

Silences

By Shadab Zeest Hashmi

Downy like falling snow, the silences came with an insulating, protective energy. I drew circles around them. I danced inside those circles, with the whisper of my imaginary pencil the only thing audible. I reveled in the swelling hush when it came, and swam in its womb waters. Silence, like solitude was a fine gift in a world where each sound came with a category all its own: roosters, city traffic, portable transistors, and a myriad languages, each with its own baggage: Arabic was a language of sobriety, understood only in its religious expression— women reflexively covered their head with their trailing *dupattas*, and men fell silent out of respect when they heard the *azaan*. This was the language of the velvet and silk wrapped Quran, kept on the highest shelf. One couldn't imagine, for instance, asking for a pack of cigarettes in Arabic, or talking to one's dog. English was used to explicate, reprimand, show-off and was readily mixed with Urdu as a boosting agent: toddlers were taught not to take their clothes off in public because "*shame, shame ho jai gi,*" students were told "*attention kharay ho jain,*" "*time waste mut karain,*" so on. Urdu was at times a language of nostalgia and at times, full of airs— pretending to be a China shop with the provincial languages (Pushto, Punjabi, Sindhi, Baluchi) the bulls smashing around. Urdu had the pride of place as the language of the Mughal empire with all the grandeur of high culture embedded in it, if you chose to care, that is, about the pre-Raj history of India and sought to tether your identity to the cultivated past in the hopes of continuing that legacy.

In reality, Urdu was good for little other than poetry, and for programming on radio and television that followed the ideological agenda of chiseling the new nation's identity. For academic and professional success, or to be considered a person of status, you had to know English. The British had left, it was said, but not without leaving us the noose of the necktie, and their language in our throats. But why blame the British for seeking progress through imitation instead of innovation? Of the many undesirable things, the worst manifestation of linguistic supremacy was the classism and racism that this complex of language engendered. The partition of East and West Pakistan happened in part due to Urdu being imposed as the national language when it was foreign to Bengali Pakistanis who preferred to speak Bangla. Growing up in Peshawar, I sensed the same fervor

for Pushto among the Pathans, few of whom cared for Urdu or for the Mughali *adaab* (etiquette), or the cultivation and power it represented.

Then there was Punjabi, colossally ridiculed for its nasal, slack-jawed, boorish sounds compared to Urdu. It was a little known fact that Punjabi, considered to be the ugly stepsister of Urdu, is a much older language with the richest tradition of sufi poetry in the subcontinent. It also happened to be the mother tongue of some of the masters of Urdu poetry such as Iqbal, Faiz and Noon Meem Rashid.

Up until my grandparents' generation, most well off Indian Muslims were tutored in Persian. It signified supreme refinement as it had been the language of the Mughal court. High Urdu was peppered with Persian expressions. The culture of the Raj replaced Persian as the elite language with English to a large extent: "chehel qadmi" was replaced with "walk," "mehman khana" with "drawing room" – English dignitaries had been depicted in their tailcoats sitting with legs folded court-style in nineteenth century Mughal miniatures, a bit off-kilter in the surrounding regalia. There are no miniatures of the British around the time they departed India in 1947 but if there were, they would show them watching polo, playing tennis, and dancing in ballrooms where dark-skinned people, the "natives" were only seen as "bearers," "sais" and "ball boys," like Kipling's rendering of the noble "mughal" into the savage "mowgli."

The English lexicon borrowed quite a bit from Urdu, mostly topography and culture specific words: *khaki* (dust-colored), *must* (elephant going berserk), *cummerbund* (sash/belt), *jungle*, *sepoy*, *chutney*, so on. This aspect of English would strike me as significant as an English major at Reed, writing poems about why I write in English and not Urdu, why Urdu being a hybrid of disparate languages is aptly symbolic of a fragmented sense of identity. Not only would I now learn to pay attention to Urdu in all its musical and metaphorical beauty, its achingly lovely poetry; I would also remember the endearing frankness of Punjabi, at once soulfully innocent and comic; Pushto with its crispness, zest and simplicity; and Pakistani English, the idiom of the suppressed with its own often humorous idiosyncrasies. Mostly, I would embrace all over the intermittent silences of my childhood, the soft padding against the grinding noise of history, the bewildering clamor of conflict.