



DASTANGOI: A DIASPORIC CULTURE OF STORYTELLING

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary period, diaspora literature is studied from different perspectives. The emerging interest in diasporic studies has recently begun to permeate various academic disciplines, none more so than cultural studies. Diaspora is a Greek word which was used to refer the dispersion of Jews, migrated from their homeland Israel. In her Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall examined diaspora into different contexts such as ethnicity and identity. In this paper, my study will be focus on Urdu storytelling tradition 'Dastangoi' as diasporic cultural art of story-narrating which was not originated in India but brought by Mughals in 16th century. How this tradition was brought and practised by different people of different communities in each period. In contemporary period, it is being practised by Mahmood Farooqui and his group.

Keywords: *Dastangoi, Diasporic art, Mahmood Farooqui, Mughals and Storytelling etc.*

Introduction

The word 'Diaspora' is derived from Greek word, means 'scattering' which was used to refer the dispersion of Jews, migrated from their homeland Israel. It is also considered that dispersion of the people from their homeland was not limited with the dispersion of population but it was an expansion of language, culture or tradition. The word 'Diaspora' was recorded in English language in 1876 referring to the Irish migrants. Later in the 1980s and onwards, this term was used metaphorically designation of different migrant people such as expellees, immigrants, Alien residents and political refugees etc.

The aim of this paper is to focus on Dastangoi, an Urdu storytelling tradition in the context of diasporic cultural art. As it is not originated in India but existed with the arrival of Mughals. During 13th -14th century, this tradition of storytelling was recited orally but later some works



were written down and recited as well. Dastangoi was a generic term for a narrative that had taken stories from the *Shahnama*, from some popular romances such as *Abu Moslem Nama*, *Hamzanama*, *Eskandar Nama*, *Darab Nama*, *Samak e Ayyar*, *Hosen e Kord*.

Stuart Hall highlights diaspora in the term of ethnicity and identity: Diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return. This is the old, the imperializing, the homogenizing form of 'ethnicity.' The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves in new structure, through transformation and difference. ('Cultural', 235).

Dastangoi came to India with the Persian-speaking people who arrived in Sindh in the early eighth century as part of military exploration. This was the time when several Turks also used Persian as the courtly language. Till the 16th century, many Turkish tribal Mongols had migrated to Iran where they adopted the local culture and language. Dastangoi was one of them as adopted culture. Prevalent at this time was the tradition of public narrations of medieval stories of romance, war and magic. While some storytellers narrated dastans in a simple and straightforward manner, others narrated these accounts of the hero as being involved in magical realms, with encounters with djinns, parizads and fairies. The tales of adventures of Amir Hamza were popular in Arabian as well as Persian culture (M. Farooqi "Dastangoi").

The profession of storytellers changed with the appearance of coffee houses in the Safavid period (1502- 1736) in Persia. The coffee houses became centres of popular entertainment as stories were now heard amidst tea, coffee, and hookahs served to customers. The coffee-houses were the favourite places of scholars, poets, musicians, and *Sufis*. Of these various forms that flourished in the coffee-houses, the most prominent form of public storytelling was *dastangoi* (Dawud "Coffee house"). In India, *Dastangoi* emerged under the rule of the Mughal dynasty during the 16th century when Babur was the Mughal emperor in Delhi. He was a descendent of the Timur dynasty which reigned in Persia for many years. Under Akbar's rule, dastangoi gained more popularity due to his patronage. He was fascinated by the tradition of dastangoi so much that he disregarded his grandfather Babur's prejudice against story narration (M.A. Farooqi Adventures 540-41).

In 19th century, while much of the 1857 war was spread over Lucknow, Delhi, Rampur and Bareilly, undoubtedly most of the action centered around Delhi. Consequently, many people from Delhi migrated to Lucknow and Rampur. It was during this time a tradition of storytelling was found thriving in the streets of Lucknow and other places. The migrated people adopted and used to practice of this tradition. This traditional practice soon became a



cultural gathering and the medium of the form but predominantly in oral form. Soon, this storytelling considered as cultural art, migrated to Delhi with the people. Mahmood Farooqui claims the presence of an oral tradition in Delhi where people met near Jama Masjid every Thursday and Friday in the evenings to tell and listen to stories. It was performed as a form of entertainment in the public sphere (“Dastangoi lost art form” 2006). Thus this, dastangoi being a diasporic storytelling brought by Mughals from Persia migrated once again in India itself from Lucknow to Delhi. It was narrated as professional storytelling by Mir Baqar Ali, a famous storyteller of 19th century. This tradition of story narration was flourished due to his mesmerize performances but soon it was lost with the death of Mir Baqar Ali.

After more than seven decades, it has been practiced by Mahmood Farooqui and his group. Besides it, there was also an internal migration from old generation to new generation. When this tradition was passed down from Shamsur Rahman Faruqi to his nephew, Mahmood Farooqui. After this migration, dastangoi existed with some changes in its content, performer and audience. If we trace the expansion of dastangoi from Persia to India from different period, we find that in each migration it (dastangoi) adopted some changes from performer to the way of performance. For instance, now, the Dastangoi is performed in an auditorium atmosphere with two *dastangos* on the stage. Each dastango narrates the tale in a dramatic manner with appropriate tone, expression, gesture and style.

Conclusion:

Thus, this paper analysed the term diaspora in the context of dastangoi, how this tradition of Urdu storytelling as such called 'Dastangoi' was migrated from different places by different people in different period. Firstly, it was adopted by Mongolians, diasporic people of Mongol. Later, it was flourished in Persia. During 16th century, it was brought to India by Mughals. In 19th century, once again, this tradition of storytelling faced migration from Delhi to Lucknow in India. In contemporary period, dastangoi is being performed by Mahmood Farooqui and his groups. New youth is also interested to narrate stories through this tradition. Therefore, this cultural art of storytelling's expansion is continued among cities in India.

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