

Eyeless in the wasteland of values

Feuilleton

Prof Khwaja Masud

'Man should not be measured from head to foot, but from head to heaven' — Confucius.



Man is defined as a rational animal. He may as well be described as a moral animal. His morality stems from his rationality. Nevertheless, taking mankind as a whole, not many spend as much time in reasoning, arguing from one position to another, as in worrying about values of one kind or another. In fact, all of us seem to be deeply concerned about values. Every one talks about the disintegration and collapse of values. This deep and abiding concern springs from that powerful moral sense which is man's peculiar prerogative in this world.

Unfortunately, we express our admonition, disgust or condemnation more often than our appreciation or love. But it would be cynical to hold that men were not greatly influenced most of their lives in some subtle, silent way by what they believed in their hearts to be worthwhile. Far be it for me to inveigh against the morals and values of our age. In any case, mere denunciation accomplishes nothing except to reveal our own unbalanced moral sense. As we look around us, ordinary vices are there in profusion. More than ill-gotten affluence, it is the all-prevalent frustration, misery, humiliation, and anguish that strike us. We stand aghast, eyeless in the wasteland of values.

Anguish — angst! Here is the cry of existentialism, prophetically depicted in Munch's Cry. Our contemporary society is mirrored in stories, novels, plays and paintings. We can see writ large what it is that makes our life so restless and ill at ease, and why it is the age of Angry Young Men. Most of us may be irritated by Angry Young Men. We must admit that Angry Young Men are a peculiar feature of our society, but angry old men are common at all times.

Jimmy Porter in Osborne's 'Looking Back in Anger' is the prototype of the Angry Young Man. Like the existentialist character of Sartre, he hates apathy and is determined at all cost to live. He cries out: "Oh, Heavens, how I long for a little human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm - that's all". In the 19th century, religion was the great bulwark of convention in the west, until finally the one became mistaken for the other. Convention was the only religion for most of the middle class, particularly in the East.

The radically-minded intellectuals who had lost the religion of their forefathers and scorned the shallowness of their contemporaries made a new religion of their struggle to destroy convention and the values that were nothing but the props of the privileged.

The First World War (1914-1918) produced Dadaism, which conducted a bitter struggle against conventional values in art. For the most important

and destructive side of modern art, we must look to Cubism, which preceded Dadaism, and Surrealism, which came after it. The Surrealists tried to fill the vacuum left by Dadaism and the contents of the unconscious. In particular, it had its dogma that true reality is to be found by suspending reason and consciously controlled activity. Surrealism and Dadaism were an attempt to escape from the confusion of a bourgeois world that made a mockery of human intelligence.

Cubism is far more radical in its flight from conventional representation. The Cubist tries to penetrate beneath the visual appearance of things to the basic forms, which underlie reality. Picasso is even more of an engaged artist in his cubist paintings than in the more conventional ones. Talking of Guernica, possibly the best painting of the 20th century, to the American Artists Congress, he said: "It is my wish this time to remind you that I have always believed and still believe that artists who work and live with spiritual values cannot and should not remain indif-

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ferent to a conflict in which the highest values of humanity and civilisation are at stake."

Undoubtedly, Guernica is the most powerful indictment of war, while the painting Les Femmes d'Alger conveys something of the same pathos and sense of disintegration that characterise Guernica. It prophetically foreshadows the 20th century. But much of modern art is the work of experimentalists in technique, who have nothing to say. Aesthetically their work is at best pleasing design. In fact, it is because they have nothing to say, no vision of the world except that of the bourgeois world in disarray, that they are thrown back on technique as an end in itself, rejecting reality in toto.

The modern artist is like the religious ascetic who rejects the world. Significantly, the history of religion shows similar periods when man's body and soul seem to have lost their harmony — extreme asceticism and extreme sensuality have lived cheek by jowl.

It is not easy to live a harmonious life - or to be sincere and live a full life in a wasteland without values. If we are sincere, we have something to be sincere about, some standards by which to judge whether life is full or not. The two deadly sins are failure to choose or decide, and hypocrisy. If we fail to choose, we will be left waiting hopelessly in an agony of indecision. It is this state that is conveyed so well by Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot'. In our apathy we disintegrate.

The writer is a former principal, Gordon College, Rawalpindi
Email: khmasud22@yahoo.com

Human consciousness

By Dr Mustafa Siba'i

Once a caravan came to Madinah. It had women and children too with it. Hadhrat Umar bin Khattaab (Radhi Allahu anho) said to Hadhrat Abdul Rahman bin 'Auf (Radhi Allahu anho), "Can you stand guard on them tonight?" So Hadhrat Umar, the second caliph, and he, kept awake that night together and kept vigil over the caravan. During that nightly vigil, both of them offered Tahajjud (late night) prayer as well.

Hadhrat Umar on hearing a baby's cry and approaching, said to the mother, "Fear Allah and do look after your child carefully." Saying this he came back to his own position.

Once again he heard her crying, and going over to her mother once again gave her the same advice.

When during the last part of the night the child cried once again, Hadhrat Umar came to its mother and said, "Woe to you! You appear not to be a good mother.

How is it that your child could not sleep peacefully during the night." The woman little suspecting that she was speaking to the Amir of the believers, said in reply, "May Allah bless you, O man, you have pestered me several times during the night. I want to wean it forcefully (before time), but the child is intractable."

He asked her, "And pray, why wean it forcefully?" She said in reply, "Because Umar grants allowance only for such children that have been

weaned."

Hadhrat Umar asked her, "How old is your child?" She told him it was only a few months old. Hadhrat Umar asked the woman not to be hasty in weaning her child.

Then he led the Morning Prayer in such a state that his weeping made the recital of the Holy Qur'aan inaudible and unintelligible. At the end of the prayer, he said, "Umar is ruined. He killed the children of the believers!"

At this, he ordered the crier to proclaim in the town of Madinah that the mothers should not wean their children only for the sake of allowance for the suckling. From now on, every child, suckling or weaned, shall receive a stipend. And it was also proclaimed throughout the length and the breadth of the Islamic state. Unparalleled in the entire history of mankind.

By Allah! The entire history of mankind is unable to produce such a brilliant and glorious incident. None among the civilizations of the world can present any personage like him. He kept awake the whole night, keeping guard over the caravan and the caravan slept in peace.

And we should keep in mind that he was the head of the Islamic state, and wielded great authority and power that had conquered the then mighty empires of Rome and Persia.

And in spite of all that, he did what a petty guard detailed to patrol the vicinity of a caravan in its sojourn would not do.