

# Khadija Naveem

## CHILDREN'S LITERATURE MEDIA AND CULTURE

Stories to read – stories to create

Traditional storytelling in Pakistan:  
Gypsies, wandering storytellers and the Art of  
Puppetry



**Khadija Naeem**

**Children's Literature Media and Culture**

**Stories to read, stories to create - a community learning programme**

**Traditional storytelling in Pakistan: Gypsies, wandering storytellers and the Art of Puppetry**

### **Background**

Similar to other countries, storytelling was a major source of transferring culture, language, and heritage from one generation to another in Pakistan. The stories were told through grandparents, wandering storytellers and puppetry performances in the villages, streets and at the recreational and sacred places of the country such as shrines and melas (festivals). The folk tales and folklores remained in one form or another however, these traditional ways of storytelling started vanishing steadily with only few traces left behind. Today, we are fortunate to have digital technology to preserve these traditions in the form of pictures and videos which can help us revive the heritage with continuous efforts. In this writing, I will explain the origin and evolution of storytelling traditions in Pakistan.

## Gypsies and the Art of Puppetry

According to Oxford dictionary a gypsy (Roma) is defined as,

“a member of a people originating in South Asia and traditionally having an itinerant way of life, living widely dispersed across Europe and North and South America and speaking a language (Romani)” They were called Gypsies because European mistakenly believed that they came from Egypt when they arrived in Europe between eighth and ninth C.E.

In the subcontinent, these Romani tribes were famous for storytelling through various mediums including puppetry. According to Richard Pischel (1849-1908) from Germany, the art of puppetry has only one geographical origin and that India is the birthplace of puppetry (Jorkowski, 2009). He supports his thesis by two arguments:

- This philologist – specializing in India – makes references to the Sanskrit terms sutradhara (he who holds the strings) and sutraprota (puppet), which would denote the first written accounts of puppetry in world literature.
- Secondly, he supports his thesis by pointing out the role played by Gypsies in the dissemination of this art throughout the world

Arthur B. Allen in his book, *Puppetry for Beginners (Puppets & Puppetry Series)* mentions,

“From the East we find the puppet marching forward steadily towards Europe. The gypsies brought him as they brought so much that was fine across the world.” (2014)

Therefore, it can be proposed that Puppetry used for entertainment or theatrical performances origins back in subcontinent (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) before partition.

During the era of Mughals in sub-continent, the Mughal emperor Akbar (16<sup>th</sup> century) commissioned a project called, 'Hamza Nama' in which folktales were painted on huge canvasses with the story written on the back in the verse form. At the same time, the art of puppetry was flourishing to give these tales a life, an alternate for human actors. In the beginning puppetry was only performed in the Mughal court but gradually it started disseminating in the masses. It became a medium to preserve and pass the folk tales from generation to generation.

This tradition of storytelling continued after partition with slight modifications depending on the region. Some storytellers would use only puppets in their performances while others would use dance and musical instruments such as Dhol and Bansuri.



In some regions, a mixture of all forms of art (music, dance, puppetry etc) was used for this purpose.

### **Harvesting Celebrations in Punjab**

They would tell folktales such as Heer Ranjha, Mirza Sahiba and Sasi Punno etc They would also come around festivities such as the harvesting season or the birth of a baby telling a story about the hard work and importance of farmers or about the good fortune of the born baby.

With the urbanization, the tradition started vanishing but still existing in small towns or cities. I remember during my childhood, someone would inform, 'Gali me kahani sunane wala aya hai' which means 'a storyteller is in the street' and all the children would run to



gather around that person and listen the stories. Gradually, they stopped coming and only a Bansuri player would come from time to time playing the folk tunes.

During this time, there were no proper sets for puppetry and the shows were staged in traditional manners using two bamboo bed frames with sheets to serve as a curtain and backdrop with performers and musicians at the back. The puppets were made of wood and costumes were decorative. A video gives a glimpse of traditional puppetry in children' literature festival Bahawalpur to tell a folk story,



**Link 1:**<https://fb.watch/9zH3qf98W3/>

In the 1970s, the art of puppetry was almost extinct because of the lack of interest from the government. It revived with the help of Pakistan Arts Council under the management of Faiz Ahmad Faiz (a revolutionary poet) who introduced Glove puppet shows for children first through European fairytales and then Urdu stories. From then on, several art institutes

including Lahore Arts Council, Alhambra Arts Centre, Punjab Lok Raahs, produced and promoted puppetry in Pakistan. Pakistan National Council of the Art's *History of Pakistan through Puppets* (1979) uses 200 figures to tell the national history and is a valuable collection. Rafi Peer Theatre Workshop is another group who created the largest puppet museum in Pakistan. All these institutes experimented with various kinds of puppetry including rods, string, gloves, shadow theatre.

UNIMA (Union Internationale De La Marionnette) -Pakistan was founded in 1993 by the collaboration of Rafi Peer Theatre Workshop, Rasheed Putli Group, PNCA Puppet Theatre from Rawalpindi and Farooq Qaiser, a columnist and writer-performer of the popular TV puppet show Kaliyan.

Here is the link for a humorous puppet skit in children's literature festival,



Link 2:<https://fb.watch/9zFdgCWWaD/>

Today, puppetry is still a loved as a traditional form of storytelling in Pakistan. Institutes working for children often use it to promote reading, creating a fun learning environment and developing creativity. It is used for both for entertainment and for addressing social topics creating awareness among youngsters. In Lahore Children’s literature festival, Suneha Puppet group working for child’ rights held a show on the importance of saying, ‘NO’ when faced with abuse or injustice.



The link is shared below,

Link 3: <https://fb.watch/9zFuVo-c21/>

Since Pakistan has oral storytelling as a dominant traditional art, it is vanishing with time however, puppetry evolved through the time and is practiced now in its modern form mixed with traditional elements.



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