

Introduction, Part Three: The Ḥamzah Romance in Urdu

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, an important change was gradually taking place, first in the Deccan and then in North India: Urdu was developing as a literary language. It was equipping its Indic grammar with an extensive overlay of sophisticated Persian words, expressions, and idioms. It was also appropriating every Persian genre it could possibly use. Both Urdu poetry and Urdu prose seem to have developed initially in the Deccan, then gradually migrated northwards. The various genres of poetry, led by the ghazal (*ghazal*), made the transition quickly and easily.

Prose, however, was another matter. Dakkani (“Deccani”) Urdu may have been, as was Persian, a medium for oral dastan-narration; there is little evidence either way. But it could certainly boast the qissah-like allegorical prose romance *Sab ras* (1635) and the Ḥamzah-influenced verse narrative *Ḳhāvar nāmah* (1649). The latter in particular was full of battles in which Ḥazrat Alī, the Prophet’s son-in-law, “fought with Devs and Paris, and confronted dragons, tigers, and ghosts”; the action also included “wars with hundreds of kings, and in between, some romantic episodes.”¹ The Ḥamzah story itself exists in a late Dakkani prose version called *Qiṣṣah-e jang-e amīr Ḥamzah* (Qissah of the War of Amir Ḥamzah) (1784). This work was probably translated from a Persian text, but we cannot be sure; very little is known about its background. Dakhani Urdu was also the medium of a number of other, generally shorter qissah narratives with the typical themes of magic, romance, and adventure. These qissahs were produced from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries; the earlier ones were mostly in verse, the later ones in prose.²

Despite this early cultivation in the Deccan, written Urdu prose seems to have been a late migrant to the North: ordinary people were illiterate, and literate people, even if they spoke fluent Urdu, wrote in Persian.³ “Until the end of the eighteenth century,” according to Gyan Chand Jain, “the writing of prose in Urdu was such a unique thing that several authors...thought they had invented it.”⁴ A few manuscript works like Fazl-e Alī Fazlī’s *Karbal kathā* (The Story of Karbala) (1732), a tragic narrative about the battle of Karbala; Mīr Muḥammad Ḥusain Aṭā Ḳhān Taḥsīn’s *Nau tarz-e muraṣṣa* (A New Style of Adornment) (1780), an elaborately told version of the Persian *Qiṣṣah-e cahār darvesh* (Qissah of the Four Dervishes); and the Mughal king Shāh Ālam’s *Ajā ib ul-qīṣaṣ* (Wonder among Qissahs) (c1790), also a traditional qissah,

¹Farmān Fathpūrī, *Urdū kī manzūm dāstāneñ*, p. 90.

²Farmān Fathpūrī, *Manzūm dāstāneñ*, pp. 118-120; Gyān Chand, *Nasrī dāstāneñ*, pp. 130-139.

³The great prestige of Persian, which lasted far into the nineteenth century, was lamented by Abdul Ḥalīm Sharar in his famous cultural history of Lucknow: “But as for prose, the whole country was interested only in reading and writing in Persian....The result of which was that however sweet and elegant the Urdu language had become for colloquial conversation, when it came to writing, everyone was struck dumb.” Sharar, *Guzashtah Lakhna ū*, p. 181.

⁴Gyān Chand, *Nasrī dāstāneñ*, p. 143.

stand as rare examples--and even they tend to be heavily and somewhat clumsily Persianized in style.⁵

Azīz Aḥmad states flatly that pre-nineteenth-century Urdu prose developed an “intricate and interminable” romance tradition that “lost itself into the fantasies of the dastan, chiefly of the cycle of Amir Hamza,”⁶ but there is not yet enough evidence to establish the point. It is easy to show that during the eighteenth century the Islamicized North Indian elite patronized the Ḥamzah romance in Persian; but even when Ḳhiyāl set out to challenge the dominance of the Ḥamzah romance he wrote, as we have seen, not an Urdu dastan, but another Persian one. If the Urdu Ḥamzah romance was cultivated, either in oral narration or in manuscript form, in eighteenth-century North India, no clear proof of its presence has yet been found.

There are a few vague traces, but they are exasperatingly blurred by the constant interpenetration of Persian and Urdu. One such murky trace is a verse by the great early ghazal poet Mīr (c1722-1810): “The story-teller’s boy--how can I tell you, he’s so worth seeing! / My and his qissah is, friends, worth hearing.”⁷ The verse is in Urdu, but were the stories? In the 1770’s the Urdu poet Mīr Ḥasan composed, in Persian, a *taẓkirah* or anthology of Urdu poets. In it he said of one contemporary poet, “He earns his living through qissah-khvani; in this art he is the pupil of the late Mīr Aḥmad, who was famous for his qissah-khvani.”⁸ A casual statement, showing that qissah-khvani was a well-known and long-established profession. But was its medium Urdu, or Persian? An even more tantalizing trace appears in Ḳhiyāl’s manuscript itself. Ḳhiyāl writes that when he had completed *Bostān-e ḳhiyāl* and was reading it in a coffee-house, to the listeners’ approval, a qissah-khvan made some objections, one of which was: “This man tells this story in Persian, but a sweet story is one which is told in Hindi [=Urdu].”⁹ The qissah-khvan’s remark itself is recorded in Persian, as is the whole anecdote. Do we here see the only real evidence of a parallel tradition of Urdu dastan-narration in the eighteenth century, as Rāz Yazdānī argues? Were qissah-khvans like the one quoted here bilingual in their narrative skills, choosing Persian or Urdu according to the capacities of their listeners? We do not at present have enough evidence to be certain.

Once we move into the nineteenth century, however, we are immediately on firmer ground. In 1800 the famous Fort William College in Calcutta was founded, to teach Indian languages to newly arrived English agents of the East India Company. Fort William commissioned, and printed in various modern Indic languages (and Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit as well), a number of simple texts that could be used as readers for language training. Most of the works Fort William published were prose fairy tales, romances, and fables, often didactic in intent. In the case of Urdu, the Fort William text *Bāgh o bahār* (Garden and Spring), also known as *Qiṣṣah-e cahār darvesh* (Qissah of the Four Dervishes) (1801), by Mīr Amman, is recognized

⁵Gyān Chand, *Naṣrī dāstāneḥ*, pp. 140-147, 729-751.

⁶Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 255.

⁷Mīr Taqī Mīr, *Kulliyāt-e Mīr*, ed. by Zill-e Abbās ‘Abbāsī (Delhi: Ilmī Majlis, 1968), pp. 679-680.

⁸Mīr Ḥasan, *Taẓkirah-e shu arā-e urdū* (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy, 1985), p. 28.

⁹The manuscript is in the Raza Library, Rampur; the anecdote is quoted and discussed by Rāz Yazdānī in his excellent article, “Urdū meḥ dāstān go ī aur dāstān navīsī,” p. 9.

as one of the masterpieces of prose narrative in the language. The Fort William versions of well-known traditional North Indian folk narratives like *Sinhāsan battīsī* (Thirty-two [Tales] of the Throne) (1801), *Baitāl paccīsī* (Twenty-five [Tales] of the Vampire) (1802), *Gul-e bakāvalī* (The Bakāvalī Flower) (1803), and *Ārā ish-e mahfil* (Adornment of the Gathering), also known as *Qiṣṣah-e Hātīm Tā ī* (1803), have enjoyed long and successful careers. All these works, including *Bāgh o bahār*, have been perennial favorites of the popular publishing industry from its very inception, in the 1880's, to the present.¹⁰

Fort William's Hindustani department included on its staff a "qissukhaun," or qissah-khvan, no doubt to give the students listening practice; we have, alas, no record of his tales.¹¹ We do know, however, that another member of the Hindustani department, Ḳhalīl Alī Ḳhān Ashk, composed one of the first, and longest, Fort William books to be published: the 500-page *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* (1801). Ashk writes in his preface,

Let it be known to all that this interesting qissah was created in the time of Sulṭān Maḥmūd Bādshāh. And in that era, all the sweet-tongued narrators sat down together to narrate and commemorate plans for battles and fort-seizures and conquests of countries. Especially for the king they wrote down fourteen volumes of the qissah of Amīr Ḥamzah. Every night they used to narrate one dastan in His Majesty's presence, and attain rewards and honor. Now in the era of the noble Shāh Ālam Bādshāh, in the year 1215 Hījrā, that is to say, 1801 A.D., Ḳhalīl Alī Ḳhān, who uses the pen-name Ashk, according to the desire of Mister Gilchrist Ṣāhib of great glory and high praise, for the use of those who have just started to learn the Hindi [=Urdu] language, wrote this qissah in the language of *Urdū-e mu allā* [i.e., standard Urdu] so that it would be easy for the beginning Ṣāhibs to read, by His bounty and grace.¹²

In this notable preface to the first known North Indian Urdu dastan, Ashk brings together two classic dastan themes that are worth examining in a bit more detail: the claim of ancient, remote, and prestigious origins; and the claim to tell a story of great length.

Ashk claims that the story he is telling goes back to the time of Maḥmūd of Ghazna, in the early eleventh century; he implies that his present text is a translation, or at least a rendering, of the written, presumably Persian text that the distinguished dastan-narrators of Maḥmūd's court first set down. Once again, we can see that Ashk envisions these narrators' oral dastan-narration as closely linked to the production of written texts: they composed written dastans which they then narrated to the king. The actual historical claim involved is highly doubtful, for a fourteen-volume dastan would be a major undertaking, and we have no evidence that Maḥmūd of Ghazna ever sponsored the production of such a work. Gyān Chand thinks that

¹⁰The modern genre of printed pamphlet literature, called *qiṣṣah* in Urdu and *kissā* in Hindi, to which all these works came to belong, has been studied in my dissertation, *Marvelous Encounters: Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi*; see especially Chapter 2.

¹¹M. Atique Siddiqi, ed., *Origins of Modern Hindustani Literature--Source Material: Gilchrist Letters* (Aligarh: Nayī Kitāb Ghar, 1963), pp. 123, 159-160.

¹²Ashk, *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah*, p. 2. The "His" in the last sentence is cleverly ambiguous: it can refer either to God or to Gilchrist. In different editions of the Ashk text there are slight variations in the wording of this introduction, but the main points are always clear. I have not yet seen a first edition.

Ashk in fact based his version on the Dakhani *Qiṣṣah-e jang-e amīr Ḥamzah* (1784),¹³ which was itself probably translated from a Persian source. Certainly there are enough Persianisms of usage and idiom in Ashk's text to make it overwhelmingly likely that he had a Persian source, either directly or indirectly. His plot agrees in many important particulars with the early Persian *Qiṣṣah-e Ḥamzah*, but it disagrees in many others. In our present state of knowledge we cannot say whether he used a Persian text from which he sometimes departed, or used a divergent Indo-Persian text. The point to be noted is his finely cavalier attitude about the whole business: questions of plausibility and textual access and historical possibility simply don't arise. The claim's the thing, and the more sweeping and impressive the better.

In this he is merely continuing a classic dastan tradition. The early Persian Ḥamzah romance has been said to have been commissioned by Ḥamzah the Ḳhārijite¹⁴; the later Indo-Persian Ḥamzah romance has been said to have been composed by Faiṣī for Akbar.¹⁵ The *Zubdat ur-rumūz* actually gives two conflicting origin-stories: first, that after Ḥamzah's death anecdotes in his praise were told by ladies living near the Prophet's house, in order to get the Prophet's attention, and that one Mas'ūd Makkī then produced the first written version of these stories, in order to divert the Meccans from their hostility to the Prophet; and second, that the romance was devised and recited by wise courtiers to cure the brain fever of one of the Abbāsīd caliphs.¹⁶ The 1909 Indo-Persian version also gives two conflicting sources: first, that the dastan was invented by Abbās, who used to tell it to the Prophet, his nephew, when he was feeling sad, to cheer him up with stories of his other uncle's glory; or, second, that the dastan was invented during the reign of Mu'awiyā (r661-79), to keep loyalty to the Prophet's family alive among the people despite official hostility and vilification.¹⁷

The point seems to be that the story should be ascribed to some irreproachably ancient and picturesque source, which will envelop the dastan in an additional veil of interest by evoking a bygone time and place; and also that the remoteness of the original source from the present audience will make incongruities or inconsistencies in the story seem no more than what one would expect. Dastans never begin with a "Once upon a time" formula, but invoking the mysterious aura of the past serves to create the same effect. The whole pretense of chronicle-writing and consultation of ancient "writers" or "narrators" which most dastans keep up (though only sporadically) is far from being a real historicity; it is in fact anti-historical, and serves to remind the audience that the dastan world is inaccessible, unchallengeable, wrapped in layer after layer of the past.

Ashk also claims that his sources, the narrators of Maḥmūd's court, compiled fourteen volumes of Ḥamzah's adventures. The implication is that the dastan is immensely large

¹³Gyān Chand, *Naṣrī dāstāneñ*, p. 134.

¹⁴See Ja far Shi'ār, *Qiṣṣah-e Ḥamzah*, introduction to volume 1, p. 3.

¹⁵The claim that the Indo-Persian Ḥamzah romance was written by Faiṣī for Akbar is made most insistently by a later Urdu version of the romance, to be discussed below; the claim has been thoroughly discredited, though it lingers on in many library catalogues. See Gyān Chand, *Naṣrī dāstāneñ*, pp. 476-480, for a convincing refutation.

¹⁶Ḥājī Qiṣṣah-ḵhvān Hamadānī, *Zubdat ur-rumūz*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁷Mirzā Muḥammad Ḳhān, *Kitāb-e dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah*, pp. 2-3.

in relation to any individual narrator's resources of time and energy. (*Bostān-e k̄hiyāl*, with its fifteen 500-page volumes, had taken even the resolute K̄hiyāl thirty years to create.) The single 400-page book that Ashk actually composed consists of twenty-two dastans, or chapters, grouped into four "volumes."¹⁸ But apparently Ashk's plan for his work was at some point much more expansive--or at least so he told his patron, John Gilchrist, head of the Hindustani department at Fort William College, for Gilchrist wrote with suitably patronizing approval,

If, as KHULEEL KHAN, one of the learned natives of the College, and who now considers himself the Hereditary Story Teller of the Emperor, Princes, and Nobles of India, asserts, the Historical Romance of Umeer Humzu itself, which he is now translating, will consist of 15 or 20 large Volumes, the patrons and admirers of the Hindoostanee may, in this branch alone, hail an inexhaustible fund of legendary narrative and diversion. Though oriental knight errantry and Harlequinism can hardly possess many charms for the present age, it may nevertheless exhibit in the wonderful feats and ingenious pranks of Umeer Humzu's squire Omr-yar, and such other heroes of Asia, some instructive lessons, as the first models of several of our most excentric ideal characters, in modern times.¹⁹

Even if Ashk never actually intended to write so many volumes, the numbers had a fine, grandiloquent effect: they were a rhetorical flourish, sufficiently impressive in their own right, and they served to call attention to the vastness of the Ḥamzah cycle. Moreover, by confirming that the ultimate size of the dastan was far greater than the text he had (so far) written, Ashk left ample scope for future dastan-writers to create "pre-legitimated" expansions and additions. Interestingly, at least one later nineteenth-century dastan-writer took very explicit advantage of this legitimating process: he claimed that of the original fourteen volumes produced at Maḥmūd's court, Ashk had translated only four, then had tacked on Ḥamzah's martyrdom from the fourteenth--and so he himself would now translate volumes five through eight!²⁰

During the early and middle nineteenth century, we start to have glimpses of Urdu dastan-narration in public places. We know that the famous Qiṣṣah-ḵhvānī Bāzār in Peshawar was a celebrated institution, and that dastan-narrators figured commonly in fairs and festivals, catering to mixed audiences of Muslims and Hindus.²¹ We know from a travel book about Delhi called *A Tour of the Sights* (1820?) that nightly performances took place at the Jāma Masjid: "On the stairs on the north side in the evening a qissah-khvan comes and does qissah-

¹⁸ The word "volume" (*jild*) can be used to refer to units of text ranging in length from fewer than 100 pages to more than 1,000 pages; instances at both ends of the spectrum are easy to find. My observation is that the sense of "volume" shifts toward the large end of the range when claims or boasts of length are being made; but within a single book or manuscript small clusters of chapters are sometimes grouped together, and each of these clusters may also be called a "volume."

¹⁹ John Borthwick Gilchrist, *The Hindee Story Teller, or Entertaining Expositor of the Roman Persian, and Nagree Characters* (Calcutta: Hindoostanee Press, 1802), vol. 2, p. iii.

²⁰ Niyāz Aḥmad K̄hān, *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah*, p. 4. However, the author's own zeal seems to have failed him after a time: volume 5 is 132 pages long; volume 6, 83 pages; volume 7, 71 pages; and volume 8, entirely lacking (though the work is complete). This text is in my possession.

²¹ Narayani Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires, 1803-1931* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 5, 51.

narration.”²² Writing in 1847, Sir Sayyid Aḥmad K̄hān amplified this description of the Jāma Masjid’s northern stairs: “In the evening a qissah-khvan arranges a reed stool, sits down, and narrates the dastan of Amīr Ḥamzah. To one side the qissah of Ḥātim Ṭāī is being told, and somewhere else the dastan *Bostān-e k̄hiyāl*. Hundreds of men gather to hear the performances.”²³ No less a literary figure than Ḡhālib, who as we have seen took a strong interest in dastans, wrote in 1864 of arranging private dastan performances at his own house: “Muḥammad Mirzā comes [to my house] on Thursdays and Fridays at the time of dastan [narration].”²⁴

Now that dastans were narrated in Urdu, the language of the general population, they could be enjoyed beyond the narrow ranks of the educated and elite; romance-narration became much more like the popular, street-corner, coffee-house tradition it had always been in Iran. From about 1830 on we begin to know the names of individual dastan-narrators.²⁵ At some point during this period, “dastan” came to be used as a special name for the longer, more elaborate romances, like that of Ḥamzah, and “qissah” became a residual category of shorter, simpler stories that were more like traditional fairy tales²⁶; but this distinction was never absolute.

While oral dastan-narration was well launched in popularity during the first half of the century (if not before), dastan printing necessarily lagged behind. Ashk’s text was reprinted several times, and two one-volume Urdu “translations” of *Bostān-e k̄hiyāl*--Calcutta, 1834,²⁷ and Bhagalpur, 1842²⁸--were published. But dastans could not be printed on a large scale until sufficient presses were available. Presses had been in the hands of Englishmen, missionaries, educators, local rulers, newspaper editors, and others with various axes to grind, since at least the beginning of the century. Not until the second half of the century, however, did presses gradually come into the hands of enterprising businessmen with a keen eye for what large numbers of people really wanted. It was the second half of the nineteenth century that saw the Urdu dastan tradition, in both oral and printed forms, at its height.

²²Mirzā Sangīn Beg, *Sair ul-manāzil*, trans. and ed. by Sharīf Ḥusain Qāsimī (New Delhi: Ghalib Institute, 1982), pp. 18, 161.

²³Sayyid Aḥmad K̄hān, *Āšār uṣ-ṣanādīd*, ed. by K̄hālid Naṣīr Hāshimī (Delhi: Central Book Depot, 1965), p. 278.

²⁴Mirzā Asadullāh K̄hān Ḡhālib, *K̄hatūṭ-e Ḡhālib*, ed. by Ghulām Rasūl Mihr (Lahore: Panjab University, 1969), vol. 1, p. 329.

²⁵Rāz Yazdānī, “Urdū meñ dāstān go ī,” pp. 6-7.

²⁶This is how Sir Sayyid Aḥmad K̄hān uses the terms in the passage quoted above.

²⁷Garçin de Tassy, *Histoire de la littérature Hindouie et Hindoustanie* (Paris: Adolphe Labitte, 1870, 3 vols.), vol. 1, pp. 186, 236.

²⁸This version, perhaps in the tradition of *Zubdat ur-rumūz*, was called *Zubdat ul-k̄hiyāl*. Ibn-e Kanval, *Hindūstānī tahzīb*, p. 28.