Chapter Five

Towards Integration

Childhood shows the man, as morning shows the day.

- John Milton -

"Hero Bhaiyya, Hero Bhaiyya, wo log Miss India ko utha ké lé gayé!" (Brother Hero, Brother Hero, those people have taken away Miss India) shouts the little boy who bursts onto the screen from the murky depths of a burning, rioting Bombay. At the critical moment when our Hero has been almost beaten into abandoning what seems to be a hopeless quest for his Miss India in Ketan Mehta's 1995 film *Oh Darling Yeh Hai India*, this child shines the illuminating torch on smoke-obscured roads. A light suddenly breaks out from the darkened skies, and the hero forges ahead in the direction that the child has indicated. In a film, otherwise exclusively peopled by adults, and in itself a superbly crafted postcolonial cinematic text, this telling intrusion of the figure of the child throws light on the increasingly important function of the trope of the child in postcolonial fiction.

As the exploration into postcolonial fiction from Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent in the preceding chapters has shown, the use of the child in the postcolonial novel is part of the writer's attempt at finding a voice that is protean and effective. Using naïve and vulnerable protagonists, and recreating a wide

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1 *Oh Darling Yeh Hai India. Released in August*, 1995. Directed by Ketan Mehta, starring Shah Rukh Khan as 'Hero' and Deepa Sahi as 'Miss India'.
gamut of emotions, starting with the precarious, fragile childhood hope and moving to brooding melancholy, serious issues including those of decolonisation are addressed. The novels not only raise a voice against erstwhile colonial masters, but also take the aftermath of imperialism into account by offering a critique of neocolonisation where the newly freed nations are unable to shake off the white man's incursions into their lives.

The historical overview of the child in English literature, and the subsequent recognition of his position in the contemporary English novel as a consciousness and as a strategy, makes it clear that subsequent writers in English from other parts of the world have found a new direction in the way the child is used in fiction. The postcolonial writer has understood how the impact of domestic and political power on the child had made him the ultimate colony. Unveiling the political fissures as reflected through the child's fractured psyche, the postcolonial writer has taken a step towards the integration of both his personal and national identities.

The scrutiny of the child-centred texts has shown that the child, by virtue of his age and relative inexperience, is intrinsically best suited to take a first step; to make a new beginning. Still at the threshold of a full-blown identity, he represents the possibility of a person being an author of his own meaning. For the same reason, through him, the threat of the erasure of identity can be combated and the novelist can take the opportunity of creating meaning through the discursive agency of fictional writing with a child at the centre. As such then, in the postcolonial world he becomes a metaphor both for effecting and representing a break with the
erstwhile 'centre', the child’s imagination becoming a conduit to postcolonial self-definition.

It is now evident that in the last fifty years or so, the child has become the conscious well-meditated choice of many novelists like Lamming, Ghosh, Sidhwa and Okri as the primary consciousness, if not the sole filter, through which comment on the contemporary scene is enunciated. Subsequently, the attempted analysis of this use in novels from the three geographical regions, Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent, has highlighted certain areas of correspondence and divergence.

The shared history of colonialism is certainly responsible for the common emphases on issues like nationalism, the concept of a national identity, decolonisation and English education. Proving the truth of the African proverb that 'sorrow knows neither child nor elder,'\(^2\) the novels from the three regions, locate the child amidst political events of far-reaching consequences, all devastating historical happenings over which the child had no control. In fact, these crucial and trying junctures of history had even made the adult populace helpless. Thus it is that the partition of the Indian subcontinent becomes a powerful and meaningful setting for Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*. Colonialism with the resultant cultural divides and psychological repercussions, inform novels like the above, as also Okri's *The Famished Road*, Ngugi's *Matigari* and Weep *Not Child* and Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* and Foster's *No Man in the House*.

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Consequently, in exercising the choice of the consciousness of a child, the postcolonial writer of fiction from these areas is trying to do what Ngugi counsels:

...In our time man must decide whether he can afford to continue the exploitation of childhood as an arsenal of irrational fears, or whether the relationship of adult and child, like other inequalities, can be raised to a position of partnership in a more reasonable order of things.\(^3\)

Whether the aim is diagnostic, prescriptive, therapeutic or even curative, it is in this capacity that the postcolonial writer fulfils his duty as a leader and commentator on his society and its ills. As already mentioned, Ngugi says, 'literature and writers cannot be exempted from the battlefield.'\(^4\)

The child becomes a metaphor for the fledgling nation, the growth pangs of one finding an echo in those of the other. In countries which have long faced efforts of erasure of national identities at the hands of colonising forces, working out a new independent national identity is high on the agenda for the postcolonial novelists, at least, in the early literary efforts. For Africa and the Indian sub-continent, it was as much a recovery of identity as a recuperation. In the Caribbean, which consisted of

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\(^4\) ibid., p. 12.
people originally displaced from distant continents like Africa and Asia, the imperative was to carve out a completely new one. Foster’s Howard Prescod in *No Man In the House* from the Caribbean, Sidhwa’s Lenny in *Ice-Candy Man* from Pakistan, and Askar in Farah’s *Maps* show this commonality.

Therefore, the postcolonial writer uses the tool of the consciousness of the child as a site for mapping out territories and rescribing histories in the postcolonial novel. What Simon Gikandi says of postcolonial writing in general

> To write is to claim a text of one's own; textuality is an instrument of territorial possession; because the other confers on us an identity that alienates us from ourselves, narrative is crucial to the discovery of our selfhood.⁵

becomes pertinent with reference to the novels with the child at the fulcrum. The growth to awareness of the child runs parallel to this ‘territorial possession’ and thus, symptomises the postcolonial exercise of carving an autonomous identity. The child, in all his ingenuousness becomes the embodiment of the interrogation of the uncertain postcolonial situation which succeeds the colonial experience when the concepts of history and ‘territorial’ inheritance

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are hazy. In fact, in offering his vulnerable self as an unwitting battering ram for the onslaughts of postcolonial ills, he becomes an important tool in the articulation of this critique. As such then, the use of the child gives the novelist the opportunity to locate what Ernest Renan would call the ‘soul’ or the ‘spiritual principle’ of the nation.6

Significantly, in all the child-centred novels from the three regions, the deployment of the child in postcolonial fiction throws light on the different ways a writer can negotiate with the problematic of postcoloniality. With the change in power structures, decolonisation had demanded a symbolic overhauling and a reshaping of dominant meanings. Postcolonial literature formed part of that process of overhaul. Skirting the pitfall of an amnesiac erasure of the past, he often meets it headlong in the ‘anti’ stance apparent in novels like In the Castle of My Skin and Matigari among others. Today, the nineties’ postcolonial novel shows increasing evidence of a third response of the writer revealed in an implicit surmounting of the historical fact of colonisation and all that it involved. This decolonised position of the writer of fiction, very often presumes an awareness of the earlier counter-colonial attitude, with the writer now wilfully electing not to react by taking outright anti-colonial positions. Now, with the recognition of colonisation as an experience of the past, there is, so to speak, little or no anxiety about grappling with the ghosts of the past. Quite often with this attitude, the novelist of the nineties specifically,

moves to a position which is literally 'post' colonial. In these cases, by and large, the 'colonial' problem has been laid to rest.

In novels like Anthony’s *The Year in San Fernando*, Neelum Saran Gour’s *Speaking of '62*, Mrinal Pande’s *Daughter’s Daughters* and to some extent Okri’s *The Famished Road*, the writer now addresses his or her attention to the ‘immediate’ present, to current issues of national or social import. The story has little to do with the past of colonialism directly, though it may still hint at it. In these novels, life in postcolonial times is represented faithfully, bolstered by the sincere belief that the ‘present’ is a viable focus for the launch of a new beginning. This naturally results in the acknowledgement of fresh responsibilities on the novelists’ part.\(^7\)

Whatever the nature of the response, the use of the trope of the child helps the novelist negotiate with the marginality into which the postcolonial has been driven, and reinforces his tropological import as a recuperating, recovering entity. The deployment of the child supplies the critical metaphors required for this recovering engagement in fresh cartographies. The earlier self-aware exercise of dislodging the Eurocentric ideology engendered by the colonisers gives way to the unselfconscious acceptance of the presence of the West in their historical legacy. Both approaches move towards a re-discovery of the self.

Yet, in opting for a particular approach, each writer follows his path in accordance with his own personal and national

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\(^7\) It is to be stressed that this is no rigid classification. They are not chronological and no value judgement is implied vis à vis either categories of ‘postcolonialism.’
background, beliefs and requirements. So, contemporary postcolonial writing with the child at the centre may reveal different levels of inclusion of the colonial. The Zimbabwean Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and the Barbadian Cecil Foster's *No Man in the House* (1991) may show a greater evidence of the erstwhile colonising figure than do the Indian writers- Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and Mrinal Pande in *Daughter's Daughter* (1993). Even within the same geographical set-up, the Caribbean Anthony's *The Year in San Fernando* has less to say about the outcome of colonial rule than Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey*.

Both the novels came out in 1970. Moreover, in spite of common impulses, the regional specifics of historical and geographical location of the three regions are responsible for diverging historical and national perspectives. So, within Africa, though all use the perspective of the child, the Somali Nuruddin Farah talks of the Ogaden conflict in *Maps*, the Nigerian Okri concentrates on the Nigerian civil wars in *The Famished Road*, and the Kenyan Ngugi makes the Mau Mau struggle the centre of *Weep Not Child*.

So too, at the broader level, analysis has revealed differences in the negotiation with the two key aspects—territory and history. The child in the Caribbean novel mirrors the restlessness that results from the particular Caribbean history of slavery which makes it impossible for the same intuitive territorial and historical alignment and cohesiveness as in India and Africa. Floundering in a particular rootlessness the West Indian child generally grows up with the idea of emigration as an attractive means of shaping an independent identity and working out a better future. Moreover, the cultural diversity of Caribbean children with origins in different lands, marks a deep ontological malaise. The few remnants of race
memory are not enough to instil an identifying pride. This imprint of desired diasporic activity is not often evident in the child of the African or the Indian novel in which the child tries to locate identity within the land and its historical and territorial specificities. With no evident ties with a history or a land, the children in the West Indian novels—"G" or Annie, for example, all move away from the islands ultimately.

With the dominant aim of the discovery of identity, the postcolonial novelist from any of the three once colonised lands observes and deciphers both the child and childhood in fiction without regressing to the banal or the sentimental. Without any hint of a bogging nostalgia, the novelist recreates the twin aspects, striving to maintain a discreet balance between the perspectives of the child and the adult. As analysis has highlighted, the deployment of the child is interesting for the paradox inherent in the consciously 'adult' recognition of its importance. The simultaneous presence of the child and the adult's point of view in the novels from the chosen areas enables a nuanced reading of the situation. Lacking a mature, discerning outlook, a child's voice by itself cannot reveal effectively, but an 'adult' childhood voice certainly can. In fact, the children are, quite often, more aware than even adults. Azaro, Askar, Howard and Saleem partake of a kind of knowledge that none of the adults in the novels, The Famished Road, Maps, No Man in the House and Midnight's Children have. In the interests of fictional veracity and critical efficacy, the distance between the adult and the child has to be judiciously maintained. Without unduly accenting it, the postcolonial novel prudently manages to keep this distance.
Maintaining this distance becomes a more demanding task when the childhood portrayed by the novelist is his own, or at least partly his own. It has emerged that a considerable proportion of the fiction from the Caribbean, Africa and the Indian subcontinent deploying the child’s consciousness, has its roots in autobiography. But these novels do not remain limited to the act of remembering. Rather, they represent a feat of working out an independent personal and national identity through the recollection of a childhood self and childhood experience. The adult use of the searching childhood voice becomes a basis of revelation, clarifying the ambivalent affiliations of the postcolonial condition along the way.

The use of autobiographical material is, to a great extent, responsible for the predominant use of the first person narrative technique in these postcolonial novels which have a child protagonist as the narrating consciousness. He needs the distancing absolution of a child’s perspective for any critique that he is making. He also gains artistic elbowroom because the child, by virtue of his age and innocence, cannot be put in the docks for his point of view and can therefore be excused of the onus of accountability. On the other hand, the magnitude of the postcolonial problematic also demands that the use of the child be attributed with urgency and immediacy. The first person narrative succeeds in doing just that. The number of novels using this is quite large and therefore excites attention. *The Famished Road, Maps, Nervous Conditions, Miguel Street, In the Castle of My Skin, No Man in the House, Speaking of ’62, The Shadow Lines* and *Midnight’s Children*, all use the first-person narrative technique. All owe a great deal to their authors’ lives, and all deal with issues close to their hearts.
The experiences that they focus on, are those that they have gone through as children and have felt a need to talk about for a long time. Generally, these novels are either the first, or at least one of the earliest novels of a writer's career, implying that they relate to issues that they had to write about before moving on to other things. The use of the child has thus, in part, a significant cathartic function.

It must be remembered that the reconstruction of a 'previous self' can never be perfect because childhood details can never be recalled accurately or fully. Moreover, the adult perception of things would obviously colour the creative effort. But since the concerns of postcolonial fiction lie elsewhere, the novelist is not bound to paint an 'actual' picture of childhood. Moreover, since this is fiction and not autobiography, he is allowed a certain degree of latitude in the construction. He can pick only a short period in a childhood, as brief a period as two years in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*. This allows concentration on just one main event be it the Partition in this case and in other novels from the Indian subcontinent, or Okri's focus on the Nigerian civil unrest in *The Famished Road*, or the first general elections in free Barbados in *No Man in the House*. Clearly, the idea is not to trace the growth of the child protagonist to physical maturity in years as in the *bildungsroman*, but to concentrate on the impact of this event.

Under these circumstances, the elements of personal and national autobiographies converge and occupy much of the novelist's attention. In the postcolonial scenario, the use of personal history as touched by colonisation is the history that the writer knows best, and it is this that works itself into the novel. This
augments the invaluable quality of immediacy and authenticity. Sidhwa, Rushdie, Ngugi, Lamming or anyone who chooses to write about such issues, reaps the benefit of the mode. The postcolonial writer is called upon to re-textualise his traumatised nation and thus to find representation for the self.

This re-textualisation draws attention to the marginalised child, the bastard, the orphan or the girl-child. In all the three colonised areas studied in this dissertation, one contributing reason was the alienating effect of Western education. The lesson of mimicry, stressed in Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* and forced by the colonisers on their subjects through education, led to a severe crisis of identity. It is not surprising then that most of the novels which deploy the child concentrate on the educational process. *In the Castle of My Skin, The Narrow Path, Nervous Conditions, Weep Not Child, The Potter's Wheel, No Man in the House, Crick Crack Monkey, Beka Lamb,* all detail the schooling of the child protagonists. Education, which had been a major weapon in the hands of the erstwhile coloniser, now becomes wielded by the postcolonial as an enabling tool in this resurgence of a reassured identity.

In the West Indies, with the springboard provided by English education, the child moves out to Western metropolises in quest of a better future when he grows up. In Africa and India too it becomes a means of understanding the self. When the children move out from these two areas, the awareness of a cohering 'national' identity with ties with a particular land and history exercise a check. In India, the positive influence of this new western education was almost immediately discerned and the benefits simultaneously reaped. It is thus that though African and
Caribbean novels detail school life, there is no such instance in the novels from the Indian subcontinent though stray ‘lessons’ given either at home or at school may be presented as in the kitchen classes held by the protagonist’s ‘schoolteacher’ father in Gour’s *Speaking of ’62.*

Though formal education may be a prime factor in the building of identity, the novels obviously also talk about the growth and knowledge which generally come from the experience of life. Either way, it makes the genre of the *bildungsroman* important in the postcolonial context. The use of the child protagonist seems best suited to this genre because the movement from innocence to critical knowledge and self-awareness finds a felicitous and faithful mirror in the physical growth of the child. Yet there is an intrinsic difference in the emphasis in that the child's progress to physical maturity and worldly success is not the main or the only interest of the postcolonial novel.

The fiction of women novelists marks the increasing visibility of the girl-child in postcolonial fiction from all the regions under consideration. Addressing typical feminist problems like a discriminating patriarchy and unequal opportunities for the girl child, the child-centred novels of women novelists like Zee Edgell, Jamaica Kincaid, Merle Hodge, Neelum Saran Gour, Arundhati Roy, Mrinal Pande and Buchi Emechta, Tsitsi Dangarembga become the enunciation of a new-found confidence. The covert and the obvious implications of the socialising myths now come in for a re-interpretation and are followed by the assertion of a new equation within the postcolonial framework.
All the various responses to the postcolonial scenario find their way into the fiction of these women novelists in their mature address of the situation through childhood and its deployment in their fiction. Fictional girl children like Beka, Tee, Annie, are on stronger ground in the Caribbean where the mother is the mainstay of the society in the absence of husbands who have either forsaken them or have gone abroad in search of a better livelihood. Their weakness only surfaces when they, like Shanti and Toycie, are sexually violated. But right from the beginning, girl children in Africa have to fight ‘feminist’ battles against traditional patriarchies which gave them almost no opportunities as compared to boys. These issues are more important to Tambu, Nyasha and Ogechukwu than any others. In the novels from the Indian subcontinent, though the awareness of these issues underlies the novels by women writers, apart from Pande, no one else treats it as the only central issue. There is a confident recognition of the difference of gender and an assertion of the self. Issues other than those of gender are addressed.

Another emergent fact is that the postcolonial writer wields the technique of fantasy as an able aid to voice his critique of the contemporary environment in some of the novels which make use of the child’s point of view. Where there is a rich native tradition of literature to fall back upon, as in the oral literature of Africa and the long history of written literature in the Indian subcontinent, fantasy appears as a tried option as seen in the examples of Okri, Farah and Rushdie. In the West Indies the onus of having to carve an identity out of ‘nothing’ seems to place too much of a burden making the Caribbean novel with the child at the centre more rooted in the reality of the islands. Though Lamming’s In the Castle of My Skin
may become surrealistic in parts, a concerted use of the genre of fantasy seems to be missing in the Caribbean novels discussed here.

Further, the intertextuality of the fictional texts plays an important part in bringing together the concept of childhood and the actual experience of childhood; the lived experience and the imaginary. The relationship between Askar, Azaro, Saleem and Grass's Tin Drummer, is very apparent and yields a fund of rich connections. It makes the postcolonial novel part of the literature of the world though its particular character as African, Caribbean or Asian is still retained. Harking back to the specific Indian or Nigerian political, historical and mythic past, novels like Rushdie's Midnight's Children and Okri's The Famished Road attempt the verbalisation of the 'unsaid'. The critique of the contemporary scene works itself into interstices between the two.

In re-imagining the familiar through the mind of the child, the postcolonial writer manages to tap the possibilities of both the child's perspective and the use of the fantastic. The use is also part of the exercise of identity formation because it, quite often, purports to establish links with an identifying mythic and folk-loric past as in The Famished Road, and Midnight's Children. The intention is to create a fresh mythic structure based on this reclamation of the past. The nature of the tradition, whether oral, as in Africa or written, as in India, naturally influences the structure and the rhythm of the narrative and in the representation of the child hero.

In all the novels, the perspective of the child also facilitates the induction of objectivity which also happens to be a stringent prerequisite for the creation of a fantasy. To quite an extent, in this
fiction the urged distance is achieved by the use of a child narrator. Though traditionally, fantasies subscribe to the third person narrative scheme, it emerges that in the postcolonial fantasy, the first person narrative seems to be preferred as in Farah's *Maps*, Okri's *The Famished Road* and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The apparent illogicality of maintaining distance on the one hand, and destroying it on the other, once again links the use of the child to the ontological disorder of the postcolonial. Following this, it can be conjectured that where the traditional fantasist treaded cautiously by not demanding the ultimate suspension of disbelief, the postcolonial writer's first person narrator insists that this is the only reality.

Furthermore, the bewildered child can sometimes only fall back on the fantastic for support. The erosion of morals in these troubled, buffeted times, hardly allows the formulation of a comfortable norm of the sensible or the rational. In the effort to construct a solid set of beliefs, more often than not, he ends up creating an inverted sort of a myth. The nativity of the three child inhabitants of the phantasmagoria of the postcolonial world, Saleem, Askar and Azaro, is a mock 'creation and nativity' myth. All three have super clairvoyant powers but are ultimately subjected to embarrassing, stultifying or nullifying checks. Saleem's foresight fails at the crucial moment and he goes into a benumbing trance. Ultimately, he is rendered both physically and figuratively impotent. Azaro cannot alleviate his parents' or his nation's misery and Askar loses his mother and his nation, and finds his identity confounded in spite of their visionary powers.
Against the unstable backdrop of postcolonial uncertainty, the child, especially the visionary one, becomes the symbol of hope, and the use of visions and fantasy emphasises this fact. In *The Famished Road*, the father vocalises what the spirit-child has known all along intuitively and the child becomes representative of the effort of freeing the nation from stultifying myths and prejudices. The Caribbean novels with child protagonist-narrators all close on an optimistic note. In *Midnight's Children* Saleem too vests the possibilities of a hopeful future in his child.

Thus, though the entrenchment in a definite fantastic, mythic background establishes that the use of the child is, to a great extent, culture-specific in its manifestation, the trope also helps in working out connective strategies. Sudhir Kakar may be talking of the particular Indian scene when he says:

> I have been thus aware, in myself, and in many other Indian expatriates, of a deep and persistent undercurrent of nostalgia, almost sensual in character, for the sights, smells, tastes, sounds of the country of our childhood.⁸

But his observation is equally applicable to the use of the child in the fiction from other locales like the Caribbean and Africa. His subsequent assertion that 'the element of nostalgic reverence for childhood' is characteristic of the Hindu 'ideal of the liberated man' too hints at the guiding ideal behind the usage in general. This is amply borne out by statements by philosophers like Sarvapalli

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Radhakrishnan who says that

The child is much nearer the vision of the self. We must become as little children before we can enter into the realm of truth... The need for being born again is insisted upon. It is said that the wisdom of babes is greater than that of scholars.  

This was the wisdom that the Romantics had attributed to the child, and is also the strength of the postcolonial literary creation of the child, be it Muruki, Askar or Azaro from Africa; or Saleem, Lenny or Rahel from the Indian subcontinent; or Howard Prescod or Beka Lamb from the Caribbean.

Ultimately, in fiction the metaphorical application of the child overrides the realisation of the child as character. This emphasises the potential and the possibilities inherent in it. So, as Salman Rushdie himself indicates ‘instead of being one speck on the beach, Saleem became the speck that contained the beach.’ The child, moving centre-stage, becomes the means of regaining sight of the need to prepare for the future. The use of childhood implies a hopeful homecoming, a return, a restoration to wholeness. It becomes representative of the working out of a new kind of a nationalism. In this contested site of childhood then, lies the spring of the enigmatic complexity which so often characterises

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postcolonial fiction. Moreover, since the novels which have been taken for consideration are quite often, either the first, or one of the early novels by writers, who were little known till the time of publication for example, Arundhati Roy, the rejuvenative power of the trope is accented. By thus facilitating the entry of the uncanonised into the purview of postcolonial stock-taking, it ensures continued freshness and vigour in the domain of postcolonial writing.

It finally emerges that the use of the child in fiction is a patent clue to the awareness of an ethical responsibility on the postcolonial novelist’s part because the vulnerability of the child imposes an obligation on him. The privilege that he accords to the child clearly stems from his belief that he is emblematic of the postcolonial situation. He believes with Adrian Roscoe that children are ‘those vessels for the visionary optimism of the adult world who are felt to carry the promise of a better tomorrow.’ The child represents a wholeness and a wholesomeness of values which are in danger of being corroded or exterminated. It is through him that the novelist succeeds in opening up local histories against the backdrop of larger, global histories. It is through him finally, that the postcolonial writer specially gives voice to what F.R. Leavis calls, ‘that distinctive sense of responsibility towards life that the Romantic Movement brought to the human heritage.’

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