CHAPTER 1

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Contemporary Indian drama has made use of bold innovations and daring experiments both in terms of themes and techniques. On the one hand, it has used history, myth, folklore and philosophies (such as existentialism and absurdism); on the other hand, it has employed shifting temporal settings, dream sequences, masks and voice-overs. It has not only assimilated the elements of Indian theatre tradition but also borrowed from the modern western dramatists such as Bertolt Brecht, Jean Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. Thus it has emerged as an innovative phenomenon. It has also attracted considerable critical attention and as a result a good deal of work has been done on it.

The critical scholarship as of now leaves, however, a lot to be desired, as there are many gaps yet to be filled. Critics and scholars have generally looked at Indian drama from conventional points of view. But Indian drama in its present shape and output calls for fresh critical analysis in the light of modern literary theory. Literary theory today is, broadly speaking, anti-foundationalist and anti-essentialist. For instance, in recent years it has moved away from obsolete terminology and increasingly employed the term “subject” in place of “self”. The term “self” pre-supposes the idea of unitarian identity, of identity as
something unique, coherent and autonomous. The term “subject” is relatively open and marked by difference as it takes into account various socio-political, linguistic and cultural factors that constitute subjectivity. The subject is no longer regarded as a definite, coherent and fixed construction but as a malleable structure open to change, moulding and remoulding by a variety of factors. Subjectivity thus can be examined for the ways in which it is fashioned by language, discourse, power, culture and ideology. Language, for instance, which was once thought to be only a medium of expression, is now considered to be a limiting factor with regard to what we can think.

The question of subjectivity occupies the centre of the Indian literary scene today due to rapid cultural change, driven mainly by globalisation and the increasing popularity of media and the information and communication technologies (ICTs). The emerging culture thrives on and encourages multiple subject positions. Consequently, an Indian is today faced with the question of identity which can adequately be posed only in terms of subjectivity as formulated in contemporary theory and manifested in Indian literature, particularly in the contemporary Indian drama.

These questions need to be especially addressed in the sphere of Indian drama insofar as it tries to explore the question of subjectivity as central to the contemporary concerns of culture, politics and society. The three major Indian dramatists proposed to be studied here, namely Vijay
Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani address the problematic of contemporary Indian subjectivity in their works in their own distinctive ways. The problematic is approached in their works from diverse but complementary points of view, revealing the various facets of contemporary Indian subjectivity.

The present research project undertakes a study of the plays of Tendulkar, Karnad and Dattani in order to explore the emergence of a composite conception of contemporary Indian subjectivity. The project also examines the nature of this subjectivity and its cultural-political implications. The question of subjectivity assumes special importance in view of the rapid cultural changes that have taken place in recent years in the developing countries, especially India. Cross-cultural influences and the dissemination of traditions through mass migrations and globalization have become increasingly prominent. The widespread influence of media and the information and communication technologies, as noted above, has also contributed to a dynamic and hybrid culture. The rise of global metropolises in different continents and the necessity of multiple and often incompatible subject positions in a period of unprecedented speed of cultural changes has made the question of subjectivity extremely important.
1.1 Drama in India: Historical Background

Drama in India has a long history. The dramatic tradition may be said to have matured here even before Greek drama came to the Indians’ knowledge. Taking recitation from *Rig Veda*, imitation from *Yajur Veda*, melody from *Sama Veda*, and aesthetic flavor from *Atharva Veda*, as a legend would have it, Indian drama is said to have come into being as a subtle means of communicating significant experiences.

Bharata’s *Natyashatra* is considered to be the foundation of the discipline of dramatics in India. Scholars equate it to Aristotle’s *Poetics* as a treatise in the field of drama. *Natyashatra* elaborately discusses the poetics and stagecraft of drama. Various aspects of drama, including plot construction, characterization, stage setting and music have been dealt with in this treatise. The norms prescribed in *Natyashastra* were generally followed by Sanskrit dramatists such as Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidasa, Harsha and Bhavabhuti, whose works are imbued with technical excellence. Bhasa (dated between 1st century BCE and 4th century CE) is the oldest known Indian dramatist. He is said to have written 35 plays, but only 13 of them are available to us. *Urubhangam*, *Dutavakyā* and *Karna* are his most famous plays. Sudraka (200 BCE), who was a king, became famous for his social comedy *Mricchakatikam*. His two other plays are *Vinavasavadatta* and *Padmaprabhritaka*.

The golden age of Sanskrit drama produced world-famous playwrights, among whom Kalidasa (370-450 CE) is definitely the best
known. His masterpiece *Abhijnanashakuntalam* is a tragi-comedy of exquisite workmanship. *Malvikagnimitram* is a romantic comedy, while *Raghuvansham* traces the history of the clan of King Raghu. Kalidasa is usually celebrated for his beautiful poetry, vast range of characters and spiritual vision.

Vishakhadatta (5th century CE) belonged to a princely family and wrote political plays such as *Mudrarakshasa*. Harshavardhana (590-647 CE) was a Buddhist emperor and playwright; his plays are based on the epics and *Puranas*. His most famous play is *Priyadarsika*. Bhavabhuti (700-730 CE) produced beautiful poetic plays such as *Mahaviracharita* and *Malatimadhava*. As a literary genre, Sanskrit drama is basically romantic, with a comic streak. It is rich in symbolism, spiritualism and mysticism.

Sanskrit drama flourished in India till the 12th century, but with the decline of the Sanskrit language the stage productions ceased and the plays were only read as literature. After the hey-day of Sanskrit drama, the theatre of the people flourished for many centuries in India. The *Jatras* in Bengal, *Yakshagana* in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, *Kathakali* in Kerala, *Bhavai* in Gujarat and *Ram Lila* in North India are some of the examples. These varied forms kept alive the spirit of drama in India.

After the British came to India, a new awakening came over the Indian arts, including drama. English education brought, over the
course of years, the study of western drama. Foreign troupes visited and performed in India. The exposure to new forms of literature and drama strengthened the dormant impulse of Indian drama. Translations and adaptations from Sanskrit and English followed. By the end of the 19th century, modern Indian drama written originally in vernacular languages and sometimes translated into English had come into being. This new form of drama employed the western tradition on the one hand and experimented with the Indian tradition on the other. Commenting on its function Jasbir Jain remarks, “Probably it was during the colonial period that drama in English surfaced primarily as a medium of reaching across or framing Indian culture for the benefit of the British” (27).

In the pre-independence era, playwrights like Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya significantly contributed to the growth of Indian English drama. Tagore (1861-1941) was probably the first major playwright who invested Indian English drama with lyrical excellence, symbolism and allegorical significance. His best-known plays are *Sacrifice, Chitra, The Post Office* and *Red Oleanders*. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) wrote originally in English on the model of Elizabethan poetic drama. His well-known plays are *Perseus, Vasavadutta* and *Rodogune*. His plays are steeped in beautiful poetry. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (1907-1988) wrote with a revolutionary zeal and socialist leanings. He wrote a few devotional plays also, like
Raidas, Chokha Mela and Tuka Ram. His other plays like The Window, The Parrot and The Coffin reveal his concern for various social issues.

These three dramatists contributed largely to the development of Indian English drama. Their works are notable for their poetical excellence, thematic variety, technical virtuosity, symbolism and moral commitment, but were not very suitable for stage production. Asif Currimbhoy (1928-1994) was one exception who used the elements of pantomime, dance and song to create powerful auditory effects and visual impressions. His famous plays are The Hungry Ones, The Dumb Dancer and The Doldrummers. But in spite of such impressive record, Indian drama in English could not flourish as much as the drama in vernacular did.

While drama in English struggled to sustain itself, drama in other Indian languages kept on experimenting, growing and absorbing folk forms. Dharmavir Bharati, Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad are widely considered to be among the finest dramatists writing in Indian languages. They have made use of remarkable innovations and experiments in technique and theme. Dharmavir Bharati (1926-1997) uses epic material from Mahabharata in Andha Yug, linking it to the contemporary political scenario. The play was translated into English by Paul Jacob as The Blind Age in 1972. Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) uses historical characters to present the breakdown of communication in modern life in Aashadh Ka Ek Din. His
other famous plays are *Adhe Adhoore* and *Lehron Ke Rajhans*. Badal Sircar (b. 1925) employs contemporary situations to project an existential attitude to modern life. Sircar has created a genuine people’s theatre known as the Third Theatre, a theatre supported and created by people and not merely performed by them. Transcending the limits and limitations of the traditional and folk theatres, the Third Theatre is a four-way flow of influences – actor to actor, audience to actor, actor to audience and audience to audience. *Procession, Bhoma* and *Stale News* are the plays based on this conception of theatre. Through his plays Sircar suggests constructive action aimed at social change.

Vijay Tendulkar (1931-2008) with his Marathi plays has significantly changed the form and pattern of Indian drama. Demolishing the constraints imposed by the three-act play, by developing flexible and carefully crafted forms, he has bridged the gap between traditional and modern theatre. He deals with the suffering of persons trapped in isolation and hostile surroundings. His plays like *Sakharam Binder, Ghashiram Kotwal* and *Silence! The Court is in Session* raise disturbing questions about love, sex, marriage and moral values, and highlight the hollowness of middle-class morality. His protagonist in *Ghashiram Kotwal* is an embodiment of political machinations. *Sakharam* is a study in hollow patriarchal morality, while *Vultures* shows people caught in hypocrisy and acute social and mental isolation.
While Vijay Tendulkar explores the socio-political matrix of contemporary Indian subjectivity in his plays, Girish Karnad (b. 1938) addresses the problematic of this subjectivity by employing the devices of myth, folklore and history. He uses these devices not just to visit the past but to look at the present and also to foreshadow the future. He uses myth and history to create a new consciousness of the absurdity of human life with all its passions and conflicts. His Tughlaq and Tipu Sultan (the protagonists of *Tughlaq* and *Dreams of Tipu Sultan* respectively) are not just figures from history but also our contemporary characters. Their predicament is the predicament of our times, rooted in the political and cultural situation in which we find ourselves. In *Hayavadana*, Karnad uses myth and folklore to articulate the urge for completeness and to show how this urge leaves a wound in the subject. *Nagamandala* again makes a superb use of myth and folklore to explore the gendered psychosexual construction of subjectivity. According to Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, Girish Karnad “invents a structure in which the use of folk conventions is ironic and reflexive as well as expedient and natural, and where the action occupies at once the mythic realm of folk culture and the historical present” (*Theatres of Independence* 337). Five plays of Karnad have been taken up in this study as he has the widest range in terms of theme and technique. Both *Tughlaq* and *Dreams of Tipu Sultan* are historical plays but the focus in *Tughlaq* is on the inner life of the protagonist, while in *Dreams of Tipu
Sultan the focus is primarily historical. Both Hayavadana and Nagamandala are based in myth and folklore and complement each other in terms of treatment and technique. Wedding Album, on the other hand, is altogether different from Karnad’s previous plays in theme and content.

Both Karnad and Tendulkar explore different facets of contemporary Indian subjectivity, but in recent years Indian English drama has found new life also in the work of Mahesh Dattani (b. 1958) who writes on relatively unconventional subjects. These include the seemingly mean, ugly and unhappy things of life, but his special focus is on the suffering that arises from problems centered on sexuality. His plays address the comparatively unexplored, contemporary issues of sexuality as constitutive of the contemporary urban Indian subjectivity. He deals with the expression and repression of human sexuality, alternate sexual preferences, socially unacceptable sexual codes, and their consequences for the individual.

A survey of contemporary Indian drama shows that the works of Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani represent a powerful and resurgent Indian drama. These playwrights have, with their innovative and experimental work of contemporary relevance, given new directions to Indian drama. One of the things which profoundly unites them is their mutually complementary treatment of the problematic of contemporary Indian subjectivity on the various axes of
1.2 Critical Studies of Contemporary Indian Drama: A Survey

Contemporary Indian drama has been studied from a variety of critical positions which use insights from psychoanalysis, cultural studies, gender studies, archetypal criticism, Marxist criticism, formalism, etc. Nevertheless, the field remains relatively unexplored with critical tools provided by recent developments in theory. Since contemporary Indian drama is very complex and employs the latest techniques and innovative themes, its critical evaluation also needs to be theoretically up to date. The insights provided by recent developments in theory can reveal its many aspects and hitherto unexplored layers. One of these is the complex nature of contemporary Indian subjectivity as a multidimensional construct, especially as it can be understood in the light of recent theory with its interdisciplinary resources.

Of course, Indian drama in recent years has attracted a good deal of in-depth critical analysis; a lot of critical work has been done on Indian drama in translation as well. As a result, a considerable body of critical work exists on Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani as their plays have been interpreted and analysed by using different critical techniques and tools.
N.S. Dharan in *The Plays of Vijay Tendulkar* explores various aspects of Tendulkar's plays. The essays included in the book discuss Tendulkar as a writer of acute socio-political consciousness, besides assessing him for his technical virtuosity. Feminist, psychoanalytical and the political-critical are some of the approaches used by N.S. Dharan. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri in *Mahesh Dattani* explores the setting of Mahesh Dattani's plays, the thematic issues of gender taken up by the dramatist, the stage viability and filming of the plays, and Dattani's place in contemporary Indian writing. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker in *Theatres of Independence* studies Indian drama from various angles such as the social issues, stage productions and the history of drama, but she basically deals with the trajectory of Indian theatre after Independence. She discusses the conditions in which Indian theatre flourished and offers detailed discussions on major playwrights, directors and their various performances in post-independence India. *The Indian Imagination of Girish Karnad: Essays on Hayavadana* by P. Dhanavel reads *Hayavadana* for its humanistic vision, the identity crisis of the protagonist/s, and the anxiety of influence through an application of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to the play. M. Sarat Babu in *Indian Drama Today: A Study in the Theme of Cultural Deformity* studies the plays of Tendulkar, Karnad, Mohan Rakesh and Badal Sircar from the viewpoint of various social, political, physical, mental and spiritual “deformities”.

Among the edited works, the most important seems to be *The Plays of Girish Karnad* by Jayadipsinh Dodiya. It is a collection of papers exploring various aspects of Karnad’s plays, like the treatment of psychocultural issues, shape-shifting and power politics. The papers also examine alienation and incompleteness as themes in Karnad’s plays. The papers study, among other things, the motif of betrayal, the use of myth as a fulcrum, the quest for perfection, and the use of Dionysian ego in *Hayavadana*. *Girish Karnad’s Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives* edited by Tutun Mukherji has papers which shed light on the use of history, myth and reality in Karnad’s plays. The focus is on reading the plays from the perspectives of race and gender, politics of power and dramatic techniques. Various performances of Karnad’s plays on different occasions are also discussed.

There are also a number of articles critically examining the works of both Karnad and Tendulkar together. Some of these explore the experimentation and innovation in the plays of Karnad, Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh and Badal Sircar taken together. A. Jaganamohana Chari in his paper “*Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*: a Study in Postcolonial Dialectics” explores the two plays of Karnad as therapeutic devices aiming to relieve the author of his predicament as an Indian English playwright. Veena Noble Dass in her article “A Re-Reading of Girish Karnad’s Plays with Reference to Myth and Folktale” studies the use of myth and its remodelling in selected plays of Karnad. Aparna
Dharwadker in “Historical Fictions and Postcolonial Representation: Reading Girish Karnad’s *Tughlaq*” reads Tughlaq with a view to exploring postcolonial resonances in the play. Rajesh Kumar Sharma has called Tughlaq a Nietzschean enigma in his paper “Karnad’s Tughlaq: a Nietzschean Enigma”, comparing Tughlaq to Nietzsche, who too was way ahead of his times and who peered into the “abyss” of being. Sudha Rai in “Gender Crossings: Vijay Tendulkar’s Deconstructive Axis in *Sakharam Binder, Kamala and Kanyadaan*” argues that the women characters in Tendulkar’s plays are agents of social change. Urmil Talwar in “The Protean Self: Karnad’s *Tughlaq*” interrogates the notion of a unified self through the subjectivity of Tughlaq as created by Karnad. Ram Sharma in his article “Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattani’s *Tara*” discusses the theme of gender discrimination and patriarchal control in Dattani’s play *Tara*. Luxmi Sharma in “An Exploration of Mahesh Dattani’s Play *Where There is a Will*” sees the play as a representation of Gujarati middle class society with its patriarchal constraints and close-knit family structure. Rajesh Kumar Sharma in his article “*Final Solutions*: Mahesh Dattani’s Radical Political Theatre” discusses the limitations of prevailing discourses about Hindu-Muslim relations and argues for identifying the problem as simultaneously historical, psychological, cultural and economic.

None of the above mentioned studies, however, examines the construction of contemporary Indian subjectivity in the plays of Karnad,
Tendulkar and Dattani together and comprehensively in the light of the insights provided by literary theory today. As it is evident from the above survey, although the three authors have received a good deal of critical attention, the area of investigation as well as the approach of the present research project would arguably make a significant contribution to critical scholarship.

1.3 The Problematic of Subjectivity

1.3.1 Explorations in Western Theory

For a very long time after the Renaissance, the western thinkers continued to envisage the human being in terms of the Renaissance humanistic idea of the self. Traditional literary criticism, with its mimetic approach, thus continued to treat the self as something essentially and evidently given. Recent theory, however, has strongly contested the assumption of an essential self and its givenness in the realm of literature, since literature foregrounds language which, in turn, is obviously an unstable and unreliable medium of communication. Because we rely on language in articulating our perceptions of reality and in formulating our knowledge of that reality, human perception and knowledge cannot be said to be founded on any immutable certainty. Hence we cannot claim any genuine and indubitable knowledge of our “self”. As Michel Foucault notes in *The Archeology of Knowledge*:
The researches of psychoanalysis, of linguistics, of anthropology have “decentered” the subject in relation to the laws of its desire, the forms of its language, the rules of its actions or the play of its mythical and imaginative discourse. (22)

If the possibilities of thought and action are controlled by systems and forces which a subject does not really control or comprehend, then the subject is neither a centre nor a source to which one may refer in order to finally explain a particular action or even a thought.

But the question arises whether the subject is merely created by circumstances or whether it has any say in its self-formation. In other words, does it have any choice with regard to itself? The English word “subject” exemplifies the crux of the theoretical problem. As the subject of a sentence, it denotes a free subjectivity that does things as a free agent, a doer. On the other hand, as the “subject of a queen” or as a medical subject, one is subjected to and determined by dominant powers and discourses.

In the following pages, the historical development of the concept of subjectivity in the Western world shall be discussed. Beginning with Marxist thought and its contribution and followed by the seminal ideas of thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Ferdinand de Saussure, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser, the study ends with Judith Butler’s contribution to the understanding of the problematic of subjectivity. The work of these thinkers is discussed in
detail after a brief introductory outline of their contribution to the aforementioned problematic.

The question of subjectivity dates back in the West to at least René Descartes’s (1596-1650) “cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”), stated by him in his *Discourse on Method* (1637). Focusing attention on interiority in the process of his search for truth, Descartes says that one could negate one’s body by thinking that it does not exist, while on the other hand if one ceased thinking, one would automatically cease existing. To be more precise, according to him, the illusion of existence can be maintained through thought only. Descartes says, “I knew from this that I was a substance, the whole essence or nature of which was to think” (25). Although he does not base his argument on any logic (except that he could perceive it distinctly, which proved it to be true), yet this notion of a thinking, coherent self has become extremely popular since its formulation and statement by Descartes. Ruth Robbins believes that Descartes’s statement is extremely significant in founding the modern consciousness, since it inscribes a model of selfhood founded on interiority: “In its insistence on thought as the defining proof of existence, it focuses attention on language” (6).

However, although “cogito” is a foundational concept, the subjectivity it describes is a limited conception of what a human self might be. The making of the self takes place in language; therefore, there is a close relationship between thinking in language and being. Hence
the understanding of the self obviously needs to be widened to include forces outside ourselves which have effects on us.

The first comprehensive challenge to humanistic ‘identity’ comes from the nineteenth century trio of Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, and it was further advanced by Ferdinand de Saussure in the twentieth century. Cartesian humanism had displaced God with man as a rational being, while Nietzsche, Marx, Freud and the later poststructuralist thinkers displaced man and instituted in that vacated place a function called the “subject” which behaves like a self-conscious and self-identified human being yet can no longer forget that it is primarily a function only, and ultimately only a fiction.

Nietzsche’s contribution to the emergence of the concept of the “subject” can be understood in two ways. Firstly, Nietzsche has argued that the human being is a historical product; hence s/he can be transcended. Secondly, he avers that it is as a subject moulded by value system that a human being finds her/his identity, and any change in this value system will automatically change her/him. Karl Marx also challenges the notion of a fixed coherent self and suggests that “human essence” owes its origin to certain social structures and certain conditions of production and communication. He theorises self in the light of forces and relations of production.

The word “subject” gained currency in contemporary literary theory largely due to the psychoanalytical tradition inaugurated by Jacques
Lacan (1901-1981) in his re-readings of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). According to Freud, selfhood begins with the body. The new born child can perceive no distinction between himself and the world. The pleasure and displeasure he experiences are his only sense of being. As the child grows, he is inserted into a pre-existing culture insisting on the rules made before the child even came into the world. To avoid punishment in the form of castration, he has to regulate his desires and be obedient to the social order represented by his father. But the repressed desires stay in the unconscious mind pushed away from consciousness. The unconscious is however partially accessible in dreams, reveries, slips of the tongue etc. The “self” is thus not only beyond our control but also in a state of perpetual conflict between “id” and “super-ego”.

Lacan, however, gave a new direction to psychoanalysis by reading Freud in terms of semiotics. According to him, there is nothing outside language; and, moreover, language constructs subjectivity. According to him, the phase of early childhood, before introduction into the world of language, is what may be termed as the *Imaginary*, during which the child cannot differentiate between self and the other, herself/himself and the mother and male and female. But this aura of completeness and coherence is shattered when the child is introduced into the world of language, law and exchange. Lacan calls this phase of a child’s life the *Symbolic*. In this phase, the unity of the self and the other has been
destroyed by the emergence of a father figure that is represented by those social and cultural forces that develop the child into a subject.

Linguistically, the conception of the subject is usually traced to the work of structuralists. Structuralism appeared in literary criticism in the second half of the twentieth century and went on to become one of the most popular approaches in the analysis of language, culture, and society. The work of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) in linguistics is generally considered to be the starting point of structuralism. Ferdinand de Saussure is remembered as the originator of the structuralist movement and the major theories given by him can be found in *Course in General Linguistics* (1915), compiled by his colleagues after his death and based on his students’ notes on his seminars. In the *Course* he focussed not on the use of language (*parole*, or speech), but also on the underlying system of language (*langue*) and called his theory *semiology*. However, as he remarked, the analysis and research of the underlying system (*langue*) could be done only through the examination of its actual use (*parole*).

Saussure argues that language is a system of signs and these signs are arbitrary at first, but go on to become conventions. These signs have not taken their specific forms because of what they mean but on the basis of their difference from other signs. As Saussure himself remarks, “Their most precise characteristic is being what the others are not” (117). Linguistic signs are composed of two parts, a *signifier* (the actual word as
it is spoken or written) and a *signified* (the concept or meaning of the word). Signifiers are arbitrary signs and their signifieds contain layers of meanings and conventions deposited through history of usage. Each language is a system of concepts as well as forms: a system of conventional signs that organises the world. A linguistic code is thus a theory of the world. Different languages divide the world differently. In other words, language is not a nomenclature that provides labels to preexisting categories but generates its own categories. In other words, it is language which precedes thought and creates the frameworks within which thought has to function. Reality is therefore constituted by language as language limits and organises what we think. Language thus determines our reactions to the world and dictates the way we see the world. As Jonathan Culler observes, taking the implications of these insights to their logical conclusion, language is a manifestation of ideology, “the categories in which speakers are authorised to think – and the site of its questioning or undoing” (60).

Beside linguistics, the principles and methods employed by semiologists were soon adopted by scholars and literary thinkers, such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Claude Lévi-Strauss, and implemented in their respective areas of study (literary studies and philosophy, psychoanalysis and anthropology, respectively) which gave rise to the structuralist movement. The term “structuralism” itself appreared in the work of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and
the “structuralist movement” became the catalyst for the pioneering work of such thinkers as Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan.

The structuralists are strong anti-humanists who suggest that there is no unique meaning inherent in a text and that a text generates its meaning depending on the working of structures that are universal in nature and range. But Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) goes one step ahead of the structuralists and proposes that the text is an infinite play of signifiers and signifieds in which the meaning “differs” and is “deferred” infinitely (Of Grammatology, 1978). Hence, we can deconstruct a text to show that the discovery of a single, definitive and coherent meaning in it is only an illusion. Derrida thus inaugurates what has come to be known as poststructuralism. He finds language to be a very unreliable medium and develops his attack on logocentrism through the deconstruction of texts. Saussurian semiotics and, subsequently, deconstruction have contributed to the view of what may be termed as the textualisation of all reality, including subjectivity. In other words, the text does not denote only a verbal construct, but anything that is constituted as a sign or set of signs. By deconstructing subjectivity, poststructuralism lays bare its constructed nature and we are, thus, led to see its constitutive contradictions, ambivalences and ambiguities.

Poststructuralism brings home the insight that individual identity cannot be described as a free and self-transparent consciousness nor as a stable human essence, but at best only a construction of language,
politics and culture. Particularly, it plays on the ambiguity between agency and structure, which means the freedom of a person to be the author of her/his utterance and action while also indicating her/his subjection to various structures. In other words, the subject is both free and unfree in her/his utterance and actions. The clear binary distinction between agency and structure stands deconstructed thanks to poststructuralism.

Louis Althusser (1918-1990), the most important structuralist Marxist, deconstructs the idea of humanistic self by incorporating the theoretically informed idea of the “subject” into Marxist thought. According to him, it merely appears that the subject acts willingly out of her/his own belief, in all consciousness, but it is actually the ideology acting through the subject. The subject acts in the belief that she/he is acting on his own, but it is really a misconception. The term “subject”, therefore, becomes the central term in Althusser’s work.

Michel Foucault’s (1926-1984) work also calls attention to the role of language and discourse in the exercise and preservation of power. He examines the procedures by which our societies regulate themselves. Foucault seeks to expose the way power is at work in language. Each era produces different discourses through which the subject may be objectified according to ruling values, beliefs and interests of its society. What we call the truth is a creation of discourses over a period of time.
Foucault denies the possibility of apprehending any reality outside or beyond discourses.

Judith Butler (b.1956) revisits the question of identity from a somewhat different position but one which is situated within the Derridean and Foucauldian territories of poststructuralism. She sees identity as “performative”. Her concept of performativity describes the mechanisms by which particular subjectivities are formed through the submission of bodies to discursive practices and the repetition involved in the ways in which disciplinary power is lived by individuals and habituated into their lives. By identifying the repetitive and reiterative processes of inscription of social norms in the body, Butler emphasises the discontinuous nature of identity. This allows her to locate the possibility of resistance within the process of reiteration itself.

In the following pages a detailed examination of the problematic of subjectivity has been undertaken insofar as it has been comprehensively explored in the modern Western world across various disciplines such as psychoanalysis, culture studies, gender studies and so on. The work of thinkers like Nietzsche, Marx, Althusser, Freud, Lacan, Foucault and Judith Butler is discussed with reference to their contribution to an understanding of subjectivity. On account of the greater amount of work done in the West on subjectivity, we shall in this part focus on the concept of subjectivity as developed in the West. But there are Indian traditions also which can be re-appropriated in the light of the
conception of subjectivity that has recently emerged in the Western world. Indian thinkers like Nagarjuna, Bhartrihari, thinkers of the Chittamatra school and Charvaka too examined self and identity from various angles and noticed the flaws in the conventional notions of an absolute, fixed, coherent self centuries ago. The notion of a fixed, permanent, comprehensible self is challenged and superseded in the Indian philosophy time and again in favour of a more nuanced and complex understanding. A study of the emergence of the concept of subjectivity is, therefore, incomplete without taking into consideration the Indian viewpoints on self/identity. The discussion of the Western perspectives on the problematic of subjectivity will therefore be followed by a brief account of the Indian perspectives.

**Friedrich Nietzsche**

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is a German philosopher, who was not only neglected but also often variously misinterpreted during his life and for many years after his death. A diverse spectrum of “isms” has tried to validate its theories naming Nietzsche as their inspiration and justification. Anarchists, Nazis, Socialists, Feminists and Nihilists are a few among those who claim Nietzsche as their source of inspiration. Nietzsche had already prophesied in his work that his philosophy might be misinterpreted. In the preface of *Ecce Homo*, he wrote, “Listen to me!
For I am thus and thus. Do not above all confound me with what I am not!” (1).

But very few of his readers in the century of his death have done anything else. He knew that he would not be understood in his own lifetime since he was ahead of his times. His ideas, however, today throw a frightening and disturbing challenge to modern consciousness. We are slowly becoming aware of the profound changes in our relationship to truth, science and morality, which Nietzsche long ago foretold. His work casts a long shadow that reaches us and falls far away into the future that we yet are only dimly aware of.

According to Nietzsche, subjectivity is the product of repressive value systems of morality. People are trained to follow and respect abstract notions such as reason, truth, and morality. Nietzsche traces the birth of morality to the herding together of the weak and their proclaiming their opponents, the strong, as “bad” or “evil” and, consequently, themselves as “good” and “moral”. The suffering that the weak receive at the hands of their enemies is attributed by them to divine providence. They pronounce themselves to be fortunate and moral in their suffering as they are the chosen ones of God, while actually they are weak and impotent. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche looks back at the origin of the words “good” and “bad”, and concludes in a satiric tone:
. . . “the enemy” as the man of resentment conceives him -
and here precisely is his deed, his creation: he has conceived “the evil enemy”, “the Evil One”, and this in fact is his basic concept, from which he then evolves as an afterthought and pendant, a “good one” himself! (39)

The weak try to validate their weakness by claiming that whatever the strong did was evil, and they attribute everything to divine providence and resign themselves to their fate as if it were a voluntary achievement and a meritorious act. Nietzsche calls it “the sublime self-deception that interprets weakness as freedom, and their being thus-and-thus as a merit” (Genealogy of Morals 46). Their so-called morality, ideals and tolerance thus are an excuse not to try and be like their rulers, the strong.

Nietzsche also investigates the invention/origin of God, claiming that the gods served as originators of evil justifying the sins committed by human beings initially. Thus systematically dispensing with God, morality and truth, Nietzsche stresses that all these are functions of a repressive social structure. Michael Tanner interprets Nietzsche’s views on morality thus: “Morality is a self-supporting system, resting on nothing outside itself; that morality is founded in reason, and that the basis of morality is demonstrable” (33). Dani Cavallaro, in Critical and Cultural Theory, describes this subjugating force as “. . . the whole tradition of Western thought amounts[ing] to a celebration of Nihilism -
meaning by this term, a reduction and eventually a negation of life itself” (89).

Nietzsche sees life in terms of a “will to power” that at all times requires the confrontation of danger and suffering instead of hiding behind a convenient veil of morality and divine providence. Cavallaro, explaining this, writes: “Genuine will to power entails the discovery and actualization of humankind’s boundless potentialities, including those which are methodically crushed by dominant cultural paradigm” (88).

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche contemplates the figure of *ubermensch* or “Overman” as the type of subject who will have overcome the limitations of human beings and would be free from ideas received through generations. He would have the potential to create himself without being blocked by prevailing metaphysics: “. . . a few ideas . . . rendered inextinguishable, ever-present, unforgettable, “fixed”, with the aim of hypnotizing the entire nervous and intellectual system” (*Genealogy of Morals* 61). These ideas that have been fed to humankind for centuries need to be erased. Nietzsche questions the validity and authenticity of these ideas as they form a repressive value system suffocating the energy of human beings. Peter Barry describes Nietzsche’s enterprise of exposing these ideas in these words:

. . . this new Nietzschean universe, where there are no guaranteed facts, only interpretations, none of which has the stamp of authority upon it, since there is no longer any
authoritative centre to which to appeal for validation of our interpretations. (67)

Thus liberating his Overman from centuries-old metaphysical shackles, Nietzsche prophesies a new subject who will carry the burden of his/her freedom. Dani Cavallaro describes this subject as

. . . the type of subject who, through unending creative efforts, is capable of reinventing existence and of accepting life’s random contingency, in opposition to all forms of classification, dogmatism and hypocrisy (89).

Nietzsche’s critique of conventional systems of theology and morality indicates that the subject is a construction of dominant ideologies “systematically trained into a masochistic internalization of constraining values” (Cavallaro 89). The subject creates around her/himself a cocoon of cultural codes and institutions in which he/she feels secure but actually increases his/her subjection to these codes/institutions.

The Cartesian view of the subject (“I think, therefore I am”) as a free and rational entity is refuted by Nietzsche’s anti-rationalist and anti-idealist philosophy, since it is difficult to demonstrate that thought proceeds from “I” because there is no evidence of the existence of “I” as a stable, coherent and fixed essence. It is rather a construction of language, politics and culture.
An optimistic Nietzsche though anticipates that his Overman would see through this construction and overthrow it. He would live and will independently of any metaphysical chains. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche however, voices his fear that the Overman may never be achieved by a human being, meaning thereby that the subject would oscillate like a pendulum between freedom and subjugation, making him doomed to be both free and unfree perhaps forever.

Thus Nietzsche’s contribution to the emergence of the concept of the “subject” can be understood in two ways. Firstly, Nietzsche has argued that the human being is a historical product; hence s/he can be transcended. Secondly, he avers that it is as a subject moulded by value system that a human being finds her/his identity, and any change in this value system will automatically change her/him. Therefore, it becomes impossible to conceive of the human being as a coherent, self-sufficient and comprehensible entity after Nietzsche.

**Karl Marx**

The concept of subjectivity has gradually gained ground in recent literary critical studies as a result of contributions from diverse critical approaches. An important and major impact towards this change was arguably wrought by Marxist thought.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) started out with the idea that man is a coherent and recognizable entity, the traits of
which can be ascertained and defined biologically and psychologically. They believed in the existence of a fixed and transparent essence, “... an inner, mute, general character which unites the many individuals in a natural way” (The German Ideology 616), averring that thought arises from being. The notion of the fixed essence in the early period of Marx was arguably derived from the ideas of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). According to David McLellan, the Hegelian view of an individual's existence can be understood in terms of the development of mind in three stages. The first stage is that of immediate perception of the here and now. The second stage is of self-consciousness, in which a person analyses the world and accordingly orders his/her actions. The third is the stage of reason, in which a person attains the understanding of the real after which the spirit, by way of religion and art, acquires absolute knowledge (26).

Each of these stages, according to Hegel, retains elements of the previous stage and yet transcends it. There is always a state of tension between the present state of affairs and what it is becoming because it is in the process of being negated and subsequently changed. Hegel called this process “dialectic”. In the words of Eric Fromm, “Man and things are in a constant transition from one suchness into another; hence a thing is for itself only when it has posited all its determinates and made them moments of its self-realization” (25). Marx appropriated this key point of Hegel in Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848), formulating a theory of
class consciousness and an inevitable conflict forming a notion of politicised subjectivity, thus suggesting that individual identity can undergo a change if a shared experience can be recognised and worked for. In suggesting that man has the ability to change the material conditions, Marxist thought opens up identity to a certain degree of control.

Marxist theory argues that the way we think and the way we experience the world are conditioned by the way material reality is organised. The Marxist model of society is constituted by a base (the means of production, distribution and exchange) and a superstructure, which includes culture, art, religion, law, ideas and so on. The latter, according to the Marxist view, are determined by the nature of the base. This view is famously though simplistically known as economic determinism.

If we look at the later writings of Marx, we find the idea of a recognizable, consistent and coherent self slightly fading: “. . . the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each separate individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of social relations” (The German Ideology 616). The essence is not an integral part of human nature but which “owe[s] [its] origin to certain social structures and certain conditions of production and communication,” as Eric Fromm suggests (24).

In A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859), Marx argues that the social existence of an individual determines her/his
consciousness. Thus we see the later Marx admitting the influence of various forces in shaping the “essence” of man. In his economic interpretation of history, Marx finds history as created by human labour and in turn as also creating human essence. As Fromm suggests, “Man does change in the course of history; he develops himself; he transforms himself, he is his own product. History is the history of man’s self-realization; it is nothing but the self-creation of man through the process of his work and his production” (24). World history, therefore, is nothing but the account of the creation of man through human labour.

Marx viewed history as the unconscious creation of labouring men and as subject to observable laws. Human beings make their own history, but they do not do so arbitrarily but rather under some given circumstances either directly encountered or transmitted from the past. Labour, thus, is seen as an instrument of the human beings’ self-creation. According to David McLellan, “Marx’s labouring productive man is constantly developing and changing his relationship to the world and thereby changing, creating his own nature” (43).

Marx believed that it is not the consciousness of a person that determines his/her social being, but his/her social being that determines his/her consciousness, and that no element in the total process of history can be isolated and given significance unaffected by other elements.
Marx agreed with the view of Goethe that an individual could make sense of his/her life only by being productively active. But the problem arises when a person treats other productively active individuals as a means, thus degrading them. The classical economists take a one-sided view of the worker when they see him as a cog in the economic wheel, not sufficiently considering him as a human being. The worker becomes alienated from work and does not feel at home in it and s/he is thus also alienated from him/herself and from other workers. Marx was in favor of production organised in a humane manner, that is, a human being affirming himself/herself and his/her fellow beings in his/her work and the consequent production. According to Fromm:

Labour is the self-expression of man, an expression of his individual, physical and mental powers. In this process of genuine activity, man develops himself, becomes himself; work is not only a means to an end - the product but an end in itself, the meaningful expression of human energy. (33)

Marx thus challenges the notion of a fixed and coherent self and suggests that “human essence” owes its origin to certain social structures and certain conditions of production and reproduction. He theorises self in the light of the forces and relations of production, and sees the human being as a subject constituted in her/his interiority as much as exteriority in/by the forces and relations of production.
Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) has revolutionised the way we comprehend our identity, challenging the Cartesian idea of an autonomous self, conscious of its coherent and comprehensible existence and powers of perception, reasoning and free agency. Donald E. Hall says, “It was Sigmund Freud and his psychology of the unconscious that most clearly contested any blind faith in rational control over human behavior and social life” (59-60).

Freud recognised the powerful influence of the unconscious on conscious life. He assumed that the unconscious is chiefly derived from repression and consists of impulses, thoughts and feelings that are unacceptable to the ego. According to Freud, the mind consists of three parts, which are ego, id and super-ego. As Robert Bocock explains, the ego is “. . . the aspect of mind’s functioning which is responsible for reality testing, that is for rational thinking, and for checking what it is safe to do in a given physical and social environment” (76). It is the part of mind representing consciousness. It employs reason and common sense and defers immediate responses to external stimuli. It represses or postpones the fulfillment of desires unacceptable to reason. Id is that part of mind which is composed of repressed wishes and which strives for immediate satisfaction of instinctive needs. It is governed by the pleasure principle: the most basic, primitive desires, the avoidance of any “unpleasure”, and the pursuit of pleasure. And there is an ego ideal to
which the ego does not always conform, which Freud called the super-ego. In the words of Anthony Storr, it is “... an agency within the mind that devote[s] itself to self-observation: which watche[s] the ego, and decide[s] whether or not the ego [is] conforming to, or [falls] short of the ego-ideal” (63).

Hence, whenever the ego falls short of this ideal, a voice of conscience is heard. Super-ego thus manifests itself in the criticism of the ego, and this results in guilt and punishment. Freud regards civilization as built on repression. He claims that the super-ego is extremely destructive not only to the individual but also, on a larger scale, to civilization. In his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud makes a comparison between civilization and the super-ego. These "discontents" of civilization can be interpreted as tension between the collective ego and the collective super-ego. In Anthony Storr’s words, “It [the super-ego] impose[s] more restraints upon intellectual fulfillment than most human beings could tolerate without developing at least some neurotic symptoms” (105).

The neurotic symptoms or mental illnesses can be traced back to the patient’s infancy, where some seeds of repression may lie hidden which cause the illness. Freud suggests that the adult human consciousness and identity is the result of a complex development process during infancy and childhood that can be seen in terms of various stages. The newborn child cannot perceive any difference
between himself/herself and the world. He/she corresponds roughly to the gratification of desires associated with various bodily regions. As the male child grows and reaches the phallic stage, he becomes so attached to his mother that he wishes to gain exclusive possession of her and therefore forms hostile impulses towards the father. The hostility arouses the fear that the father will retaliate through castration. The fear of castration is termed as Oedipus complex by Freud (after the mythical Greek King named Oedipus, who unknowingly murders his father and marries his mother).

The identification with father resolves the Oedipus complex and leads to repression, which forms the unconscious. Repression, however, may result in neurotic symptoms. The unconscious often gives glimpses of itself in dreams and verbal slips. Freud considers dreams as the vehicles of hallucinatory fulfillment of repressed wishes because the repressed wishes are enacted in dreams, thus giving pleasure to the dreamer.

A subject is thus potentially at the mercy of forces, drives and desires that are beyond his/her control and that are hidden away in the form of the unconscious. One does not, therefore, act voluntarily and coherently and does not make ideally free, rational choices. Freud’s psychoanalysis thus puts into question the idea of the self as a coherent agent, challenging the Cartesian belief in an essentially rational self. Our “self” is not only beyond our control but also in a state of perpetual
conflict between the ego and the super-ego. According to Bocock, “The Freudian notion of the unconscious introduces a new conception of the ‘self’ as disjointed, not in full control of its own desires or actions” (xii). The self as revealed in Freud’s psychoanalysis is always in a state of inner conflict, split, confused and never in control. This conception of the self is far removed from the Cartesian concept of a knowing, comprehending, coherent self, free to make rational choices. Freud’s contribution, thus, is a milestone in the history of the conceptions of subjectivity. His theory of the unconscious supported the idea of the human being as subject to certain underlying structures that affect him/her while not fully determining his/her conduct at the personal, social and cultural levels.

**Jacques Lacan**

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) gave a new direction to psychoanalysis by reading Freud with the help of semiotics. Lacan was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who made landmark contributions to psychoanalysis, philosophy, and cultural theory. He gave yearly seminars in Paris from 1953 to 1981, greatly influencing the French intellectuals in the 1960s and the 1970s, especially the post-structuralist philosophers. His interdisciplinary work is essentially Freudian, featuring the unconscious, the castration complex and language as subjective
perception. According to Lacan, there is nothing outside language and
language constructs subjectivity.

In 1953 Lacan started to hold a private weekly seminar in Paris,
urging what he described as "a return to Freud", concentrating upon the
linguistic nature of psychology. Becoming public in 1953, Lacan's
twenty-seven year long seminar was very influential in psychoanalytic
theory and clinical practice. Lacan analyses Oedipus complex in a new
light, arguing that the child does not have to renounce the desire for a
physical mother but a sense of completeness hitherto unshattered by
language and its dividing standards. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts
of Psychoanalysis* and the subsequent weekly seminars (1953-1981),
Lacan suggested that the period of early childhood before introduction
into the world of language may be denoted by the term *Imaginary*, during
which the child begins to differentiate between the self and the other,
herself/himself and the mother, and between male and female.

In the Mirror or Imaginary phase, the child, still subject to
uncoordinated body movements and dependent on others for his/her
needs, perceives its reflection in the mirror as a unified body image and
identifies with it. The resulting image of coherence and completeness
gives the child gratification.

But this aura of completeness and coherence is shattered when the
child is introduced into the world of language, law and exchange. Lacan
calls this stage of a child’s life the Symbolic. In this stage, the unity of
the self and the other is destroyed by the emergence of a father figure that is represented by those social and cultural forces that develop the child into a subject. Lacan’s influence on Althusser is manifest in the latter’s idea that the ideology acts through language in the constitution of a subject. Pointing to this very process, Catherine Belsey says, “The subject is constructed in language and, since the symbolic order constitutes the inscription of ideology, in ideology itself” (*Critical Practice* 57).

The child is compelled to adjust to these forces in order to develop into a subject. Inaccessible to the Imaginary and the Symbolic lies the Real, by which Lacan understands that area which neither culture nor language can penetrate or represent. The Real happens to lie buried under the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

The emergence of subjectivity in a child thus involves division, alienation and misrecognition. In the Mirror phase, the first division takes place between the “I” that watches and the “I” that is being watched. The image of itself with which the child identifies is something other than itself, resulting in alienation and the displacement of the self on to the other. The identification with the image is, in fact, a misrecognition since the actual body of the child is disjointed and non-coherent as opposed to the unified mirror image.

When the child enters the order of the language, a second division takes place between the “I” that speaks and the “I” that is spoken about.
The subject is alienated by integration into an impersonal order of signs, i.e. language. The subject also misrecognises itself as the independent author of its utterances, which, in fact are a product of language. Linking language with subjectivity, Malcolm Bowie says, “For language was there from the beginning, as the condition of the individual’s subjectionhood, and supplies the underlying vacillatory pattern for all his adventures in being” (82).

According to Lacan, sexual difference is also a construction of language as its systems of signs designate the subject as male or female. The entry of a child into the symbolic order presumes that the child must exist in a system of signs existing before its birth, meaning thereby that we can only say what language allows us to say. We are generally at a loss to express our deepest feelings, fears and emotions. We have to conform to a given set of codes and conventions which precede us. In other words, our entry into the symbolic order produces a profound sense of lack. Dani Cavallaro describes this lack as “the loss of the imaginary world of plenitude, on one hand and the lack of adequate means of expressing ourselves, on the other” (95).

Thus it is the symbolic which structures subjectivity. The entry into the symbolic order facilitates social intercourse and at the same time condemns the subject to a permanently divided status. There is a definite barrier between the signified and the signifier, that which can be
expressed in language and that which does not find any expression; it is this barrier which prevents chaos.

Lacan thus lays bare the constructed nature of subjectivity and reveals its constituent contradictions, ambivalences and ambiguities. He brings home the insight that individual identity cannot be described as a free and self-transparent consciousness nor as a stable human essence, but at best only as a construction of language, politics and culture. Lacan’s work is, in this way, a continuation and extension of Freud’s work.

**Louis Althusser**

Marxist thought has been given a new direction by Louis Althusser (1918-1990) who has incorporated the theoretically informed Lacanian idea of the “subject” into Marxist thought. He explored the Marxist concepts of base and superstructure to generate different conclusions, projecting the workers as subjects rather than coherent, self-identical individuals.

According to Althusser, the reproduction of labour power is necessary for any social formation to continue existing. Labour can be reproduced by ensuring the necessary material conditions for their reproduction, that is by fulfilling the basic needs of labour. But to ensure a labour which is competent, diversely skilled and willing to work, the capitalist regime requires the ideological state apparatus.
Marx by and large treated the state as a repressive apparatus with an economic base and an ideological superstructure. However, according to Althusser, state power is exercised through state apparatuses which are of two types: Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). The state apparatus as conceived by Marx thus becomes RSA in Althusser, while ISA can be seen as his own addition to the theory. ISAs may be religious, educational, legal, political, familial, cultural and those of the media and so on. RSAs predominantly function by the exercise of repressive violence, while ISAs function through ideology.

Among these, the Educational ISA is the dominant ISA in a capitalist regime. At various stages of their education, the subjects of the state learn the know-how, the rules of good behavior, morality, respect for division of labour, submission to the established order and also the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology. Thus Educational ISA plays an important role in the process of incorporating the element of subjection among the state subjects.

Althusser, obviously, pays special attention to the nature and function of ideology. According to Althusser, ideology is the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. So, ideology is not reality; it only alludes to reality:

All ideology represents, in its necessarily imaginary distortion, not the existing relations of production but above
all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that derive from them. What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations, which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live. (39)

However, Althusser also avers that ideology has a material existence. Ideology demonstrates its material existence in the way it affects the individuals. Under the effect of dominant/ruling ideology, human beings acquire the attitudes corresponding to that ideology and gradually these attitudes get inscribed in ritual practices. These ritual practices further consolidate ideology. Thus a cycle is formed:

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Althusser believes that the term “subject” here is the decisive term. According to him, it merely appears that the subject acts willingly out of his/her own belief, in all consciousness, but it is actually the ideology acting through the subject. The subject acts in the belief that he/she is acting on his/her own, but it is actually a misconception. The term “subject”, therefore becomes the central term in Althusser’s work, “. . . the decisive central term on which everything else depends: the notion of the subject” (44). There is no practice except by and in an ideology and there is no ideology except by the subject and for subject, “. . . the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (45).

The action of ideology on individuals is so subtle and yet obvious that they usually fail to realise its effects. They so regularly practice the rituals of ideology that they start believing they are acting autonomously. You and I are always already subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects. (46-47)

Just as Freud studied the genital and pre-genital stages of sexuality and concluded that an individual is a sexual subject even before he/she is born, Althusser points out that an individual is always
already a subject of ideology even before he/she is born. He shows that individuals are always abstract with respect to their subject positions. The ideological ritual that surrounds the expectation of birth makes them subjects even before their birth. Everyone knows in what way an unborn child is expected to “be”. It is appointed as a subject by the specific familial social ideological configuration in which it is expected, once it has been conceived.

In the nineteenth century, the trio of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud cast a shadow on the Cartesian concept of identity as coherent and comprehensible. Marxist thought formulated the societal relations on the basis of relations of production, while Althusser took forward Marxist theory of historical materialism and concluded that human beings are not independent, thinking, self-sufficient creatures, but they are subjects of state ideological apparatus. The term “subject” is the central term in Marxist ideology that challenges the idea of an immutable, coherent self.

**Michel Foucault**

Michel Foucault’s (1926-1984) work calls attention to the role of discourses in the exercise and preservation of power. He examines the procedures by which our societies regulate themselves and seeks to expose the ways in which power operates in language. Power imposes definitions upon us in ways that we might be unaware of.
In *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of Prison*, Foucault describes how 18th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s model of prison called Panopticon has been gradually applied to schools, churches, factories, hospitals and various other social structures for surveillance and control. The aim of Panopticon was to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness of being watched which would ensure that each subject is made automatically subject to power to the point of self-policing.

The structures through which subjects are fashioned are termed by Foucault as *discourses*. According to Dani Cavallaro:

> A discourse could be described as a set of recurring statements that define a particular cultural object (e.g. madness, criminality, sexuality) and provide the concepts and terms through which such an object can be studied and discussed. (90)

Each era produces discourses through which the subject may be objectified according to dominant norms, values, beliefs and interests. What we call “truth” is a specific creation of discourses over a period of time. Foucault questions the possibility of apprehending any “truth” outside or beyond discourses.

Foucault suggests in *Power/Knowledge* that knowledge and power are interdependent and that they are forms of control and the means of organizing subjectivity:
What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs throughout the whole social body. (119)

Power works through discourses and a discourse, according to Hans Bertens, is “a loose structure of interconnected assumptions that makes knowledge possible” (154).

A discourse produces specific claims to knowledge and it is these claims which we accept and that give it its power. Knowledge is a way to define and categorise objects and things. The truth of human sciences is the effect of discourses, including language. Knowledge does not derive from reality of the world, but from the rules of discourses. In other words, knowledge counts as knowledge because we have been persuaded to accept it as such; because the discourse is powerful enough to make us believe that it is knowledge.

Because of their claims to expertise, such discourses go on to determine the way we think and talk, and these persuade us to keep others and ourselves under constant surveillance. As Bertens aptly notes: “Since we are all extensions of the discourses that we have internalised, we ourselves constantly reproduce their power, even in our intimate relations” (156).
Discourses organise the way we see the world. We live and breathe discourses and function unknowingly as links in chains of power. Foucault shatters the beliefs concerning our own truths and values that have been cherished for long. So the Cartesian idea that human beings are coherent, independent and immutable selves stands permanently and irreparably challenged by Foucault’s understanding of our discursive constitution. Foucault calls for a critical analysis of age-old assumptions concerning selfhood and identity and looks forward to the proliferation of possibilities of new forms of subjectivity.

**Judith Butler**

Judith Butler (b.1956) in her most influential work *Gender Trouble* traces the various discourses around sex and gender and shows their problematic nature. Her theory of performativity which has been hailed as a significant contribution to theory and criticism also takes shape in this book.

Butler calls into question the category of “woman”, saying that many feminist theorists have mistakenly assumed the existence of this category as fixed and permanent. She argues that the category of the subject is a performative construct and there are ways of “doing” one’s identity which might trouble the neat binary oppositions of male/female, masculine/feminine, straight/queer etc. Butler claims that gender identity is a sequence of acts, but she does not mean by this that there is
a pre-existing performer who performs these acts. However, this does not mean that there is no subject: it merely means that the subject does not come before these acts.

Arguing about the instability of the category of “woman”, Butler says:

Woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the “congealing” is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means. (Gender Trouble 33)

Butler believes that sex, gender and sexuality do not exist in relation to each other. Generally, sex is seen to cause gender and gender is seen to cause desire, but Butler's attempt is to show that gender and desire are not fixed but flexible. It is possible to be female by sex and yet display masculine traits. Gender, according to Butler, is a “choice”, that is not as simple as it might appear to be. By “choice” Butler does not mean that a subject is an entirely free agent who can select her/his gender; this is not possible because the choice of gender is always limited from the start. Butler remarks in Variations on Sex and Gender, “[T]o choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that
organises them anew. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew one’s cultural history in one’s own terms” (131).

Gender is thus an act or a sequence of acts that goes on. Basing her project on Foucault’s works, Butler argues that sex and gender are discursively constructed and there is no possibility of freedom beyond discourse. In this context, Sara Salih remarks, “Culturally constructed sexuality cannot be repudiated, so that the subject is left with the question of how to acknowledge and ‘do’ the construction it is already in” (48).

Butler suggests that it is possible to “do” these constructions differently. She asserts that feminist theories should not accept the category of “woman” blindly but analyse how it is produced within the constraints of power structures. Butler calls for “a feminist genealogy of the category of women” (Gender Trouble 2). She uses the word “genealogy” in a Foucauldian sense to mean an investigation into the way the discourses function and also into the political aims they fulfill. She says that genealogy investigates the “political stakes in designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffused points of origin” (viii-ix). Thus the idea that the subject is an effect rather than a cause lies at the basis of Butler’s theory of performativity.

Gender then, according to Butler, is constructed and not naturally determined by sex. But this raises the question as to whether sex is also
culturally constructed as gender is or, in other words, whether sex is gender. Thus, questioning the distinction usually made between sex and gender, Butler says that both these categories are performative:

Gender is not a noun (but it) proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. (Gender Trouble 25)

Thus if both gender and sex are performative rather than givens, according to Salih, it would be possible to “enact them in unexpected, potentially subversive ways” (58). However, Butler also emphasises that sex and gender are the effects of discourses and the law. According to her, the plurality of law produces sexed and gendered identities that appear to be natural and innate; indeed, the law itself produces the identities and desires it represses in order to establish and maintain the stability of mainstream sex and gender identities (28).

Butler obviously derives her approach from Foucault, who argues that speaking about sex is a way of simultaneously producing and controlling it; and since there can be no position outside the law, subversion of law also must take place within the existing discursive structures. Moreover, the law by prohibiting a particular form of behavior creates and helps it. It means that the repressive and the productive function of the law/discourse go hand in hand. In other
words, the dominant discourse of heterosexuality requires homosexuality to define itself and maintain its stability.

However, Butler departs from Foucault who assumes that there is a body prior to the discourse. Butler believes that the body is not a given fact, but like sex and gender it is also produced by discourses. Butler sees the possibility of subverting the law against itself through “reinscription and re-citations” of sex and gender which constitute the subject’s agency within the law (Salih 62). According to Salih, gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (33)

Butler thus suggests that the subject is not totally free to pick and choose the gender she/he wishes to perform but has a limited range from which to make a choice of gender styles. Elaborating the idea of performativity, Butler says:

Gender proves to be performative - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always
a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said
to pre-exist the deed. (*Gender Trouble* 25)

Beyond Foucault, Butler is also indebted to Nietzsche in stating
that there is no fixed gender identity behind the expressions of gender,
that identity is performatively constructed by the very expressions that
are said to be its results.

One might here ask: How can there be a performance without a
performer? Sara Salih points out that Butler does not claim that gender
is a performance, and that she distinguishes between performance and
performativity. Performance presupposes a pre-existing subject;
performativity contests the very notion of the subject (64).

Butler links gender also with linguistic performativity. Since
gender identities are constructed and constituted in language, there is no
gender identity that precedes language. Salih points out that there is no
“I” beyond language since identity is itself a signifying practice, so that
“culturally intelligible subjects” are the effects rather than the causes of
discourses that conceal their workings (64).

And if there is no identity outside language, the existence of an
inner core or essence is thrown open to challenge. Butler suggests that
gender acts are not performed by a subject, but these acts constitute the
subject performatively. Butler says, “That the gendered body is
performatively suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the
various acts, which constitute its reality” (136). In other words, gender is
not what you are but what you do at particular times within the possibilities of discourses. Thus any identity acquired through the repetition of expected acts is not truly coherent and stable. Its coherence and stability are only illusions and can be deconstructed to reveal their constructed nature. In fact, there are many performative acts which undermine the normative conceptions of sexual and gender identity, such as cross-dressing. According to Hans Bertens:

Cross-dressing undermines the claim to naturalness of standard heterosexual identities and emphasises a theatrical, performance-like dimension of gender and sexual orientation that our discourses seek to suppress. (230)

Cross-dressing and other unusual experiments with sexuality lay bare the constructedness of sexuality and show that there are no fixities but ever-shifting differences in the field of sexuality.

Butler suggests that certain cultural configurations of gender have come to seem natural in our culture. But these are only effects of discourses. As such, these cultural configurations are not fixed but flexible and can be changed. Butler calls for action to change gender norms and the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity. Since there is scope for combining and recombining certain markers of gender and sexuality, gender is open to re-interpretation and re-signification.
Nevertheless, as Sara Salih points out, even this subversion and re-signification will be determined by dominant discourses, since there is nothing outside discourses. In other words, there is no such thing as complete freedom of choice, since the choice is to be made from among whatever is available to us. Butler herself remarks, “There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very “taking up” is enabled by the tool lying there” (145). Here, Sara Salih raises a very pertinent question, “If subversion itself is conditioned and constrained by discourse, then how can we tell that it is subversion at all?” (66). She gives some examples of cross-dressing performances from movies, which she claims are not subversive but serve only to reinforce the existing heterosexual power structures. It appears as if the subject is trapped within a discourse it has no power to evade or alter. Since the methods of subversion of a discourse are also to be determined by the discourse itself, the freedom of choice is hopelessly limited. According to Salih, the discourses would already have determined “how to repeat” in advance, and what appears to be agency is probably another effect of discourse disguised as something else (67).

Yet Butler is optimistic about the possibility of redoing gender identities to reveal the constructed nature of heterosexuality. Hence, she claims, “Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency” (147). She, thus, examines subjectivity on a performative axis, calling for subtle actions to subvert pre-existing gender norms gradually.
She erodes the last vestiges of the Cartesian self and inaugurates a conception of the performative subject as both free and unfree.

1.3.2 Explorations in Indian Philosophical Tradition

In the light of theories of subjectivity emerging in the west, it is today possible to reassess the Indian philosophical conceptualization of subjectivity and re-appropriate these for contemporary times. The concept of subjectivity, although usually considered to be a recent concept, has been there in Indian philosophies for long. An elaborate conceptualization of the kind we find in contemporary poststructuralist thought is, of course, not to be found in Indian philosophies, but these systems of thought approximate the poststructuralist insights in several ways and enable us to appropriate western poststructuralism from a position grounded in the diversity of Indian tradition. Read together, Indian philosophies and western poststructuralism supplement each other.

The oldest germ of the concept of subjectivity (as understood today) can be seen in the Vedanta. “Tat Twam Asi” is one of the Mahavakyas¹ in Vedantic Hinduism. It appears in Chandogya Upanishad² and is translated as “Thou art that” or “You are that”. The scholars of Hinduism understand it to be meaning – the self located in the other³. The interpretation obviously looks beyond the idea of an absolute/coherent self and effects the displacement of the self on to what
is not-self. Thus, self is de-essentialised. Another mahavakya, “Aham Brahmasmi”, often translated as “I am the universe”, brings about the displacement of the self on to the whole universe. “I” and “the universe” are not thus two poles of reality, but rather “I” is “the universe”. The self is, in a way, evacuated of any essential self-being and makes the way for a non-binary, non-essentialist and non-transcendental reappropriation.

The debate about the nature of the self has a long history in Indian thought. This debate was at its peak in the era when Buddhism flourished on the subcontinent. In fact, Buddhism tried new ways to search for an answer to the eternal question, “who am I?” Buddhist philosophy is skeptical about the absolute nature of the self and questions the ancient concept of a self which is fixed, immutable and coherent. Kshanikavada is one such concept. Translated as “momentariness,” this concept was developed by Ratnakirtti (an eleventh-century Buddhist logician). According to him, a thing or person cannot produce an effect at the present moment, similar to that in the past or future moments, which proves that it is not the same thing or person at different moments.

In Jainism too, a negation of the notion of a fixed coherent self can be found in the principle of Anekantavada or “relative pluralism”. According to this concept, nothing can be confirmed absolutely because all affirmations are true only under certain conditions. All things possess infinite qualities, each of which can be affirmed only in a particular
sense. And at each moment, there are new collocations. And finally, there can be different points of view of looking at things. These points of view are known as “Nayas” in Jain thought and are considered to be infinite. Each of the various available standpoints represents only one of the many points of view from which a thing can be looked at. Therefore, any of the affirmations which might appear to be true is so in a limited sense and under limited conditions only. Contrary affirmations of things can be assumed to be true from different standpoints. Therefore, truth is only conditional and is inconceivable from any absolute point of view. The same approach is applicable to the ‘self’. It is impossible to perceive the self definitively or absolutely due to its multi-facetedness. Hence it is logically impossible to posit the existence of a fixed, definite and coherent self.

The Nyāya school of thought in Indian philosophy also questions the existence of a fixed/permanent self. Nyāya is the name given to one of the six orthodox or Āstika schools of Hindu philosophy. The Nyāya school of philosophical speculation is based on a text called the Nyāya Sūtra. It was written by Gautama, also known as Akshapada, around the fourth or fifth century BCE. The most important contribution made by this school is its methodology, which is based on a system of logic. Its followers believed that obtaining valid knowledge was the only way to obtain release from suffering. They took great pains to identify valid sources of knowledge and to distinguish these from mere false opinions.
In this sense, Nyāya is probably the closest Indian equivalent to contemporary Western analytical philosophy. According to the Nyāya school of thought, the capacity of any thing or person cannot be known until the effect produced by it is known. Therefore the being/existence of a thing or person cannot be known until it produces another effect the next moment and so on. This means it is impossible to know any being in totality over a span to time. Moreover, a permanent perceiver would be required to observe the change that takes place in the being/existence, which however is not logical to assume.

Nagarjuna, the famous Buddhist thinker (100 CE), believed that three kinds of “svabhava” of things/beings can be logically posited. The first is the “essence svabhava” which is that essential property of an object which it cannot lose without ceasing to be that object. The second is the “absolute svabhava” which neither originates from some source, nor is mutable, nor dependent on anything. The third kind of svabhava in which Nagarjuna believes is the “substance svabhava”. It is primarily an ontological notion. It is a kind of secondary existent depending on linguistic and mental constructions. The fifteenth chapter of the Madhyamaka by Nagarjuna, investigating the notion of svabhava, begins by stating:

Svabhava cannot result from causes and conditions, because if it was produced from conditions and causes it would be something artificially created. But how could svabhava be
artificially created, as it is not artificially created and not
dependent on anything else? (1-2)

To have *svabhava* means to exist in a primary manner,
unconstructed and independent of anything else, not artificially created
or dependent on anything else. But since there is change/mutation in
*svabhava*, it can be inferred that there is in fact no “substance
*svabhava*”. Everything depends on something and undergoes constant
changes, proving the non-existence of “substance *svabhava*”.

According to the ancient Indian thought, the self is
constituted of five elements, i.e. body, sensation, intellect, perception and
consciousness. But Nagarjuna argues that the self cannot be identified
with any of these constituents because they are always changing. In that
case, we will have to assume that the self is not fixed or immutable.
Secondly, the self cannot be assumed to be above these constituents,
because then it would be incomprehensible through any of these
constituents. If we can not know/reach our self, then it is unimaginable
that it can make our decisions for us. Also it would lose its importance
for us in that case. Discussing the nature of *svabhava*, Jan Westerhoff
remarks:

Its realization, that is not just the intellectual
understanding of the absence of *svabhava* in the
self but the cognitive shift accompanying the
ability to stop conceiving of oneself as a
substantial self, is taken to be an essential step on the road to liberation. (157)

Since there is no continuity in the self, it is not overarching or unchanging. As regards the constitutive properties of the self, Nagarjuna opines that it is we who nominalise one property to be constitutive and perceive all other properties to be less important. This assumption of ours is entirely baseless and there is hardly any such hierarchy among these properties. The self, according to him, is the arbitrary selection of “shifting coalition of psychophysical elements” by us without any ontological grounding (160). It is impossible to know the self because although it is the subject of all experience, yet it is distinct from all experience. It cannot be known through introspection but only by some indirect clues. In Nagarjuna’s philosophy, the absoluteness of self vanishes and in its place emerges a changing subjectivity which is constructed by events outside oneself.

It can be stated that Buddhism does not accept anything to be permanent and possessed of an immutable essence. Becoming, not being, is the nature of whatever is. Things appear and are destroyed. Whatever exists is momentary. Our notion of permanence is derived from the notion of an illusory permanence of ourselves. But differentiating between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’, Buddhism denies even the existence of any permanent self. What appears as self is only a collection of emotions, ideas and tendencies at a particular moment. But these ideas, emotions
etc., change every moment. Self is a combined product of these ideas, emotions etc. and the memory of earlier emotions/tendencies gives the illusion of a coherent/permanent self. But the fact that one has the sensation of remembering that one has existed over a long period does not prove that a permanent/immutable self has been in existence.

The concept of *Pratityasamutpada* or “dependent origination” has been used in Buddhism to refer to the illusory manifestation of the senses and intellect that things originate from each other or from themselves. Since things/beings have no true essence/nature, there is no truth or essence in the phenomena that appear. No appearances have any intrinsic nature of their own which does not depend on anything else. Explaining this Sue Hamilton remarks, “It is not stating that nothing exists, but that the manner in which all things occur is different from either existence, which implies independence, or non-existence, which implies a denial of occurrence” (49). Moreover, if the soul is a unity, it cannot undergo any process. In the Buddhist thought, *Nirvana* is the absence of the essence of all phenomena and not what is commonly assumed, that is the ending of all phenomena. Rather, it is the perception that these phenomena never existed.

During the 5th century CE, the grammarian Bhartrihari put forward the concept, known as “*sphota*” that a complete sentence forms a unit of meaning. The utterance of the whole sentence conveys knowledge in a way the individual words and phrases do not. Individual words
convey only partial and incomplete knowledge, which can be easily distorted and misleading. Moreover, since words are joined in sentences to produce meaning, there can be no knowledge outside the medium of language, meaning thereby that to know something is to know it as it is expressed in language. In other words, language determines our comprehension of things and objects. Bhartrihari believed that the world follows the word or, in other words, it is language which produces the world as we understand it. He thus stresses on the formative influence of language in the construction of reality.

The idea of an absolute and coherent self is also refuted by the constructionist school of Chittamatra. The Chittamatra is a Mahayana school founded by Asanga (300 CE). Its followers hold that all phenomena are merely mind or the “all-ground consciousness” manifesting as environment, objects and the physical body, as a result of habitual tendencies stored within it. It also means that the manner in which any object exists can only be established within the context of the cognition of that object. The world exists through our mental construction and since the mind is always historically and specifically located, the construction formulated by the mind will always be specific. Self is thus de-essentialised by the Chittamatra School and rendered in terms of what may be termed as modern parameters of subjectivity.

Charvaka, the 7th century philosopher of the Lokayata school of thought, rejects the superiority of mind over body and the related
practices of ascetic penance and torturing of the body to achieve moksha or happiness incarnation. His school of thought believes in joyful living and in rejection of the soul, the caste system, God, after-life and religious rites. The age-old tradition of treating the mind as superior to the body is challenged by Charvaka, concluding that our self is not composed of mind only but can be perceived through body as well.

Thus the notion of a fixed/permanent/coherent self is interrogated and undermined in several ways in the Indian philosophy. A study of the emergence of the recent concept of subject in literary and cultural theory is therefore incomplete without taking into consideration the Indian viewpoints. It can be argued that subjectivity has been theorised in Indian philosophies, though not in the terms used in poststructuralism. We today, fortunately, have access to resources from diverse cultural histories and have the opportunity to employ the insights yielded by those resources. Moreover, contemporary Indian drama has a complex genealogy to which both the Western and the Indian traditions have contributed. It would only be appropriate therefore to study subjectivity in it in the light of the reflective and speculative traditions that may have grown centuries and continents apart but which concur on de-essentialising the self and reconstituting it as “subject”.