



essay

Of Obedience and Disobedience : The Case of Thoreau

by Neamat Imam

I

Confucius said, "If a state is governed by the principles of reason, poverty and misery are subjects of shame; if a state is not governed by the principles of reason, riches and honours are the subjects of shame." Confucius focuses on three main points: the state, the governance of that state, and the role reason has to play in such governance. These are three elements of primordial importance for the creation of a comfortable human habitat where urgency for proper harmony among people will be natural and where an individual will let loose his imagination, cultivate his conscience against all kinds of indecency and pre-predicative predicament and thus continue a sacred journey through life.

It is in this regard Henry David Thoreau refers to Confucius in his creative essay 'Civil Disobedience', which brings the individual and the state face to face to understand and respect each other. This essay was written just after Thoreau was released from jail in 1845. He was imprisoned for his refusal to pay the poll-tax that he knew would be used in meeting the expenses of the American war against Mexico. A vast geographical area of what we now call the United States, came from the American exercise of expansionism towards Mexico. Thoreau could not support the cryptic policy of the government and so wanted to resist it from executing such an anti-humanitarian programme. He urged the people to follow the dictation of their conscience and come ahead with commonsensical pres-

ence to create a nation-wide movement against the government.

II

Every honest, free and creative individual, believed Thoreau, has the right to pass his life in the prison. The individual, as guided by a determinate criterion, will soon find faults with the government regarding its ways of conducting administration, state policy and all other related sectors, and will protest against it, as a result of which he may be imprisoned because, on the one hand, the government will find in him a mere disturbing element that puts obstacles on the way to development which is mostly needed for the benefit of people. The Government may imprison hundreds and thousands of such individuals to make its way smooth and prove its supremacy conspicuous over the individual or individuals. On the other hand, individuals may willingly leave the outside world behind for its contaminated environment, abusive ideals and pestilence-worn complexion, and enter the prison considering it to be a better place for a peaceful life. "The proper place to-day, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her free and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons," wrote Thoreau in this regard. In a state of unjust government prisons can only punish a just person physically and, instead of offering mental oppression, they unambiguously free his inner being. According to Thoreau, one can only pity this government. Not only an autocratic government — autocratic governments are no authority to consider the future of the

state, the ornamental growth of the nation, since they utilize the power of the government to meet their personal ends and since their propensity to enjoy the warmth of power is indelible — but a democratic government may also indulge in encouraging and supporting inhuman activities in the state. The sledge of power is not always sleek and most of the times has to sprint down a slippery highway. The material enormity of the yes of the people is the only force to guide it onward, to confirm which a Government may even extend its enormous support to the anarchic liberty of the people related to it. For this reason Thoreau questioned, "Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government?" Democracy is the rule of majority and majority may not always be reasonable to take the right decision; majority may not always foresee what is lying before. Beyond this, illiteracy, fundamentalism or superstition may delude the majority resulting suicidal conclusion in a state. Thoreau thought democracy incomplete as a system not merely for its traditional limitations. To him, democracy is a chance and not an assertion. An individual applies his voting power to elect someone who he thinks can materialize his plans better and leaves it to the consideration of the majority. He knows that he is fighting for the right, and also knows that it is an uncertain process and he may not be saved eventually. Yet, as the system claims, he leaves his beloved right to the mercy of others and thinks others will understand it and vote for it. If others do not understand — ifs in this matter are very

frequent and very seldom subject to polemics — his right will be proved a big wrong, proving him passive regarding the attainment of a rightful place for the right. An honest man cannot be passive, and hence indifferent, and will not leave the right to be pitted by others. As he does not wait for majority's support, so he does not fear for being a member of the minority. He understands what is just and so resists what is unjust. He advances consciously towards his goal, very consciously knowing the fact that — against social-cultural-political-ideological unconscious — the prison is his ultimate destination and virtually that place is holier.

III

Obedience to Thoreau means obedience to conscience and not to tradition, society, bureaucracy, the Government, or any other institution that we have created throughout the ages to protect us from both constative and performative insanity and arbitrariness. This obedience may appear tremendous disobedience, or immense disloyalty, to the law of the state and its government, and also a mortal crime, given the seriousness. Even for this the final bell may toll. Yet an individual should not flee away from it paving passages for the social vampires to invariably undermine the prospective vision of the people and stagnate through profuse machinations their enthusiasm for future enlightenment.

Everyday though we achieve nothing, we suppress our feelings hundreds of times; we poke and wound and kill our dreams, being famished and curtailed

by our impoverishment. We look forward to and see nothing; with whom we entrusted the responsibility of maintaining a good house for us, a very desired shelter, being drowned in the abyss of hierarchical nuisance and being too much in love with power, they forged us. They exterminate our dreams to materialize their dreams and forget the fair faith that we very solemnly kept on them. We talk of change, they change the face of the earth, establishing mountainous buildings in the capital, buildings that threat even the sun and make us salute them. We talk of politics, they bring democracy, the Parliament, Prime Minister, highway processions, hartal, Special Act, the jail, detective branch, etc. We talk of law; in the twinkling of an eye they introduce law, enforce law, employ lowers to prove one law insufficient, and then whittle it away. Without getting any blackhole to hide us from their harebrained schemes we talk of religion... no, we need not talk of it: they are present at every religious congregation — in the mosque, in the temple, in the church, everywhere — and, O God, in the very first row. They are doing everything for the maintenance of our religious identity. They start speeches with recitation from the holy books, though they do not conclude them with the same. They do not want God come to the ground and attempt in a duel and through extramundane conspiracy confiscate the credits of their painstaking achievements. Even in the funeral prayer they must attend lest somebody should go to the underworld without prior reconfirmation of the heaven they have confirmed

for us. We talk of relationship, of having friends outside; they go from India to Pakistan, from America to Russia, from Palestine to Israel and, in turn, invite them to come and see us physically. We feel satisfied to see our bilateral and multilateral friendship so mature, so magnanimous; pageants of gods and goddesses turn our city to a modern Alps. We talk of revenue.

IV

The strategic disobedience and arrogance of the Government cannot be challenged and silenced in the way Thoreau suggests, since the dimension and direction of the Government have radically changed over the decades and have become extensively complicated in modern times. Practically speaking, Thoreau himself failed in his attempt to bring opposite ends to a common platform where from — abolishing all superstructural oddities and relative transformational barriers — a new urge for concern and compromise might be voiced. He went to the Walden Pond where he lived an absolutely secluded life, a life which articulates the ideological impracticality of his position and, by extension, which weakens talent of the triangular interconnections among the person, the state or the Government, and the bondage the state imposes on the person. Yet it must be acknowledged that the politics of Thoreau's disobedience in this regard can make a grand beginning possible — to save us from the spatial and spectral disobedience of the Government — after which the course of action will spontaneously take its own turn.

theatre

A Play for All Seasons

By Ekram Kabir

ATHRYN and Les Viguerie's residence in Gulshan North was far, if not marooned, from the Dhaka city's Bali Road bailiwick. But for the last couple of days (28-31) of October, the place chimed with dialogues in King's English and nobody seemed to have returned banal-hearted, and there were no dearth of applaud at the intervals and when the curtain fell. For some, mostly expatriates from the North, who do speak and understand the language, the humorous elements — through which the drama sometimes seemed a comedy — of British playwright Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* turned out to be sheer educational pastime.

Organised by Dhaka Stage — a Dhaka-based theatre group formed in 1968 by the foreigners, especially by the British in Bangladesh for charity that have so far staged 24 plays in Dhaka — and directed and produced by David Palmer and Lyn Palmer, *A Man for All Seasons* carried some serious messages: it was a play about human integrity, morals, conscience and above all else,

the play is about pure British history — and as far as Robert Bolt is concerned, all the twelve characters of the play can be termed as protagonists. And again, there were three main characters: Thomas More, the man of honour and integrity, and there was the King who had a problem and was desperate to solve it, and finally there was Cromwell who thinks he had got a solution, and as Bolt revealed, Cromwell was a very evil man of England's political history.

As the plot unfolds, it registers the backdrop of sixteenth-century England when in 1525, Henry VIII was on the British throne at the age of thirty-four, chaperoned by his fifty-year-old Chancellor of England Thomas Wolsey.

It has been fifteen years the King has been married to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon who has given birth to six children including two "sons", but all except Mary — the future Queen — either were still-born or died in infancy. So, Henry is now desperate for a heir — a son — but to sire one legitimately, he



A man for all seasons. — Photo Zaheed

human soul. Soul is something any ideal human being will never spare to be polluted. Living without it is no life at all.

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first needs to divorce Catherine.

But divorces, especially of Kings, were not easy accomplishments since the Church was then still Catholic with the Pope as its supreme head. Given the social reality, Henry thinks he has found a way, because Catherine was married to Henry's elder brother Arthur; and when Arthur died, the Pope allowed Henry with a special dispensation to marry his brother's widow.

Says the director-recaster of *A Man for All Seasons* David Palmer: "This dispensation probably was motivated more by politics than religion for keeping peace between England and Spain and for maintaining the broker-power of the Pope who was increasingly becoming corrupt; well, whatever the reason was the dispensation was given."

Henry banks on the scripted words — "Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother's wife" — and sets out to persuade the Pope that without a divorce he is mortal peril of his soul. But for this, he need the support of his statesmen like Bishops and influential people who have convincing power over the Pope.

Here at a crucial stage of the King's pursuit comes Thomas More — the man of many good qualities as an individual and high positions at the state level — whose aid is a must for the King in solving his problem. So Henry seeks More's advocacy. At this juncture, More's self seems in jeopardy, almost to the point of falling apart: his firm belief in religion and unconditional loyalty to the King put him in his inner dilemma he ever faced. But at the end, the lawyer-theologian-diplomat More stands erect — without being a willing martyr — giving priority to his "self" denial of which would have made his "life" valueless.

By neatly presenting the play with the amateur performers, who did very well after rehearsing for two months, before the footlights and who as a crew comprised British, Americans, Australians, French etc., all the appreciative words go to the Palmers because it is not an every-day affair one can get aesthetic people from so many countries on the stage, and especially David when he says: "Even Bangla-speaking people are welcome to join the Dhaka Stage."

two poems by Louise Schleiner

David and Jonathan

"David returned from slaughtering Goliath and brought the head before Saul. When he had finished speaking, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David.

And he made a covenant with David because he loved him as his own soul, and stripped himself of his robe and gave it to David, and even his sword, bow, and girdle.... Jonathan went out to the field and shot an arrow [signaling Saul meant to kill David.] And David fell on his face three times, and they kissed and wept with one another until David exceeded himself. Then Jonathan said, 'Go in peace, for we both have sworn, the Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever.... After Jonathan's death David chanted, 'Jonathan lies slain upon your high places, Israel; I am distressed for you my brother Jonathan. Your love to me was wonderful. Passing the love of women" (from 1st Sam. 17:57-18:35-42; 2nd 1:25-26).

Prince Jonathan was heir to Saul, A heritage yet threatened By the rising star of David — Strategist of battles, darling of the crowds, Spiritual captain. Some called him king already. How could they be soul mates? Or how could they not so love? — Heir apparent and heir apparent. Double signs of splendor. When David sang at the throneroom fire, Armor beside him catching light. Harp in hand. Of Elohim and battle courage. Or then of meadow streams over grassy bottoms For shepherds watering their sheep And stroking fleecy backs. Jonathan forgot himself. Entranced.

And David fell entranced with princeliness. They swore each other goodness always. Down to descendants' days. What folly though for Jonathan To favor this ruddy David, Anointed by war and prophets' oil To take his crown.

David the village boy — Fame fell upon him — he had a grace To turn up anywhere And find himself adored.

But Jonathan prince of self-abandon, Captain yourself in battles. For him you stripped off spear and shield. Gave all your soul for the matching soul. For the brother-in-arms. Your prescience failed.

You couldn't picture David dying, ordering his Solomon To kill your son Mephibosheth — This 'the man after God's own heart'? Poet who sung the god-presence Pulsing everywhere from the forming limbs in any womb To the outer gates of sunset? — He, on his deathbed, doing what?

It was policy. David held out, all his long days. Keeping Mephibosheth at bay. Honored and watched at the royal table. But finally, his mere existence harmed — No way but this to stave off Bloody strife of heirs. It was so in your day too. Jonathan prince of generosity — Saul and David fought their wars, kin slaughtered kin. But not by any choice of yours. Nothing you cared to keep the crown from David.

You lost yourself in love of what you saw — His glory.

So you entered his high song That moved him, body and mind: Wonderful was your love to me, My brother Jonathan. Passing the love of women. How are the mighty fallen! Slain on the high places.

Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

"When the Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame she came with a very great retinue to test him with hard questions, and told him all that was on her mind. And Solomon answered all her questions.... And she said, 'Your wisdom and prosperity surpass the report I heard, happy are your wives and servants, blessed be the Lord your God.' And she gave the king 120 talents of gold and a very great quantity of spices; never again came such an abundance of spices to him.... And King Solomon gave her gifts, as well as all that she desired (from 1st Kings 10: 1-12).

She traveled to meet men Reputed wise — a queen of questions. Applauding well turned answers. In Solomon's new cedar palace Facing thrones were erected On the inlaid stones adorned with six-winged creatures. Prophets' pictures of awe before the unseen god of storms. Mornings to sunsets they talked and smiled. Their gestures more sweeping each day. Solomon so pleased her mind That all the gold and spices she had brought Were scarcely worthy gifts, she thought.

Spicy were his looks, golden his words, Spoken fitly within each moment's Turn of talk. Like apples of gold in silver settings.

How may one best deal with enemies?

"Ah," said he, give them bread and drink, for so

You will heap fire coals on their heads.

"And should we save the poor and abused?

"What else," he said, "Rescue those being taken away

To death — if you say you did not know it

Yet he who watches thoughts will know, and requite you

Desertion for desertion."

"And how should one practice love, O wise one, you

With your many hundred wives and concubines?

"To love is to come to one's garden, my sister,

And gather myrrh with the spice,

To eat the whole honeycomb with the honey,

And drink both wine and milk."

Regal herself in querying, the queen adored his replies.

She laid down her gifts.

He too gave bounteous mementos.

And beyond them, 'All she desired.'

The Ethiopians say that this meant love nights.

Their bodies joining minds in love,

With fullest honoring.

They trace their Ethiop lineage to the sparks that flew

Between these two

In a love full fledged in Spirit and also

Spicy.

Back to her land with camels in tow she went,

And no one again brought Solomon such spices as hers —

Lover of his dancing mind,

Queen of riches more than kingly.

About the writer: Louise Schleiner is currently Professor and Director of Graduate Studies at the English Department, Washington State University.