

Reviving Narratives: A Critical Analysis of the Dramatization of Lost Storytelling Arts

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ABSTRACT

Urdu dastan is a lost art form of storytelling which was once most popular among the masses. Urdu Dastan writing started in 1635 however; it gained public popularity and fame in the nineteenth century. In this period, Urdu Dastan Goi had become a regular art form of storytelling. During this era, many Dastan Writers and narrators (Dastan go) appeared who narrated these Dastans in various palaces, gatherings and public places. Dramatization in Urdu literature started much later. When Urdu drama started to stage, the art of dastan goi had ended. In the 20th century, the Urdu Dastan began to consider an obsolete genre. In the present time, efforts are being made for the revival of Urdu Dastan, but dramatization of dastan is still missing. Dramatization may be a one of the most important factor in the revival of Urdu dastans. In this article, the process of the dramatization of the dastan is critically analyzed and suggestions are made in this regard.

Keywords: Dastan, Dramatization, Lost Art Form, Storytelling

Objective:

The objective of this paper is to analyze possibilities and dimensions of the dramatization of the lost art form of storytelling which was most popular among the masses till the start of the twentieth century.

Research Question:

How to critically interpret the possibilities and dimensions of the dramatization of the lost art form of storytelling by applying different approaches to the dramatization?

Methodology:

The method used in this research involves textual and dramatic analysis of the dramatization of the lost art form and efforts made for the revival of Urdu dastan by applying the basic concepts of dramatization and stage storytelling.

Introduction:

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are very important for the origin of storytelling in Urdu. These centuries are considered the golden age in terms of the development of Urdu language at Deccan. At that time, not only the poets and writers associated with the court but also the kings used Urdu as a medium of expression. In the same era, the interest in stories and anecdotes increased and thus the regular writing of rhymed stories and love stories in Urdu began.

Dastan refers to the tale or story of a fictional world. Dastans were not only a source of entertainment for the people of that era, but also a source of education and promotion of moral values and fictional style of various events. These dastans included elements of all kinds of stories, such as anecdotes, myths, legends, fables, parables and romances. Prof (Dr.) Shirin Abbas defined the word dastan:

“Dastan in Persian means story and goya means to recite or tell, thus Dastangoi is the art of storytelling. Which originated in pre-Islamic Arabia and when Islam made its eastward journey, travelled to Iran, then India to Delhi and then to Lucknow where it was refined into the classic art form.” (1)

We find traces of storytelling in Urdu prose in the later period in North India. After Aurangzeb Alamgir's invasion of the Deccan the interaction between the people of South and North India further promoted the Urdu language and literature. Dastan writing started in North India in the 18th century and few dastans written in that era. At the beginning, these Urdu dastans did not gain fame compared to Urdu poetry. This effort was limited to dastan writing while dastan goi had not yet become a practice in festivals, palaces, courts and bazaars. People were interested in impersonation and used it. It was not necessary to have a dastan for imitation. Urdu dastan was regularly associated with this impersonation later.

The establishment of Fort William College is an important turning point in the history of Urdu dastan. This college inaugurated on 10 July 1800 and like other departments, the Department of Indian Literature established, headed by Dr. John Borthwick Gilchrist. In this college, besides geography, history, law, grammar, religious books, many dastans translated from Persian and

Sanskrit. Among the works published in Fort William College, Urdu dastans are the most important. Along with Fort William College, regular Urdu dastan goi started in Delhi, Lucknow and Rampur. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan writes about the dastans of that era:

“Jamia Masjid Delhi has 39 steps on the north side. Although there are barbecues sitting on this side as well and bargains, shops are set up. However, the big spectacle is that of the orbiters and storytellers. In the afternoon, a storyteller sits with chair and tells the story of Amir Hamza. Somewhere there is a story of Hatim Tai and somewhere there is a Bostan e Khayal and hundreds of people gather to listen to it.” (2)

It was in the 18th century that the political, social and economic upheaval of Delhi led to the settlement of Lucknow. During this era, hundreds of artistic geniuses preferred to migrate and took refuge in Lucknow. As Compared to Delhi, the kingdom of Oudh was more prosperous, Lucknow had gained a central position due to abundance of wealth, easy provision of opportunities for luxury. In such an environment, the popularity of dastan was natural, that is why Lucknow had made its place in Urdu dastan goi at the beginning of the nineteenth century. After such acceptance among the public, dastan goi became a regular art form of storytelling.

It was a sign of the popularity of the dastan goi that the kings, nobles and elite class as well as common people liked it a lot. In addition to organizing regular storytelling (dastan goi) gatherings in courts and palaces, regular storytelling is performed in public places, fairs and festivals. These dastans included wars, court atmosphere, beauty, love, cunning, intrigue and curiosity, so the dastans used to captivate the hearts and minds of the audience.

“The love of telling and listening stories was common among the people and this hobby included the common people, nobles, ministers and even the king. The dastans told in Urdu and Persian. The storytellers used to crave and create stories from their mind and imagination and narrated them by modifying and adding to the stories of others.” (3)

The importance and fame of the storyteller (dastan go) depended on his power of expression, erudition and eloquence. With his power of imagination and style of narration, he would create new charm in the story, in the narration of love; he would such anxiety and indecision as if he was a lover himself. If he had mentioned the magic world, he would have struck awe and self-oblivion on the listeners and viewers with its magic narration and atmosphere of fear.

The narrator (dastan go) would set the hero of the story on a journey, entangle him in difficulties, and in the meantime focus more on establishing the curiosity on which his story would move forward. He used imagination, romance, mystical atmosphere and exaggeration to create curiosity and interest in the story. These narrations spanned several months.

Why did the dastan, which was so popular in the nineteenth century among the masses, suddenly fall into decline until it started to be considered an obsolete genre? In addition, despite such popularity, promotion and rise, Urdu dastan could not go beyond storytelling and why could it not establish any connection with dramatic formation?

Discussion:

In the 21st century, once again, it is emphasizing on the revival of Urdu dastan and efforts are being made in this regard. Storytelling (dastan goi) festivals have formally started, and programs related to storytelling have been included in the literary festivals organized year after year. When the public appreciated the programs regarding storytelling (dastan goi), many storytellers (dastan go) came forward. The texts of dastans presented in these storytelling events are neither completely taken from the old dastans nor are in a completely modern form, but these texts have been reproduced according to modern times.

“These Storytelling (dastan goi) sessions are different from the traditional sessions, which last a little less than two hours... The atmosphere of these modern sessions is somewhat formal and artificial... They present the components of the dastan written by others to the public based on their essence. But there is no doubt that what they narrate is dastan and their narration is related to the oral tradition of dastan Amir Hamza.” (4)

The style of storytelling (dastan goi) that is trying to introduce in modern times is not very different from the ancient style of storytelling. All that is being done is that instead of one, two narrators (dastan go) have been added and they are adorned with a specific style of white hat and white clothes. Even in the current storytelling sessions, the dastan is presented in the form of a story, which is to some extent a form of narration. Storytellers (dastan go) in the ancient style, despite not having dramatic resources, were skilled in this art, which is lacking in the modern style. Storytellers (dastan go) of the present era, although they do not have the skill in storytelling that was the specialty of Mir Kazim Ali and Mir Baqir Ali, but the storytellers of the present era have more dramatic resources than them. Therefore, for the effective revival of dastan goi in the contemporary era, it is necessary to use dramatic resources in dastan goi.

Aristotle defined the elements of tragic dramatization as plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle (scenic effect), and music. It is necessary to include these elements in storytelling (dastan goi). For effective storytelling, Dastan must bring it closer to drama.

In the present time, with the development of drama and film industry and modern equipment, most of the world, especially western mythologies filmed or dramatized. These principles and techniques may use for the dramatization of the dastans. Supernatural characters, which were impossible to portray in the era of Dastan, have become the favorite characters of film and drama. Animated films have changed the concept of supernatural characters and events. Dastan must go towards drama commercialization as the demands of the present era and dramatic needs cannot ignore.

For effective dramatization of the Dastan, it can be divided into two types of screen performance and live performance. Screen performances include the dramatization of Dastan for television, cinema and social media such as You Tube and Netflix. Live performances include theater and stage. Different needs have to keep in mind for the dramatic formation both types for dastan because both dramatic forms are different from each other and hence their needs are separate. For the dramatization of the Dastan, the elements of dastan and drama have to be included. This must be a combination of Dastan and drama; may call Dasmatic and process may call Dasmaticization. This will be a new term and will be used for the dramatization of Dastan.

In this combination, the characters will present as in Dastan. For this, either the characters will form old stories (dastans) or they will create in a Dastan style. For characters combination both natural and supernatural characters will be included. Natural characters would include kings, queens, princes, princesses, ministers, legends or heroes of war, etc. Supernatural characters will include fairies, ghosts, witches, giants, animals, birds, reptiles etc. All the characters would have proper attire, especially supernatural ones.

For story and plot combination, story will be used from old dastans or be created a new story correlated with the dastan. The plot will be used from old Dastans, or a new plot can be created by combining features of old Dastans depending on the length, quality and need. The common features of Dasmatic may be supernatural elements, metamorphosis, magic, locale or place and these features will be very different from common drama. The dramatization of the dastan may require a lot of expenditure, so animation, computer graphics and green screen may be used for this.

There is a need to change the live performance of dastan goi as described above in reference to Shams Ur Rahman Farooqi. The current form of dastan goi cannot be effective for the dramatization and revival of the dastan. Here is some suggestions can be followed for live performances of dastan goi.

1. A distinction must be made between character and actor. A single actor cannot play all the roles in a Dastan. Each character has its own style, so the actor should present according to the style in the dastan. Conformity between the character and the actor can only happen when he is present on the stage in his attire.
2. In storytelling (dastan goi), the narration should be reduced, and dialogue should be increased. The narrator can also narrate the dastan while remaining absent from the stage and only the characters act on the stage according to the plot and the story. Female characters should also be included in live performances of dastan goi.
3. Music must be part of Dastan. Music can enhance emotions such as laughter, sadness, fear and amazement. Therefore, it is important to arrange the music according to the story and scene. Music may be used for horror, sadness, happiness, laughing, supernatural character voices, animals, birds' voices, reptiles' voices, weather like thunder, storm, rain etc.
4. Decoration is very important for the dramatic structure of Dastan. The stage should be properly set for dastan goi. Although the scenery changes rapidly in the dastan, the stage decoration is a difficult task, yet we must arrange it digitally. There should be lighting on stage according to the scene.

Conclusion:

The dramatization of the dastan, whether it is in the form of screen performance or a live performance, is somewhat difficult but not impossible. The public reception of live performance of dastan goi shows that people still love dastan and dastan goi. If drama is also included in the current form of dastan goi, surely the popularity of dastan goi will increase further. Therefore, the combination of Dastan and drama must be created for it, which we can call Dasmatic or Dasmaticization in simple words. For dramatization of the dastans, we need to rework on the texts, plot and characters of the dastans. Although these suggestions for dramatization of the Dastan are not exhaustive, we can use these suggestions to improve the current form of Dastan.

So, for all of this, dastan goi will have to be commercialized. Serious efforts need to be made for dramatization of dastan and revival of dastan goi. Screen performances and live performances of the dastan goi need to set the poetics keeping in mind the modern techniques and technologies of dramatization and these poetics will need to be followed seriously. Otherwise, these events of dastan goi may be interesting for the time being, but they cannot help in the dramatization and revitalization of dastan goi.

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