

The Romance and Reconstruction of National Identity in *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

What are some of the consequences of imagined nationalism in a post-colonial world, particularly at the sub-national level? In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues nationality is "imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6). Edward Said, too, writes about imagined geography in *Orientalism* where the Orient is a mere concoction, an imaginary space. While Anderson discusses nationalism, nationhood and nation-space (all the while blurring the line between the terms) in a broader sense, Said limits his discussion to the Orient. Inarguably, the people of a nation do share a bond, a closeness that they cannot deny. However, the question Anderson and Said prompt us to ask is how authentic is that imagined quality of an imagined geography/community?

In Amitabh Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, a non-linear narration highlights how time and place are not permanent. The lines that divide places and even times are, mere shadows, and hence forever trespassed. Ghosh's novel delineates the intricacies of man-made nation space in the Indian subcontinent in a fluid yet pithy way. Further complicating the already tricky issue of nationalism in India is the cross-national relationship between a man with no countries and a woman across the seas. What, thus, are the consequences of imagined nationalism and/or imagined nation-space? Can there be a situation where nationalism is not a unified, political ideology? Can nationalism be stratified, even reconstructed? The project, thus attempts to understand what really happens when the author tries to construct an understanding of nationalism from a post-ideological perspective.

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What makes a nation? What is nationality? What is it about borders – some few thousand or more square – inches-that make the people within a nation feel connected to each other? Borders are political and often politicized. They can be illusory too; sociologically speaking, nationality and nation space have more to do with social agents like economic, legal, cultural and spatial structures than with discernible differences among people. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues nationality is "imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6). People belonging to a nation-state do often share a bond, a kind of uniformity that is unique to them. For Edward Said, nationalism is a perception of space imagined by the Occident based on myths and images. The manifestation of this imagined geography is essential for the existence of the Occident. There is an obvious power battle here – those with the power to 'imagine' possess the strength to 'create' a space that befits their agenda, whatever it may be. To complicate matters even further, there is no 'real' geography that the imagined ones can be compared to. Questions thus remain: how authentic is that imagined quality of imagined geography/community? How can an individual negotiate with the imagined aspect of nationality, community and identity?

Nationality and its many weighty facets can be hard to define. In fact, there is little evidence to claim the existence of a universal definition and execution of nationalism. Anderson by way of explanation suggests, "unlike most other isms, nationalism has never produced its own grand thinkers" (5). The reality is, he argues "the end of the era of nationalism,' so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (3). Nationalism, thus is nowhere near to being illegitimate in today's political and social life. Nonetheless, how crucial is it in the lives of individuals?

For the characters in Amitabh Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* the very borders the masterminds and policymakers behind Indian 'independence' had fought brutally over signify very little. The non-linear narration of the text also highlights how time and place are not permanent. The character Tridib lives his life vicariously through the narrator. When his story is combined with those of his lover May and his brother Robi, together they outline the places from Ballygunge to Brick Lane as dramatically to the reader as to those who lived in them. The

lines that divide places and even times are, thus, mere shadows, and hence forever trespassed. Even the contrasts against which Tridib's character stands, Ila and the narrator's grandmother, show that the characters all work for and in opposition with Tridib because of their shared missing link – that of a place to call home. Ghosh's novel delineates the intricacies of man-made nation space with sensitivity and empathy.

Thus, some of the key questions for this essay include: What are the consequences of imagined nationalism and/or imagined nation-space? Can there be a situation where nationalism is not a unified, political sentiment? Can nationalism be stratified, even reconstructed? In *The Shadow Lines*, nationalism is a familial, cultural and geographical concept that runs parallel to, if not above, religious and/or communal complexities. Ghosh's handling of the issue is nuanced and thought-provoking, and does not undermine that seriousness of the matter in the subcontinent. For the major part of the plot, it shows that borders and national identity can and should be traversed. Yet it is the ending of the narrative that throws the question of individual or national identity slightly off when two people belonging to entirely different continents, race and age group become one. Does the novel supersede the thorny issues related to national identity and nationalism for a too-easy mishmash of romantic love? Not quite – rather Ghosh constructs the ending in a way so that his characters articulate a vision to reside in or rather choose a world where people can come together because of those very differences.

I

The misery of the general population prior to and post-independence in 1947 is well documented in history, fiction and archives. Amitabh Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* exemplifies the repercussions of a very complex and difficult independence process and shows how the residues of violence still haunt and affect human lives across the superficially imposed borders nearly half a century after its occurrence. As Ghosh shows in his novel, August 1947 did not bring to an end the terrifying results of religious and political violence; the lackluster attempt by the British and Indian authorities to produce a resolution by drawing the maps of the newfound nations did not make things any less complicated in either India or Pakistan.

Ghosh's novel takes place in Bengal, among many other locations. Bengal is a historically significant and conflicted part of Indian subcontinent. "The territories of British India were partitioned between the two new countries on a principle of religious majorities. Thus provinces with Muslim majorities

constituted the territories of Pakistan, divided into two wings, one in the west and the other in the east. Two provinces – Punjab and Bengal – were themselves partitioned according to the religious composition of the district populations in those provinces", notes Partha Chatterjee (1). Home to both Hindu and Muslim population, Bengal suffered heavily during Partition. Urbashi Barat stresses, "for Bengalis, Independence was also Partition, the invention of borders which permanently and irrevocably exiled entire communities. Even today, more than half a century after the event, the victims of Partition continue to explore the dimensions of their loss of home, to attempt to understand what it has done to their sense of identity and their social relationships"(214). Ghosh introduces individual characters in the novel who represent the horrors and confusions brought about by Partition. Through them, he tries to examine identity from both a national and post-national perspective. His characters are global citizens who are often baffled and intrigued by such concepts like nationalism and national identity.

The Shadow Lines introduces the reader to two families and a series of events that transcends generations, time and space. The novel centralizes on the life and story of Tridib, the unnamed narrator's uncle he lives vicariously through. Tridib – a character that is luscious with depth – acts in the novel as a sort of liaison between two continents, three countries and two Partitions. Through the narrator's back and forth storytelling about his uncle's life, the story travels from Kolkata to Dhaka to London – all the while blurring the boundaries and borders that, ideally, should separate the characters. Through Tridib, Ghosh attempts to disintegrate the idea of a nation state, which manifests in the portrayal of three cities that are emblematic of three countries. The story also travels through time – this is a story of India and Pakistan during the 1960s, India and England during the 1980s and the beginning of the twentieth century. Sujala Singh argues that "the first movement 'going away' looks out in the world, collecting and classifying, mapping, conceiving of geographies, which the unnamed narrator records an obsessive will to remember. This is an individuated spatiality, organized by the structure of a private re-collection" (162). The boundaries between private and public are somewhat fluid in the novel. Tridib, over the course of the novel, becomes a link that connects the various characters of the novel, including the narrator, his lover May, and his brother Robi. Eventually, through Tridib's life, the narrator re-examines his lifelong notion of a nation state. The love affair between Tridib and May bear direct consequences of a Partition narrative that is fraught with disbelief and uncertainty. So does the character of the narrator's grandmother – a formidable female figure who questions the ludicrousness of

Partition itself with an exasperation many victims (perhaps all fifteen million who had to find a new home) could identify with.

On the other end of the spectrum is the narrator's cousin Ila, the quintessentially cosmopolitan Indian who refuses to be one or bear any resemblance to what she thinks it means. The irreverently rash character picks such heavy-handed battles with her national identity that they border on stereotypes. Not allowed to dance at a nightclub of Grand Hotel in Calcutta, Ila exclaims, "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? It is only because I want to be free. Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you" (Ghosh 87). As Tridib observes, "Although she had lived in many places, she had never traveled at all" (21).

The lives the characters of the novel live are not defined by geography or location as we know it. From Thamma's (the grandmother) migration to India to Tridib and May's love affair to the narrator's almost voyeuristic pleasure in already knowing the alleys and corners of London and Dhaka without ever setting foot there, a wide range of plot points shows how *The Shadow Lines* constantly tries to re-define space.¹ What makes Ghosh's foray into the discourse of imagined space particularly engaging is the way in which he strangles the banality of borders and maps (through Thamma) while simultaneously remaining fascinated by places both imaginary and real (through the narrator). The narrative arc-defining scene where the grandmother faces the idea of revising her birthplace Dhaka after many years of exile is ripe with caution, frustration and reproach. She wonders if there is an actual border with "trenches perhaps, or soldiers or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land" between India and East Pakistan (148). The answering "no" is met with sheer indignation and bafflement as she loudly proclaims, "what's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before[...]What was it all for then-Partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between?" (149). Indeed, these are some of the key queries Ghosh himself sets out to answer in this novel. What is this nation-space then? What defines it? What makes it a strong imperative that people will wage war in its name?

Why does nation-space matter? More importantly, why does it matter in the context of *The Shadow Lines*? Before one can venture out to solve that problem, one must wonder, what is home? Urbashi Barat suggests, "Home is the sight of nostalgia as well as of a terror of the unknown, the borders between the

¹Thamma took part in India's nationalist movement, reestablished herself into a new homeland and refuse to let go of her former homeland or the idea of it even if it was not anything like it used to be. When she visits Dhaka years later, she keeps asking "but where is Dhaka?" (201)

spaces are 'shadow' ones, achieving presence only when they are crossed" (219). *Desb* in Bengali has two meanings, one's "nation" and one's native village. Home, too has dual meanings: *basha* means a house, a dwelling while *bari* is where one's ancestors have lived, where one at once forms the history and is part of it. Do Ghosh's characters yearn for that *bari*? A nation-space that is also part of their history and where they are also part of? Perhaps that explains the fierce protectiveness Thamma has for her home. Barat agrees, saying, "the ferocity with which the grandmother defends her home and its values is clearly a part of the alienation and the disorientation that are themselves the product of exile; the fluidity of borders that Tridib and the narrator experience are also born of their dislocation from home" (226). Is dislocation the root of all uncertainty then? The incapacity to fit in? Many of Ghosh's characters refuse to be defined by a uniform definition of national identity for the most part. In *The Wretched of the Earth* Franz Fanon argues "a national culture is sought in systematic fashion. It becomes a set of automatic habits, some traditions of dress and a few broken-down institutions" (Fanon, 1588). In a criss-crossing storyline of love and space between a man with no countries (Tridib) and a woman across the sea (May) Ghosh's text builds an intricate and complex web of back and forth. It shows a kind of geographical displacement through personal and emotional experiences and thoroughly questions concepts such as "home" and "homeland".

The central characters of the novel have multiple belongings and plural identities – all the while breaking the regular or appropriate standard of time and space. Thanks largely to the truly global citizenry of almost all of them – with the head of the family in the Foreign Services, Ila's father in the United Nations and Tridib, Robi and Ila all repeatedly traveling back and forth between Europe and India. The tattered old atlas Tridib gave the narrator and the way in which he knew the nooks and crannies of London without ever setting foot there once for all complicate their identity. For Ghosh, the dilemma between "coming" home and "going" home is ripe with innuendoes. "How could you have 'come' home to Dhaka? You don't know the difference between coming and going"--asks the young narrator to his grandmother (Ghosh 150). *Ashi*, the Bengali replacement for both coming and going is a wonderful paradox Ghosh uses to its full potential. For Tha'mma – someone who is caught literally between memory and belonging and between reality and a strict belief in nationality – it is no wonder that she is lost. It is also no wonder the young narrator, the voice of sanity in the novel, is also out of his depth trying to understand the coming and going of it all. As he later tries to explain: "Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was

looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement" (150). Home, homeland, *desh*, *bari*, coming, going, nationalism, map and borders are all concepts that are problematic in the novel.

That particular quest of looking for a home is eventually what propels the redoubtable grandmother to embark upon a rescuing mission of their uncle across the border in Dhaka. As the narrator explains, "For people like my grandmother, who have no home but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection" (Ghosh 194). Among all the characters of this book, hers perhaps is the most strident form of nationalism. It does not come as a surprise to the reader though, simply because while Ghosh's characters all share a palpably comparable longing for a "home" it is Thamma who believes in giving blood for it. At one point in the novel Thamma declares that Ila has no right to a home in Britain as her ancestors had not given their blood for it, so it could never be her nation, her *desh*.

Incidentally, her Jethamoshai an uncle is another shining example of a character whose caustic remarks prove the entire Partition exercise pointless – "I don't believe in this India Shindia. Once you start moving, you never stop, he said. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere?" (Ghosh, 215) The takeaway from this rant is not that he is above and beyond the rescue his nieces think he so desperately needs but that once a line is drawn to alter the ones that never were, there is no turning back, no stopping. In the case of India, therefore, what the Radcliffe Commission did can never be undone – only aggravated.

The novel culminates in the death of Tridib in a religious riot in the other half of Bengal in Pakistan. With that the narrator asks the reader to share in his own experience and unlearn everything he had learned about borders and religion and identity. His death in a religious riot that rocked both sides of Bengal is a testament to the religious and cultural reality of the subcontinent. A seemingly innocent loss of the Prophet's hair from Kashmir perpetuates repercussions that prove reality is strangely similar across the borders in the subcontinent. Also crucial is May's involvement in that pivotal moment that forever changed the lives of the characters. In the end when the narrator lay in the arms of May, his uncle's lover, he not only questions his nationhood, but also begins to dismiss the necessity of it. By the denouement of the novel, he not only questions the relevance and validity of political and religiously constituted nation space but re-learns the meaning of being a child of "a free state" (Ghosh 242).

In *Imagined Communities* Benedict Anderson argues that "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, [...] for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (Anderson 7). In the context of India and Pakistan that comradeship includes religion. The way that religious conflict plays out in *The Shadow Lines* is problematic. In *State and Politics in India*, Partha Chatterjee argues that the concept of nation state is largely formed in western social scientific thoughts. Thus when the idea is applied to the subcontinent, its effectiveness is negligible (Chatterjee 24). The practical problem, according to Chatterjee, is that in adopting the paradigm of nation-state post-colonial administrators blinded themselves to new possibilities of thinking outside Western categories.

Not only does Tridib's death help negotiate the legacies of artificial boundaries erected through Partition, Ghosh is also interested in challenging the very question of national identity. The tendency emerges through the character of May in *The Shadow Lines*. The events leading to Tridib's death and the narrator's own personal encounter with violence are in fact ripple effects of one particular event – the disappearance of a sacred relic, the hair of the Prophet Mohammad from Hazratbal Mosque of Kashmir. During the first days of riot, Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus did not fight each other; their common enemy was the establishment. Still, as with any war that is waged between "oneself and one's mirror image," tension mounted to a fever pitch in East Pakistan and India as Hindu refugees began pouring over to India and mobs went ruthless on the Muslims in Kolkata (200). The way Ghosh ties together the two events of Tridib's death in Dhaka and the schoolboy narrator's encounter with the riot in Kolkata is symbolic. It goes on to show that reality is the same across the border in the subcontinent. While discussing Hindu Kolkata and Muslim Pakistan, Singh argues that "the signs and effects of religious and national identity are shown to spill over the constraints imposed by the agencies of power that endeavor to cordon off a space as its own" (170).² The allegorical tattered old atlas Tridib uses to teach his nephew about the fluidity of borders also confirm that geography has little significance in terms of people's perception of religion and national identity. Singh stresses, "The compression into a narrow time-slot of systematic events, mirroring each other across the border, is a ploy utilized in the narrative to

² Sujala Singh notes: "It is in dreams and memory, and in the particular arrangement of their narratives, that the silences in the discourses of the public spheres are prized upon by the juxtaposing of spaces and the freezing of time, in parody of the ways in which the newspapers do the same" (169). She also suggests that Tridib's death "invites us to read off an allegory of sectarian nationalist identity in post-Partition India" (170).

indicate how any carved-out notion of a communal or national identity is haunted by the spectre, the reflection, of the constitutive Other"(169). At the heart of Ghosh's novel, thus, is a quest to find meaning in this meaningless of borders, partitions and separations.

While the concept of entangled identity is quite appropriate in the context of the subcontinent, how effective is it in terms of England and India, as those two imagined geographies are represented through Tridib and May? May's is a complex characterization by Ghosh: she falls in love with the good-humored, wise-beyond-his-years Tridib almost as quickly as she judges the ways in which a post-Partition India functions. From her altruistic rescuing of a dying dog in the streets of Kolkata to her sheer repulsion in discovering a giant, imported oak dining table at the Chowdhury household – May's response to India is complex. However, what most complicates May's position in the novel is her involvement in Tridib's death at Dhaka. When the little rescue force comprised by the Bose sisters, Tridib and May try to take the senile Jethamoshai back with them to Kolkata, her actions cause irrevocable damage in the lives of the central characters. When an angry mob assaults the driver and the uncle, May's superior 'Memshahib' attitude makes her jump out of the car to help (218). Her action prompts Tridib to jump right into the frenzy and leads him to his eventual death within minutes (alongside the old uncle and the driver). Was she acting out of superiority? Her feeling of guilt is clear affirms that when she confesses that she was not "going to listen to a stupid, cowardly old woman" and she that she did try to be a "heroine" (245). How responsible does that make her though? Should she have had a better grasp of the unique situation of mirrored reality across the border in Dhaka? This stray, singular moment of violence caused by individuals who want to fuel the differences between communities and the individual actions of May and Tridib accentuate the necessity for individual action to confront such communal agitation.

Yet, question remains: is individual action enough? Tridib's death was a sacrifice; Ghosh insists, "Tridib gave himself up. It was a sacrifice" (246). He had died in Dhaka, a city he had little intimate history with, and in the hands of a stray group of rioters for a cause he cared nothing about. It was love that propelled Tridib to meet his doom, not religion and definitely not nationalism. The deaths of Khalil (the driver), the old uncle and Tridib stand independently, away from the actual riot that broke apart the Hindu and Muslim population in India and East Pakistan. Somehow, it provides a romantic ending for Tridib and May where two different people from two different continents, cultures and races

finally come together. It gives Tridib and May a chance to finally consummate their mostly chaste relationship. Through their union in death, Ghosh asks his characters to forget their differences and the nations they represent. The lines that separate the central characters, thus, are not only of borders and frontiers, but also of present and past, self and image, colonizer and colonized. In a way, Ghosh thus offers an opportunity to his readers (and characters) to evade the enmeshed complexities of differences borders enact on humans.

II

In light of the multiple kinds of boundaries that divide characters from one another and in the context of the example of May and her character's representation of a romantic and private transcendence, what really are the consequences of imagined nation space in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*? The only time the expanded Dutta-Chowdhury family members deal with a persisting Hindu-Muslim conflict in a post-Partition era is during Tridib's death. The terrible ending haunts the lives of Robi, May and the narrator for the rest of their lives and it leaves some form of conflicted feelings in the other characters. Ghosh insists that the Muslims and Hindus of India and East Pakistan were almost helpless in their participation in the 1964 riot. On the one hand, the narrator remembers the fear that crippled him during the nightmarish bus-ride in 1964, "it is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent" (200); on the other, Ghosh asserts "there were innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives, and equally, in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslims" (225). When the college-age narrator realizes that Tridib was killed by a mob in Dhaka in the same riot that engulfed Kolkata, he realizes "there will always be something that will connect Calcutta to Dhaka, Bengali to Bengali. Even in their self-destructive violence the people of East and West Bengal exhibit their common inheritance and kinship" (225). One of the major consequences that arises from the depiction of the riot is the narrator's realization of the similarities between these two seemingly unrelated events. The reasons for Tridib's death in Dhaka are discovered (by the narrator) in deep layers of private as well as public history.³ Thus when the narrator tries to excavate his memories of that event he is

³Sujala Singh stresses the following, "In the second movement, 'coming home', this conceptualization of his private memory is contextualized within public histories, and punctuated by the calendar dates of singular events. The sweep of his early vision gets marked up for divisions of war, religion and gender, and he has to grow up to face the responsibilities imposed by stories that refuse to let his outlook transcend them" (162). She goes on to argue that "Tridib himself appears from a fragment of newspaper article from a long time ago, cut down by the horrors of the religious lines drawn across maps and between people" (162).

incapable of separating the two. Years later, as a PhD student the narrator's memory is jogged by an Australian expert in Asian Studies and he begins to see through the texture of the events. Once the narrator researches the archives and gets all the data in his hands, he begins his "strangest journey: a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking-glass events" (Ghosh, 219). This act of going to the library to support his claims of a terrible riot in 1964 in which the number of deaths was not a lot less than the war of 1962 shows that India's political history is anything but objective. As Ghosh rightly notes, this is how the subcontinent functions – for just shy of two weeks after the riot ended the newspapers stopped writing about it. Ghosh brings to light an amnesiac tendency to gloss over painful details, an eerie capacity to move on even after something so avoidably tragic happens. "I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates; I believed that across the border there existed another reality" says the narrator and slowly, with time, he begins to unlearn everything he had known (214).

In the end, when in honor of Tridib's memory, the narrator chooses to unlearn the national divide resulting from Partition and instead embraces homogeneity, Ghosh offers his readers some kind of a solace. The Bartholomew Atlas, Tridib's dreams for his nephew to "worlds to travel in and...eyes to see them with," all conspire to challenge the very concept of imagined boundaries in the subcontinent (20). As the narrator recalls his memory of the riot, he realizes: "It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world – not language, not food, not music – it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror" (200). Ultimately, the novel offers just that – to brave that war and reconcile.

Ghosh's novels, almost all of them steeped in history have a tendency to accommodate views that can only be suited to someone like him – a true global writer who is comfortably rooted in his own identity. *The Circle of Reason* (1986) too, begins in Bengal, criss-crosses across India, moves on to the Middle East, and ends somewhere in Africa. The same holds true for *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) – travelling back and forth between colonial India and twentieth-century New York and Kolkata and *In an Antique Land* (1993) which moves backward and forward in history and traverses a track as widespread as the Middle East, India, Africa, Europe and North America. In short, his novels, although mostly situated in India, are never shy of being global and never afraid of redefining concepts such as time, spatiality and temporality.

All his life, the young narrator of *The Shadow Lines* aspires to rise above his Kolkata-based existence. His fascination with the cafes in Madrid, the corner store in Brick Lane and that old atlas show a kind of strange obsession with a world that has no boundaries; yet he is forever impatient to intrude in it. Tridib and his nephew's shared desire to bring together an already fractured world comes from their own personal incapability to belong. In *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhaba argues, "Our nation-centered view of sovereign citizenship can only comprehend the predicament of minoritarian 'belonging' as a problem of ontology – a question of belonging to a race, a gender, a class, a generation become a kind of 'second nature', a primordial identification, an inheritance of tradition, a naturalization of the problems of citizenship" (xvii). Through Tridib and his nephew's relationship with May, Ghosh tries to connect the imperial center and the former colony. His cosmopolitan characters make colonial and postcolonial history come together and Ghosh eventually captures the perspectival view of time, space and events in this book that attach people together. Finally, *The Shadow Lines* offers us hope. While admitting the many complexities of cultural and national identification in the subcontinent Ghosh nonetheless opts to offer a narrative conclusion where divisive lines which threaten our common humanity cease to exist and where individual resistance comes out triumphant.

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