



DĀSTĀN-SARĀ'Ī

DĀSTĀN-SARĀ'Ī (storytelling), term used for written and oral genres of fictional narrative. Other terms used for the same genres include *dāstān-gū'ī*, *dāstān-pardāzī*, *qeṣṣa-gū'ī*, *afsāna-sarā'ī*, and *naqqālī*. In this article primarily the oral forms of storytelling will be discussed. Oral storytelling is generally considered a part of popular culture, but it also touches on literary culture at many points. It is performed in a number of different genres and contexts, of which a general overview will be given here. Storytelling may be classified according to the status of the storyteller, whether amateur or professional; the settings in which it takes place, either private or public; and the subject matter or literary genres of the stories.

In private gatherings traditional folktales are recited by older family members, male or female, as a form of family entertainment. Children may be put to sleep with recitations of such stories as “Sang-e ṣabūr” (Lorimer, pp. 153-56; idem and Lorimer, pp. 19-24). If the gathering includes listeners who are not members of the family, males and females may not both be present together: Female storytellers will address all-female gatherings, and males will perform for male groups (for an extensive discussion of this sort of storytelling, see Mills).

Storytelling in public contexts has been more widely studied. It encompasses a greater variety of performance genres. In pre-Islamic times minstrels performed at royal courts, providing entertainment, as well as news for their audiences. What is known of this practice has been described in detail by Mary Boyce. There are only scattered references to storytellers in Persian texts



before the Safavid period. Bayhaqī (ed. Fayyāz, pp. 154, 905) described an incident involving an amateur storyteller (*moḥaddet*) at the court of the Ghaznavid sultan Mas'ūd (421-32/1030-41); he also condemned popular storytellers because they related tales of absurdities to please only the ignorant. Professional storytellers were often classed with such other public entertainers as jugglers, wrestlers, tight-rope walkers, and weight lifters (Sīstānī, p. 254; Wā'eż Kāšefī, 1350 Š./1971, pp. 275-343), all of whom used to perform in squares and open areas of towns and cities.

In the Safavid period, when [coffeehouses](#) appeared in Isfahan and became centers of popular entertainment, the nature of professional storytelling began to change. The coffeehouse provided a place where storytellers could appear regularly and entertain a more or less stable audience, which in turn permitted them to tell longer and more complex stories that could be continued from one day to the next and did not have to be concluded in one session (for a broad discussion of such professional storytellers, see Maḥjūb). They also became more free to specialize. The most prominent form of public storytelling was *naqqālī*, still practiced to a limited extent in large cities. In the Safavid and Qajar periods *naqqāl* was most often a generic term for a narrator of stories from the *Šāh-nāma* and such great popular romances as *Abū Moslem-nāma* (see [ABŪ MOSLEM KORĀSĀNĪ](#)), *Ḥamza-nāma*, *Eskandar-nāma*, *Dārāb-nāma*, *Samak-e 'Ayyār*, *Ḥosayn-e Kord*, and in late Qajar times *Amīr Arsalān*.

Many *naqqāls* in the Safavid period specialized in single, though extensive stories; they were accordingly known as *Šāh-nāmaḵvān*, *Amīr Ḥamzaḵvān*, and the like. The names of some famous contemporary *Šāh-nāmaḵvāns* were recorded by Mīrzā Moḥammad-Ṭāher Naṣrābādī (pp. 145, 307, 357, 379, 401). In the 20th century, as competition from other forms of entertainment began to restrict the audiences for popular recitations, the *naqqāls* gradually limited their repertoire to stories from the *Šāh-nāma*.

Already prominent in the Middle Ages were various types of *maddāḥ* (lit., “panegyrist”) including the *manāqebḵvāns*, who told stories glorifying the Shī'ite imams, and the competing *fazā'elḵvāns*, with stories in praise of the first three caliphs (Qazvīnī, p. 67).

Two specialized genres of oral storytelling were *rawza-ḵvānī* and *parda-dārī*. The *rawzaḵvān* told stories of the imams Ḥasan and Ḥosayn and the events at Karbalā'. They performed at private gatherings in people's homes, as well as in



public spaces like shrines and cemeteries, and their function had a religious significance beyond that of simple entertainment. The term *rawza-kvānī* itself is said to have come from the work *Rawzat-al-šohadā* of Ḥosayn Wā‘eẓ Kāšefī (d. 910/1504). *Parda-dārī* is a form of illustrated storytelling in which the narrator or two narrators working as a team recite stories, usually about important early Shi‘ite figures, using a large painting, or *parda*, as a prop. These individuals, who were still functioning in Persia in the 1970s, were usually itinerant, moving from village to village on market days and setting up the *parda* on a wall in a village square (for a discussion of “picture storytelling” in its larger Asian context, see Mair, pp. 119-20).

Popular storytelling has been acknowledged in a number of literary works. The ethical dimensions of popular storytelling were discussed by Wā‘eẓ Kāšefī in a chapter on singers of tales and narrators of stories (1350 Š./1971, pp. 302-05). The poem “Pahlavān-e nāmawjūd” by Abu’l-Qāsem Lāhūtī (1304-77=1336 Š./1887-1957) is about people’s reactions to the performance of a storyteller on a summer evening in Kermānšāh (Monīb-al-Raḥmān, I, pp. 194-96). Maḥdī Aḳawān-e Tāleṭ (pp. 66-68), in his poem “Ādamak,” gave the thoughts of an old *naqqāl* as he sees his audience seduced by the attractions of a radio in the coffeehouses of large cities. As *naqqālī* gradually disappears from these coffeehouses, more attention is being paid to it by litterateurs and scholars. For example, ‘Alī-Akbar Sa‘īdī Sīrjānī has published a narration of the story of Esfandīār from the *Šāh-nāma* as a *naqqāl* would recite it, and Jalīl Dūstḳvāh has published the story of Rostam and Sohrāb from the *tūmār*, or notebook, of the famous *naqqāl* of Isfahan, Moršed ‘Abbās Zarīrī.

For a music sample, see [Harāy-āhang-e bolbol](#).

For a music sample, see [llāri](#).

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