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reviewer1@nptel.iitm.ac.in ▼

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Unit 6 - Week 5

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WEEK 5 ASSIGNMENT

The due date for submitting this assignment has passed. **Due on 2016-08-30, 23:30 IST.**

Submitted assignment

Dastangoi: The Lost Art Form of Urdu Storytelling

While Dastans had many principals and many stories, the story of Hamza began to stand out early on. Beginning with an unknown Arabic version the Persian versions of the story narrated the life and adventures of Amir Hamza, supposedly an uncle of the Prophet Mohammed. Marked out by fairies, djinns and prophecies, Hamza travels to different lands in his infancy and even as a young child shows great physical prowess and daring. His fame spreads far and wide and he is called by the chief minister of the King of Persia to aid the latter in his troubles, encountering many adventures, beings, species and realms Hamza remains triumphant and unvanquished, right to the end. By the sixteenth century, versions of the Hamza story had begun to circulate in India. Mentioned first in the Deccan courts, the story reached its artistic apogee in the court of Emperor Akbar. By then, specialized tellers of the story, called Dastangos had emerged. There is very little information on what the ingredients of their art were, but they were sufficiently distinct to merit a separate genre for themselves. Akbar himself was exceedingly fond of the narrative and used to recite it himself. One of the first artistic projects commissioned under him was an illustrated version of the Hamza story which became known to posterity as Hamzanama. It was a mammoth artistic undertaking which consisted of over 1200 folios, each at least a yard and a half by a yard in size, making it an unusual picture project, with the text inscribed at the back. Nothing of that size, ambition or scale was ever attempted again by the Mughal regime, attesting to the importance of the Hamza story in the medieval imagination. Some scholars have conjectured that the large size of the panels indicates their use as a kind of an audio-visual story telling, the narrators would stand behind the panels and narrate the story from the text and the panels would be changed as the story progressed, envisaging it as a form of proto-television. For the next two centuries, different Persian versions of the Hamza story circulated in India, with occasional mention of the Dastangos who performed them. There were at the same time other Dastans, sharing tropes and conventions of the Hamza narrative which, in their emphases, begin to differ from the Persian versions of the narrative. Bostan-e Khyal, composed at the end of the eighteenth century enhances greatly the role of magic in its telling of a fantastical tale. Given primacy too is the art of ayyari, trickery, a relatively neglected feature in Persian storytelling.

As print came to North India in the middle of the nineteenth century, stories, fables and Dastans proved to be the most important motor for the print revolution, along side religious literature. Tales such as Nal Damyanti and qissas such as Qissa-e Meherafroz-o Dilbar were printed many times over. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the Hamza tradition in Urdu was thriving more as an oral performance tradition rather than as a successful print commodity. While Dastangos at Rampur, many of them migrants from Lucknow, were committing the narrative to paper, it remained in manuscript form. But already, the stories were expanding, while very few Persian versions exceeded a single volume the Urdu manuscripts had begun to extend to several volumes. Acquiring primacy too were new areas in the story, the tricksters and the magical and wondrous worlds created by sorcerers, pretenders to divinity many of them, which in their colorfulness, imagery and fancifulness were like nothing seen in Persian literature.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the practice of Dastangoi was sufficiently entrenched in most parts of Northern India. In Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's ethnographic account of Delhi Asar-us-Sanadid, Dastangos are mentioned prominently. Every thursday, they are said to gather at the steps of the Jama Masjid where they recite their tales. It is interesting that a mosque should have been the site for a profane storytelling for the Quran specifically mentions poets and storytellers and asks the believers to be wary of them for they mislead with the magic of their words. Mirza Ghalib, the famous Urdu poet was exceedingly fond of the Hamza Dastan and for a period of two years used to organize weekly performance sessions at his house in Delhi. He composed a long poem using characters and tropes from the Hamza story and once wrote in a letter to a friend that it was raining and he had just acquired, 'six chapters of the Hamza dastan and sixteen casks of wine, what more do I want from life.' Although Dastans continued to be published into the middle of the twentieth century, their popularity was clearly waning. Many of its conventions had passed into Cinema, the oral culture of which it was a product was giving place to a literary culture and the spaces where it was traditionally performed were being recast. In 1928, just a few years before sound revolutionized the Indian film industry, Mir Baqar Ali died. He was the last famous Dastango of India. The connection is not merely incidental. Reports of his performances establish beyond doubt that he was perhaps the last great traditional actor to be born in this country. Over time the genre became so neglected that today the Dastan-e Amir Hamza has completely receded from public consciousness. Few critics have engaged seriously with it, few Urdu students read them and in fact the whole set of the 46 volumes can today only be found in only one collection in the world. While their neglect as literature is inexcusable, they have also been wholly obliterated from the canon of performing Arts. As anecdotes of Mir Baqar make clear, their performance required an exceptional command over rhetoric, delivery, mimicry, ventriloquism and spontaneous composition. Moreover, Dastangoi was one feature of an oral/performative culture where the public arena was the first and perhaps the most natural site of performance. Qissagos, contortionists, sooth-sayers, faqirs, magicians, madaris, animal fights, mushairas and sundry other activities provide a prismatic context in which Dastans were composed and performed. Their skill as actors lay in commanding the audience attention at all times, an audience that in the case of a public performance was likely to fritter away at the slightest drop of intensity. This demanded acting and performing skills that range from drama to dance to mime to performance art. Rather than occupying a central place in our artistic heritage therefore, they have been sent to total oblivion.

1) Besides Dastans the story of which character stood separately in the narratives? **1 point**

- a. Amir Hamza
- b. Ali baba
- c. Alladin
- d. Prophet Mohammed

No, the answer is incorrect.

Score: 0

Accepted Answers:

a. Amir Hamza

2) Identify the century during which Hamza stories became famous ? **1 point**

- a. 19th century
- b. 20th century
- c. 16th century
- d. 18th century

No, the answer is incorrect.

Score: 0

Accepted Answers:

c. 16th century

3) Identify one of the characteristic that can be associated with the character of Hamza ? **1 point**

- a. Merchant
- b. Traveller
- c. Potter

d. Shopkeeper

No, the answer is incorrect.

Score: 0

Accepted Answers:

b. Traveller

4) Name the Mughal emperor in whose court the Hamza narratives became famous ?

1 point

- a. Akbar
- b. Jahangir
- c. Shah jahan
- d. Aurangzeb

No, the answer is incorrect.

Score: 0

Accepted Answers:

a. Akbar

5) Identify the composition that took place at the end of the eighteenth century greatly enhanced the role of magic in its telling of a fantastical tale ?

1 point

- a. Bostan-e-khayal
- b. Story telling
- c. Kingdom
- d. Narratives

No, the answer is incorrect.

Score: 0

Accepted Answers:

a. Bostan-e-khayal

6) Identify the language in which the Hamza narratives became more famous as compared to any other language ?

1 point

- a. English
- b. Hindi
- c. Urdu
- d. Persian

No, the answer is incorrect.

Score: 0

Accepted Answers:

c. Urdu

7) Name the place where every Thursday the tales of Dastangos were recited ?

1 point

- a. Red Fort
- b. Gateway of India
- c. Char Minar
- d. Jama Masjid

No, the answer is incorrect.

Score: 0

Accepted Answers:

d. Jama Masjid

8) Name the famous poet who was one amongst the admirers of Hamza dastans ?

1 point

- a. Mirza Galib
- b. Gulzar
- c. MD Rafi
- d. Kedarnath

No, the answer is incorrect.

Score: 0

Accepted Answers:

a. Mirza Galib

9) Name the last famous Dastango of India ?

1 point

- a. Mir Baqar Ali
- b. Hamza
- c. Prophet Mohammed
- d. Akbar

No, the answer is incorrect.

Score: 0

Accepted Answers:

a. Mir Baqar Ali

10) Identify the year in which the last Dastango died ?

1 point

- a. 1927
- b. 1938
- c. 1928
- d. 1937

No, the answer is incorrect.

Score: 0

Accepted Answers:

c. 1928

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