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ECOLOGICAL CONCERN A STUDY OF THE  
HUNGRY TIDE & THE SHADOW LINES**

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# Research Material & Method – Ecological Concern a Study of the Hungry Tide & the Shadow Lines

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**Abstract – Amitav Ghosh's new novel, *The Hungry Tide*, is rich in worldly lore. The paper is set in the Sundarbans, "an immense archipelago of islands....interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal". The setting suggested vivid possibilities. Floods continually submerge the scattered bodies of land. Whole forests lift their heads above the tides and then disappear. Fresh and salty channels cut into each other, creating a diverse natural habitat. The only permanent thing is the water. Whatever is human has to pick its spots among the inconstant islands.**

**Keywords – Partition, Cartography, Nationalism, Communalism, Narratology**

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## INTRODUCTION

**The Hungry Tide** belongs to a category of books particularly difficult to review: the quite good ones. The prose is clean, often insightful; the passage of the storm that resolves these entangled relations at the end is admirably told. Most of the characters do believable things most of the time. The various love stories pass the hours.

A couple of cavils: the quantity of Rilke, the vapidness of the native myths. But the knowledge imparted is worth learning; the politics and geology a little more worthwhile than the cytology and local fables.

And the landscape itself seems truly wonderful – much of that wonder is captured in the story.

Still, the prose, and the story, lack true strangeness – the vivid realization of other lives. The characters seem a little childish, easily rendered. The arguments between virtue and idealism, or between the poetry and prose of life, add little to an interesting debate. This is hardly a condemnation: something like it is true of everything but the rarest writing. And, at least, Ghosh takes seriously the writer's task to tell the reader something he doesn't know. Geographically, *The Hungry Tide* is set in familiar territory for Ghosh – the archipelago of the Sundarbans, in the Bay of Bengal. These mangrove swamps are infested with crocodiles, snakes and tigers which are a constant threat to the scant human population.

Ghosh takes up into this mesh of vegetation, animal life and the every-present river with Kanai, who has taken leave from a translating job in New Delhi. Here, he meets Piya, an expatriate Indian scientist from the U.S. who believes there is an unusual species of dolphin in the murky waters of the Sundarbans. Ghosh places these two characters along with Fokir, a native fisherman, at the centre of his narrative.

Against this backdrop, he weaves the stories of Lord Hamilton, an eccentric peer of the Raj who founded a utopian community of fishermen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as Nirmal, a once-radical communist who flees Calcutta in the 1970s to continue Hamilton's experiment. It is Nirmal's journal that has drawn Kanai here, and through which the past is entwined with the present.

These strands come together in an ill-fated expedition down the river that exposes all the characters to the brutality of the elements and leaves them inescapably changed.

Ghosh's passion shows through his finely drawn characters and his gift for evoking strange places is undiminished. *The Hungry Tide* reads as a metaphor for the lost ideals that each character in this complex novel reaches for but cannot achieve.

The Orcaella, or fresh water dolphin, is one of the earth's rarest and least well favored creatures. A cousin of the killer whale, it swims on its side and

looks like a pig. When Piya, the tenacious marine biologist at the centre of Amitav Ghosh's novel, finally comes across one, her translator companion Kanai is distinctly underwhelmed: "I just cannot believe we've come all the way to look at these ridiculous porcine little things," he says. "If you're going to risk jail for an animal, couldn't you have picked something with a little more sex appeal?"

Amitav Ghosh stands out among his peers for the admirable directness and lucidity of his prose as well as for his brilliant perception of the complexities of human relations in the multicultural world. As an ingenious crafter of fiction he has made his mark and earned substantial critical acclaim. His originality was readily apparent even in his first novel, *The Circle of Reason* which received considerable appreciation for its bold experimentation with content and form. Ghosh's abiding concern about the relation between culture and imperialism is evident in this picaresque tale. But the novel goes far beyond presenting the simple binary divide between tradition and modernity set on an East/West axis. Ghosh proposes the theme of "complex cultural imbrications" as a result of ongoing migrations, border crossings and inter-cultural flows. This preoccupation with transnational cultural processes, including the author's nuanced critique of the exclusive notion of discrete cultures, gains a new focus and dimension in *The Shadow Lines*.

While *The Shadow Lines* explores the author's major concern about wider, cross-border humanity with striking insights into the issues of ethnic nationalism and communalism, it also reveals new levels of his technical prowess. Ghosh has departed from Rushdie's mode of "imaginative serio-comic storytelling" or "the disjointed magic realism" Mukherjee evident in his apprentice novel. What he now offers is a supple and sophisticated mnemonic narrative. He wraps together slices of history by mnemonic triggers or "wistful evocations of memory" Mukherjee, "Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma" to reflect on communal carnage and sectarian tension in the Indian subcontinent. Evidently, his deft craft of story-telling plays an important part in soldering the narrative components to the tale's emotional centre. Discrete and non-sequential units of time and place are conflated to carry the main narrative burden. The multiple switches in the narrative from one time-sequence to another or the apparent achronicity constitutes a counterpoint to hegemonic history or the grand narratives of the nation – a key device in the novel to unpack specific predicaments and traumas of individuals. This paper aims at examining the signifying transactions in *The Shadow Lines* as well as the process by which Ghosh transforms his material into the finished product. The novel derives its material from Ghosh's experience of the fracture following the Partition and the resultant rupture in the affiliative bonds of the communities across the border. What makes his experience worthy of investigation is the technique by which his experience is distilled into a fascinating narrative.

The difference between "content" and "achieved content" or between experience and art is technique. Mark Schorer defines technique as any "selection, elimination or distortion, any form of rhythm imposed upon the world of action by means of which our appreciation of the world of action is enriched or renewed". The study of narrative grammar or narratology is concerned with prying open the narrative "langue" or deep structure. As the Russian Formalists have theorized narrative aesthetics, technique manipulates fabula into *suzette*. The former is the unshaped, uncrated story; the latter the shaped narrative discourse. Seymour Chatman designates fabula as the "what" of the narrative, and *suzettes* the "how" of the narrative. In other words, the *suzette*, or the conditions of telling the story can alter our perceptions of what the narrative is all about. These two terms are analogous to Gérard Genette's *histoire* and *recite*.

Genette has also offered a comprehensive typology of narrators. According to him, the extradiegetic narrator is the apparently distant third-person narrator while the autodiegetic narrator makes continuous use of the first-person account. Unlike the former, the latter is not an impersonal, though reliable and seemingly all-knowing, purveyor of the events. However, in either case of narration the principle of focalization works. Applying Genette's views on narrative technique and the typology of narrators to our discussion of Ghosh's craft in *The Shadow Lines*, we notice that the unnamed first-person narrator in this novel is both an autodiegetic narrator and the primary agent of external and internal focalizing. By external focalizing we mean reports on the activities of characters whereas internal focalizing suggests references to the thoughts and feelings of the characters including the narrator's own. We shall now see how the process of focalization is controlled and orchestrated in *The Shadow Lines* by the narrator who not only narrates the events from a retrospective distance of about two decades but also taps into his mnemonic fund to recall momentous incidents germane to the novel's plot dynamics from times long past: In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib.... Mayadebi was twenty-nine when they left and Tridib was eight. I remember trying very hard to imagine him back to my age, to reduce his height to mine, and to think away the spectacles that were so much a part of him that I really believed he had been born with them.... My grandmother didn't approve of Tridib. He is a loafer and a wastrel.... For her time was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy if it wasn't used.... Tridib's father was a diplomat, an officer in the Foreign Service. He and Mayadebi were always away.... Of Tridib's two brothers, Jatin-Kaku, the elder... was an economist with the U.N. He was always away too, somewhere in Africa or South-East Asia, with his wife and his daughter Ila, who was my age.... Tridib had been to London, with his parents, many years ago... and there was a family called Price... very, very old friends of Tridib's family, because Mrs. Price's father, Lionel Tresawsen had been in India when the British

were here, and... she had a daughter called May, but she was a little baby when Tridib was in London, and as far as I knew he hadn't seen her since... I met May Price for the first time... when she came to Calcutta on a visit. The next time I met her was seventeen years later, when I went to London myself.... Later, when we were eating our dinner, I discovered that in 1959, when Tridib was twenty-seven and she nineteen, they had begun a long correspondence.... Smiling at the memory, she told me how Tridib's card had reached her just when she was trying to get over an adolescent crush on a schoolboy trombonist... and after that they had written to each other regularly – short, chatty letters, usually. Soon, pen-friend like they had exchanged photographs.

In the digenesis the first-person unnamed narrator refers explicitly to his own opinions or feelings as well as to his relationship with the characters of the narrative and is part of their spoken exchanges. The narrational choice predicates his involvement in the story in that he tells the story as an element of his own experience. Of course extradiegetic narrators, too, are to some extent intradiegetic, but the use of stylistic signals in their narration gives the air of objectivity and impartiality.

In an interview with John C. Hawley, Ghosh, asked about the philosophy of narrative technique compatible to his purposes as a novelist, referred to the potency of Proustian recollection: The narrative structure of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* made a huge impression on me when I first read it, in my teens. My interest in Proust was born when I found out, many years later, that Madox Ford had been influenced by *Remembrance of Things Past*. However, I did not read *Remembrance of Things Past* until 1985, after I'd written my first novel *The Circle of Reason*. This was about the time that I was starting my second novel, *The Shadow Lines* and Proust certainly had a great impact on that book. Proust's influence on *The Shadow Lines* is clearly evident I think, even in the structure of its sentences. Similarly, it was in deference to Proust that the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* was left unnamed. But Proust's influence is evident also in the ways in which time and space are collapsed in the narrative of *The Shadow Lines*. I remember that at the time my ambition was to do with space what Proust had done with time: that is, to make completely different instances of a continuum immanent in each other.

As Proust plunges into the core events of his childhood while tasting a particular cookie dipped in tea, the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* summons up an array of recollections in a web of connections. The differences of time and place blur as the process of recollection transforms the past events into a throbbing sense of what has been lost. The historical events carried by the novel includes the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the Partition of India in

1947, and the spontaneous communal combustion in the form of riots in East Pakistan and India following the Hazratbal incident in Srinagar. The novel is not a bare and bland recapitulation of those tense historical moments; it captures the trauma of emotional rupture and estrangement as also the damaging potential of the siege within people sundered by bigoted politics. The materiality of Ghosh's novel as reappropriated history threads through the narratives and melds the historical moments into a compelling tale. The reconstruction of the past through houses, photographs, maps, road names, newspapers, advertisements and other concretizations allows us to collate the text with concurrent co-texts and validate the author's perception of the time and milieu covered by the novel. The principal episodes viewed in a simultaneous focus seem to be part of a historical continuum and the narrator's insight into the characters falling into insane frenzy or wallowing in stolid indifference to transcultural currents can be palpably located.

Ghosh's narrative management can be assessed by comparing the bare bones of the story with the ideological and aesthetic enhancement across the text. To sketch the story of *The Shadow Lines*, Tridib saw May Price as a little boy when he went to England with his parents in 1939. The friendship between the two families started when Mrs. Price's father, Lionel Tresawson and Tridib's grandfather, Mr. Justice Chandrasekhar Datta-Chaudhuri, met in Calcutta at séances. By the time Tridib meets May in India in 1962, their friendship through correspondence since 1959 has ripened into love. The narrator's grandmother, Tha'mma, is Tridib's mother, Mayadebi's elder sister. The narrator, born in 1952, is of the same age as Ila, Tridib's niece and Mayadebi's granddaughter. Ila's father and Tridib's elder brother, Jatin is a peripatetic UN official, while Tridib stays home in Calcutta. Although disliked by Tha'mma, Tridib, with his abundant information on a variety of subjects, becomes virtually the narrator's mentor. The narrator, again despite his grandmother's disapproval, is also increasingly infatuated with Ila's peripatetic lifestyle, while she is obviously enamored of Nick Price, May's youngest brother. May and Tridib, though on the periphery of the narrative, become central to the novel's concerns.

The narrator recalls his two encounters with May: first in 1963-64, when she accompanied Tha'mma, Mayadebi and Tridib to bring the narrator's grandmother's uncle, Jethamoshai, from Dhaka to Calcutta and was witness to the killing of Tridib in an episode of communal violence; the second, when the narrator, during his visit to London on a year's research grant to collect material for a Ph.D. thesis, locates her in London in 1979-80. The narrator recalls his meeting with May in 1961, when he was nine years old: "I met May Price for the first time two years after that incident, when she came to Calcutta on a



visit. The next time I met her was seventeen years later, when I went to London myself". Thus the novel narrates the events taking place in 1939-40, 1960-63 and 1978-79 in a jumbled way but the adult narrator focalizes on these recollections in the 1980s and manipulates these blurred temporal and spatial fragments into a coherent stretch to stage postcolonial situations as well as cultural dislocations and anxieties, and presents the issue of fractured nationalities in close and telling encounters for good measure.

Although, chronologically, the story begins with a passage of time in colonial India when the narrator was not even born, it embraces a good deal of postcolonial moments, and all the episodes are held in simultaneous focus to illuminate the narrative resolution. The year 1939 is historically significant for the outbreak of the Second World War and the phenomenal upheavals on the Indian subcontinent coming in its wake. Mayadebi's visit to London around this time, her intimate contact with the Price family and the Tridib-May component of the story are recounted by Tridib twenty-one years later to the narrator, an eight-year-old inquisitive child. May was a little baby when Tridib saw her in London. A romantic relationship between them has developed through correspondence, transcending the shadow lines of nationality and cultural boundaries. Amitav Ghosh explores the mysterious pull between Tridib and May and the abiding bond between the two families defying distance and physical frontiers even as the countries they belong to are pitted against each other. This search for invisible links and "indivisible sanity," ranging across the realities of nationality, cultural segregation and racial discrimination to counter the inherently inexplicable ethnic distance or, to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty's phrase, "a deafness to the Other", is the central theme of *The Shadow Lines*. The author questions the obsessive assertion of difference because of geographical boundaries and celebrates the union of aliens pulled together by self-propelling empathy and attachment. Lionel Tresawson and Justice Chandrasekhar Datta-Chaudhuri, Tridib and May, Jethamoshai and Khalil rise above the prevailing passion and prejudice, racial hatred and communal bad blood emanating from a heightening of borders, that is, a clash of national and cultural particularities.

By shunning conventional mimesis or digenesis and utilizing memory as the very motor of the story, Ghosh succeeds in engaging these issues with multiple moving revelations. "Memory," as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, "is a complex phenomenon that reaches out to far beyond what normally constitutes a historian's archives, for memory is much more than what the mind can remember or what objects can help us document about the past". The first-person narrator whose memories provide the structure of the narrative has a mobile narratorial perspective. Unlike the use of memory in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, where the third-person narrator's focus is impersonal and the perspectives shift from story line to story line

through differing narrative voices, *The Shadow Lines* has the narrator as a participant in the story with shadowy extra-digenetic voices. Also, the regulation of narrative information in *The Shadow Lines* and the deployment of such techniques as paralipsis, ellipsis, analeptics and prolepsis in the book's structure to manipulate the disposition of events and the levels of temporality are notably different from those in Roy's novel. However, Ghosh makes skilful use of narrationally-framed free direct and free indirect speech to supply the structural frame for the memory's content. For instance, while interweaving Ila's and her mother's versions of a story about their house in Colombo with narratorial commentary, Ghosh deploys free direct speech and free indirect speech in conjunction with a trustworthy, authentic narrative voice: Their house was in a quiet part of Colombo where diplomats and senior civil servants and people like that lived.... It was a big house with large verandas and a steeply sloping roof covered with mossy tiles. The garden was at the back....here was only one problem: adjoining on to the garden at the back was a poultry farm. This caused Ila's mother a good deal of worry... for she had heard that snakes were certain to appear wherever there were chickens.... One morning, soon after they moved in, their cook Ram Dayal came running upstairs and burst in upon Ila's mother who was taking her mid-morning nap in an easy chair on a veranda upstairs.

Mugger-much, shrieked Ram Dayal. Save me, burra mem, bachao me from this crocodile. He was a tall, willowy, usually drowsy man, but now his eyes were starting from his gaunt face and his lips were flecked with spittle. Never heard of such a thing, Ila's mother said to us. Crocodile in my garden; almost fell out of my easy chair. My grandmother and I looked carefully away from each other.... Shut up Ram Dayal, Queen Victoria snapped. Stop buk- bucking like a chhokra-boy.... And right he was, Queen Victoria said her voice shrill with amazement.... But being as she was the daughter of a man who had left his village in Barisal in rags and gone on to earn a knighthood in the old Indian Civil Service, she retained her composure.

We see that a spectrum of continuous effects is being created by subtle modulations of the narrative register as the prose moves in and out of free direct speech, free indirect speech and the narrative reports of speech acts wherein unimportant stretches of conversation are summarized by the narrator. In the direct strings of narrative speech presented above in a freer form by omitting the inverted commas, the characters apparently speak to us more immediately without the narrator as an intermediary. The narrative voice becomes protean with telling shifts in the cline of the narrator's control over the character's speech. The characters, while retaining their subjectivity, seem to be in temporary narratorial alignment, that is, the character logical point of view is narratorially adopted. The mediating first-person narrator does not subsume the words of the characters under focus. By using these narrative strategies "the mind of the character is unobtrusively disclosed".

Notably, in addition, Ghosh adeptly deploys conversational code-switching which is a natural occurrence in bilingual or multilingual societies. In the passage quoted above Ila's mother uses non-standard English – a kind of local patois – as a boundary-maintaining strategy to negotiate the relations of privilege and exclusion in interactional moments. The characters' parlance is objectified by showing up the marked ideolectal/sociolectal differentiation from the narrator's. Besides supplying local color and nuances of meaning, the motivation of code-switching in the passage comes from the larger dynamics of subverting Standard English by effecting a kind of syntactical assault upon it. However, such examples of style-shifting in Ghosh's novel are far fewer than those in the novels of Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. Unlike Rushdie and Roy or for that matter Chinua Achebe, Ghosh does not provide translation or explanation of the introduced non-English items either. I will return to the deeper thematic implications of this passage later.

Distinctly, Ghosh's use of temporal syllepsis i.e. the anachronic association of segments connected in the narration by common themes and geographical syllepsis i.e. a chronological, thematic, grouping of narrative segments is apposite and ideally suited to his aesthetic project in that the narrative becomes the tool through which recollections come together and interpenetrate to produce a memory-driven meaning. The seamless texture of the events is recalled by memory and filtered through the narrator's mediating consciousness. The point made in one episode is enlarged in another but the narrator is only seemingly omniscient as his account is scanned, interrogated and counterpointed by others' narratives. The diegetic elements, such as characters and spatial contexts, organized in the orbit of nodal events, have an almost mimetic integration although the novel's narration is an intensely mnemonic process. The events lose their linear significance and are reshuffled to elaborate meaning around the incidents in a structuring, heuristic sense as well as to measure the tensions between individual memory and public chronicles of nations or, in other words, the contradictions between psychological subjectivity and historical analysis.

Ghosh engages with the limits of essentialist nationalism and barriers to empathy across geographical borders. The novel eventuates into a search for the strategies for survival in a violent, hate-filled world of narrow divisions and finds in love an effective antidote to the miasma of ethnic tension. Thus the novel also addresses the challenge of geographical fluidity and cultural dislocations with a salutary insight into history. The cross-border movement of aliens and immigrants under the increasingly globalised scenario endorses, or rather validates, the novel's larger project of cultural accommodation, of making sense of ontological confusion in intricate spatiality and seeking adjustment

to the emerging demands of multicultural world. As Brinda Bose rightly notes: It is no doubt fitting that in the age of an extravagantly embracing of globalization, we may claim to have closed the gap between the other and straddling it; certainly, the legacy of postcolonial angst today appears to have settled into a potentially numbing acceptance of bi- or multi-cultural euphoria. In such a circumstance, the diasporic imagination of Amitav Ghosh – that wrestles with an understanding of bi-culturalism as it 'yokes by violence together' discrete and distant identities – is essential to our understanding of our history even as it is being created.

Ghosh's cultural creativity stemming from a syncretic approach, compelling as it is in its tolerant and humanist articulation, has been problematised by several critics. Gauri Viswanathan points out that Ghosh's stance on broad humanity or inter-community solidarity effaces the particularities of competing groups in that "the formative energy of identity and community gradually dissipates and is replaced by frozen icons of communal solidarity." In a cogent observation on Ghosh's preoccupation with the bonds that overwhelm the borders in *An Antique Land*, Viswanathan argues: If I have been proposing that the syncretism of Ghosh's narrative voice is analogous to Matthew Arnold's culture, I have done so to suggest that the only way both culture and syncretism have been able to deal with difference is by amalgamating difference to a totalizing, homogeneous whole. As Arnold's ideal culture effaces class differences, so Ghosh's syncretism denies the historical reality of religious difference. That is why no matter how moving Ghosh's book might be, and no matter how appealing his humanist call for dissolving barriers between nations, peoples, and communities on the grounds that world civilizations were syncretic long before the divisions introduced by the territorial boundaries of nation-states, the work cannot get beyond nostalgia to offer ways of dealing with what is, after all, an intractable political problem.

Also, Ghosh's position on the militantly-charged communities is probably influenced by Rabindranath Tagore's "anti-nationalitarian" sentiment and his larger ideology of global human fellowship, as is evident in several of his works, particularly *The Home and the World*. In this novel Tagore envisions the equality and mutuality of all human beings in a global society, instead of narrow nationalism, binarism and xenophobia. The creative bond of global unity can be forged by a symbiotic, synergic mode of thought in spite of the ostensible spatial demarcation between the home and the world. Ghosh does not propose any alteration/abrogation of the material world represented by maps, immigration queues, customs barriers and visa regulations. His novel, nonetheless,

“initiates an interrogation of the organizing principles of division”.

Ghosh's preoccupation with shadow lines or demarcations as “arbitrary and invented divisions between people and nations” has also been closely questioned by A.N. Kaul. In his opinion, *The Shadow Lines* “ends up attributing value and a higher reality to a sort of amorphous romantic subjectivity”. Kaul argues that unlike Henry James and E.M. Forster, who recognize the barriers to cultural crossings due to a variety of political and cultural complexities, Ghosh privileges the world of private refuge over historical and political realities and thus regards these troublesome realities or historical formations as immaterial; at any rate, he blithely disregards them. As Kaul notes, the novel insists on a sentimental resolution and as such it lacks an authentic resonance. He also reads some signifying and profound statements about life in the novel as “postmodern banalities” or mere “conundrums.”

Ghosh's narratorial inflection in *The Shadow Lines* on forging connections across ethnic differences addresses the fragility of a secular national identity feeding into intermittent irrational frenzy. The book does not propose any dismissal of national particularities or erasure of physical borders; nor does it legitimize the self/other dialectic. Tha'mma's negation of the pluralities in nationalism is, by implication, the narrator's recognition of the non-Self. It is towards this epistemological end that the mentor has been guiding the acolyte. Precise use of imagination means plugging into the specificities of distant material cultures while imagining them, not indulgence in vapid motions of fancy to fuel one's fantasy. It requires an alert and active intelligence as well as warm empathy to manipulate such translations across cultures.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ila is incapable of such inter-cultural negotiations because she lives intensely in the present with “easy arrogance,” which limits her cultural grasp. She revels in passing infatuation with places – “illusory whirl of movement” – and thus reveals her short-range imagination in static recollections. Her reminiscences are shallow in that she only remembers excitements generated by shifting landscapes during her journeys. The lack of concreteness or materiality of her imagination is exemplified in an episode set in Colombo which she shares with the narrator. As is evident in the narrative report on Ila's speech acts, her cognition deficit is pointed out by Tridib to the narrator. Ila carries the memories of exotic reptiles stored in her senses without registering the material co-ordinates of the place or its appropriate physicality to see her sojourn in a transnational perspective: Ila lived so intensely in the present that she would not have believed that there were really people like Tridib, who could experience the world as concretely in their imagination as she did through her senses.... For Ila the current was real: it was as though she lived in a present which

was like an airlock in a canal, shut away in from the tidewaters of the past and the future by steel floodgates.

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