

We Never Stop Talking.

The blur between the real and the orchestrated.

Saira Ansari. After the Lahore Silent Dinner, December 2016.

Saira Ansari is a researcher and a writer with an interest in South Asian contemporary and modern art history.

1.

The Careem car is hurtling through the chaotic streets of Lahore. The street lamps seem to have gone out, but the blinking frenzy of oncoming, swerving, honking, motorbikes and rickshaws provide enough light. I think I'm running late but I'm not sure. The dinner invitation said 8 sharp. One hand shifting between the steering wheel and the gear stick, the other one clamped to his ear, the driver is arguing with someone over the phone while he drives. As pedestrians, cars, life, veers out of our way, a uniformed man jumps in front of our car. "Oh no" exclaims the driver, as he hits the breaks and drops his phone. A conversation – that probably has occurred in a thousand different iterations in the career of this Traffic Warden – unfolds. The Warden points out that driving and speaking on the phone is a traffic violation. The driver pleads guilty, feigns distress. He crumples 200 rupees in the Warden's hand. The Warden crumples a traffic ticket in the dust. The actors nod in mutual understanding, perhaps never to meet again. The pandemonium picks up again as the car belts past the Railway Station, a bastion of colonial virulence. Across a traffic signal. A new bridge. What is this cemented monstrosity? A sharp left. I'm back in familiar territory. A gate, a trot, and I make it to my destination. Early.

2.

Existing in Lahore requires a ritualised performance in itself. But to walk from that into an orchestrated one is a bit surreal. This city does theatrical stage performances well and I have spent a large part of my life both on stage and in the audience. It was much later, during my time at the National College of Arts, Lahore (first from 2001 to 2004 and then again from 2009 to 2010) when I began to draw a feeble line of understanding between the performing arts and *performance art*. It was new and confusing, and exciting too. In a culture so rich and diverse in thespianism as ours, it was unfortunate that I knew nothing of local performance art. There was no published documentation around it that I was able to find. I still admit to knowing very little of what happened in the past. Perhaps nothing like it did happen. But as time passed, I began to familiarise myself with the pockets of performance art taking shape around me. The few and far between performances grew in number, and I began to slowly piece together a nuanced vocabulary of my own.

3.

Tonight the roles of the performer and observer are not divided upon entering the staging space. Tonight we are all participants, and our presence makes the event.

The event is in the historical district of the city in the murky colourful *Heera Mandi* (Diamond Market) neighbourhood, the oldest red light district in Pakistan. Cropping up in the shadows of the Lahore Fort and *Badshahi* Mosque, the area first served as the living quarters for the royal courtesans of the Mughal Emperors. Dinner will be served on the top floor of a nondescript building next to *Andaaz* restaurant. On the other side of *Andaaz* looms *Cooco's Den*: the first restaurant concept in the area that invited the rest of the city into the centuries old sex-worker's neighbourhood for a *kosher* entertainment experience. The multi-storied *haveli*¹, owned by renowned artist Iqbal Hussain, opened its ground floor museum-like lobby and the glittering rooftop to the public, while the rest housed the artist's family. The son of a sex-worker, Hussain grew up in a crumbling *Heera Mandi* and painted the prostitutes and dancing girls around him. People flocked to eat at this restaurant, overpay for food, and peer over the backside of the roof into the scores of windows, rooftops, and street life of a very different world. At the end of the meal, the curious would drive through the backstreets and try to sneak a look into the 'music' shops. I remember the pimps, eating from street vendors, keeping one eye out sharply for potential clients. That was the 90s. Now the area is eerily gentrified – the streets have been cleaned up and the houses illuminated. A government sign welcomes people, and a slew of restaurants line the *new* food street. The green belt in front has been rid of its human lumps of heroine addicts. The backstreets now have paid parking. Prostitution is still active.

4.

Please do not use words or your voice.

Please don't read or write.

Try to make as little noise as possible.

Don't interact with technology.

Stay for at least 2 hours.

We walk out of the elevator and on to the rooftop, and are welcomed to a bird's eye view of the majestic *Badshahi* Mosque, a spectacular specimen of Mughal architecture that flanks the Lahore Fort. It's lit up strategically, aware of the many eyes that watch it.

¹ Traditional South Asian townhouse/mansion

There are a few long tables set up on our rooftop and several people are sitting already, waiting quietly. I head to the last table, to the last chair, and take the seat that faces outwards. It's a strategic choice. I'm expecting to be extremely uncomfortable in my forced silence amongst strangers, and so I want to be facing the least number of people and also want a view to distract myself with. If I must contemplate, I must have a pleasing unobstructed view to be the backdrop. I was invited tonight by the artist in my capacity as a writer, but there was no specific request to observe; I wasn't the audience, but a participant in this act - hence, painfully aware of my own self and my indisposition to hold eye contact for long.

Forced silence. Ordered silence. It evokes an inner noise that is cacophonous. Every thought possible chimes in, louder than the last. I'm conscious of being part of an 'art event.' How must I act? Must I act at all? I'm distracted, disturbed almost, by how much I can't *let go*.

The location bothers me. It is beautiful, but it's a postcard setting for a glibly cleaned up Lahore, The Cultural Capital. I feel a sense of being Other-ed: a self-fetishization, evoked through the eye of an outsider. I choose not to ask if the location is the artist's selection or a recommendation by the hosts. I choose instead to make a more considered judgement at the end of the night.

More people arrive, this time familiar faces. They seek comfort in recognition and silently head towards my table. Within minutes, I'm surrounded by many whom I know from my art school days. Two artists, an eastern classical dancer, students from an art history class that I assisted at, a friend, a critic. Add to that some strangers and a sole white male. Nods of acknowledgment, hello, how do you do, this is strange, haha, nothing more to say, let's look away, the view is amazing, I am so calm and collected, this doesn't bother me, actually it does bother me, what are we doing.

It's a bit chilly. There is some preoccupation with adjusting outerwear.

5.

Lahore is not a silent city; no metropolis really is. And the older it gets, the more its buildings and streets creak louder. Punjab, the province, is louder still: the men have big laughs; the women have big thighs. Everything moves, constantly. The fights are big, and love larger. Personal lives spill outside doors and windows, and everyone always talks. Talks, chatters, gossips, lectures, snitches, orates soliloquies. Everyone. Talks. All

the time. Silence is not something that comes naturally to our people, and those who practice it are deemed wise and few.

Honi, I say, when I'm first introduced to her two days before, you are brave to do this in Lahore. How are you going to keep Lahoris silent for an entire evening?

6.

It's been 15 minutes. The girl in front of me slips out her phone to check her whatsapp or facebook or whatever social lifeline she needs to slice through the awkwardness. Everyone looks at her, reproaching loudly in their heads. Her neighbour nudges her and pantomimes disapproval, trying to soften it with a smile. She doesn't care, but switches her phone off after one last glance. Someone moves, a chair scrapes, a shawl is draped. A giggle is stifled. My neighbours do an elaborate mime of appreciating each other's rings, clothes, necklaces. Their fingers touch, graze, linger, share. The lack of words to condense the exchange transpires in an acceptable physicality.

Plastic sealed trays of salad are served and yogurt bowls are placed on the sides. There are not enough serving spoons. People pass around the trays and the one large spoon and begin cutting through the cucumber. Niftily. Calculatedly. Something to keep our confused hands occupied.

Physical. I realise that more and more people around me are beginning to resort to theatrical gesturing. The expressions are exaggerated: eyes are wide open, mouths distorted to express a question or an answer; arms flail, hands mimic words. There is a lot of polite smiling and nods and eyebrow dancing. And cucumber forking. Time ticks.

Finally an entrée is served. Good, because everyone is hungry and no one knows what tonight's fare is. Silently, obediently, a slew of staff serves a purplish, blood red concoction. It's a shredded beetroot salad with some kind of local crumbly, white cheese. I like beetroot. It tastes a bit like cardboard, but the cheese compliments it and a low, humming sound of appreciation escapes my throat. *Mmmm*. Heads whip to look at the elicitor of the sound, and some laugh: shoulders moving, without sound. I peek over and half way down, a couple is poking at the salad disappointedly. They are cautious, hesitant, take a bite and push their plates away in distaste.

7.

Slowly the awareness spreads past our own bodies. Realisation awakens that the other next to us is just as awkward, if not as uncomfortable. And so we begin to point now to other people, the mosque, the moon, and the rooftops next to us. Everything is inspiring an amplified fascination. The music playing from other rooftop restaurants surrounds us. Our food is taking too long.

After what might seem like a sophisticated timeframe of endurance, patience begins to run thin. My neighbour pokes me, I turn around, a cigarette is offered. A white flag. I nod eagerly and we get up. Our metal chairs drag loudly on the floor. Everyone turns to look at us, their senses heightened, their pupils tracking our steps as we walk towards a staircase and up to a small chunk of elevated landscape that can best be described as a vantage point for jumpers. I take a drag, and let out a huge, smoky sigh. Thanks, I nod to my accomplice. More people join us, all girls. Now, suddenly, I'm conscious again. On a petri dish fit for an enlarged microscope, emancipated girls smoke. Morally sound customers from the next-door restaurant's attached rooftop stare and shake their head in disapproval. I find myself lowering my gaze, rushing to finish my cigarette without belittling my generous accomplice's stick gift, and rush down. All eyes stare. It is the quietest, oddest dinner party I have ever been to.

8.

Hunger is not something *Lahoris* deal with well. Food for us, on the other hand, is the sacred glue that binds government deals and marriage vows. The country's current Prime Minister hails from Punjab, and his grand eating habits have often made national news.

The space between the entrée and the main course is excessively long for many around me. The mime now revolves around hunger, death, biting off one's arm, etc. Finally there is a signal that food is served, buffet style. We all get up and queue in a line. I'm very curious about what's on the menu: is it special? Will there be new things to try? Is it traditional *Lahori* cuisine, set to match the location?

Standing at the edge of a very low boundary wall, I see the open kitchen of the restaurant next door. It is close enough for me to jump into. The spread is lavish and with every kind of meat, chicken and fish grilling, frying, simmering. The smells waft up and my stomach growls very loud. I turn around to the person behind me and point and smile, mistaking this to be our dinner fare. He laughs and mouths the words: no meat. I assume

he's vegetarian. My turn finally comes to reach for the silver food trays and... it's all vegetarian. I hear a gasp from the person in front of me who has just also realised this.

Lahoris are known for their excessive food habits - cooking, eating and feeding. Traditionally, a sign of hospitality is the meat you can put on the table. Its expensiveness is a testament to how much a guest is valued, outmoded as it may sound. It is a carnivorous culture, and the sacrifice of goats and cows is something we all grow up seeing. Several of my friends and colleagues are vegetarians in Pakistan. They never find it easy to eat out - no one really understands how to cater to them. So, quite visibly, I see people distressed around me.

The food is good. I pile up my plate high, but the shock of no meat has hit me too. I firmly believe the artist is aware of this conundrum. Whatever her personal choices may be, this is not a decision taken lightly when hosting a dinner in Lahore.

9.

I return to the table and look longingly at the *Cooco's* rooftop, a few buildings down. Their lamb chops are notoriously famous for being delicious and overpriced. As my attention turns away from inside my head and my stomach, I begin to focus on the music wafting in from the surrounding eateries. The wind picks up different pockets of songs and flings them towards us. A popular Bollywood song from the 90s is tossed around with an eastern classical *raag*. Turn this way, and you hear the *raag* more, turn the other and you can tap your foot to the beat.

The precise act of eating distracts the best of people. Everyone is engrossed with shovelling food from plate to mouth, but there is a choreographed togetherness in the scores of people doing the same thing. Plying deftly formed *pathooray*² wrapped bites into their mouths with their hands, one after another. An older, officious looking gentleman has been seated next to me. He is very upset and he plays with his food, but he too eats. The two next to me get up for a second helping.

The food breaks a barrier. The ability to get up and move around brings with it the sounds of physicality that help create the most minimal of *dins*, but one that cuts the silence. It brings a relief. I now see around me lots of wordless but animated conversations taking place. Across from me, the art critic is acting out an elaborate story that has his conversation partner wobbling with silent laughter. I stand up gently, lean against the

² Deep-fried Indian bread

roof railing, and finally observe. No one notices me anymore. Everyone is engaged. It is like someone pushed the mute button on a television show.

We have all become willing participants of this performance. We are the layers, the textures. We are the material and the meaning. The artist watches too.

10.

I look across and see Honi walk across to Herman. They hold hands and stare in each other's eyes for several lengthy minutes. People point to them and everyone stops to turn and look. Suddenly a new epicentre of the gathering is formed, and it demands attention in its silent but powerful non-activity. Are they together romantically, someone gestures a question at me. I shrug, I don't know.

It is dramatic, theatrical and apparently un-staged, but it leaves an impression. Their conversation requires no pantomime, just an exchange of imperceptible communication through touch and sight. After an extended period, which seems like forever to me, they nod and disengage. Honi then walks across and repeats this with a random dinner guest, and then with the next, edging slowly towards our side. A moment of panic hits me and I turn sharply away, avoiding any possibility of being picked. I am incredibly uncomfortable with maintaining eye contact in general, and do not wish to participate in this seemingly innocuous act. She comes close to me, engages with my neighbour, and then moves on. I didn't realise I was holding my breath for that entire time. Whoosh, it comes out.

11.

The evening is almost coming to a close and it gives me time to reflect – upon this experiment that we put ourselves through. Experiences require no validation; yet they instigate a deluge of judgements. For me, the Silent Dinner became more of a sociological study into the dissection of an audience and how we as One Body responded to an estrangement from our own instincts. Watching a performance is different – it allows us to vicariously live through the desires, sorrows and ambitions of a character. Our colour, ethnicity, social, religious and economic status, for that brief period, unyoked. To be part of a performance as the same laymen, on the other hand, requires us to exhibit our fragilities – in an inexperienced manner that both cripples us and liberates us – for everyone to see. We stumble in the aching awareness of our dumbness; we pretend to know better.

It is quite likely that a different demographic – not of the city, or perhaps even of the country – might have responded differently within this setting. One can only postulate that the enchantment of Lahore would have held sway over the night. What if the dinner had taken place inside a room? A plain room, with no ethnographic details to embellish the condition. By the end of the night, the location seemed like an elaborate set. If the dinner was not silent, this particular group of people perhaps might not have engaged long in a conversation about the old city, the mosque, the fort, and the romance of the Mughal period. Instead, I imagine, the conversation would have focused on how the recent spate of horrifically planned urban development has ripped through the fabric of their city and built a brute bridge that obliterates the views of this historic neighbourhood. The backdrop, then, would serve as a reminder of all that is being rapidly lost to delinquency. The conversation would also have revolved around, with equal vigour, the food served that night and being cheated of a carnivorous feast the Old City always promises, and delivers.

If an extreme consciousness of our own self and our thoughts and anxieties, is what public silence – and also art – is supposed to bring, the night was successful.

12.

Is it time yet? Wrists swing to display watch faces. It is time. Why are they not giving out a signal to start talking? There is confusion and gesturing. Someone points to Honi, shows her the watch and mouths if they can speak now. She smiles and motions, your choice. The official silent time is over, but no one wants to be the first to talk. Unpredictably, speaking has become as uncomfortable an act as being silent was just two hours before. Everyone looks to another for clarity. Suddenly, unceremoniously, a whoop of delight from a table at the other end pierces the evening. Someone has just seen the time. That sharp, loud cry of joy draws laughter from everyone. Another table starts clapping and everyone launches into conversation together. Not hearing, just speaking.

The diners at the rooftop next to us had been just as caught up with our act as we had been. To them, a large party of about 50 or 60 had spent an entire evening in silence. Upon hearing us break our vow of silence, they hoot cheers of appreciation and clap for us. A moment of sound and cacophony connects us strangers.

---*---