

I Brood, Therefore I Am

THE Muslim intellectual is a gloomy individual. When he is not trite, he is murderously depressive. Whilst his conscience far outstrips his thought, his thought cannot bear the reality of his existence. For him, mental agony is the primary attribute of his existence. How could it be otherwise, when his list of self-indictments easily matches the agenda of his intellectual tasks ahead. Here are, at least, some of the causes of his dejection:

Power is arbitrary in our culture. Political power exists in the absence of any theory of legitimacy. Religious power operates in the absence of any sacred institutions. There are no public institutions to check the autocracy of the ruler, just as there is no institutional discourse to discipline the vision of the ideologue. Politics has become autonomous of the will of the citizens and religion has grown indifferent to the welfare of the believers. In this chaos, the individual, whether a political tyrant, an economic tycoon or a religious overlord, is more powerful than the combined might of the polity, market and congregation.

Ideologies and power establishments are not organically related in our societies. Our ideologies are hopelessly utopian and other-worldly; our power-establishments are brutally cynical and this-worldly. The nature of our worldview, furthermore, precludes any close identification of our ideals with power. The ideal must forever remain distant from us, whereas we must always distance ourselves from the real. Consequently, the state does not cohabit with society in our civilization, but subdues and suppresses it. In revenge, the society damns the state and its apparatus with the curse of its own moral talisman.

Power and knowledge too are discordant with us. The knowledge that is part of the world, that produces power and riches, is not part of our tradition. We cannot manufacture it ourselves but must buy it elsewhere. The knowledge that spellbinds us, that has complete sway over our hearts and minds, brings us no tangible re-

wards. It rules not the world but our emotions. Foreign knowledge is in the hands of the ruler, the general and the exploiter; local knowledge is for the preacher, the teacher and the artist. The wound in our society is much worse than the cleavage of the 'two cultures'.

Learning has been made cheap in our times. Emotions and slogans now replace criticisms and insights. Empirical research is shunned; ideological discourse thrives. Disciplined thought is a rarity, ideational chaos abounds. Excellence goes unrewarded but mediocrity produces its own cults. In fact, we can no longer differentiate fact from fancy. Whatever educational institutions that we possess are outdated. They cater not to our needs but produce solutions to problems that we have long since discarded. Or, at best, they comfort our souls. For, we have renounced the world of Nature for the ecstasy of the Self.

Our Islamic discourse is transnational, global and universal, yet our institutions are national, local and parochial. What may be said in Islamic terms, thus, is either general to the point of being platitudinous or moral to the extent of being metaphysical. As a thinker, the Muslim must either address intractable issues like the 'Nature of leadership in Islam' or come up with computerised salvational schemes. Between an idealised World and a concretised Hereafter, there is no intellectual space for the Muslim to breathe in.

Our culture has lost the ability to evaluate itself. Beyond the immediately quantifiable, which measures itself as it were, there is no system of public values. What cannot be measured in economic or military terms is evaluated, if at all, quite erratically and arbitrarily. Where unavoidable, our judgement is either of the ethereal kind, coming like a divine decree and condemning us to the doom of the Hereafter, or it is of the most crassly cynical variety, permitting everything that escapes public detection. Furthermore, we possess no authentic theory of the surplus: what is necessary and

what is superfluous evades our judgement. In the allocation of our human and financial resources, thus, that which gives no immediate return is never an object of rational evaluation. At best, it may be decided by moods and caprices. The artist, the thinker, the publicist are, thus, all left to the mercy of the whimsical tyrant or the eccentric rich. With us, there is no recognition of talent, only an homage to success.

Because we have lost the ability to evaluate ourselves, there is a crisis of the public personality. We do not know whom to trust and whom to entrust with our destiny. In the absence of self-evaluating institutions and ideologies, thus, our public space is being filled by every kind of charlatan and salesman. Rulers without courage, thinkers without conviction, doctors without learning, divines without piety and public servants without integrity have, thus, all become part and parcel of our everyday life. Our traditional ethics, however, which values modesty and charity above self-promotion and egocentricity, cannot ward them off completely. We need public and institutional safeguards.

The crisis of public values in our culture is, in the final resort, an *intellectual* crisis. For, it is not being contended here that our *eternal* values have become obsolete with our loss of global leadership. No one is suggesting that because we no longer shape the destiny of the world, we cannot recognize our own worth either. No, it is the absence of the concrete elaboration of our value-framework in the new social realities, our inability to fill the vast intellectual space that has been left empty because of our 'fall', that creates this crisis. No doubt, it is the task of the Muslim thinker to restore the integrity of our value-paradigm. For, self-evaluation, whether intellectual or emotional, is a *rational* effort through and through. The Muslim intellectual broods, however, because his culture does not value him.