Amitav Ghosh's *Ghost-Eye*: The Natural Supernatural Reinvented

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I

Ghost-Eye appeared close on the heels of *Wild Fictions* (2025). The latter is a collection of essays that, despite its range, retains a singular focus on the health and survival of the planet and humankind. However, what one admires even more about the collection is the power of its non-fiction to articulate complex concerns in compelling but lucid prose, without prolixity or pedantry. Not that the reader does not constantly pick up new words, all drawn from the author's stupendous range of reading. However, these are not fanciful neologisms, but words new to the general reader only in view of our unfamiliarity with those disciplinary terrains. The insidious transgressiveness of a writer and public intellectual lies in effortlessly assimilating old and new knowledge into a prose style that is argumentative and analytical without being academic.

Ghosh's diction in *Ghost-Eye* is so simple and spare as to suggest that he wanted it to be a story rather than a novel. This may not have been an easy decision, given that the vintage Ghosh plot, freely interweaving

times and spaces and people against shifting historical contexts, is as crucial to *Ghost-Eye* as it was to *Gun Island* (2019). Nor does his prose here bear the mythic simplicity of *The Living Mountain* (2022) and *Jungle Nama* (2021). The former reminds one of timeless political allegories such as Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945).

Ghost-Eye is functional in its style, and its objective is to get the story told. There is a tacit evangelism in this sparseness rather than starkness of style. It reminds one of Thomas Hobbes's insistence in *Leviathan* (1651) – that early manifesto of analytical writing – on paring away metaphors and unnecessary rhetorical flourish from philosophical prose (113-115). This plain style of story-telling, which cannot be told apart from the non-fiction of explication, polemics and advocacy, as well as the epistemology it connotes can well be seen as adjuncts of Reason and the scientific method that the European Enlightenment propagated through colonisation.

In the introductory paragraphs above, this essay has sought to identify the formal choices made by Amitav Ghosh in *Ghost-Eye*. Certain informed conjectures have also been offered as to his reasons for privileging the story-element without altogether abandoning the scope of the novel as a form. The endeavour has also been to connect *Ghost-Eye* to the authorial aim informing its immediate predecessor, the non-fictional work titled *Wild Fictions*.

II

Let us now proceed to analyse the apparent anomaly between the form and the ethos espoused in *Ghost-Eye*. Such an analysis helps the reader understand the author's intent. Given the fact that intentionality is a prominent and undisguised feature of Ghosh's recent fictional mode, this critic does not find it amiss to address questions of authorial purpose and intent.

The story of *Ghost-Eye* is an intriguing mix: a cerebral celebration of that which cannot be contained, comprehended or even communicated in terms of rational intellection. At the core of that story prevails the enduringness of relationships, human to human, human to nonhuman, past to present, even soul to soul. The central idea propelling the plot challenges us to acculturate ourselves to an alternative intellectual and cultural history of the world, one that we, as sceptical English-educated scions of modernity, knew all along the existence of but were afraid of acknowledging, lest our membership of the dominant league of Enlightenment-driven intellectual enquiry is imperilled by such transgressions. Readers steeped in vernacular culture might initially find the willing suspension of disbelief less of a challenge. Yet their position, as refracted through the traditional homely bahu Dipika Gupta's traumatic struggle to make sense of the unfolding crisis "of the reincarnation type" (Ghosh, *Ghost-Eye*, 5-6, 25), is no less complex and fraught. One of the requirements of stories, especially stories that set themselves up at the intersection of the known and the unknown, i.e. mysteries, crimes, horror, supernatural, or nonsense, is that the surprise, the shock, and the recognition are not exclusive to a particular set of readers defined by language, race or historical moment. The cultural specificity of the shock element would derail what is ultimately the primal universality of the story as a form. However, Ghosh is careful not to sentimentalise this rebellion of un-reason. He does not embrace the raw affect of creative expression as comfortably as he affirms the centrality of the affect in human experience. This makes for a bewildering duality in Ghosh's fiction. His language remains determinedly cerebral, as though he is mistrustful of whether he will be taken seriously if he writes with affect, rather than *of* affect.

Interestingly, two particular areas of the affect, namely, love and sexuality, do not have a very palpable presence in his style, notwithstanding the impish mention of the adolescent Dinu's discovery of a copy of *The Kama Sutra* at her aunt and uncle's house

(Ghosh, *Ghost-Eye*, 36). In this we might find a similarity with Satyajit Ray's short stories and the Feluda series. This could be because of their shared intentionality when it comes to the envisioned reader. Clearly, like Satyajit Ray's detective fiction and short stories of the uncanny as well as of everyday life in Calcutta, Ghosh's recent fiction, too, is informed by a conscious choice of the general reader across all age groups, instead of adults who come to novels to experience the intimacy of the personal and the inter-personal. Ghosh's style is thus a conscious fit for his activist approach to writing. It is as though he has himself been addressing his own indictment of "the art and literature of our time" for being "drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight" (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 15).

In the preceding paragraphs, we have noted how the tension between the matter of the story and the kind of storytelling that *Ghost-Eye* brings together is not accidental. The comparison with Satyajit Ray was meant to help the reader see how the shared projection of a general reader for stories that rely on phenomena of primal and hence potentially universal appeal, overshadows the choice of language and style. Implicitly then, this essay is positing a shared cultural lineage between Ghosh and twentieth-century Bengali writers more than with English, European or western writers. Further, by showing an overlap of target readership and restrained, reasoned style of storytelling in Ray and Ghosh, perhaps consciously imbibed and deployed by the latter, this essay is locating Ghosh in the legacy of the Bengal Renaissance and its absorption of elements from the European Enlightenment. In other words, this essay makes a case for reading Ghosh as a writer of fiction and non-fiction in English who can draw upon his moorings in Bengali culture quite strongly when he so chooses. That a Bengali writer should have Bengali cultural moorings is by no means a tautological presumption in today's cosmopolitan literary milieu and it is far from obvious in the case of an intellectual like Amitav Ghosh who prides himself on his cultural non-insularity.

III

The essay now goes on to discuss at length aspects of the uncanny in *Ghost-Eye* and argues that the uncanny and the supernatural are here fundamentally Ghosh's strategies for attributing agency back to nature. This intention is presaged in *The Great Derangement*. This section also identifies *Ghost-Eye* as a unique treatment of the urban, metropolitan uncanny. While it does resemble certain contemporary cultural experiments with the uncanny in Bengali cinema, its politics of representation is distinct. The discussion also proffers certain sociological reasons why the post-colonial uncanny becomes an experimental space for a range of modern Bengali writers. This section makes certain contentions as to why the Christian supernatural does not admit of such a humorous treatment and instead, in many mainstream Hollywood films, takes a decidedly Manichean direction. Further, the kind of clash of world-views that engendered the emergence of the literary uncanny in colonial India is loosely compared with similar tectonic collisions informing the development of Gothic fiction in England and magical realism in South America. The historiography inflecting such comparativism is that different cultures negotiate conflicting epistemologies and ontologies – native and foreign, mythic and rationalist, supernatural and naturalist, through similar but not identical cultural expressions along their respective historical trajectories. Thus, while this essay locates Ghosh's *Ghost-Eye* at the intersection of the European Enlightenment and modern Bengal's literary tradition emerging out of the colonial encounter, it also seeks to connect this tradition to other cultural upheavals and their literary fruits elsewhere in the world. In this fashion, fittingly, the essay places Ghosh back in the larger global historical framework that he himself always keeps in view.

Ghost-Eye does present interludes of immersive, sensuous, writing, e.g., the "tenderness" in the description of a Calcutta childhood in the

seventies (Ghosh, *Ghost-Eye*, 15-17; 33-36). On the whole, the narrative is far less forced than in *Gun Island*. The fact that the marvellous and the uncanny should make the familiar Kolkata/Calcutta its home is where the plot of *Ghost-Eye* becomes most arresting. Implicitly, then, the setting follows the very definition of the Freudian uncanny, the familiar turned unfamiliar, the home that feels estranged while continuing to inhabit the known. Ghosh's Kolkata in this novel and Tipu who coins the term, are "ghost-eyes" (232-233), those who live simultaneously in two worlds. The popular Anik Dutta film *Bhooter Bhobiswat* (2012) may also come to mind in this connection. Yet what Dutta does in his story is to naturalise ghosts into familiar people rather than the other way round.

Ghosh's story is far away from mainstream Hollywood horror films like *The Exorcist* (1973) or *The Omen* (1976), both of which feature the ghost making its home, marvellously, sinisterly, diabolically, in a little child, and in the process striking a very decisive blow at the Romantic assumption that the child is always the darling of the divine. There is a further reason why such a story of remembered past lives that ultimately steer and shape the future as well as the present would be difficult to situate within a Christian schema. The uncanny and the miraculous do not sit together, thanks to Christianity's clear demarcation between theurgy and necromancy, magic and religion, at the turning point from Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Christopher Marlowe's villainisation of *Doctor Faustus* (c.1594) is a case in point. Yet the fact that such beliefs did not disappear overnight is evident from the seventeenth-century Welsh poet Henry Vaughan's poem "Retreat", which was published in 1646. "Retreat" is often seen as anticipating Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1802-4). The nostalgic Vaughan calls his earthly life his "second race" and "when his dust falls to the urn", he yearns "to return" to his past life in heaven (Burrow 216). Wordsworth too ponders, "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting" (line 58).

Ghost-Eye might be said to have its antecedents in Ray's *Sonar Kella* (1971), built around a very interesting dynamic of cooperation rather than conflict between modern, secular Western logic-driven epistemology and the vestigial, residual or resurgent epistemologies of the pre-modern and the pre-colonial, relying on the extrasensory, the intuitive, the subconscious and the non-rational. Ultimately the worlds are made to converge into a utopian vision of new possibilities. If *The Gun Island* envisions a utopia founded upon international and interracial fraternity, then *Ghost-Eye* turns the uncanny into an unexpected love story with a fairy tale ending (322).

This brings us back to the mode of telling and its careful insistence on simplicity and the avoidance of sentimentality. One wonders if the reason for both could be the author's motivation to find a way of conveying the story without being diverted by the inevitable nuances and complexities of the novel form. The authorial urgency to reimagine the world where all the limits of possibility scrupulously rejected by the advances in the sciences are tested, challenged and reaffirmed is hard to miss. Beyond that strain of intentionality, there is also a healing, futurist vision of life where the human and the nonhuman, the living and the deceased, the known and the unknown, indeed the heart, the mind and the soul can recover from the Cartesian split that had set them at odds in sixteenth-century Europe.

Needless to say, the divorce between these spheres and strata of existence and knowledge has never been decisive in the case of Bengal and India. The continued and keen interest in these parallel universes and alternative realities evident in Bengali literature and letters testifies as much. Besides Rabindranath's interest in the occult (Aadrit Banerjee), we know of Bibhutibhushan's exploration of ecological and supernatural terrains in his long and short fiction. Practically every writer in Bengali literature has at least one or two uncanny or supernatural tales to his credit. Satyajit Ray straddled science fiction, detective fiction, and the supernatural in his fictional permutations. Felu-

da is the diminutive informal address, a unique Bengali convention, and in this case redolent with the humorous self-deprecation around failure and rejection so quintessential to Bengali laughter. *Phelā* in Bengali merges with "failing" in English. When Felu-da exclaims triumphantly in *Sonar Kella*, "āchhē achhē āmāder telepathy-r jor āchhē!" (Telepathy works, it really works!"), it is Pradosh Mitter embracing his Bengali identity through a jubilant affirmation of these interstitial epistemologies. This is perhaps why Ghosh pins his hopes on the city of his childhood and the refreshingly hybrid community of the imagination Bengali modernity created through its assimilation of the European Renaissance within intersecting strands of a living indigenous cultural lineage.

It is intriguing in this context to speculate upon the emergence of the supernatural or the uncanny as forms of writing. The Gothic in European literature picked up the threads of the Middle Ages laid to rest under the weight of the Enlightenment. The Gothic strands flourished on both sides of the Atlantic at the next transition, i.e., the crisis of modernity. Bengal's tryst with the uncanny and the supernatural may be located in the similar tectonic upheaval of a newly awakened cultural consciousness remembering its precolonial past and heritage while negotiating the catalytic force of colonial modernity. The past, inevitably, is forced to slide underneath the forced reality of the present to give birth to a new liminality born of repression, suppression and forgetting. The literary crop of this collision is as wide-ranging as nonsense literature, ghost stories, detective fiction, historical novels and science fiction. Bengal's excavations in the uncanny, in particular, may well be compared in their aetiology to magical realism in South American literature, no doubt produced through similar seismic collisions between indigenous belief systems and Spanish Catholicism. It is hardly to be expected that these rich cultural entanglements will have been lost on the prodigiously well-read storytelling mind of Amitav Ghosh. Having said that, Ghosh's style is too purposive to be magical realist. He writes with clarity and without the excess, the eccentricity and the sensuous expansiveness that a Marquez novel

engulfs us with. In Ghosh's *Ghost-Eye*, everything, even mystery and menace have their due place and tends not to stray from the omniscient storyteller's scheme of things. It is like Bach's "well-tempered Klavier", as it were.

Ghosh's *Ghost-Eye* then, envisions a collusion rather than a clash of the neo-classical and the neo-Romantic worldviews and aesthetics, without conforming to either wholesale. Thus, the nature that we encounter in this novel is neither entirely benign nor malicious. Its ways, its sympathies, its reasonings seem mysterious and unintelligible only because humans have unlearned nature's system of communication and, consequently, lost their ability to read her language. Here Ghosh's perception of nature as an unforgiving goddess to those who wilfully harm her circle of life has elements alike from the Greek Furies, the Judaic Yahweh of retribution, the Hindu deity Manasa, whom *Ghost-Eye* re-invokes from *The Gun Island*, and the Adivasi *Marang Buru*, supreme deity of the mountain. Her workings are at once atavistic and providential. Like the presiding household deity Hestia (goddess of the hearth) and her etymological twin, *Ishtadebi*, Manasa must be appeased. Her benevolence may not be trifled with or taken for granted. In her scheme of justice, snakes, crows, trees, fish and humans command the same respect as vital beings, unlike in the hierarchy written into the Biblical Genesis. Any attempt to disrupt that fine balance makes her creatures move the elements into a preternatural vortex of reactions. Ghosh's rationale for setting up this collusion is of course the catastrophic nature of the collision he and we are living through, between human-centred civilisation and an increasingly unpredictable, uncontrollable, science-defying, seemingly deranged physical world. While in his non-fiction Ghosh relentlessly records the collision, his recent fiction has been his vehicle and vessel for conjuring a better, truly braver new world into existence.

Both *The Gun Island* and *Ghost-Eye* are suffused with optimism that seems to be neo-Renaissance in spirit and it is interesting to note how

Ghosh balances the apocalyptic, censorious chord of his recent non-fiction, *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021; 242-243) and *Wild Fictions* (2025), with imaginative works where the fatigued reader in the age of late capitalism is confronted with a variety that is almost fantastical. Not only does he manage to interweave unknown stories of distant unconnected places and people that only a world historian would be privy to, but also mingles literary styles and disciplines of knowledge into a hybrid form that in many ways recalls the undiscriminating equity of Greek metempsychosis and Indian reincarnation. It is crucial to remember that for Ghosh, reincarnation is the levelling concept that allows the universe to sustain a lateral equity rather than a top-down repressive control. That is where the story of Isha Mondal reborn as Varsha Gupta meets the deeply filial bond between Dinu and Tipu, or between Shoma and Dev, despite the fact they are not blood relations. This social plane of class-neutral confluence is as pivotal to environmental justice as Ghosh conceives of it, as is the realignment of the human and the nonhuman.

Many would see the novel's resolution as uneasy truce between two distinct and not easily reconcilable worldviews. That so many Bengalis alternate between practising the sciences professionally and holding on to their rituals of piety at home is testimony to science and religion not having made peace altogether. Among other works, Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Putul Nācher Itikathā* (1935; The Puppet's Tale), Satyajit Ray's *Ganashatru* (1990; Enemy of the People) address this friction in interestingly divergent ways.

In *Ghost-Eye* the paradox is the complicity of Western research methodology in overturning its own premises. Dinu's methodology is textual and archival but the nature of the archive he studies leads him to a substantiation of empirical phenomena that defy conventional scientism. He accomplishes this mission on the authority of documented research expertise shared between Western and Indian academic researchers, in this case Shoma and Catherine Booth, later

Dinu and Tipu, just as it was Cinta and Dinu in *The Gun Island*. So, the trust in rigorous research leading to matching documented evidence with empirical data remains sacrosanct. The impression the discerning reader is left with is that Ghosh does not wish to abandon Western research methodology and Enlightenment practices altogether. He wants methods from various knowledge systems to collaborate in reorienting and reintegrating the world back to forgotten ways of sustainable life. Ghosh's professed reservations about the term reincarnation may be understood as a corollary of his continued allegiance to his academic training and the rigorous research that still informs his writing. This too is not about leaving a part of oneself behind; rather it is about applying it, celebrating it in different intellectual directions. This makes for the Derridean hauntology (10, 45-46) informing Ghosh's relationship with earlier novels of his own. *Ghost-Eye* invokes not just *The Hungry Tide* (2004) but also *The Glass Palace* (2000; e.g.63-64). We often teach creative work as research in methodology classes. Ghosh's fiction is a prime example of that interracial, inter-cultural marriage of reason and imagination. If one were to look for an analogy, it is like the Raja in Rabindranath's *Raktakarabi* (1924; *The Red Oleanders*) breaking out of his own fortress and joining the march to dethrone himself. It is the European Enlightenment's project of self-rectification.

It also marks what is palpably a more involved, engaged return to his Bengali roots. Now the question may arise whether Ghosh's project and mission, the wilding of fiction and the simultaneous decolonising of intellectual practice may be aligned with the nationalist project of Indian Knowledge Systems that all educational institutions across the country are promoting, adopting, implementing, and propagating. The coincidence points towards an interesting convergence of variant objectives. The Indian Knowledge Systems project is decolonial and revivalist within a largely monocultural nationalist framework. Ghosh is the champion for the essentially secular, global and pagan core within every faith, continent and culture. Both Cinta and Shoma variously remind Dinu how the belief in past lives is native to Catholicism too,

not just among Hindus, but Buddhists and Jains. Polish auteur Krzysztof Kieslowski's films, *La Double Vie de Veronique* (1991) and *Three Colours: Red* (1994) come to mind. Ghosh's vision is of making the world aware of India and Asia as continued repositories of pagan knowledge where the human-nonhuman inter-existence is organic and sacred rather than marked by political and material dominance. His mission is not to privilege India's claim on indigeneity over other cultures. This is where Ghosh seems to have aligned himself with Rabindranath Tagore.

What possibly motivates Amitav Ghosh to continue to write fiction is that it still wields enormous power and influence on the human mind, even amidst the perceived crisis in reading today. As Shakespeare's older contemporary, Sir Philip Sidney argued in his *Apology for Poetry* (published 1595), fiction is a powerful initiator into a life of the mind, because it is the canniest fusion of philosophical abstractions and historical facts. Any reader gravitating to *The Great Derangement* and *Wild Fictions* or *Uncanny and Improbable Events* after *Ghost-Eye* should thank the enduring appeal of the story as an art-form. On final analysis, *Ghost-Eye* is insidious when it tries least. Indeed, the author of this essay realised this when she found herself, shortly after finishing reading, insisting on using locally pressed mustard oil as the cooking medium.

In the concluding section above, this critic has attempted to address the fundamental aspiration that informs the collusion of epistemologies – European and Indian – upheld and advocated in *Ghost-Eye*. It is argued that Ghosh seeks to reconcile the European methodology of rigorous research with more indigenous and syncretic methods in *The Gun Island* and *Ghost-Eye* because he believes that planetary survival and a more eco-centric global culture demand this collaboration. This fusion, then, is a sign that the author is aware of his intellectual conflictedness, although he chooses to instrumentalise this tension in the interest of promoting and propagating a more decolonial and inclusive intellectual culture globally. Here, the Derridean hauntological framework is drawn

upon to suggest that the preoccupation with past and past lives in *Ghost-Eye* is perhaps the trope through which Ghosh makes a tacit acknowledgement of the spectral presence of his earlier novels underneath these latest ones. Towards the end of this section, the critic digresses a little to discuss the divergence between the nationalist framework within which Indian Knowledge Systems are being implemented as a means of intellectual decolonisation and the more planetary moorings of Ghosh's decoloniality and literary politics. Finally, the essay returns to the question of Ghosh's commitment to fiction as a pathway to decolonisation and concludes on an auto-ethnographic note about the experiential impact of the book on the author of this essay.

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