Chapter Five

Modernity, Sexuality and Identity in *The Ibis Trilogy*

> "Sexual dynamics crucially underpinned the whole operation of British Empire and Victorian expansion.
>
> — Ronald Hyam (*Empire and Sexuality*, 1)

I

One of the relatively less recognised aspects of the British Empire in India is how the sexual attitudes and activities of the colonial elites are imbricated with the expansion and consolidation of the Raj. According to Walter D. Mignolo, sexuality and gender are important constituents of 'the colonial matrix of power.' Like epistemology, they are also nodes of control, management and also of transgression. The colonisers presented their sexual ethics as universal paradigm with regard to sexual conduct. Colonial sexuality is also underpinned by the ethos of modernity. Like epistemology, the sexual conduct of the colonisers is an integral part of their racial worldview. Postcolonial theorists posit that colonialism operated on the assumed racial superiority of the colonisers over the colonised. One of the cornerstones of this assumption is the sexual sanctimoniousness of the colonisers. In *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* Ann Laura Stoler contends that an implicit 'racial grammar' which was circulated through empire and back through Europe was inextricably bound with sexual practices of the colonisers. In

Stoler's analysis, colonial bourgeois sexuality was discursively and practically implicated in colonial sexual order. In fact, regulation of sexuality and reproduction was at the heart of fixing colonial privilege and its boundaries. She points out that Michel Foucault's analysis of the key process of modernity in Europe (as analysed in *History of Sexuality: 1)* ignores the ways in which colonial experiences were complicit in these processes. In *The History of Sexuality*: *1* Foucault engages with the strategies of the nineteenth century European sexuality. Foucault examines why, despite the attempts to hide and repress sexuality from public domain, there had been a huge proliferation of discourse of sex. For Foucault, sexuality is a not mere biological drive which is repressed by society, but is a "dense transfer point" of power, inscribed with "instrumentality" (*The History of Sexuality*: *1*, 103). Foucault did not subscribe to the notion that repression was the cause of its silences and proliferations. Rather, Foucault was interested to know why the 'truth' of sex became an important component of bourgeois self and social order. The history of sexuality, for Foucault, is the history of, as Stoler notes, "patterned discursive incitements and stimulations that facilitated the penetration of social and self-disciplinary regimes into most intimate domains of modern life" (*Race and the Education of Desire*, 03). The discourses of sex set the criteria of bourgeois identity. The emergence of biopower and technologies of sex played a crucial role in disciplining and regulating individuals for managing and controlling the whole population.

Scholars have found parallels between management of sexuality and management of empire. Studies have shown that deployment of sexual policies and practices were central to colonial order of things. Stoler argues that the emergence of bourgeois sexuality did not happen in the confinement of Europe; rather it originated in colonies due to bourgeois insistence on the distinction of race. In a sense, the sexual discourse of empire and the biopolitic state in Europe were complementary. Stoler writes:

> First, that Europe's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses on sexuality, like other cultural, political, or economic assertions, cannot be charted in Europe alone. In short-circuiting empire, Foucault's history of European sexuality misses key sites in the production of that discourse, discounts the practices that racialized bodies, and thus elides a field of knowledge that provided the contrasts for what a "healthy, vigorous, bourgeois body" was all about. Europe's eighteenth-century discourses on sexuality can—indeed must—be traced along a more circuitous imperial route that leads to nineteenth-century technologies of sex. *They were refracted through the discourses of empire and its exigencies, by men and women whose affirmations of a bourgeois self, and the racialized contexts in which those confidences were built, could not be disentangled*. (*Race and the Education of Desire*, 07) [emphases added]

Sexuality, then, was intricately implicated in colonial enterprise. Sexuality was, indeed, very important in the construction of the self-image of the coloniser. She further argues that discourses of sexuality not only set the boundary of bourgeois self but also fix the moral parameters of European nations. Within the vocabulary of bourgeois civility in colonies, self-control and self-discipline became the defining parameters. Stoler asserts that these parameters, though "affirmed in the ideal family milieu, were often transgressed by the sexual, moral and religious contaminations in those same European colonial Homes" (*Race and the Education of Desire*, 08). The rise of bourgeois order in the early nineteenth century is inextricably linked with the racially-spurred assertions of sexual practices of the colonisers. The "imperial prude" that Foucault refers to in the opening pages of *The History of Sexuality: I* did not reside in Europe, but in the colony where s/he became an embodiment of modern Western sexuality. With European concerns to divide and control interclass and interracial

sexual relationships, to reform and change gender relations, to manage and to regulate sexual life of citizens, the colonies became 'laboratories of modernity' whose experiments on race, class and sexual relations were exported to the metropolis. And as in any cultural production, fault lines are entailed in the sexual politics of the bourgeois colonisers also.

So modern notions of self and sex are intimately connected to the rise of bourgeois, and by extension, to the expansion and consolidation of empire. Taking the clue from Stoler, Paul Gillen and Devleena Ghosh postulate that modern ideas about gender roles (how to be a proper gentleman or lady), domestic management (thrifty and efficient housewifery) or middle or working class respectability (sexual purity and maintaining distance from natives) were experimented in the colonies before being exported to imperial centres. In fact, modern discourses of sexuality and gender have been constructed by conflict and interplay between colonies and Europe. Colonial societies were obsessed with the regulation of sexuality which was fraught with colonial legitimacy. They write:

> Colonial societies displayed Foucauldian patterns in their enthusiasm for finding and controlling internal enemies who destabilised the colonial power structure. These 'deviants' transgressed bourgeois norms such as sexual control, domesticity and racial purity. Curiously, in this paradigm, Europeanness appeared weak and in constant fear of degeneration or 'going native', demanding self-discipline and conformity to bourgeois sexual mores, in contrast to the powerful appeal of 'native' biological and cultural contamination. (*Colonialism and Modernity*, 186-7)

That is why the education of desire, that is, to control and channelise it in productive direction, got premium importance in colonial ideology. In another book titled *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* Stoler refers, while

writing on the British attitude towards Indian sexuality in the nineteenth century, to Georges Hardy who in 1929 commented that "A man remains a man as long as he is under the gaze of a woman of his own race" (1). Taking that cue from Stoler, Pashmina Murthy claims — in her essay "Tropics of Sexuality: Sexual Excesses and 'Oriental Vices' in the British Raj"— that Hardy's comments not only "signal the importance of race and gender in demarcating boundaries of acceptable sexuality, but they posit the European woman as the European male's only salvation from the contagions of the tropics" (221-2). What she says is that in the hyper-erotic East, the Western men are likely to fall prey to sexual fantasy and excess unless they are properly checked and guided by Western women. Thus, though colonialism created a homosocial bonding among European men out in the East, Western women were still indispensable for stopping the European men from becoming unmanned through intimacy with native black or brown women whose sexuality was stereotyped as wild, ferocious and demonic. Murthy has referred to Cynthia Humes who holds that the demonisation of the goddess Kali from 1820 to 1840 as a ferocious, blood-drinking, murderous woman who wears the garland of human skull, fashions a skirt of the severed hands of her victims and stands on her prostrate husband is the epitomisation of exotic Indian women. This demonic representation of Kali in the early nineteenth century government records, missionary tracts and popular British imagination not only created the notion of wildness of Indian women and effeminacy of Indian men but also struck a contrast between native women and the idealised *memsahib*, the "Madam Sir" whose integrity, "chastity and patriotism were proof of her proper role as facilitator to the Sahib in the colonialist project" ("Tropics of Sexuality," 223). So there was an underlying suspicion that the European men can sexually go astray at any moment as the East seemed so enticing to them. Western women were supposed to uphold civilised values as well as to restrain the men from becoming sexually wayward. But things do not happen always as they are envisioned. Epitome of manly righteousness and female

virtues prove to be epitome of vices. History abounds in instances of the sexual promiscuity of exemplary imperial figures,[1] let alone the ordinary Europeans out in the colonies.

Historian Ronald Hyam has drawn attention to the dual strands in the colonial sexual ethics in India. He contends that without the easy sexual opportunities available in colonies, the British trade and administration in tropical territories would have been impossible in the nineteenth century. Consciousness of sex suffused the minds of the soldiers and the traders alike. Sexual opportunities and indulgences created an invisible bond between different stakeholders of the empire. The empire-builders grabbed every sexual opportunity with imperious confidence. But in contemporary Britain this view of overseas sexual laxity was fiercely contested, with the proposition that if the empire was to survive, then the imperial race must exercise sexual restraint, and Government must devise strict policies for it. We have to remember that Victorian Age is marked by many double standards—"between national success and the exploitation of lower class workers at home and of colonies overseas; a compromise between philanthropy and tolerance (the abolition of slavery, 1833; tolerance for Catholics, 1829) and repression (the punishment of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, 1834; the conditions of the poor)" (*The Routledge History of English Literature*, 251). In the domain of sexuality, it is an age of sexual prudishness and repression. The Victorian morality acquired added significance in colonies as it served the purpose of establishing the moral and cultural superiority of the colonisers. But interestingly, though Victorian sexuality proscribed sexual debauchery, the actual practices of the colonial rulers were far from the ideal as the historical facts do show. Hyam makes a pertinent observation:

> Britain has spread venereal disease around the globe along with its racecourses and botanical gardens, barracks and jails, steam engines and law books. Britain merely did not sell cotton clothes to all the world: it also exported nude erotic photographs. George Cannon, William Dugdale and Henry Hayler were

> world leaders among the entrepreneurs of pornography. There was a flourishing free trade in prostitution. But alongside this often insensitive activity, paradoxically the British had another export too, and a very influential counterbalancing one: its official prudery. *Practice and theory diverged. Britain had 'an ultra-squeamishness and hyper-prudery peculiar to itself': narrow, blinkered, defective and intolerant attitudes towards sex which it all too successfully imposed on the rest of the world.* (*Empire and Sexuality*, 3) [Emphases added]

Two contradictory points emerge from this observation. First, British colonialism ushered in a sort of pornographic culture in the colonies. Second, it also wore a mask of sexual sanctimoniousness. Looking at the whole sexual dynamics of the British, one can easily decode its double-standard in sexual ethics. This chapter aims to understand how literary works engage with colonial sexuality, fictionally exposing its double-standard and examining the predicaments of certain characters who maintained the official prudery. Amitav Ghosh's *The Ibis Trilogy* deals with, inter alia, sexual life of Mr. and Mrs. Burnham, two self-certified doyens of civilisational morality and values. Mr. Burnham lusts after Paulette, a young orphaned girl whom he gives shelter, while teaching her lessons of the Bible. Mrs. Burnham indulges in sexual act with the mulatto sailor Zachary Reid on the pretext of curing him of onanism. This chapter traces Ghosh's critique of the sexual ethics of the colonisers, and at the same time focuses on how Ghosh has thoroughly humanised the characters by concentrating on the grave consequence of their sexual conduct, especially in the case of Mrs. Burnham.

II

In Amitav Ghosh's fiction, individual stories occupy a central place within the historical macro-narratives of Southeast Asia both during colonial rule and after it. As a novelist, Ghosh is primarily concerned with tales of human predicaments, and it is through these predicaments he deals with larger ethical issues. His *The Ibis Trilogy* not only uncovers the dark underside of the European Free Trade, but also unmasks the façade of the civilised morality of the doyens of superior civilisation. Ghosh's depiction of the sexual behaviour of the Burnham couple reveals that their practices did not match with their professed preaching. In Ghosh's fictional recreation of the nineteenth century colonial occupation in India, the holier-than-thou attitude of the colonisers shows sufficient contradiction with their secret dissolute practices. The tension between preaching and practice achieves special poignancy in case of the colonisers who often proclaimed themselves as bearer of light and reason, ethics and morality in the supposedly barbaric East. These dual strands in their psyche make most of them contested sites between civilised morality and suppressed sexuality, between law and libido. It is these conflicts which generate profound moral dilemma for the civilisers. In an interview with Chitra Sankaran, Ghosh clarifies his take on ethics:

> I mean a writer reflects continuously on ethics, on morality, the state of things in the world. Some do it by, as it were, reflecting on the immoral [laughs]. Some do it by reflecting upon conscious ethics or conscious morality. But I think it's really impossible for people to pretend that writing does not address the issue of "who are you,""what is right conduct, what is wrong conduct." I don't mean to say that writing is necessarily prescriptive…I don't think that is what it is at all—all that would be much more like philosophy or something and I would not be drawn to that because I don't think I am in a position to be telling people what they should be doing, as a rule. But I'm very drawn to

> ethical predicaments—the difficulty of ethical, moral predicaments… (*History, Narrative and Testimony*, 13)

That is what he does also in the trilogy, especially in *Sea of Poppies* and *The Flood of Fire*: he unmasks the ethical hypocrisy of the colonisers, without becoming prescriptive. The cases of Mr. Burnham and Mrs. Burnham — the Burra Sahib and Burra BeeBee — in *The Ibis Trilogy* become particularly interesting from this perspective. Both of them violate the implicit and much-hyped sanctimoniousness of colonial morality, and their transgressions almost verge on perversion. But perversion from whose point of view? One should not be summarily criticised for being on the wrong side of history. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines perversion as "behaviour that most people think is not normal or acceptable, especially when it is connected with sex." In his book *What are Perversions?* Sergio Benvenuto describes perversion as "essentially a moral judgment: a reproach, an insult or a slander" and "like every moral judgment, it varies according to customs of every epoch and culture" (xiii). In fact, until the end of the nineteenth century, the only legitimate sexuality was that of a married couple with the aim of procreation. Perversion or the psychological term "paraphilia" implies, at its simplest, sexual behaviour that deviates from norm, be it religious, legal, or customary. The norm should be that of contemporary time of the incidents. Some of the forms of perversions identified by the nineteenth century psychiatrists are exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, paedophilia, masochism, sexual sadism etc. Other forms of perversions are adultery, homosexuality etc. In *The Ibis Trilogy*, Mr. Burnham turns out to be a masochist and Mrs. Burnham commits adultery, though both of them pretend to be preachers and practitioners of Christian ethics and heterosexual normativity.

In the trilogy, it is Mr. Benjamin Burnham who is the model for what a European man can accomplish in colonies. An opium merchant, business tycoon, preacher of the

universality of Free Trade and proud bourgeois, Mr. Burnham is a representative European for whom colonialism has opened the means of amassing huge wealth by illegal trading of opium. He is the owner of the ship Ibis after which the trilogy is named. The interesting thing relating to Mr. Burnham is that whatever he does, he justifies it on the rhetoric of God's command. When he meets Neel, the impoverished son of the old Raja, he asserts that "Merchants like myself are but servants of Free Trade, which is as immutable as God's commandments" (*Sea of Poppies*, 117), and moralises that if England has to go to the extent of war with China for ban on opium sale, it would not be for opium, but for the principle of Free Trade which is "a right conferred on Man by God" (*Sea of Poppies*, 115). This rhetoric of religiosity permeates every decision, behaviour and action of Mr. Burnham. He embodies the notion that colonialism itself is a very holy, religious and sanctimonious project which has borne the torch of civilisation in the savage East.

As a self-certified representative of superior race, Mr. Burnham poses as a charitable person to the poor whites in Calcutta, especially to helpless young girls. He tends to exemplify what it is to do God's work: to sell opium in the Eastern countries to relieve the people of the torture of despotic rulers, to fight for the universality of Free Trade, to confiscate the property of an Indian zaminder by convicting him as a criminal, to trade in transporting the convicts, and most importantly, to teach biblical lessons to wayward young girls. It is in this spirit he gives shelter to Paulette Lambert, the eighteen year old daughter of late French botanist Pierre Lambert who had been in charge of the Botanical Garden in Calcutta. When, after the death of her father, Paulette came to live in Bethel (the palatial house of Mr. Burnham), she found herself ill at ease with everything; she is unaccustomed to the luxurious living and the consciousness of what it is to be a *memsahib*. Though by birth Paulette is a European, but by heart she is a Bengali: she loves wearing saree, eating Bengali food and talking in Bengali. At Bethel, Paulette's discomfiture is evident in every little thing

like bathing, clothing, and talking properly. It is a place where the master and the mistress have exemplified themselves as the ideal to be emulated by others. Paulette discovers "that at Bethel, the servants, no less than the masters, held strong views on what was appropriate for Europeans, especially memsahibs" (*Sea of Poppies*, 123). They sneered at her for her failure to dress or speak like a pucca *memsahib*. But what ostensibly scandalised Mr. Burnham about Paulette is not merely her ineptitude in external mannerism, but her ignorance of Scripture, and consequently, her non-Christian worldview. Being the daughter of a naturalist, the world of Nature – its flora and fauna – had been to her a sort of spiritual sustenance. It is her ignorance in religious matters that prompted Mr. Burnham, says Paulette later to Zachary Reid aboard Zodu's boat on the Ganges in a late night, to take personal charge of her instruction despite his busy schedule. Awestruck as she was, she could hardly believe that her patron and benefactor would take so much trouble for her moral improvement. Mr. Burnham always stresses the importance of penitence and chastisement, and decides to teach her lessons on these concepts.

Thus started his biblical classes. The classes were held—like Mrs. Burnham's classes of Zachary as narrated later in *Flood of Fire*—in secrecy, in the evening, after dinner when the house was quiet, the servants were at rest and Mrs. Burnham had retired to her bedchamber after taking a dose of opium. Mr. Burnham deemed such a time and such solemn atmosphere suitable for "contemplation and penitence" (*Sea of Poppies*, 298). He would draw the curtain and latch the door fast to prevent, apparently, any kind of disturbance from outside in the work of righteousness. The room would be dark except the light of the flames of a bunch of candles placed over the high lectern where the Bible lay open. Mr. Burnham would appear in a possessed, frenzied mood with shinning eyes and glowing beard. In such a hushed ambience he would impart the biblical lesson he had already chosen for the day. The passages chosen by Mr. Burnham would be the ones on penitence, and he would read them in

solemn voice, “like a mighty waterfall, breaking upon the silence of a great valley” (*Sea of Poppies*, 298). Proceeding lesson after lesson, one day they came to a chapter of Hebrews which inculcates the imperative of chastening in a person’s life: “ If you endure chastening, God dealeth with you as sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if he be without chastisement, whereof all are pertakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons” (*Sea of Poppies*, 299). Having read the passage with great emotion, Mr. Burnham knelt down beside Paulette who was already dismayed, and asked her in the most severe manner whether she was without chastisement. The question sent a tremor down her spine and she confessed her lack of chastisement. He asked her whether she wants to learn of chastisement, and though horrified at the thought of being chastised by so big and powerful a man, she mustered all her courage and declared herself ready to receive the blows. But then came the surprise. Mr. Burnham told Paulette that it is not she whom he would chastise; rather it is he who desired to be chastised by her. Amazed and nervous she was, but she agreed to obey her benefactor, and then started the act. He would assume a strange posture by lowering his face to the feet of seated Paulette, cupping her slippers in his hand and raising his buttock high in air. Then he would ask her to strike with her hand severely on his buttock, and he would plead Paulette to exert all her strength to strike him. As her striking would be harder, more intense would be his pain-pleasure, and he would bite and suck her slippers, making them wet. After each session, instead of showing symptoms of pain, he would be so pleased as to tickle her under her chin. But he would strictly forbid her to reveal anything of the classes to anyone as that would surely undo the lessons learnt.

Thus Mr. Burnham turns out to be a masochist who gains pleasure from being beaten. He continues the game, even making it more severe. In one of the following classes he told Paulette that her hands were not sufficient instrument for his punishment, and he wished to be beaten by a sweeper’s broom (i.e. the Indian ‘jhatas’ or ‘jharus’) which, according to him, is a

reminder of the fallen nature of man and the sinfulness of our bodies. Paulette had to procure it with great difficulty given the curiosity of the servants, and Mr. Burnham's joy knew no bounds in anticipation of his impending torture. He chose the biblical passage carefully: "And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword" (*Sea of Poppies*, 302), and having put the 'jhata' in her hand, urged her to strike his ass: "I am the city and this your sword. Strike me, smite me, burn me with your fire" (*Sea of Poppies*, 302). Though he would squirm and writhe in pain, and Paulette would be very afraid for having seriously injured him, he would plead to go on harder. With the increase in the lashing, there seemed to be an increase in the orgasmic pleasure he got from the beating. Paulette recounts the horrific incident to bemused Zachary:

> So I swung back my arm and lashed him with the jhata, using all my strength—which, you may be sure, is not inconsiderable— until finalmently he moaned and his body went slack on the floor. What horror! I have killed him for sure. So I leant down and whispered: "Oh poor Mr Burnham—are you all right?" Vaste was my relief, you can be sure, when he stirred and moved his head. But yet he would not rise to his feet, no, he lay flat on the floor and squirmed over the parquet like some creature of the soil, all the way to the door. "Are you hurt, Mr. Burnham? I inquired, following him. "Have you broken your back? Why do you lie thus on the floor? Why do you not rise? He answered me with a moan: "All is well, do not worry, go to the lectern and read again the lesson." I went to obey him, but no sooner was my back turned than he leapt nimbly to his feet, undid the latch and hurried away up the stairs. I was retracing my steps to the lectern when I saw on the floor a curious mark, a long, wet stain, as if some thin, damp creature had crawled over the parquet. (*Sea of Poppies*, 302-3)

Little did she know what the stain was, and she screamed by mistaking it as a snake which had intruded into the room. She cried out "*Sap!Sap!*" just as a servant entered the room and asked him to hunt the serpent which has entered the room from the jungle. It took a while for Paulette to understand what the stain actually was even after the servant pointed out to her that it "was not made by a serpent of the jungle; it is a mark of the snake that lives in Man" (*Sea of Poppies*, 303). Innocent as she was, she could not imagine that such an imposing and overtly religious man like Mr. Burnham can be a pervert who would derive sexual pleasure to the point of ejaculating by being beaten by a young woman who is good enough to be his daughter. One is reminded that in any perverse act the subject gains sexual enjoyment while the other subject is only involved as an instrument to that enjoyment. Perversion does not intend to use the other as an object but to use the other as a subject, making her a "subjective object." That is why Benvenuto claims that "The subjectivity of the other is an essential component of perverse acts" (*What are Perversions?*, 03). For example, the masochist—unlike the sadist who enjoys the pain of his victim—"seems satisfied with having an accomplice: but it is the anger and contempt of the Other that the perverse staging wishes to evoke" (*What are Perversions?*, 03). Here the "other" subject has two implications: firstly, "the actual other", the concrete person's subjectivity that the masochist uses for his enjoyment, and secondly, what Jacques Lacan calls "Other" which is not the actual person, but a virtual otherness, a pure "position." The Lacanians think that perversions are means to secure the enjoyment of the Other. In every act of perversion, the primary subject must be an ethically split self: the pervert requires the other's subjectivity, but he requires it only for his own enjoyment. Because of the split in the ego, the primary subject fantasises the other to become the Other to fulfill his enjoyment which is bound with the enjoyment of the Other. Thus the masochist needs the Other's rage and strictness. But as the Other does not exist in

the literal sense, the masochist wishes the other to play the role of the Other. Benvenuto contends:

> Indeed, the masochist derives enjoyment from giving enjoyment to the sadistic Other, who punishes and humiliates him, even if this Other is not present, so to speak: a woman who lends herself to masochistic mise-en-scene embodies the Other, just as an actress embodies a character. (*What are Perversions?*, 6)

As it has already been pointed out, the punishing woman in masochism is no more than an instrument to the pervert for whom she must play the part of the Other. So the actual woman is expected by the masochist to be an actress. But the irony is that it does not happen always. It is the gap between the other and the Other that often exposes the perversion of the subject. Thus, though Mr. Burnham forbids Paulette to disclose anything of his humiliation by her for his upliftment, she reveals it to Zachary in order to seek his help to find a passage for Mauritius. She refuses to play the role of the Other. The gap between his expectation and the reality unmasks his true self. However, from another ironical angle, Paulette fulfills Mr. Burnham's masochistic desire to the core because a masochist desires an "intransigent woman", but does not desire to satisfy her desire. Indeed, his partner's desire is not an end for him, but for a means to him to procure hedonistic pleasure.

Mr. Burnham's desire to be punished and humiliated by a woman reveals his true subjectivity and identity; he is a masochist under the guise of an imperial humanitarian. The term masochism was coined by Austro-German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902) with reference to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, a nineteenth century Austrian novelist in whose works men are humiliated and tormented by beautiful women. Krafft-Ebing defined masochism as "the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force" (*Psychopathia Sexualis*, 27).

A masochist, according to Krafft-Ebing, "in sexual feeling and thought is controlled by the idea of being completely and unconditionally subjected to the will of a person of the opposite sex; of being treated by this person as by a master, humiliated and abused"(*Psychopathia Sexualis*, 28). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) of American Psychiatric Association looks at masochism as a form of mental illness. Freud also viewed masochism as perversion and identified nonsexual forms of masochism. In his article "Sexual Modernity in the Works of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll" Harry Oosterhuis argues, by taking clue from the works of Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll, that the notion of sexual modernity entails "that sexuality is a powerful, continuous, compulsive and irresistible force in human life, which is dangerous as well as wholesome, and with which everybody has to come to terms" (Paragraph 12). Different forms of non-conforming sexuality which are often categorised as perversions are seen as modes of modern sexuality, and in the notion of modern sexuality, the focus is shifted from procreation to pleasure. Though Oosterhius' proposition that modern notion of sexuality is liberating for the self is tenable to a large extent, it contradicts modernity's emphasis on self-control. Sexuality becomes paradoxical when it is appropriated for the purpose of exemplifying the modern notion of bourgeois self but is inverted from inside. But one thing is undeniable: with the advent of the nineteenth century bourgeois modernity, sexuality came to be a dominating component of self and identity.

Roy F. Baumeister has argued in his *Masochism and the Self* that sexual masochism is the original, prototypical form of masochism which is a pattern of sexual behaviour that "associates sexual pleasure with one or more of the following three features: receiving pain; relinquishing control through bondage, rules, commands, or other means; and embarrassment or humiliation"(3). What interests Baumeister about masochism is its paradoxical relation with self. He notes that the self is developed to avoid pain, but the masochist seeks pain; the

self strives for control but the masochist surrenders; and, the self aims to maximise its esteem, but the masochist willingly desires to be humiliated. Baumeister contends that masochism is a mode of escape from self. By "self" he means the body and a set of cultural signifiers that are elaborated around it. Social and interpersonal roles, commitments and obligations, memberships in groups and institutions, personal values and goals, personal history, concepts of one's own personality, and conceptions of one's potential identity—all these are added on to the body to form the notion of self. Masochism is an escape from self in the sense that it bares the self to its essence, stripping it of its formal identity. Baumeister further argues that masochism is a deconstruction of the self in that it "contradicts and undermines the meaningful definitions of self, replacing these with mere awareness of the body" (*Masochism and the Self*, 30). In other words, it prevents higher level of self awareness and promotes lower level of self awareness. The higher level of self determines one's societal roles, one's career, one's family roles, one's belief in abstract values, one's social and institutional obligations etc. Masochism systematically suspends this self and reduces an individual to his inner self. Baumeister writes:

> Masochism thus prevents the person from being aware of many meaningful aspects of his or her self-concept. Awareness is confined to a minimal, relatively meaningless, deconstructed version of self. The self is stripped of its civilized, human properties, and it ceases to be a complex, symbol-using, decision-making, valued entity. It is reduced to a body or even a mere thing. Masochism replaces identity with body. (*Masochism and the Self*, 31)

That is what happens with Mr. Burnham. The masochistic episodes with Paulette strip him of his outer self and reveal his true self which is a pervert self. This stripping takes on an added significance in case of him as he has always prided on his higher self. All his boastings — his advocacy of the universality of Free Trade, the necessity of opium trade in China to relieve

its people from the pain of living under a tyrant, his altruism in helping poor whites in India by giving them shelter and food, his preoccupation to teach people lessons of the Bible — turn out to be empty mouthing, pretensions and role-playing. The ethos of the colonial bourgeois elite is undermined and the naked self is bared before the reader. It is also the undermining of colonial bourgeois sexual morality which is the construct of modernity.

III

In the trilogy, it is Mrs. Burnham who is the ethical centre of the book. She is a *memsahib* who is committed to "many social obligations and improving causes" (*Flood of Fire*, 11-12). A *memsahib* was expected to carry on, what Thomas Babington Macaulay in his 1833 "Speech on the Government of India" called, "the pacific triumphs of reason over barbarism." In the colonial enterprise, as a civilised woman she was expected to embody "the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws" (qtd. in *The perishable Empire*, ix). In the ambience of colonial racism, she was obliged to exemplify the superiority of European ethics by her conduct. By Western standards, "men," writes John McLeod, "are meant to be active, courageous, strong; by the same token, women are meant to be passive, moral, chaste" (*Beginning Postcolonialism*, 45). She should be upright, courageous, and determined on the one hand, and on the other hand hospitable, presentable and humanitarian. As a counterpart to the male civilisers, she should embody the very best of European culture. *Memsahib* is not merely an honourable address to a white European woman of high social status by non-whites; it connotes an invocation of mystery and reverence for the colonised people. Ronald Hyam gives an extensive narration of the roles that a *mem* had to play in British India. Going beyond the stereotype of the *memsahibs* (sickly, dull, incurious, vindictive to the locals, prone to extra-marital affair, abusive to the servants and insulated in the household and more like these) who upheld new standards of

racial prejudice, Hyam posits that the "truth of the matter is that if the mems contributed to racial exclusiveness it was because they were by their very presence meant to do" (*Empire and Sexuality*, 119). Though their contact was limited in the elite class, they were supposed to play crucial roles in securing the stability of the empire. Hyam writes:

> The memsahib's function was political: to maintain 'civilised standards', especially sexual standards, and to contain the temptations of the male. 'Social distance' between ruler and ruled was the policy, especially after the Mutiny, and the memsahibs were its instrument. Men defined the rules and regulated the memsahibs' roles, and saw to it they largely restricted their activities to the European community. (*Empire and Sexuality*, 119)

The Victorian ideal of 'the Angel in the House' was given a twist in colonies. In England, the elite British woman was expected to be pure, devoted and submissive to her husband; but in the colonies, she was expected to be a strong and determined employer, gracious and hospitable hostess, occasional secretarial assistant and humanitarian social worker. Apart from her household duties like providing her husband with a stable environment, taking care of health and hygiene, supervising the servants and caring for children, she had to perform many social activities like negotiating among Europeans in case of internal conflict, giving advice and support to newcomers, arranging and presiding over parties, participating in the activities of charitable organisations like Women's Institutes, Red Cross, Young Women's Christian Association and Girl Guides. In fact, "the memsahibs were important links in maintaining the structure to white rule" (Hyam, 119). But their activities were confined mainly within the white enclave because of the imagined fear of lascivious Indian men. Further, the British officials disliked the mixing of their wives with Indians in voluntary social work. That is why the *memsahibs* were very much preoccupied with protocol and code of conduct.

When at first Mrs. Burnham appears in the novel, she impresses everybody as an awe-inspiring and imposing personality. Her position in the Garden Reach palace is of absolute command. She runs her household in strict discipline. There is hardly any scope of laxity for anybody. But she does not confine herself to the household, and commits herself to many altruistic activities. She believes that it is her duty to be "sympathetic to the poor whites of the country" (*Flood of Fire*, 29). She enlists the assistance of insolvent Zachary to repair a boat but warns him to abide by strict discipline. On the boat Zachary was passing his days well, often imagining having sex with Paulette, and relieving himself through masturbation until one hot and sultry afternoon Mrs. Burnham watched him vigorously polishing a belaying pin in waist-deep water in the river, and drew the unfortunate inference that Zachary was indulging in self-pleasure. When a little later she comes to the riverside to accost her daughter for being out in the sun, her cheeks were flushed and hair disheveled. This is the first sign of her weakness for Zachary, and the stern attitude she displays by admonishing Zachary for his immodesty at a Christian house is nothing but her attempt to dispel the stormy clouds of passion gathering in her.

After that incident, instead of issuing a termination letter to Zachary as he was expecting, she sends him, along with two books, an anonymous pamphlet titled *Onania: Or the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution* which thoroughly unsettles Zachary. The pamphlet denounces onanism as an "unnatural practice" in which a solitary person yields to "filthy imaginations"; it is a monstrous crime; it "destroys conjugal affection, perverts natural inclination, and tends to extinguish the Hopes of Posterity" (*Flood of Fire*, 60). Moreover, it causes painful and horrible diseases like phymosis, paraphymosis, stranguries, priapism and the incurable gonorrhea. The pamphlet was actually published in 1712, and it had a massive impact on contemporary society. In *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* Thomas W. Laquer postulates that the 1712 anonymous pamphlet "not only named but actually

invented a new disease" as a new, highly specific, thoroughly modern, and neatly universal engine for generating guilt, shame and anxiety; it made onanism "a creature of the Enlightenment" and an "act with serious ethical implications." Laquer observes:

> In fact, masturbation continued to be a morally fraught, much-thought-about arena of human sexuality–indeed a critical component of what came to be understood as "sexuality"–long after it stopped being regarded as a cause of real physical harm…Moral passion and medical danger grew up together, the latter as an expression of the former. But when the threat of physical harm ceased to be persuasive, the anxiety about solitary sex–first voiced around 1712–did not go away. To the contrary. (*Solitary Sex*, 17)

Masturbation became an ethical issue in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries precisely because the Enlightenment invented the notion of morality as self-governance, and that of individual self as autonomous. Mrs. Burnham's invocation of the rhetoric of the bourgeois morality seems perfectly in accordance with her position in India: she is not merely the wife of a bourgeois free trader, but also a representative of the Western Enlightenment. The irony is that she longs for unethical sexual pleasure while condemning it in others.

Zachary's first reaction, after reading the pamphlet, was that of absolute terror of being afflicted with incurable diseases. His next reaction was even more frightful: whether the pamphlet arrived accidentally or was it deliberately sent by Mrs. Burnham? Zachary could not bring himself to believe that a woman of such high discipline can know the existence of such a pamphlet, let alone she could have sent it. What haunted him more was his cognisance that Mrs. Burnham had looked into his very soul; and because of decency, he could never raise the topic before her. But the impact of the pamphlet was so deep that Zachary tried to muster all his courage to fight against onanism: thought of Paulette filled

him with severe self-loathing and, as if, the very meaning of his existence depends upon his being cured of onanism. But the more he tries to control his thoughts, the more difficult it becomes for him: breast-shaped cloud, sight of a boatwoman or even glimpse of a goat would stimulate him. His battle with himself generates profound depression and self-reproach in him. Zachary's attempt at self-reformation illustrates the Foucauldian mode of "subjectification" in which a human being actively turns himself or herself into a subject. Paul Rabinow categorises this process as the third mode — the other two being "dividing practices" and "scientific classification" — of objectification to produce a particular kind of subject:

> Foucault is primarily concerned with isolating those techniques through which the person initiates an active self-formation…These operations characteristically entail a process of self-understanding but one which is mediated by an external authority figure, be he confessor or psychoanalyst. Foucault shows us, for example, how during the nineteenth century there was a vast proliferation of scientific discourses about "sex," in part because sex was seen as holding key to self-understanding; this line culminated in Freud. (*The Foucault Reader,* 11)

In this process of mediation, the subject is oriented towards particular directions by the dominant ideology. By committing herself to cure Zachary of onanism, Mrs. Burnham appropriates the role of a secular confessor who wants to make a scientific study of Zachary's perversion to rescue him from physical and moral disintegration. But hers is the story of the pot calling the kettle black: it is she who has already deviated from hetero-normativity and longs for extramarital affair, but she is all set, ostensibly of course, to right others' perversion.

Mrs. Burnham's adroit execution of her plan at the Harbourmaster's Ball—her revealing dress, acting of suffocation, asking Zachary to unbutton her and her feathery touch across his lap first to arouse him and then to catch him unawares while aroused—shows that she has a clever scheme to seduce him in such a way that it would be beyond Zachary's wildest imagination that he is being manipulated by the *burra memsahib*. She first rebuffs him, then diagnoses him, and finally promises to be his saviour. She employs herself as Zachary's sympathetic guide, and commits herself to cure Zachary of his illness; she would dare to risk her modesty to rescue him from sin and disease. Ghosh's implicit sarcasm against colonial missionaries becomes manifest when she declares that her sacrifice is nothing compared to the great sacrifices of the missionaries thrown in the colony, the land of brutes and savages. She cites the example of her husband who has saved many wayward girls. She assumes the same guardian-like imperialistic role and promises to guide Zachary after consulting a specialist.

Thus started the series of Mrs. Burnham's letters and terrible pamphlets to Zachary and her arrangement of secret rendezvous between them. The modalities of her treatment include all available contemporary methods: to provide medical literature to educate the patient, to force the patient into rigorous confession to know the truth of his being, and ultimately to make him cognisant of his plight. In their very first daytime meeting which she arranges on the pretext of repairing furniture at her sewing room, Mrs. Burnham betrays herself while taking an account of the impact of the pamphlets she had sent to him recently: Zachary noticed that "two bright spots of colour had now appeared on her cheeks" (*Flood of Fire*, 129). From now on, Mrs. Burnham's mind becomes a site on which forces of libidinal desire and her ethical liabilities are enacted and where they are contested. She tries to stifle her sexual urge towards Zachary by deflecting herself more devoutly to his treatment; when Zachary once again fails to control his tumescence in the face of her seductive dress, she

assumes a palliative tone, and promises not to abandon him. The irony is that she is as much struggling with herself as Zachary is with himself; the difference is that she is artful, Zachary is not.

Her acting continues in her evaluation of Zachary's convalescence. Her arrangement to meet with Zachary at eleven at night at her boudoir to check his progress suggests that she has some other plans. Her new avatar at night—warlike and forbidding, with pistol at hand—implies both her exigency and insecurity. Her repeated reminder that she is from the line of the brave in that her father had been a brigadier-general in the Bengal Native Infantry reveals her psychic insecurity, and hence, like Lady Macbeth, the need to pluck up her courage. The way in which she traps Zachary to confess the minutiae history of his malady makes her the Western representative who deploys the scientific method—what Foucault calls *scientia sexualis*—to discover the truth of individual sexuality. In this equation of sex with truth and falsehood, confession becomes the central means to know, manage and control human sexuality through bourgeois power structure. Foucault puts it:

> …the confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth […]. One confesses—or is forced to confess. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from the person by violence or threat; it is driven from its hiding place in the soul, or extracted from the body. (*The History of Sexuality: I*, 59)

Mrs. Burnham's deployment of this confessional technique brings Zachary to her complete control. "In the confession," writes Barry Smart, "truth and sex have been joined and from it has evolved a knowledge of the subject" (*Michel Foucault*, 98). Having established her command over Zachary, the seductress now plays with him. She traps and threatens him; and her planned enquiry of Zachary's sexual history is as much to know Zachary's perversions

and his affair with Paulette as her Husband's. But her sudden transformation into a soft, yielding woman after learning of her husband's perversion is nothing but the part of her play-acting to entangle Zachary into sexual escapades. Once she succeeds in having passionate sex with Zachary, the real woman inside her begins to reveal herself. That her self-appointed guardianship of Zachary was nothing but her ploy to use Zachary becomes manifest now.

Stormy night it was, and electrifying was their sex, an explosion of pent-up passions. But as soon as it was over, she returns to her usual self: cautious, moralistic and determined. She warns him of the practical dangers as well as the implausibility of continuing their relation. Having passed seven weeks in the midst of apprehension after that night, when Zachary meets her at Mr. Doughty's place, not only does she completely ignore him, but pretends not to remember his name; she snubbed him as a nobody, a mere *mystery* (that is, a carpenter or a mechanic) to her. Later she explains why she has to be so grumpy towards him in public:

> '…The reason I cannot bear to look at you in company is that I am gubbrowed half to death.'
>
> 'Why?'
>
> 'I am stricken with terror that my face will give away the gollmaul that wells up in me at the very sight of you!' (*Flood of Fire*, 234)

This confession shows the precarious situation she was in: in public she is the *burra memsahib*, but in private she is the playful mistress. The irony of her situation is that she uses the hard shell of her appearance to cover up the insecure woman beneath. For her, the need of sexual gratification is as important as her social position. In fact, she loves both her status as Mrs. Burnham and his young friend.

In his essay "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness"[2] Sigmund Freud contended that in modern society the main reason for nervous illness of people, especially those of women, is "the harmful suppression of sexual life in civilized peoples (or classes) by the 'civilized' sexual morality prevailing in them" (88). By "civilized sexual morality" Freud means the third stage in the development of civilisation at which only legitimate reproduction is permitted as a sexual aim and all sexual activity outside marriage is condemned. Such restrictions within marriage tell on the psyche of women who have been brought up in accordance with the civilisational requirements, with the result that "in the conflict between her desires and her sense of duty she once again takes refuge in neurosis" (Freud, 97). It is not for nothing Mrs. Burnahm is irresistibly attracted towards well-built young Zachary: not only is she denied her real love, but also is married off to a *sahib* who is fifteen years her senior. Hers was the marriage of convenience, and their sexual relation was a failure because of her frigidity due to their age difference. It is not that she did not know how to make love as she appears to be adroit in it in her sleeping with Zachary; rather she did not have any feeling of love for her husband. Yet she managed to content herself with her *sahib* husband because she knows very well that feelings have to be contained in order to be a *memsahib*. The debate between Mrs. Burnham and Paulette in *Sea of Poppies* on love and worldly privileges is, in a way, central to the trilogy's exploration of colonial sexuality and its repercussions. When penniless, homeless and parentless Paulette refuses the marriage proposal of Justice Kendalbushe, Mrs. Burnham is at a loss to comprehend how can an impoverished and lorn girl like Paulette decline such 'fine a shikar' as Mr. Kendalbushe. Mrs. Burnham elaborates her pet theory regarding the profession of *memsahib*. "Sentiments, my dear puggly," she explains to Paulette, "are for dhobis and dashis. We mems can't let that kind of thing get in the way! No, dear, let me tell you—you're lucky to have a judge in your sights and you mustn't let banduk waver" (*Flood of Fire*, 274). The enthusiasm and exigency

in her metaphoric Anglo-Indian dialogue implies the imperative of not missing the opportunity of hunting down a rich husband at any cost. Ironically, this is also a kind of education of desire, for it requires either blocking the sentiments or sublimating them. The difference in attitudes between Mrs. Burnham and Paulette underpins the difference in mindsets of a colonial woman and a relatively free woman who is not to carry the legacy of colonial authority. Paulette values genuine love more than worldly possessions and imposed role-playing. That is why she unambiguously apprises Mrs. Burnham that she cannot marry a man whom she cannot love; she cannot marry the judge who is old enough to be her father. The conversation between the two ladies makes clear that priorities differ from person to person on the basis of ideological affiliation. Ghosh writes:

> 'Oh Madame,' said Paulette, weeping freely now, but are not the things of this world were mere dross when weighed against love?
>
> 'Love?' said Mrs Burnham, in mounting astonishment. 'What on earth are you bucking about? My dear Puggly, with your prospects, you can't be letting your shokes run away with you. I know the judge is not as young as he might be, but he's certainly not past giving you a butcha or two before he slips into his dotage. And after that, dear, why, there's nothing a mem needs that can't be cured by a long bath and a couple of cushy-girls. Believe me, Puggly, there's a lot to be said for men of that age. No badmashee at all hours of the night, for one thing. I can tell you, dear, there's nothing more annoying than to be puckraowed just when you're looking forward to a sip of laudanum and a nice sleep." (*Sea of Poppies*, 274)

Paulette thinks that such a life is nothing but a form of punishment. But Mrs. Burnham opines that it would be the best sort of life because before long the old judge will pass away and then

Paulette can go with all the "cuzzanah" (that is, money) of the revered deceased man to Paris where she will easily hook some impoverished duke or marquis. Paulette shudders at the thought of selling her youth and love for wealth. Mrs. Burnham thinks that Paulette can learn to love the old judge as long as he would be alive. But Paulette differs in that one cannot learn to love; rather love comes in a sudden unforeseen way, often in coup de fourde, that is, love at first sight. Mrs. Burnham immediately suspects Paulette to be in love with the American (actually a mulatto) sailor Zachary Reid. She warns Paulette of the uselessness of such love of a poor white woman like Paulette for a sailor, for the young seaman may be handsome but he does not have money and his life is always at risk. On the contrary, an old but rich husband can provide her worldly comfort; she would be served by many servants whereas she herself may end up as a servant if she imprudently marries the young sailor. When Paulette expresses her belief that true love requires full devotion, Mrs. Burnham suspects if she has compromised her honour with Zachary, and is fiercely bent on to know the worst of it. Little did she know that she herself will compromise her honour shortly with the same Zachary, and that her theory of love will be a boomerang upon her, totally wrecking her career and life of a *memsahib*. She lays bare her heart before a flummoxed Zachary:

> Don't you know that a memsahib cannot allow mere feelings to get in her way of her career? Sentiments are for dhobis and dashies, not for women like us: that is what my mother taught me and it is what I shall teach my daughter. (*Flood of Fire*, 211)

In her career of *memsahib*, she prioritises her social standing by compromising her libidinal urge, and later as her libido takes priority over her, the fear of compromising her social standing does her in: she gets stranded at the crossroad between desire and duty.

A person's internalisation of the rules and customs creates a subjectivity which is achieved at the cost of the real self. In pursuit of her dream of becoming a *memsahib*, Mrs. Burnham not only submits herself to a loveless marriage, but also compromises her conscience: given the affluence and luxury gifted to her by her husband, she does not mind his extramarital affairs. She is hardly surprised at his perverted gesture towards Paulette. As for herself, she is actually a bisexual, drawn towards both young women and men. She surprises Zachary by revealing that she does not bother about her husband's long absence as the household maids and cushy girls satisfy her. Freud points out in the same essay:

> As a further consequence of the difficulties to which normal sexual life has become subject, one must mention the spread of homosexual satisfaction; those whose homosexuality is due to their constitution or was acquired in childhood are now joined by many others, for whom, in their mature years, the mainstream of the libido has been blocked off and the homosexual side-channel has consequently widened. ("'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness,"101)

As for her, she has willingly blocked her libido to achieve her social status, and then seeks to satisfy her libidinal urge through the means that are not usually sanctioned by society. The truth about her sexuality is revealed as she confesses that she at first saw Zachary "as a rival, rather than a lover" because he seemed to confound her plan for Paulette (*Flood of Fire*, 224). Despite the façade of respectability both Mr. Burnham and Mrs. Burnham felt trapped in the pulls of their libidinal substrate.

According to Jacques Lacan, as a person enters into the arena of language as he grows up, his psyche gets permeated by the Symbolic. It is one of the three orders (the other two being the Imaginary and the Real) that structure human subjectivity. It is the domain of law

and culture that makes up a particular society. It is the impersonal system that not only precedes an individual, but also regulates and controls his desire. "To be fully human," writes Sean Homer, "we are *subjected* to this symbolic order – the order of language, of discourse; we cannot escape it, although as a structure it escapes us" (*Jacques Lacan*, 44).The Symbolic works within the domain of the big Other which refers to the language which is alien to the subject, but into which the subject must be inscribed if he/she is to exist as a human being. Lacan famously postulated that "the unconscious is the Other's discourse" (*Ecrits*, 10), and "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 235). In Lacanian paradigm, man's desire is always centered around a lack which is created by the subject's entry into the realm of the Symbolic and the intervention of—in the dyadic relation between child and mother—the Name-of-the-Father which, according to Joel Dor, "designates the recognition of a symbolic function defined in the place from which the law exercises its influence" (*Introduction to the Reading of Lacan*, 116-7). In contrast to "need" and "demand", "desire", for Lacan, is inextricably bound up with the internalisation of social norms. Dino Felluga sums this up well:

> Desire, in other words, has little to do with material sexuality for Lacan; it is caught up, rather, in social structures and strictures, in the fantasy version of reality that forever dominated our lives after our entrance into language … In a sense, our desire is properly never our own, but is created through fantasies that are caught up in cultural ideologies rather than material sexuality. (Paragraph 2)

The Symbolic alienates the subject from its own bodily drives, and makes it a subject of the signifier, the language. Needless to say, the Lacanian subject is essentially a split self who is always caught at the crossroad between the pre-linguistic fullness (What Lacan named the Real) and the desire-generating lack in the Symbolic.

As for Mrs. Burnham, she represses her instinctual desires and gives herself in to the big Other by internalising its dictates. As one's desire is never one's own, hers was fixed by her parents: she has to be a *memsahib* in order to have an affluent life and to enjoy powerful social standing. She endeavoured to forget her real love Captain Mee when her insolvent parents packed her away from Ranchi to Calcutta, and then, married her off to Mr. Burnham, the promising opium merchant. No doubt, she was powerless to resist it, but the way she fits herself in the role of a *memsahib* evidently indicates how she has allowed her psyche to be annexed by the Symbolic. Her mannerism, command in the household, language and her overt morality apparently make her an ideal *memsahib*. Even her wish to be strong and her regular reminder that she is a brigadier's brave daughter who can even handle a pistol indicate how she has internalised the colonial imperative of dominance of masculinity over femininity; she enacts the "suppression of one's self for the sake of an imposed imperial identity" (*The Intimate Enemy*, 40). It is not that she is not aware of her mask of self-complacency and self-confidence; but what disconcerts her is her fear to face her repressed self. What interests Lacan is that the paternal law internalised by the subject (the process of formation of the superego) cannot completely take hold of him as the superego undermines its own workings. Sean Homer puts the complex modalities of the superego thus:

> The law, in other words, is founded upon that which it seeks to exclude, or, to put it another way, the desire to break and transgress the law is the very precondition for the existence of the law itself…The superego, therefore, is at once the law and its own destruction or that which undermines the law. (*Jacques Lacan*, 58)

Mrs. Burnham's simultaneous adherence to the sanctity of the colonial morality and her transgression of it illustrates this process. No doubt, inhibited is her first love from developing into marital ties, and circumscribed are her sexual energies in her marriage; but

once she transgresses the boundary of outer civility, her real self finds release. This is most evident in her love-making with Zachary: the cautious, dainty, debonair woman for whom decorum was most important now speaks in a playfully inventive way; the woman who once refused to soil her lips by uttering filthy words to describe Zachary's self-pollution now throws arousing words. She completely fascinates Zachary "not just with her body but also with her words" (*Flood of Fire*, 207): she metaphorically calls Zachary's organ as "bawhawdersepoy" (*Flood of Fire*, 208); sensuously exclaims, "You have made a jellybee of your poor Mrs Burnham" (*Flood of Fire*, 208); playfully deploys innovative and amorous phrases like "It's my turn now, to bajow your ghanta" (*Flood of Fire*, 209). "She deploys," writes Ghosh, "these strings of words with the skill of an expert angler, teasing, mocking, and egging him on to further advances in the art of the puckrow" (*Flood of Fire*, 209). But completely permeated as her psyche was by the colonial civilisational discourse, she is always haunted by it, even at climatic moment of sex. Thus, even when Zachary addresses her as "Cathy" at the orgasmic moment, she is visibly startled:

> 'What? What was that you called me?'
>
> 'Cathy.'
>
> 'No, my dear no!' she cried, twitching her hips in such a way as to abruptly unbivouack the sepoy.
>
> 'I am, and must remain, Mrs. Burnham to you – and you must remain Mr. Reid to me. If we permit ourselves to lapse into "Zachs" and "Cathies" in private then you may be sure that our tongues will ambush us one day when we are in company… No, dear, it will not hoga. "Mrs Burnham" and "Mr Reid" we are, and so we must remain.' (*Flood of Fire*, 208)

By willfully violating the social law, she derives, perhaps, the pleasure of transgression. Alex Clark in his the *Guardian* review of *Flood of Fire* observes: "Mrs Burnham's Anglo-Indian vocab is a product of her colonial upbringing; her insistence that the lovers address each other, even in bed, as Mr. Reid and Mrs. Burnham is an expression of terror–not only of their adultery being exposed but also of radically upsetting established hierarchies" (Paragraph 5). Her psyche becomes a contested site between pleasure and the law which constantly threaten each other. There is no easy escape for her from this tension, and it is this tension which engenders a sense of guilt in her which only gets aggravated by her sudden confrontation, after the gap of seventeen years, with her former lover Captain Mee, a heart-broken and resigned man who has wasted away his life because of his unfulfilled love. After the loss of the real object of her love, her libido is metonymically transferred from one object to another: from maids to Paulette to Zachary. As she meets her real love, her psychic trauma is rekindled and gradually she gets deeply disturbed; she turned pale and "began to tremble like a leaf" as they meet (*Flood of Fire,* 432). The self-confident, decorum-obsessed and self-certified humanitarian *memsahib* is now a bundle of angst and guilt. In *Civilisation and its Discontents* Freud contends that when the inherent aggressivity of men faces the strictures of civilisation, it is directed back to the ego from where it came, and there it became the super-ego which manifests itself as "conscience.""The tension", postulated Freud, "between the stern super-ego and the ego that is subject to it is what we call a 'sense of guilt'; this manifests itself as a need for punishment" (*Civilisation and its Discontents,* 61). In this state, an individual is afraid of an external authority for the possibility of losing its love and of being punished by it; it is kind of social anxiety. But renunciation of enjoyment in the fear of being found out by the external authority does not guarantee happiness as the internalised authority, the "consciousness of guilt" will continue to haunt the individual, resulting in "an enduring inner unhappiness" and pushing him towards repentance (*Civilisation and its*

Discontents, 64). Even her sense of guilt is manifest as early as her first liaison with Zachary; no sooner had they finished than she retorted:

> Tomorrow we will wake to an eternity of guilt and remorse. Since we have only this one night together, we may as well deserve our punishment. (*Flood of Fire*, 169)

Mrs. Burnham's gradual descent into profound uneasiness and her fervent wish to unite Paulette with Zachary are indicative of the working of the sense of guilt in her. Her guilt is only aggravated as she is blackmailed by Zachary who traps Capatin Mee by threatening to reveal the secret between her and the Captain in order to force him to accept Mr. Burnham's unfair business proposal. In such a situation, what engulfs an individual is, what Freud calls, the death drive which rules the world jointly with the Eros or the love-drive. It is the silent force which not only induces in man "a hostility of each against all and all against each" (*Civilisation and its Discontents*, 58), but also generates the "suicidal tendency" (*Ecrits*, 152). Mrs. Burnham's conscious decision to "ride out the storm on the Anahita" was, perhaps, her only way out to get rid of the dilemma between love and duty (*Flood of Fire*, 589).

Mrs. Burnham's untimely death is a reminder of the price one has to pay if one becomes trapped in an impasse of ideology and passion. No doubt, she had ingeniously manipulated the colonial ideals for her sexual need, but she has to accomplish it at the cost of her life. Ghosh has let all the civilisers blow their bubbles hard before pricking them. But as for Mrs. Burnham, Ghosh has not only questioned the ethical superiority of the Europeans by making her a *memsahib* of double standard but also has made her a fragile, insecure creature deprived of love and sympathy. By failing to choose between her own desire and the desire of the Other, she is alienated from her true self. Her descent from a *memsahib* to a mistress and the consequent trauma leading to her demise are not psychologically unfounded. By digging

deep in her mind and letting her undergo the terrible psychic trauma, Ghosh has thoroughly humanised her. It is Ghosh's nuanced critique of colonial morality through human predicament that makes the novel a fascinating read.

IV

Though the context of debauchery is different in the cases of Mr. Burnham and Mrs. Burnham, the common point between them is that both transgress the law they profess to abide by. Though they overtly tried to set an ideal to be emulated by the supposedly inferior, racially different people, they did transgress the boundaries fixed by them for the sake of pleasure. In the complex intertwining of power and pleasure, especially in case of bourgeois colonisers, pleasure is antithetical to power. There is not only pleasure in transgression but pleasure itself is transgressive. The power relation between the coloniser and the colonised in the nineteenth century socio-political context of India paved way for over-emphasis on the imperative of controlling pleasure only to give it, ironically perhaps, free reign. Implicit categories of 'perverse' and 'normal' were constructed so that these categories could be dismantled through the transgressive forces of pleasure. The boundary between acceptable sexuality and non-acceptable sexuality was brought into existence not merely for securing colonial dominance, but for overstepping those boundaries also. Both Mr. Burnham and Mrs. Burnham, despite their overt insistence on sententious sexual ethics, could not restrict themselves in becoming slaves to pleasure. It seems that the European superiority has to be repeatedly asserted to cover up its hollowness. Whether the categories or labels of pervert or deviant are applied to them or not, it seems that their selves are not in control of them. What is at stake because of this failure is their identity. Mr. Burnham is a colonial trader, spokesperson of Free Trade and the cultural superiority of the West over the East, but at the

same time he is a pervert and masochist. Mrs. Burnham is a *memsahib* and humanitarian but at the same time she is a bisexual and adulterer. Both of them turn out to be humbug. It is by exposing their mask of cant, Ghosh has presented his critique of colonial sexuality. It is through the gap between their covert self and overt self, Ghosh has tried to show that the experiment on modern notions of gender, sexuality and self in colonies was a failure. And interestingly, the failure is not caused by external forces; rather it is caused by irresistible internal impulsions before which the colonial rhetoric of self-assertion proves to be an ineffective and hypocritical endeavour. They exemplify that despite all the emphases on the 'education of desire' by the colonial authority, desire remains uncontrolled. The failure of the Burnham couple to live up to colonial sexual standard only brings out the profound ironies of the universal paradigm of colonial sexual ethics.

Mr. Burnham and Mrs. Burnham show that the sexual identity of the colonisers is a mask to hide internal fragmentation of self. They are not what they seem to be. Once their mask of sanctity is taken off, the ironies of the sexual righteousness of the colonisers get revealed. Having exposed the double-standard of sexual ethics of the colonisers, let us turn to the role of gender in resistance to colonial hegemony. The next chapter deals with this issue with reference to Baboo Nobokrishna Panda.

Notes

1. In *Empire and Sexuality* Ronald Hyam has meticulously revealed the scandalous life of many colonial administrators. Palmerstone (1784-1865), who served as the Secretary of War from 1809 to 1828 and as the Foreign Secretary from 1830 to 1841 before becoming Prime Minister twice in 1855 and in 1859, had the reputation of maintaining a mistress (Emily Lamb, widow of Peter Leopold Louis Francis Nassau Cleavering-

Cowper, 5th Earl Cowper, and sister of William Lamb, 2nd Viscount Melbourne, Prime Minister) for twenty-eight years before marrying her in 1839. Even Gladstone (1809-1898) who served as a Prime Minister four times within the span of 1868-94 had extramarital emotional support in Mrs. Thistlethwaite, a high-class courtesan. In India, many colonial administrators had extramarital way of gratifying sexual desire. Wellesley lived a life of such scandalous tempestuousness that his brother Wellington wished him to be castrated. Metcalfe who acted as a Governor-General from 1835 to 1836 took an Indian mistress and fathered three sons between 1809 and 1817. Lord Auckland, viceroy from 1836 to 1842 was unmarried, and his sisters acted as hostesses for him. Suspicion loomed large about the consistently handsome looks of their chosen aids-de-camp. Lord Northbrook, Viceroy from 1872 to 1876 sought dubious consolation from a notorious white woman called Mrs. Searle after the untimely demise of his wife in 1867. His successor, Lord Lytton, had also a strong flirtatious streak. There are numerous other examples in 1830s and 1840s, especially among the Punjabi administrators who were regarded as 'guardian of India.' The private life of Henry Lawrence itself is a glaring example of the sexual promiscuity of the colonisers. These historical examples of sexual escapades show the underbelly of colonial sexuality.

2. The essay was first published in 1908. It is included in David Mclintock's 2002 translation of *Civilizations and its Discontents*. For the influence of the essay on Freud's later writing, one may see Leo Bersani's introduction to *Civilizations and its Discontents*.