

Historical Survey of Puppet Art in Pakistan (1947– Now)

ANEEQA MAHMOOD

Institute of Design and Visual Arts, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore

Abstract: *In this Article the historical survey of puppet art in Pakistan are explained. The survey starts from 1947 to till now. The roots of this art are traced back to the Indus valley civilization, to the Sub Continent, and eventually to the areas which are now known as Pakistan. Same like India there is no clear history of Puppet art in Pakistan. This research concludes the details of the history after independence. Underlying research has strived to explore the significance and the importance of the puppetry as art form and some extent for the sake of education in Pakistan. This art is subject to decline because of lack of interest of the people in it. This research explains to know the brief history about puppets stories its reasons and the struggle of the artist to make this term so prominent. The research also counts the positive aspects of the puppetry that despite all the odds is still alive and working in our society. Besides this many organizations are also contributing to this field of art. It proves that the puppetry is in the cultural roots of the people of this region. If a nation is alive then its art and culture is also alive. Underlying research contributes towards creating awareness for this art and entertainment form.*

KEYWORDS; *contributes, Entertainment, organizations, Pakistan, Puppet Art,*

I. INTRODUCTION

Puppetry, the performance of puppets, is the most wonderful art form as it allows great freedom of expression that otherwise cannot be expressed. It is a strong medium which can explain a point of view or a story through symbolic, simplified and direct gestures of tiny characters made of straws, wood, fabric etc. People adopt this medium because of its vitality and a kind of freedom that express a lot of new ideas and concepts from the puppets which usually human actors avoid because of their constraints and reservations. It influences the mind of the spectators through the acting of life-like characters with their strong expressions. It is an ideal art form for changing the mindset of people and bringing education and social change in the society. Performance of Puppet art is a very reflective way to express ones idea through different stories, as Puppet art practiced from our ancestors; puppetry is in our tradition from centuries. Performing arts is taken to a great extent in our society; it portrays the negatives and positive views; it develops the positive ways of individual culture. Many researchers claim that the puppet art is the dying art and it's after effects is not so good. No one wants to carry this business with him. I interviewed many persons to check this hypothesis. If the puppet art is fading away and vanishing from the country, then why puppet festivals are held every year on the national or international level? In our country Pakistan we are facing lot of difficulties in every walk of life but it does not mean that we forgot our culture. We have to struggle to put up high. In this Research Paper many important things about the puppet art have been discussed. The basic agenda of puppetry is to revive the culture and tradition. There are many folk puppeteers performing the old folk stories. Many of them are facing decline because of the invasion of electronic media such as television, cinemas and internet.

II. HISTORICAL SURVEY OF PUPPET ART

The Alhamra Art Council, Lahore was the only organization, who provided the platform where the shows of puppet art were conducted. Faiz Ahmad Faiz's was appointed as the secretary of the Alhamra Art council induced a new life into the institution. Previously it was badly affected because no activity related to art and

Culture was conducted in this institute. This cultural body has never lived up to the expectation of stakeholders since its inauguration in the late 1940s. Alys Faiz wife of Faiz Ahmad Faiz was privately charged with the responsibility to manage and arrange shows for the entertainment of children.

In this respect she requested Anna Molka to make puppets for the proposed show. Anna Molka was the great artist who knows much about the puppet art. She used to make a puppet of the purposed show at the Alhamra like 'Jin k teen Sunheri Baal,' 'Jadoo ka Darakht,' 'Bashah Baghloul,' 'Alladin' and etc. Faiz Ahmad Faiz's Mother was the first lady who brought the puppet from the England; it was a glove puppet that kindled love for puppetry in the Faiz household." While talking to Salima Hashmi, in an interview she explained that at the age of five (1947-48), she was not acquainted with the puppets ever before. However, her grandmother brought a puppet which was traditional punch and Judy puppets. She said that she had a puppet show with her younger sister at home for the children of *Mohallah* using two chairs as a stage with a *dubatta* across them.¹

The Family of Faiz Ahmad Faiz was so much committed to set up the art activities in the society that for the first time in our history Salima Hashmi and her sister Muneeza Hashmi held the puppet shows for the children in the district and made money in this agreement. Alys Faiz was the first who organized the puppet show in Alhamra Art Council. She had a puppet theater constructed with the help of a carpenter and it had a space of two or three chairs behind the stage, the total height of the stage is five feet and the length was six to seven feet. It had tube lights on the top this was the only setup at that time.² These shows were based on stories of children e.g. Punch & Judy and those from Hans Christian Andersen. Faiz Ahmad Faiz was the one who introduced puppet shows in Alhamra's children entertainment programs.

The first stories about puppet play there were based on English literature. Glove puppet shows used to hold in Alhamra Hall with some regularity, in which hundreds of people could seat easily. The people related to the theater are Salima Hashmi, Ruqqaiya Hassan, Zakia Hassan, and Abdulah Qasim Lodhi. Salima Hashmi, Muneeza Hashmi, Salma Taseer, Zakia Sarwar, was the main Puppeteer of that time. They were the self taught puppeteers.

Salima Hashmi learned to manipulate puppets from her Grandmother later Salima Hashmi used to teach puppetry to others.³ Salima Hashmi recorded her voice for the puppet shows and gave them ideas how to make puppets and stages manually from cheap and easy materials. Salima Hashmi has been working in this field for a long time. As she was a teacher of NCA she started the puppet art there too. Many students and art lover involved in this art field and considered it as performing art. She was self taught puppeteer to heighten the potential growth and interest of puppetry. After that like Salima Hashmi, Samina Ahmad, was working in Alhamra Art Council.⁴

Czechoslovakian puppeteer invited to Pakistan in the early 1960s to hold the workshop at the Alhamra Art Council, Lahore. Haveilikove and Vadickova (artists), who tragically died in the plane Crash in 1965s while going back after the workshop, they introduced the art of puppetry as conceived and practiced in modern times that inspired the group of young boys and girls. At that time a free workshop was started for six weeks to teach the puppet art, in which many students enrolled named Naeem Tahir, Yasmin Imtiaz (Yasmeen Tahir), Farooq Zameer, Salima Faiz (Salima Hashmi), and Muneeza Faiz (Muneeza Hashmi). They trained to make *Papier mâché*, a French word, a material that made of paper mixed with glue, water and other substances and that hardens as it dries and works string Puppets (Marionettes).

The result of the workshop was that they start making puppets for the performances. The head of the puppet was made up of *Papier mâché*, the rest of the body is with cloth. The most favorite puppet is monkey puppet, that was brought from London and everybody used to loves it.⁵ In 1964 television broadcast started with many entertainment programs in which puppet shows played a vital role for the entertainment of the youngsters. The trained group of young puppeteers introduced a new theme to attract the viewers with many fresh stories and

¹ Salima Hashmi, interview by author, Lahore, February 20, 2017.

² Ibid.

³ Salima Hashmi, Lahore, February 20, 2017.

⁴ Samina Ahmad, Lahore, June 8, 2017.

⁵ Ibid.

characters were portrayed in a very interesting manner.⁶ In 1969, a series of program named as Sesame Street- an educational program was on aired in America, on the same time Rafi Peer taken its right to play this show in Pakistan. This is the only show, which lead many smaller fields of Pakistan. It was the first show, which was detailed and planned for comprehensive educational curriculum. Its target audience was lower income family. It found after a research survey that many students and children watched the program before starting their school in the early ages.

The show gained much of its popularity after the introductory season.

During the 1960s it was Pakistan's policy to broadcast at least one program for children every day.⁷ After Sesame Street, 'Kaliyaan' was another famous puppet show aired on PTV (Pakistani television) in 1970s. From that very instant the television shows are thus repopularizing the oldest art form in Pakistan.

Because of the efforts of puppeteers, it could be possible to run innovative stories on television weekly or daily. The puppetry was in its Climax in 1970, because many governments and non government organization were taking initiatives to enhance the value of puppet art in the Pakistan. National Council of Art was built in 1973 and it took the responsibility to look after the cultural heritage. After that a non government organization Rafi Peer Theater Workshop constructed Museum of puppetry in 1974 which is still working even after three decades. Salima Hashmi the focal person of puppet art, in an interview she told that she left Lahore to study in the UK, when she came back the puppet theater was no more in the country. The puppets had disappeared so she worked in PTV on a puppet program called *Babloo aur Naazi* for almost a year. After that, she returned to London for three years and after her departure, there was once again no puppet Program running on PTV.

After time passes In 1981 Alhamra art center, inaugurated the new hall and in 1982 Samina Ahmad organized a show with the help of the Pakistan National Council of art team Alhamra.⁸ She mentioned in her interview for a long time this had been her intense hidden desire, she always loved to work for a puppet show at the Alhamra Puppet Theater. When she was in fifth grade, she learned to make a puppet and it was her first interaction with this field of art. She also worked for Pakistan Television and performed in the play entitled "*Akkar Bakkar*." In 1982 the first official puppet show which inspired Samina Ahmad "The Story of Pakistan" performed by Pakistan National Council of Arts team on the stage through puppet manipulations in Islamabad.⁹ It was a brilliant and superb work and the whole show was played with the help of rod and glove puppet. Then she started a regular platform for puppetry at Alhamra.

In 1983 Samina Ahmad joined as a Director of Alhamra Puppet Theater on a permanent seat. Although there were no proper arrangements, the illuminations were not enough for the shows; the echo system was not there, no proper stage setting for the show, no enough space for people to sit and to enjoy the show. It is said that the puppet art was the only entertainment that's why the number of viewers were very large.¹⁰ Puppet art took five years to get familiar with people and set their minds to accept this field as an art form.

It is difficult for the organizations to continue a new field of art as for the shortage of resources. It was not an easy task to motivate and encourage the Alhamra authorities to arrange a puppet theater for children.¹¹ Usually the authority of Alhamra Art Council did not agree with the proposal of puppet show performed in Alhamra, or if they agreed they would allocate limited resources. There were a limited number of trained puppeteers and this was one of the biggest hurdles to conduct a successful show. In this respect, a workshop was held under the guidance of Samina Ahmad and Faqir Hussain Saga, in which many youngsters from National College of Arts got the opportunity and took an active part to introduce their talent. At this point, the name of Faqir Hussain Saga was very important who was not only a good dancer but also a trained puppeteer from China. Faqir Hussain Saga was the one who contributed a lot in the field of puppet art, conducted many workshops and gave training to the upcoming puppeteers. He gave assistance to the youngsters about the relevant physical exercises

⁶ Sarwat Ali, *Animating the Inanimate: Puppet Theater in Pakistan* (Lahore: The Museum of Puppetry and Ferozsons, 2005), 9.

⁷ Imran Peerzadah, interview by author, Lahore, March 31, 2016.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Samina Ahmad, interview by author, Lahore, June 8, 2017.

¹⁰ Sarwat Ali, *Animating the Inanimate* (Lahore: Museum of Puppetry and Ferozsons 2005), 66.

¹¹ Samina Ahmad, interview by author, Lahore, June 8, 2017.

which helped to manipulate puppets, thus enabling them to hold the puppet and make it work.¹² Samina Ahmad was the great puppet art lover. Samina Ahmad visited Islamabad to observe the performance on Chinese puppetry.

Samina Ahmad indulged many students from the National College of Arts which was the only institute where the puppet art training was given back in 1985. Many students were selected to make a mural of puppet art in Alhamra Art Council.¹³ It was the time when Zulfiqar Ali Zulfi worked at Alhamra as a puppeteer. Zulfiqar Ali Zulfi has also made many puppets. The famous show by Zulfiqar Ali Zulfi was “*Chal Meri Tamki.*”¹⁴ Now Zulfiqar Ali Zulfi is the director of the Puppet art society in Alhamra Art Council. He manages the puppet show and look after the affairs of puppet shows.

Puppetry faces many crises by losing the interest of people in its shows. The Only sponsors of Puppet shows in Pakistan were USAID; they face Corruption cases made against them. It created its own puppet show like Sesame Street, an original puppet show and they have to pay the fine of 20 million dollar which later was halved. Because of these hurdles USAID stopped funding Rafi Peer Theater.¹⁵ After a long gap of around ten years in 1992 Rafi Peer Theater Workshop arranged its first International Festival of World performing Arts.

This festival took place by the struggle of Faizan Peerzadah the Director and the curator of the show. Started from that day to current days this festival is conducted on a regular basis. The museum of puppetry works amazingly on puppet art. In Puppet shows the children and students came to see the shows arranged for the school and a college trip to this museum. The Museum has a vast area along with the open air theater. Rafi Peer arranges workshop gradually on every second year. And these workshops were the remarkable years in the history of puppet art in Pakistan.¹⁶

After that Puppetry became the primary thing to focus. Four other festivals were arranged in the year 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005. A Pakistani group remained actively involved in various puppet theaters. From 2006 different courses and Diplomas were offered by the Rafi Peer Theater along with the free shows for the development of interest among folks. After these festivals the 2010 Puppet shows was not very fortunate as a cracker was blasted near the Festival ground.

It diverted the people away from this show and persuaded them to involve in the other entertainment activities.¹⁷ People prefer to visit outdoor parks and like to enjoy the play lands along with their children because the adverse impact of that day was so strong. Rafi Peer Theater Workshop faced tragedy. People are so terrified that they quit attending open air festivals. After some time puppets gained its position back. A one day festival was set up with a proper security arrangement to prevent any unpleasant incident. This festival was arranged in a huge open place. People enjoyed this event a lot. Each puppet show consists of many puppeteers. Normally a group of puppeteers comprised the members of the same Family, the husband manipulates puppets, Lend his voice and narrated stories while the wife, played *dholak* and sang songs and produced other sound effects. The members of the family support each other in manipulation of the puppet and singing chorus.

An old person usually the Grandfather acted as the second narrator. In Alhamra when shows are conducted puppeteers are dressed up colorfully with bright turbans, singing songs and holding their Marionettes in their hands. Company of puppeteers used to visit cities, towns and villages. They talked to people through their Marionettes and attract their attention easily. They used to gather the crowd of spectators and delighted them at their show.

A marionette show was not always designed for kids instead it was entertainment for the whole family irrespective of new and old. In the houses of the rich persons, acquaintances, relatives and neighbors are invited to see the show. When it took place in communities, the crowds were even bigger because everyone was welcomed without the distinction of religion, race or creed. On occasions of religious ceremonies, *melas*, celebrations of harvesting season and marriage ceremonies, the puppet show is always conducted. Puppetry in

¹² Samina Ahmad, June 6, 2017.

¹³ Samina Ahmad, Lahore, June 8, 2017.

¹⁴ Zulfiqar Ali Zulfi, interview by author, Lahore, May 20, 2017.

¹⁵ Jawaad. USAID- The real Case against Rafi Peer Theater, <http://blog.alchemya.com/2012/08/usaid-the-real-case-against-rafi-peer-theater/> (accessed April 3, 2015).

¹⁶ Sadiq Sultan, interview by author, Lahore, August 31, 2016.

¹⁷ Sadiq Sultan, interview by author, Lahore, August 31, 2016.

the southern district of the Punjab, Multan, Bahawalpur has been promoted & performed by the Gypsy tribes for hundred years. A gypsy is a member of a group of people who originally came from northern India and today live in Asia, Europe and North America.

They used to change their geographical location on a regular basis. The gypsy performers are still well versed in performing art. The trend of Puppet folk art can be seen in different areas of Pakistan. Sindh is famous for a spacious scope of folk crafts, lacquer art, *farasi* weaving, blue pottery, Sindhi embroidery, *Ajrak*, block printing, traditional carpet weaving, *Riley* (appliqué work), tie-dye, chess weaving, wood works, *Thari* embroidery and several other items.¹⁸

In Islamabad Mega event was organized by the National Institute of Folk and traditional heritage (Lok Virsa), a particular governing body working on the promotion and preservation of heritage and culture of Pakistan. Many Sindhi Folk dancers are invited for open air events at a national or International level.¹⁹ Lok Virsa is the one and only grand heritage museum in Pakistan, which is preserving the Traditional art. Along with Lok Virsa, Lahore Museum has many traditional puppets. Puppets play an important role in Pakistan as it is the principal part of our folk tradition. The eating, working, living, celebrating, decorating habits of people are called folk tradition. The puppet depicts the folk tradition of Pakistan.

Their main Item was “*Akbar Badshah Kay Darbar Main*”. It is the story that holds the elements of Drama, tension, relief, music, dance and the articulation of issues. The scene in the court of *Akbar* the great, two of his famous courtier *Birbul* and *Mullah Do Piyaza* are present. Though they contribute little in the show, the main character is *Gauhar Jan*, a court dancer and singer and *Patay Khan* a clown which created a lot of wit. *Gauhar Jan* is the author, the cowkider, the host the commentator and the announcer, rolled into one character.

The other active puppet is *Akbar* Himself; he remained seated, but his mind, eyes and face moved to mark his participation. ‘*Akbar Badshah kay Darbar Main*’ was a simple show. At that time there was no artificial sets and the shows are conducted in a simple manner. The only method which they applied to decorate their sets is two bamboos Charpoys on either side with printed sheets to serve a curtain and backdrop, either side of the corpus sits the player and the vocalists. The main music accompaniment is the *Dholak* played by the female singers themselves, the voices provided by the participants.

Costumes are ornate, the apparel of the puppet was of sharp color adorned with different *laces* and *chamkela* was used on it to enhance the vividness of the puppet. Because of much crowd, it is not possible to see the puppet from the distance that’s why the clothes were planed likewise. These clothes are light-weight, bright and colorful. Mostly the puppets are made of wood. Other materials used for puppet making is cloth or paper. The show is entertaining in all aspects as the puppet is funny and interesting in both appearance and dialogue.

Sometimes it explains the brutal reality of life. Urban audience initially watched the rural puppeteers with interest and affection and they show their appreciation with cash rewards. For the gain of these appreciations the Gypsies often visit the urban areas of Pakistan. The cities based puppeteers are gradually unnecessary. Currently these performances are rarely seen in the urban centers.²⁰ The conventionally the puppeteer’s role was twofold; they brought the sense of royalty to folks and simultaneously brought the plight of poor’s to the members of the royal family. This thing made the puppeteer more strong and self oriented. Though the puppets are inanimate and inarticulate yet it requires a character through which any dialogue or voice could be released.

The PNCA (Pakistan National Council of Art) contributed to show painting, theater, music and as well as puppetry. The department of puppetry set up inside the council with proper management and staff who is responsible to lead the Art. People sent to China, where they discovered the artistic world of Rod Puppetry and on return they set up a small group which played regularly. The object of puppetry by the arts council was akin to recognizing the importance of puppetry, raising its level and making it more prestigious. Their shows were

¹⁸ Sardar Khan Niazi, “*The Patriot*”, <http://dailythepatriot.com/lok-mela-showcases-colours-of-sindh-at-islamabad/> (accessed April 6, 2016).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Sarwat Ali, *Animating the Inanimate: Puppet theater in Pakistan* (Lahore: Pakistan Museum of Puppetry and Ferozsons, 2005), 10.

imaginative for its time and it legitimized the idea that puppets could perform live with the participation of the audience.

They arranged the shows in northern areas and exposed these areas to the art of puppetry. They enable the people to accept the puppetry as a performing art.²¹ Their shows are message oriented, especially the “Story of Pakistan” in which the struggle of Quid-e-Azam is highlighted. Shahid Toosay is the puppeteer of this organization who has been the most active person in the group. Contemporary puppetry on stage was started by the Rafi Peer Theater Workshop in the late nineteen seventies (1970s). Audiences in Pakistan are now more familiar with the art of puppetry. In this process many youngsters inspired and many volunteers joined the Rafi Peer Theater Workshop to become a puppeteer. In the last twenty five years, many puppeteers have been trained. The pioneer puppeteers have trained many new puppeteers if they could create their own groups and stage shows. The Rafi Peer Theater Workshop has served as a nucleus of the entire trend of contemporizing puppetry in the state.

III. CONCLUSION

The manipulation of the puppet is very useful art for the children’s education as well as entertainment. The puppet art in Pakistan was initiated with the efforts of Salima Hashmi, Samina Ahmad, Farooq Qaiser and many other artists. Peerzadah Family is the prominent among the artist community who took steps to introduce new elements in puppetry. Samina Ahmad was the main force behind the creation of this art and its continuation along a firm basis. In the beginning new plays were written and shows are performed for the audience. The regularity of the show develops the interest of youngsters in puppet. Its regularity has gone a long way in controlling itself and the art. The wide assortment of puppets and the report on which the puppet plays indicates the path that has navigated by puppetry in Pakistan. There is a puppet show for everyone. It is necessary for the government of Pakistan to take care of this art with the collaboration of Rafi Peer Theater, so that, a better form of puppet art is transferred to next generation. It will help the youngsters who want to see their Pakistan better and flourishing. The puppet art in Pakistan is still surviving from decades and will maintain its existence in future as well.

IV. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to thank Almighty Allah who gave me strength to fulfill my project. Further, I would also express my special thanks and gratitude to the Institute of Design and Visual Arts, Lahore College for Women University who provided me with the opportunity to work on my MS Research Paper. I am also thankful to the Head of the Department, Dr Rifaat Saif Dar, who gave me a lot of suggestions and helped me to find out the facts. The moral support of my Parents and my sister Saria Adnan without her honest hold; it would never be possible to complete this. This acknowledgement remains incomplete without thanking my Husband. This project is not only prepared for degree completion but also to highlight the importance of this field in the culture of Indo-Pakistan.

REFERENCES

- [1] Salima Hashmi, interview by author, Lahore, February 20, 2017.
- [2] Samina Ahmad, Lahore, June 8, 2017.
- [3] Sarwat Ali, *Animating the Inanimate: Puppet Theater in Pakistan* (Lahore: The Museum of Puppetry and Ferozsons, 2005), 9.
- [4] Imran Peerzadah, interview by author, Lahore, March 31, 2016.
- [5] Zulfiqar Ali Zulfi, interview by author, Lahore, May 20, 2017.
- [6] Jawaad. USAID- The real Case against Rafi Peer Theater, <http://blog.alchemya.com/2012/08/usaaid-the-real-case-against-rafi-peer-theater/> (accessed April 3, 2015).
- [7] Sadiq Sultan, interview by author, Lahore, August 31, 2016.
- [8] Sardar Khan Niazi, “*The Patriot*”, <http://dailythepatriot.com/lok-mela-showcases-colours-of-sindh-at-islamabad/> (accessed April 6, 2016).

²¹ Ali, *Animating the Inanimate: Puppet Theater in Pakistan*, 11.