

Introduction, Part Two: The Persian romance tradition comes to India

Persian-speakers began to establish themselves in Sind from the early eighth century, and in large regions of northwestern South Asia from the early eleventh century onward. They came as military adventurers, and stayed to become founders of dynasties. The cultural prestige of Persian was so commanding at the time that even those rulers whose native language was Turkish tended to use Persian as their court language. But of all the Persian romances, only the story of Ḥamzah took firm root in the new soil. Annemarie Schimmel judges that the Ḥamzah story “must have been popular in the Subcontinent from the days of Mahmud of Ghazna”¹ in the early eleventh century, and it is tempting to suppose so. The earliest solid evidence, however, seems to be a late-fifteenth-century set of paintings that illustrate the story; these were crudely executed, possibly in Jaunpur, perhaps for a not-too-affluent patron.²

By the beginning of the Mughal period the Ḥamzah story was well established across a wide region. In 1555, Bābur noted with disapproval that the leading literary figure of Khurasan had recently “wasted his time” in composing an imitation of the cycle.³ The great emperor Akbar (r1556-1605), far from sharing his grandfather’s attitude, conceived and supervised the immense task of illustrating the whole romance. As Akbar’s court chronicler tells us, Ḥamzah’s adventures were “represented in twelve volumes, and clever painters made the most astonishing illustrations for no less than one thousand and four hundred passages of the story.”⁴ The illustrated manuscript thus created became the supreme achievement of Mughal art: “of all the loot carried off from Delhi by Nadir Shah in 1739 (including the Peacock Throne), it was only the *Hamza-nama*, ‘painted with images that defy the imagination,’ that Emperor Muhammad Shah pleaded to have returned.”⁵ Akbar was so fond of the Ḥamzah story that he even used to tell it himself, like a qissah-khvan or qissah-narrator, in the harem.⁶ Akbar’s personal qissah-khvan--himself the son of another professional narrator--was so constantly present in court that he is said to have earned the nickname of “Darbār Ḳhān.”⁷ Akbar’s successor Jahāngīr (r1605-

¹Annemarie Schimmel, *Classical Urdu Literature from the Beginning to Iqbal*, p. 204.

²Karl Khandalavala and Moti Chandra, *New Documents of Indian Painting--a Reappraisal* (Bombay: Board of Trustees of the Prince of Wales Museum, 1969), pp. 50-55, plates 117-126.

³Bābur described this imitation as a “far-fetched lie, opposed to sense and nature.” Annette S. Beveridge, trans., *The Babur-nāma in English* (London: Luzac and Co., 1969), p. 280.

⁴H. Blochmann, trans., *Ain i Akbari* (Lahore: Qausain, 1975; 2nd ed.), p. 115.

⁵Stuart Cary Welch, *Imperial Mughal Painting* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), p. 44. Only about 150 of these paintings are known to survive today.

⁶Lang and Meredith-Owens, “*Amiran-Darejaniani*,” p. 473. For an attempt to outline the story as Akbar knew it, see Glück, *Die Indischen Miniaturen des Haemzae-Romanes*; see also the more scrupulous Faredany-Akhavan, *The Problems of the Mughal Manuscript of the Hamza-Nama*.

⁷H. Beveridge, trans., *The Akbar Nama* (Delhi: Ess Ess Publications, 1977), vol. 2, p. 343.

27) also retained a Persian qissah-khvan, Mirzā Asad Beg Shīrāzī, whose skill he valued and rewarded.⁸

The Ḥamzah story left traces in the Deccan as well. One Persian romance-narrator, Ḥājī Qiṣṣah-Ḳhvān Hamadānī, records his arrival in 1612 at Hyderabad, at the court of Sultan Abdullāh Quṭb Shāh (r1611-72) of Golconda. The Ḥājī writes, “I had brought with me a number of manuscripts of the *Rumūz-e Ḥamzah*. When I presented them in the king’s service, I was ordered, ‘Prepare a summary of them.’ In obedience to this order this book *Zubdat ur-rumūz* (The Cream of the *Rumūz*) has been prepared.”⁹ The prestige of the written word in this oral performance tradition can be clearly seen: a professional oral narrator, a qissah-khvan, can think of no better way to introduce himself at the court of a potential patron than by presenting written texts. The king graciously responds by ordering the qissah-khvan to make a written digest of these texts--an offer which no doubt included a pension, permission to attend at court, and a chance to practice his oral art as well. At least two other seventeenth-century Indo-Persian Ḥamzah manuscripts survive, dated A.H.1096 [1684-5] and A.H.1099 [1687-8], as well as various undated and later ones.¹⁰

By the eighteenth century, the Ḥamzah story was so well-known in India that it inspired an indigenous Indo-Persian imitation, the massive *Bostān-e Ḳhiyāl* (Garden of “Ḳhiyāl”). The future author of this work, Mīr Muḥammad Taqī, who had chosen as his pen-name “Ḳhiyāl” (“dream, vision”), came to Delhi from Ahmedabad, hoping to improve his none-too-promising fortunes.

Near the house where he was staying was a gathering place where a number of people came every day, and before them a qissah-khvan used to narrate the qissah of Amīr Ḥamzah, which is well-known in the whole world. Poor Mīr Taqī too, with a view to lifting his spirits, joined the gathering on one or two occasions, and listened silently to the qissah. The qissah-khvan, seeing this person poorly dressed and looking like a student, one day said tauntingly before the people of the gathering, “A man can, according to his capacity, learn every discipline and science. But the art of qissah narration is so subtle and difficult that it can never be acquired at all--except by someone whose temperament is naturally suited to it.”

The young Ḳhiyāl is supposed to have responded to the taunt by vowing to create a “colorful story of such a style that not even the sky itself--much less mere human beings--will ever have heard the like!”¹¹

The result of his boast was an original Persian dastan that kept getting longer and longer: over a thirty-year period (1726-1756) Ḳhiyāl composed a dastan long enough to fill fifteen massive manuscript volumes which averaged something like 500 (extraordinarily large-

⁸Gyān Chand Jain, *Urdū kī naṣrī dāstāneñ*, p. 106.

⁹Ḥājī Qiṣṣah-Ḳhvān Hamadānī, *Zubdat ur-rumūz*, p. 2. The manuscript, which is in the Khudabakhsh Library in Patna, is unfortunately incomplete.

¹⁰Aḥmad Manzavī, comp., *A Comprehensive Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Iran Pakistan Institute of Persian Studies, 1987), vol. 6, pp. 933-939.

¹¹Amān, “Dībāchah-e kitāb natījah-e fikr-e tarjamah nigār,” an introduction to *Hadā iq-e anṣār*, p. 3. (This is the first volume of Ḳhvājah Amān’s Urdu translation of *Bostān-e Ḳhiyāl*.) In typical dastan style, there is another origin myth as well: that in his youth Ḳhiyāl invented one new qissah every day, at the command of a woman with whom he was in love. See Ibn-e Kanval, *Hindūstānī tahzīb bostān-e Ḳhiyāl ke tanāzur meñ*, pp. 24-25.

sized) pages in length; during most of this time he lived on patronage from various local rulers. To speed up the process of composition, one eager patron is said to have bestowed on him “fifteen swift-writing scribes with fine penmanship.”¹² *Ḳhiyāl*’s original work was never printed, but it circulated widely in manuscript form, and as a basis for oral narrative it indeed became the only serious rival to the *Ḥamzah* cycle throughout North India.¹³

The degree to which the *Ḥamzah* romance had become a part of Indo-Persian language and culture can be seen in some of the most famous Indo-Persian dictionaries: they define a number of characteristic terms from the story as full-fledged words in the Persian language.¹⁴ In the course of countless retellings before faithful audiences, the Indo-Persian *Ḥamzah* story seems to have grown generally longer and more elaborate throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Oral narration in Persian continued well into the nineteenth century. Writing in 1834, James Forbes describes the household of a Persianized navab at Cambay, near Ahmedabad, as containing the usual contingent of professional “kissa kawn, a class of people well known to the admirers of Persian and Arabian tales.” Forbes then tells an anecdote about an English friend who was ill with a dangerously high fever “the nabob sent him two female story-tellers, of respectable Mogul families, but neither young nor handsome. Placing themselves on each side of his pillow, one of them in a monotonous tone commenced a tale, which in due time had a soporiferous effect.” Whenever the patient woke, “the story was renewed exactly where it had left off.” The women relieved each other day and night by his bedside, until they “wrought a cure.”¹⁵

Even in the second half of the nineteenth century, it appears that written Persian dastans of considerable length were circulating among the educated elite in North India. The great Urdu (and Persian) poet Mirzā Asadullāh Ḳhān Ḡhālib (1797-1869), writing around 1861, speaks of his delight at receiving “a book of the dastan of Amīr Ḥamzah about fifty or sixty *juzvs* long, and a volume of the same size of *Bostān-e ḳhiyāl*.”¹⁶ The length of a *juzv* in Delhi was usually sixteen pages, which would yield a book 800 to 960 pages long.¹⁷ No Urdu version of such length then existed, so Ḡhālib was surely reading a Persian narrative—but was it an indigenous Indo-Persian work, or an import from Iran? Was it some manuscript descendant of the sixteenth-century text which Akbar caused to be illustrated in the *Ḥamzah nāmah*?¹⁸ Was it

¹²Ibn-e Kanval, *Hindūstānī tahzīb*, p. 25.

¹³Gyān Chand, *Naṣrī dāstāneñ*, pp. 598-600.

¹⁴These dictionaries include *Burhān-e qātī* (mid-seventeenth century), *Bahār-e ‘ajam* (early eighteenth century), *Chirāgh-e hidāyat* (early eighteenth century), and *Shams ul-luāhāt* (printed in the early nineteenth century, but based on much older dictionaries). Examples of such linguistic incorporation are being compiled by S. R. Fārūqī as part of a larger study of the Persian and Urdu *Ḥamzah* tradition.

¹⁵James Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs; a Narrative of Seventeen Years Residence in India* (London: Richard Bentley, 1834, 2 vols.), vol. 2, pp. 235-236.

¹⁶Mirzā Asadullāh Ḳhān Ḡhālib, *Ḳhuṭūṭ-e ḡhālib*, ed. by Ḡhulām Rasūl Mihr (Lahore: Panjab University Press, 1969, 2 vols.), vol. 1, p. 385.

¹⁷Abdul Qadir interprets the length as “960 pages.” Sir Abdul Qadir, *Famous Urdu Poets and Writers* (Lahore: New Book Society, 1947), p. 42.

¹⁸Only bits and pieces of this text survive, mostly on the backs of the famous illustrated leaves which are

an offshoot of Hājī Qiṣṣah K̄hvān Hamadānī’s massive manuscript *Zubdat ur-rumūz* (c.1612)? (We do not know the full length of either of these works, since only fragments of the former remain, and our only existing copy of the latter is incomplete.) Or had Ġhālib perhaps received the newly published *Kitāb-e rumūz-e Ḥamzah*, printed in Teheran in 1857-59? The questions are tantalizing, and the answers still all too few. In the case of *Bostān-e K̄hiyāl* as well, Ġhālib almost surely read a Persian (manuscript) text;¹⁹ for a few years later he took elaborate and celebratory notice of two different Urdu translations, as though he had never seen one before.

Near the end of his life Ġhālib paid one last conspicuous tribute to the dastan world. When his patron Navāb Kalb-e Alī K̄hān of Rampur (r1865-86) expressed interest in the Ḥamzah romance, Ġhālib addressed to him a Persian praise-poem (*qaṣīdah*)²⁰ in which every verse contained a witty reference to one or more characters in the dastan. Of a total of forty-seven references, eight were to Ḥamzah himself, five to his trickster companion, Amar Ayyār, and the rest to about thirty-three other characters; Ġhālib arranged the references so cleverly, and made them so evocative of the various characters’ individual roles, that he clearly knew the dastan extensively and well. In an accompanying letter (1865), he gave his own account of the history of the Ḥamzah romance, calling it a “fictional” (*mauṣū ī*) work “written by talented men of Iran in the days of Shah Abbas II [1642-1666].” In Iran, he said, it was called *Rumūz-e Ḥamzah*, while in India it was known as *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah*. “It was written something over two hundred years ago, but is still famous and always will be.”²¹

By the nineteenth century, however, Persian as an Indian language was in a slow decline, for its political and cultural place was being taken by the rapidly developing modern languages. But even into the early twentieth century, there was at least some market in India for short Persian versions of the Ḥamzah romance: one such version was published in Bombay as recently as 1909.²²

The Ḥamzah romance spread gradually, usually in its briefer and less elaborate forms, into a number of the modern languages of South Asia. Pushtu and Sindhi were particularly hospitable to the Ḥamzah story, and at least in Pushtu it continues to flourish today, with printed pamphlet versions being produced.²³ In Bengali it was popular among Muslims as

now dispersed in museums around the world. For a thorough and fascinating study of these fragments, see Faridany-Akhavan, *The Problems of the Mughal Manuscript of the Hamza-Nama*.

¹⁹The one existing printed Urdu version (1842) was much shorter. There were, however, some Urdu manuscript volumes done at Rampur, at the Navāb’s command, from 1842 onwards; see Ibn-e Kanval, *Hindūstānī tahzīb*, pp. 28-29.

²⁰Ġhālib, *Kulliyāt-e Ġhālib fārsī* (Lahore: Majlis Taraqqī-e Urdū, 1967), vol. 2, pp. 390-395. I am grateful to C. M. Naim for bringing this *qaṣīdah* to my attention.

²¹Russell and Islam, trans. and eds., *Ghalib*, p. 321. See also Ġhālib, *Qaṣā id o maṣnaviyāt-e fārsī*, ed. by Ghulām Rasūl Mihr (Lahore Panjab University, 1969), pp. 470-475. Apparently Ġhālib knew nothing of Akbar’s *Ḥamzah nāmāh*, which antedates the reign of Shāh Abbās II by more than half a century.

²²Mirzā Muḥammad K̄hān Malik ul-Kuttāb, *Kitāb-e dāstān-e amīr ḥamzah ṣāhib qirān*. This version is in the Columbia University Library. Two other late printed Indo-Persian versions--Bombay, 1895, and Lucknow, 1906--are in the British Library. Each of the three is about 250 large, closely-printed pages long.

²³For this information I am indebted to Dr. Wilma Heston of the University of Pennsylvania, who has made an extensive study of modern Pushtu folk narrative. One substantial 324-page printed verse version in modern

early as the eighteenth century, in a long verse romance called *Amīrhamjar pūthī* which was described by its authors, Fakīr Garībullāh and Saiyad Hamjā, as a translation from the Persian²⁴; this romance was printed repeatedly in pamphlet form in the nineteenth century, and even occasionally in the twentieth. Various Hindi versions were produced, as we will see. But above all, the story of Ḥamzah flourished in Urdu.

Pushtu, Jān Muḥammad Mullā, *Dāstān amīr ḥamzah* (Peshawar: Miyān Ḥājī Abdul Ḳhāliq, 1949), is documented in Iqbal Ali Jatōi, *Bibliography of Folk Literature* (Islamabad: National Institute of Folk Heritage, 1980), p. 76.

²⁴Abdul Mannan, *The Emergence and Development of Dobhasi Literature in Bengal*, pp. 79-133.