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## THE EVOLUTION OF PUPPET THEATER IN PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

In this Paper the Evolution of puppet art and the origin of puppetry in Pakistan are explained. 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. Underlying research has strived to explore the significance and the importance of the puppetry as an 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. The research explains the evolution of puppetry, its origin, its different forms, its making, different govt. and non-government theaters, its comparison with other countries and the reasons of its decline. The research also counts the positive aspects of the puppetry that despite all the odds, this art is still alive and working in our society. The title of the promotion of this art goes to theaters and cultural bodies who run puppet shows on proper platform. Besides this many schools and colleges 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

Puppet, Art, Evolution, Pakistan, Promotion,  
Culture

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### 1.Introduction

Puppetry, the performance of puppets, is the most wonderful art form as it allows great freedom of expression that

otherwise cannot be expressed. The word puppet means “doll” (figure a).

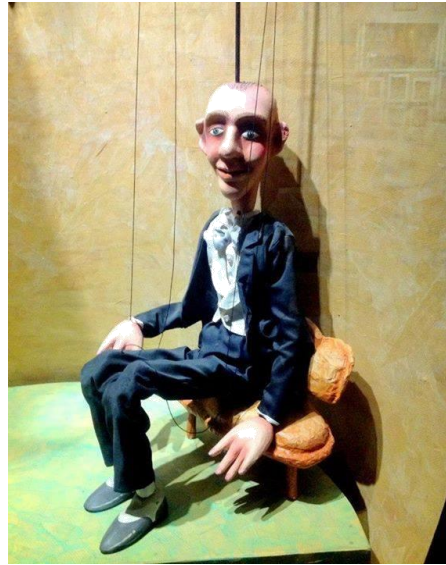


Figure a. French Puppet, Rafi Peer Theater Workshop, Lahore.  
Source: Picture by author, August 31, 2015.

The origin of word ‘puppet’ is from Middle English *popet* doll, from Middle French *poupette*, alteration of Latin *pupa*. The first use of the word Puppet is explored from the British English Dictionary (Webster 1828.) Over the passage of time it was developed as a powerful medium of communication. Starting from the history of the subcontinent, puppet art was the basic cultural entertainment of that

time. The local name of Puppets is “*Putli*” and the performance is called “*Putlitamasha*” (Pakistan, Folklore). This name is so common in both Indian and Pakistani Theater; this term is equally famous in India another name of puppet is *Kathputli*. (Pakistan, Folklore) This is a special kind of puppet called String puppet, *Katha* mean “story” and *putli* mean Puppet (figure b).



Figure b. String Puppeteer, Rafi Peer Theater Workshop, Lahore.  
Source: Picture by author, March 30, 2017.

The puppet is a Doll, up to two feet tall, manipulated by puppeteers using strings which are connected to the head, waist,

shoulders and arms of puppeteer. Usually puppets do not have legs their bodies are covered with a long piece of cloth. 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. To check this hypothesis it is necessary to interview many persons. 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?

To check this hypothesis primary data was collected using 'interview' technique. Famous & prominent personalities related to the field of puppetry were interviewed. One such personality was Salima Hashmi- A renowned professor of Art in Beaconhouse National University Lahore. She was interviewed at same campus. Another prominent figure which was interviewed was Bashir Ahmad the Puppeteer of Rafi Peer Theater Workshop. Both of these figures are considered 'authority' in puppet art. Similarly interviews were conducted from professional puppeteers who were continuing it as a source for earning their bread & butter. These puppeteers are custodian of this dying art. One such person was 'Basheer' a puppeteer of Rafi Peer Theater. He was seasoned puppeteer.

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 art of puppetry started from prehistorical era. It is a unitary of the ancient varieties of artwork. If we unfold the pre-historic times of South Asia, many evidences of puppet art have been found in the Indus Valley Civilization around 3000 BC. Unfortunately, insufficient evidences of puppetry have been documented in the Indus Valley Civilization. Jonathan Mark Kenoyer mentioned in his book the "Ancient Cities of Indus Valley Civilization" that these small masks like objects have hand puppets or worn as amulets for children's toys (Kenoyer 2006). According to archaeologist Jonathan Mark Kenoyer has unearthed many evidences in different time frame such as one terracotta mask depicted the bull-horned with a beard when the faces are in a peaceful mood. The mask is combed flat, but when in angry mood the beard spread wide and the fringes of a roaring tiger are visible (Kenoyer 2006) (figure c).



Figure c. Miniature Mask of Beard, Horned Deity, 1965, Mohenjo-Daro Department of Archeology Karachi, Terracotta 5.3 x 3.5cm.

Source: Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 82.

Many terracotta figurines have been found wearing detachable headdress. Although most of the headdresses broken. Kenoyer has documented in his book that “due to the delicate nature of the wide spreading horns, most terracotta figurines of the deity broken down, but despite this, fragmentary pieces give a sense of the powerful beauty of the deity (Kenoyer 2006). These small masks like figurines are not explored from their graveyard or from their sacred places instead these are found in the soil or in trash boxes. Several were broken and a few of them are in their original form. After the link between terracotta figurine and puppets, it was confirmed that these small figures have different appearances and are for different functions. It is not possible that folks discarded images of their ditties, god and goddesses in waste boxes. It is obvious that people used these figurines as a toy to entertain their children. The evidences of making these types of figures and drawing found from Bhimbetika Cave Art 5500 BC. Ajanta Cave Art of 1st Century BC is the most important

cave art in India in which many drawings found most of them were faded away. By mean of these drawings people convey their thoughts and experiences. These drawings also served as pictorial messages to their families. The depictions of these drawings are directly related to puppet manipulation. As we explore that the Puppetry is an ancient form of entertainment and famous in the entire world. The origin of Puppet Theater comes from China from 13<sup>th</sup> century. China evolved theater performance with different thematic stories. This was the earliest time when theater started. Guan Hanqing was the famous actor of that time its dramatic theme concern the story of tragic fate of young women (Bradon 1993). Later on, the history is unfolded and it is revealed that in the period of great Mughal

Empire of 15<sup>th</sup> century where Islam becomes the state religion, theaters activity failed to succeed further. During 15<sup>th</sup> century theater was the important force in Indian society, but after the arrival of Mughals in the Subcontinent the theater breathed to its last.

According to the writing of different authors, the existence of this art form has been there since 17<sup>th</sup> century. As per the writing of R.C Craven, Hindus were religiously bound to perform dances, they have faith in it and they talk to their god and demons through meditations. At the same time they had some rituals to perform in the festivals. Afterward Muhammed of Gazzni weakened the kingdoms of North India. After covering the ancient history of puppetry we come to the south Asian history of puppets. While we talk about the puppetry in South Asia, particularly in the region of sub-continent which comprised of India and Pakistan. Where both the nations lived together and shared their art and cultural activities. *Eid, Holi, Dewali, Besakhi*, wedding ceremonies, dance and music was celebrated indifferent of religion, race or creed. Both the communities took an active part in societal activities and gathered for puppet shows, drama, peasant festivals and other celebrations. Many South Asian puppeteers are from the lower class and stucked to their caste system. The silent feature of puppet art is impersonates the real life character such as political or social celebrities. Puppet shows are used to changes their thoughts toward the social scenario. Puppetry is the course of theater and it reflects upon the taboos of our society and conveys a direct message through their subtle expression worked out by the puppets. Rajasthan and Kerala State are the most prominent in the history of Puppet art, where many forms of puppets are still used for performance (figure d).



Figure d. Kerala Puppets, Rajasthan India.

Source: <http://www.tripmalabar.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/yaksha-puppets-tour-kasaragod.jpg> (accessed July 14, 2017).

The people of Rajasthan used the term “*Kathputli*”. This term drive from their cultural drama which is named as *Khathkali*. *Khathkali* dance or drama is a distinctive genre of South Asian dance develops during sixteenth or seventeenth century in the Malayalam speaking coastal region of southwest India known today as Kerala state. In Bengal, ShombhuMitra was active with his Tagore plays and excellent production of *Oedipus Red*. With BadalSircar the theatre scene got hold of a new twist. Various dramatic arts from folk to traditional and modern urban theatre co-exist, influencing each other creatively and effectively.

While reading Sarwat Ali Book of puppetry it showed that after independence of Pakistan a very limited contribution have been observed towards Puppet Art in Pakistan. In the book, “*Image and Identity*” Akbar Nakvi explains the first fifty years of Pakistan were not so good asit faces many problems because of political and social conflict of India-Pakistan. In the early 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. AlysFaiz wife of Faiz Ahmad Faiz was privately charged with the responsibility to manage and arrange shows for the entertainment of children. “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.” 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 (Hashmi 2017). The Family of Faiz Ahmad Faiz was so much committed to set 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

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. 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. 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.

Czechoslovakian puppeteer invited to Pakistan in the early1960s 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. 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 characters were portrayed in a very interesting manner.

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. 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 (figure e).

of puppetry. In this process many youngsters inspired and many volunteers joined the Rafi Peer Theater Workshop to become a puppeteer. The Rafi Peer Theater Workshop



has served as a nucleus of the entire trend of contemporizing puppetry in the state. The foundation of the Rafi Peer Theater Workshop was laid by five brothers, who are responsible to run the workshop, after the death of their father Rafi Pererzadah in 1974 (Ali, 2005). Rafi Peer's sons established their own group of puppeteers and made their individual puppets. The main idea is to emphasize the living styles of peasant, such as their festivals, clothing style, season of rain, season of harvest, wedding, Eid and so on. In the beginning it was called the Rafi Peer Theater Workshop (RPTW) and later on it was called the Museum of puppetry.



Figure e. Museum of Puppetry, Rafi Peer Theater Workshop, Lahore.

Source: Picture by author, August 3

It is constructed in Lahore on a private basis and works as a non-government organization. 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. 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. Samina Ahmad was the great puppet art lover. Samina Ahmad visited Islamabad to observe the performance on Chinese puppetry. Samina Ahmad included 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. Along with Alhamra Art Council 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 Puppet Art. Puppeteer sent to China, where they discovered the artistic world of Rod Puppetry and on return they set up a small group which played regularly. They arranged the shows in northern areas and exposed these areas to the art of puppetry. 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. These theaters are continuously preparing the puppet shows to revive the puppetry of Pakistan. The major puppet events are held on Independence Day, Pakistan Day, Qaid-E-Azam Day etc.

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. 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 FaizanPeerzadah the Director and the curator of the show. Started from that day to current days this festival is conducted on a regular basis (Bashir, 2017).

In 1997 Norwegian Embassy approve the idea to make a museum for puppets 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. The Rafi Peer Museum enjoys prominence as it is the only museum of Pakistan, where there is a proper display of different kinds of puppets including local, national and international puppets are included. These puppets are very useful for the

students of performing art. Along with the theater activity Rafi Peer arrange the workshop gradually on every second year. And these workshops were the remarkable years in the history of puppet art in Pakistan in which 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. People are so terrified that they quit attending open air festivals. After some time puppets gained its position back (Bashir 2017). 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. Puppets play an important role in Pakistan as it is the principal part of our folk tradition. The puppet depicts the folk tradition of Pakistan.

Farooq Qaiser was the one who give the strength to the puppets and brought reality to puppets, he is the renowned puppeteer and famous drama producer. He did not only depend on old stories, but picked up every day happening to ordinary people and created episodes that have great deal of humors. He made puppets that had a remarkable likeness to real life people, their dialogue and their voice mannerism. 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 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. The manipulation of the puppet is very useful art for the children’s education as well as entertainment.

Puppet art is the basic entertainment not only in different theaters, institutes also in schools. Many schools have started up proper puppet classes. Schools are not only performing old stories but also new ones with different regional languages along with Urdu and English. They have set up their own puppet theaters and made their own puppets. 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.

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