

## **The Palimpsest of Memory: A Literary Reading of Reincarnation in Amitav Ghosh's *Ghost-Eye*.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines Amitav Ghosh's *Ghost Eye* (2025) through the theoretical framework of Ian Stevenson's research on reincarnation-type memories, focusing on the ways in which the novel represents memory as a force that transcends the boundaries of a single lifetime. Through the characters of Varsha and Noor, Ghosh explores the complex relationship between memory, identity, consciousness, and the continuity of lived experience across different temporal and existential boundaries. Set against the social and cultural landscape of late-1960s Calcutta, the novel engages with questions of reincarnation, sensory remembrance, personal identity, and the persistence of the past in the present. While *Ghost Eye* may also be approached through ecological and cultural perspectives, this study foregrounds memory as a central organising principle of its narrative. Drawing upon Stevenson's observations of spontaneous childhood recollections, behavioural patterns, sensory recognition, and the gradual fading of purported past-life memories, the paper investigates how Ghosh transforms reincarnation from a purely supernatural concept into a significant literary and philosophical device. It argues that memory in *Ghost Eye* is neither a static record of the past nor merely a cognitive process; rather, it emerges as a layered, embodied, and dynamic force through which experiences and identities continue to shape the present. By examining the intersection of reincarnation-type memory, sensory experience, and the construction of identity, the study demonstrates that the novel challenges conventional understandings of the self as confined to a single lifetime. Ultimately, the paper argues that *Ghost Eye* reconceptualises memory as a mode of continuity that complicates the boundaries between lived and remembered experience, thereby offering a compelling literary exploration of persistence, consciousness, identity, and the enduring relationship between the past and the present.

**Keywords:** Reincarnation; Memory Studies; Past Lives; Identity; Rebirth

### **Introduction**

Memory is the alive echo of past in the present, the fluid space through which incidents, images, and narratives are transferred across time and constantly reworked in the individual psyche. In Psychology, memory is understood as the human ability to encode, store, and retrieve experiences, enabling individuals to construct their identity and form a sense of continuity between past and the present. It is not merely recollections of the past but an evolving process through which human beings find purpose of their lives. Psychology understood memory as a personal and biological process but during the second half of the twentieth century, an interdisciplinary field known as memory studies emerged and

reconceived memory not merely as a subjective cognitive act but as a social, cultural, and historical aspect.

Influential thinkers such as Maurice Halbwachs's theory of "collective memory" stated that memory is not entirely individual but socially formed. Halbwachs rightly said, "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories." (Halbwachs 38) Similarly, Freudian psychoanalysis approached memory through repression and trauma, structuring memory as something that could be hidden yet continue to shape behavior unconsciously. Ian Stevenson amplified memory studies by analysing children's accounts of past-life memories. He did not treat these incidents as stories or superstitions but found them worthy of investigation and systematic research. Pierre Nora, Marianne Hirsch, and Cath Caruth explored how trauma, collective memory, and post memory are travelled from one generation to another. Thereby, memory studies expanded at the intersection of psychology, sociology, and history. From this evolution, literary scholars began to examine the way texts narrate, mold, and challenge memory, evaluating genres like autobiographical, testimonial, and historical writings as places where personal and collective pasts are formed and mediated. Literature has frequently revolved around memory to investigate how the past persists, not as a static record but as something rebuilt and incomplete.

Contemporary fiction has widened stereotypical understandings of memory by exploring experiences that withstand scientific description. Memory in the modern fiction is studied from a lens where it is showcased as dynamic, fragmented, and reconstructive. Contemporary fiction emphasizes how historical events keep on influencing a person's life and social consciousness. Modern narratives depict that a character's memory whether of a previous life, a hidden trauma, or a fragmented past, seldom remains bound to their own lived experience, it affects those around them. These secondary characters generally become guardians of a memory they did not form, their own sense of identity and their relation to one another is disrupted in the course. This narrative arrangement suggests that memory's role in literature is not only to describe an individual's past and its influence, but to work as a catalyst that redistributes emotional toil across a chain of characters, revealing how identity is co-created instead of self-contained.

Modern fiction has expanded the concept of memory by blurring the lines between past and the present life. Contemporary narratives portray the influence of past life reincarnation and transgenerational memory on the characters. Such depictions fade the difference between history, memory, and identity. It is within this wider literary milieu that Amitav Ghosh's *Ghost Eye* becomes distinctly remarkable. The novel propels an exploration of memory, identity, and the tenacity of the past. Ghosh presents memory as a force that surpasses the limits of time, death, and individual existence. The novel provides an evocative engagement of reincarnation, haunting, mythology, environmental concerns, and the persistence of the past exquisitely interwoven into a single thread through the character of a three-year-old, Varsha Gupta. The experiences she remembers suggesting memories of past life, and other characters whose lives are molded by different beliefs. The novel examines the questions of identity, loss, and belonging. Ghosh forms a narrative that blurs the boundaries

between reality and the supernatural by focusing on the mythological traditions. The plot Ghosh creates is such in which time is cyclical instead of linear and the past recurrently infuse the present, making it a specifically significant work for exploring the complicated ways in which memory shapes viewpoint, identity, and continuity.

The novel, *Ghost Eye* has been studied through various lenses for instance, mythological, folklore, and supernatural. Ghosh's texts explicitly talk about environmental issues which makes this text a rich source in that context and currently being researched on. Existing research has examined this novel through the depiction of haunting, mythic imagination, and cultural identity underlining Ghosh's inspection of the interdependence between humans, nature, and the spiritual world and its influence in shaping both individual and collective experiences. Despite these useful contributions, relatively less attention has been given to memory as the main organizing basis through which the text's narrative unravels. Selectively, the novel's presentation of repeated identities, reincarnation-type experiences, and emotional bonds has not been explored through the interdisciplinary structure of memory studies. This paper fills that gap by applying Ian Stevenson's theory to investigate how *Ghost-Eye* reconceptualises memory as a force that surpasses the boundaries of one lifetime.

This paper draws on three distinct theoretical frameworks to study the broader field of memory studies. The first one is Cases of Reincarnation Type (CORT) by Ian Stevenson who introduced this term that suggest the instances mostly amongst children where they remember their past lives, often followed by verifiable details about the departed person's identity, the cause of death, familial relationships, or the place where the individual lived. Stevenson's theory is based on empirical investigation of the children's statements. Rather than putting such experiences as superstition or coincidence, he suggested that these memories deserved consequential scholarly reflection. Stevenson's work provides a valuable theoretical framework for scrutinizing literary narratives that indulge with recollections broadening past single lifetime. In *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, Stevenson describes that "the cases themselves suggest the hypothesis of reincarnation" (Stevenson 338). His research suggests, reincarnation-type memory mentions impromptu recalling of people, places, and relationships from previous life. With this perfectly blended theoretical lens in place, the discussion now moves to an examination of how the text forms memory as the multidimensional phenomenon that transcends human lives and construct identity, narrative, and relationships.

Memory has been established as the forming lens through which *Ghost-Eye* discusses the concepts of trauma, identity, and reincarnation. This research moves closely to analyse the novel's central character, Varsha. Enclosed within the context, Stevenson's theory provides an insightful lens for interpreting Varsha's impromptu past life memories or *jatismar* and her connection with Dinu over several lives. The novel also expands beyond the scope of factual reincarnation studies by placing Varsha's experiences within a broader emotional, cultural, and mythological framework. This framework allows the paper to track down how memory in the text functions simultaneously as biological flow, intentional archival preservation, and unsettled traumatic remnants.

Varsha acquires the pivotal place in the novel, serving as the central narrative focus. Primarily portrayed as a young girl, her life gradually becomes unsettled because of the repeated dreams, *jatismar*, incomprehensible visions, and a strange sense of familiarity with people and places she has never been to. The earliest reflection appeared when Varsha turned three, she started recalling her past life experiences beginning from asking for fish as her meal saying, “I want rice and fish. Give me some fish”. (Ghosh 4) Being born into a Jain community, her family was stunned to hear the word ‘fish’ that was never spoken near Varsha or anyone in that house. This seemingly normal incident holds significance when seen from Ian Stevenson’s theory of reincarnation-type memory. This lens explores that these memories surface when the individual is young, typically between age two and five, without deliberate recollection. This event therefore functions as the text’s first indication of embedded memory, implying that the traces of her previous existence continue to influence her present consciousness even before she gains her rational ability of interpreting the situation. Another incident occurs in the novel where she started conversing in a rustic Bengali dialect, “Ami machh-bhat khabo. Machh dao” continuously asked for the food. (Ghosh 4) The language which was not properly spoken by the elders in her family as they were Marwari Hindus living in Calcutta. Her ability to communicate in a language linked with her previous life surpasses the linguistic barrier of her present upbringing, which aligns with Stevenson’s analysis of uncommon semantic ability in such cases. As said by Shoma, “But language is a memory too, isn’t it? And in cases like these it’s not all that uncommon for languages to be passed on”. (Ghosh 55)

The continuity of Varsha’s reincarnation-type memory becomes more prominent when she declares, “I have lived in another place – a house by a river. It wasn’t like this house. It had mud walls and the roof was made of leaves. Behind it was a pond where I caught fish with a net. There were many kinds of fish in the pond and I used to cook them in different ways.” (Ghosh 8) This becomes a good example of what Stevenson calls “recognition”, one of the three key types of evidence he searches for in reincarnation cases. Recognition is distinct from other kinds of evidence because it is not something that can be empirically verified later. It’s about how instant and explicit the memory seems to the child. In Varsha’s case, the house, the pond, real mother, and the fish, came in full-fledged pattern and not as fragmented flashbacks. Her vivid recalling of the experiences of her previous life indicates a continuity of personal identity carried forward in the present life. Not only Varsha bears the memories of her former life, but she even remembers the cause of her death by identifying the mark near her ribcage where she was fatally bitten by a snake, thereby connecting a present fleshly feature with a retrieved traumatic event. This intersection of recalled memory and physical evidence significantly intensifies the narrative’s study of reincarnation-type memory. In such investigations of children having prior life memories, Stevenson witnessed that, “about 35% of children who claim to remember previous lives have birthmarks and/ or birth defects” matching to the wounds on the dead person they remembered. (Stevenson 403) Studied through this lens, Varsha’s marks act as more than a figurative reminder of the past.

In the text, there are several encounters of cases of reincarnation-type that have been discussed by Shoma to prove the authenticity of this theory which in Indian context is

believed have mythological and superstition connotations. For instance, Varsha's mother considers this her bad luck that her daughter had some kind of mental disability. Similarly, Abhay Gupta, Varsha's father said, "After all, as Hindus, we are taught that reincarnation is just as fact of life". (Ghosh 75). Whereas Shoma questions the notion about what happens when one person is in transition from one life to another, which unknown place they go to, where do they wait for their next life. (Ghosh 76)

Further in the novel, when Shoma wants to confirm the authenticity of Varsha's memories, she let Varsha taste different kinds of fish and to her surprise Varsha identifies most of the dishes despite being raised in a Jain household. As the narrator mentions, "It was as if the child was remembering, with perfect recall, the sensory experience of eating fish." (Ghosh 133) Analysing this instance from Stevenson's lens, it suggests that children who describe memories of their former lives frequently show behavioural and sensory progressions, including unfamiliar food preferences and recognitions, that resemble the life they claimed to have lived before. (Stevenson 1987) Shoma's observation apprehends the continuity when she says, "Yet this child had been able to make the identification through taste alone because of a memory that had been imprinted upon someone else's tongue in another time and place." (Ghosh 132) This act of recognition by Varsha suggests that memory is embodied rather than a cognitive call.

The importance of this sensory memory becomes even more noticeable later in the text, when as an adult, Varsha has forgotten the details of her past life. Nonetheless on reading Dinu's manuscript, she asks him to prepare same kind of fish, believing that will help her revive her memories which indicates that while autobiographical memories have faded, the sensory traces linked with her previous life persists. Dinu describes, "it was as though with every movement of her limbs, with every aroma she inhaled, her body was remembering what she needed to do and executing it flawlessly." (Ghosh 295) Varsha indeed was able to bring back her memories by just eating the fish, as she exclaims, "It's all coming back to me now." (Ghosh 295) From Stevenson's perspective, the flavour of fish thus works as a mnemonic trigger, showing that sensory memory can outlive wide awake recollection and continue to connect the lines between past and present identities.

The plot of the novel takes a turn when, one of the most important aspects of Varsha's case which is the direct sequential relationship between Isha Mondal's death and Varsha's birth comes in the vision. In her investigation, Dr. Shoma Bose analysed that Varsha was born only a little later after Isha's death, a pattern that accurately aligns with Ian Stevenson's observations of reincarnation-type memory. According to Stevenson, in such cases the gap between the death of the previous identity and the birth of the child is relatively short. As Stevenson observes, "The interval between the previous personality's death and the subject's birth is usually short, averaging about fifteen months in the cases that I investigated." The transitory proximity between Isha's death and Varsha's birth thus functions as more than a narrative chance, it parallels to a repetitive empirical trait documented in Stevenson's study.

Among the many factors that operate memory, profound emotional experiences hold a strong position, suited to overshadowing even memories that appear deeply rooted. One such influential episode happens in the text when Shoma receives a letter from Dipika informing



that, “since the day of her father’s death, Varsha has never again mentioned the matter on which we consulted you. Nor has she ever asked for any Bengali foods. It would seem that the shock was enough to cure her of her illness” (Ghosh 224).

Varsha’s loss of memory is not an anomaly, but an attribute documented by Stevenson. The emotional turmoil following her father’s death denotes a crucial shift in her psychological development, intensifying her attachment to her current identity and family. Hence, the diminishing of Isha Mondal’s memories indicates the steady dissolution of the former personality’s influence as Varsha’s own individuality assumes longevity. This incident significantly highlights Ghosh’s attempt to echo Stevenson’s factual findings by displaying the departure of reincarnation-type memories as an innate stage in the child’s growth path.

Ghosh has not only used Varsha’s character as an isolated anomaly but also narrated another reincarnation-type memory case. The character of Noor exhibits such qualities in the novel along with Varsha. Noor further strengthens the novel’s engagement in depicting *Jatismar*. Like Varsha, Noor starts remembering vivid memories that belong to her prior existence. Noor’s recollections, thus, expand the text’s examination of reincarnation beyond a single protagonist. By including Noor’s case along with Varsha, Ghosh reflects Stevenson’s methods which rely on studying multiple cases to identify repeated patterns.

Noor in novel, helps Tipu and other characters with Ghost Eye. Unlike typical childhood memories, her recollections conserve fragments of former existence that give her the knowledge attainable through traditional means. Noor’s memories become a medium through which lost histories are found, undetermined incidents are acknowledged, and interaction between the living and the dead becomes feasible.

Her recollections help the people to assist them in recovering the histories that vanished during Bhola Cyclone. As Tipu says, “But mainly it was Noor who did it – and she’s not a ghost-eye in just this life. She’s been through many lives before, and the knowledge that people like her have could be one of the most important resources to help us survive this war of extermination that we’re trapped in” (Ghosh 233). Tipu explains that their ancestors had this understanding of old cropping patterns and the usefulness of fire to make land fertile. But this knowledge was destroyed by European colonisers who imposed their technology and called it Green Revolution. (234) Tipu further describes, “Because Noor, through her past life memories, remembers how things were done before this machine of destruction that we call “progress” started doing its dirty work” (Ghosh 234).

Though Noor’s case is different from that of Stevenson’s concept, but it has one of the expound features of reincarnation-type memory, the endurance of knowledge that is hard to explain through ordinary learning or experience. Noor remembering and her connection with Tipu and other ghost eyes can be comprehended as an addition of this flow of memory. While Stevenson does not claim that reincarnation-type memories reinforce interaction with spirits, Ghosh creatively builds upon his foundation by transforming these remaining memories into a literary technique through which buried past lives and histories are recovered. Accordingly, Noor’s role elaborates the importance of memories passed across lives and how it turns influential in saving collective memory, letting the voices of the dead to be recognized through the consciousness of the living.

This paper focuses on the shift in the narrative that moves beyond dealing memory as a mere recollection of the past experiences and rather presents it as something that disrupts the conventional understanding of identity, consciousness, and time. The transition from individual remembrance to wider philosophical investigation prepares the foundation for interpreting the broad significance of memory within the text.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined Amitav Ghosh's *Ghost-Eye* through the theoretical framework of Ian Stevenson's research on reincarnation-type memories. The analysis demonstrates that the novel presents memory as a complex and dynamic phenomenon that challenges conventional distinctions between past and present, life and death, and individual identity. Through Varsha's experiences, the narrative reflects several characteristics associated with Stevenson's investigations, including spontaneous childhood recollections, unusual linguistic and behavioural tendencies, sensory recognition, memories connected with a previous identity, and the gradual fading of such memories over time. However, Ghosh does not employ reincarnation merely as a supernatural motif; instead, he transforms it into a significant narrative device for exploring the persistence, instability, and embodied nature of memory. Varsha's experiences suggest that identity cannot always be confined to the experiences of a single lifetime. Her memories emerge not only through conscious recollection but also through language, taste, desire, bodily sensations, and emotional attachments. The recurring importance of sensory memory, particularly her recognition of fish and Bengali food, indicates that memory in the novel is deeply embodied. The body consequently functions as a repository of experiences whose traces may survive even when conscious recollection has faded. At the same time, the gradual disappearance of Varsha's memories introduces an important paradox: while memory creates continuity between different lives, forgetting is equally necessary for the formation of a new identity.

The character of Noor further broadens the novel's engagement with reincarnation by connecting memory with collective history, cultural knowledge, and environmental survival. Through Noor, memories of previous lives become associated with forms of knowledge that have been neglected or erased through historical processes of colonisation and modernity. Memory, therefore, acquires both personal and collective significance, linking individual consciousness with the preservation of cultural and ecological knowledge. Ultimately, *Ghost-Eye* reconceptualises memory as a layered force that exceeds the boundaries of chronological time and individual existence. Stevenson's framework helps identify the recurrent patterns underlying Ghosh's representation of reincarnation-type memory, while the novel extends these ideas into broader philosophical questions concerning consciousness, identity, belonging, and continuity. The study therefore concludes that *Ghost-Eye* is not merely concerned with whether memories can survive death; rather, it interrogates how memory continues to shape the self when the boundaries of a single lifetime can no longer contain human experience.

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