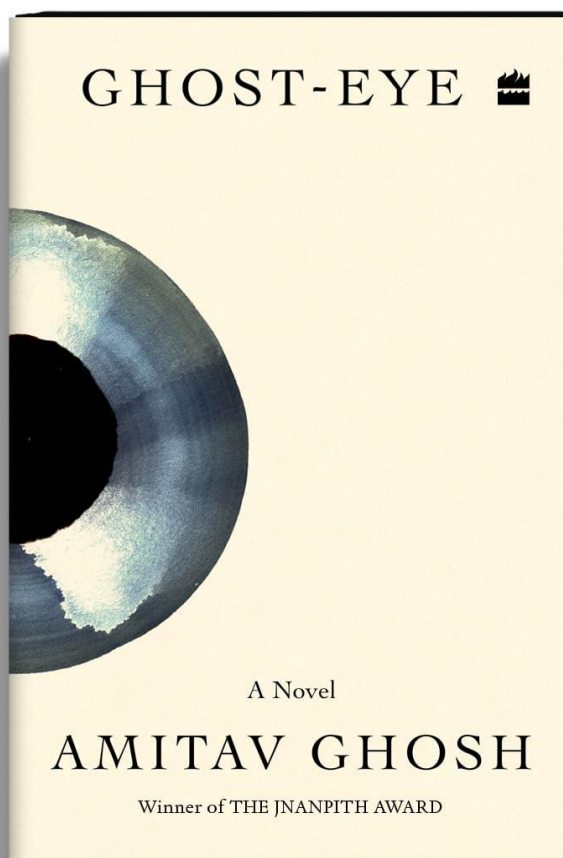


Amitav Ghosh, *Ghost-Eye: A Novel*. Fourth Estate: An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers India, 2026. Pp. 322+1. ISBN: 978-93-7307-343-9.



Amitav Ghosh’s choice of the title for his 2026 novel *Ghost Eye: A Novel* clearly sets forth the experimental theme of the work. Tipu, the titular ghost-eye, has heterochromia and asserts that according to Native American mythology “ghost-eyes can see two worlds: One of them is the ordinary one that everyone can see... the other one—that’s just for us ghost-eyes” (232). Indeed, in the novel, Tipu’s ghost-eyes are granted special powers, to see and detect things that others simply cannot. Ghosh’s work captures the strange, the uncanny and things that lie

beyond normal lives and daily range of experience. The author almost completely does away with the conventional strictures of modern realist fiction in the novel.

Ghosh interweaves multiple strands in the narrative—reincarnation, climate-fiction, environmental activism, impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic situation such as lockdowns and social distancing, and many others—all of these disparate elements are blended together in a non-linear narrative, stylistically using magic realism. In this novel, many characters from Ghosh’s past works make a reappearance – Piya, from *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Dinu or Dinanath Dutta, Tipu and his partner Rafi from *Gun Island* (2019). The Sunderbans also reappear as the backdrop of the novel, with the narrative using the fictional village of Lusibari as one of the locales. These components are deftly combined for the purpose of creating an experimental novel, where novelistic traditions are put aside in the service of the author’s personal commitment to concerns such as representation of the environment and questioning the inherent anthropocentrism perceived in novel-writing. The novel showcases deep underlying connections between categories considered mutually exclusive, such as humans/non-humans, local/global, and others.

The narrative opens in 1969 Kolkata with the three-year-old daughter of a wealthy Marwari industrialist family, Varsha, suddenly demanding *machh-bhaat* (fish and rice) for lunch in a traditional and strictly vegetarian household. The incident triggers extreme shock and trauma for the family, which stems from the idea of eating prohibited food items and is compounded by the child’s strong rejection of her biological mother (she claims that her true family hails from the Sunderbans). It causes the predominantly urban family to realise that their daughter is referring to her previous birth where she was born into impoverishment and penury in the economically backward Sunderbans, far from the luxury that their wealthy industrialist background provides. They seek professional help for their child, presuming her condition as a psychological malady. Through their family physician, Dr. Monty Bose, the Guptas reach out to his psychiatric wife Dr. Shoma Bose, who specialises in “cases of the reincarnation type” (25). Shoma befriends the child Varsha and gets to know the facts of her past life, where she was Isha Mondal, the daughter of Binoy (a snake-charmer) and Jhorna (a woman of the *Adivasi Munda* tribe). The reincarnation element of the plot, therefore, serves to connect the urban, wealthy, upper-class, Marwari family to the remoteness and precarity associated with the liminal Sunderbans zone. Shoma and Monty Bose live in their upscale bungalow Tavoy in Kolkata, which symbolically connects Kolkata to Burma. Dev, originally from Burma, lives with the Bose family, working as their driver. A Buddhist himself, he familiarises Shoma with Buddhist mythology, spirits (the Shindaw Nat) and

religious rituals, which she uses to calm down the spirit of the belligerent old mango tree at Tavoy.

The narrator is Dinu, based in Brooklyn, who has spent considerable amount of time in Tavoy during his growing up years. Tipu and Rafi are presented as climate-activists. They run an NGO in the Sunderbans region, trying to restore the zone to its pristine state. Human encroachment, commercial exploitation and political intervention have altered the nature of the land, modifying its flora and fauna. Connecting with Varsha is central to their project of restoration. In her previous birth, as Isha Mondal, Varsha was a dweller of the Sunderbans. Her knowledge about local crops such as the original varieties of salt-resistant paddy would be immensely useful to make the zone and its people economically self-dependent again. Tipu and Rafi are dedicated to the cause of countering an anticipated climate-catastrophe. They suspect that powerful people across the world are pushing an extreme climate-crisis event to get “rid of the world’s surplus population” (231). Tipu explains that it is almost akin to the idea of a “Great Cleansing” (231).

While depicting the story of the Mondal family (the story of Isha and her parents), Ghosh brings up the issue of external encroachment in fragile ecosystems such as the Sunderbans. Ghosh’ narrative depicts the harsh reality of land-grabbing by external profit-making enterprises, displacement of the indigenous people, and blindly adapting to commercially profitable methods of farming at the cost of traditional sustainable practices. While traditional methods of fishing, farming, agriculture are specifically attuned to the particular bio-cultural zones, modern profit-oriented versions are controlled by capital. These activities, in modern understanding, are reduced to their economic practicalities and are completely separated from the rooted living of man in his environment. The Mondal family’s resistance to external pressures and their consequent suspicious deaths, represent the general picture of bioregional destruction in the postcolonial nation-state. They are the direct victims of rampant land-grabbing in the hinterlands. Tipu and Rafi also represent another face of the environmental struggle, the fraught issue of activism. Their aim is to survive, and “help others in... [the] community survive as well” (232)—a purpose best-served by living a rooted life in a place that they know well. In such a location, “forests and deserts and oceans have always” (232) helped people live in a purposeful connection with their surroundings. This eventually leads them to their planned restoration of the ravaged Sunderbans. For this, Varsha’s intervention is crucial.

In the novel, however, serious issues such as environmental destruction, precarity, and displacement have been sidelined due to an absence of sustained focus. Narrative experimentation receives excessive attention, to the extent that

the author allows these significant issues to remain under-focussed. Larger climatic and environmental concerns have been subsumed to the overarching formal experimentation carried out in the novel. The presence of multiple distracting strands (mentioned above) further confuses the reader. This is not to say that the reincarnation plot of the narrative should have been completely removed. In fact, working towards a better integration of these two primary trajectories—the reincarnation plot and the environmental aspect—could have resulted in a smoother, more immersive reading experience.

Ghosh devotes excess descriptive space to peripheral elements, such as the discussion on the ichthyology of Bengal, including the Latin names for almost all local Bengal fish varieties (for instance, *Labio rohita* instead of *rui/rohu* and *Oreochromis niloticus* instead of *tilapia*), understandably for the benefit of his vast Western readership. One is forced to wonder about the necessity of the detailed passages elaborating the special powers of the reincarnated child Varsha which he calls ‘precognition’ or those describing Tipu’s special powers. To break down the barriers between human and animal species, the narrative pushes boundaries so much that it almost borders on the absurd. By the end of the novel, it is revealed that the narrator Dinu is a reincarnation as well, and was connected to Isha Mondal (Varsha’s previous birth). In his previous birth, he was an otter (*udbiral*), trained by Isha’s father Binoy to catch fish and was exceptionally attached to his daughter Isha. After his death due to attack by a giant fish, the Goddess Manasha Devi promised the grieving Isha that they would be reunited soon. This promise is fulfilled in their current births. They are reincarnated as Dinu and Varsha respectively and are united at the end of the novel.

Constant digressions and a complete lack of sustained, in-depth engagement with the major trajectories of the narrative, hinders the formation of any significant central foci of the novel. Ghosh definitely makes space for the environmental and the climatic in his fiction, in keeping with his discussion in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). However, it may be surmised that when he spoke of the failure of modern fiction to accommodate the environment, it indicated sustained engagement with the issue. The novel’s excessive avant-gardeism hinders an immersive reading experience. The narrative elements are compromised to such an extent that the novel is likely to disappoint the reader.

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