CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
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'We live in a world where identity matters. It matters both as concept, theoretically, and as contested fact of contemporary life.'

Identity categories provide modes of examining significant correlation between lived experience and social location. It occurs from various aspects of social life, including the individual's behaviour in large and small groups, the place of the individual in social-historical perspective, the nature of socialisation, deviance and the social structural conditions of inequality as they are reflected in class, race, gender, sexual orientation and gender expression.

An individual's views about how his society is structured and where he and others fit into that totality, again, can not be a homogenous inference. The internal heterogeneity of groups, the multiple and sometimes contradictory constitutions of individuals, the possibility of change- both cultural and at the level of individual, always make the concept of identity a very complex one. There are millions of words across the globe that are used to describe people and uncover their identity. But one finds it very difficult to begin to describe something that varies so greatly from one human being to another. It is also difficult to create a universal meaning for a word describing human concepts that people often fail to define for themselves.

Identity is marked by similarity based on people who are alike and by difference, based on those who are not. A simple badge can be a clear public statement of one's identification with a particular group. Symbols and representations are very significant in making the ways in which one shares identity with some people and distinguishes oneself as different from others. In this sense, although as individuals we have to take up identities actively, those identities are necessarily the product of the society in which we live and share relationship with others. Identity thus provides a link between individuals and the world they live in. It is about how one sees oneself and how one is perceived by others. Identity thus involves the internal, the subjective and the external. It is a socially recognised position, recognised by others and not just by one's own self.

The concept of identity encompasses some notion of human agency, an idea, that we can have some control in constructing our own identities. There
are constraints, however, in the external world, where the material and the social factors may limit the degree of agency. Using a structure/agency approach to understand identity is not very logical. Because it allows one to understand to what extent identity depends on individual choice and also to what extent it is reliant upon the particular socio-historical circumstances. Because agency does not refer to the individual's intention to do things rather it refers to the individual's capability of doing a thing.

From the sociological perspective, the self is a relatively stable set of perceptions of who we are in relation to ourselves, to others and to social systems. On a structural level, the self is also based on the cultural ideas about the social status that one occupies. A woman who is a mother will draw upon the cultural ideas about mothers in constructing her idea of who she is. Apart from it, an important aspect of the self is the ideal self, which consists of ideas who we ought to be rather than who we actually are.

The level of positive and negative regard we have for ourselves depends on how well the self-concept and the ideal self agree. The self is thus a socially constructed phenomenon in the sense that it is shaped through interaction with other people and it draws upon social materials in the form of cultural indicators and ideas. The individual is not a passive participant in the process. He rather exerts powerful influence over how this process and its consequences develop. The significant aspect of a society is the system of relationships, the pattern of norms of interaction by which the members of the society maintain themselves.

Since socialisation is an important matter for society, it is but desirable that the individual's socialisation should not be left to mere accident rather it should be controlled through institutional channels. It is the process of socialisation which turns the individual into a useful member of the society. Socialisation at times needs to proceed through authoritarian modes because the pattern of behaviour expected in the culture are not innate, sometimes these are even contrary to biological inclination. The family, the school, friends and the religious institutions are the chief agencies of socialisation. Socialisation helps the individual to develop a self-concept leading to the construction of identity. It is generally referred to as the answer to the question of who am I. In other words, it implies the individual comprehensiveness of the persons own self.

Identity is a process that develops through different stages. It is also a
unique combination of many identifications as broad as woman or man, or as narrow as a member of a particular family. It may be extended to countries and communities, so that people feel hurt when people sharing their identity are injured or killed. Sometimes they are even ready to sacrifice their individual lives to preserve the essence of their identity. They have strong belief that they share the same collective identity with people they have not even met in their life. Identity thus is a collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which an individual is recognised as a member of a group. An individual almost universally has a bond towards what Muzaffer Sherif calls "Reference Group." These are groups to which an individual does not have a real membership, but to which he conceptually relates as a human being, and from which he might accept goals and values as a part of his self identity.

Community plays a decisive role in shaping one's identity. Nowhere in earth do people live regularly in isolated families. Everywhere territorial propinquity, supported by diverse other bonds, unites at least a few neighbouring families into a larger social group, all of whose members maintain face-to-face relationships with one another. The community organisation provides individuals with increased opportunities for gratification through social intercourse, with insurance against temporary incapacity or adversity through mutual aid and sharing. The member holds that the chances of survival seem to be materially enhanced through community organisation, and this, together with the directly perceived gains, doubtless, accounts for its universality.

The community is the primary seat of social control. It is noteworthy that ostracism from the community is widely regarded as the severest of punishments and that, its threat serves as the ultimate inducement to cultural conformity. Through the operation of social sanctions, ideas and behaviour tend to become relatively stereotyped within a community, and hence it gives birth to a local culture. United by reciprocal relationships and bound by a common culture, the members of a community form an 'in-group', characterised by internal peace, law, order and co-operative efforts.

The self-regarding sentiment is an important part of the preparation for the understanding of social phenomena. This development is essentially a social process, dependent upon the complex interactions between the individual and the organised society to which he belongs. The development is affected by constant interplay between personalities, - between the self and the society.
The complex conception of self thus attained, implies constant reference to others and to society in general, and is, in fact, not merely a conception of self, but always of one’s self in relation to other selves. Social approval can, on occasions, become the only decisive factor in a person’s life. Because the strength of his desire to secure the approval and avoid the disapproval of the fellow-men can go beyond all rational grounds. In the modern day scenario, the demand for construction of identity is as strong as the demand for its recognition. In the words of Charles Taylor,

'The demand for recognition in these case is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity, where 'identity' designates something like an understanding of who we are, of our fundamental definition characteristics as human beings. The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognitions or its absences, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non recognition or mis-recognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being.'

In this context the relevant questions such as how do members of the society come to adopt the behaviour expected of them and who influence these expectations become inevitable. It all depends on the basis of the distribution of power within the society as it is bound to affect the relationship between man and man, man and woman and man and society. Some groups are accorded high status while others such as women or ethnic minorities are often denied respect and opportunities. For instance, in the United States all individuals are equal before law, but the theoretical abstraction serves to mask the concrete inequalities within the ‘civil society’. It is a process imbedded within the state and economy, and all institutions mediate between the two. Hegemonic domination is hard to discover because it lurks within culture itself.

Karl Marx describes the world history and social evolution as a steadily growing accumulation of power. He views society as a system, with its own dynamics, its own logic and its own inherent development. The social control of access to the physical stuff like food, fuel is the key to social power and Marx refers to these as the infrastructure of the society with a material basis. On the
top of the production of the material base of existence, there exists a superstructure - an organisation, an ideology that reflects power.

The key concept of Marxian analysis of identity is class, that consists of members of the society, who are together not because they have a common religion or political ideology, or because they live in the same region, or because they share a common ancestry but rather because they recognise their common interests. They are gradually driven to organise to do battle against those in the society who have rival economic interests.

Marx's insistence upon an understanding of society and history based upon class is an attempt to get us to rethink our criteria of understanding ourselves. Marx's theory reclassifies human and social life, not in terms of traditional categories of rank, religion, neighbourhood or language, but rather in terms of economic power and material conditions.

In the Marxist tradition, Antonio Gramsci has elaborated the role of cultural hegemony in ideology as a means of strengthening the power of capitalism and of the nation-state. Gramsci saw power as something used by the bourgeois to keep the proletariat in their place. Through his concept of 'hegemony', Gramsci argued that the ruling class achieves domination not by force alone but also by creating subjects who willingly submit to being governed. Ideology becomes essential in creating consent and it is the medium through which certain ideas are transmitted and are held to be true. Bertrand Russel recognises it to be power which is produced with intended effects. He terms it as propaganda that has "the opportunity for creating desired habits in other."

Foucault, however does not deny the importance of economy, but denies its centrality. He decentralises power and argues that it does not operate through class but through mechanisms and strategies. Power in that sense does not exist, what exists is an infinitely complex network of 'micro-power', of power relations that permeate every aspect of social life. In a society with such a complex power-dynamics, one's attempt to construct an identity always remains an elusive one. It is never static, since the identity that perceives as 'I' is always embedded in the totality of life-experiences and life is always in a flux. Identity develops over time, as a reaction to those environmental stimuli that are presented. How such events are perceived by the particular person, depends upon all previous experiences. In short, an individual is the sum total of all he
has experienced in life.

The post-modernist view posits that identity is constructed by the representations of society. The self is seen as a subject of discourse that defines and categorises by focussing on differences. In this way, subjectivity is always contextual, always gendered, always rooted in class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Through discursive, representational practices social institutions dictate individual’s everyday actions and their ways of perceiving the world. An intermediate perspective is that, human beings are neither fully autonomous nor totally subjugated, they have agency but also are constrained by social structures. Being less idealistic about human nature can only lead to the proper understanding of the fact that self is dynamic, always in flux and hence capable of portraying a wide range of identities.

An individual crafts his identity using the dynamics of social roles and common cultural models to suit any given social context. An individual has not one personal self but rather several selves that correspond to widening circles of group membership. Different social contexts may trigger an individual to think, feel and act on the basis of his personal, family or national level of self. Apart from the various levels, an individual has multiple social identities which are derived from an individual-based perception of what defines the ‘us’ associated with any internalised group membership. Group membership creates in-group or self-categorisation.

After being categorised with a group membership, individuals seek to achieve positive self-esteem by differentiating their in-group from the out-group on some valued dimension. An individual categorises objects in order to understand them. In a very similar way he categorises people (including himself) to understand the social environment such as Black, Muslim, White, Student etc. This is just how he finds out things about himself by knowing which category he belongs to, and this can be done only when a person knows who belongs to his group. However, an individual’s identification carries two meanings. Part of who he is, is made up of his group membership. That is, sometimes individuals think of themselves as ‘us’ vs ‘them’ and at other times as ‘I’ vs ‘he’ or ‘she’. This is how individuals think of themselves as group members sometimes and as unique individuals at some other time.

The ‘Other’ thus, plays a key role in the process of one’s identity formation. ‘Other’ is opposed to the concept of ‘same’. It refers to that which a
person considers to be entirely unrelated to his concept of self-identity. A person’s definition of the Other is part of what defines or even constitutes his sense of self. The cultural units – such as human beings, words, meanings, social organisations are maintained through a process of exclusion and opposition. Other phenomena must be represented as foreign or Other in which the Other is devalued. Social Identity Theory talks of ‘several selves’ of an individual that correspond to ever-widening circles of group-memberships. Different social contexts may trigger an individual to think, feel and act on the basis of his personal, family, regional, occupational or national level of self. A social identity according to this perspective is an individual-based understanding of what defines the group. At each level of self we have two deep-seated motivations, to define ourselves and to enjoy positive self-esteem. The pursuit of self-definition at every level pushes the individual to compare and contrast his ‘in-group’ with the ‘out-group’.

Muzaffer Sherif explains this in terms of prejudice in human relationship. In An Outline of Social Psychology (1966) he observes how prejudice is revealed in discrimination, in the denial of opportunities of living and development and in exploitation. He observes how group prejudice may be characterised as the negative attitude of members of one group toward another group and its members.

The negative feature of prejudice is demonstrated in terms of the social distance at which the members of a prejudiced group hold another group and its members in relation to themselves. At least a majority of the members identify themselves very closely with the standardised values and prejudices of their group which they consider to be their own group-attitudes. One feels that in order to be a good member of the group, one has to share these prejudices as well as other values of his group – positive and negative. The scale of hierarchy of prejudice flows from the strong and eminent down to lower hierarchies.

The superiority doctrine, once established, finds support in the social setting. Because, according to Muzaffer Sherif, it seems ‘safe to generalise’ that as long as the social distance scale is kept intact, the particular set of beliefs and stereotypes concerning the out-group and their station in life will largely reflect the norms of the in-group in question, which, in some degree, keep the out-group “in its place”.

7
With the rise of capitalism and nationalism, the racial exploitation and prejudice developed among the Europeans. The Capitalist exploiter, being opportunistic and practical, utilised every opportunity to keep his labour and other resources freely exploitable. The colonial state differs from the Capitalist state in important aspects. The former does not reflect economic power but creates and enforces it. It is not a superstructure erected on the economic base. It rather helps to create an economic base. The capitalist state however, is the instrument for enforcing the rule of domination of one class over another, while the colonial state is the organised power of the metropolitan ruling class for dominating the entire colonial society. In the colony it is a relation between the foreign ruling class and the colonial people as a whole. The colonial state thus does not represent any of the indigenous social classes of the colony. Racial hierarchy becomes the decisive factor and ironically both the exploiters and the exploited, for the most part, are seen to be born heirs to it. As Fanon says “The cause is the consequence. You are rich because you are White, you are White because you are rich” (The Wretched of the Earth). With colonialism “White” capital moved out into the lands of the coloured people who were to be suppressed with any degree of ruthlessness. It remained for thinkers to produce the evidence that the native people had an inferior, animal like capacity for culture.

Based on the exploitation of natural and human resources of the colonised nations, colonialism perpetuates itself through oppression and aggression. The system of creating the myth of the coloniser and the colonised is supported by social institutions, the government, the judicial system and an educational pattern. It throws the colonised from the history-making process, calcifies his society and deadens his culture. It further produces a racial culture based on a hierarchical system that attaches importance to distinctions of colour, caste, religion, creed and even language. A distinct mythology, ideology and philosophy is developed around these distinctions which systematically eliminates the involvement of the colonised whose historical past is distorted, disfigured and finally destroyed, if it is not strong enough to hold it. Oliver Cox terms it as “proletarianisation” of races.

As the historical conditions of the colonialism were different in various parts of the world, the form of the corresponding change in the social structure also differed. In the traditional societies of Nigeria and Kenya, the colonial
consciousness had to grapple with the problem of collective consciousness as their social structure started breaking under the pressure of the colonial forces of disruption mainly because of the acceptance of a new religion and language. Achebe and Ngugi’s heroes live in the colonial world. They are at peace with themselves, but are at war with the world which is falling apart under the forces of colonialism and all that goes with it – an alien culture and religion. With the Black Americans, colonialism is an everyday reality in the form of White racism. They are away from their homes and their own community in pursuit of their individualistic goals which they can not attain due to the colour of their skin.

Alienation, therefore, becomes a defining feature of these individuals. Though the main cause of alienation of the colonised might be a political one, it, however, operates because of the psychological, social and cultural conflicts between the two contrasting world views of the coloniser and the colonised. Having been compelled to pursue a colonial education, the colonised develops just a marginal personality. The question of identity thus takes a different dimension. The young and rebellious ones even don a negative identity. The wretched of the earth are so much preoccupied in the struggle to stay alive that the question of identity does not exist for them the way it is with others. Erikson maintains – “For sound ego identity to come into being, there has to be a good balance between the individual’s potentialities and the culture’s ability to actualise them.” The sick, terrified colonised society fails to supply them an adequate sense of self. “A society fails to supply adequate identity when symbols are disturbed to the extent that they no longer give reliable reference points which can locate themselves socially, realise themselves sentimentally, and declare (to self and others) who they are.” This inadequacy creates an acute identity crisis in the Eriksonian sense of the term.

Jack David Eller (1999) explains the deep significance of ‘past’ and its connection to the development of one’s identity, the past as tradition, the past as history, the past as myth and the past as the ‘resource’ for the present.

Many people in many parts of the world consider that the past has a strong presence. An ethnic group without a memory of its cultural past is virtually unthinkable. The historical past is also as important as the cultural / traditional past which is the record of the actual or supposedly actual events that happened to the group in the past. It helps the group to develop a strong sense of identity and solidarity. ‘Groups will, in fact, go to the great lengths to
“discover” and systematise a past in which they were either prior to, superior to, or dominant over rival groups or in which they were damaged or shamed by those groups."^{10}

Klapp maintains that a traditional society with a close knit village and tribal life faces no or very less problem regarding identity construction. A transitional society, on the other hand makes its population mobile and urban-oriented due to its exposure to technology. It weakens their group solidarity. The identity problem therefore multiplies in a technologically advanced society.

With no reference symbols to help replace the rituals of a traditional society, its members seek this reassurance in finding an identity in a profession or by joining a group activity in a collective search for identity. "Identity is like wealth: when you have it you do not need it but when it is gone you know you do not have it."^{11} More than any one else, the colonised knows that he has lost his identity because of an onslaught of colonialism. Colonialism eroded many matrilineal or woman-friendly cultures and practices. Christianity, especially profoundly altered family structures and sexual patterns of many Aboriginal societies.

The ‘othering’ of vast number of indigenous people and their construction as backward and inferior was done on the basis of racial considerations. Such oppositions were crucial not only for creating image of the outsider but equally essential for constructing the insider, that is, the White European male self. Colonialism purposefully intensified patriarchal relations in the colonised lands.

The insecure native man turned violent and tyrannical at home, - the wife being the only site where domination could be asserted. Colonialism was responsible for wiping out many such cultures where women were held in high esteem. Paula Gunn Allen holds the European explorers and colonisers responsible for erasing the central role that women played in most Native societies. Paula’s mixed Native American, Scottish and Lebanese heritage greatly influences her work. The essays in The Sacred Hoop (1986) emphasise on the themes of alienation and provide several examples of the key disagreement between the world views of the Indians and the Westerners. This conflict leads the disempowered to internalise a deep sense of inferiority resulting in low self-esteem. Ania Loomba describes this ideology of opposition as something that - “includes all our ‘mental frameworks’, our beliefs, concepts,
and ways of expressing our relationship to the world." She points out that ideology is a consciousness of the world which disguises people's real relationship to the world. This is so because the ideologies that most circulate in any society reflect and reproduce the interests of the dominant social classes.

Ideological practices make it difficult for individuals to think otherwise as they are exercises in power and control. However this element of control is not static. It changes in the course of the historical process of relations between the dominant and the subordinate groups.

Part of the aftermath of sixties witnessed the rediscovery of history. What was thought to be universal was found to be transitory and temporary. Objects thought to be persistent like social structures were found to be conditional ones. As a result, the process of identity construction had undergone a radical change. The politics of universalism attempts to ignore the unique identity of the individual or the group by making it assimilate to a dominant identity. The European discourse for example, had been, so far, infamous for either suppressing or failing to appreciate other cultures. The voices that were suppressed so far became vocal against this politics of universalism.

Various movements seeking civil rights, human rights and social justice for people who suffered from severe oppression including enforced racial segregation and second class citizenship had emerged in the fifties and the sixties. Subsequently, the disadvantaged groups all over the world organised their own movements inspired by the tactics and rhetoric of the American Civil Rights movement.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 affirmed the significance of the democratic principles and inspired the ongoing activities of nations and groups whose civil rights were being denied. The struggle of these movements increased worldwide civil unrest culminating in popular rebellions. These rebellions coincided with the struggles against colonialism. The Women's movement emerging out of these struggles claimed that personal lives and relationships were all characterised by power fraught with political meaning. The Red Power Movement was another series of collective actions related to the American Indian Movement, between November 20, 1969 and the Longest Walk in 1978. The goal was to secure redressal to the political, cultural and economic repressions which mirrored a long history of Indian poverty not only
on the reservations but in the urban environments too. It can be termed as the revolt against the White man’s culture. The Red Power Movement inspired the Indians to be proud of their heritage by reaffirming the superiority of their native cultural traditions. The Indian ethnicity thus became a more valued social status than it was ever before.

Under such conflicting situations there emerged the identity politics, a politics that stresses on strong collective group identity as the basis of political analysis and action. Political engagements with the society as a whole was increasingly perceived to have produced insufficient progress and solution. In the absence of a compelling model of a society worth struggling for, many people retreated into a focus of their own “self” and into specific cultural and ideological identity groups which made rights, status and privilege claims on the basis of a victimised identity. These groups included the ethnic minorities, religious groups, lesbian and gay men and disabled people. They looked upon the development of a culture that was able to create a new and positive conception of the self and articulation of a collective identity. These identities provided a retreat where the oppressed felt comfortable and safe from the assaults of the repressive society. A need for decolonisation in the once colonised countries was an inevitable outcome of such unrests.

The politics of decolonisation, where the indigenous populations overthrew their European masters was completely different in Asia or Africa from that of Canada where the nation-state itself was established in the image of the mother-land, England. The term post-colonial is under contestation in Canada because of its location within the industrialised west and because of the treatment of its Aboriginal peoples and other minorities. Here, one’s experiences of colonial exploitation depended on one’s location within the complex internal hierarchy. Even though the Aboriginal inhabitants try to form a separate identity based on their ethnicities, they are still pushed to the outer periphery of power. The anti-colonial movements have failed to represent the interest of all its peoples. The internal divisions and fractions rather prove that post-colonialism can not be applied indiscriminately to all unless and until decolonisation comes from within. For instance the White populations in Canada, Australia and New Zealand might have some problems with the mother countries, but they had never suffered from genocide or cultural decimation like the indigenous peoples. "White settlers were historically the agents of colonial
rule" and their location therefore can not be compared to that of other colonised countries.

In these countries the vast number of indigenous peoples are still made to serve the ideological justification of the White supremacy. This has been rather a continuous psychic experience with those who suffer, which they have to go through even after colonialism has been formally dismantled. Post-colonial authors use their literature and poetry to solidify through criticism and celebration, an emerging national identity. The re-evaluation of national identity is an eventual and essential result in a country emerging from its sufferings as a settler colony. It is a process of the continued shedding of the old skin of Western thought and discourse and emergence of a new self-awareness, critique and celebration. With the self-awareness comes self-expression. However, it is difficult for the inhabitants of a colonial territory, or a formerly colonised country to articulate themselves immediately after they have achieved their independence.

Throughout history, power has often shifted from one group to another and the very nature of power is currently shifting radically. Sociologically power can be defined as the ability to impose one's will on others even against resistance. More generally one can define power as a more or less unilateral ability or potential to bring about significant change, usually in people's lives through the action of oneself or of others. Power operates in a relational manner in the sense that one can not meaningfully talk about a particular social actor's having power without also specifying the other parties to the social relationship. To control others, one must have control over things that they desire or need, but one can not exercise that control without a measure of reverse control, - larger, smaller or equal, - also existing.

Foucault holds that power works through people rather than only on them. He claims that belief system gains momentum and hence power, when more people come to accept the particular views associated with that belief system as common knowledge. Such belief systems define their figures of authority. It is through resistance that power defines itself. "...... power is not an institution, and not a structure, neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular situation."
In countries where the indigenous culture or cultures have been suppressed or misrepresented by the colonisers, the process of resisting and overthrowing the colonial assumptions has become a way of empowerment for those who have been powerless earlier. Struggling to deconstruct the misrepresentation and finding a voice within the dominant institution of English literature has become a strategy to achieve empowerment. Historically, Native peoples have been silenced politically, economically and culturally. Native people’s voices were absent from written literature until the sixties. The early attempts by Native writers were heavily edited by non-Native missionaries, anthropologists, who told the world the Native “tales” of the igloos, the smokehouse as ‘exotic’ fit for ethnological inquiry but not for serious literary studies. Writing by Native writers, therefore, represents the struggle to tell the truth; to tell of the realities of Native life and culture. Many Native writers find themselves “writing back” and for some, this equals empowerment.

Rushdie comments on how remaking English, the coloniser’s language, can be a therapeutic act of resistance, to reflect the post-colonial experiences. “Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of this language to Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the opinion that we can’t simply use the language the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes.” The theoretical and scholarly debate about language is addressed in detail in *The Empire Writes Back*. The authors explore the ways in which writers encounter a dominant, colonial language. They describe a two-part process through which writers in the post-colonial world displace a standard language and replace with a local variant that does not have the perceived stain of being sub-standard. The language rather reflects a distinct cultural outlook through local usages.

The role of one’s own culture thus, is believed to transform one’s state of being. Therefore, cultural affirmation of the indigenous way is looked upon as one of the most efficient tools as far the self-making or selving is concerned. Even the cosmopolitan post-colonial critics also recognise that cultural nationalism plays a very important role in the process of decolonisation. The discourse on colonialism, however, is a very complicated one. Because some nations are considered to be good and progressive, while some are termed as bad and reactionary. The division, on various occasions, arises from the deep-rooted antipathy toward the anti-western and oppositional development of
cultural nationalism. Cultural nationalism is considered to be responsible for distorting the modern nation-states. In Hobsbawm’s words:

"..... the characteristic nationalist movements of the late twentieth century are essentially negative, or rather divisive ..... (they are mostly) rejections of modern modes of political organisation, both national and supranational. Time and again they seem to be reactions of weakness and fear, attempts to erect barricades to keep at bay the forces of the modern world."18

Stuart Hall, however expresses his doubt whether gender, sexuality, race, class or nationality can be considered to be the markers of one’s identity. His "Introduction : Who needs ‘Identity’ ?" addresses the questions whether the new forms of identification are breaking the modern individual as a unified subject. Hall also tries to locate how the crisis of identity relates to the wider process of changes which are generating problems for modern societies. Identity is not something that once was created and subsequently has become fixed. It is something which is always changing, contextual, relational and shifting. Cultural identities are far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, and are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. Like everything which is historical, they undergo a constant change and transformation. It is always tempting to present the experiences of the post-colonial identity in the universalised manner in terms of cultural displacement and homelessness.

The experiences are so varied that they need to be examined from the subjective splits caused by the colonial rule to specific histories and locations. For example, no nation had to witness the trauma generated by the largest population shift in history – the division of India and Pakistan. However, though colonised people in other countries did not have to physically move out of their own places yet the place where they spoke from, was ideologically, politically and economically a fractured space. They were homeless, and the homelessness had been on the internal level. The experiences of sufferings are different from one another. They may be “other” from the colonisers, but they are also different from each other and from their own past. Their positionings can not be totalised or essentialised such as black-consciousness, Indian soul or aboriginal culture etc. Their different kinds of dislocations result in different split subjectivities.
To think of achieving liberation by reviving cultural identity can not be the absolute answer. Because past can be reclaimed but it can not be reconstituted and therefore the idea of going home is always partial and fragmented. Stuart Hall suggests that colonised people can not expect to turn to the past which is waiting to be found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity. Cultural identity, according to him, belongs to the future as much as to the past.

There is no pre-existing essential self which is then represented or expressed. Rather subjectivity and identity are constructed within discourse. Hall’s intervention in the debate about identity is to recast the terms in which identity is understood, not as a hidden essence to be uncovered, but as an active process of representation or discursive construction.

Hall differs on the issue of cultural revivalism. He feels that one can not simply think of turning back to the idea of a collective pre-colonial culture and discover it to be the ultimate source of resilience. It should not be imagined as something which is when found, would lead ourselves to the ultimate truth. Such a concept was essential for anti-colonial resistance which has to be reconsidered from the present day perspective. There is no fixed origin that one can return to, because history can not be addressed as a simple and factual past. “We can not speak for very long with any exactness, about one’s identity, without acknowledging its other side- the raptures and discontinuities.”

Hall (1992) remarks that in recent decades, chiefly from the 1960s on, the population of Western Europe has changed radically. Huge number of people have moved from one corner of the world to the other. Migration gives birth to cultures that adopt elements from other cultures. Cultural identities are, thus, far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. The colonial domination internalised the knowledge of viewing oneself as the ‘other’. This is no false consciousness that can be shed off easily. Hall’s contention on post-colonial identity is not based on hybridity but is based on a sense of difference which is different from otherness.

However, it would not be fair to say that there is no agency. The problem is rather that agency and creativity are the preserve of the elite few, while the majority remains passive. Hall argues that the challenge is to seize the means of making new human subjects and lead them in the direction of a new culture.
The glorification of unreasoned endorsement of one’s inherited traditions can lead to inevitable confinement of outlook, which prevents one to grow. The Communitarian theorists glorify the cause of ‘discovering’ one’s real identity based on inherited affiliations.

Edward Said says:

"Nothing seems less interesting than the narcissistic self-study that today passes in many places for identity politics, or ethnic studies, or affirmation of roots, cultural pride, drum-beating nationalism and so on. We have to defend peoples and identities threatened with extinction or subordinate because they are considered inferior, but that is very different from aggrandising a past invented for present reasons."

Amartya Sen (2006) finds it difficult to understand as to how identity can be a matter of just discovering something about oneself, without having an exercise of choice.

‘The illusion of singularity draws on the presumption that a person not be seen as an individual with many affiliations, nor as someone who belongs to many different groups, but just as a member of one particular collectivity, which gives him or her a uniquely important identity.’

He finds the ‘solitarist’ approach to human identity, which sees human beings as members of exactly one group to be ‘a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world. In our normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups- we belong to all of them.’

Each individual can identify with many different groups. A person may have an identity of citizenship (for example, being an Indian), gender (being a woman), race (being a Bengali), regional ancestry (having come from Bangladesh), religion (being a Hindu), profession (being a teacher), location (being a resident of Assam) and so on. Within the range of the memberships that one actually has, one can choose what priority to give to one membership to another in a particular context. Because the world provides one with enough room to acknowledge the plurality of one’s affiliations. Moreover, the very nature of identity is fluid, that changes contextually. It is more so because traditions can change even within a particular country and culture.

History and background thus are definitely not the only way to determine one’s identity. They help us to know our location, but it is crucial for us to remember always that apart from one’s historical background of being a
woman, originally from Bangladesh, now migrated to India, one has other affiliations also, such as, being a mother, a movie-lover, a singer and many other things. One would not like to confine oneself, as Sen says, within ‘imagined singularity.’ There is a lot of categories one may belong to - there can be lot more one would like to get associated with in different context. But the increasing tendency to overlook the plural identities and to try to classify individuals according to a single allegedly pre-eminent identity is confusing. The advocacy of single dimensional categorisation of human beings blurs the vision.

‘In some versions of communitarian thinking, it is presumed ...... that one’s identity with the community must be the principal or dominant (perhaps even the only significant) identity a person has ...... It is also argued that ... the explanation of a person’s moral judgements must be based on the values and norms of the community of which the person belongs ......’

In the present day scenario, especially, being born in a particular cultural milieu is not an exercise of freedom where one is expected to give automatic priority to the inherited culture. Here the attachment to the community is not merely an attribute but a constituent of the member’s identity. Now it depends whether the person is willing to live within the terms of that culture or not.

The new concept of ‘indigenism’ as an inherent right for aboriginal people to practice an independent level of politics in order to maintain their distinct identity and rights as humans of a separate culture has become a popular notion of late. However it must be noted that in the past, colonisation had typically been a one-to-one situation between the colonising society and the colonised natives. But the new world of global culture has allowed the colonised groups to foster relationships with the world across, that opens the possibility of plural connections. Their existence as distinctive culture depends on how they respond to and interact with the rest of the world. It makes the story of the once colonised indigenous people’s identity a prism of possibilities, hybrid, heterogeneous, imagined and re-imagined. In this situation of international shift one’s quest for an identity comes as an unending journey, constantly projecting the possibility of imaginary identity construction determining the politics of cultural affirmation.
Notes and References


13. The term 'indigenous' has been referred to in the thesis as a political definition of a people engaged in an anti-colonial resistance to domination and sometimes, genocide. This definition is based on a people's self-definition according to local, traditional criteria.

In recent years the term “Native” has come to be used as a broad category that includes status and non-status Indians. In the thesis, the term “Indian” has been interchangeably used with “Native” rather than as a specific designation for status Indians.


Hobsbawm, E. J. in D. Lloyd “Nationalism against the State: Toward a critic of the anti-nationalist prejudice” in *Re-examining and Reviewing the Philippine Progressive Vision*, eds. Forum for Philippine Alternatives Diliman, Quezon City, 1993a, p. 2.


Ibid, p. XII.

Ibid, p. 10.

Ibid, p. 33.