Introduction

"... Riffaterre calls the poem's 'matrix', a word, phrase or sentence unit which does not necessarily exist in a text itself but which represents the kernel upon which the text's semiotic system is based. As Riffaterre puts it: "The matrix is hypothetical, being only the grammatical and lexical actualization of a structure' (1978: 19). The text's structural unity is created by the transformation of this matrix" (Intertextuality 119).

The Indian litterateurs have been writing in English prose since the days when it was their master's language and their writings more or less followed the Victorian norms in their use of the language and genre. Although some writers experimented with form in their works¹, postmodern features became prominent only from and after the publication of Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children. What is noticeable is a dearth of modernist features in the Indian English prose².

Midnight's Children is a proper postmodern novel in its use of autobiographical elements with a postmodern attitude to it. It is a 'historiographic metafiction', problematizing history and fiction. It is also postmodern in its use of magic realism, a favourite among the Latin American writers like Marquez and Borges. Its self-reflexive feature of asserting itself as a work of art by repeatedly bringing the author to disrupt the fiction, qualifies it as a postmodern work. Amitav Ghosh is not only a chronological but also a worthy temperamental successor of Rushdie and is probably the most erudite of the writers from the nineteen eighties. Quite interestingly, the nineteen eighties was the heyday of postmodernism.
This dissertation seeks to investigate the matrix of postmodernism in the novels of Amitav Ghosh. I have used the term “matrix” in its biological sense of womb, an environment in which something develops and in its mathematical sense of a group or an array of elements. From these viewpoints, I have tried to look at how much and how far the tenets of postmodernism have cradled the form and content of Ghosh’s fictions. What had initially arrested my attention was that, all the novels of Ghosh, defy categorization. Every work is different from what has gone before and from what follows. Apart from this, the other aspect that attracted my notice is that his writing career [of his fictions specially] began in the heyday of postmodernism. The idea of postmodernism flourished in the nineteen eighties when it received maximum attention from critics all over the world. It is in this milieu that Ghosh began his artistic career in the ‘room on the roof’ (The Imam and the Indian 46).

I am quite conscious that some might disagree with my use of the term postmodernism as I have used it interchangeably with poststructuralism. This I have done intentionally, in spite of the on-going debate whether it can be done or not. I have done so because the post in postmodernism and the post in poststructuralism have more similarities than difference (as has been discussed by A. Mondal in his article “Allegories of Anxiety”). Both the posts have the same connotation, both in the sense of after - historically, methodologically and in mood. To make things more clear, I attempt at a very brief history as well as the main characteristics of postmodernism as a critical theory in literature.

Every work of art is representation because art is always mediated. The difference lies in the mode and to what extent the representation is brought close to reality. Pre-modern or Victorian realism regarded art as a direct substitute for reality for they believed in the transparency of language. The novels of this period give priority to objective representation and
hence imitate essentially the phenomenal world, the objective world, the world we can see, feel and touch. Therefore, critics see realism as an attempt to hold up a mirror to the world.

According to Peter Childs, realism was "modelled on prose forms such as history or journalism (and) generally features characters, language and a spatial and temporal setting very similar to its contemporary readers and often presents itself as transparently representative of the author’s society" (2-3). In a realist novel, Raymond Williams finds that the novelist offers to show people and their relationships in essentially knowable and communicable ways. Much of the confidence of this method depends on a particular kind of social confidence and experience. In its simplest form, it amounts to saying - though at its most confident it did not have to be said - that the knowable and therefore known relationships compose and are part of a wholly known social structure, And that in and through the relationships the persons themselves can be wholly known (13).

In such novels, the narrator has god-like ability with complete power and control over the entire canvas of the novel. He or she knows everything but has to make a selection in the act of representation (Cobley 101). Colin McCabe, cited by Cobley, supports this and says that "The narrative prose outside inverted commas exercises its power in an authoritarian way; controlling readers' access to reality." The narrator’s control leads to a hierarchy in classic realism.

Accordingly, the narrator’s voice subordinates the voices of the characters (92). In a realist narrative, the narrator does not allow free interaction among the characters, but links the time and space with his summarizing voice. In realism, Space is specified in the drawing rooms or in larger spaces like entire towns while Time is presented as linear discrete moments. George Eliot’s Middlemarch is a case in point:
One of the movements of the ‘classic realist text’ is the nineteenth century novel by George Eliot (nee Mary Evans) entitled *Middlemarch* (1872). Quintessentially, it is an example of classic realism because Eliot, as author, presents the events of people’s lives, but, at the same time, as she is presenting them, she allows the moralistic tone of the narratorial voice scorn and pass judgments on events and characters. (Cobley 93)

Catherine Belsey reiterates this:

Classic realism presents in individuals those traits of character, understood as essential and predominantly given, constrain the choices they make and whose potential for development depends on what is given. Human nature is thus seen as a system of character differences existing in the world, but one which nonetheless permits the reader to share the hopes and fears of a wide range of kinds of characters. This contradiction – that readers, like the central figures of fiction are unique, and so that so many readers can identify with so many protagonists - is accommodated in ideology as a paradox. There is no character in *Middlemarch* with whom we cannot have some sense of shared humanity. (68)

Raymond Williams objects to this technique of depicting reality because social relationships do not provide total knowledge of human beings: “Some part of the personality precedes and survives - in a way is unaffected by relationships; [...] in this special sense persons are not knowable, are indeed fundamentally and crucially unknowable (14).” Even Dostoyevsky was dissatisfied with this reality because

it is well known that whole trains of thought sometimes pass through our brains, instantaneously, as though they were sensations, without being translated into
human speech, still less into a literary language. But we will try to translate these sensations of our heroes and present to the reader at least the kernel and nearest to reality in them. For many of our sensations when translated into ordinary language seem absolutely unreal. That is why they never find expression, though everyone has them. (Edel 26)

Hence, agreeing that subjective states can be reported but not presented in the novel, Dostoyevsky attempted for some ‘higher realism’ in his novels.

From all this we may conclude that the pre-modern world was based on the religious grand narrative that God is the creator of the world. From this flowed the concept that reality was the objective visible world. In short, the pre-modern reality was essentially a social reality. Hence, the followers of realism believed that the objective social world was a proper guide to the individual world because it was the individuals who constituted the society. That is, the whole is assumed to represent the part, and the form of representation, to use Jakobson’s term, is metonymic. Obviously, the artistic mode of the pre-modern takes the social reality as the ‘real’ reality.

God’s existence became very uncertain with the publication of Darwin’s hypothesis in 1859, in which he said that the origin of the human species was through natural selection and that in the process of evolution only the fittest survived. Darwin argues that sex and natural selection forms the basis of human development, and his hypothesis suggests a different kind of species from the previous belief in one never changing humanity. Humans are closer to animals than to a god, and nature is evolving and dynamic, not static. We do not know exactly when God died but in 1887 Nietzsche declared, “God is dead.” Man filled up the vacuum created by the death of God and ushered in the age of science and technology. With the departure of God from the
director's seat of the universe, humankind found themselves in a world they could no longer recognize. Ambiguity descended and decomposed the single divine Truth into myriad relative truths. This was the Modern Era where Descartes' Cogito (the thinking self) became the yardstick of measuring 'reality' (Kundera 6). With rapid industrialization and urbanization, human outlook changed. This in turn gave rise to a feeling among the writers that the traditional novel no longer rose up to the occasion: "its imaginary worlds did not, in fact correspond to the way one's fellows spent their entire lives" (Levenson 70-71). Therefore, something new was an absolute necessity. Accordingly, in the world of art, the objective reality of the older world was substituted by the 'more real' subjective reality. The literature of the modern period turned their focus of attention from the outer world to the inner world - the world of the human psyche. Reality began to be depicted by turning the human psyche inside out. In the literary arts, the writers 'mimicked' this with the technique of stream-of-consciousness or interior monologue, initiated by writers like Dorothy Richardson and perfected by writers like James Joyce.

There were a number of precursors to the new modernist style in fiction across the continent of Europe. They include Gustave Flaubert (1821-80), Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-81), Emile Zola (1840-1902) and Henry James (1843-1916). Each of them attempted to improve upon the realist style and form. Flaubert who wrote with scrupulous precision developed the practice of channelling the narrative through the perceptions of one character. Dostoyevsky aimed at a "higher realism" which included spiritual and material truth. Zola perfected the principle of verisimilitude which came to be known as 'naturalism'. Henry James, who strove for "psychological realism", perfected Flaubert's technique and his style was quite at odds with the Victorian idea of the novel as a 'baggy monster'. In his final phase (from 1902), he used 'point of view', mediating the story entirely through the filtering mind of a particular character, in a
style that presaged the stream of consciousness technique associated with James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson. With all these authors, there was a growing concern towards the ethos of the times that can be described as

a way of living and of experiencing life which has arisen with the changes wrought by industrialization, urbanization, and secularization; its characteristics are disintegration and reformation, fragmentation and rapid change, ephemerality and insecurity. It involves certain new understandings of time and space: speed, mobility, communication, travel, dynamism, chaos and cultural revolution.

(Childs 14-15)

Modernity is also associated with the rise of the European empire and its colonial enterprise of navigation and subjugation, giving birth to an individual heart of darkness and a social wasteland. Loss of faith, groundlessness of value, the violence of war, an unidentifiable anxiety are mirrored by figures of nihilism, of degeneration and despair both in works of art as well as to the responses to them ((Levenson 4-5). Modernism, is therefore, usually seen as an aesthetic and cultural reaction to modernity and modernization. In addition to the real world around, the thinkers like Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud and Einstein also influenced this reaction. All these thinkers attempted to place humanity and in particular human reason at the centre of everything, from religion and nature to finance and science. In the nineteenth century, there was a rapid shift from country to city, land to factory, individual to mass production. All this can be best understood with the help of the Marxian analysis of history, politics and society. Marx decentred History and his critique comes handy to understand the conscious eliticism of the modernists and the difficulty of understanding their texts:
The elitism ascribed to the modernist writers can again be read in terms of the loss of authority suffered by professionals, spiritual and artistic elites, who all became paid labour alongside every other wage-earner. The market economy recognizes no privileges or externalities but considers all commodities and competitors equally. In fact, questions of value and vulgarity are at the heart of the bourgeois mentality but seep into the economy only in terms of the vagaries of supply and demand: Van Gogh's paintings were valueless in the 1890s and priceless in the 1990s. Many Modernist artists reacted against this by creating a new importance for art, by elevating aesthetics above everything, including morality and money, and by condemning the everyday and the humdrum, often including ordinary life. (Childs 30)

An example of a severe critique of the contemporary figures is found in The Waste Land. The modernists attempted a systematic elevation of art above truth, completing the circle—'Art imitates life', through 'art imitates art', to 'life imitates art'.

Perhaps the greatest influence on modernism, other than Marx's, was Freud's. Freud decentred the human psyche saying that, a man's or a woman's actions are not governed by the conscious but the unconscious motives. Freud first taught us to scientifically look into the human mind. Freud's signature is felt everywhere, in Conrad, in Lawrence, in Joyce, in Woolf. Without Freud, it becomes difficult to understand Kafka and his paranoid tales. Conrad's Heart of Darkness is interpreted as an allegory of a journey into the inner dark recesses of human psyche - into the heart of darkness. Freud's concept of Free Association, that is speaking out one's unconscious motives, is almost the same as the concept of the 'stream of consciousness', a termed by coined by William James, brother of Henry James. In the Principles of Psychology
William James writes that consciousness is nothing jointed; it flows like a "river" or a "stream". He calls it the "stream of thought, of consciousness". Although Nietzsche is probably more influential upon the postmodernists, even the modernists like Lawrence admired his philosophy. Lawrence's most discussed novels like The Rainbow and Women in Love are suffused with Nietzschean language of "will-to-power". Ursula Brangwen's steady and gradual search for her "self" is a Nietzschean philosophy "to become what you are".

While Darwin revolutionized the natural sciences, Max Planck's work on Quantum Theory and Einstein's Theory of Relativity along with Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle revolutionized physics and astronomy, though the last work is one of the pillars of the postmodernist theory. These works, on the one hand threw humankind into a pit of uncertainty and helplessness, on the other hand, they taught us to look at the world from a human viewpoint that is bound to be relative. Lawrence writes in 'Why the Novel Matters': "We should ask for no absolutes or absolute. Once and for all and for ever, let us have done with the ugly imperialism of absolute. There is no absolute good, there is nothing absolutely right. All things flow and change, and even change is not absolute" (290).

If a Newtonian universe is reflected in the realist novels, Modernism reflects Einstein's four dimensional space-time continuum where "time moved in arcs, flashbacks, jumps, repetitions and above all, subjective leaps and swerves" (Childs 67). This subjective relativity is reflected even in the act of ascertaining the Modern Period. According to Virginia Woolf, it was on or about December 1910 (King Edward died and the first post-impressionist exhibition was held in London) when human nature changed. And this change was reflected in various aspects of life: religion, conduct, politics and literature.
D.H. Lawrence's apocalyptic year was 1915 when the old world ended. Roland Barthes declared that it is around 1850 when classical writing disintegrated and all literature became “the problematics of language.” However, it is generally agreed that the Modernist Period is the time from 1890 to 1930 due to the fact that:

One of the most remarkable features of this period between 1890 and 1930 is the extraordinary galaxy of talent that we find here. Few historical phases contain such an extraordinary wealth of major writers - European, English, American - whose complexity of aesthetic inquiry, those sustaining and self-risking intelligence offers so much work worthy of detailed consideration. (Bradbury and McFarlane 52)

According to the same authors:

In short, Modernism was in most countries an extraordinary compound of the futuristic and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolistic, the romantic and the classical. It was a celebration of a technological age and a condemnation of it, an excited acceptance of the belief that the old regimes of culture were over, and a deep despairing in the face of that fear; a mixture of convictions that the new forms were escapes from historicism and the pressures of the time with convictions that they were precisely the living expressions of these things and in most of these countries the fermenting decade was the eighteen nineties. (Bradbury and McFarlane 46)

This is why Foucault looks at the Modernist Period not as an epoch but as an attitude, a way of looking at things.
According to most critics, the typical aspects of a modernist writing are radical aesthetics, technical experimentation, spatial or rhythmic rather than chronological form, self-conscious reflexiveness, scepticism towards the idea of a centred human subject, and a sustained inquiry into the uncertainty of reality. The avant-garde felt the need of new techniques to represent the new world that they witnessed. In poetry, modernism breaks away from the iambic pentameter and introduces the vers libre, symbolism and others. In prose, modernism attempts to show or represent the human mind inside out, through interior monologue, stream of consciousness, tunnelling, defamiliarization, rhythm, irresolution and others. The slogan of the modernists was 'to make it new' (Ezra Pound) and to do this they attempted to modify, if not overturn, existing modes of representation, partly by pushing them towards the abstract or the introspective. They aimed to express the new sensibilities of their time in a compressed and condensed, hence complex literature of the city, industry, technology and their paraphernalia. Thus, modernism is looked upon as anti-historical because according to its theories truth is not evolutionary but requires analysis. Like the science of the modernist period that was interested in atomic and sub – atomic particles, modernism focuses on the microcosm, which is the individual, rather than the macrocosm, that is the society. Its texts are self-referential and self-contained stressing on fragmentation rather than Victorian harmony. Modernism stresses on the object's function rather than on the object itself. Thus according to Le Corbusier, a house is something to live in and to William Carlos Williams, a poem is a machine of words. The modernist outlook is unashamedly elitist, complex and difficult. Modernism has a great suspicion on language as a medium of expressing and comprehending the world. As a result, almost all modernist texts have an underlying sense of apocalypse, despair and helplessness. With this, we may add the negative aspect, the late nineteenth century theories of 'degeneracy', which fit into the general area of
new ideas about human development and social manipulation. The translation of Max Nordau’s influential book *Degeneration* was perhaps the most important of many works published in Britain on the theme from 1880 onwards. This is perhaps the common underlying theme of almost all important modernist works. However, the modernist works do not only indulge in despair but also seek for transcendence. Marlowe’s journey into the heart of darkness to save Kurtz from complete damnation may be seen as an allegory of the above-mentioned theme. The same is observed in the spiritual wasteland of Eliot and the paranoid world of Kafka. It is for this reason that Eliot supported and praised Joyce’s use of myth to organize the fragmented world of modern Dublin. Ursula Brangwen could not compromise with anything or anybody, not even her dear parents, on her path of personal salvation and the assertion of her will. In Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, we find in Lily Briscoe’s art, a refuge from the disintegrating world of the Ramsays.

Thus, the central theme in the modernist writings is one of despair in the face of fragmentation along with a search for a unifying grand narrative - myth, evolution, dialectics, unconscious will, relativity and so on. It is at this edge of anxiety or collapse that Saussure enters, and with him begins a new era in the history of Western art and literature.

Although the importance of language is as great to modernism as it is to postmodernism, the role of language to the modernists is different from that of the postmodernists. The realist writers used language as a tool to describe the objective world that was their reality. They took language to be transparent. In contrast, the postmodernist writers look upon language as that which constructs and constitutes reality. The modernist attitude falls in-between these two positions because to the modernist writers language was still a medium for representing the world, inner or outer, but they were finding it increasingly difficult to convey and express what they wanted to, through words. Language was always falling short of their requirement. Hence,
as Homi Bhabha has argued, Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* describes his experience as only “The horror!” while the experience of the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India* is expressed as “ou-boum!” The rest is silence. Modernist writers fell silent when they needed the language most. Eliot’s Prufock complains, “That is not what I meant at all” and Conrad’s Marlowe asks, “Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to be I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt.”

In this despairing state of affairs where things were falling apart and the centre could no longer hold, one man showed the light – Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist. If, with epoch-making consequences, Freud decentred the individual consciousness and Marx decentred history, it was Saussure’s decentring of language that made possible so much subsequent theoretical work across the arts, social sciences and humanities in the second half of the twentieth century. Saussure studied language synchronically, that is as a system instead of diachronically. According to Saussurean linguistics, language has two basic components – the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’. Thus, we understand the meaning of an idea or a concept through difference. According to Saussurean synchronic study of language, all different language utterances (parole) have an essential basic system of principles (langue) upon which the individual utterances depend. From this developed that branch of study known as structuralism. The structuralists like Vladimir Propp, Levi-Strauss, and the early Barthes and to some extent Jacques Lacan ventured upon various structuralists research in their individual field of study. Propp concluded that all folk tales no matter how different they appear to be, have the same basic structure of plot and characters. Levi-Strauss reached the same conclusion in his study of various tribes of people and their myths. Barthes showed that any story or novel can be categorized into six codes and Lacan declared that the human unconscious is structured like language.
The poststructuralists reacted to this sort of attitude and interpretation saying that structuralism does not explain the differences that exist between one story and another, one myth and another, and so on. While the structuralists follow one thread of Saussurean linguistics, the poststructuralists hold on to another, which is inherent – that of difference. It is this 'difference' that predominates in the theories and studies of Foucault, Derrida, later Lacan, later Barthes and Heidegger. The structuralists view language differentially. They treat every idea in the form of a pair of coordinates. One is the negative aspect of the other (difference) – bad is not good, white is not black. The two aspects of structuralism that come under severe attack of the poststructuralists are one, the mutually exclusive nature of the binary opposites and two, the synchronic treatment of language that denies the influence of history and culture on language. They point out that Saussure had clearly mentioned the role of society in ascertaining or attributing the value of a word [sign]: “The arbitrary nature of the sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up: by himself the individual is incapable of fixing a single value” (Raman Selden 115). The poststructuralists argue that the arbitrariness of meaning associated with the sign or words changes with time and history.

Culture, influenced by history, decides the meaning of a particular sign according to its usage in the society. Again, the poststructuralists also vehemently argue that the binary opposites cannot be mutually exclusive. When we use a sign of ‘bad’, we think of it as not good. So in the concept of ‘bad’ a trace (to use Derrida's term) of ‘good’ is always present. Hence, here though the sign ‘good’ is absent in the sign ‘bad’ its trace is present in the idea of it. From another angle, Derrida attacks the structuralists as well as the entire western metaphysics of thought regarding the concept of the binary opposites. He says that the first member of the binary pair is always
privileged against the other member of the pair. We always say 'good and bad' and not 'bad and good' or 'man and woman' not 'woman and man' or 'light and dark' not 'dark and light'. Hence, history and culture have privileged the first term. When we are using the sign of 'man', we privilege the presence of the term, not the absence of the idea 'not woman' that has a trace of the presence of 'woman'. He says that if we reverse the order of the pair of binary opposites and privilege the second term then many pillars of western knowledge, philosophy, thought and practice would come crashing down. From this, Derrida concludes that the elements of the binary pair are never mutually exclusive but are at 'play'. From this and many other important investigations Derrida has shown that, a 'text' never has any absolute meaning because we can never pin down the signifiers. The signifiers are always at play and meaning is always deferred ('differance') ad infinitum. In short, Derrida has in this way 'deconstructed' many of the established notions of western thought and practice.

While Derrida attacks the structuralists with their own weapon, Linguistics, Heidegger does the same with philosophy. Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world gives an individual a 'subject position' and this position influences his understanding of things. A person cannot be autonomous in his understanding of things: he is influenced and controlled by his subject position. Hence, a text may mean differently to different people of different cultural and historical subject position. What controls the subject position is what Althusser calls 'ideology'. However, this 'ideology' is never a matter of choice, as it is usually understood. Foucault argues that those 'in power' create the ideology according to their need to maintain and preserve the power structure in society. This ideology of the powerful is thrust upon the powerless although the powerless are never conscious of it. They think that they have freely made a choice whereas the reality is that they have been ideologically forced to make the particular choice. They have
no alternative otherwise. Here the poststructuralists also differ from the existentialists like Sartre who stressed on the importance of human choice. According to Sartre, a man/woman has only one freedom – to choose and the existence of a man/woman depends upon his/her choice. All this – Derrida’s deconstruction, Heidegger’s ‘situatedness’, Foucault’s concept of power, Lacan’s reinterpretation of Freud and the iconoclastic thoughts of Nietzsche have gone into the making of the theory of postmodernism. However postmodernism is not only this but also much more. It is a general and sometimes controversial term used to refer to changes, to development and to tendencies which have taken place and are still taking place in literature, art, music, architecture, philosophy, etcetera since the nineteen forties or nineteen fifties. Postmodernism is different from modernism, even a reaction against it. It is not easy to define like many other -isms. Like them, it is amorphous by nature. Christopher Butler reiterates this aspect of the indefinable nature and regards postmodernism as “a loosely constituted and quarrelsome political party [...] not particularly unified in doctrine” (2). Postmodernism, whose main aspect is plurality, is bound to be indefinable. Hence, for the study to continue and keeping in with the postmodern attitude we have to begin with a number of opinions of prominent and established postmodern critics.

Extending the sceptic attitude of the modernists Lyotard defines postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” of the likes of Enlightenment and Marxism because they have failed to keep their promises of human progress and liberation respectively. Frederic Jameson, a well-known Marxist critic, sees postmodernism as the “cultural logic of late capitalism” – the final stage in the three stages of capitalism – pre-modern, modern and postmodern. Patricia Waugh sees postmodernism as the anxiety of tolerance, as the culmination of the aestheticist tradition of Romanticism and as a romance of the marginal or the Other.
Umberto Eco has suggested that the postmodern is born at the moment when we discover that the world has no fixed centre and that as Foucault taught; power is not something unitary that exists outside of us (Poetics 86). Leslie Fiedler’s postmodernism “crosses the border and closes the gap” between high and popular culture. Peter Barry is epigrammatic, “The modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernists celebrate it.” Baudrillard is iconoclastic when he opines that postmodernism is the child of postmodernity, an epoch where reality dissolves into hyperreality.

Postmodernist novels are as complex as the attitude. According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernist fiction puts into question that entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with what we conveniently label as liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, centre, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin. (Poetics 57)

Brian McHale believes that, “The dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological. That is postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and the foreground questions like… ‘Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it’ (10)? Steven Connor says, “Postmodernist texts turned modernist worries about the limits of language into a chattering polyglossary (The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism 70).”

Postmodernism does not believe in autonomy. This is reflected in the postmodernist fictions that foreground intertextuality. The French Lieutenant’s Woman continuously cross-refers to the Victorian writers like Dickens, Hardy, Tennyson and others. While reading Foe we have constantly at the back of our minds Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. If on a Winter’s Night a
Traveller is a novel about writing and reading of a novel by an author named Marana and in The Name of the Rose, we are repeatedly brought in to the library and come in contact with various medieval manuscripts. In fact, Eco himself has remarked that he has “discovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told” (Reflections 20). This aspect of the postmodernist novels comes close to the ‘rhizomatic’ nature of the postmodern ethos as suggested by Deleuze and Guattari. Perhaps this is why the labyrinth is a dominant symbol in postmodernist novels. This is in contrast to the modernists’ “in depth” study symbolized by a tree. Modernist texts take us deeper and deeper into the psyche of an individual. Every modernist text deals with a single viewpoint (There may be a number of perspectives presented but one particular is given prominence) - The Ambassadors is Strether’s story, Heart of Darkness is Marlowe’s tale, The Rainbow is a psychological narrative of Ursula’s will to power, To the Lighthouse is Lily Briscoe’s way of looking at the Ramsays. In contrast, postmodernist fiction portrays multiple perspectives without any one being the central one. Characteristically, Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury is more postmodernist than modernist because every chapter is related from a different perspective.

Through the foregrounding of intertextuality, the postmodernist novel questions the concept of origin. According to postmodernism, nothing is original. Heidegger has pointed out that no one is an island; every being-in-the-world is situated. Therefore, he or she is always interconnected and the question of original autonomous perspective does not hold. As postmodernism questions the concept of originality, it also does away with a similar concept - centre. The modernists had decentred the realist attitude only to be in turn decentred by the postmodernists. However, the postmodernists have not given us a new centre: they have done
away with the centre. They do not believe in centre. This is also similar and related to the concept that nothing is original because there is no origin. In Realism, the author is god and he pervades every aspect of the fiction because it is through the omniscient narrator that we come in contact with the world of the fiction. In the modernist era, the author sits back, detached while in the postmodernist text the author is dead. This leads us to the aspect of authority.

Discussing about William Gass’s comment that “These days, often, the novelist resumes the guise of god,” McHale comments that:

The analogy between the author and god is, as we already know, an old one. Nevertheless, the postmodernists writers seems to be obsessed with it - obsessed enough, at any rate, to be willing to sacrifice novelistic illusion for the sake of asserting their “authority” in the most basic sense, their mastery over the fictional world, their ontological superiority as authors. (210)

This is best illustrated in Chapter Thirteen of The French Lieutenant’s Woman: “I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind” (97). However, Fowles is fully aware that in his age the author has been declared dead and so he puts himself under “erasure” when he declares that:

If I have pretended until now to know my characters’ mind and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (Just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and ‘voice’ of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word. (97)
It is in this sense that Barthes has commented that an author may come back into a text but only as “a guest” and then he is no longer a privileged figure. To this authorial status McHale adds that:

The oscillation between authorial presence and absence characterizes the postmodernist author. Fully aware that the author has been declared dead, the postmodernist text nevertheless insists on authorial presence although not consistently. The author flickers in and out of existence at different levels of the ontological structure and at different points in the unfolding text. (202)

Few lines later, he adds, “The author, in short, is another tool, for the exploration and exploitation of ontology” (202). McHale probably has in mind that Foucault had discarded the notion of author as “entity” and regarded author as “a function” in texts. Another illustration will prove the point. Malcolm Bradbury in The History Man attempts to endorse that history is fiction; reality is fiction; truth is fiction. These are very important postmodern trends. Hutcheon is quite clear about the first trend:

What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past (“exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination”). In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events but in the systems which make those past “events” into present historical “facts”. This is not a “dishonest refuge from truth” but an acknowledgement of the meaning making function of human constructs. The postmodern, then, effects two simultaneous moves. It reinstalls historical contexts as significant and ever
determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge. (Poetics 89)

Hence, Nietzsche was right when he said, in his eighteen-eighties notebooks that “There are no facts, only interpretations.” The second aspect that Bradbury seeks to present is that ‘reality is fiction’. Steven Conner proclaims in “Postmodernism and literature”: “Rather than retreating from worldliness into the word, Postmodernism could continue to embrace the world, though on the contradiction that this world was known and shown to be made up of words” (The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism 69). This is in direct contrast to modernist texts:

Where modernist literary texts acknowledged their linguistic constitution in a blushing or grudging manner, post modernist texts candidly embraced and celebrated their wordedness in the form of wordiness. Postmodernist texts turned modernist worries about the limits of language into a chattering polyglossary. (The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism 69-70)

Patricia Waugh in Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism reiterates “… Post modernism is simply an extension of that tendency in structuralist thought which sees the ‘real’ purely a construct, intra-linguistic process, which confine one forever to the prison-house of language. Worse still, postmodernists are ‘lost in the fun house’ of art” (84). That is, the postmodernists see art as a language game, a ‘funhouse’. This is in direct contrast to the modernist high seriousness. According to Leslie Fiedler, postmodernist art and literature “close the gap” between high and popular art as a direct protest against the modernist’s literally elitist quality. Consequently mixing, hybridity, crossing over, of stepping beyond boundaries or even the credibility of boundaries have become important phenomena of postmodern studies. For Leslie Fiedler, cited by Waugh, closing the gap means not only of high and popular art but also “The closing of the
gap between critic and audience too, if by critic one understands ‘leader of taste’ and by audience ‘follower’. But most importantly of all it implies the closing of the gap between artist and audience, or at any rate, between professional and amateur in the realm of art” (Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism 43). This discussion reminds us of the Derridean play of signifiers between binary opposites and in postmodernism:

There have been liberating effects of moving from the language of alienation (otherness) to that of decentering (difference) because the center used to function as the pivot between binary opposites which always privileged one half: white/black, male/female, self/other, intellect/body, west/east, objectivity/subjectivity - the list is now well known. But if the center is seen as a construct, a fiction, not fixed and unchangeable reality, the “old either-or begins to break down,” as Susan Griffin put it and the new and also of multiplicity and difference open up new possibilities. (Poetics 62)

Christopher Butler opines of binary opposites that:

For Derrideans, indeed, the revelation of their hidden interdependence ‘deconstructs’ them. They can be undone, or reversed often to paradoxical effect, so that truth is really a kind of fiction, reading is a form of misreading. And most fundamentally, understanding is always a form of misunderstanding, because it is never direct, it is always a form of partial interpretation, and often uses metaphor when it thinks it is being literal. It is this central use of deconstruction to subvert our confidence in logical, ethical and political commonplaces that has proved most revolutionary - and typical of postmodernism. (20-21)
This is what Bradbury does in his author's note in *The History Man* - erases his self and his fiction. As Hans Bertens says regarding postmodern fiction: "However, it always undermines itself: it makes fun of itself, expose its own fictionality, expressly thwart all attempts at interpretation, deliberately refuse one answer questions it has posed - it puts itself under erasure" (138-45). This brings us to the concept of 'self'.

The postmodern 'self' has undergone a thorough change under the influence of Foucault's analysis of the relation between discourse and power:

Indeed the term preferred by postmodernist to apply to individuals is not so much 'self' as 'subject', because the latter term implicitly draws attention to the - 'subjected' condition of persons who are, whether they know it or not 'controlled' (if you are on the left) or 'constituted' (if you are in the middle) by the ideologically motivated discourses of power which predominate in the society they inhabit. (Butler 50)

This is quite in contrast to the modern 'self': "Modernity" is thus a condition defined by a characteristic denial or disavowal of being-in-the-world. A detached subjectivity has come to stand over an inert nature, speculating, observing, judging and manipulating it for its own ends" (Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism 2). As Heidegger has said, "In clarifying Being-in-the-world, we have shown that a bare subject without a world never... is... given. And so... an isolated 'I' without others is just as far from being proximally given" (152). Thus, a postmodern self is no island but only a node in a complex fabric of relations. This is in tandem with what Deleuze and Guattari says, as cited in *Poetics*: "So maybe metaphors: the image of the labyrinth without centre or periphery might replace the conventionally ordered notion we usually
have of a library (like in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*) or the spreading rhizome might be a less repressively structuring concept than the hierarchical tree" (59-60).

In a reflection on his own novel, *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco has said, "The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence (discovery of modernism), must be revisited but with irony, not innocently" (Reflections 7). Alan Wilde, as cited in *Postmodernist Culture*, has described two types of irony — Disjunctive Irony and Suspensive Irony. The first one "is the response to a world perceived to be in fragments, and represents the desire simultaneously to be true to incoherence and to transcend it" (115). This is the modernist attitude. The other irony "marks an intensification of the awareness of incoherence, to the point where it seems no longer capable of being accounted for and contained even in the ordering frame of the aesthetic" (*Postmodernist Culture* 115). This incoherence or the fragmentary nature is common to both modernism and postmodernism. However, in contrast to modernism the postmodernist attitude to such fragmentariness

is an exhilarating provocation rather than a traumatizing ordeal. Rather than representing a threat to be tamed, the multiple becomes a promise or horizon to which art must try to live up. Few things evidence the naturalization of postmodernism more emphatically than the fact that what used to look like disorder now looks like brimming plenitude. (*The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* 68-70)

This is exactly what Peter Barry means when he says, "While modernism laments fragmentation, postmodernism celebrates it" (*Beginning Theory* 84).
Therefore, postmodernism means both — modernism extended and modernism contrasted. Accordingly, in postmodern literature, some modernist tendencies are taken to their extreme and some are directly flouted. Patricia Waugh gives us a more or less comprehensive definition:

We must regard postmodern firstly as a mood or style of thought which privileges aesthetic modes over those of logic for method; secondly as an aesthetic practice with an accompanying body of commentary upon it; thirdly as a concept designating a cultural epoch which has facilitated the rise to prominence of such theory and aesthetic styles and which may or may not constitute a break with previous structures of Modernism. (Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism 7)

In short, the two main aspects of postmodernism are extreme relativism and extreme problematization. It is for this reason Hutcheon says that we need a “problematics” rather than a “poetics” of the postmodern art.

Thus, we see that the elements of postmodernism are many and extremely varied. Out of the immensity of elements, we have drawn up a working matrix of the following elements — postmodernist themes, tendencies and attitudes; fragmentation; foregrounding of the fictionality of fiction; disappearance of the real; mixing of literary genre; foregrounding of irony in the sense that Eco has used the term; elements of narcissism or self-reflexiveness; closing of gaps of various types; marginality; the importance of the Other; fictionality of borders; constructedness of binary hierarchies; power of knowledge; fictionality of metanarratives; rhizomes and the extreme importance of language. Out of these varieties of postmodernist elements I have tried to find out which of these devices and techniques are more commonly used by Amitav Ghosh.
I, to summarize, refer to an excellently simple description of the condition of fiction in the postmodern times: "Once we knew that fiction was about life and criticism was about fiction – and everything was simple. Now we know that fiction is about other fiction, is criticism in fact or metafiction. And we know that criticism is about the impossibility of anything being about life, really, or even about fiction, or finally, about anything" (Nicol 1). What makes postmodernism problematic is its object, the string of phenomena it attempts to explain, which is extremely unstable, uncertain because of its changing contextual nature. Postmodernism is still a dynamic process concerned with the contemporary. Other artistic movements like ‘Romanticism’ or ‘Modernism’ came to be definable ‘posthumously’. Post modernism is a mode of awareness of the conviction that everything in life – Nationalism, value systems, identity, history, even reality are cultural constructs. The irony of the situation is, previously ideology was a construct imposed upon us, but we were not conscious of it. Now we are conscious and still put our faith on the fakes, that is why, according to Eco, the dominant mode in postmodern culture is irony because we are aware of the knowledge that being is never fixed; it is always changing with tones and times. Eco’s ‘faith in the fakes’ is thus in harmony with Baudrillardian ‘simulation’ or hyperreality which is the cultural condition of the late twentieth century, heavily dependent on digital technology. Thus, in contrast to those critics for whom postmodernism implies “of potentially liberating knowingness about our changed experience of reality” (Nicol 6), critics like Jameson looks upon the phenomena as a cultural logic of late capitalism “which reads almost like an extended psychoanalytic case study of the postmodern (paranoid) subject, a variety of cultural texts figuring as its symptomatology” (Nicol 6).

Thus, due to the ironic feature of the postmodern milieu, the most characteristic formal practice in postmodern fiction is metafiction, fiction that foregrounds its own status as a fictional.
construct. This stresses the nature of a fiction, not as a window to reality, neither subjective nor objective, but as a ‘language game’ with its own set of special rules applicable to fiction only as found in Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, metafiction that concludes that fiction is fictional, but no more than reality. It momentarily collapses the distinction between fiction and reality by the ‘rupturing effect’ where the outside world intrudes into the fictional in the form of author himself. All this can be traced back to Julia Kristeva’s term ‘intertextuality’ that she coins in her study of Saussure and Bakhtin. Intertextuality is as difficult a term to define as postmodernism itself. However, as a working term it means that no text is original because it is made up of other texts that have gone before it. No author can originate meaning because he/she has to use a language that consists of ‘signifiers’ and ‘signifieds’. No signifier has a single signified because signifieds vary from reader to reader, author to author and culture to culture. Thus, a text cannot have a fixed meaning but a variety of meanings:

Narrative fiction, in other words, never reaches us without having already gone through a process of signification. Narratives do not reach us directly and it do not directly represent the world; their meaning is always bound up in a system which forms the basis of their meaning. The meaning of a narrative, in other words, stems from the system of narratives out of which it is produced and not from its presentation of reality. The meaning of all narratives is mediated, understanding mediation here in its technical sense: that which passes through a process or system of transformation in its in representation (Allen, Barthes 60).

Hence a postmodern writer has always to confess to the reader that the signifiers he is using in his text is not his own but belongs to language and so the reader is free to make whatever he wants of it. It is in this context that Barthes had concluded the death of the author
and it is in this same context Derrida has coined the term 'differance' which means both to differ and to defer. Every signifier projects on to other signifiers as meanings and this continues ad infinitum. He shows that there is no 'transcendental signified' that can be the source of meaning.

Finally, the question that arises is, how far we can use the term postmodernism as a theory of criticism when it refers to such a variety of things, meaning almost everything and thus nearly nothing. To this, Brian McHale provides a solution:

Whatever we think of the term, however much or little we may be satisfied with it, one thing is certain: the referent of 'postmodernism', the thing to which the term claims to refer, does not exist ... precisely in the way that 'The Renaissance' or 'romanticism' do not exist. There is no postmodernism 'out there' in the world anymore than there ever was a Renaissance or a Romanticism out there. (4)

We find another supporter in Bakhtin who defined the novel as the most indefinable genre and its study having its 'peculiar difficulties' because the genre is in continual development, it is always 'becoming' and hence still an 'unfinished project'.

So, as my project deals with two problematic areas of contemporary cultural criticism, postmodernism and novel, I make it clear that my aim is not to reduce the novels of Amitav Ghosh to postmodernism. Accordingly, I have used the term 'matrix' that would gradually fill up or 'become'. My matrix will not be the only one. Others may later enlarge it or change it altogether. My endeavour would be to look for the postmodern elements in Ghosh's creations and how far and how much the social milieu he has been working in has affected or given birth to his themes and characters.
Thus, like postmodernism and the genre of the novel, my project will be in the process of becoming, as a condition of knowledge in this 'post human' era of digital technology, the era of simulacrum.
Notes

1. G. V. Desani’s *All About Harry Hatter* (1948, 1972), Sashti Brata’s *She and He* (1973), Saros Cowasjee’s *Goodbye to Elsa* (1974) and others.

2. Hence, it is no surprise that an article on Indian English writing, published in an Indian daily, with reference to Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*, announced that “Indian literature which many would suggest is barely into the modern era, has taken a dazzling leap beyond into Post-Modernism” (Pillai 11).

3. On looking up a dictionary, we come across the conflicting meaning of the term ‘after’. The first is that of behind in place or the order of things, for example, one who is after someone in a queue. The second is that of ‘later in time or following next – someone or something which succeeds (comes after) someone or something else. Thus the word can mean either coming behind or being in front.

4. Bradbury in his note on *The History Man* says “This fiction is for Beamish, whom, while en route for some conference or other, I saw at Frankfurt Airport, enquiring from desk to desk about his luggage, unhappily not loaded onto the same plane as he. It is a total invention with delusory approximations to historical reality, just as is history itself. Not only does the University of Watermouth, which appears here, bear no relation to the real University of Watermouth (which does not exist) to any other university; the year 1972, which also appears bears no relation to the real 1972, which was a fiction anyway; and so on. As for the characters, so-called, no one but the other characters in this book knows them and they not well: they are pure inventions, as is the plot in which they more than participate. Nor did I fly to a conference the other day; and if I did, there was no one on the plane named Beamish, who certainly did not lose his luggage. The rest of course is true.”