



RESEARCH PAPER

**Cities and the Palimpsest: An Analysis of Urban Landscape in
China Mieville's The City and the City**

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ABSTRACT

The earth being a Palimpsest tablet encompasses different layers of history and cultures in terms of architecture. The current study aims to highlight the importance of utilizing the principles of palimpsests which allow the communication of ideas of landscapes while also complementing the existing surroundings in China Mieville's *The City and The City*. The study through qualitative analysis identifies how the layers of architecture in the city of Ul Qoma and Bezel are represented in quite a subtle and minimalistic way. These layers are not just limited to geological constructions, rather they encompass endless transformations and modifications in the past as well as the present. The cities represented in the novel have an urban structure, which evolved over a certain period through the overlapping of ideas, experiences, and values from different historical eras.

Keywords

China Mieville, City Literature, Historical Transformations, Layering of Bezel & Ul Qoma, Palimpsests, *The City & the City*

Introduction

Urban spaces are intrinsically associated with political, social, and financial happenings in the cities and continually transform themselves to reflect changes inside these environments. These spaces are ideal channels to analyze the social, political, or spatial changes that take place. They additionally incorporate the portrayal of their inhabitants and their behavioral and psychological conduct. Hence, these spaces are an embodiment of complexities and contradictions. To study these spaces and the constant modifications that they go through, the phenomena of Palimpsest is put forward. The term 'Palimpsests' originated in the mid 17th century. It is derived from the Greek word 'palimpsēstos' palin meaning "again", and psēstos meaning "rubbed smooth". However, Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary gives palimpsest the extended definition of "something having usually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface" (Webster, 2010) leaving a broad range of possible applications for the term. In the book, *Archeology of Time* by Gavin Lucas, "it refers to the traces of multiple, overlapping activities over variable periods and the variable erasing of earlier traces" (Lucas, 2005, p.48).

The urban landscape is a space of practices in which various artifacts play their roles and set the canvas for the citizens in public space to represent their form

of art creating layers, hence palimpsest usually refers to a superimposition of successive activities. These layers could be temporal, spatial, or even imaginary in accordance with their constant transformations and representation of art and architecture in a given period. Kevin Lynch in his article, 'Valladolid Cathedral: a suspended palimpsest' explains it as, "Layering is used as a deliberate device of esthetic expression – the visible accumulation of overlapping traces from successive periods, each trace modifying and being modified by the new additions, to produce something like a collage of time. It is the sense of depth in an old city that is so intriguing. The remains uncovered imply the layers still hidden" (Lynch, 2016, p.1). Hence the paper analyzes the relationship between landscape and palimpsest and how palimpsest acts as a tool for the construction of landscape architecture.

China Mieville's views on cities have drastically changed from being comfortable with traditional patterns in *Perdido Street Station* (2000) to *The City and The City* (2009) where he believes in the evolution of the cities and cities being spaces of experimentation. His exploration of urban settings in the novel is quite literal, he not only describes the physicality of the architecture or what it means to live in an urban environment but also the psychological interpretation of how cities behave and evolve. He uncoils the two different cities of Bezel and Ul Qoma sharing the same geographical space but with completely different set patterns. The study will explore the concept of palimpsest in the context of socio-economic transformations and will shed light on the patterns of archeological features resulting in a strong interplay between human activities and the physical changes that take place in the landscape of Bezel and Ul Qoma. With the uprise of globalization, homogenous cityscapes started appearing with the loss of local architecture in the city of Bezel and Ul Qoma because of new implementations that took place as a result of capitalism and industrialization. This study aims to highlight the importance of utilizing the principles of palimpsests which will allow for the integration of the present construct methods while also complementing the existing surroundings in the novel.

Literature Review

Urban landscape and its quality completely depend on the spatial and temporal factors of the city's evolution. Donald Meinig was the first geographer to describe the landscape as a palimpsest in his book "The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes". According to him the making of the landscape is a temporal process and the landscape itself reflects some of its past properties. Jasper Knight in "Development of Palimpsest Landscapes" discussed how different landforms that make up the landscape are not from the same age rather they are formed at some point in the past when conditions, processes, or environments were different or operated at a different magnitude to present. "A useful way to conceptualize the development of a palimpsest landscape is to consider each successive episode of landscape change to be a different 'layer' laid as a blanket across the landscape's surface" (Knight, 2017, p.2).

Justin Prystash in "The Misplaced Familiar: Aesthetic Crisis in China Mieville's *The City & The City*" represents how architecture is just not a cultural manifestation but rather a visual expression of changing historical circumstances, economic and social conditions, and ideas and values. 'The cities are the most suitable places for engaging alterity because urban ecology is so deeply textured: the complex web of streets, buildings, surrounding air, and beneath the city's surface presents a deeply entangled vision of being' (Prystash, 2017, p.13).

Ljubica Matek in the article 'Who Owns the City? China Miéville's *The City and the City* as an Urban Gothic Dystopia' describes the reasons for all the changes that occur in the landscape of the city as, "The rise of the city (that is, urbanization) is inextricably linked with industrialization and, subsequently, with capital and its accumulation" (Matek, 2020, p.18). However urban development should not only protect the past but the past and present should be regarded as one integrated organism so that the architectural spirit is imprisoned and dying can be given a new life. The idea of the city of Bezel and Ul Qoma having multilayers due to historical and cultural aspects is described by Johan Schimanski in his article "Seeing Disorientation: China Miéville's *The City & the City* " as "The fictional cities of China Miéville's *The City & the City* are set in a fragmented and multi-layered space characterized by displacement and disorientation" (Schimanski, 2016, p.2).

On the other hand, William Morris and John Ruskin being the founder of 'The theory of Preservation' believed that one should never try to restore the building in terms of preserving its historical and cultural values as the restoration itself is a lie. In Morris's day, "restoration" was related to the practice of destroying parts of the building and rebuilding but the architectural style did not resemble the original style hence completely abolishing the layers formed under the phenomena of Palimpsests.

Considering the literature review, I found the palimpsest concept being used within a range of landscape-related fields. However, the idea of 'Palimpsests' has not been fully studied and is still an unexplored topic from a theoretical landscape architecture perspective. I'll utilize the theoretical framework of 'Palimpsest' to describe the changes that take place in the city of Bezel and Ul Qoma. Unlike the research mentioned above, this paper will interpret and describe the use of land to build structures in an urban context. Within some disciplines, the landscape is simply regarded as a physical entity however this paper will discuss the phenomena of palimpsests as a social construct.

Material and Methods

The research is qualitative provided that it is a theoretical analysis of urban landscape through the lens of palimpsest in China Miéville's *The City and The City*. To support the arguments, the idea of 'Layering' is taken into consideration as looking at the landscape through the lens of the palimpsest involves the interaction between physical layers, layers of time, historical layers, and cultural layers.

Theoretical Framework

Through the lens of 'Palimpsest', the study will focus on the renovations of the historical building and monuments in the city of Bezel and Ul Qoma along with keeping traces of the past in the context of development and remaking. This phenomenon may take place in two forms in the novel

1. Using old buildings and monuments as an origin of new design
2. Designing a new building in such a way that the one wrecked can be fully distinguished and can also be renovated and reconstructed.

This study clarifies palimpsest's potential as a tool for theoretical and practical work within the field of landscape architecture. The concept of Palimpsest can potentially be utilized to 'describe' and 'design' landscape. How the combination

of historic layers with the ideas of identity can create an architecture that establishes a new 'sense of place' to juxtapose the past with the present. This paper will analyze how the protagonist of the novel, Inspector Borlú identifies the layering of multiple elements, styles, or designs across time. The layers could be physical, layers of meanings, layers of time, historical layers, or even cultural layers.

Method of Analysis

An inductive approach is used to conduct this research. The data collected in this research begins with idea that for every landscape, there are certain historical references, which are established by its inhabitants or visitors in the form of memorials, monuments, or even collective memories of destruction and reconstruction.

Results and Discussion

The transformative processes of time and history in terms of buildings, landscapes, objects show how human beings constantly rebuild their environments, similarly we find evidence and remains of those who have experienced different cultures and social norms at the given place. Cities are so deeply scatted and textured that they can't be conceived as a whole, similarly the borders that we utilize to define them are also arbitrary. While a physical layer is represented by a defined border between one stratum and another, landscape as a body alters itself both physically and in terms of human understanding. To express the shift and flow of landscape, the idea of 'layering' can be taken in consideration. These layers could be temporal, spatial or even imaginative. These layers are emblematic of continual transformations in an urban setting, where each layer tells us a story.

Palimpsest- A Metaphor for Landscape Development

Architectures and designers along with mixing relics or traces of past with contemporary narrations create such a strong link between the old and new as if the newly created cityscape protects the older one. This impact of human actions on cityscape and landscape can be observed at different levels of human settlements, transport routes and architecture. Certain elements remain in place for long periods of time, some change, some are forgotten, and some of them are reinvented while some of them are destroyed and new elements emerge in their place. A true palimpsest is strict in terms of all the traces of earlier activities that have been removed or renovated. Inspector Borlú being the observer and witness of all the changes that take place in the city of Bezel and Ul Qoma defines them as, "A few decades before these places would not have been so tumbling down; they would have emitted more noise and the street would have been filled with young clerks in dark suits and visiting foremen. Behind the northern buildings were industrial yards, and beyond them a curl in the river, where docks used to bustle and focuses where their iron skeletons still graveyard lay" (Mieville, 2009, p.21).

One of the major layers of the literary palimpsest that constitutes the cities in the novel is 'Physical Layering' as streets in both the cities are "crosshatched", meaning a street, building, or even room can be in either city i.e., Citizens can see building both in Bezel and Ul Qoma. To attain a sustainable, balanced, and coherent development of the city with rich historical past the cultural heritage must be revitalized along with exclusive developments. Similarly, architectures also believe that different cultures are piled up in landscape which are then translated and

decoded by the people in upcoming generations. Likewise, when Inspector Borlú looks at these ancient buildings and monuments he relates them back to what they were before the development took place. "Beszel's dark ages are very dark. Sometime between two thousand and seventeen hundred years ago the city was founded, here in this curl of coastline. There are still remains from those times in the heart of the town, when it was a port hiding a few kilometers up the river to shelter from the pirates of the shore" (Mieville, 2009, p.49).

While analyzing the urban landscape as a palimpsest, combination of old architectural values with new ones along with preserving the local identity can be identified, since the cities themselves are created as a patchwork quilt of individual viewpoints and opinions. Considering the incidents from the novel, the concept of palimpsest had a positive effect while re-designing buildings in the city of Ul Qoma, "The once collapsing Ul Qoma rookeries, crenellated and lumpenbaroque (not that I saw them—I unsaw carefully, but they still registered a little, illicitly, and I remembered the styles from photographs), were renovated, the sites of galleries and startups" (Mieville, 2009, p.52). The city of Bezel was considered as more of a decaying, poorer, more traditional, and less secular city in comparison to Ul Qoma, the more prosperous city of modern architecture and skyscrapers and fashion expounds how the association of economic benefit with the development of the city through new buildings and architecture can provide the state with long lasting benefits. "The back streets and forgotten shops were replaced by warehouses and factories. "Few antique Besz' stylings, few steep roofs or many-paned windows: these were hobbled factories and warehouses" (Mieville, 2009, 160).

Throughout history it can be observed that people remembered the past through the transfer of ideas, history and culture in the form of architecture which allows for the continuation of narrative and contribute to a rich memory landscape that cultivates a unified perception of community memory. Similarly, the city of Bezel was growing rapidly with its chaotic and dynamic features that were constantly changing and transforming the city to produce new urban spaces for its inhabitants. While Inspector Borlú was investigating the murder and was looking for the clues, he tried to understand the complicated marginalia, the victim, Mahalia, wrote in her copy of Bowden's monograph, *Between the City and the City*. "I could discern phases of annotation, though not in any page wise chronology – all the notes were layered, a palimpsest of evolving interpretation. I did archaeology" (Mieville, 2009, 45).

It is evident that these layers hold diverse range of opinions and interests held by a specific group of people examining a particular landscape project, the way Mahalia was trying to study the third city, Orciny. It could also include different associations or a certain emotion that evokes in the visitors, depending on their individual experiences and connections to the place. Borlú was just not an ordinary walker rather he was a flâneur, who derived meanings from the social structures and architecture of both the cities by forming intimate relationship with each city's unique features. While Inspector Borlú visited Ul Qoma he met, Dr. David Bowden, He described his library as if it was in need of renovation, "His walls were painted beiges and browns in need of renovation it had bookshelf, antique maps of both the cities and clockwork" (Mieville, 2009, 162) representing the amount of historical evidences that were stored in that library i.e. as if he had stored the time, leading to the layering of history and meaning.

Memory and Mapping

A palimpsest can never be considered as something neutral. Similarly, there are always some concealed ideologies and powers working behind that or something is abolished to make space for something new. It is vital to identify the mechanism that makes something to be hidden of less importance or to bring it up front or resurface it from oblivion. This can be easily studied through mapping, which also highlights the significance of any landscape that lays in its intangible layers. Maps being an instrument to study landscapes help us define the complex relation of time, space and memory. Similarly, people residing within a specific border hold diverse range of opinions and interests forming their collective memory.

The city of Bezel and Ul Qoma being sites of long history reflected cultural values, traditions and norms. These remind us of once occurring human interactions and their contributions in forming city's identity as a palimpsest. "These few streets – mongrel names, Illitan nouns and a Besz suffix, YulSainStrász, LiligiStrász, and so on – were the center of the cultural world for the small community of Ul Qoman expatriates living in Beszel. They had come for various reasons – political persecution, economic self-betterment" (Mieville, 2009, p.48). The idea of identity goes beyond human beings, it includes each force that shapes the city, whether it's time or space, but collectively the form different layers of Palimpsest. The urban spaces of Ul Qoma and Bezel were constantly expanding and were recreated with the addition of more and more layers,

The palimpsest layers discussed in the study range from physical remains of natural and cultural city to communal memory associated to the city of Bezel and Ul Qoma making it historically significant. The identity of the cities is formed through its urban fabric and how they are carried from one generation to another. Since buildings have the capacity to adjust to the changing surroundings, as to physical wear and tear, their magnitude to survive also increases with developments around them. Inspector Borlú discloses this phenomenon in a way that it encompasses the character defining elements of past and it appears as a work of art. "We passed between ancient age-mottled roadside stone pillars. I recognized them from photographs, remembered too late that the one on the eastern side of the road was the only one I should see – it was in Ul Qoma, the other in Beszel" (Mieville, 2009, p.180).

While remembering the old city Of Bezel, Inspector Borlú considers it as a lack of identity, as the old houses were abolished with 'newly gentrified chic' and more and more foreigners had taken over the place. The feeling of Beszel familiarity was replaced by some larger strangeness. (Mieville, 2009, p.217) This lack of identity often arises intense feelings among people as the new buildings are drastically different from the historical surroundings. While mentioning 'DöplirCaffé' Inspector Borlú states, "One Muslim and one Jewish coffeehouse, rented side by side, each with its own counter and kitchen, halal and kosher, sharing a single name, sign, and sprawl of tables, the dividing wall removed" (Mieville, 2009, p.27) but the scenario completely changed with the interruption of 'breach'. Maps are the representation of our real world on a much smaller scale. During the investigation, maps really helped Inspector Borlú and his team to get from one location to another in the city of Ul Qoma. Being a functional too they simplified complicated information for them. "Maps made clear to walkers where they might go. It was here in the crosshatch that the students might stand, scandalously, touching distance from a foreign power, pornography of separation" (Mieville, 2009, p.225).

Since the borders or invisible boundaries keep on changing from time to time, depending on the sort of remaking and reconstruction that takes places it not only brings changes in its physical form rather it creates a new sense of the place. Likewise, all the cities have layers of history, some are visible some are hidden or partially erased so in order to fully discover the city and explain the enormous fascinations they bring maps are crucial. "I traced on my map the proximity and route between Bol and the offices of Ul Qoma University" (Mieville, 2009, 188). Similarly, when Inspector Borlú along with his team visited Ul Qoma, he took a map with him. These maps act as evidence that something existed in the given period of time, the places, the shops, the cafes and the architecture too.

According to the geography of the cities of Beszel and Ul Qoma the two cities lie on top of one another, with a different city lying on top as a 'geographic palimpsest'. While examining the maps during the course of his investigation he defines it as, "the lines and shades of division were there— total, alter, and crosshatched—but ostentatiously subtle, distinctions of greyscale" (Mieville, 2009, 46). He describes the areas that are geographically identical but are in different cities as *topolgängers*, "Streets mostly of very different character than their Ul Qoman *topolgängers*" (Mieville, 2009, p. 159).

Urban Palimpsest and Gentrification

Palimpsests being a process of continuous human actions and interpretations is simply just not the chronologically overlaid eras rather it holds the great diversity of individual and cultural meaning present at a certain time. Similarly, urban palimpsest constitutes of several components including the buildings, the images of the city (its physical features), spatial dynamics and its territorial development that mutually defines the city's current configuration and dynamics. The cities just like parchments transform themselves by their evolutionary history and through different meanings in relation to the societies that inhabit them through gentrification.

Gentrification is defined as one of the geographical urban processes that takes place in the modern cities. It is done by the wealthier sectors of society and includes degeneration of the old urban spaces and displacement of lower-class inhabitants. Olalekan Jeyifous, one of the famous modern experimental architects shed light on the city of Ul Qoma and Bezel with regards to gentrification and explains the kind of interaction between the gentrifying folks in my neighborhood and folks who live here for a very long time as "Walking up and down the street every day, I see such a complete disconnect between the two communities of the Black folks sitting on the steps chilling, and then newer gentrifying folks spilling out of bars. They may walk into the same bodega, but there's zero acknowledgment." (Jeyifous, 2020) Similarly, this displacement in the city of Bezel and Ul Qoma caused confusion and vagueness among the people. "The corridors of Copula Hall are in a determined style that must have evolved over the many centuries of the building's existence and centrality to Besz and Ul Qoman life and politics: they are antique and haute, but somehow vague, definitionless. The oil paintings are well executed but as if without vague, definitionless. (Mieville, 2009, p.60).

Mieville represents the process of urban layering in the city of Bezel and Ul Qoma through gentrification. "The ruins are surrounded now or in some places incorporated, antique foundations, into the substance of the city. There are older ruins too, like the mosaic remnants in Yozhef Park. These Romanesque remains

predate Beszel, we think. We built Beszel on their bones, perhaps.” (Mieville, 2009, p.50). Since the medieval towns are emblematic of multiple and endless signs of the lives of the people inhabiting them, their cultural and historical perspectives are clearly defined through the landscapes and how landscapes stratify different layers.

Layering through Urbanization

Landscape being a geographical term is used to define a physical space in terms of mountains, plains, marshes etc. However, neither the space nor the time of landscape can be studied without its social practices. The spatial development in urban spaces represents the result of their evolution over a course of time and are highly influenced by the territorial dynamics. This phenomenon can be treated as a record of cultural values from the past, the exclusive constructions in the present and a new starting point for further developments. Different socioeconomic, political and technological processes found in landscape morphology result in physical transformations that occur in the urban land scape. Similarly, this transition is also visible in the cities of Borlú and Ul Qoma since both were in a state of evolution over a period.

During the investigation of murder of Mahalia, Inspector Borlú visits the site where her dead body was found and he remembers how he used to visit that place as a schoolboy to check out the ruins, however with all these transformations a new spectrum is formed. “I did not know the area well. I’d been to the island, of course, visited the ruins, when I was a schoolboy and occasionally since, but my rat-runs were elsewhere. Signs showing directions to local destinations were bolted to the outsides of pastry bakers and little workshops, and I followed them to a tram stop in a pretty square.” (Mieville, 2009, p.16). The political and cultural shifts in Ul Qoma resulted in more dramatic changes to urban iconography. The buildings were either recycled or new inscriptions or statuary.

The phenomena of Palimpsest took place in a unique manner in the city of Ul Qoma, reflecting constellations of socio-economic power, being connected through local, state or national interests reifying the power of city to carry the narratives of past, present and future. “THE CORRIDORS OF COPULA HALL are in a determined style that must have evolved over the many centuries of the building’s existence and centrality to Besz and Ul Qoman life and politics: they are antique and haute, but somehow vague, definitionless. The oil paintings are well executed but as if without vague, definitionless (Mieville, 2009, p. 60). According to an article, A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time, written by John B. Jackson there are certain events, rituals and celebrations linked to specific place, which give rise to “sense of wellbeing and which we want to return to, time and again” (Jackson, 1995, p.48) Hence these layers of time represent the dimension in which the landscape progresses and changes depending on their condition. The buildings in Bezel were centuries old and were turned into antique shops for economic purposes so that they would attract the tourists which in return will be a source of foreign currency i.e., the process of urbanization is synonymous to the process of industrialization, sometimes the buildings of residential areas are demolished without taking in account their architectural value and heritage. “That trade had been doing well, as well as anything did in the city for some years, handdowns polished and spruced as people emptied their apartments of heirlooms for a few Beszmarques.” (Mieville, 2009, p.16).

It is evident that urbanization plays a vital role in transformation and renewal of all the changes that place in the city of Bezel and Ul Qoma, which is subsequently

linked with capitalism and inextricably with industrialization. "Each drip of foreign investment – and to everyone's surprise there were drips – brought forth enomia. Even a couple of high-tech companies had recently moved in, though it was hard to believe it was in response to Beszel's fatuous recent selfdescription as "Silicon Estuary." (Mieville, 2009, p.17). However as compared to Bezel UI Qoma had more radically socialist tradition, as during 1960s, it was along favored destinations of Cuba and China, "China, Cuba, and UI Qoma were the destinations of choice." (Mieville, 2009, p.9).

But given the geopolitical situation it's hard to guess how UI Qoma became a victim of economic sanctions imposed by the US State Department while Beszel happens to maintain good relationships with Washington but in contrast, even though UI Qoma feels more "Modern" due to the presence of massive Western consumer capital, as Borlú bitterly comments while being in conversation with an UI Qoman colleague, "Washington loves us, and all we've got to show for it is Coke." (Mieville, 2009, p.13). The city of UI Qoma was drastically changing in comparison to Bezel due to the interference of economy and capitalism, as the people in the city of Bezel had to build everything from starch following the tabula rasa approach. "Back then the region of UI Qoma that shared the space had been quiet. It had grown noisier: the neighbors had moved in economic antiphase. As the river industry of Beszel had slowed, UI Qoma's business picked up, and now there were more foreigners walking on the worn-down crosshatched cobbles than Besz locals." (Mieville, 2009, p. 29) In Mieville's work, Inspector Borlú is a walker who experiences the city in a primal way by assimilating himself into the urban landscape, while being in the city of UI Qoma he clearly states its modes of production and the way that capitalism continuously re-invents itself by its use of space. "With the CD-and-DVD shops, the software startups and galleries. The bullish UI Qoman financial markets, the revalued dinar, came, they said, New Politics, a very vaunted openness to hitherto dangerous dissidence. Not to say that radical groups, let alone parties, were legalized, but their ideas were sometimes acknowledged." (Mieville, 2009, p.139).

Different meanings, social interactions and meanings are formed within the cultural, historical, and spatial context. Along with different social practices, shared cultures and individual minds different interpretations and meanings are continuously and actively constructed and reconstructed. However even after all the transformations and developments, past remains as a major protagonist in the city of UI Qoma and Bezel. It is embedded Arts, urban planning or even in city's architecture and is still considered as a fundamental tool to reshape the city.

Conclusion

All the incidents of *The City and The City* are chronologically analyzed by applying the concept of 'palimpsest'. According to which maintaining a dialogue between past and present is essential for a citizen's sense of identity. Similarly preservation is essential for city's health, as it includes conservation of ideas, experiences, and values that are no less than any building or the monument. For an urban palimpsest innovative designs, urban conservation and heritage preservation are very crucial as it treats the urban landscape as an object or site from past and has been reconstructed through cultural values in the present but is also a starting point from where new developments can take place in future.

China Michevelle brings together the notion of time, geography and imagination. The palimpsest layers mentioned in the study represent both the

personal and communal memories by the citizens. The same way new architectural forms are created by citizens in Ul Qoma where people want to improve the space and therefore the quality of their lives. The goal is to increase economy of the city and give spotlight to the city through renovation and reconstruction, in simpler words, 'making it more modern'. Similarly it allows for the comparison of varied cultural and environmental constructions of landscapes in both the cities of Bezel and Ul Qoma. The city of Bezel and Ul Qoma themselves are palimpsest; as they move within time and there's collection of layers in terms of history and traditions in them. The heritage in the cities transformed the urban landscape in a way that it became a product for economic, political and historical factors. Finally, through the study palimpsest ability to draw the attention towards the significance of time, one can identify Bezel's potential to grow and develop as Ul Qoma did.

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