Chapter One

Colonial Modernity and Cultural Identity

> My argument is that because of the way in which the history of our modernity has been intertwined with the history of colonialism, we have never quite been able to believe that there exists a universal domain of free discourse, unfettered by differences of race or nationality. Somehow, from the very beginning, we have made a shrewd guess that given the close proximity between modern knowledges and modern regimes of power, we would forever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would we be taken as its producers. It is for this reason that we have tried, for over a hundred years, to take our eyes away from this chimera of universal modernity and clear a space where we might become the creators of our own modernity.
>
> —Partha Chatterjee ("Our Modernity," 146)

I

As the two key phrases in the title of the dissertation are 'cultural identity' and 'colonial modernity,' it would be advisable to clarify these concepts at first, and then to show how they can be related. The phrase 'colonial modernity' evokes a sense of complex relation between two apparently distinct phenomena—colonialism and modernity. Colonialism implies "the specific form of cultural exploitation that developed with the expansion of

Europe over the last 400 years" (*Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 44). Ania Loomba defines colonialism "as the conquest and control of other people's land and goods" (*Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 8). Modernity implies scientific and technological developments which helped dispel the darkness of superstitious and ignorant middle ages. At one level they seem to be unrelated developments; but closer inspection reveals that they are not only connected but also are complementary. Their mutual relation gets disclosed when one discovers that colonialism used the pretense of spreading modernity in the colony, and thereby masked its real motive of plunder and domination. It is for this reason colonial modernity is a paradox: it suppresses on the pretext of emancipation.

In 'Prologue' to *Colonial Modernity: Indian perspectives* (2011), the editor Pradip Basu describes colonial modernity as "the paradoxical reception of the European project of Enlightenment modernity by the rest of the world, whereby non-Europeans are assigned subjectness precisely at the moment of the denial of their historical agency" (1). Two points are to be noted here. First, colonial modernity is a European project. To be specific, it is the project of the Enlightenment which is received by non-Europeans paradoxically. It means that colonial modernity is accepted as well as questioned, dismantled and undermined by the colonised. Second, colonial modernity is a mechanism which endows the colonised with 'subjectness' while at the same time denying them historical agency. 'Subjectness' should be understood as a particular kind of subjectivity and by extension, identity. 'Historical agency' should be understood as the subject's ability to act on their own, and thus, to be able to create their own history. History here means a linear journey toward progress and civilisational developments. So what colonial modernity does is to construct a particular kind of subject who, by internalising the colonial ethos, would be ever submissive to the colonisers. This process of creating subjects is not unilateral because the subjects often resist, undermine,

break away from and subvert the ideological, epistemological and cultural domination effected by colonial modernity.

It is evident that the phrase 'colonial modernity' merges two massive events, namely colonialism and modernity, which made huge, unprecedented, "spectacular" transformations in the world in the last five hundred years (Gillen and Ghosh, 1). In fact, a new kind of world order has been brought into being by colonialism and modernity. Almost everything in the world—be it economy or technology or nations or nature or man's subjectivity and identity—is affected by them on a long-term basis. In order to understand how these two phenomena complement each other, we have to look into the concepts of the Argentine decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo.

Mignolo has intensively investigated the interrelation between colonialism and modernity from decolonial[1] perspectives and suggested ways to resist the neocolonial hegemony backed by modernity. In a series of articles and books Mignolo puts forward his ideas on coloniality, modernity, theopolitics and egopolitics of knowledge, geopolitics and bodypolitics of knowledge, border thinking, and similar concepts associated with decoloniality. Central to Mignolo's argument in almost all his writings is the assertion that coloniality is the darker side of modernity. There is no coloniality without modernity and there is no modernity without coloniality. Consequently, colonialism has imposed and continues to impose Western modernity upon the colonised as a universal paradigm. Decolonial thinking, writing and activism attempt to provide an analytic, from the perspectives of the colonised, of the epistemic violence and cultural hegemony of colonialism and modernity, and thus to pave the path for epistemic delinking which would eventually create a space for a more accommodative and less exploitative world order.

According to Mignolo, the notion of coloniality was first espoused in the 1980s by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano. Mignolo's idea of the dyad between modernity and coloniality is deeply influenced by Quijano's essay "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality." In this ground-breaking essay Quijano contends that European colonialism consolidated its domination over non-European countries with the help of "the cultural complex known as European modernity/rationality" (25). In other words, modernity is the key player in marking out the colonial difference and in producing 'coloniality.' Quijano characterises coloniality as the most general form of domination in post-colonial times. The domination is general because it entangles, without direct political control, almost every sphere of life. In other words, European paradigm is normalised in such a way that it has become the standard way of life for the subjugated. Colonialism propagated modernity as "a universal paradigm of knowledge" (Quijano, 26), and European culture as "a universal cultural model" (Quijano, 23). As a result, the "imaginary of the non-European cultures could hardly exist today and above all, reproduce itself outside of those relations"(Quijano, 23). This can be called cultural Europeanisation in neocolonial times. Every field in the life of common people—be it education, economy or health—has become unthinkable outside European standards. This presumed inequality between Europeans and non-Europeans generates, what Quijano calls, 'coloniality of power.' It is constituted by four factors: (a) racial classification of peoples across the globe, (b) institutional underpinnings to maintain the racial classification, (c) categorisation of spaces in accordance with the racial categorisations, (d) a new epistemology to establish a new matrix of power. It is quite evident that 'coloniality of power' established the repressive power structure of colonialism by introducing European epistemology as the only authentic knowledge in the world. The subjugation of the colonised by the coloniser was justified on the ground of the superior epistemology of the coloniser. Mignolo describes 'coloniality of power' as "a conflict of knowledges and structures of power" (*Local*

Histories/Global Designs, 16). Now it is proven that European coloniality is more long lasting than European colonialism.

Mignolo takes the cue from Quijano and contends in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (hence referred to as *The Darker Side*) that coloniality is the "hidden agenda (and darker side) of modernity" (*The Darker Side*, 2). The narrative of modernity is not confined to Europe only. It extends to the colonies as the justificatory logic of colonialism. Modernity's European existence is only half of the story; the missing other half can be found in colonial history. The overt agendas of modernity, no doubt, are "salvation, progress, development, modernization and democracy" (*The Darker Side*, 14); but the covert agendas of modernity are the control, domination and exploitation of the colonies. Mignolo's basic contention is:

> "…modernity" is a complex narrative whose point of origination was Europe; a narrative that builds Western civilization by celebrating its achievements while hiding at the same time its darker side, "coloniality." *Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity—there is no modernity without coloniality*. (*The Darker Side*, 2-3) [emphases mine]

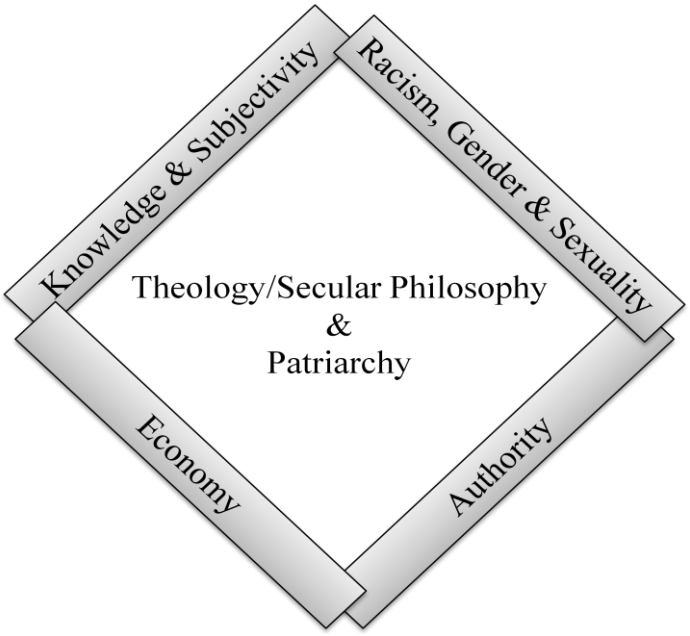
So, as the passage shows, modernity and coloniality are not separate entities; rather, they are mutually inclusive. Indeed, they are obverse and reverse of the same coin. Modernity's secret side is coloniality which is a mechanism for subjugating the colonised and coloniality's apparent brighter side is modernity which is a mechanism to usher in the light of civilisation and progress in the colonies.

Coloniality is the underbelly of modernity because, on the pretext of bringing rationality and progress in the colonies, it appropriates non-European lands, categorises non-European peoples as savage, and imposes upon them its own form of ideological, political

and economic domination. Mass murder, economic plunder, slave trade, torture, violence, destruction of non-European civilisations etc. are some of the unpalatable, less acknowledged facts that accompanied the journey of modernity from Europe to the rest of the world. More pernicious than these, perhaps, is the epistemic colonisation propagated by modernity. To impose one system of knowledge as universal upon others is unwholesome for human life and also for the whole planet. But this is precisely what European imperialism did to non-European peoples in the last 500 years. The European knowledge system or what Mignolo calls the 'Western Code' is used for the benefit of a small portion of humanity at the cost of the major portion. The projection of Western epistemology as universal started during the Renaissance and reached its height during the Enlightenment. European imperialism in non-European places has been instrumental in establishing and consolidating the legitimacy of the 'Western Code' and at the same time, in delegitimising non-European epistemologies. It is not that Western modernity is itself an insignificant event; there is no denying that it is a colossal phenomenon in human history. It is an enormous addition to the already existing various forms of culture and civilisation in the world. But to posit it as "the point of arrival of human history and the model for the entire planet" is epistemic violence (*The Darker Side*, xiv). But that is what has happened. This is the darker side of modernity, and it is this darker side which formed the logic of coloniality. Hence, "coloniality is constitutive of modernity; that coloniality was the secret shame of the family, kept in the attic, out of the view of friends and family" (*The Darker Side*, xxi).

But how did modernity establish itself as a universal model? Mignolo contends that modernity achieved its universality by forming, what he calls, 'the colonial matrix of power.' Modernity played a crucial role in colonial project by producing this matrix of power. This matrix is very much in operation in today's post-colonial, globalised world because the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality are the two sides of globalisation. Mignolo

identifies ‘the colonial matrix of power’ as “a structure of control and management of authority, economy, subjectivity, gender and sexual norms” based on Eurocentric epistemology (*The Darker Side*, 7). This matrix is constituted by “four interrelated domains: control of the economy, of authority, of gender and sexuality, and of knowledge and subjectivity” (*The Darker Side*, 8). Mignolo labels these four fields as four “heads” that are erected upon two “legs,” the racial and patriarchal pillars of knowledge (*The Darker Side*, 8). Here is Mignolo’s diagram of colonial matrix of power:



Mignolo calls ‘the colonial matrix of power’ “a four-headed and two-legged monster” that ensured the consolidation of European colonial occupation. Of the four heads or axes, two—knowledge and gender and sexuality—form the thrust area in my dissertation. I have tried to

show how in Ghosh's novels knowledge and sexuality and gender associated with colonialism and modernity have been problematised by cultural identity of certain characters.

However, among the four heads, the head of knowledge is, as it has already been mentioned, most important because it is the coloniser's weapon to determine what is legitimate and what is illegitimate for the colonised. Epistemic colonisation, no doubt, is the most powerful form of colonisation because if the indigenous knowledge is discredited, the colonised's acceptance of inferiority will continue eternally. Epistemic colonisation, in fact, subsumes the very self of the colonised. Mignolo writes:

> Knowledge in colonial matrix of power was a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it was mediation to the ontology of the world as well as a way of being in the world (subjectivity). On the other hand, *as far as knowledge was conceived imperially as true knowledge, it became a commodity to be exported to those whose knowledge was deviant or non-modern according to Christian theology and later on, secular philosophy and sciences*." (*The Darker Side*, 13) [emphases mine]

Two points are evident here: first, knowledge constitutes the subjectivity of a person. In other words, epistemology plays a vital role in making a person what he is. Second, colonialism propounded a particular form of knowledge as the only legitimate knowledge. This is the knowledge of modernity which colonialism appropriated and deployed as universal. In this way, the epistemology of modernity became totalitarian and hegemonic. This knowledge was formulated first through theopolitics and then it mutated to egopolitics. This form of knowledge in its totality is called by Mignolo as 'the hubris of zero point.' It is a kind of knowledge which imposes 'truth without parenthesis' upon the colonised. The shift from theopolitics to egopolitics of knowledge did not alter the hegemonic nature of knowledge

because the actors in both the cases were white, European, Christian males who, besides controlling the production and management of knowledge, also "assumed heterosexual relations as the norm—consequently they also classified gender distinctions and sexual normativity" (*The Darker Side*, 9). It is important to remember that patriarchy is one of the supporting pillars of 'the colonial matrix of power.' Colonialism made patriarchal assumptions regarding sexuality and gender roles. These assumptions and roles were manufactured by modernity. Internally, colonialism was a bourgeois project, and it appropriated and deployed strict heterosexuality as the only form of legitimate sexuality. The sexual sanctity of Europeans was one of the parameters of their cultural superiority. The colonisers also imposed their notion of sexuality and gender upon the colonised as another universal paradigm. In reality, however, the colonisers themselves violated their own norms, and their imposition of gender roles was resisted and undermined by the colonised in various ways. Colonialism introduced in the colonies a whole new parameters relating to gender and sexuality. New categories like 'man', 'woman,' 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' came into being. Heterosexuality became the only legitimate form of sexuality. Mignolo states that 'the colonial matrix of power' deployed a "global gender/sex hierarchy that privileged males over females and European patriarchy over other forms of gender configuration and sexual relations" (*The Darker Side,* 18). In colonial encounter, gender is the site where patriarchy, racism and modernity intersect to ensure European dominance over the rest of the world. My study intends to understand Ghosh's problematisation of sexuality and gender with reference to *The Ibis Trilogy*.

The colonial matrix of power started its journey in the sixteenth century, as it has been already mentioned, through theopolitics of knowledge which evolved into egopolitics of knowledge. Mignolo thinks that coloniality had its origin in Christian theology or theopolitics of knowledge in which God was the guarantor of knowledge. Gradually science and secular

philosophy took the place of God, and the emphasis was given on Reason. In this way, the colonial matrix came to be underpinned by secular epistemology. In other words, theopolitics of knowledge was replaced by egopolitics of knowledge. This rationality-backed secular epistemology was deployed by the colonisers as the only legitimate form of knowledge that would emancipate humanity. Western epistemology became the determining factor of human identity and sexual norms in Asia and Africa. From the seventeenth century onwards, "secularism displaced God as the guarantor of knowledge, placing Man and Reason in God's stead, and centralized the Ego" (*The Darker Side*, 15). This is the shift from theopolitics of knowledge to egopolitics of knowledge.

Mignolo charts the evolution of knowledge in the context of colonialism and modernity in an essay titled "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference." With the rise of European capitalism, the assertion of the impossibility of other categories of knowledge contributed to "a conceptualization of knowledge to a geopolitical space (Western Europe) and erased the possibility of thinking about a conceptualization and distribution of knowledge emanating from other local histories (China, India, Islam, etc.)"("The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," 96). Gradually, Western knowledge became a totality which engulfed other knowledges and excluded them from the sphere of legitimate knowledge. It dismissed other forms of knowledge as non-knowledge and presented itself as universal. The shift from theopolitics of knowledge to egopolitics of knowledge reached its height during the Enlightenment. It may seem that theopolitics of knowledge and egopolitics of knowledge are quite opposite in their orientations. They are different certainly; but when it comes to 'the colonial matrix of power,' they become complementary. According to Mignolo,

> Western knowledge, cast in Western imperial languages, was theo-politically and ego-politically founded. *Such foundations legitimized the assumptions and*

> *claims that knowledge was beyond bodies and places, and that Christian theology and secular philosophy and science were limits of knowledge-making, beyond and besides which all knowledge was lacking: folklore, myth traditional knowledge were invented to legitimize imperial epistemology.* (*The Darker Side*, 141-142) [emphases mine]

As the passage shows, European knowledge became the only valid form of knowledge. European knowledge is imperialist in nature because it discredits non-European forms of knowledge as well as the so-called non-standard forms of knowledge like oral stories, myth and folklore. Only Europeans are supposed to be the authentic persons to decide everything for the entire planet. The Cartesian dictum 'I think, therefore I am' implies a universal, transcendental subject whose reasoning ability is applicable to the whole planet. The modern man is a European, white, Christian and male who knows what is best for everybody all over the globe. European knowledge became 'truth without parenthesis' which would emancipate the rest of the world from barbarism and primitivism. So, beneath the emancipatory rhetoric of modernity, there was the imperial negation, suppression and dismissal of non-European knowledges. But can other forms of knowledge really be suppressed and dismissed forever? The answer is that they cannot be subordinated eternally. Apart from politics, cultural representations can play important roles in holding up the non-European forms of knowledge. Mignolo thinks that bodypolitics and geopolitics of knowledge are not only means to resist colonial hegemony but also are means of forming of knowledge systems which are not dependent on European knowledge system. Literature is a significant medium to articulate bodypolitics and geopolitics of knowledge. My study attempts to locate such bodypolitics and geopolitics of knowledge in Ghosh's novels.

The function of decolonial thinking is to unmask how 'the colonial matrix of power' operates in the epistemological subordination of the colonised. In doing so, decolonial

thinking attempts to open up options before the subordinated for disentangling from 'the colonial matrix of power.' If de-coloniality is to happen in reality, the first thing to do is, what Mignolo calls, 'epistemic delinking.' Decolonisation of knowledge accompanies decolonisation of being which implies reconfigurations of gender, sexuality, subjectivity and knowledge. Body is a means of resisting the colonial configuration of knowledge. The body may refuse to accept the subjectivity and identity as well as sexuality and gender roles imposed upon it. Similarly, the specificity of the place of enunciation may dismantle the universal paradigm of knowledge. The limit of Western epistemology is the border where different local epistemologies emerge and grate against it. Mignolo terms this confrontation as 'border thinking.' It is a critical practice to articulate epistemological difference by the marginalised. Mignolo thinks that border thinking is indispensable to resist the reproduction of totality produced by Europeans in the first place, and then to stop the imposition of that totality upon Asians and Africans. In other words, Western master ideas like capitalism, logocentrism and modernity which are cogent for Europe and America may not hold good for Asia and Africa. Thus it is the time to dismantle colonial difference. "It is crucial," contends Mignolo, "for the ethics, politics, and epistemology of the future to recognize that the totality of Western epistemology, from either the right or the left, is no longer valid for the entire planet. The colonial difference is becoming unavoidable" ("The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," 86). Assertion of this difference becomes possible by foregrounding the local, non-European forms of knowledge which are discredited by the West. Mignolo calls this practice geopolitics of knowledge as well as border thinking. It gives privilege to place-specific practices of magic, folklore, wisdom and the like. Geopolitics of knowledge dismisses the Cartesian universal subject by proposing a local, place-bound subject whose motto is 'I am where I think' (*Local Histories/Global Designs*, 89). This practice posits an 'other logic' which rejects European legacy and creates the "conditions for

diversality as a universal project" ("The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," 91). According to Mignolo, "it is the recognition of colonial difference from subaltern perspectives that demands border thinking" (*Local Histories/Global Designs*, 6). In a nutshell, border thinking is a strategy to achieve "future epistemological breakthrough" by bringing into the scene indigenous forms of knowledge and thus, to find alternatives to modern epistemology (*Local Histories/Global Designs*, 8). In "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality" Mignolo writes: "critical border thinking is a method that connects pluriversality (different colonial histories entangled with imperial modernity) into a uni-versal project of delinking from modern rationality and building other possible worlds" (352). 'Pluriversality' implies peaceful coexistence of many worlds whose economic system, philosophy, subjectivity, epistemology and subjectivity would be of multiple types. There should not be one particular universal category to measure everything. Mignolo's ultimate aim is to delink from coloniality/modernity and make a shift from 'coloniality' to 'decoloniality.' The purpose of 'decoloniality' is to undo, disobey, delink and disengage from 'the colonial matrix of power,' and thereby, to construct "paths and praxis toward an otherwise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing and living" (*On Decoloniality*, 4). It is to be noted here that 'decoloniality' never proposes itself as 'the' alternative of 'coloniality' because to claim it as the only right thing is to work on the principle of 'coloniality.' That is why Mignolo characterises 'decoloniality' as "a way, option, standpoint, analytic, practice, and praxis' (*On Decoloniality*, 5). Mignolo never claims that Western modernity is entirely evil because its hidden agenda is coloniality. Western modernity is a colossal phenomenon, and has many positive qualities; but to impose it as the only legitimate form of worldview is nothing but epistemic violence. Decolonial study does not always aim to find alternative modernity; it strives, sometimes, to find and form alternatives to modernity.

It is quite clear that decolonial approaches give premium importance to achieving epistemological independence for assertion of human dignity of the colonised. In the field of politics, that can be done by activism and conscious policy making by the governments. But cultural forms are also important means to resist the dual hegemony of colonialism and modernity. In literature, the author's politics of identity can be a potent means to resist, subvert and undermine colonial modernity as well as to envision another form of worldview that is in harmony with local reality and is also helpful for an individual to have a sense of freedom and dignity. In other words, identity as lived experience is a means of destabilising colonial difference. The next section looks into that potential of 'cultural identity.'

II

Before we understand cultural identity in particular, it is quite relevant to understand identity in general sense. The peculiarity of the concept of identity is that it seems so self-evident and so elusive at the same time. Despite its enigmatic nature, identity has always been an important means which, according to the sociologist Anthony Elliott, "can help us to analyse the world in which we live" (*The Routledge Handbook of Identity Studies*, xiii). Elliott notes that identity has two dimensions—personal and social. One's identity develops in the process of one's interaction with society. If the dynamics of the social is an important part of identity, then it necessitates the making and re-making of identity with the changes in society. So identity is very important for an individual in determining his or her place in the world. Elliot writes:

> Identity, as we have seen, is at once concept and reality, high theory and lived experience. For a person to have a sense of "identity" necessarily requires all sorts of thoughts, assumptions, beliefs and affects about who they are and

> what their relationship is to others as well as the wider world. (*The Routledge Handbook of Identity Studies*, xxi)

Identity is, then, the combination of man's lived experience and his beliefs. The beliefs and assumptions are subject to change with the changes in society. It is for this reason, identity is often found to be split, fractured, ambivalent and in the process of transformation. This protean nature of identity leads us to the question of subjectivity.

The concepts of identity and subjectivity are often used interchangeably, but they are not exactly the same. Donald E. Hall points out the difference as well as the relation between identity and subjectivity very succinctly. According to Hall,

> one's identity can be thought of as that particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that, in short- or long-term ways, gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being, while subjectivity implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity, at the same time allowing myriad of limitations, and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity. (*Subjectivity*, 03)

It appears then that despite its limitation, subjectivity is a kind of pre-condition of identity. Subjectivity, in other words, is responsible for the formation of identity. As identity and subjectivity are closely linked, my analysis of identity also involves analysis of subjectivity.

The questions of 'subject' and 'subjectivity' have long been debated in philosophy and other social sciences. The debate got new momentum with the emphasis on human autonomy during the Renaissance, and it is still going on. The key concerns include to what extent human beings are autonomous individuals and to what extent they are shaped by society. In *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920,* Regenia Gagnier characterises 'subject' and 'subjectivity' in terms of five parameters: first, a subject

as an ontological being (“the subject is a subject to itself, an “I,” ” 8); second, a subject is someone who is different from others (“the subject is a subject to, and of, others; in fact, it is often an “Other” to others,” 8); third, the epistemological subject (“a subject of knowledge,” 8); fourth, bodily subject who is separate from other bodies but tied with the environment (“the subject is a body,” 8); and fifth, the Cartesian subject who is always limited, partial and prone to errors (“subjectivity in its common Cartesian sense—and despite the efforts of the intellectuals to deconstruct the dichotomy—is opposed to objectivity,” 8-9). However, it should be added here that the apparent erroneous Cartesian subject searches truth by doubting and reasoning.

The view that a subject is the product of a particular ideology has been very prominent in the last century. With the emergence of ideas like Foucauldian discourse and Althusserian ideology, a subject is mainly viewed as an over-determined product and mere effect of discourse or ideology. Such a subject has almost no autonomy, and acts almost like a puppet in the hands of the invisible, superimposing ideology. But what needs to be recognised is that subject formation is a dialogical process which entails a subject’s acceptance, negotiation and rejection of prevailing discourses. Althusser’s assertion that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects is quite plausible; but what should also be noted that in reality ideology forces non-subjects to be subjects. But the problem with this ideological subjectivity lies in the fact that no ideology is absolutely immune to change, and conflicting cross-currents gradually develop even in an absolutist, totalitarian ideology. As a subject is not a static or fully developed entity, it may threaten to disrupt the apparent coherence of the discourse by bringing to light the fault lines of it. Social changes happen because of the subject’s rejection of one ideology and acceptance of another ideology. In such a transition phase, the subject must exercise freedom of thought and action with

innovation. Through such dialectic between an individual and society, new subjects emerge. Peter V. Zima puts this process of subject formation thus:

> A subject is, among other things, a discursive instance whose development depends on a dialogue with others in the course of which it reacts imitatively, consensually or polemically to other discourses and their subjects, thereby opting in favour of or against a certain vocabulary, particular semantics, relevance criteria, classifications and definitions. Its identity as speaking and acting subject develops in discourse as *narrative programme*. (*Subjectivity and Identity*, 10-11)

The subject's participation in the dialectical process often involves conscious choice and self-reflection. If a subject is a 'discursive instance,' then it is always within a discourse, never outside it. The choice of one discourse over others implies the necessary re-formulation of subjectivity itself. So subjectivity is a process rather than a finished product. And last but not least, the identity of the active subject is formed in a narrative programme. It implies that identity formation requires creativity and improvisation on the part on the subject, and identities are only temporal, contingent positions held by the subject in its dialogical interactions with ideology. Such a notion of subjectivity and identity brings to our mind the complex ideas of cultural identity espoused by the Jamaican-born British cultural theorist Stuart Hall.

Hall wrote extensively on cultural identity in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Though he was particularly concerned with the Black identity politics vis-à-vis colonial experience, it is useful to deploy his notions of cultural identity to comprehend and analyse other colonial experiences also. For Stuart Hall, culture is a means of constructing identity which gives meaning to a person's life. The concept of 'culture' is very

complicated. Raymond Williams considers the word 'culture' as "one of the two or three most complicated words in English language" (*Keywords,* 87). In the nineteenth century, there happened a shift from culture 'of' something to culture 'in' itself, that is, culture as a thing. Williams describes 'culture' in its nineteenth century manifestations in four ways: a. "a general state or habit of the mind," b. "the general state of intellectual development in a society as a whole," c. "the general body of the arts, and finally, d. "a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual" (*Culture and Society,* xiv). This last view of culture is quite all-encompassing because culture includes almost everything of man's social, intellectual and spiritual aspects. The role of culture in colonial subjugation is well known. Both Quijano and Mignolo have stressed the role modernity plays in accomplishing cultural Europeanisation. Identity is one of the spheres where the battle for cultural Europeanisation is fought. As identity formation is a dialogical process and narrative programme, an analysis of identity may unveil the nuances of culture.

Hall wrote a number of essays on cultural identity and its relation with colonialism. In these essays Hall moves beyond both the essentialist and the Postmodern concepts of identity, and postulates a cultural, contingent and positional concept of identity. In "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" Hall attempts to account for why the question of identity is still very relevant in the field of culture even after the exhaustive decentering of post-Cartesian stable, rational self from the perspectives of Derridean Deconstruction, Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Foucouldian Discourse. Hall's answer is that the deconstructive critiques of essentialist identity do not supersede and replace one essentialist idea with another essentialist idea; they, rather only put the idea 'under erasure.' As a result, we have to continue with the old idea, though in its detotalised form. In case of identity, the old concepts are decentered but the new concepts are too dispersed. Hall's concept of cultural identity

emerges out of this gap between the old, essentialist identity on the one hand and the new, dispersed identity on the other.

Hall thinks that in the discourse-dominated scenario, identity becomes a matter of non-essentialist, provisional and strategic positioning. This positioning is done within cultural representations. The reservoir of history, language and culture has important roles in making us who we are. As identity is a matter of strategic positioning within cultural practices, it arises from the "narrativization of self" ("Introduction: Who Needs Identity?", 4). But Hall is careful to remind us immediately that the fictional nature of identity formation "in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity", and consequently, identities articulated within particular cultural and discursive practices, remain a potential force to resist and undermine cultural imposition of any kind ("Introduction: Who Needs Identity?", 4). Identity, for Hall, is a matter of conscious performance:

> The question which individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the 'positions' to which they are summoned; as well how they fashion, stylize, produce and 'perform' these positions, and why they never do so completely, for once and all time, and some never do, or are in a constant, agonistic process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative rules with which they confront and regulate themselves. ("Introduction: Who Needs Identity?", 13-14)

So the articulation of identity is a temporal and contingent process rather than a final destination. With the change of social and cultural context, individuals have to devise new strategies in order to cope with the new regulative rules. These strategies are only temporal and provisional positions relating to identity. In "Old and New Identities, Old and New

Ethnicities" Hall reiterates the same point: "identities are never complete, never finished" and they are "always in the process of formation" (47).

In order to account for how the 'positional' identity functions, Hall draws upon Derrida's idea of 'differance' and gives a twist to it. The word 'differance' combines two French verbs—'to differ' as well as 'to defer.' The word 'differance' suggests that meaning of a word or an utterance depends on its difference from other words or utterances; but the difference is not a binary or fixed one. As the relation between a word (the signifier) and its meaning (the signified) is arbitrary and each signified is a signifier in turn, then meaning is the effect of an endless play of signification. In other words, 'differance' implies that it is impossible to arrive at any final or fixed meaning because the present meaning is nothing but a holding on to one point or position in a never-ending chain of signification. Hall jokingly said that it has been quite fashionable to deconstruct anything as an unending play of signification, without any fixed position. But to reduce everything to a mere play, Hall thinks, is to completely misunderstand the politics of articulation implied by Derrida. If any utterance is deconstructed in the very moment of its articulation in the name of endless play of signification, then one will never be in a position to make any standpoint on any issue. Hall appropriates Derrida's implication of the tension between holding on to a position and movement at the same time to conceptualise a new notion of identity.

This new notion of identity is a matter of contingent positioning in the chain of positionings. It is like punctuations in a language. Deconstructive approaches would hold that any utterance has potential for infinite proliferations of meaning and infinite deferral of meaning. But in order to make any utterance meaningful, one has to stop at various points. In another essay "Minimal Selves" Hall uses the same grammatical idea to postulate his new interpretation of 'differance.' Infinite play would not lead us anywhere: "Potentially, discourse is endless: the infinite semiosis of meaning. But to say anything in particular, you

do have to stop talking" ("Minimal Selves", qtd. in James Procter, 120-21). These stops are not natural breaks or final ends, but are provisional and deliberate positionings which make meaning possible. New identities are like these stops in a language; they are temporal positions to make meaning possible. Politics of difference at least works; but the politics of endless proliferation is no politics at all. In "New Ethnicities" Hall opines that "if we are concerned to maintain a politics it cannot be defined exclusively in terms of an infinite sliding of the signifier" (202). Positioning is a precondition to say something meaningfully. This simple but innovative approach to identity helps us to move beyond the oppositional positions of the stable, essential identity on the one hand and the ever-sprawling, ever-unstuck play of identities on the other hand. James Procter characterises Hall's innovative approach to identity as 'politics of identity' rather than 'identity politics'[2] (*Stuart Hall*, 117). It charts out an alternative, non-essentialist politics of identity which, by maintaining difference and contingency, is very effective in resisting colonial hegemony.

Identity, then, is a matter of positioning. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" Hall clarifies how the positioning is done for the articulation of cultural identity. There are two ways, according to Hall, to articulate cultural identity. First, to assert one's position within a collective or larger group having shared history and experience. Such a position strives to recover 'one true self' which lies buried under many imposed selves. Colonialism imposes its own identity upon the colonised, thus burying indigenous identity of the colonised. One of the ways to resist colonial subordination is to return to the original, essentialist identity. Such a view assumes that there is a solid, shared identity which is suppressed by colonialism and which can be unearthed by the colonised. Negritude is such a movement to assert the African identity by the African diaspora.

The second category of cultural identity, according to Hall, is marked by ruptures and transformation in the context of colonial experience. There is no simple way to return to a

pristine past. Asserting one's identity, thus, is a matter of becoming rather than being. Hall states:

> Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 225)

Cultural identity, then, turns out to be not a final, finished product, but a continuous process of transformation. It implies a strategic positioning within the narratives of past, and by extension, of culture. It is important to note that 'past' here does not mean recorded, literal past because that past is irrevocably lost from us. The construction of past is a strategy to resist imperial imposition. Past, warrants Hall, "is always constituted through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora." 226). Cultural identity becomes a means for identification—after the traumatic disruption caused by colonialism—with one's own culture. Such identification never implies a return to an essential underlying presence; rather cultural identity is a matter of strategic positioning within one's culture. It is a strategy of establishing points of 'suture' within one's own culture. Such points are not fixed or eternal, but are only temporary. It is such an idea of cultural identity—non-essential, contingent, provisional, creative and most importantly, positional—that I find in some of

Ghosh's novels. In Ghosh's novels, such an identity is not an end in itself, but is a means to forge colonial difference.

III

My dissertation takes into account both general concepts of identity as well as Hall's concept of positional identity. I have tried to analyse Ghosh's portrayal of identity of certain characters in different novels to show how the novels offer critiques of colonial modernity from different sides. The different theoretical perspectives used in case of different novels share the same basic premise: colonial modernity imposed by the colonisers is a problematic concept. It does not fit well in the Indian context, and creates ruptures both for the coloniser and the colonised. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, argues that the universal model of Western modernity simply does not go well with the unique reality of India. Similarly, Hardt and Negri's notion of altermodernity is also a strategic positioning to move beyond the limit of modernity. Place theories imply that the local, indigenous knowledge system (geopolitics of knowledge) rather than European modernity is more suitable in particular places. Theories of sexuality and gender also help us understand that the sexual and gender identities dictated by colonial modernity seem to be out of sync with the reality in the colonies. Instead of a linear transmission of colonial modernity from the coloniser to the colonised, we find that it is rather translated, dismantled and undermined. The results of the interactions between the colonisers and the colonised are very complex and rather unpredictable. In many instances, the Indians form their own version of modernity or create alternatives to modernity.

That the reception of modernity has not been a one-way process is very incisively pointed out by Partha Chatterjee in his 1994 essay "Our Modernity." In the essay Chatterjee contends that Western modernity, which was introduced in India by the British colonialism,

is not wholly suitable for India. Western rationality which is the product of the Enlightenment only creates multiple ruptures in the lived experience of the Indians. Chatterjee opines that Western modernity does not chime with the Indian reality, and at the same time, the uniqueness of Indian modernity may seem strange, non-modern to Europeans. Chatterjee claims that one of the most important self-contradictions or ironies of Western modernity is that it is has been instrumental in establishing the power structure of colonialism by disguising itself as a harbinger of reason and emancipation in the colonies. It is because of modernity's complicity with colonialism, Indians have always been sceptical about the universal values of Western modernity. Indians have forged their own modernity in order to escape from the imposition of Western modernity. The duality of modernity is that, on one hand, it assists imperialism in subjugating non-Europeans and, on the other hand, makes them conscious that self-rule and liberation are the desired goals. Chatterjee thinks that in the present age of globalisation we cannot support or reject modernity; we can only develop strategies to deal with it. These strategies may produce good results or bring in ruin for the neocolonial subjects. Whatever the case may be, we have to forego our naïve belief that if something is rational and modern, it is universally good.

Chatterjee opines that the best way to cope with Western modernity and fashion our own modernity is by creating "a sense of attachment" with the past ("Our Modernity," 151). It does not indicate regressive steps for going backwards; rather it suggests a strategic positioning within the narratives of past. Past does not mean historical, factual records; rather it is a deliberate creation. The construction of a glorious past is for diplomatic reason in order to handle the oppressive present or, better to say, to get away from the trap of Western modernity which wants to make us its eternal consumers, not its producers. Only by doing that we can create a space for our own modernity.

Chatterjee's stance on the mismatch between Western modernity and the Indian reality due to the former's universalist claim and complicity with colonial oppression resembles Mignolo's take on the universal paradigm of Western knowledge as well as the mutually constitutive nature of colonialism and modernity. Western modernity can neither be fully rejected nor can be fully assimilated. Modernity must have many incarnations in different geographical and cultural contexts. In order to accomplish these pluriversal modernities, delinking from Western formula is an imperative. Delinking implies, according to Mignolo, "that Western foundation of modernity and of knowledge is on the one hand unavoidable and on the other highly limited and dangerous" ("Delinking: the Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality," 309). Formation of identity is one of the means to accomplish epistemic delinking from the 'Western Code.' Chatterjee's take on the strategic and creative use of past to cope with modernity reminds us of Hall's take on identity to cope with colonialism. So we find that colonial modernity can be critiqued with cultural identity. In the next few chapters I shall try to explain some select novels of Ghosh to show how the subjectivity and identity of certain characters problematises colonial modernity.

Notes

1. Decolonial perspectives are to be differentiated from Postmodern as well as postcolonial perspectives. According to Mignolo, whereas both Postcolonialism and Postmodernism offer critiques of Totality from European perspective, decoloniality offers critiques of Totality from the perspectives of the Third World. Postcolonial thinkers like Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha have developed their theories on the model of Poststructuralist ideas of Foucault, Lacan and Derrida. Decolonial studies emerged from

non-European locations like Africa, Latin America and Asia. Decolonial studies consist of a variety of approaches all of which resist imperial imposition of universalist knowledge upon the Third World countries. According to Mignolo, decolonial elements can be found in the works and activism of persons like Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Aimé Césaire, Gloria Anzaldúa and Mahatma Gandhi. My study combines both postcolonial and decolonial perspectives. For more on this distinction, one may see Mignolo's essay "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and The Grammar of De-coloniality."

2. Identity Politics refers to the political movements for claiming an essential, homogenous collective identity. Such movements happened in 1960s and 1970s in North America and Western Europe. "A traditional identity politics defines itself in terms of an absolute, undivided commitment to, and identification with, a particular community; a group which presents a united front through the exclusion of all others" (Procter, 118). Negritude, women's liberation movement (WLM) are examples of Identity Politics. Hall was critical of such Identity Politics because these movements suppressed internal differences among communities and imposed an imagined homogeneity.