, and the joyful play reflected in his face, that I remember, for no apparent reason, years later when I return to studies of yoga and meditation. Then, I realize why I remember her: women are missing in lineages of male yogis, and, thus, seem to be excluded from yoga's history. Her face haunts me even as I cling that much harder to my skepticism towards the existence of modern-day deities.

Anandamai Ma and “This Body”

For all 87 years of her life, Anandamai Ma called herself “an unlettered little girl” and signed her name with a “mere dot, maintaining that ‘in it contained everything’” (Hallstrom 2). More typically she referred to herself as “this body” and little else.

Only marginally educated, Anandamai Ma seldom wrote. The task was left to her devotees to represent her life and words in writing. None of them has ever written or spoken about any occasion in which she refers to herself in the first person or identifies her body as “hers.” Instead, her consistent use of the third person symbolizes her refusal to identify herself with her body.

Several interpretive frameworks address this refusal. One framework places Anandamai Ma within ancient Hindu traditions surrounding *sannyas*, the rites of renunciation through which an individual relinquishes his or her personal self in order to merge with the greater Self of the Creator. Another framework places Ma’s refusal to identify with her body within the cultural production of gender in Indian society, in particular the rural Bengal village life into which Ma was born. Women of that time and place, notes Elizabeth Hallstrom, “[learn] about this ideal of the selfless, obedient wife who worships her husband as her god and happily bears him sons [. . .] from listening to classical [Hindu] stories and by watching and later performing rites handed down from woman to woman” (127). When such women cannot bear children, and thus achieve the ideal of selflessness as both wife and mother, an “alternative, socially condoned focus [is to] tak[e] a guru and engag[e] in full-time religious activities” (Fruzzetti qtd. in Hallstrom 126). Thus women are taught from early on to merge their identities with husband and children, a renunciation of self in favor of the larger Self as represented by her family. A third framework comes from an identity specifically assigned by her devotees—that of an *avatara*, or realized soul, incarnated in human form out of compassion for the unenlightened. An *avatara* represents the ideal of *sannyas*, what the *sannyasi* aspires to become in future incarnations. An *avatara* comes into the world fully realized, with no need to strive for the perfection sought by *sannyasis*.

All accounts of Anandamai Ma’s life, however, are either silent or contradictory on whether she identified herself within any of these categories of identity. She did not specifically claim to be a *sannyasi*, and, in fact, never received formal initiation, although “her burial was performed according to strict scriptural injunctions, presided over by some of India’s most renowned Brahmin priests” (Hallstrom 1-2). Also, as noted earlier, she apparently told many devotees that she had initiated *herself* as a young girl, a highly unconventional practice.

Neither does Ma claim to be a woman. She does identify herself as a “little girl,” but that would exempt her from forms of renunciation that Indian women of her time and place vowed upon marriage. Although she was married at age 13 to a man much older than she and spent approximately the first ten years of her life living alone with his family while he worked in another region of India to support her, she never claimed the title of “wife” for herself. Instead, she gradually relinquished, and ultimately reversed the role of caretaking; until his death

her husband cared for *her* needs. By that point, she had initiated him, and he had accepted her as his guru as well as the Devi (goddess) incarnate.

Finally, Ma never identified herself as any particular Deity, although devotees routinely worshipped her as Krishna, Durga, Kali, and Shiva, to name a few of the Hindu deities with whom she was associated. Rarely, then, did Ma identify herself as anything other than “this little girl” and “this body” or the dot of her signature. It’s possible that her devotees, who are her only biographers to date, chose not to include that information, but given the volumes written about Ma, it’s unlikely that such a detail would have escaped their notice. It could mean that they ignored such an utterance as anomaly, or suppressed it as something that undermined their own beliefs. Yet that seems unlikely, given how closely they attended to her every word, eager for her to tell them in no uncertain terms “who she is.”

Devotion

Food, once a joyful obsession, is now a burden to her, and eating is a trial. It is too hot during the day to go out to a restaurant or grocery store. Even if she had an appetite, she has little strength to satisfy it. The only water she can drink she must boil herself, since even the bottled water is not trustworthy. The bottles she throws out across the lane, on a vacant lot frequented by pigs, are, she notices, gone by the next visit. Opportunists are said to take the empty bottles, refill them with tap water, and sell them to tourists as “pure.” She has no thirst, yet she knows she must drink or risk serious consequences. Only in illness has her body ever refused nourishment before, and now it seems there is no end in sight for this current “illness,” no end to the struggle to devote herself to her own care.

No Understanding Without Devotion

By chance, I find a few books in a California bookstore published by her Calcutta Ashram, but they are the diaries of one devotee, Gurupriya Devi, who cared for Ma almost her entire life. Written with a slavish dedication to recording events but with little or no commentary, they include little by which to locate the narrator or the purpose of the narrative except brief devotional interludes. With only a third-grade equivalent education, Ma did not write anything of substance herself, nor did she ask that her spoken words be recorded, since she was indifferent to the preservation of anything produced in her name, including the ashrams, schools, and hospitals scattered all over northern India. Her devotees took it upon themselves to record her life and teachings, and to translate them into other languages. As a result, almost everything written about her is written, in part, as an act of devotion.

To further complicate my emerging inquiry, the authors of these texts insist that one cannot achieve an understanding of Ma without similar devotion. From Alexander Lipski, an American scholar who wrote about his encounter with Ma in the 1965, to Bithika Mukerji, an Indian scholar who

has devoted her life to writing three biographical volumes of Ma's life, to name two more of her biographers, all accept her as a Divine Incarnation. They are careful to note, however, that Ma does not name herself in this way.

Her identification as a deity is solely the product of her devotees. Yet these same devotees recall many occasions in which Ma instructed them to dress her in the guise of a specific deity to celebrate a particular holiday or spiritual occasion. Thus, even though the devotees name her as a certain deity, they are doing so in response to actions that, to them, reveal Ma's tacit instruction as to the nature of her true Self.

Locating the Spaces Between Human and Divine Agency

Because Ma did occupy a human body, was born, grew up, suffered illness and ultimately death, it would seem she experienced the same physical limitations as any human being and thus rightly could be identified as one. While she did not identify with the body, she was nonetheless subject to its weaknesses and failings. Such episodes are painstakingly recorded in the diaries of Ma's closest devotee, Gurupriya Devi.

Gurupriya Devi, or Didi (sister), as she was known by those around her, published several volumes in which she faithfully recorded the daily events of Ma's life, including details of Ma's eating, grooming, and sleeping, as well as her travels, companions, and, on occasion, her words of advice, caution, praise, and devotion to those she encountered. Didi recorded countless occasions on which Ma is sustained by only a few grains of rice (sometimes painstakingly selected and placed directly into her mouth by Didi) and a few sips of water, for weeks at a time, with no ill effects.

Yet at other times, when Ma received the most attentive care and careful diet, when her needs were well attended, she succumbed to seemingly inexplicable illness. In the following passage, Didi questions Ma about this apparent contradiction between her physical health and material well being, at a time when Ma, now 41 years old, is having difficulty walking:

During conversation this evening I told Ma, "I have seen you live without eating food for many days. You haven't even drunk water some days and yet your body was keeping well. Now with even the slightest exertion your body seems to behave strangely." Ma said, "At that time the condition was different. The kind of *bhava* (spiritual mood) that existed during childhood is prevailing again now. At that time [my] Ma would call me and feed me. I had no mood to eat at any time. You people [her devotees] have witnessed the *bhavas* that existed in between. The reason why the body kept healthy even without food was that at that time [various yogas] were being manifested within this body [. . .]." I said, "After the illness at Siddheshwari your health has been deteriorating. After that illness even painstaking service has not been able to set your health right." Ma said, "I do not stop anyone. But this is innate nature. On finding opposition to its *bhava* such a form appeared." (145)

Although her body did experience illness, discomfort, pain, and aging, Ma explains this not as the seemingly inevitable progress of human development and decline, but instead as the ebb and flow of particular *bhavas*, or spiritual moods, that visit her in childhood then return in middle age. How well or poorly her body is treated by herself or others, then, ultimately has little direct effect upon its health. In fact, as Ma points out to Didi in the quote above, when the service of others interferes with the *bhavas*, it creates the ill health those around her seek to prevent.

Ma's paradoxical relationship between the well-being of her body and its care presents an apparent contradiction to Western rationalist narratives of causality and time. The health of her body is not, according to her, causally related to material effects. While her body does, in fact, manifest signs of aging, first in childhood and then in middle age, this progress is explained as a *bhava*, or spiritual mood. The apparent progress of her life from birth to death is only an apparent truth that is superseded by the deeper reality of Ma's being, namely that she is not bound to human constructs of causality and linear time. For Ma, such concepts are human imaginaries that blur the deeper truth that she, as an expression of the Infinite, embodies.

To represent her agency as anything other than "human" would locate it outside the conceptual, within discourses of myth and the "unreal." Yet to imagine her agency solely within the "unreal" is to silence its power within a dialogic relationship *between* the conceptual contradictions of human and divine agency that she embodies.

Worship

She is standing on the bathing ghat named after Anandamai Ma, looking down upon the Ganges, when a swarm of ragged children closes in on her. The stairs that descend to the water are narrow and steep, and her footing, already uncertain, feels even more unstable as the children grab at her backpack, sunglasses, camera, and rings.

"Baksheesh, Baksheesh!" they cry out, their curious, insistent fingers tracing whatever seems most Western, and thus valuable, to them. She assumes they want money, but then their hands suggest more.

Afraid she might fall, she waves them off, then struggles towards a ledge that juts out from the temple landing. As she sits, the children, ranging from toddler to adolescent, close in again. Again, their hands are grabbing and grasping, like the monkeys in Durga temple, she thinks, some of them rabid, that attack worshippers, then flee like bandits. Except, the intention of these children, if they have a single intention, seems unclear. Instead, like so many scenes she has been subject to so far, they seem driven by a storm of contradictory impulses, tender and fierce, curious and aloof, generous and selfish.

She reaches into her backpack, careful not to let the straps drop from her arms, to prevent a quick theft. Inside is a plastic ziplock bag stuffed with Bazooka bubble gum that she brought from the States for just such an occasion. Into each child's hand she places a pink-wrapped rectangle printed with Bazooka Joe's cartoon image then unwraps one and puts it in her mouth.

They stare at her a long, long time as she blows one bubble after another, as if they have never, in their wildest dreams, imagined such a thing.

Whoever You Think I Am

Finally, I just give in to other people's assumptions. On one hand, it seems deceitful and thus unethical; how can I maintain my integrity as a researcher unless my informants know my "true" identity? I am not a devotee of Ma, nor am I interested in following the example of so many others by writing a devotional work. Nor am I a political activist dedicated to the exposure of ashram exploiters of women. Yet the more people ask me, especially those who had known Ma first hand, the more I find myself agreeing that I think Ma is whoever *they* think she is.

Elizabeth Hallstrom recounts a similar quandary as she becomes acquainted with Bithika Mukerji, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Banaras Hindu University and long-time devotee of Ma. Hallstrom writes,

I said, "Well, I am very excited to be doing this study on Ma. You know, I have been interested in women saints for a long time." A look of alarm and even horror came over Bithika's face. "My dear Lisa," Bithika said emphatically, "Ma was neither a woman or [sic] a saint!" (4)

White lies? Half-truths? Opportunistic ambition? Or am I simply too overwhelmed by the heat, the noise, the crush of people and constant activity of this strange, difficult place, to think straight? It seems as if the only way to get "inside" of anything—inside the ashram, inside the heads and hearts of those around Ma, inside the minds of critics, is to act as if I share a similar devotion and/or resistance.

I take to meditating every weekday morning in the Gopal temple, the main shrine devoted to Ma at the Varanasi ashram, hoping someone will notice and take pity on me. My meditation practice is, like many Westerners, not specifically religious—no icons or deities involved. Nonetheless, I sit on the floor and stare at an elaborate idol of Anandamai Ma in which she is depicted as young, middle-aged, and old, all in the same figure.

Unfortunately, the only person who ever seems to notice me is the temple guard, who speaks only a little English. He kindly turns on overhead fans while I sit in the temple after spending a couple of hours on the ghat writing and talking to anyone who may have met Ma.

Unsatisfied, I later attempt a more direct "invasion." After I interview the manager of the Varanasi ashram, Pandu Da, I ask if I might meditate in the second-floor, Annapurna Temple, hoping to glimpse a bit more of the ashram activities, and at the very least, experience the inner walls of the place, not to mention find a quiet place for my practice. Graciously, Pandu Da extends the invitation to one he believes is a true seeker of Ma's grace. He tells me I can come and go as I like. After that I find the doors of the ashram are, quite literally, open whenever I come.

Refusal as a Holding of Space

If we consider the following logical assertions about Anandamai Ma and her body within a dialogical, rather than contradictory, framework, they yield more than a simple negation of each other: Ma is human because she has a body; Ma is not human because she has a body; and Ma is human and not human because she has a body. That is, these apparent contradictions also invite the imaginary. In this way the imaginary creates a space between concepts so that we can consider them in a reciprocal, not simply contradictory, relationship.

For example, the implied linkage between “human” and “body” is “refused” by the imaginary, thus complicating that relationship. Biologist Lewis Thomas has similarly complicated this question of what is “human”:

A good case can be made for our nonexistence as entities [. . .] . We are shared, rented, occupied. At the interior of our cells, driving them [. . .] are the mitochondria, and in a strict sense, they are not ours. [. . .] I like to think that they work in my interest, that each breath they draw for me, but perhaps it is they who walk through the local park in the early morning, sensing my senses, listening to my music, thinking my thoughts. (2-3)

Thus, having a body is not necessarily what makes us “human.” In this sense we are all Human and Other. Anandamai Ma’s lack of identification with her body, then, can be understood as a reflection on our own paradoxical relationship with our bodies in which the concepts by which we define the limits of our bodies do not absolutely govern their operations.

The imaginary, then, exposes how our concepts mask this Other truth in a “performance of [masculinist] power” (Rose 58) that seeks to regulate the body as masculine. In this way the assumed “real” relationship of human and body, reiterated as a matter of common sense, begins to break down when we consider the implied contradictions within those reiterations, specifically those that define what is human. Having a body does and does not signify human. Not all bodies are human, and yet humans must have bodies to be human. Here the stability of the concept human breaks down within this dialogue, suggesting that human is, is not, and is more than having a body. Thus, the relationship between the concepts “human” and “body” are complicated by conditions that cannot, in any absolute way, be accounted for, represented only by the imaginary’s “refusal.” In this way the imaginary maintains a space for a dialogue about what other kinds of relationships between human and body are possible, one that may now include the possibility of a third concept, what cannot be conceptualized, as part of the dialogue.

Realization

One day a woman in a white cotton sari and black rimmed glasses enters the temple from a side door nearest the altar. She approaches a lone worshipper seated on the floor. Silently she pours sugar puffs into the worshipper’s hands.

The worshipper recognizes these as *prasad*, food blessed during the daily prayers to the deity. She smiles by way of thanks and looks at the sweets. A few ants crawl out of the puffs. She is repulsed yet fascinated by the images moving between her hands.

Waiting until the *sannyasini* leaves, she then shakes the ants out of the sugar puffs so as not to cause the insects harm. ☺

Works Cited

- Devi, Gurupriya. *Sri Sri Ma Anandamayi*. 5 vols. Calcutta: Shree Shree Anandamayi Charitable Society, 1984-1990.
- Hallstrom, Elizabeth. "My Mother, My God: Anandamayi Ma (1896-1982)." Diss. Harvard U, 1995.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Lipski, Alexander. *Life and Teaching of Sri Anandamayi Ma*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977.
- Mukerji, Bithika. *From the Life of Sri Anandamayi Ma*. 2 vols. Calcutta: Shree Shree Anandamayi Charitable Society, 1980-1981.
- Rose, Gillian. "As If the Mirrors Had Bled: Masculine Dwelling, Masculinist Theory, and Feminist Masquerade." *BodySpace*. Ed. Nancy Duncan. New York: Routledge, 1996. 56-74.
- Thomas, Lewis. *Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- Waldenfels, Bernhard. "Response to the Other." *Encountering the Other(s): Studies in Literature, History, and Culture*. Albany: SUNY P, 1995. 35-44.
- Yogananda, Paramahansa. *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1979.