Puppetry theater in pakistan media essay

A couple of months back I attended the Karachi Literary festival, over there I saw puppeteers perform, a nostalgic feeling took over and reminded me of my childhood days when I enjoyed puppet shows with my parents at carnivals, birthday parties, entertainment in school and etc. In fact in primary school level it was almost necessary in our arts and craft class to make hand puppets with socks and develop stories and characters around them.

I remember it being very popular even on television, characters like Uncle Sargam and the show ' Kalian' were shown in the 90's on PTV. It was once a vibrant part of our popular culture but with the advent of technological changes, lack of funds and constant development this form of art and its popularity is retreating into darkness.

In this dissertation I am going examine the rise and fall of theater puppetry in Pakistan with particular focus on reasons of decline of this industry in comparison to other countries in the subcontinent. I will provide an analysis of the downfall and the efforts of The Raafi Peer Theater to revive puppetry in Pakistan.

Literature review:

Puppetry captures the imagination and interest of young students and therefore used in many schools in the west and east as a medium to communicate and teach the children. Stories are told and retold through toys, gestures, animals and puppets using dramatic voices and theatrical effects. The popularity of puppets as a method for teaching can be traced for centuries. In the Flemish manuscript " The Romance of Alexander", written in

1340, there is an illustration of glove pup- pets. Xenophon and Plutarch mention the use of marionettes. Medieval morality plays are performed by marionettes, and the pup- pets' popularity is alluded to by Cervantes and Ben Jonson, Haydn, Mozart and Bach compose brief operas for marionettes in the wealthy court circles of the eighteenth century.[1]

In " Puppetry as an Educative Media" Roberta Jane Confino reveals how puppetry can be transformed into an effective media by the educator's today. Puppetery is often related to artwork and brings out the creativity in children as it mixes both memory with imagination, it seeks expression rather than true representation.[2]It becomes the educator's responsibility to guide, encourage and build a rapport with child. " The most important function of the teacher in an art room, and perhaps in every other school room also, is to create a creative atmosphere."[3]

Puppets can be created from various objects such as finger puppets involve paper cut outs and material to fit over a child finger. Hand puppets involve movement of the entire hand with fingers and different areas. Shadow puppets are created when rod puppets are shown on a screen illuminated from behind. Marionettes, or string puppets may be simply worked with one or two strings or they may be made more complex.[4]Puppets may be made of materials found around the house or in nature. Painted branches or twisted scraps of wood are the beginning elements of characterization, paper-bag puppets, milk container puppets, puppets with simplistic design, and puppets with detailed color or features.[5]These puppets offer great opportunities for diversity, the possibilities are almost endless and Creativity and imagination can flourish[6]

Technological advancements have also played a major role with animation and computer graphics. These days characters are made on the computer and shown on television catering to a larger audience. Steve Tillis in " Art of puppetry in the Age of Media production" questions if the figures made of the computer can be termed as puppets and if not what the reasons are for it. Is a person operating a puppet (tangible or virtual) in real-time is doing what puppeteers have always done; but a person working at a keyboard with a virtual puppet-despite the fact that one is controlling the movement of the puppet-does not seem to be engaged in the same activity, despite the fact that the result (i. e., movement of the figure) is the same.[7]One might say that the computer has freed the puppet from its dependence on conventional puppeteers, but computers have not freed the puppet from the necessity of human control of one sort or another.

Steve Tillis brings the issue of tangibility as computer graphics figures are not tangible, they cannot be touched. However there are striking similarities in the creation of computer graphics figures and puppets: the creation of both involves the construction of a figure, in short, are artificial human constructs designed for manipulation (of one sort or another) by people. [8]Despite the similarities, I feel tangibility is a significant part that distinguishes the two. Puppets are as we have known them be thought of as " tangible", while computer graphics figures are thought of as " virtual" puppets.

The hands on experience of making the puppet, interacting with it, learning about it, integrating culture and history to it cannot be compared to a figure made on computer. There is a pleasure still to be found in the live

performance of a tangible puppet, the direct confrontation between an audience and a " living" object that is distinct from the particular pleasures of media puppets.

Rachel A. Bonney in her article on, " Teaching Anthropology through folklore" for the Anthropology & Education Quarterly brings an anthropological view on the importance of folklore as an educational tool for children and the society as these stories hold value, cultural traditions that are passed on from one generation to the other.

In this article Rachel A. Bonney focuses on how storytelling can be used for educational practices not only for children but at college level as well. She has been using this method for the past ten years as a teaching aid in both introductory and advanced anthropology classes.[9]She describes three separate uses of folklore: collecting folklore through fieldwork interviewing, analyzing themes in these stories and using folklore through puppetry and plays.[10]She points out how folktales are used as sources of information and insights on child-rearing and making them more aware of other cultures and on their morals, traditions and values. However, children are more familiar with their own culture and traditions than of others and therefore she used American or European cultures to analyze folklore material as it is easier and effective to identify and relate.

For her study she used Grimm's fairy tales such as ' Hansel and Gretel' and " Little Red Riding Hood" because these two stories are popular in the American culture despite Medieval European origins and cultural change. [11]Furthermore she tells us how these stories are dramatized with puppet

plays where students make their clothes, give them a face and make the surrounding that are illustrated to make it is culturally appropriate. They may range from stick puppets to socks, scraps of cloth, paper plates etc, and are often performed in a small scale setting and therefore it is cost effective. [12]Often additional sounds effects are used for example music, back vocals that are taped to enhance the dramatic presentation. Through background research for script writing students learn about another culture in depth, for example if the students were putting up a puppet show about Ali Baba and the forty thieves they would have to look in to the historical background, the roots of the charactors, what they wore in that time and so on.

Rachel A. Bonney's argues that folklore might be seen as " high tech" in modern America, but her approaches have successfully shown us how Western and non-western values can be integrated to a child's bringing up not only in the literate society but as an effective device in non-literate society[13]. She further builds her argument by saying that anthropology is not exclusively an exotic and esoteric discipline for the study of ' primitive society'. Anthropology is not for a few elite, but for everyone.[14]

Her study on folklore tales is not restricted to the western world but also relatable here in the subcontinent. Much of the puppetry in the sub continent is associated with folklore stories based on historical themes. They hold great pride in their stories as they have been passed on from generations through oral history and have become a central part of identity of tradition and culture. Common folklores in the sub continent are of Heer Rahja, Sassi Pannu and Laila Majnu, these characters are recognized and referred to in their everyday lives. For example when someone is madly in love he will be

referred to as Majnu not Shakespeare's Romeo. Shakespeareans characters Romeo and Juliet represent undying love such is the case with Laila Majnu. Many additions and subtractions have been made to the story over the years but what remains constant is Majnu's love for Laila.

Puppets are portrayed differently around the sub continent for example in India they are popular in Tamil Nadu, Orrisa, Andhra Pradesh, Asaam and the West Bengal. They portrayed unique features of the art and are operated through strings attached to the knees, hips, wrists, shoulders that make each and every part of the body move in different directions just as humans do. This method is practiced till today. Thyagaraja Sharma, an English Professor, said that the art dated back to Indus Valley Civilization.[15]Excavations of clay dolls from the site were an indication of this long tradition. A lot of information about puppetry was seen in Sangam literature too. They are often religiously portrayed from epics like Mahabarata, Bhuddas life and Raamayana. Besides dealing with religious themes, Indian puppetry also conveys useful messages from Panchat`ntra and other mythological and historical epics.[16]Started initially as a medium of entertainment, puppetry became the media for propagation of ideas, dissemination of information, and educating the masses.[17]

Anna Sobel, a professional puppeteer and an activist was intrigued by a show put up by the Indian puppeteers in the Smithsonian gallery in Washington DC. She spoke to them later and found out that they use puppets for social awareness programs such as AIDS in villages back home. In September she went to India on a nine month Fulbright grant to study Indian puppetry as a tool for social change in the primitive society.[18]

In her article " Mutual respect: Re-examining puppetry in India", Anna Sobel discusses how the uneducated class in India respond to puppetry and how their behavior changes because of it. As mentioned above India has a rich cultural association with puppets and with the help of government funding educational puppetry in not a foreign concept. The puppeteers took this responsibility as a moral obligation to the public which includes adults and children.[19]Sobel observed that the children in the village would get up early as four in the morning to practice and recite the story of Ramayana which they performed for forty one nights straight. They took this opportunity to provide extensive commentary on healing properties of local herbs and discussed educational themes.[20]She further observed how puppeteers were able to adapt a show to in the local ambiance much better than what she saw at the Smithsonian, as the audience recognized the stories, songs and characters. In addition, the live performance of the puppetry allowed direct rapport with the audience allowing them to be involved directly, the likely hood of them to remember the message more than if they saw the program on the television for example.

Live shows are more common in the rural areas in India because they do not have access to mass media, such as television or newspaper. This may be the reason why in the cities puppetry is not common anymore as media has replaced this source of entertainment. However, the Indian government has still reinforced this craft because they use this as a tool for religious education.

In Pakistan Rafi Peer theater workshop(RPTW) is one organization that has revived puppetry through theater, dance, music that has provided a rich

cross cultural experience to audiences in Pakistan and abroad. In a country where accessing early childhood education is close to impossible, those who attend dropout at a early stage due to financial and family issues. RPTW is a non-government organization which is doing pioneering work in the field of Arts is run by the Peerzada family. Headed by Usmaan Peerzada, Faizaan Peerzada, Saadaan Peerzada, Imran Peerzada, Tasneem Peerzada and Salman Peerzada. It has built a Museum of Puppetry. It runs the Universal Child Art Foundation, promoting child art and visual learning globally. Presently it is developing a Theatre Arts training Institute.

RPTW most important milestone is the establishment of the Museum of Puppetry in 2004. Till now it has organized over 25 international performing arts festivals. Festivals are one of the most popular attractions of cultural tourism, have been a part and parcel of South Asian culture for a long time. Pakistan Children Television (PCT) can be considered a landmark when it comes to educating children who lack formal education opportunities.

Through PCT they started a show called, Sim Sim Hamara, an educational series of shows for children. It is a adaptation of Sesame Street has been created by RPTW in collaboration with the Sesame Workshop, New York, and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The project is the outcome of extensive research as it includes participants from different provinces . They worked with the government and other educational experts so that they can cater to the educational needs for the children.

This TV series was set to provide high-quality early education resource for a larger audience. Their goal is to educate families and children and the fact that learning can happen in formal and non-formals means. They use examples from the real world for example reading prayers from The Holy Quran, buying vegetables from the local market, attending school, how to communicate with other people, measuring ingredients for ' roti' as a basis for storylines and materials.