

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology
of Egypt / Egyptology

Governance of the Ojibwes' Ethical Ideology: An Insight into the
Multifarious Moral Codes in Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House*

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Dr. J . Chitta, Governance of the Ojibwes' Ethical Ideology: An Insight into the Multifarious Moral Codes in Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* - PalArch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 17(9). Key Words: Ethics; Indigenous; Traditional; Moral; Community; Survive

Abstract

Human beings are in need of ethics, to lead a hustle free life. Knowingly or unknowingly they are need to be governed by ethics and values from their birth till they leave the world. It is quite awesome to understand the ethics followed by the indigenous people. Throughout the ages, the Ojibweys immensely believe and follow the traditional ethical practices of their ancestors. In all the ethos of their life, they give priority to human bonding to lead a structured life. In the novel *The Birchbark House* Erdrich provides ample evidences of how the Ojibwe tribe inculcate their young ones on the moral teachings. In the fiction Erdrich firmly proves if a family or a community that follows ethics in their day to day existence will survive.

Full Paper

Ethics and values sustain a society because they govern the expectations of consistency and predictability among the members of that particular society in all their behaviour and action. Willingly or unwillingly humans are being controlled by ethics and moralistic values from birth till death. Especially the first nation people practice the sets of rules and regulations that are processed and executed by their ancestors and are handed over to their generation for sustenance of their tradition. Ojibwe nation celebrate nuances of their culture through the implementation of ethics and moral values among its clan. They inculcate their younger ones on the moral teaching including truth, justice, and honesty. Louise Erdrich, one of the Native American writers brings to the forefront on the patterns of rules and regulations of the Ojibwe tribe in *The Birchbark House*. The fiction comes under children's literature where reader can find morally sound characters rule over the whole

narration. The present paper analyses how the ethical values are transferred from one generation to another in order to uphold the ethical values of the Ojibwes in the years to come.

The Ojibwe tribe is one of the largest tribal groups who reside in the Northern part of United States of America like Dakota and Minnesota has a vibrant tradition of its own. Amazingly this tribal community practices its own cultural practices that are mixed with sacred teachings entwined with nature. Even though they accept the utilitarian functions of the modern technology, they are not ready to forsake their ethical practices. The elders of the Ojibwe tribe inculcates ethical values to their generations along with an interdependency of nature as they believe that “a loving relationship with Earth was central to being fully human and alive” (MacGregor 228). In the fiction *The Birchbark House*, Erdrich provides a detailed narration of the ethical practices of the Ojibwes that weave a part of their eco-cultural life in the mind-nineteenth century. Through the portrayal of the protagonist Omakayas, who lives along with her adopted Ojibwe family in the Anishnabeg Island of the Golden Breasted Woodpecker in a village named La Pointe on the Lake Superior, Erdrich, focuses on the ethical values followed by the Ojibwes. Erdrich also remarkably enunciates the idea that the ethical codes of the Ojibwes help them to establish identities of their own among the world communities as well as which will help them positively to attain spiritual growth and moral growth. The core content of the ethics of the Ojibwes provides a unique position among the other tribal groups.

A society that strictly follows ethical values in its day to day activities enjoys an elegant culture apart from the other world communities. To ensure their society morally sound, the Ojibwes inculcates seven moral teachings to their members including the children. The unique teachings of the Ojibwes are as follows: *inendamoin* (respect), *zhawenjigewin* (love), *soongatiziwin* (courage), *iepwein* (honesty), *amik* (wisdom), *tabasenimowin* (humility) and *kawakaatizinwin* (truth). The writers of the Ojibwe community express the importance of the above values in their literary output. In some of their literary works they link these teachings with the following wild animals and birds: the Buffalo, the Eagle, the Black Bear, the Sow Bear, the Beaver, the Wolf and the Turtle. It can be understood that, if a person adopt these moral principles he can withstand and overcome difficulties that come across in his life. Moreover, these teachings elucidate the value of real-life as well as if a person adheres to these moral values in his life, he can stand before the so called ‘elite’ people, among their clan as well as with the other people because he himself is decent and work for his betterment of life..

The Ojibwes celebrate their ethical nuances through the enriched eco-cultural heritages that are entwined with uniqueness. Through the eco-cultural artefacts of the Ojibwes it can be observed that there is an inevitable interaction of an astonishing environment which is conceived as a part of their cultural practice. The ecocritic Norwood opines that, “Nature and culture are interactive processes: human culture is affected by the landscape as well as effecting change on it” (334). Since the Ojibwes consider nature as their great providence of their on-going journey, they often encode their moral values along with the natural objects or nature. It is through this ideology, the Ojibwes try to get a sustainable identity among the other tribes of the world. In the novel, *The Birchbark House*, Erdrich provides a fact that often rejuvenation takes place in mind due to the blend of ecocultural bondage with the ethical codes that are to be systematically followed in their lifestyle.

Identity is a concept that is traditionally linked with the concepts involving beliefs about who a person is and like who he wants to become. The concept of identity as 'an Ojibwe' is deeply rooted in the minds of the Ojibwes. Hence they curtail their relationship with the colonizers. Always they are beware of themselves of not being mingle with the people of other communities. Their resolution of being aloof from the colonizers and other encroaches not only preserve their cultural purity, but also prevents the diminishment of their culture. To them, their language, their culture and tradition are 'rare' as they segregate them from other world communities and attract the people because they feel their cultural impact is of high value. Erdrich registers the insatiable love of Omakayas and her sister Angeline have to enrol themselves in the school run by Catholic Mission. While they walk near the edge of the school yard they are fascinated by the "signs and marks that the priest made with a soft white stick on the big black wall" (*Birch* 110). Also the singsong "reciting voices floated from inside the log schoolhouse" (110) enchant them. Angeline's face turns "eagerly forward the sound of the priest's instructions" (110), whereas Omakayas suddenly remembers of the words of her grandmother, which retrieves of her conscious mind. Nokomis already has instructed Omkayas. , " 'don't forget your own. You are Anishnaabe. Your mother and grandmother are wolf clan people. Don't forget. Also, you sweat bath yourself clean every day, even jump in the freezing lake, a thing that a Chimookomanung do not do. My girl, don't become like them " (110). The above instance provides an example, of how the virtue is incorporated in the mindset of the seven years old Omakayas, which makes her a sudden decision of not mingle herself with the colonizers. Respecting the elderly people is one of the basic virtue that is taught to the Ojibwe young ones. Since Omakayas respects her grandmother and so she reconsiders her resolution of not going to the Mission School and educating herself, she winds down her thoughts and decides to be like a 'pure' Ojibwe tribe culturally and ethically.

To maintain a better relationship, the Ojibwes adapt nuances in an enigmatic manner, which is revealed the narration of certain incidents in the novel. The parents never show partiality among their children, which is clearly evident as in the case of Omakayas. Even though she is an adopted daughter they encourage her to involve in many cultural activities that enrich her cultural heritage and her parents' greatness is seen is not revealing the secrets of her birth and parentage. Also the elders encourage the youngsters to enrich the activities and also they boost them up to do certain household works. Once when Omakayas is unable to fasten the beads, tears roll from her eyes. But Angeline encourages her, which creates a positive attitude within herself which instils her to encourage Milkwan, her father to win in the game of chess results in "a small square of salt pork, a bit of flour, some dried apples, and a bladder of fish oil"(165), which comforts the starving family to come out of its hunger. Henceforth it is evident that when moral values once instilled within a human mind, a positive reaction is the outcome.

The eco-cultural life of the Ojibwes is depicted in the novel through the Ojibwes' celebrations in the cultural evenings amidst serene and ecofriendly atmosphere during the winter nights. It is a peculiar feature of the Ojibwes to celebrate winter nights with dance, which is one of the arts that bifocus the culture of their society. During the social gathering they dance for the music which enhances community bonding as it unites their minds together. Actually, "Music occupies a vaguely defined territory which blurs the distinction between mind and body, conscious and unconscious experience, the self and others" (Ryan 105-6). During winter nights, the Ojibwes unite together as a crowd of drummers, dancers, grandparents, parents and children, who seat themselves

on soft dance lodge for the rhythmic beats of the drum they dance holding “partridge- fail fan” (*Birch* 141) with its handles made of “birch back, bound tightly, quilled with sweet flowers” (129). Erdrich reverberates the idea that the tribal people expose their deep cultural heritage mixing their enthralling conscious experience within themselves and others. After the dance the Ojibwes partake in the social gathering laughing, talking till they end their day with a grand feast enjoying “venison and corn soup” (142) which is served in the “birch bark makuks”, which once again stresses the idea that the Ojibwes always have a deep faith with the social gathering through which they can maintain their affinity with one another.

For a better understanding among the people of a community healthy relationships should be maintained. It cannot be built on a single day; rather, it can be developed day-by-day with love, care and gentle affection that each other in the clan share within themselves. Erdrich writes that ‘oneness’ of the family members is essential for the betterment of life. Each day the family members of Omakayas work together even “the family worked hard to prepare as much food as possible for the winter” (99). Also when they come together for some familial purposes, they seem to be united as it is recorded in the novel as, the Ojibway community while they come together, they enjoy “games in the rice camps, the pleasures of talk, feasting, more talk, more visiting and feasting” (91). It must be noticed that when Deyday, returns from the trade, many aunties and uncles of Omakayas, gather in her house to hear stories from Deyday and crack jokes among themselves. It is an amazing fact that while they are together either as a family or as a community they never quarrel among themselves or they spread rumours against each other. It is really a challenge to the modern world in which black sheeps and back biters move around and spoil the reputation of the fellow human beings.

Communal relationship is decently maintained for a healthy relationship among the clan. The Ojibways has a unique way of welcoming and thanking others. The characters in the fiction use Ojibwa terms whenever they greet others, which automatically represent the importance that they give to each other. They use the following words “*Ahneen*” (a greeting) (23) “*mino aya sana*” (I wish you good health), (23) for a greeting and wishing good health and “*megwetch*” (128), a word used to thank others. Moreover, in order to enhance their relationships, they also share food. When Milkwan gets venison, he shares it with “his starving family and to Tallow, who shared it to Auntie Muskrat, Lo LaPautre’s hungry children, and to Fishtail” (183). When Fish Tail meets Omakayas’ family the family feels his sickness and provides him a good stew, which “he took great gulps of the fish broth, and slowly feeling better” (194) and begins to talk to others. Not only wish others from their heart, the Ojibways but also they put their words into actions which not only comforts the physical ailment but also it helps them to strengthen their relationships.

Familial life of the Ojibwa community is strongly binded with cultural ethical codes that are overlapped with love. Omakayas’ parents never show partiality among the children, Even though Omakayas, their adopted daughter, they never reveal that secret to her. Rather they show slightly extra affection and care than their own children. Even the grandmother of the house is seen instructing, insulating new ideas, and histories about their clan often. Most of the time Omakayas, is seen with her grandmother, who is the elderly person in the family. Often Nokomis and Yellow Kettle, seem to be worried that Omakayas, lacks few in her life, which shows that they show affection to their very much.

Healthy practices and optimistic attitudes sustain and strengthen a society's future. Voluntarily the elders themselves take up the responsibility of passing on the values to their generation. Erdrich, being a contentious writer brings to the forefront on how a religious belief which is based on eco-cosmology develops a sense of respect for the elders of a community. The religious belief of the Ojibwes centers around Gitchie Manitau, the supreme being Omakayas, visualizes the heartfelt prayer of her beloved grandmother, through which she is infused in her conscience to adopt her way. It may be a nuance to her, but she feels that Nokomis' prayer dispels darkness from the world. Omakayas, watches the prayer offered by Nokomis, raising her hands towards the sun near the water in the morning as well as in the dusk which makes Omakayas, to make a judgement, "Whenever grandma prayers, She made the world around her feel protected, safe central" (101). Omakayas feels that the flora and fauna of the environment in which she lives show reverence to the prayer of Nokomis. Omakayas observes when Nokomis, prays, "Everything grew very quiet around her . . . Outside, the birds hushed. The sky bent to listen. The wind died down. Golden leaves balanced in the air" (101). The following prayer of Nokomis, is not a self-centered prayer, but it reveals the inner most angst of a person who prayer for the protection of her community. Nokomis prays,

"We are very small," she said "just human. Help us to live this winter through. Come to us, especially, during the harshest moon, the crust on the snow moon, when so often meat is scarce, when the ice is too thick to catch many fish, when disease breaks us and the windigo spirit, the hungry one, come stalking from house to Anishinabe house." (*Birch* 102-03)

The above prayer is not only a proof to the religious life of the Ojibwes but also an example to be followed by her generations. In fact Omakayas follows the footsteps of Nokomis because she believes that the older generation people always stand like a sign post that shows direction for the new arrivals.

Moreover it is a peculiar feature of the indigenous people to live in harmony with all nature and the dwellers of earth. They believe that their existence is entwined with ecology, thereby in order to partake with this ability, Ojibwes accept provisions and food from nature all grateful heart. To their children, Ojibwes impart natural intelligence' that provides them "with education about their environment on a daily basis. Children learn to find food and how to build shelter, and in doing so they come to know and understand everything that walks, crawls, or grows" (MacGregor 235). They offer a prayer of thankfulness to Manitous or to the spirits before obtaining things from their surroundings Nokomis, teaches Omakayas, how to get provisions from their environment. Omakayas, also adheres to the words of Nokomis, for instance before cutting the bark of the birch tree, Omakayas, talks to Manitous and Nokomis, dips out a pinch of tobacco to it. Afterwards Omakayas, talks to the birch tree telling "old sister' she said to the birch bark tree, "we need your skin for our shelter" (*Birch* 7). At this juncture there are two ideas are to be noticed; the inculcation practice of imparted to the children of how to respect elders and the nature that surround them. It should be noticed that the natives show high regard and respect for people as well as Mother Nature that help them to sustain their life.

The familial life of Ojibwa community is closely knitted which is bonded with love. The kind of love that is practiced in the families can be stated as "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant" (I Corinthians 13:4). The elders of the family build the family up with

'love' which is manifested through smile, happiness, exchanging gifts and never let down while passing through toughest situations in life. Yellow Kettle does the household chores with delight. Her "smile was generous, enigmatic, slightly crooked and kind" (9-10). Her approach to everyone in the family with love which is tinted with smile makes everyone in the family to respect her. The father of the family Milkwarm, shows his love through the precious gifts that he gives everyone after every trade. Actually "he loves giving gifts, drawing out the suspense and he always chose wonderful things" (68). The gifts are rare which shows his ability to buy "a length of blue broadcloth for Mama to sew into a dress. He bought Pinch some calico trim for a pair of makazins, and a piece of velvet cloth for Angeline to use as she wished. For Nokomis, sewing needles and a cup of shining copper. For Omakayas, he "bought a small cross stamped out of German trade silver" (216-17). He also gets the love and affection from the family members. Never a time Milkwarm scolds his family members not shouts at him. Continuously working, once he becomes tired which is noticed by Omakayas, She pleasingly tells him " 'Rest, Deydey' she begged in fear at his fixed and set face, his deep eyes" (145). Then she gives a cup of rabbit soup to strengthen him. This shows the 'love' of a little girl towards her father. Moreover, there are ample evidences in the fiction of how the whole family sheds on love and affection towards each other to build up their relationships. Erdrich reverberates the fact that the pure love shown towards each other brings forth happiness and joy to a family which automatically raises the 'quality of life' of the each member of the family.

The parents of the Ojibwe community enforce strict rules and regulations their children so that their children would grow up into decent human being who will not be a menace to the society. When need arises, they even shout at them and threaten them to reinforce to do their works promptly. Yellow Kettle helps the children to maintain their family garden. Pinch her son "pretended to help" (226) and he kicks at tiny weeds and smoothed circle in the dirt with his hands and also throws mud balls. When Yellow Kettle notices him, she "gave her *hoe* to him" (226) and threatens him "if he stopped working just once she would take away all of his play warrior weapons" (226). Omakayas who is nurtured as a wholesome personality by the elders always remembers their advice. When she is in a mood to raise question to Old Tallow, she remembers, "Mama had always insisted that Omakayas be polite as possible to her elders Omakayas, pretended to listen to the story" (231). The above evidences poignantly focus the ideas that if the parents try to grow up their children with proper care and restrictions, they will behave in a proper way.

Erdrich emphatically idealizes the fact that the Ojibwes are united together with a bond of love. They experience this uniqueness of this bond when they do household activities, unitedly and during the time when they are on and during the time when they are on and off their homes. The writer focuses the relationship between a grandmother Nokomis and her granddaughter Omakayas, in a peculiar manner. Nokomis and Omakayas amazingly united to cut the bark of the birch tree to set up a birch bark house for them. After gathering the birch bark, the whole family constructs their house without any ego, fuss and grudge, which is a wonderful act of love. Their new house "was swept out, smoothed, fussily arranged and admired, they moved in" (9). The above line from the fiction provides a proof on how household purposes are being done with happiness.

It is a universal ideology of the elders to teach moral values to the young ones which is the duty of their community. When it is continued the moral base of a youngster who is being trained or educated is shaped into a well-behaved one. A child, who is below the age of eight continue to do

any activity as it becomes a habit for them. The children mostly involve in the progression of the novel are below eight years or just crossed their eight years. The protagonist Omakayas is eight years old, her brother is younger to her, whereas her sister Angeline is about ten years old. The novelist points out that, "the old people talked to the young people, teaching them about the way to live as an Anishinabe in this world" (210). Not only through their talk or words, but also the elders especially the parents and the grandparent teach them what they should follow so that their community will always thrive amidst difficult circumstances.

Erdrich focuses a view that how a mother in an Anishinabe family imbibes moral etiquettes to their children. Yellow Kettle the mother of Omakayas, assigns Pinch to dry deep blackish-purple chokecherries, a clean birch bark in the warmest patch of sun she can find. She instructs him "You watch them carefully now, Big Pinch. Keep the birds away. Listen, my son" (83). The words and actions followed shows how the mother carefully evokes awareness and has efficiently planned his son to imbibe a work. She "narrowed her eyes at Pinch" (83) and gives a ferny branch so that he will know he is trusted with an important task. Ambitious Pinch consumes the chokeberries till the birch bark is almost empty. On returning from her work, Yellow Kettle yells at him "What happened? Where are the berries I picked you sleepy boy!" (85). Those words could not elicit an answer from him. Later on, Pinch's stomach hurts him a lot Yellow Kettle, checks out him and finds that he had eaten those cherries. The mother yelling sound " 'Pinch' is a voice was worse than angry" (88). Here, it can be understood at times, parents should raise their voice and teach their children the right way to follow. The raising tone of the voice just threatens young children and in future when they are tend to commit mistakes. The voice they once heard will never allow to do the same. In the latter part of the fiction when Pinch tries to tell a lie, of killing a deer, but he never does. He is "amazed at himself for not lying" (215). May be in his mind he heard the threatening voice of his mother. If the parents take authoritative steps to teach their siblings they will never repeat commit mistakes.

To build a high self-esteem in their children, the elders often serve as role models to them. If the child is able to see and feel what the elders are doing they can repeat it when they are in a position to take decisions. The elders in Ojibwa community subject themselves as good models to be followed. Nokomis the mother-in-law of Yellow Kettle often works with her without any fuss or grudge. Yellow Kettle checks "fish nets" (183) and along with Nokomis she repairs the canoe which used by the family for travel that is "beautifully made, light and strong, carefully water- proofed" (91-92). On the day the family set out for rice harvest, Yellow Kettle "Paddle(s) and steer(s)" (92) the canoe. The narrator of the novel Omakayas watches all these incidents. Moreover, Yellow Kettle and Nokomis, are known "as the keepers of a good store of food and a warm fire" (122). Also in repairing their house hold item It is recorded in the novel as "Mama and Grandma set their workout on blankets before them" (129). Nokomis, "was completing the edge of a great round box of birch bark" (129) is seen cutting "fancy shapes of stars out to sew in the sides and "finished a beautiful dance fan made of a partridge tail" (129) and Yellow Kettle tries to finish Angeline's fine clothing "to wear at the gathering dance" (129) that would be held soon. In the afore mentioned incidents it is evident that the elders in the Ojibwe family become lively examples for the children. Their dexterous works also convey an idea that round through the year, a family should be closely knitted and so their works promptly.

It is quite amazing to find the practical works of the young ones are over saw by the elders of the Ojibwa community. Not only serving as the role-models but also they provide chance to work along with them, which automatically rears up self-confidence in the children mind as well as it provides an opportunity to do the works in an manner. The elders teach those multifarious household chores including sewing, cutting the wood, decorating their house processing food, cooking, buying provisions from town and so on. Nokomis gets the assistance of Omakayas to cut birch bark to construct their house, and “watching her Keenly, made a great fuss over the work Omakayas, had done on the hide” (36) “Nokomis and Omakayas, arranged the food they'd brought” (196). To get the maple syrup Nokomis, teaches Omakayas, to chop the until “She had a huge sack full of wedges, which Omakayas, lugged back to the camp” “Omakayas and her grandmother are also seen “hard retrying the intersection on last year's willow frame’ (222) and cuts “new bark, made fancy overlaps and rain diversion flaps” (222). The training that Omakayas, gets makes her to establish herself as a good of the house. Along with Angeline she drags kettles of mud and “chinked the cracks that had opened during hot weather” (91). The training that the elders provide makes the young ones assertive to complete the household works easily and usefully.

Courage is cultivated within a person when he allows himself to undergo pain and intimidation. It is a part of life, without which a person cannot succeed in life. When the children are allowed to undergo tribulations in their life, they will be moulded and chiselled from all ugliness in their life. In the fiction, Old Tallow is “so isolated by the force and strangeness of her personality” (19) who live alone with “ferocious animals more wolf than dog” (19–20) that are fiercely devoted to her. Omakayas who is a regular visitor to old tallow's house, often? “Screwed up her courage” (21) when she enters into her house. This action provides her an inherent energy to undertake huge tasks beyond her capacity as a small girl. Omakayas, and Angel hunt birds with Nokomi's fishing net while they guard their corn fields. When they fall on the net, they “caught each struggling, flapping bird and broke its neck with one quick, strong twist” (58) and bring back to their household enthusiastically, which makes their father to exclaim “These are my daughters . . . They are hunters” (60). The word ‘hunter’ explains the wholesome personality of a person who hunts ferociously. Erdrich provides a fact that Ojibwa parents encourage ‘capacity building’ attitude of their children. Courageous persons undertake difficult tasks and achieve in their life. Towards the end of the novel, Erdrich records how Old Tallow courageously saves Omakayas from the Spirit Island which is infected by small pox where she is the only survivor. This incident boosts up the courage of the readers and kindles their thoughts to undertake courageous action when identical situation comes across in their lives.

Industrious people are abundantly blessed with diligence and enthusiastic nature. The elders whom Omakayas, has seen are all hand working persons throughout the year. She constantly watches her mother working throughout the day, her grandmother tirelessly works for the well-being of the family and her father whose is a trader, often undertakes voyages. She also knows the efficiency of the female members of her family. When the small pox takes away the life of Neewo, his younger son, he is completely devastated but he “spent the day chopping wood, hauling water, hunting, chopping holes in ice, fishing to keep them strong making sure the water in their kettle was always fresh and clear, their wood piled high”(145). Having visualized the untiring works of their parents and grandmother, Omakayas, Angeline and Pinch also undertake high tasks. Omakayas helps her family rekindling “the outdoor cooking fire” (73) “smoothing and arranging the coals into an even

bed for baking the meat” (115). Omakayas, Angeline and Pinch are the ones “responsible for hauling the water for tea and the wood for fire that burned in the proud little hearth”(122). Once Pinch is sent out to “bring wood” (132). Omakayas, Twilight and Little Bee “carted heavy rocks from the lakeshore to weigh down the makuks and then hauled wood for the fire” (197), till they become tired. Since these children observe the day to day activities of their parents, they are encouraged to follow their examples. Since the elders create a rigid aroma of working atmosphere throughout the day, which consciously or unconsciously make the children to follow their path.

Throughout the novel *The Birchbark House*, Erdrich pinpoints the idea that there is a fusion of ethical values with a personality of a person. To a better survival and an efficacy of life, moral codes should be certainly implemented in a society, within every family circle and in a person's life. Erdrich points out that, the Ojibwes inculcate ethics to their younger generation so that they can lead a healthy life. The fiction revolves around children of below ten years old, which is an age that shapes human mind. The elder characters in the fiction provide themselves to be the role models to their generation in all aspects of life. Following them, the younger ones do all the odd jobs with discipline, which includes maintaining amiable relationships, sharing food, valour and so on. Erdrich brings to the forefront that indigenous people thrive in their life, as they follow the aforementioned qualities. The whole world is sincerely waiting for a new generation with optimal ethical qualities that can drive humans to a better understanding of humanism and friendliness among the human beings for better survival.

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