

FOCUS

Waiting for the Change

by Edward Said

For us this means strengthening our civil institutions like universities, the media, research and legal apparatuses, participatory democracy, literacy — the lot. Without that rising to confront the pauperism, dependence and compliance imposed on us by outsiders there can be no hope for us to evolve into the kinds of societies a whole new generation of Arabs now, I believe, quite ardently desires. But no, the rulers believe it is best to go on waiting for the barbarians or Godot (they may be the same, after all) since waiting itself may be a kind of solution!

If we were to pick perhaps the most symbolically important and metaphysically significant aesthetic work of the century that has just come to an unremarkable end (a fizzle perhaps?) it might be Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot". Originally written by the Irish author in French, it was later translated by him into English, and since then has of course been performed everywhere and in every language.

Beckett, I think, described his play's action as "nothing happens, twice," which indeed seems to cover the two-act structure of the play and its endlessly circular, inconsequential, trivial discussions between two tramps who are waiting for someone called Godot to arrive, but who never does. All sorts of interpretations have been advanced to the play — that Godot, for instance, is God; that the two tramps are really Adam and Eve; that the play is actually about a post-nuclear holocaust.

But the main thing for me, having read and seen the play many times since its appearance about fifty years ago, is that it is about waiting, about unending expectation, about the moment that comes before something which itself never comes but which in the process reduces everyone to a frozen state of clown-like, pathetic banality in which only limited motion is possible in virtually the same place.

And so, I feel, that for us as Arabs now, we are in fact waiting for all sorts of things to happen with very little certainty as to what they are, how they will affect us, and what will come after. It is nothing short of staggering how our powerlessness (which we share with the two main characters in Godot) has induced in us a similar sort of unlimited attitude of just hanging on, waiting for the main event to take place while we play all sorts of banal little roles outside the main action, so to speak.

We are now waiting for the result of the Syrian-Israeli talks, for the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, and for in-

numerable other things to take place, which we don't know but, like the two clowns in Beckett, we nevertheless produce endless reams of speculation, trivial gossip, baseless rumour, observation, and "information" none of it of any value in the current impasse.

We know that those big men, Barak, Clinton and their Arab interlocutors are producing drafts of agreements (frequently leaked or straight-out printed in the press) and actual facts on the ground over which we more or less correctly suppose that only the Americans and Israelis have any real control. Whether Barak wants to give up 5 per cent Palestinian land on January 15, or 4 per cent on February 10 is entirely up to him: we wait, emit a few disapproving noises, but go along sheepishly in the end.

For me, the main thing we seem to be waiting for is what will follow the current round of peace negotiations when the peace accords themselves will be signed (as of course they will), the question of normalization, the status of the refugees, the return (or not) of territory. For most Arabs there is the feeling that all these matters are not only beyond their control even to think about rationally, but that they must be thought about in miraculous and magical terms: there is an American/Zionist plot-conspiracy, "they" are planning to put all the refugees in Iraq, to make Lebanon give them citizenship in return for x or y, that agreement has already been reached on everything, the rest is a matter of time, and so on.

So great a distance separates ruler from ruled, government from citizen, that only magical, or supernatural, or paranoid terms will serve: they (whoever "they" may or may not be) have already decided, they will do this or that, they will make us willing, they will transport X or Y, and so on and so on. In other words, as "Waiting for Godot" testifies in both its busy and extremely funny acts (the play, after all, is a comedy, not a tragedy, and Beckett actually

wants us to laugh not to feel pity or fear), the act of waiting displaces our state on to an outside, or exterior dimension. Waiting allows us to project psychological states of confusion, anxiety, and inadequacy out onto the world, instead of keeping those feelings bottled up inside. Unfortunately these feelings appear visibly to be comic, and neither dignified nor even tragic.

The other great aesthetic twentieth century object whose main concern is waiting is by the pre-second world war Greek poet from Alexandria, Constantine Cavafy, an extraordinary artist who lived all his life (1863-1933) in Egypt's northern summer and trading capital as an employee of the Irrigation Office, a homosexual and recluse, and who never published his poetry in his lifetime except privately. He is now recognized as one of the great writers of the century, a major poet and stylist despite the very small number of poems he wrote, none of them, interestingly, concerning modern Egypt or Egyptians.

One of his most famous poems (which, being a perfectionist, he never felt he finished or completed — satisfactorily) is "Waiting for the Barbarians", a 35-line masterpiece in his laconic style that nonetheless allows Cavafy to convey an entire drama. In an imagined ancient Roman setting, the people are waiting for an attack against them by a barbarian horde, outside the city. During the main body of the poem the speaker describes all the hurried preparations made by senators, emperor (why did our emperor get up so early, and why is he sitting enthroned at the city's main gate, in state,

wearing the crown?), consultants, orators, who are readying themselves so as to make some sort of favourable impression on the incoming, probably violent visitors. Then suddenly there is confusion and bewilderment everywhere. Why? I shall quote the last few lines of the poem:

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly.

Everyone going home lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.

And some of our men just in from the border say

There are no barbarians any longer.

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?

They were, those people, a kind of solution.

The title and situation of this poem was used by the distinguished South African novelist J.M. Coetzee for his novel (also called "Waiting for the Barbarians") about apartheid South Africa, waiting for the inevitable change to happen, as if from the outside, yet in fact forced to confront it inside.

This, I think, is Cavafy's point, that the existence (real or imagined, it does not matter) of some threatening alien and outside presence is not only necessary for society to maintain its identity as a sort of mythological barrier against barbarism, but also as a method for postponing the need for facing the internal situation which has long gone on unnoticed and festering so that the external threat can be mobilized against. In the final analysis neither outside nor inside can be addressed since the whole edifice of waiting sud-

dently crumbles. I do not at all want to suggest that to Palestinians and their Arabs whose lands were occupied and their lives changed unutterably by the whole Zionist intervention into the Middle East for the past century, there was no real threat to them. There was indeed, a very powerful one, especially to Palestinians whose entire society was destroyed. That so many hundreds of thousands of refugees are still waiting to return home is one of the great, awful tragedies of our time.

These are unimaginable, unconscionable realities, no doubt at all about that. And yet, what Cavafy and Beckett talk about so profoundly is not the reality, about which they have nothing to say or add, but the institution of the reality, its becoming a phenomenon that induces a state of apprehensive waiting.

Kafka has a superb parable about some priests of a mysterious religion going through one of their habitual rituals, when suddenly a tribe of dangerous leopards interrupts the service, scattering the priests and congregation who are most interested in saving their lives. They survive and then resume their rituals as before, except that from then on a place is preserved in the service for the leopards to appear again, which of course they do not. Waiting

can be a kind of solution to the problems that we don't deal with while we wait. For us these problems remain as part of the distortion that we have accepted, and indeed allowed for in our national and cultural life.

Some examples are, for instance, education which has remained years behind that of standards everywhere else in the developing world. Primary school education in the Arab world is still based upon rote learning, imitation of the teacher, and violence as punishment. This kills individual initiative, it cancels the possibility of creating an active and questioning mind that grows all the time and, above all, it gives rise to a deep hatred of the Other (teacher, ruler, foreigner).

The reason given for this situation is allegedly that there are more important priorities, i.e. defending against the outside enemy, mobilizing for war, giving so much power to the army and party, allowing dictatorship to be the style of government and not democracy. All that is waiting, for Godot, or for the barbarians. But the question is, how long do we wait, and is a solution from outside whether it is the coming of the barbarians or their disappearance, the real answer to educational reform. The principles of education after all

are not dependent on resolving a national crisis like Israel's aggression; on the contrary, it is crisis that makes a new curriculum and a new democratic attitude to intellectual growth and creativity even more necessary than otherwise.

The trouble is, however, that too many of us have bought in to the notion of waiting, as if waiting for a miraculous outside solution alone can solve the long-term problems we face within our societies. Hence we have no democracy to speak of, every citizen is in fact encouraged to flatter or somehow placate the ruler no matter what disasters he flounders in and out of, and most intellectuals and journalists accept the principle of self-censorship except at moments when the regime (as in Jordan or Palestine) goes too far in totally unacceptable restrictions.

What particularly concerns me now is that we have as a group of countries accepted the principle of globalization and the rule of the US acting through the World Trade Organization. And so we wait till the so-called fruits of that particular pact with the devil are achieved, enduring meanwhile the effacement of the local work force and the emasculation of the unions which either comply with WTO regulations or are pounded into submission, we accept the diktat that the state sector responsible for social benefits like health and social security be curtailed, we comply with draconian measures that limit environmental protection and that distort our economies so that their priority is to produce export goods determined by the world economy not by local needs. All this as we wait for the benefits. But the fact is that now, I am

happy to say, a few Arab countries are waking up to the fact that the wait wasn't worth it, that in its relentless expansion of its markets the US has imposed conditions on developing countries that have been ruinous, and that in the long run we must look to the interests of our citizens before we wait for Godot to appear in the form of prosperity and modernity.

I wish that this kind of awareness was becoming more true of our foreign policies with regard to Israel and the US, neither of whom, it should be clear after all this time, can properly be said to provide solutions to any of our problems. As Antonio Gramsci long ago said, when dealing with non-military realities (military realities are beyond our reach, despite the famous Arab habit of overspending on useless military hardware) the only policy to combat failure is one of developing a counter-hegemony against the ruling hegemonic powers.

For us this means strengthening our civil institutions like universities, the media, research and legal apparatuses, participatory democracy, literacy — the lot. Without that rising to confront the pauperism, dependence and compliance imposed on us by outsiders there can be no hope for us to evolve into the kinds of societies a whole new generation of Arabs now, I believe, quite ardently desires. But no, the rulers believe it is best to go on waiting for the barbarians or Godot (they may be the same, after all) since waiting itself may be a kind of solution! But for how long can it work? Copyright Edward W. Said, 2000.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan.

Women have a Greater Role to Play in Literacy Campaign

Dr Amrik Singh writes from New Delhi

When it comes to development the international experience has one simple truth to project: those who cannot universalise literacy are destined to remain backward. A footnote to this projection is that unless the majority of teachers, both at the primary and the upper primary levels, are women, success will always remain partial and unsatisfactory.

ENSURING universal literacy is not a simple thing. A number of factors have to be brought together in order to ensure it. One of the important contributory factors is what is the percentage of women teachers, especially at the primary level.

Going by the general law of average, their proportion should be 50 per cent. But female literacy is one of the weaker points in our society and this explains, amongst other things, why the percentage of women teachers does not come up to even 50 per cent. Properly speaking the percentage of women teachers at the primary level should be much higher than 50 per cent. This is for the simple reason that women have a special way with children. When it comes to handling small children and instructing them, women perform better than men.

Discussing this issue with one of the Ministers of a state where the proportion of women teachers is on the low side, we both came to the conclusion that, ideally speaking, at the primary level, the percentage of women should be 90 per cent and, at the upper primary level, it should be 70 per cent. What are the facts however?

According to the Sixth All India Educational Survey undertaken by the NCERT in 1993, the situation is broadly divisible into four categories. Certain states have a high proportion of women teachers. These are Goa (54.93 per cent), Kerala (65.64 per cent), Punjab (53.00 per cent), Chandigarh (92.5 per cent). These might be called high achievers. Chandigarh is only a city. The situation in that city can therefore be described as somewhat unique. It is the other three states of Goa, Kerala and Punjab, properly speaking, which can be described as high achievers.

Then there are the middle level achievers. These are: Himachal Pradesh (37.08 per cent), J&K (32.84 per cent), Mizoram (34.07 per cent), Sikkim (33.76 per cent), Haryana (38.27 per cent), Tamil Nadu (33.15 per cent), Dadar and Nagar Haveli (47.64 per cent), Delhi (41.79 per cent), Pondicherry (37.93 per cent). In each one of these, the percentage is between 30 to 50 per cent. Then there are poor achievers and those are between 20-30 per cent. Amongst them may be listed Andhra Pradesh (24.75 per cent), Assam (24.29 per cent), Gujarat (25.57 per cent), Karnataka (7.99 per cent), Maharashtra (25.87 per cent). Perhaps, even a fourth category may be referred to. These are below 20 per cent and include Bihar (17.03 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (12.62 per cent), Orissa (19.19 per cent), Rajasthan (19.18 per cent), UP (12.23 per cent), West Bengal (14.23 per cent).

As should be evident, these figures are revealing. It is not suggested that were the figures of women teachers in the last category to be higher than they are at present, things would automatically improve. That is not likely to happen. To repeat, so many other factors continue to lower the rate of literacy but the availability of women teachers is surely one of them and that is why specific reference is being made to that issue.

In regard to West Bengal, it is odd, to put it no more strongly, to find this state in the company of the backward Hindi-speaking. As is well recognized, it is these states which bring down the national average. Enquiries show that, quite some years ago, the CPM government worked out a set of parameters whereby every intending candidate for the job of a teacher had to sit for a competitive test in addition to a number of other requirements. Some of the opposition people in that state challenged the rules and the matter went right up to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court upheld the rules as formulated by the State government. For the last decade or so, the recruitment of primary school teachers has been made

in terms of those rules. It appears however that these rules worked to the disadvantage of the intending women teachers. Should there be a certain amount of reservation for women teachers therefore? The issue needs to be discussed not only with reference to West Bengal but also a number of other states.

In the political field, attempts are being made to reserve 33 per cent of seats for women. However uphill the struggle for these reservations might be, the issue is being pursued with a certain amount of vigour. Perhaps in the ultimate analysis things would be much better if planned attempts were to be made to improve the number of women teachers entering the profession. This itself, amongst other things, would in the long run bring about a kind of change and perhaps lead to a higher representation of women in the political process than obtains today.

In any case, it needs to be recognised that in educational terms, it would markedly improve things if more and more women were to be recruited as teachers. It should not be necessary to repeat what has been already stated above that the performance of schools would significantly improve in case the percentage of women teachers were to be greater than what it is today.

What was described above was with reference to primary schools. Is the situation in respect of upper primary schools significantly better? The answer is in the negative. Except for a few states, Gujarat for example, where instead of going down the percentage has gone up (36.52% instead of 25.47% in many other cases) there are fewer women teachers at the upper primary than at the primary level. Bihar has 14.67 per cent teachers at the upper primary level as against 17.3 per cent at the primary level. This is the broad thrust though there are some exceptions here and

there. In West Bengal, there is an unexpected increase. From 14.23 per cent at the primary level the percentage goes up to 21.16 per cent.

The issue needs to be pursued further in respect of different states. Situations vary as do traditions and facilities. What needs to be underlined is the fact that, at the primary and the upper primary levels, the situation calls for some kind of intervention. The presence of women teachers makes a marked difference. That being so, other methods which are adopted, something ought to be done. To have ignored this dimension of the problem has been unwise, to say no more about it.

Perhaps a reference to the experience of other countries may be made here. While in the rest of the developed world, the spread of literacy was a slow and gradual process, in the USSR where the Communists took over power in 1917, literacy was universalised within a decade almost. By 1928 when the First Five Year Plan was introduced in that country, illiteracy had been more or less wiped out. How did this happen? Apart from the various other steps taken, women teachers were involved in a big way. By the time that country broke up in 1991, three fourths of the teachers at the primary level were women.

It is puzzling that even this model of development did not influence decision making in the state of West Bengal. When it comes to development the international experience has one simple truth to project: those who cannot universalise literacy are destined to remain backward. A footnote to this projection is that unless the majority of teachers, both at the primary and the upper primary levels, are women, success will always remain partial and unsatisfactory. — Mandira

The author is a former Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University.

The Limits of Public Servicing

by Alif Zabr

ABOUT a fortnight ago, a single day's issue of the Daily Star (Jan 24) contained some perturbing news and comment which have deeper roots than the daily life of a newspaper. One is the sacking of the Managing Director and two other Directors of DESCO (Dhaka Electric Supply Company) and the other, a constructive criticism of the government plan to set up some 13,000 new community health centres, in addition to the current government network existing at other levels. There are several common issues in these two items which need public attention.

It is a traditional pattern for the regimes in the underdeveloped countries in the Third World to provide the basic public and utility services to the communities, either free of charge, or heavily subsidised, for the simple reason that the private sector was not adequate enough to take on this national burden. The overall picture had some negative aspects: high system loss, low efficiency and low morale, poor standard of operation and maintenance of the service, and pervasive corruption and malpractices due to multiplicity in the fixation of responsibility, hindered by a centralised administration. In

undisciplined societies, close feedback and visual monitoring is necessary.

But the politicians and the political parties have always the temptation of earning some transient name and fame through publicity of high-profile mass-friendly projects, some of which came with very high capital and investment costs, and the sustainability cannot be guaranteed after some years. Therefore it is a common sign in the poorer countries to see frequent foundation-stone laying ceremonies of a very large number of projects, many of these dubious, in the public sector, to earn more advance goodwill than later ap- probation. This culture continues unabated today, due to low purchasing power and lack of competition within the operating environment.

On the other hand, a careful study of the statistics would reveal a pathetic situation in several areas: (i) incomplete, ailing or lingering projects; (ii) poor performance; (iii) inadequate support services; (iv) lack of adequate and needed infrastructure; (v) inadequate of recurring budget; and, (vi) corrupt practices in various forms. The compliment "bottomless bas-

ket" is a realistic coinage. Something available "free" is not appreciated or mentally accepted at face value.

The UN and donor agencies made a note of these adverse operating conditions in many countries, and pleaded for involving the private sector in phases, according to the level of development inside a country. This was resisted in socialist and welfare states, but the trend is changing, as these days the private sector is becoming more visible, and are capable of taking a part of the burden of providing a number of public services at the basic and core levels (subsidies are still required due to the low purchasing power of the economically backward clients).

One example is the power and energy sector; and the other the partial commercialisation of some railway services, and some relaxation in the aviation sector. The railway is running at a loss due to diversion of faster business in the private road transport sector. The private medical clinic network has sprouted out rapidly, numbering in thousands, but the problem is quantity vs quality, which is baffling the public regulators. Message: the govern-

ment has to compete, and let go in some sectors, and act as a facilitator. This is happening now, but the impact is not big enough to be noticeable publicly.

In the LDCs, the bureaucracy had to be of ample girth to provide all kinds of miscellaneous services to the community for tens of decades. It is a vicious circle which is supposed to last till the economic take-off point. Therefore in a changing environment of operating conditions, the present and future role of the civil service has to be carefully tailored. The civil service is a secure service, hence the resistance would be tough. On the other hand, as the private sector develops, there will be brain drain from the civil service, starting at the higher and professional levels.

Static planning exercises according to the standard books are no longer valid in these days of constantly changing parameters, as now national planning is heavily influenced by global trends. Currently long-term effects of the implementation of national projects are more difficult to assess as the variables are changing. The government experts are aware of the trends, but the analysis of projects should be more revealing to the outsiders.

Making a Bid for Immortality!

Looking ahead to the new year is one thing, looking ahead to the rest of eternity is quite another. But that is what 80 people in the world are doing — and they are prepared to put their money where their minds are. Some of those trying to buy immortality talk to a Gemini News Service correspondent — who is herself paying to have her body preserved for subsequent resurrection.

Maria Ciancia writes from London

MARIA Camacho is hoping to buy immortality for herself. Or, to be precise, immortality for her head.

The plan is that after her death, her head will be preserved in a freezing process. One day, she hopes, when science has advanced sufficiently to complete the job, her head will be defrosted and, with the knowledge that will then exist, her brain will be treated to enable it to live forever.

Like most mothers, she is even more ambitious when it comes to her son, 16-year-old Michael. She plans to have his entire body frozen.

The cost of this bid for eternal life is about \$80,000. She pays an annual fee to one of several companies offering cryonics — the process of freezing bodies in liquid nitrogen. As is required, she has also made the company the beneficiary of her life insurance policy.

"I want to see the future and this is the only way to do it at the moment," she says in her London home. Her kitchen walls are plastered with newspaper and magazine cuttings about cryonics.

Michael agrees: "I also want to go to the future, to be with my mother and sisters because I think that life is too short, there is just not enough time to do many things."

He proudly sports a bracelet provided by the company. It is engraved with instructions about how his body should be dealt with in the event of his death and gives the company's US phone number. Instructions include "No autopsy or embalming," but that would, of course, depend on the nature of death.

An estimated 80 people are paying for similar arrangements. Most live in the United States, where clients tend to be young professionals, computer

"Freezing generates a lot of damage because of thermal expansion," he warns. "If you freeze a strawberry, which contains a lot of water like the body does, it turns into mush."

But the companies remain bullish (one pamphlet states: "The goal of cryonics is the transport of today's terminal patients to a time in the future when cell and tissue repair technology will be available and restoration to full health possible") and the clients unquenchably optimistic that reality will catch up with science fiction.

"Our brain and bodies will be repaired by nanotechnology when they bring us back to life in the far away future," Maria Camacho believes.

Nanotechnology holds out the dream of tiny machines small enough to be injected into the bloodstream that will build copies of themselves and then go about repairing a body's damaged cells.

"All of this will be possible with nanotechnology," she insists. Faith that science will conquer all impediments is common to all would-be-immortal customers. Without it, they would not be willing to pay large sums of money for an outcome that is still beyond reach.

"I want to have my head frozen because I consider that a future technology that can bring me back to life won't have any problem in providing a body, cloned or otherwise," says a customer, Jack.

They all also share a desire to cheat death. "Why do we have to die in the first place? That is the worst calamity affecting mankind at the moment," says Brian. "Life is too short, death doesn't have to be the end of it."



TOM & JERRY

HEALTH CLUB

BY ANI FEINBERG DRAWINGS BY MORAN

IT MAY HAVE BEEN A FRODO... DO YOU HAPPEN TO KNOW, SIR - WAS MR. THOMAS GIVING SOME ENEMIES? BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES - PERHAPS?

COULDN'T SAY... I ONLY KNEW HIM AS A CUSTOMER... YOU'D BETTER ASK MR. THOMAS HIMSELF

SO MUCH FOR OUR MAN IN A HURRY! HE'S NOW IN THE SHOP LAST NIGHT - AT LEAST THE FRENCH HE NOT FINDING HE NOT FINDING HIS BODY!!

HE APPEARS NOT TO HAVE BEEN IN THE SHOP LAST NIGHT - AT LEAST THE FRENCH HE NOT FINDING HE NOT FINDING HIS BODY!!

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James Bond

BY ANI FEINBERG DRAWINGS BY MORAN

BY ANI FEINBERG DRAWINGS BY MORAN

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