

Introduction, Part Six:

Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah: the Bilgrāmī Text

In the long run, Naval Kishor turned out to be a more important patron of the Urdu dastan than any prince or aristocrat: he was responsible for creating and preserving most of the texts which today provide our only real access to the tradition. As we have seen, Naval Kishor started with the Ashk version of the story. After printing and reprinting it, in 1871 he replaced it with another version which proclaimed itself a great improvement:

Although [the Ashk version], because of its appeal to great and small, has been printed in thousands of copies in Calcutta, Bombay, and Delhi, and at the *Avadh Akhbār* Press, it has always been disliked by purists for its archaic idioms and convoluted style. With the greatest effort and energy Maulvī Ḥāfīz Abdullāh Ṣāhib, teacher at the Arabic school (*madrāsah*) of Kanpur, has made modern additions and alterations and corrections in the language and idioms, at the desire of the Master of the Press. And under the supervision of the employees of the press of Munshi Naval Kishor, situated in Lucknow, in the month of November 1871 A.D., at the special request of Janāb Maulvī Abdul Azīz Ṣāhib Bookseller of Lucknow, who has generously promised before publication to buy a great number of copies, with the greatest haste it has undergone publication.¹

This new Abdullāh Bilgrāmī version obviously sold excellently, for it was reprinted in 1874 with a note at the end expressing great satisfaction at its popularity. As the note complacently observed, the Bilgrāmī version had joined a growing tradition of successful Ḥamzah printings all over North India, editions which were selling out seemingly as soon as they were placed on the market:

Although every dastan has a certain rank, nevertheless that pinnacle of speech the dastan of Amīr Ḥamzah has a rank even higher and more perfect....For everyone seeks it with his whole heart and soul, from east to west it is in great demand. Previously it was printed a number of times in Calcutta and Delhi, and still is printed there. It sold so fast that in the presses not even one copy could be found--not even under dire necessity!....[Our new edition has] a thousand ornaments and

¹Bilgrāmī, *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* (1871), p. 752. This text is in the India Office section of the British Library, and is available on microfilm.

improvements, and has become collyrium to the eyes of those who have been watching for it.²

The buyers of this collyrium must indeed have been numerous, for as we have seen, the continuing success of the Bilgrāmī version was followed by the Hindi *Amīr Hamzah kī dāstān*, by Shāyān’s verse rendering, and by the immense forty-six-volume version of the cycle, as well as a number of other one-volume versions by other publishers. Throughout this whole period, and indeed up to the present, the Bilgrāmī version seems to have been kept constantly in print. It even inspired an English translation, though the work was never completed.³

About the author of the version, Abdullāh Bilgrāmī, we know only a little. He is identified by the 1874 edition as the “head teacher of the Arabic school of Kanpur,” and described as a “Maulvī,” or man of religious learning; as a “Sayyid,” or descendant of the Prophet; as a “Ḥāfiz,” or memorizer the whole of the Qur’ān; and as a “Bilgrāmī,” coming from the small but intellectually sophisticated town of Bilgram, northwest of Lucknow. This official Naval Kishor description suggests a pious, learned schoolteacher of simple tastes, sitting blamelessly in Kanpur revising and improving the sometimes defective language of the Ashk version.

The truth, however, is much more complex, dubious, and interesting, for we now know exactly where Bilgrāmī obtained the text from which he worked: he plagiarized it. He did not base his work on the Ashk version at all, but took a version published by one Ġhālīb Lakhnavī in Calcutta in 1855, embroidered it in various ways, and passed it off as his own. I know of only two surviving copies of this Ġhālīb Lakhnavī text,⁴ but they suffice to make the case clear. Ġhālīb Lakhnavī⁵ describes himself in his introduction as the son-in-law of the oldest son of Ṭīpū Sulṭān (r1783-99), and claims--perhaps even accurately, for all we can presently tell--to be translating from a Persian text into colloquial Urdu, to oblige his friends who thought that the Ḥamzah story should be made more accessible to ordinary people. Of his narrative organization he says, “Since in this dastan there are four things, *razm*, *bazm*, *ṭilism*, and *ayyārī*, the translator has made the fourteen volumes of the Persian into four.”⁶ The figure of fourteen volumes does arouse

²Bilgrāmī, *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* (1874), pp. 559-560. The reduction in length from 750 to 560 pages was due to changes in format, not in content.

³Shaikh Sajjad Husain, *The Amir Hamza, an Oriental Novel* (Calcutta, 1892). Only Part 1 exists; apparently no more was ever published. The text is in the British Library.

⁴It was my great good fortune to discover one surviving copy, battered but complete, in July 1985, and to be able to buy it. A microfiche of it is now in the collection of the Library of Congress. Another copy is in the Panjab University Library in Lahore; see Suhail Buḫhārī, *Urdū dāstān*, pp. 228-229.

⁵Ġhālīb Lakhnavī, an obscure figure, is mentioned in one *taẓkirah*, *Suḫhan-e shu arā* by ‘Abd ul-Ghafūr Nassākh; he is described as a student of the poet Qaṭīl, and a convert from Hinduism. I am indebted to S. R. Fārūqī for this information.

⁶Ġhālīb Lakhnavī, *Tarjamah dāstān ṣāhib qirān*, pp. 1-2.

suspicions: could Ġhālib too, like Ashk, be claiming descent from the legendary Maḥmūd of Ghazna version? Ġhālib's version of the story closely resembles Ashk's throughout its first volume--then veers away considerably, with occasional similar episodes embedded among completely different ones.

Bilgrāmī followed Ġhālib not only in his general structure of four sections (he calls them *daftars*) but in an almost literally line-by-line way: though he sometimes added phrases of his own, he usually took Ġhālib's phrases and slightly modified them, most often by adding a rhyming echo-phrase. While Ġhālib's work contains almost no rhyming prose, Bilgrāmī's contains more than any other dastan text I have seen. Ġhālib's very simple, lively, fast-moving narrative is slowed into greater elaborateness by Bilgrāmī's additions--which, since they are being inserted into a pre-existing text, cannot really advance the story and must merely repeat and amplify what has already been said. Here, for example, is a Bilgrāmī passage with his additions to Ġhālib's original text italicized:

*The arrangers of colorful reports and the news-bearers of variegated effects, the mystery-knowers of the arenas of event-understanding and the subtlety-speakers of the ranks of literary skill gallop the steed of the pen into the field of composition in this way, tell the agreeable story in this way: When the Khvajah after traveling a long way and traversing many stages arrived near Mecca the Great, from his halting place he wrote to Khvajah 'Abdul Muttalib, who was chief of the tribe of Bani Hashim, a letter like this: This lowly servant has come to worship at Mecca the Great, and also longs to wait on you. I hope that you will gladden me with a meeting, and show hospitality to a traveler. Khvajah Abdul Muttalib, having read the letter, was very pleased. Taking all the nobles of Mecca with him, he went to welcome Buzurchmihr; he escorted him with the greatest honor and respect, and had many fine houses vacated for him to stay in. First Buzurchmihr made his pious visit to the Kabah with Khvajah Abdul Muttalib. Afterwards, he met the nobles of the city with great magnificence. Giving rupees and gold pieces to every one, he said, "The King of Iran says, 'I am most happy with you all, and know you all as my well-wishers, and want you always to pray for me.'"*⁷

Bilgrāmī's additions were, as can be seen even in this small sample, much more extensive in the static parts of the story: in particular, he added the highly Persianized introductions considered very elegant at the time. He also inserted fairly long descriptive verse passages at some points in the story--including a conventionalized head-to-foot description (*sarāpā*) of Mihr Nigār, Ḥamzah's

⁷Ġhālib Lakhnavī, *Tarjamah-e dāstān-e ṣāḥib qirān*, p. 30; Bilgrāmī, *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* (1871), p. 48.

beloved, that ran to a hundred and fourteen lines. His additions tended to create the classic two-layered romance style, with its alternating complex and simple passages, that has been described by Hanaway.

The original 1871 edition was reprinted in a second, freshly calligraphed edition in 1874. An edition printed in 1887 describes itself as the fifth, and claims to have been newly revised by Taşadduq Husain.⁸ However, the 1874 and 1887 editions correspond page by page and line by line, so the “revisions” are obviously the publisher’s attempt to create new interest in a standard product. As the Bilgrāmī version was reprinted again and again over the years, a trend toward simplification eventually set in. It was a late and slow trend, however; even the self-described seventh edition, in 1927, retained most of Bilgrāmī’s elaborate prose and verse interludes. At some point fairly soon thereafter, as well as can be judged from comparing the vague notes at the back of different editions, Abdul Bārī Āsī, a well-known scholar who was an employee of the Press, performed a more radical kind of surgery, stripping away almost all the elaborate passages, which were by then going rapidly out of fashion. In the eleventh and most recent edition, printed in 1969, the introductory part of the passage given above has been simplified to read, “The arrangers of colorful reports tell this agreeable story in this way,” while the rest of the passage remains unchanged. The lengthy *sarāpā* description of Mihr Nigār has been eliminated, and other deletions of the same sort have been made throughout the work. These changes over time have made the story simpler and more translatable; they have certainly given the dastan the shape that it has today--and will continue to have in the future, for a new twelfth edition, virtually unchanged from the eleventh, is expected to come out soon. (All the modern editions are published by the Tej Kumār Press of Lucknow, owned by one of Naval Kishor’s heirs.) It is the eleventh (1969) edition which has been used in making the present translation. All further discussion of the text and narrative will therefore be based on this eleventh edition.

By using the most recent edition of the most popular dastan text, I have adopted a number of editorial choices made over time within the tradition. However, since I have here translated only about half of the 544-page Urdu text, I have had to make many additional choices myself. On the largest structural level, I have ignored the section (*daftar*) divisions entirely, and have taken liberties with the chapter breaks as well. This reshaping has not resulted in too great a loss, for the division of the text into four sections and seventy-nine chapters, called dastans, appears to be quite arbitrary. The breaks between Section One (27 chapters), Section Two (27 chapters), Section Three (8 chapters), and Section Four (17

⁸This was not the same Taşadduq Husain who wrote much of the forty-six-volume version, but a man of learning employed as a *muşahhih*, or editor, at the Naval Kishor Press.

chapters) sometimes occur in the midst of stories, at seemingly haphazard points. As for the chapters themselves, they range in length from one to twenty-two pages; some begin with elaborate, Persianized introductory phrases, while others begin in the midst of the action. Sometimes quite minor events are accorded chapters of their own, while much more important events are run together in a single long chapter with a title which does not refer to them at all. I have preserved the original chapter titles where possible, and in the remaining cases have provided titles of my own, identified by square brackets; all deletions within chapters are indicated either by ellipses, or by bracketed summaries of intervening events.

In the interests of clarity, the transitional comments between translated passages do not necessarily summarize all the material omitted; they aim only at making the following passages comprehensible. Footnotes too have been kept to a minimum. Diacritics have been omitted from the translation, but all important names are highlighted by “*,” and terms by “#,” on their first appearance; they will then be found fully transliterated and briefly explained in the Index of Characters or the Glossary.

Since the Urdu text flows on from beginning to end, interrupted only by chapter divisions and occasional line drawings, I have also had to add punctuation: all the periods, commas, exclamation points, quotation marks, and even paragraph breaks are mine. I have punctuated with as light a hand as possible, aiming for intelligibility but not overdetermination. I have also had to decide about meaningful names: whether Ḥamzah’s horse should be called “Siyah Qitas” (Siyāh Qītās) or “Black Constellation,” whether Naushervan’s vazir should be called “Buzurchmihr” or “Great Sun.” My decisions about names have been based on considerations of English style and sound, and have not been consistent; all the important characters, however, appear in the Index of Characters, where their names are given in accurate Urdu transliteration and are (if meaningful) translated.

There remains the larger question of how, and how much, presenting only half of the original text has reshaped the narrative. Certainly the broad contours of the story have survived intact: Ḥamzah’s birth, his early exploits at Naushervān’s court and elsewhere, his prolonged stay in Qāf, his most important martial and marital adventures, his children and family affairs, and finally the circumstances surrounding his death, have been carefully preserved, with crucial episodes translated in full. The life and exploits of his closest companion, ‘Amar Ayyār, have also been well represented. The cuts have been made in peripheral material and in recurrent adventures.

Cutting peripheral material has meant omitting some of the independent adventures of certain secondary characters: Landhaur, Bahrām Gurd, Ādī, and some of Ḥamzah’s offspring figure much less prominently in the translation than in

the original, while Naushervān's father Qubād and his courtiers, whose adventures occupy the first thirty-four pages of the Urdu text, have been excised entirely. Cutting recurrent adventures has meant that certain standard kinds of episodes have been represented by selected instances only, with many other similar events omitted: Ḥamzah's single combats, his journeys and encounters with strange champions, his killing of monsters and Devs, and his wanderings in the deserts of Qāf; Amar's feats of fort-capture, trickery, and *ayyārī*; the visits of divine emissaries bearing gifts and injunctions--all these events occur far more often in the original than in the translation. Making the best of an inevitably idiosyncratic business, I have been careful to include my own favorite episodes, hoping that the reader will enjoy them with me.

What I have tried hardest to preserve has been the actual verbal texture of the dastan; I have tried to reflect it in English with a minimum of distortion. I have, of course, translated prose as prose and rhymed verse as rhymed verse; most of the verse is of minor literary merit, so not too much has been lost. To retain the rhymed prose was impossible, since Urdu, with its highly regular verbs at the ends of phrases, makes rhyme feel unforced and fluent in a way impossible to capture in English. I have, however, provided a sample of rhymed prose--in Chapter One, when Buzurchmihr predicts the newborn Amar's destiny. I have also retained the repeated phrases, even without their rhyme, and have tried to give them a certain texture and interest of their own. And I have been careful to carry over into my translation the strong tendency for sentences to begin with the name of a character, to use common, colloquial, "least marked" verbs and syntax, and to be organized paratactically--simply "one fact laid end to end with the next"--in a straightforward temporal sequence.

In studying and understanding the structure of the text, I have found one work particularly helpful: *Romance and Chronicle*, P. J. C. Field's study of Malory's prose style. Bilgrāmī's text, like Malory's *Morte Darthur*, puts "romance material into chronicle form": among the features common to both works are a simple, self-effacing, "matter-of-fact" narrative line; a heavy reliance on parataxis and temporal sequence to organize the narrative; sentences that begin with "and," "then," etc. rather than making "zero starts"; a sparing use of adjectives and adverbs; much repetition; and a reliance on "the rhetoric of popular speech," including formulas, agglomerative repetitions, heightened and simplified descriptions, etc.⁹ Anyone with a literary or linguistic interest in prose romance will find Field's analysis valuable.

Beyond its obvious universe of other Indo-Persian and Urdu dastans, and its historical antecedents in medieval Persian dastan, a text like the present one can

⁹P. J. C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle: A Study of Malory's Prose Style*, pp. 36-82.

be studied from a wide variety of perspectives. Perhaps most immediately obvious is the cross-cultural comparison to be made with medieval European romance.¹⁰ Moreover, since all romances are full of fairy-tale elements, and the line between short simple romances and long complex fairy tales is ultimately impossible to draw,¹¹ the work of folklorists like Max Lüthi is often extraordinarily suggestive.¹² Since even written dastans are so palpably shaped by the oral story-telling situation, scholars of oral performance too have useful insights to offer.¹³ In the realm of formal literary theory, a number of new perspectives on narrative that have been developed in recent years can be tried out on dastans.¹⁴ All these lines of inquiry offer opportunities for interesting future work.

Since the Urdu Ḥamzah cycle has developed entirely in South Asia, one further question suggests itself: what affinities does the cycle have with indigenous Indic story-telling traditions? The most obvious candidate for comparison to Ḥamzah is surely Rāma: he too is a gallant, virtuous hero, a demon-slayer, predestined to Divine favor, who earns his bride through his amazing prowess, lives a wandering life for many years away from his home, endures a forcible separation from his beloved, pines for her in her absence, receives aid from both divine agents and animal allies, and finally returns home in triumph--only to lose his wife again. Within the *Mahābhārata*, the figure of Arjuna suggests itself, while Bhīma might be said to have things in common with Amar (and with Ādī). In at least two Indo-Persian dictionaries, Landhaur has been explicitly identified--though on rather unpersuasive grounds--with Karna.¹⁵ To the best of my knowledge, such correspondences are after-the-fact--though this by no means diminishes their interest--and do not prove any direct interaction or influence between the traditions.

When Naval Kishor published his Hindi *Amīr Hamzā kī dāstān* in 1879, his frontispiece made what is to me a much more suggestive Indic connection: it advertised the dastan as depicting “courage and heroism like that of Ālhā and

¹⁰Gillian Beer’s *The Romance* includes an annotated bibliography. Also of interest are R. S. Crane’s extensive study, “The Vogue of *Guy of Warwick* from the Close of the Middle Ages to the Romantic Revival” in *P.M.L.A.* 30,2 (1915):125-194, and John J. O’Connor’s *Amadis de Gaule and its Influence on Elizabethan Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1970).

¹¹This point is argued in Pritchett, *Marvelous Encounters*, pp. 164-169.

¹²Perhaps the best introduction to his work is Max Lüthi, *The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man*, translated by Jon Erickson (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984). See also the useful volume *Folklore Genres*, edited by Dan Ben-Amos (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976).

¹³For a good overview of this complex question, see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy; the Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982). Also of interest is Michael D. Cherniss, “Beowulf: Oral Presentation and the Criterion of Immediate Rhetorical Effect,” in *Genre* 3 (September 1970):214-228.

¹⁴Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, translated by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975) is of special relevance. Robert Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), provides a select and well-annotated bibliography.

¹⁵See F. W. Pritchett, “Emperor of India: Landhaur bin Sa’dan in the *Hamza* Cycle.”

Ūdal.” The *Ālhākhand*, a widely popular North Indian folk epic, indeed has certain resemblances to the Ḥamzah cycle. Ālhā and his brother Ūdal, its heroes, are warriors of lowly birth but amazing prowess, who win wives, conquer disdainful neighboring kings and their fortresses, and constantly achieve fresh feats of arms against incredible odds. In the end everyone dies except Ālhā himself, who has received the boon of immortality from the goddess Shāradā and wanders off into the Kajarī (=Dark) Forest.¹⁶ Most of the cycle’s episodes are called “The Battle of...” (... *kī laṛā ī*) and/or “The Marriage of...” (...*kā byāh*)--a pattern reminiscent of the dastan cult of *razm o bazm*.

More to the point, it can be demonstrated that the two traditions have had at least some contact. I own a remarkable Hindi work well over a thousand pages long, called *The True Ālhākhand: Magic Battles*.¹⁷ In format, verse style, etc., it is a genuine *Ālhākhand*, but the normal episodes are interwoven with *tilisms* and a variety of other magical adventures, all obviously influenced by dastan tradition. At one point, Ālhā and Ūdal themselves are trapped in a *tilism*. In true dastan style, the narrator first describes their misery and despair, then declares, “Leave them here in the *tilasm*--I’ll tell more about them later,” and turns his attention elsewhere.¹⁸ This work and its “magic battles” would well repay further study. Moreover, while studying oral *Ālhākhand* performers, Dr. Karine Schomer encountered one singer who claimed to narrate the Ḥamzah story as well.¹⁹ This kind of tentative connection obviously needs much more work, but the possibilities are there. Ḥamzah may prove to have more Indic connections than have yet been recognized.

While a translator can never be wholly satisfied, I feel at least a bit content. It is altogether frustrating to try to translate ghazals, but by comparison it *is* possible to bring much of the flavor of Ḥamzah’s life and adventures over into English. My work is emphatically not a “transcreation”; far from trying to “improve” the style or structure of the original, I have tried to retain it as faithfully as possible. I have been inspired by the work of translators like R. A. Nicholson and Reuben Levy, who know how to let a text be itself and speak its own kind of language.

¹⁶See Blackburn et al., *Oral Epics in India*, pp. 201-202.

¹⁷Maṭarūlāl Goyal Merathī, *Aslī Ālhākhand jādū kī laṛā iyāñ* (Delhi: Dehātī Pustak Bhandār, n.d. [mid-1960’s]).

¹⁸Maṭarūlāl, *Aslī Ālhākhand*, “Bhīmsiñh kā byāh, Sohangaṛh kī laṛāī,” p. 188. The variant spelling “*tilasm*” is common in Hindi.

¹⁹Dr. Karine Schomer, personal communication, April 1984.