

Summary

Introduction

The purpose of the study is to analyse how in Amitav Ghosh's select novels colonial modernity is problematised vis-à-vis cultural identity of certain characters. Colonial modernity refers to the modernity which was introduced in the colonies by the European colonialism. Western modernity itself is a massive intellectual phenomenon that was supposed to liberate man from superstition, primitivism, religious dogma and medieval darkness as well as to make him self-reliant and autonomous. However, despite logic and reason being its fundamental principles, modernity is fraught with ironies because of the fact that it causes marginalisation and suppression of people. Given Ghosh's Bengali *bhadralok* lineage, colonial modernity is a recurrent concern in his novels. As a novelist, Ghosh is preoccupied with human predicament, and it is through human predicament that he presents his critique of colonial modernity. Though a lot of research has been done on the novels of Amitav Ghosh, the representation of colonial modernity through cultural identity has not received much attention. The dissertation examines Ghosh's critique of colonial modernity in two broad fields of colonial modernity: (a) epistemology, (b) sexuality and gender.

Chapter One: Colonial Modernity and Cultural Identity

One of the important dimensions of modernity is that it has been a close ally of colonialism. This is because colonialism appropriated the emancipatory philosophy of modernity as its justificatory logic of dominating and ruling over the colonised. It is for this reason Anibal Quijano has characterised coloniality as the darker side of modernity. European colonialism

propagated modernity as “a universal paradigm of knowledge” that ensured the power relation between Europe and the rest of the world in terms and conditions set by the colonisers. Walter D. Mignolo takes the hint from Quijano, and posits in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* that coloniality is “constitutive of modernity—there is no modernity without coloniality” (3). Modernity played a crucial role in the colonial project by producing what Mignolo calls ‘the colonial matrix of power.’ This matrix is constituted by four interrelated domains: epistemology, economy, authority and gender and sexuality. By projecting these four domains as universal categories, colonialism holds its sway over the colonised. My study is concerned with two of these four domains: (a) knowledge, (b) gender and sexuality. I have sought to examine how the universal ethos of these categories are accepted, questioned, resisted, subverted and undermined by the subjectivity and identity of Ghosh’s fictional characters. Stuart Hall’s concept of ‘cultural identity’ as a strategic, temporal position is suitable to analyse the resistance put up by Ghosh’s characters against the epistemology as well as the sexual and gender roles imposed by colonial modernity.

Chapter Two: Coloniality, Rationality and Identity in *The Circle of Reason*

This chapter examines Ghosh’s critique of Reason through the predicaments of four characters—Balaram, Alu, Jyoti Das and Mrs. Verma—whose lives and identities are affected by Reason. The ideas of Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty are helpful to understand the paradoxical status of Western rationality in India. In fact, modernity is both indispensable and inadequate in the Indian context. Balaram and Alu uncompromisingly implement Western science in the Third World situation, and they only invite their ruin. Jyoti Das is brought up in the ethos of Reason, and he becomes an alienated, bewildered personality. Mrs. Verma feels constricted because of her identity as a microbiologist, and

ultimately rejects the imposed identity by burning *Life of Pasteur*, the single most influential book in her life. On the whole, the novel foregrounds the incompatibility of Reason in the post-colonial nations.

Chapter Three: Modernity, Medical Science and Identity in *The Calcutta*

Chromosome

The Calcutta Chromosome is Ghosh's fictional reexamination of the official story of the discovery of the malaria parasite by Sir Ronald Ross in Calcutta in 1898. In Ghosh's presentation, Ross was manipulated by a group of natives who led him in the particular direction towards his breakthrough. Ross did not bother to know about the natives because of his racial mindset. The novel exemplifies what Foucault called "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges." More importantly, the indigenous epistemology enables the natives to dismantle the binary of modernity and antimodernity, and move towards, what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call, 'altermodernity.' The native group develops a technique of asexual chromosome transfer from person to person, and thus to live eternally in newer incarnations. It is a technique which makes their identities fragmented, fluid and plural. Such temporal, positional identity undermines the notion of stable self and identity enshrined in modernity.

Chapter Four: Place, Modernity and Identity in *The Hungry Tide*

The Hungry Tide is Ghosh's critical examination of the feasibility of the universal paradigm of rationality in the uncanny reality of the Sunderbans. Nirmal and Kanai, who are brought up

in cities, make fun of the local myth-based worldview. They try to comprehend the tide country through the lens of rationality, and they only get confounded. Nirmal rejects his secular, rationalist worldview and becomes a new person who believes in myth. Kanai goes through a horribly disconcerting experience at Garjontola, and realises the inadequacy of the universalist rational worldview. He perceives that the local Bon Bibi legend is intricately fused with the land, and the indigenous epistemology is more effective in the Sunderbans. This realisation transforms Kanai from a proud, domineering bully to a humble person.

Chapter Five: Modernity, Sexuality and Identity in *The Ibis Trilogy*

This chapter examines Ghosh's critique of the sexual ethics of the colonisers with reference to the Burnham couple in *The Ibis Trilogy*. Both of them preach the sanctity of sexual conducts enshrined in the modern/ colonial notions of sexuality. But their actions contradict their preaching. Mr. Burnham, the sanctimonious colonial philanthropist, derives masochistic pleasure by being beaten by Paulette, a young orphan good enough to be his daughter. Mrs. Burnham, the righteous *memsahib*, entraps Zachary Reid, a mulatto sailor and indulges in sexual escapades with him. The masked identities of Mr. Burnham and Mrs. Burnham illustrate the ironies of the universalist colonial sexual ethics.

Chapter Six: Modernity, Gender and Identity in *The Ibis Trilogy*

Baboo Nobokrishna Panda shows how the universalist gender norms imposed by colonial modernity is resisted and undermined by the Indian *ardhanariswara*, that is, a fusion of male and female. Colonialism appropriated the binary gender roles propagated by modernity which made strict division between male and female. Colonialism also glorified masculinity and

condemned androgyny. Baboo Nobokrishna becomes an *ardhanariswara* in course of his life, and it endows him with a new self which is potentially subversive. This chapter analyses Baboo Nobokrishna in the light of Ashis Nandy's ideas relating to the potential of traditional Indian androgyny to resist and subvert hegemonic colonial/modern gender normativity.

Conclusion

The dissertation views Ghosh's representation of identity through three separate but interrelated modes: (a) identity as an over-determined product, (b) identity as a mask, and (c) identity as a source of resistance to colonial hegemony. My analysis of these three modes brings out the multiple incongruities, contradictions, ironies of colonial modernity as well as resistance to and undermining of it. As for the case of India, it seems that Western modernity does not go well with the Indian reality, and that Indians must strive to create a space for their own version/versions of modernity. The study, however, does not endorse any binary reversal. It advocates, rather, the coexistence of multiple epistemologies and worldviews. Such a peaceful cohabitation can show us the path towards decolonisation of being and identity.