Introduction

> The point of departure for defining "colonial modernity"...rests on two premises. The first is that modernity is a global phenomenon that came into being with the emergence of Europe's overseas colonies and empires. The second is that the experience of modernity as a colonial domination requires a close examination of local resistance to universalizing discourses, as "enlightened" as these may have been, in extra-European world.
>
> — Gerard Aching ("On Colonial Modernity," 29)

I

This study is an attempt to understand how the notion and application of colonial modernity is problematised by cultural identity of certain characters in the select novels of Amitav Ghosh. To be more specific, the dissertation analyses how the epistemology as well as the sexual ethics and gender roles introduced and enforced in India by colonial authority are questioned, undermined and resisted by the subjectivity and cultural identity of certain characters in Ghosh's novels. Most of Ghosh's novels deal with various issues associated with colonialism in Southeast Asia, and especially in India. Ghosh is very much concerned with the cultural and psychological impacts of colonialism and the repercussions and responses these generate. Colonialism, it is well known since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *Cultural Imperialism* (1993), involves not merely economic, political and ideological domination, but it results also in cultural domination. The coloniser constructed the image of the colonised as inferior to the coloniser in almost every aspect, and

justified the colonial rule on the pretext of bringing modernity to the colonies for the upliftment of the colonised. Actually, modernity is the justificatory logic upon which colonialism was founded. Modernity helped and still helps maintain the colonial subjugation in the name of bringing reason and progress to the colonies. Since my study is concerned with Amitav Ghosh's novels, I focus on two objectives: how Ghosh's novels provide a critique of colonial modernity and how they signpost decolonial options for a pluriversal world. I have tried to analyse Ghosh's critiquing of colonial modernity through his portrayal of certain characters.

Empire building has been a monumental task which requires not only territorial conquest in military terms but also consolidation of the conquest into governance through introduction of modern institutions such as education, railway, law, medicine etc. which confirmed the coloniser's superiority over the colonised. Embedded in the civilising mission of colonialism is the notion that the colonised are ignorant of modernity, and hence primitive. By modernity I mean the Western form of modernity which originated in post-medieval Europe, and which is often viewed as marking a decisive break with tradition. Though as a post-traditional order modernity can be understood in different ways in different disciplines ranging from Philosophy to Sociology and Aesthetics, as a historical category it refers to the post-Enlightenment period characterised by rejection of tradition, rise of rationalism, technology, capitalism and individualism, development of the nation-state and its constituent institutions such as democracy, public education and bureaucracy and forms of surveillance.

As a historical category, modernity refers to the "*age of reason* in the sense of 'modern times,' " generally identified with the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries (*Modern/Postmodern*, 5). As a philosophical category, modernity is "synonymous with the Enlightenment project and its belief that the light of reason and the natural sciences would eventually dispel the shadows and darkness of superstition, religion and political tyranny"

(David Macey, 259-60). Bertrand Russell distinguishes 'modern philosophy' (started with the Renaissance) from the medieval one in two prominent aspects—"the diminishing authority of the Church, and the increasing authority of science" (*The History of Western Philosophy*, 491). Modern outlook displaced medieval outlook by giving importance to individualism and gradual democratic secularisation. Central to the idea of modernity is the notion of autonomy of the individual who would choose a course of action based on reason rather than on tradition. Interestingly, however, despite rationality being its operating principle, modernity has failed to replace the sureties of tradition by a certitude of rational knowledge. Doubt is a pervasive component of modern critical reason, and permeates its philosophical consciousness. Paradoxically, modernity on the one hand ushered in rationality, science, technology, democracy, progress and individual autonomy; but on the other hand, modernity is responsible for the growth of capitalism, colonialism, violence, environmental degradation and climate change, war and subjugation of the individual to machine and technology. Modernity has played a key role in forming the conscious self-identity of individuals. Anthony Giddens succinctly puts why modernity is a paradox:

> Modernity, one should not forget, produces *difference*, *exclusion* and *marginalisation*. Holding out the possibility of emancipation, modern institutions at the same time create mechanisms of suppression, rather than actualisation, of self. (*Modernity and Self-Identity*, 6)

Two key points emerge here: first, modernity offers the hope of emancipation which is yet to materealise, and second, it generates oppressive power structures in which the self is suppressed by means of difference, exclusion and marginalisation. Modernity is actually complicit with colonialism which operates by making racial categorisation between European and non-European peoples. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin point out that modernity has been the key factor in the emergence of colonial discourse which "enabled the

large-scale regulation of human identity both within Europe and its colonies" (*Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 145). The process of colonial othering is implicitly encouraged and, even at times, sustained by modernity. According to Walter D. Mignolo, modernity participates in the colonial project of creating identity of both the coloniser and the colonised by exercising control in four main domains: "the control of the economy, of authority, of gender and sexuality, and of knowledge and subjectivity" (*The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 8). My dissertation is specifically concerned with two of the four domains: knowledge and sexuality and gender. It tries to understand how these two domains are problematised by Ghosh's portrayal of cultural identity of certain characters in some of his novels.

Today colonialism has officially ended but the institutions of modernity permeate every aspect of life and society. Thus, in post-colonial times, the Indian nation-state is run on the ethos of modernity. In fact, we are carrying the legacy of colonial modernity in every sphere of life because colonial modernity is looked upon as universal. Ghosh's novels raise significant questions regarding this much-hyped universality of colonial modernity. Interestingly, despite its claim of rationality and universality, Western modernity is fraught with multiple ironies which undermine its universalist claim. The coloniser's claim to be the bearer of light and reason turns out to be empty rhetoric as there is a wide discrepancy between what they preached and what they practised. On the other side, uncritical application of Western modernity upon the colonised society may have unforeseen and unsolicited consequences.

One of the less discussed concerns of Amitav Ghosh's novels is how they provide a critique of colonial modernity by examining the disjunctions it produces in the colonised countries. As Ghosh's novels cover incidents both in colonial and post-colonial times, Ghosh's critique involves both colonial and post-colonial period. Ghosh offers his critique

not in a prescriptive, propagandist manner but through the portrayal of the predicaments of individuals who are caught at conflicting crossroads of history. In an interview with Frederick Luis Aldama in 2002, Ghosh said that he writes both fiction and non-fiction because "In the end it's about people's lives; it's about people's history; it's about people's destinies" (86). In another interview with John C. Hawley in 2004 Ghosh said:

> My fundamental interest is in people – in individuals and their specific predicaments. If history is of interest to me it is because it provides instances of unusual and extraordinary predicaments…my essential interest is in people and their lives, histories and predicaments. There is not much room for this in formal anthropology, which is more interested in abstractions and generalisations. So I realised very early that I did not share the basic concerns of anthropology and that fiction was my proper métier. (Hawley, 7)

It is for this reason Ghosh's interest in History and Anthropology is not an end in itself, but is a means to an end, that is, fictional realisation of individual predicament. That is why we find Ghosh critically examining the micro-histories of individuals who are entangled in the maelstrom of historical metanarratives. When I say individuals, I refer to their subjectivity and identity. A person's identity is formed not in isolation, but in the process of cultural interactions. These encounters may have complex results: an individual's self and identity may be interpellated by an imposing culture if the person internalises the ethos of that culture or an individual may develop an identity that would undermine the apparent dominance of the imposing culture. The potentiality of the second option arises because in many cases a "self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences" (Giddens, 2). As formation of identity is deeply mediated by culture, an analysis of identity is likely to bring out the nuances of a culture, both its strengths and fault lines. Interestingly, formation of identity under the impact of a culture or cultures is not a unidirectional process because a self is not

always moulded according to the dictates of the dominant. Identity formation, rather, is a complex process that involves an individual's choice of acceptance and rejection of cultural forces. Thus identity can be a means of asserting as well as critiquing a culture. As my study aims to assess Ghosh's critique of colonial modernity, I have tried to understand how Ghosh does it through the cultural identity of his fictional characters. Critique of colonial modernity cannot be presented in abstraction, for that would relegate the issue to the level of philosophy. A literary artist is required to present his critique through particular situations and predicaments of individual characters. That is what Ghosh has done very effectively in his novels. The purpose of my study is to unfold this critique through the exposition of the predicaments of certain characters in the select novels.

II

Born in Calcutta on 11 July in 1956, Amitav Ghosh has established himself as one of the leading English novelists in the world. Ghosh's brief biography on his official website reveals that in "2019 *Foreign Policy* magazine named him one of the most important global thinkers of the preceding decade" (Paragraph 4). The Indian Government has duly recognised his contribution to society and Indian English literature and honoured him with *Padma Shri* in 2007. He is the first Indian English writer to win the 54th Jnanpith Award in 2018, the highest literary award in India, conferred every year on notable Indian writers by Bharatiya Jnanpith, a Delhi-based literary and research organisation. He has been felicitated with the honour, as Bharatiya Jnanpith declared, for "outstanding contribution to the enrichment of Indian Literature in English" (*The Hindu,* 13 June 2019). The organisation recognises Ghosh as "a path-breaking novelist" who "treads through historical settings to the modern era and weaves a space where the past connects with the present in relevant ways" (*The Times of*

India, 14 December 2018). This observation is very significant because Ghosh's novels often take the readers down the lane of history in order to account for why the present is as it is.

Ghosh is a prolific writer. He has nine novels, a good number of non-fictions and many essays to his credit till date. Be it fiction or non-fiction, Ghosh has the gift of telling very artfully what he wants to tell. Never moralistic, Ghosh writes with such poignancy and élan that his writings always hold the attention of the reader till end. An article published on *Economic Times* describes Ghosh as a "master storyteller, a craftsman of words" and a writer whose writing has the "innate ability to connect the past with the present and weave through beautifully varied worlds" (*Economic Times*, 14 July 2019). It is primarily because of his art of storytelling he is much loved by readers across the globe.

The reason for Ghosh's elevation to the status of a cult figure in Indian English literature is that his novels, non-fictions and articles reverberate with issues which are so relevant in post-colonial times. His writings revolve around certain concerns which are the results of colonial intervention in Southeast Asia. Some of Ghosh's chief concerns are: history, dislocation, migration, travel, problematic imposition of Western knowledge upon the colonised, problems of nation, arbitrary and porous nature of borders, family as a substitute of nation, partition and home, plight of women who are discriminated both by patriarchy and colonialism, imposition and transformation of identity etc. In most cases, Ghosh takes the cudgel on behalf of the marginalised. So it appears that Ghosh's concerns align with some of the important areas of postcolonial studies. But Ghosh himself has declined to be categorised as a postcolonial writer. In an interview with Nekula Silva and Alex Tickell in 1997 Ghosh said—"I must say, I have no truck with this term at all" (Bose, 14). To be labeled exclusively as a "postcolonial" writer is to fall in the trap of totalistic vision and to deny the multiple dimensions of one's work. This refusal to be categorised is also in tune with Ghosh's dismantling of genres and conceptual boundaries.

However, postcolonial concerns are very much manifest in Ghosh's novels. In order to understand the reason for the recurrence of postcolonial themes in Ghosh's novels, we have to locate Ghosh's position as an Indian English writer. After the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981, Indian English literature can be said to orient itself towards postcolonial concerns. Ghosh is evidently influenced by Rushdie. Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) is written in the vein of magic realism. But soon Ghosh formed his own identity as a writer by developing his own themes and style. Another important reason for Ghosh's postcolonial concerns is his Calcutta-based Bengali *bhadralok* lineage.

Though Ghosh has lived in many places across the globe, Calcutta occupies a very important place in his thinking and imagination. In "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi" Ghosh says that the "city I considered home was Calcutta" (46). The influence of Calcutta on Ghosh is deeply rooted in his psychology because he belongs to the Bengali *bhadralok* community, the upper and middle class educated Bengali gentry. This community was probably the first to receive English education in India. The community came into existence in the nineteenth century because of colonial reordering of the economy of Bengal. People belonging to that section "constitutes Bengal's intellectual, cultural and political elite" for whom Calcutta has been an intellectual and cultural hub (Mondal, 3). Being the capital of British India in the nineteenth century, Calcutta came into prominence in every aspect, becoming one of the richest cities in the world. In fact, Calcutta became the first center in the East to receive the British-borne colonial modernity which gradually spread over other parts of the country. The establishment of trading houses, educational institutions, medical colleges, High Court, theatres, lecture halls and the like made Calcutta a vibrant city. It was the nodal city for colonial operation in the East. But among its multiple identities, what saturates the imagination of the *bhadralok* class is its identity as an intellectual and cultural centre. The *bhadralok* community might not have been economically that much sound, but nonetheless

formed the culture of book reading and vigorous *addas*, that is, informal discussions. In the essay "The March of Novel through History: The Testimony of My Grandfather's Bookcase" Ghosh gives, in a humour-filled manner resembling that of R.K. Narayan, a very interesting account of the book culture of the *bhadralok* class. His grandfather's house in Calcutta where child Ghosh spent his yearly vacation sported many neatly arranged bookcases filled with books. The display of books was primarily to "let the visitor know that this was a house in which books were valued; in other words that we were cultivated people" (290). A *bhadralok* was supposed to have widely read the great modern classics of the world and thus, cosmopolitan in outlook. It is in this house that Ghosh was acquainted with the world of books which later shaped his literary sensibility to a great extent. The fact is that in the mindscape of the *bhadralok* class, Calcutta is not a mere city with physical markers, but a signifier of modernity. So it is not for nothing that Calcutta is present in all novels of Ghosh; Ghosh's concerns being postcolonial and Calcutta being a colonial city, it becomes a site to dig into the complex phenomenon known as colonial modernity.

But Calcutta's relation with modernity is not unidirectional. Calcutta's response to modernity is rather ambiguous. Though modernity operated through institutions like education and medicine, there was a growing sense of discomfiture regarding its wholehearted internalisation. The penchant of the *bhadralok* for education and knowledge made them welcome modernity which paradoxically generated the need for breaking away from cultural dependency. Modernity itself being an ambivalent phenomenon that envisions emancipation but practises domination, Calcutta's status as a colonial city is further complicated as a centre where knowledge and power intersect in multiple ways. Ghosh, the Bengali *bhadralok*, tries to make sense of the enigma that is Calcutta in almost all of his novels. Anshuman Mondal notes that "the city is both a metaphor for knowledge/power relations initiated by colonialism, and the stage on which Ghosh re-enacts what has been

called ‘the battle for cultural parity’ that the Bengali cultural elite have waged ever since” (5). What is evident here is that for Ghosh Calcutta is a contested site of modernity. It is a site where modernity is accepted, questioned and undermined for negotiating cultural parity with the West. Most of Ghosh’s novels trace the ambivalence of modernity in colonial and post-colonial contexts. In fact, through the predicaments of his fictional characters, Ghosh unravels the problematics of colonial modernity.

The term ‘problematics’ implies things that constitute a problem—things which invite attention to themselves for being the site of contestation and unsolved deliberation or for its protean nature. Collins English Dictionary defines ‘problematics’ (plural form of the noun ‘problematic’) as “problems or difficulties in a particular situation or subject.” Dictionary.com defines the term as “the uncertainties or difficulties inherent in a situation or plan.” Peter V. Zima identifies ‘problematics as “compounds of problems” (*Modern/Postmodern*, 5). Zima prefers to think of modernity, modernism, postmodernity and postmodernism not as mere historical epochs or ideologies or philosophies or aesthetics, but as ‘problematics’ which he describes as

> *Social and linguistic situations* within which conflicting answers to certain questions or incompatible solutions to certain problems are proposed. *The homogeneity of the problematic consists in the affinity of its problems and questions, its heterogeneity in divergent answers and solutions.* Questions, which, in particular historical constellation seemed relevant and meaningful and were situated at the centre of the problematic, are relegated to the periphery of intellectual life in a new problematic – or forgotten altogether. (*Modern/Postmodern*, 12)

Three points emerge here: first, problematics refers to complicated situations where there is no single or final solution; second, the problems and questions posed by a problematic are of the same kind, but answers to these questions are of varying nature; third, one problematic is replaced by another problematic with the passage of time. Colonial modernity formed the problematics when colonialism propagated modernity as a universal model and imposed it upon the colonised. As Ghosh represents colonial modernity vis-à-vis the predicaments of his characters, an analysis of identity of his characters is likely to help us understand his critique of the problematics of colonial modernity. I have broadly identified three different but interrelated modes of representation of identity in Ghosh's novels: (a) identity as an over-determined product, (b) identity as a mask, and (c) identity as a means of resistance. These three modes of identity are examined vis-à-vis two broad areas: (a) knowledge and (b) sexuality and gender. My study is concerned to understand how Ghosh critiques, through the presentation of the identity of his fictional characters, the problematics of colonial modernity in these two areas. The novels I have chosen for this purpose are *The Circle of Reason*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Hungry Tide* and *The Ibis Trilogy* (*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*). I have also taken into account some of Ghosh's essays, interviews as well as two of his non-fictional works—*The Imam and the Indian* and *The Great Derangement*—to reinforce my arguments at various points in the thesis. Now I give the rationale for the selection of the above-mentioned novels.

Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) is an assessment of the impact of science and rationality upon some educated Indians during post-colonial period. One of the most important characters in the novel is Balaram for whom science is like religion and Louis Pasteur is like God. Balaram's uncompromising philosophy to implement science everywhere not only brings his own destruction, but also misguides his nephew Alu and Mrs. Verma, the daughter of his friend Dantu. Both Alu and Mrs. Verma became psychological victims of

Balaram's philosophy of the universal applicability of Western science. *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) is a critical reappraisal of the official story of Sir Ronald Ross' discovery of the malaria parasite at PG Hospital in Calcutta in 1898. The novel presents another version of the story in which a secret subaltern group used Ross for their own research with the aim to find means of attaining immortality through the transfer of a particular chromosome from person to person. In fact, the novel raises significant questions regarding the Eastern and the Western knowledge systems and the ideas of self and identity. *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is a nuanced examination of the relative practicability of rational knowledge versus myth-based indigenous knowledge in the context of the Sunderbans which is an enigmatic site. Outsiders like Nirmal, Kanai and Piya who received modern education and who visit the Sunderbans for various reasons are disillusioned with the potentiality of rational knowledge to grasp the place. On the other hand, illiterate local fishermen like Horen and Fokir feel the pulse of the place. This novel problematises the supposed universality of modernity-backed knowledge. Thus the problematic question of epistemology runs through the three novels.

The Ibis Trilogy presents the dynamics of the nineteenth century Indo-China opium trade conducted by the East India Company, and in doing so, weaves intersecting narratives of the fate of indentured labourers, a convicted zaminder, opium merchants and their wives (both Indian and British), a self-righteous *memsahib*, a gomusta, an orphaned French girl, a mulatto sailor, and many others. The trilogy brings out the hypocrisies of the colonisers with regard to their morality as well as their identity. Moreover, the trilogy also dramatises the ingenious resistance on the part of the colonised. The trilogy offers scope of research in multiple areas; but Ghosh's delineation of sexuality and gender of certain characters is a fascinating area to explore so far as the problematisation of modernity-endorsed notions of sexuality and gender are concerned. My inclusion of the trilogy in the dissertation is to

comprehend the representation of sexuality and gender issues of three characters in the trilogy.

The Shadow Lines, probably the most popular novel of Ghosh, is completely different from *The Circle of Reason*. Essentially a novel based on memory, the novel particularly draws attention to the arbitrary nature of man-made borders which differentiate nation-states and create artificial enmity between peoples. Interestingly, such borders are also illusory because they fail to restrict the spread of communal violence across nations. Tridib, the Calcutta-based protagonist of the novel, becomes a victim of such violence in Dakha because "Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines…each city was the inverted mirror image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free—our looking-glass border" (*The Shadow Lines*, 233). Such is the chimerical nature of the shadow lines that separate nations and people. *The Shadow Lines* is a beautifully crafted novel that makes us rethink our ideas regarding border, nation, partition, riot etc. The question of nation is definitely related to modernity; but the relation is of altogether another dimension which is quite different from my line of study.

The Glass Palace is a massive novel that narrates the fate of a few generations of people whose lives are tremendously affected by the British colonial intervention in Southeast Asia. This novel, like Ghosh's other novels, deals with "the effects of history on individual lives" and focuses "central attention on minor characters" and challenges "the notion of boundaries and imperial definitions" (Hawley, 112-3). Told in seven parts, the novel charts interlocking narratives of a few families—the Burmese royal family, Rajkumar's family, Uma's family, Saya John's family—against the backdrop of British colonialism. The novel offers a biting critique of colonialism in many aspects: economic exploitation, dislocation of people, colonial pretence to emancipate the colonised from native despots, unequal status of the Indian soldiers in the colonial army and the like. What is interesting

about the novel is that it replaces nation with family. It is a family saga that brings out the networks of power—"Ideological, Economic, Military and Political"—through which British colonialism functioned (Rajalakshmi, 116). The chief concerns of *The Glass Palace* are quite different from the two broad areas (epistemology and sexuality and gender) of my study. Keeping in mind the limited scope of my thesis, I decided to leave out *The Glass Palace* from the present account.

Ghosh's latest novel *Gun Island* (2019) narrates the story a seventeenth century Bengali merchant who defied Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes, and in consequence, suffered horribly until he gave in and promised to built a shrine or 'dhaam' for the goddess in Bengal, his native land. The story is unearthed by the homodigetic narrator Dinanath Dutta, aka Deen, a relative of Nilima and dealer of rare antique books in America. The novel takes some of its characters like Piya, Tipu (actually Fokir's son Tutul who adopts that name in America), Moyna, Nilima, Kanai and Horen from *The Hungry Tide* and carries the tale forward, especially the trajectories of Tipu and Piya. Other important characters in the novel are Rafi, the grandson of a Muslim boatman in the Sunderbans, and Cinta, an Italian professor of History and expert on the history of Venice. However, in unearthing this mythic narrative, the novel brings in a few exigent issues of the present: environmental crisis, migration of animals and immigration of humans, human trafficking, human-animal relation and the like. The mythic narrative and the present narrative of its unearthing finally get merged when a miracle of the mythic narrative reemerges at the end, fusing past and present and creating a sort of epiphany. This epiphany is the realisation that there is an invisible and actively operative spirit in nature which works on its own principle and defies human rationality. This mysterious force of nature connects everything with everything else across the collapse of time and space. It is something which is inexplicable, beyond the power of dry rationalism to account for. So, on the whole, *Gun Island* is a kind of caveat to us regarding

our excessive reliance on rationality which has generated profound environmental crisis as well as has caused man's severance form nature. Alex Clark writes in his review of the book: "*Gun Island* brims with implausibility; outlandish coincidences and chance meetings blend with ancient myth and folklore, tales of heroism and the supernatural set in a contemporary world disrupted by constant migrations of human and animals" (Paragraph 3) (*The Guardian*, 5 June 2019). The central conflict in the novel is between rationalism and mysticism, and this conflict is well embodied by characters that represent, in a sense, oppositional discourses. Piya and Deen stand for rationalism while Tipu and Cinta stand for intuition and mysticism. But there is no instance of splitting or transformation of self and identity that we see in Ghosh's other novels. The novel is thematically relevant for my thesis, but as my thesis is concerned with the identity of characters, I have decided not to devote a full chapter to it. I return to this novel at the end of my thesis to show how it reinforces my argument.

Ghosh's non-fictional works also may be shown to represent his multifaceted thinking. The essays are products of Ghosh's firsthand experience of many phenomena of contemporary world. *In an Antique Land* (1992) which is perhaps the most sustained of Ghosh's all non-fictional writings is a curious kind of work that blends historical research with anthropology. The book is the product of Ghosh's stay in Egypt as a research scholar of Oxford University in early and late 1980s. The book combines two narratives: first, Ghosh's historical research about a Middle Eastern merchant who came to India in the twelfth century, and second, his own experience in Egypt. *Dancing in Cambodia and at Large in Burma* (1998) contains three essays which appeared earlier in reputed journals: "Dancing in Cambodia" on *Granta* 44 (Summer, 1993), "Stories in Stones" on *The Observer Magazine* (January 16, 1994) and "At Large in Burma" on *The New Yorker* (12 August, 1996). The anthology includes two more essays ("The Town by the Sea" and "September 11") in its 2008 edition which has been renamed *Dancing in Cambodia and Other Essays.* These essays

give interesting accounts of the history and culture of Cambodia in the face of European colonialism and internal conflicts for power. *Countdown* (1999) is Ghosh's journalistic investigation of the rationale of the nuclear test by India at Pokhran on 11 May, 1998 followed by Pakistan's nuclear testing at Chaghai on 28th of the same month. Ghosh visited the site three months later, and talked with the local people who made him realise that the nuclear test was only aimed to increase India's international prestige. Jolly Das thinks ("*Countdown*: Towards a Crisis of Civilisation") that *Countdown* is a book that foregrounds the emerging crisis of civilisation. Given the apathy of the governments and the symbolic significance of nuclear bombs for fervent nationalism, competition in nuclear experiments will only hasten the destruction of civilisations that had been built over thousands of years. It is quite evident that the concerns of these non-fictions are quite different from my thrust area.

Given Amitav Ghosh's popularity as a writer in contemporary world, his works have generated profound research interest in recent times. But despite his popularity, there are only two noteworthy monographs and a few anthologies of critical essays on Ghosh's oeuvre. The monographs are *Amitav Ghosh* by John C. Hawley and *Amitav Ghosh* by Anshuman A. Mondal. Published in 2005, Hawley's book is a kind of introductory book which gives an overview and critical discussion of Amitav Ghosh's fictional and non-fictional writings till 2004. The book also locates Ghosh as an Indian English writer who has looked beyond the boundary of commonwealth literature. Anshuman A. Mondal's book offers critical discussion on Ghosh's major themes. In Mondal's book the second chapter is titled "The 'Metaphysic' of Modernity." It gives us a glimpse of Ghosh's interest in modernity. Mondal, however, has not given any comprehensive analysis on Ghosh's critique of modernity through the predicament of individual characters. My study focuses on Ghosh's critique of colonial modernity mainly in respect of subjectivity and identity of his characters.

The critical anthologies on Ghosh's work offer many essays and a few interviews which throw lights on Ghosh's work from different angles. But the majority of the essays deal with postcolonial issues like nation, border, history, migration, diaspora etc. Some of the notable anthologies are: *The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh* (2001) edited by Indira Bhatt and Indira Nityanandam, *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives* (2002) edited by Brinda Bose, *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Companion* (2003) edited by Tabish Khair, *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Essays* (2009) edited by Bhibhas Choudhury, *History, Narrative and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction* (2012) edited by Chitra Sankaran and *In Pursuit of Amitav Ghosh: Some Recent Readings* (2013) edited by Tapan Kumar Ghosh and Prasanta Bhattacharya. These edited anthologies deal with various issues but they do not offer any comprehensive analysis on colonial modernity in particular. However, Choudhury's book contains an essay titled "Amitav Ghosh, Modernity and the Theory of the Novel." Authored by Choudhury himself, the essay attempts to understand Ghosh as a modern novelist. Choudhury postulates that Ghosh's modernity as a novelist lies in his refusal to succumb to any fixed category or template—both in narrative forms as well as in thematic preoccupations. Novel, for Ghosh—just as poetry is for Keats and novel is for Milan Kundera—is an open, protean form which dismantles established categories and searches for something new. The desire for incorporating alterity and newness makes novel a remarkably elastic and alive form. "For Ghosh" writes Choudhury, "the novel form is an open medium, an 'overarching form' that is unique among recognized literary formats for its capacity to accommodate and even go against its established traditions" (Amitav Ghosh, Modernity and the Theory of the Novel," 5). The essay, no doubt, is an insightful assessment of Amitav Ghosh as a novelist, and points out the variety—both in technique and themes—in Ghosh's work. I agree with Choudhury's argument, and carry my study in another direction. I try to assess Ghosh's multifaceted representation of the issue of colonial modernity in his select novels.

Now coming to unpublished dissertations, it must be acknowledged that recent years have witnessed a good many research works on Ghosh's novels. A careful examination of the Ph. D theses[1] shows that most of the dissertations revolve around certain issues like history, nation, family, knowledge and power, ecocriticism, quest for identity, space and time, metaphysics of silence, postcolonialism, postmodernism, multiculturalism, displacement, migration, travel, diaspora etc. Surprisingly, much work has not been done on Ghosh's take on the problematisation of colonial modernity through cultural identity. As far as my search is concerned, the only work that deals with colonialism and modernity is N.K. Rajalakshmi's thesis *Modernity, Colonialism and the Nation: A Study with Reference to Some Novels of Amitav Ghosh.* It was completed way back in 2004. The thesis focuses on how colonialism and modernity played important roles in the construction of nation. Rajalakshmi analyses how history and reason, science and technology serve the nation. As for Ghosh's take on these paradigms, Rajalakshmi focuses only on one novel, *The Glass Palace*. My work deals with colonialism from different perspectives (epistemology and sexuality and gender) and takes into account other novels. The nub of my argument shows how colonial modernity, which is the legacy of colonial rule, has been questioned and undermined by the lived experience and identity formation of certain characters, both Indians and Europeans. The theoretical perspectives I use are both postcolonial and decolonial. My thrust is on subjectivity and identity in order to bring to light the paradox of colonial modernity. In doing so, my study signposts how identity formation may open up decolonial options for global futures. There are, no doubt, a few doctoral dissertations on identity in Ghosh's work. But they deal with issues like identity in itself (*An Identity Perspective: A Critical Study of the Select Novels of Amitav Ghosh* by Ambethkar M. Raja), postcolonial identity (*Postcolonial Identities: A Study of South-Asian Characters in Select Novels of Amitav Ghosh* by R. Sankar), contextualising identity (*Contextualising Identity in Amitav Ghosh's Novels* by

Sukanta Das), negotiation of identity (*Cultural Spaces Across Borders: Dislocation and Negotiation of Identity in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh and Ben Okri* by Asis De) and quest for identity (*Quest for Cultural Identity: Postcolonial Impulses in Amitav Ghosh's Novels* by S. Sujatha). Despite these various points of view, little has been said on the potentiality of cultural identity to problematise colonial modernity, and there is still scope to explore this issue further. My study is a humble attempt to understand how Ghosh's presentation of cultural identity—formed or exposed in particular local contexts—is not an end in itself, but a means to bring out the fissures and fault lines of the supposed universality of colonial modernity. My study is a small contribution to the vast body of existing scholarship on Ghosh's works.

III

My thesis comprises six chapters apart from Introduction and Conclusion. The Introduction gives an account of the precise objective and scope of the study, Ghosh as an Indian English writer and his Bengali *bhadralok* lineage, a brief overview of Ghosh's major works, the rationale for my selection of novels, a concise review of literature and a glimpse of the following chapters.

Chapter One is titled "Colonial Modernity and Cultural Identity." In this chapter I clarify the overall theoretical framework of the entire dissertation. For 'colonial modernity' I have drawn upon the ideas of Walter D. Mignolo and Partha Chatterjee. Mignolo's ideas provide me with a framework for conceptualising the complicity between colonialism and modernity. In a way, the entire dissertation is premised upon Mignolo's ideas. Partha Chatterjee's ideas help us understand how Western modernity creates ruptures in the lives of Indians. As for 'cultural identity,' first I have given a brief account of subjectivity and

identity in general, and then, of Stuart Hall's ideas on cultural identity. These ideas help me to understand and explain how cultural identity can be a means to problematise colonial modernity. It should be pointed out here that the ideas of Mignolo, Chatterjee and Hall are applied in conjunction with some other theorists in the following chapters. The important theorists whose concepts are used in the analysis of different novels are Dipesh Chakrabarty, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Roy F. Baumeister and Ashis Nandy. All of them provide critiques of modernity in one way or other. The arguments of all these theorists are deployed to comprehend Ghosh's presentation of the two wings of colonial modernity—knowledge and sexuality and gender.

Chapter two, titled "Coloniality, Rationality and Identity in *The Circle of Reason*" is an exhaustive examination of the limits of Reason or rationality. My analysis focuses on the identity of four characters—Balaram, Alu, Jyoti Das and Mrs.Verma—who are moulded by the Western epistemology in one way or other. I have tried to understand their subjectivity and identity by conjoining Mignolo's concepts with the select ideas of Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty. This chapter mainly focuses on the incongruous outcome of the internalisation of modernity by the colonised.

Chapter Three, titled, "Modernity, Medical Science and Identity in *The Calcutta Chromosome"* is a critical reexamination of the saga of Sir Ronald Ross' discovery of the malaria parasite at Calcutta's PG Hospital in 1898. My analysis of the novel is premised upon Michel Foucault's contention of the "insurrection of the subjugated knowledges" and more importantly, upon Michael Herdt and Antonio Negri's notions of modernity, antimodernity and altermodernity expounded in their book *Commonwealth* (2009). The chapter brings out how the fluid identity of the colonised enables them to break free of the imposed modernity.

In Chapter Four, titled "Place, Modernity and Identity in *The Hungry Tide*," I have shown Ghosh's adroit exploration of the comparative viability of Western knowledge and indigenous knowledge in the unique, uncanny and liminal site of the Sunderbans. For this purpose, I analyse two characters Nirmal and Kanai by conflating Mignolo's ideas with certain theories of place. My contention is that modernity, which teaches us that man is the master over nature and man can rationally comprehend nature, does not work universally.

In Chapter Five, titled, "Modernity, Sexuality and Identity in *The Ibis Trilogy,*" I have tried to analyse the subjectivity and identity of Mr. Burnham and Mrs. Burnham, the two representatives of Western modernity, in order to expose the gap between the preaching and the practice regarding sexual ethics of the colonisers. For the understanding of Mr. Burnham's masochistic self, I have mainly taken recourse to Roy. F. Baumeister's book *Masochism and the Self*. I have analysed Mrs. Burnham's identity with reference to Foucault's *History of Sexuality: I* and Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontent*.

Chapter Six, titled "Modernity, Gender and Identity in *The Ibis Trilogy*" is on Baboo Nobokrishna Panda who puts the coloniser out after becoming an *ardhanariswara*, that is, a combination of masculinity and femininity. In this chapter I have drawn upon Ashis Nandy's conceptualisation of gender role in colonial context to contend that the traditional Indian concept of *ardhanariswara* can be a source of resistance to colonial hegemony.

In the Conclusion, I have condensed the argument spread across the preceding five chapters, providing thereby a conspectus of the thesis. I have also added a brief analysis of Ghosh's latest novel *Gun Island* to reinforce my argument regarding the problematics of colonial modernity. This is not to say that colonial modernity is to be summarily rejected by individuals and the post-colonial nations. Rather, it can be said that along with colonial modernity, other local, contingent knowledge systems may be equally effective to grapple

with reality in post-colonial times. The coexistence of multiple epistemologies opens up decolonial options among which no particular option will be ‘the’ option, ultimate and universal. Further researches are needed to explore decolonial options in other literary works and cultural productions. Such options can lead humanity to less coercive global futures.

Notes

1. The unpublished dissertations I mentioned are available on the UGC-monitored website of Shodhganga. https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in.