

The World as Word

By Quddus Mirza



Simeen Farhat, A Teardrop in Disperse

Even though we talk in different languages, all humans have an identical apparatus for speech. We survive in the midst of language, which has infused the sense of Time in human society. The concept of past, present and future exists only for mankind. Arguably, animals are beyond the constraint of temporal divisions because they are not endowed with the gift of speech.

Language is significant in the way our existence is entrapped in descriptions and definitions — of events, entities and objects. We are constantly talking with others and with ourselves too. But the problem is, in which language? It is also a point of dispute whether we choose a vocabulary according to our thoughts, or our concepts are shaped on the basis of the language we use; particularly for those who have access to more than one language.

Like most of us, Simeen Farhat also resides within a multiplicity of languages. Living in Dallas USA, English is her normal mode of expression but, as a Pakistani, Urdu is still part of her life and personality. For those of us who are

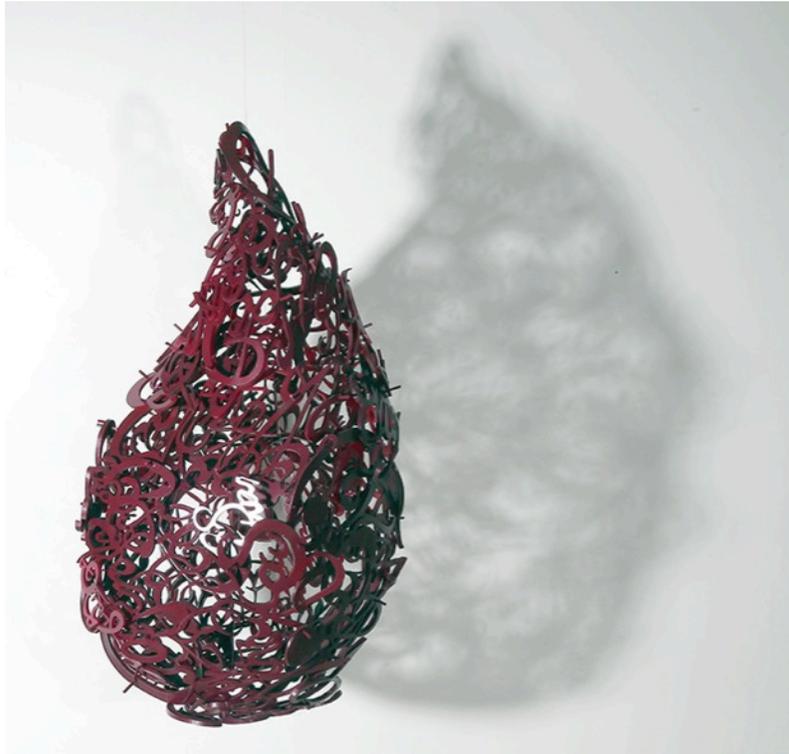
residing here, switching from Urdu to Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi or any other national language is a usual and simple act. Similarly, shifting from Urdu to English and vice versa in the middle of conversation or even in mid-sentence is a normal occurrence.

This makes one think if we are translators from one language to another, and if we are converting our ideas into one, two or three languages — what is the original language of those ideas? Or does the origin of idea depend upon words of a certain vocabulary?

Words are important in various ways, and their supremacy is stated in many religions (The Bible reminds that in the beginning was Word, and according to Muslim cosmology the entire universe was created through a word, Kun).

Language is split into two sections — written shapes and spoken sounds. Often, when we glance at a text by someone we know, we read it in their voice whether it's a mobile phone message, email or a printed article. But when we write, we are not aware of the potential of evoking sounds, even though language was initially a spoken medium and remained so till humans invented script.

Apart from readers and writers, for visual artists who are employing text in their work, the fine line between shape and sound is crucial in order to explore the possibilities of alphabets. The flowing script in several cultures could be an attempt to emulate spoken expression. Both Chinese calligraphers and our traditional scribes wrote in styles that could be read like consolidated sounds.

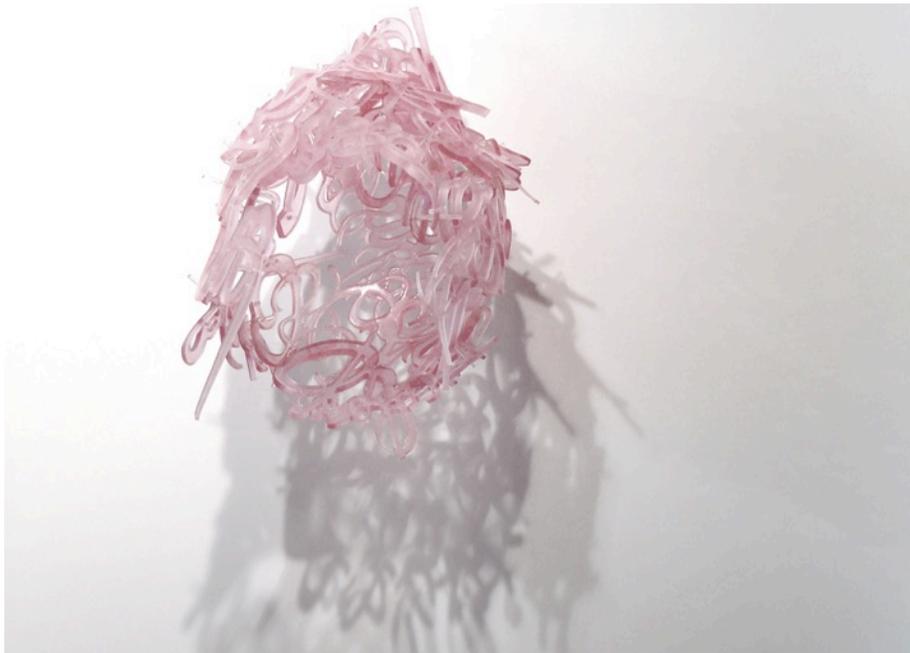


Simeen Farhat, A Red Drop of Blood

Looking at the works of Simeen Farhat, one realises the link between words and voice, and how the artist attempts to capture the sound of language rather than the mere form of script. Although Farhat claims she is “interested in the shapes of language” and has not only used letters of Urdu and English but of Arabic, Persian, Chinese, Russian, Hebrew and Hindi also, her work is more about reading the text in order to emphasise its physical/phonetic manifestation.

In her recent exhibition (From a Whirlwind to a Gentle Breeze, held from Dec 22, 2015 to Jan 21, 2016 at Art Chowk Gallery, Karachi), Farhat has displayed six works made out of separate letters of English. She composes them in phrases which serve as titles of each exhibit like ‘I Think of What I Think’, ‘A Gentle Breeze’, ‘A Bubble That Bursts’, ‘A Teardrop in Disperse’, ‘A Whirlwind That Rises’ and ‘A Red Drop of Blood’.

Made in mediums such as acrylic, enamel, and pigmented and cast resin, these composite pieces vary in size, colour and construction. Intriguingly, the artist is using English letters but her choice of writing style echoes the sensibility of Urdu script. Hence, the shape of her words is more like the English spoken in our midst with a local accent. One wonders how this body of work (all created in 2015) would be seen outside of Pakistan, although for an artist from Pakistan and living in the US, demarcations such as local and foreign are rather complex and can not be decided easily. Somehow, that confusion is conducive for art-making because it provides opportunities and occasions for a creative individual to address questions of identity and existence without succumbing to stereotypes, simplifications and statements.



Simeen Farhat, A Bubble That Bursts

Language became a tool to connect with what was left behind for another artist from Pakistan who lived away from his motherland — Anwar Jalal Shemza. In his paintings created in the UK, Shemza employed Urdu writing to recall his distant country and called the series of these small canvases Roots. For him, the Urdu text was a way to remember all that was associated with a society in which that language was used and understood. In a way, he

identified himself with that script which could not be comprehended fully on a different soil.

On the other hand, script in Simeen Farhat's hand reflects not the society of 1970s but the world of twenty-first century, in which globalisation has transformed the notion of home and away. Now, language represents multiple dimensions of a person surviving in this age. Here, English is hardly an imposed language or Urdu an indigenous tongue in the real sense because, like with other natural phenomena, languages are also growing and merging to form something new for the future. This can be seen in popular Bollywood songs which are a mixture of English, Urdu and Punjabi and in how people speak at their homes, in offices, within classrooms and on streets.

It is only in the print form, whether newspapers, magazines or books, that we stick to one language. It is mainly because of the tyranny of the printed word that we are still entangled in debates of authenticity and purity in languages (and hence ethnicity) whereas culture is moving forward, and so are our creative personalities who are responding to the future. An example is Simeen Farhat whose work about letters clustered in words to make phrases amuse a viewer due to their constantly-changing appearance, origin and meaning.