

Who Gets to Remember Gendered Testimony, Clinical Evidence, and Ecological Knowledge in Amitav Ghosh's Ghost-Eye

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's *Ghost-Eye* traces the passage of memory from a child's unsettling testimony to a clinical file, from practical knowledge of fish to the ecological history of the Sundarbans, and finally into a public narrative. This article reads that passage through feminist epistemology, drawing on Miranda Fricker's account of testimonial injustice and Donna Haraway's argument that knowledge is situated. It argues that the novel neither simply opposes science to belief nor presents the recovery of marginalised knowledge as a completed act of justice. Varsha's memories become legible through Shoma Bose's clinical inquiry; Husna's culinary and ecological expertise helps make that inquiry possible; and Isha's and Jhorna's knowledge is recovered against a history of dispossession and gendered violence. Yet the ability to record, interpret, and circulate these forms of knowledge remains unevenly distributed. Shoma's professional authority preserves evidence but also shapes its terms, while Dinu's reconstruction gives the archive a public afterlife without escaping the limits of narration. Reading these relations together shows how *Ghost-Eye* links credibility to gender, age, class, labour, community, and institutional access. The novel's concern is not only whether a memory survives, but who is recognised as a knower and whether that recognition can affect ecological and political decisions.

Keywords: Keywords: Amitav Ghosh; *Ghost-Eye*; feminist epistemology; testimonial injustice; clinical evidence; ecological knowledge; memory

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *Ghost-Eye* begins with a domestic disturbance that opens onto a much longer history. In 1969, three-year-old Varsha Gupta, raised in a strictly vegetarian Calcutta household, asks for fish and insists that the mother she remembers is not the woman who has raised her. She names Jhorna as her other mother and describes a home beside a river. Her family first treats these statements as a threat to domestic order. The case eventually brings her to Shoma Bose, whose clinical inquiry turns a private crisis into a record. More than fifty years later, that record draws Dinu, Shoma's nephew, into a search connecting Varsha's memories to the Sundarbans and to a contemporary environmental struggle (Ghosh 4–8, 73, 253).

The movement from speech to file to public action is central to the novel. Varsha's claim does not become intelligible through one kind of evidence alone. Her words, bodily marks, familiarity with fish, the knowledge held by people who live near the delta, and the case file all contribute to the reconstruction. Their authority, however, is not equal. Some forms of knowledge are easier to record and circulate; others are initially treated as domestic skill, hearsay, or superstition. The question is therefore not simply whether the past can be recovered. It is how a claim comes to count as knowledge, and who has the authority to interpret it.

Gender shapes this process, though it does not explain every difference in credibility. Varsha is a very young girl whose account unsettles her family's religious and domestic expectations. Shoma's professional standing gives her the means to take the child seriously, but she also determines what will be documented and tested. Husna, a Bengali Muslim woman displaced from her home and employed as a cook, contributes knowledge of fish developed through work and experience. Jhorna, an Adivasi woman, possesses ecological knowledge bound to livelihood, kinship, and

the defence of land. Their positions differ in class, education, social standing, and access to institutions. A feminist reading must keep those differences in view rather than treating women as a single, undifferentiated group.

This article asks how Ghost-Eye distributes credibility among women who speak from different social positions; how clinical documentation preserves Varsha's experience while also turning it into a professional record; and what happens when local and embodied knowledge enters an archive or an environmental campaign. I argue that Ghosh presents knowledge as collaborative but unequally authorised. The novel depends on forms of understanding that exceed formal expertise, yet these forms often acquire public force only after a clinician records them or a narrator assembles them into a story. Its account of memory thus includes a continuing problem of mediation.

The article does not attempt to establish reincarnation as a factual or scientific proposition. It examines the literary organisation of belief, evidence, and testimony. The focus is on how characters respond to claims, what they accept as evidence, and how knowledge moves from private experience into public circulation.

Existing Criticism and the Research Gap

Published criticism on Ghost-Eye remains a developing field. Ananya Dutta Gupta's "Amitav Ghosh's Ghost-Eye: The Natural Supernatural Reinvented" situates the novel at the intersection of rational inquiry and the supernatural. Her discussion considers the uncanny, Bengali cultural traditions, the novel's relationship to Enlightenment reason, and Ghosh's ecological and decolonial commitments (Dutta Gupta 118–33). This account is useful for understanding the novel's refusal to separate modern research from other intellectual traditions, although the distribution of credibility between particular speakers is not its main concern.

Lisa John Mundackal's "The Uncanny Nexus: Food, Cooking and Memory in Amitav Ghosh's Ghost-Eye" offers a close account of culinary practice as a medium of sensory and embodied memory. She discusses Varsha's response to fish and gives particular attention to Husna's knowledge of seasonal varieties and cooking. Husna helps Shoma design a test that depends on recognising local species and their uses. Mundackal reads these scenes through food studies, memory studies, ecocriticism, and posthumanist thought. The present article builds on that account but asks a different question: how does practical knowledge become evidence, and how is credit distributed between the person who supplies the knowledge and the professional who records it? (Mundackal).

Sahabuddin Ahamed and Praveen Toppo use the concept of "trans-species hauntology" to read the novel's entanglement of memory, human and nonhuman life, and ecological violence. Their analysis follows the Mondal family's dispossession, the uneven authority of scientific and local knowledge, and the movement from private recollection towards collective environmental action. They also emphasise that the novel's different forms of evidence remain partial rather than resolving into a single explanation (Ahamed and Toppo 187–95, 201–03). The present study shares their concern with ecological memory but shifts the emphasis to the gendered conditions under which knowledge is heard, documented, and made politically useful.

Kaushik Das Gupta's review in *The Indian Express* praises the novel's treatment of memory and ecology while questioning the brevity with which it handles some of the historical events in its background. A review is not a substitute for peer-reviewed criticism, but it indicates that the relation between narrative design and historical understanding has already attracted attention (Das Gupta). Taken together, the available studies show that memory, sensory experience, ecological relations, and the supernatural have not been ignored. The narrower gap addressed here concerns the unequal chain through which knowledge passes: Varsha's testimony, Shoma's case-making, Husna's practical expertise, Jhorna's ecological knowledge, and Dinu's later reconstruction. The claim is provisional and limited to the criticism located for this study; it is not a claim that no other relevant work exists.

2. Framework and Method

Miranda Fricker's account of testimonial injustice provides a starting point for examining credibility. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice leads a hearer to assign a speaker less credibility than the speaker deserves (Fricker 17–29). That concept should not be applied mechanically to every moment of scepticism in Ghost-Eye. Varsha's age and the unusual content of her claim shape the adults' response, as do the family's religious expectations and concern for its reputation. Gender matters because Varsha's words challenge what is expected of a daughter, while the knowledge held by other women is associated with kinds of labour or community identity that carry little institutional prestige. The relevant question is how these social relations shape who is heard, and on what terms.

Donna Haraway's account of situated knowledges helps explain why the novel does not present expertise as a view from nowhere. Knowledge emerges from particular bodies, practices, places, and relations (Haraway 575–99). Husna's knowledge of fish comes from handling, preparing, tasting, and observing them in their environments. Shoma's clinical inquiry has different strengths: it can organise observations, compare details, and preserve a record. These practices are not interchangeable, but neither can the test proceed adequately without both. Their relationship makes visible the difference between possessing knowledge and having the authority to define how it will be used.

The method is close reading, with attention to narrative sequence, point of view, and the movement of evidence between speakers and records. The analysis follows four connected stages: Varsha's initial testimony; Shoma's clinical case-making; the knowledge supplied by Husna, Jhorna, and Isha; and Dinu's later reconstruction. It asks what is written down, what is learned through practice or oral transmission, and who can make an account circulate. The supernatural premise is treated as part of the novel's narrative structure, not as proof that one system of knowledge should replace another.

Varsha's Testimony and the Domestic Order

Varsha's first account is not received as testimony. It is received as a breach of household order. Her insistence that Jhorna is her real mother and that she remembers a life beside a river challenges the family's authority to define her identity. The adults hear an impossible claim, but they also hear a child publicly rejecting her present mother. Dipika's distress and the family's fear of gossip turn the episode into a matter of discipline and reputation. The suspicion that a member of the household staff may have fed Varsha fish reveals another dimension of the hierarchy: before the child's words are examined, the family imagines a servant's disobedience as a plausible explanation (Ghosh 4–8).

The family translates Varsha's statements into familiar categories: misbehaviour, dietary contamination, and a possible failure by domestic staff to follow household rules. These explanations make the disturbance manageable, but they also prevent the claim from being considered on its own terms. The adults assume that a child cannot know a place she has never visited and that her present family must be the sole source of her identity. Her words are judged against those assumptions before they are investigated.

Gender is part of the conflict, although it is not its only cause. Varsha's declaration unsettles the moral authority attached to motherhood and the expected obedience of a daughter. Her mother, in turn, is placed in the position of defending the household's order before its staff. The novel does not make Dipika a simple antagonist: her response is shaped by shock as well as by the social costs of a family crisis. The scene instead shows how women can occupy different positions within the same structure of authority. A mother is expected to maintain order; a daughter whose words disturb that order is treated as a problem to be contained.

The decision to seek professional help changes Varsha's status. Monty Bose recommends Shoma, whose experience with children reporting memories of previous lives allows her to consider the account as a case for investigation. Varsha can now be heard as more than a disobedient child. Yet the shift also changes the form of her speech. Her experience becomes something to be observed, classified, and tested. The procedure that gives her account a hearing also places an adult professional between the child and the wider world.

Shoma's Case File: Preservation and Authority

Shoma complicates any account in which professional expertise simply silences marginal knowledge. Her training and access to clinical methods enable her to question the family's first response. She observes Varsha's speech and behaviour, considers the marks on her body, and develops a food-based test. The phrase "case of the reincarnation type" places the event within a recognised category, while the file later known as Case J allows the investigation to outlast the original encounter (Ghosh 73).

The case file is double-edged. It preserves a voice that might otherwise disappear and creates a durable record that Dinu can revisit decades later. Without Shoma's notes, photographs, and correspondence, his reconstruction would have much less to work with. At the same time, the file is not a neutral container. Varsha speaks, but Shoma decides what to record, which details to test, and how to organise observations so that other people can assess them. Her interpretation becomes part of the evidence's authority.

Shoma's position also unsettles a simple opposition between women's experience and institutional power. She is not outside professional authority; she possesses it. She also recognises the limits of her knowledge and seeks Husna's help with fish, their varieties, and their seasonal availability. This willingness to learn matters. The inquiry becomes

more credible because Shoma acknowledges that her own expertise is incomplete. Nevertheless, she frames the research question and maintains the written record. Husna's knowledge enters the investigation through a structure controlled by someone else.

The file begins as a private document. The Gupta family wants discretion, and that request limits the public reach of the evidence. Privacy may be necessary when a child and an extraordinary claim are involved, but secrecy has consequences for what can later be known. The record survives because Shoma keeps it and Dinu can access it after her death. Documentation gives knowledge continuity; it does not by itself redistribute the authority to interpret the life being documented.

Husna and the Labour Behind Evidence

Husna's contribution is one of the clearest examples of knowledge that is indispensable without being formally central. A Bengali Muslim woman displaced from her home and employed as Shoma's cook, she has practical knowledge of fish developed through everyday work and experience of the delta. Shoma cannot design a meaningful test simply by consulting scientific references. She needs to know which species are locally familiar, how their availability changes with the seasons, and how their taste and texture differ according to preparation. Husna supplies distinctions that Shoma had not previously needed to make (Mundackal).

The food-based test is therefore not a pure encounter between scientific reason and a mysterious child. Its design relies on knowledge that has been built through handling ingredients, shopping, cooking, and feeding people. Husna's expertise includes species recognition and seasonality, but it also includes the judgement needed to choose and prepare food safely. The test becomes more informative because Shoma allows this practical knowledge to shape the procedure.

The distribution of epistemic labour is unequal. Shoma's learning becomes a professional discovery; Husna's knowledge is first encountered through her employment as a cook. Shoma controls the research question and the written record, while Husna provides the situated understanding without which the test would be poorly designed. The labour that makes the evidence reliable is shared, but the authority to present that evidence is not shared to the same degree.

Husna should not be reduced to an anonymous source of information. The novel gives her a distinct presence, including her own explanations and memories of displacement and loss. Her knowledge is not intuition waiting for scientific approval. It is a practical form of expertise, tested through repetition, observation, and social transmission. Shoma's method improves when she learns from Husna; the narrative does not require Husna to become a scientist for her knowledge to count. The question is why one form of knowing is more readily entered into an official record than another.

Mundackal has already examined the mnemonic force of cooking and taste in detail. The present argument concerns the labour that allows sensory knowledge to become evidence. Husna does more than provide food that may trigger Varsha's memory. Her choices help determine what the test can establish and what its outcomes mean. She is involved in the making of evidence, even though she is not the person who formally authors the case.

Jhorna and Isha: Ecological Knowledge under Violence

The earlier life attributed to Isha extends the question beyond the clinic. Her knowledge of fishing, cooking, and the Sundarbans belongs to a household and community rather than to a formal institution. Through Isha and her mother Jhorna, ecological knowledge is tied to livelihood, kinship, land, and local practice. Their freshwater pond is not simply scenery or a symbol of nature. It sustains the family and carries practical, social, and spiritual meanings. The proposal to convert it for prawn aquaculture threatens that network of relations.

The violence against the Mondal family is gendered and material. Benoy is removed from the community after being arrested; Jhorna is killed, and Isha is subjected to violence before she dies. Ahamed and Toppo trace this history to the unequal force of development interests, political patronage, and institutions that fail to protect the family (187–200). In the novel's cosmological frame, the cobra associated with Manasa Devi intervenes, but the result is not an uncomplicated rescue. Isha dies. The supernatural event gives the violence a moral and spiritual dimension without undoing its consequences.

The narrative returns Isha's knowledge to the present through Varsha's body, appetite, and remembered skills. In doing so, it resists the idea that knowledge vanishes simply because official archives have not preserved it. Yet Isha's testimony reaches contemporary readers through a chain she cannot control: the memories attributed to Varsha, Shoma's observations, the surviving case file, and Dinu's account. Jhorna's knowledge is even less securely documented as a record in its own right. The plot offers a literary return, but that return is not equivalent to recognition at the moment when the women needed their knowledge to protect their lives and land.

The failure is not that the Mondals misunderstand their environment. Their local knowledge carries little weight in decisions made by people with greater access to money, state power, and development networks. The community that understands the pond's relations to livelihood and ecology cannot determine its future. Epistemic and material injustice meet here: the devaluation of local knowledge accompanies the conversion of a living environment into a resource for profit.

The novel does not ask readers to discard scientific inquiry or assume that local knowledge is always complete. Shoma's records help make the later reconstruction possible, and environmental activism requires organisation, legal work, communication, and collective effort. The problem is that ecological expertise has little influence when those who possess it cannot affect the decisions that determine their future. Knowledge must be heard before damage becomes irreversible, not merely recovered after dispossession.

Dinu's Narrative and Varsha's Refusal

When Shoma's papers pass to Dinu, the archive enters a second stage of mediation. Dinu, an antiquarian accustomed to assembling traces of the past, retrieves the file and photographs and reconstructs Varsha's history. His habits make him a plausible custodian of the record, but an account written about Varsha cannot guarantee that she will recognise herself in it. When Dinu presents his reconstruction, she rejects it and asks for a more direct test: she wants to taste the fish and see whether her body remembers (Ghosh 259). Her refusal challenges both his interpretation and the assumption that the written archive should settle the question.

The meal that follows changes the method. Varsha handles the tools and ingredients and begins to cook with a fluency that Dinu cannot explain in advance. Recognition emerges through gesture and practice, not through a statement alone. The scene makes bodily knowledge available to the reader while resisting the idea that it can be fully translated into documentary proof (Ghosh 293–96; Mundackal). Varsha is no longer merely the object of research; her actions force Dinu to reconsider what counts as evidence.

The shift in authority is real but incomplete. Readers witness Varsha's recognition through Dinu's narration. His voice remains the channel through which her embodied experience reaches the audience. The novel allows her to reject his account, yet it does not remove her experience from the narrative structure he controls. Rather than offering a complete escape from mediation, the scene reveals what a responsible act of interpretation must acknowledge: a record may preserve knowledge without exhausting its meaning.

The same tension appears in the public exhibition and the ecological campaign. The case file and photographs help bring the Sundarbans before audiences far from the place, but records can detach people from the contexts that make their knowledge intelligible. Public visibility may lead to recognition, or it may turn a local history into a compelling story consumed by outsiders. Dinu's movement from detached research towards involvement in the environmental campaign suggests that an archive becomes ethically consequential when it changes what people are prepared to do.

Ahamed and Toppo argue that the novel's different forms of evidence remain partial rather than merging into a single explanation (192–203). A feminist account adds that these forms are also tied to unequal social roles. The clinician writes, the cook teaches, the Adivasi woman's history returns through another body, and the antiquarian narrates. These roles shape not only what is known but who can make that knowledge durable, interpret it in public, and connect it to action.

Ecological Knowledge and the Limits of Recognition

The novel's environmental concerns make these distinctions more than questions of narrative technique. Varsha's memory of fish connects a child in a wealthy Calcutta household to a riverine life in the Sundarbans. Husna's knowledge matters because fish species and seasons are not interchangeable details. Jhorna's and Isha's knowledge matters because converting land and water for profit destroys the conditions in which local expertise has developed.

When people who understand an environment are excluded from decisions about it, the loss is both epistemic and material.

Haraway's account of situated knowledge helps avoid a false choice between universal science and romanticised local wisdom. Knowledge in *Ghost-Eye* is relational: Shoma's inquiry improves through Husna's instruction; Varsha's memories emerge through food and skilled practice; and Dinu's reconstruction depends on documents, photographs, conversations, and embodied recognition. No character possesses the full account from the outset. Yet the relations remain unequal. The capacity to publish, classify, preserve, and circulate information is not distributed evenly.

Remembering, then, is necessary but insufficient for justice. Isha's knowledge survives in the novel's spiritual and narrative structure, but it cannot save her life. Varsha's later resources and public significance do not undo what happened to Isha and Jhorna. Environmental action becomes necessary because recovered knowledge needs a route into decisions about land, water, and development. The novel places the burden not on memory alone but on the collective structures through which memory can influence public choices.

The critique of authority is therefore more complex than a rejection of professional expertise. The case file and clinical method preserve evidence; the later narrative and public exhibition connect histories that would otherwise remain separate. Their value depends on acknowledging the people and practices on which they rely. The question is whether the institutions that make knowledge legible can also recognise those whose work and experience they have not traditionally treated as authoritative.

3. Conclusion

Ghost-Eye asks readers to take seriously forms of knowledge often dismissed as implausible, domestic, local, or poorly documented. Varsha's testimony, Shoma's inquiry, Husna's knowledge of fish, and Jhorna's and Isha's ecological experience show that memory can be spoken, recorded, tasted, practised, and transmitted. No single method of verification accounts for everything the novel brings together.

The route from memory to public recognition nevertheless remains uneven. Varsha's speech becomes a clinical case; Husna's expertise enters a test devised and recorded by Shoma; Isha's knowledge returns through Varsha's body and the archive; and Dinu's narration shapes what later readers can know. Shoma's authority preserves a record, but it also determines the terms under which other people's knowledge is admitted. Husna and Jhorna reveal the cost of this arrangement: knowledge can be precise and indispensable while the people who hold it remain vulnerable to displacement and violence.

The novel's contribution to debates about memory and ecology lies in its insistence that knowledge has a social history. Credibility is shaped by gender, age, class, work, community identity, and access to institutions. *Ghost-Eye* questions the superiority routinely accorded to written and professionally validated evidence without denying their practical value. Its central challenge is to make recognition more than an act of recovery. Knowledge must be heard while it can still inform decisions and protect the lives, livelihoods, and environments from which it emerges.

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