

THE LOST SUPPER OR THE END OF A BEGINNING

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After the Silent Dinner in Lahore, Dec 2016.

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Language, the greatest means of communication, was probably the most important tool to shape *Homo erectus* into human beings. Once a man or woman communicates with others, he or she views them as a mirror in which to see his or her self. Language also provides the opportunity to store human knowledge and convey it across continents, cultures and generations. In a sense the entire world, or universe is contained inside the limited letters of an alphabet, of any language.

Octavio Paz, writing on the relation of the sound of words to things which they signify, imagines the perplexity of our ancestors who must have been surprised to find another sound (word) used for denoting the same object which has a different name/word/sound in their tongue. “Sooner or later all societies discover that there are other groups speaking a language different from their own. To realize that for other men the sounds that designate one thing or another – bread, sky, demons, trees – name other objects or designate nothing at all and are simply noise, must have been an awful experience. How can different sounds produce similar meanings?”¹. Perhaps that confusion created a sense of recognizing and realizing the presence of the *Other*, and generated the profession of translators, who convert text from one language into another tongue.

Imagine the world without translators. We would have been reduced to a small circle, without knowing or interacting with other communities, or accessing the literature written in other languages. Translators not only bring verbal expressions from other nations, they also expand our worldview, and make us global, international and transnational.

But as translators, texts and contents are of varying kinds, languages are also of different types. Along with written and spoken forms, and signs, humans communicate through images and objects they make. There may be a link between all sorts of language mankind employs in order to converse, but the peculiarity of a system of communication also determines the content in it because certain concepts and ideas are only possible in one or another language.

The limitation of language is experienced in everyday life, but it was strongly realized at ‘*The Silent Dinner*’, that took place on an early December night in Lahore. Organized on the rooftop of a restaurant in the old part of town, the dinner was attended by a number of people including artists, writers, curators, collectors,

journalists and educationists etc. Rows of table were filled with these invitees who sat for two hours without uttering a single word. Apart from using language, every other activity related to food happened that evening. Cutlery was placed, starters were served, water was brought, and guests left their seats to pick their favourite dishes from a selection of vegetarian cuisine. Dinner ended with enjoying a range of sweets, but more than that by gazing at the watches to find when the two hours are up and one can start to speak again.

But interestingly as soon as two hours were complete and ‘participants in the performance’ were ‘allowed’ to ‘talk’, some of them felt unease with words, or realized the futility of spoken language. The experience was not dissimilar to getting your wrist bone broken, having a cast on it for three to four month, not moving the hand, and once the bone is healed, cast is removed, fingers are free, you are still unable to turn it or use it. And while in that period of ‘invalidity’ you have developed a habit of substituting acts connecting to arm, hand and fingers through some other way.

Same was the case during *The Silent Dinner*, because, like me, several other guests (or participants) after feeling the initial frustration – being stopped to speak, read text on their cell phones, or write on their notebooks – were forced to find other means of communications. Shaking hands, embracing, waving arms, or pointing to items in front of them were a few modes to interact with someone sitting next or across the table. The dinner began with a sullen sensation, almost foretelling the boring two hours ahead, but by the end when 120 minutes were almost over, many of those present, were freely communicating with each other and scarcely needed words to do so. One also started thinking about the requirement, role and necessity of spoken words, and if humans had not invented language, we might have some other scheme of discourse amongst us. Probably diagrams, drawings, scratches, marks, lines, shapes etc.

The experience of being there reiterated the relevance of words, and in the same instance exposed a sense of fasting. Eating, and to a sumptuous level can not be by any chance connected to the ritual of fasting, yet *The Silent Dinner* was a blend of fasting and feasting. I, like some other participants, already had my regular meal before leaving for the restaurant, the venue of the performance. Presuming that if the speech was barred, eating might have not been allowed either (as tongue was reduced to only one of its functions: tasting, and not the other function: talking), since we always associate having dinner with others as a social activity to intermingle and discuss many things.

Actually the link between cuisine and conversation is two folded, because in some conservative households kids were instructed not to talk while having their food at the family table. For them it amounts to bad behaviour, because you shift your attention from food and indulge in trite activities. On the contrary, in some circles (and these are the majority) it is decent to engage in small talk with fellow humans while sitting at a dinner table. Eating in silence is understood to be a person’s

selfishness, self-centredness and greediness. There are diverse topics at a dinner table but it is usually observed that while eating people only discuss food (if not their plans to join a gym, loose weight or calculate calories and chart out different healthy diets!).

Thus an occasion where eating was about controlling your tongue, but fully devouring your food presented interesting and unexpected outcomes. Many (including me) despite of having their dinner, had another full meal – probably out of their frustration of not using their mouth to make sound, they engaged it to savour what was served. So at *The Silent Dinner*, food became the main course and focus of communication. Pointing towards types of salad, main course, sweetmeat or other stuff became the main act, action and activity. Everyone tried to offer what was in front of him or her to person sitting left, right or opposite. Thus the dinner, even though it was *silent*, was not without communication and interaction. Some even dared discussing slightly complex or higher subjects, for example art, politics, fashion, or the surrounding architecture dominated by the grand mosque built during the reign of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, next to Lahore Fort.

However all these attempts were proven false and futile, because soon those individuals realized the futility of these efforts. It dawned on us that if we are stopped from using ‘verbal vocabulary’ we are reduced to basic functions and elementary interactions. No matter how hard we try, we cannot move beyond the banal. This scenario is reminiscent of the egg and chicken situation: debating whether our concepts have produced our complex language, or our system of language led to a wealth of sophisticated ideas. The absence of spoken words during *The Silent Dinner* signifies the dearth of sublime concept in the wake of verbal interaction.

Certainly the participants were silent for the entire duration of dinner, they were refrained from conversation with each other, but it didn’t mean abandoning language; because in place of talking to each other, each individual was in conversation with him or herself. Once the guests were denied the right to speak loudly, speech occupied their brains, and they were in discourse with themselves – through thinking, recollecting, remembering and taking mental notes. In fact the process of thinking is just an act of verbalising, and there is no thought beyond or devoid of human speech – in the form of its internal discourse.

Yet a person questions the need for hosting *The Silent Dinner*, which in actuality did not remain ‘silent’ in the pure sense of the word. In spite of strict instructions, people did speak, in their heads, through signs, and other means, even though no sound was produced. Not even the beep of a mobile phone was ringing (an unimaginable scenario in contemporary conditions!) yet one could hear and note the sounds of surroundings, fragments of a song, lines of a verbal exchange from a far away house, the announcement of an event and the call for prayers were a few fleeting and floating sound pieces, which were comprehensible and identifiable – and initiated chains of thought in some minds. So if there was no complete and absolute suspension of speech, the whole performance served a greater cause. It provided a

unique experience of discontinuing a small section of our routine existence – for a brief period of two hours – to make us realize how important and indispensable the habit of talking is for the human race.

To some extent it also alluded to a totalitarian society, in which state, market or some other dominant force determines the discourse of a public. What to say and what not to utter. What to write and what to hide. In many communities, the authorities dictate and direct the course and conversation of its population. Often directly, and many times in an implicit manner. The tendency of self-censorship is an example of silencing one's expressions and ideas, which takes place without the direct and obvious command of a higher governing body. Due to a subjugated public's conditioned behaviour, the demand to conceal unacceptable material is met by the writers, artists and general public as an act of 'free choice'. Solely because in the beginning any restriction appears odd, oppressive and illogical, but with the passage of time it becomes part of one's system of thinking, and mode of behaviour. *The Silent Dinner* confirmed, determined and demonstrated this psychological process, where for two hours, men and women abandoned their right to speak and by the culmination of performance they seemed to be not missing much and could have continued for a further extension of the experiment.

Once the human race is stripped of the gift of speech, it can still survive and manage to make itself understood. This was observed to a level in Lahore, and must have been the same during other *Silent Dinners* in different cities. But the Lahore performance was unique because of the political history of this country. The nation has suffered years of dictatorship that always tried to stifle the voices of dissent.

The brief history of Pakistan is replete with cases of poets, painters, playwrights, dancers and actors who were stopped from publication, performance and appearances. Writers such as Josh Malihabadi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and many others were not allowed on official media; yet they survived their oppressors.

The performance 'Silent Dinner' by Honi Ryan was a reminder of that aspect of human resistance, which finds freedom from any oppressive junta commanding a country for a decade or more, or a voluntarily obligation only for two and a half hours on a rooftop on a pleasant evening in Lahore.

It also indicated how the human mind makes ways of resisting a power, because even though participants remained silent, they were able to communicate soundlessly. Which reminded in reverse the first line of *The Gospel According to St. John*: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God". Because amid this supper, in the end was the silence, and the silence was with human, and the silence was human!

1. Paz, Octavio. *Convergences*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York. 1987 (page 1)