# Dastan-e Amir Hamza Sahibqiran

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DASTAN-E AMIR HAMZA SAHIBQIRAN; TITLE PAGE

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# The Simurgh-Feather Guide to the Poetics of
## *Dastan-e Amir Hamza Sahibqiran*

### The "Total Book"

JORGE LUIS BORGES has proposed the idea of the Total Library. But as we are of a humble cast, we are perfectly happy to inaugurate a "Total Book." It is a book which is the sum of all possible plots of its story. It not only contains the entire recorded and unrecorded versions of the plot, but all possible ones as well. Every time a storyteller begins to recite the story, he unconsciously draws upon one of the plots in the Total Book, and should he invent something of his own, it too is appropriated by the Total Book as one of its missing plots. Therefore, no matter where the narrator's fancy shall reach, it remains within the confines of that Total Book. And its unwritten text assumes the shape of a composite animal, whose component parts are the many written and unwritten versions of the narrators. This composite animal has other parts too, invisible to the naked eye: these are the yet unthought-of variations on its plot. The Total Book is the narrator, but all narrators still do not make the Total Book. Or, to use an allegory from the Set Theory, it is the infinite super-set; all versions of its narrators being the sub-sets.

But does such a book actually exist in the universe? Or, is it preposterous to say that the Urdu *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza* (henceforward, *DAH*) is a Total Book?

These questions could best be addressed once we understand the concept of the Book itself in various traditions.

Starting with this concept of the Book, this essay traces the role of oral tradition in the conception of the Urdu *dāstān*, and how the *dāstān* carved its identity in Urdu and influenced the course of Urdu prose. A brief account of the *DAH*'s history in Urdu is given, and it is argued that

after the end of the *dāstān-gō'ī* (storytelling) tradition, we must redefine our relationship with the *dāstān*, before we set up any parameters for its criticism. Three central features of *DAH*—Enchantment (*ṭilism*), Trickery (*'ayyārī*) and Warfare (*razm*)—are outlined with a view to explain some aspects of the *dāstān* narrative, which are fundamental to the understanding of the dynamics of the text. It is suggested how these factors combined to make the Urdu *DAH* an almost interminable tale. How the traditions of orality, oral narration, and the *dāstān-gō* (storyteller) himself influenced the *dāstān* is also discussed.

## Oral Tradition and the Book

Orality was common to all societies, but some developed a special relationship with it in their evolution. The Oral tradition of the pre-Islamic Arabs was manifested in the popular saying: "*ash-shi'ru dīvānu 'l-'Arab*" (Poetry is the register/record of the days/battles of the Arabs).

This Poetry was not a written word. Dating back to the first century C.E. it was preserved and later retrieved through the process of oral transmission called *rivāyat* which was an institution in itself, where each poet had his own *rāvī* (transmitter). Collected after the advent of Islam as *al-Mu'allaqāt* and *al-Mufaẓẓalīyāt*, this Oral poetry acquired canonical status when its organizing principles were defined. Muḥammad's contemporaries had received his poetry through oral transmission.[1]

The Arab Oral tradition continued with Islam, and asserted itself in Islam's first book. The *Qur'ān* constantly referred to itself as a "book," and the "Book of Books," even in the earlier, Makkan *sūras,*[2] at a time when the *Qur'ān* was not compiled as one, and was preserved in the dispersed memory of men. A similar reluctance is noticed in the writing down of the Prophet Muḥammad's traditions (*aḥādīs̱*), though here the rationale against it was the fear that Muḥammad's own utterance might get mixed up with the Divine Revelation (the *Qur'ān*), resulting in the same kind of "distortion" (*taḥrīf*), for which the Holy Book, and the

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[1]For much of the above information I am indebted to Professor Muhammad Umar Memon.

[2]See Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 46:2. Hereafter all references to the *Qur'ān* appear in the text.

Muslims along with it, had censured the Jews and Christians. It was much later that the *aḥādīs̱* were collected, classified, and compiled into numerous collections, six of which, the *Ṣiḥāḥ Sitta*, acquired canonical status in the eyes of the Muslims. All this underscores the Arab view of orality as an infallible system of preservation. It was averred:

> And to you We have revealed the Book containing the truth, confirming the earlier revelations, and preserving them (from change and corruption). So judge between them by what has been revealed by God, and do not follow their whims, side-stepping the truth that has reached you… (*al-Qur'ān*, 5:48)

The parallel of the Islamic tradition of orality is found in the traditions of Jewish Oral law, although here it has been defined and articulated concretely. The Oral law was defended by the rabbis, as its Orality distinguished it from the written text of the Bible. They contended that if it were to be written down, the unique and supreme authority of Torah would be undermined, and it would become just another written text. The rabbis were also worried that once written, the law would become static and invested with finality, which would discourage its further development.[3]

This much is clear from these examples that from its earliest days the concept of the Book in both Islamic and Judaic traditions was taken not only to mean a "written" text, but also one graved on the ethereal tablet of memory. And if in the Judaic tradition this text was seen as alive, as something destined to grow; in Islam it lent itself to textual analyses:

> He has sent down this Book which contains some verses that are categorical and basic to the Book, and others allegorical. But those who are twisted of mind look for verses metaphorical, seeking dissensions by giving explanations to them of their own; but none knows their meaning except God; and those who are steeped in knowledge affirm: "We believe in them as all of them are from the Lord." But only those who have wisdom understand. (*al-Qur'ān*, 3:7)

In India the practice of memorizing the *Vedas* had long existed. Coupled with the Islamic conventions of orality it produced a society steeped

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[3]Cf. Morris Adler, *The World of the Talmud* (New York: Shocken Books, 1963), pp. 32–5.

in the oral tradition.

The concept of an oral book remained strong in India until the time the longer version of the *DAH* cycle was printed in Urdu (1883–1917). Shamsu 'r-Raḥmān Fārūqī has pointed out that the *DAH* existed in the Indian oral tradition long before it was transcribed. According to him, what establishes this fact are constant references to the earlier, unwritten *daftars* (books) of the cycle. We come across these references in the *DAH's* fifth *daftar*, *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā*,[4] which was printed first; and discover similar references also in its first *daftar*, *Naushērvān-Nāma*, regarding future events in the yet unpublished volume of the *Haumān-Nāma*.[5]

## The Ideals of the *Dastan*

The *Qur'ān*, when it cast the first stone at its contemporary Oral text, also provided the proof that the Persian *dāstān* was known in Arabia in the early years of the seventh century.

> But there are, among men, those who purchase idle tales, without knowledge (or meaning), to mislead (men) from the Path of Allah and throw ridicule (on the Path): for such there will be a humiliating chastisement.[6]

It is related that there lived in Makka, in the time of Muḥammad, a pagan named Naẓr b. al-Ḥariṣ, who was, as the ever conscious aṣ-Ṣaʿālibī points out, a notorious catamite. He harbored unorthodox beliefs, and

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[4] *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* (hereafter cited in the text and footnotes as *THR*), the fifth *daftar* of *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*, was printed from the Naval Kishore Press (Lucknow) between 1883–93. It consists of seven volumes, but the total number of books is eight, because vol. 5 is divided into parts 1 and 2. The first four volumes were compiled by Muḥammad Ḥusain Jāh and the last three volumes by Aḥmad Ḥusain Qamar.

[5] Cf. Shamsu 'r-Raḥmān Fārūqī, "Dāstān kī Sheʿriyāt kā Dībāča," in *Meḥrāb*, ed. Aḥmad Mushtāq and Suhēl Aḥmad (Lahore: Maktaba-e Meḥrāb, n.d.), pp. 211–2.

[6] *The Holy Quran: English translation of the meanings and Commentary* (Medina: King Fahd Holy Qur-an Printing Complex, 1410 A.H.), 31:6.

was an expert singer and lute player.[7] He preferred Persian romances to the message of Allah, and turned away men from Muḥammad's preaching.[8] This verse was in denunciation of him and others of his ilk, who preferred idle tales to life's realities. But it also provides a clue to the nature of the *dāstān*.

The term "idle tales" underscores that from the start the *dāstān* followed a certain ideal in its narrative, which aimed at escaping reality. There was no change in the nature of this ideal even a millennium later, when more censorious fulminations were addressed to the *dāstān*. This time it was a mortal who condemned the genre. The *dāstān* at issue was *Ḥamza-Nāma*. The man, Emperor Babur. Discussing his chief justices, Babur wrote:

> One was Mir Sir-i-barahna; he was from a village in Andijan and appears to have made claim to be a sayyid. He was a very agreeable companion, pleasant of temper and speech. His were the judgment and rulings that carried weight among men of letters and poets of Khurasan. He wasted his time by composing, in imitation of the story of Amīr Ḥamza, a work which is one long, far-fetched lie, opposed to sense and nature.[9]

"[O]ne long, far-fetched lie, opposed to sense and nature," highlights a number of facts: the idle tale has become even idler; it distorts reality; it has a dynamics which does not follow cause-and-effect; and it displays supernatural elements. When judging the supernatural in Islamic literature we must also take into account that djinns, mentioned over twenty times in the *Qur'ān*, as compared to six instances for Christians, and seven for Jews, were part of material reality in the Islamic concept of the universe.

The *DAH* text itself provides an example of this "escapist" virtue of the *dāstān*. At one place Queen Asrār Jādū must needs keep Afrāsiyāb from looking into the Book of Sameri, otherwise he would learn that she had

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[7]See Abū Manṣūr ʿAbdu 'l-Malik b. Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl aṣ-Ṣaʿālibī, *Laṭāʾif al-Maʿarif* (The Book of Curious and Entertaining Information), tr. with introduction and notes by Clifford Edmund Bosworth, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968), pp. 91–2, 102.

[8]*The Holy Quran*, p. 1211, n. 3584.

[9]As quoted by Milo Cleveland Beach, *The Imperial Image: Paintings for the Mughal Court* (Washington D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1981), p. 58.

betrayed him and joined ranks with Amīr Ḥamza's forces. She achieves this by narrating the *DAH* itself to Afrāsiyāb, who becomes so engrossed in its details that he confesses of an impulse to give up all thoughts of his monarchy and empire just to listen to that pleasurable *dāstān*. As a result, he fails to look into the Book of Sameri and, therefore, does not learn of Queen Asrār Jādū's treachery until disaster strikes (*THR*, vol. 5, pt. 1, pp. 622–9). This is perhaps a unique example in literature where the main tale becomes its own *rahmenerzählung* or frame story: but equally significant is the fact of the *dāstān* text asserting its escapist element.

### *Dastan* and Urdu Prose

These features of the *dāstān* assured it an enthusiastic audience in the decadent society of India which developed in the intervening years between the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the Mutiny (1857). It was a long period of despondency which had begun to show itself in the morale of the masses but was as yet hidden in the élite behind a façade of false prosperity.

The escapist element was a factor in the popularity of the *dāstāns*. Their world was the world of dreams which shut out all troubles. The expanse of the *dāstān* was a heaven for the Oblomovian mind. In its confines one was rid of all feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. The monsters were vanquished without moving a finger. Without exerting a muscle all stages were traversed. The *dāstān* audience became equal partners in the triumph of the hero. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Aligarh and Delhi were ushering in modern literature, Rampur and Lucknow dyed themselves in colorful *dāstāns*. Therefore, the heights which the *dāstāns* from these parts reached in imagination and sheer voluminousness, were no comparison for the texts translated at the Fort William College in Calcutta.[10] Unlike a folk-storyteller's, *dāstān-gō'ī* was considered a high profession. Since the times of Akbar the *dāstān-gō* had been inducted into the court. They were included among the retainers of nobility; and poets and writers consulted them as lexical authorities. As listening to *dāstān* recitals became a popular pastime for all classes, the *dāstān-gō* acquired a mass audience.

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[10]For a discussion of some of these points, see Gyān Čand Jain, *Urdū kī Naṡrī Dāstānēṅ* (2nd ed. Karachi: Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū, 1969), pp. 110–17.

Whatever the circumstances of *dāstān*'s induction into Indian society, it played a vital role in the development of Urdu prose. The depressing period between 1757 and 1857 was not hospitable to the composition of erudite works of prose. The Persian *dāstāns* were already known in India. Their translations became a refuge for the litterateurs: they aimed to have themselves acknowledged as the past-masters of language, and the *dāstān* afforded them an ideal opportunity. In Northern India in the eighteenth century Urdu had acquired a literary status through poetry. Persian was *de rigeur* for all other literary purposes. When the *dāstān* found patronage at the local courts, *dāstāns* and therefore prose became respectable.[11]

However, it is important to make a distinction. The *dāstān* acquired its own identity in the new culture. *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā*—the fifth *daftar* of *DAH*, entirely conceived by Urdu *dāstān* writers, who freed it of any influences of the Persian Ḥamza story—was an important landmark in Urdu literature. It was a model which not only presented a monumental work of fantastic fiction in the infancy of Urdu language; the dominance of its theme of enchantment also gave the Urdu *dāstān* a distinct identity from its Persian counterpart. A hundred years is a short period for a literary genre to become assimilated in a language: and no sooner was the Urdu *dāstān* written than the tide of events brought in a new literature. It was as much one period replacing another period, as one literature replacing another literature. Urdu was in its infancy when the culture that had cultivated it underwent a major transition, and the literature was accordingly influenced. But the development curve of Urdu prose had risen to a definite height under the influence of the *dāstān*, and it was there that the novel, the short-story and the literary essay discovered it.

## History of the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* in India

The *DAH* had an advantage over Medieval European epics like *Beowulf*, *La Chanson de Roland*, *The Nibelungenlied*, and the *Poem of the Cid*; all written down between the middle of the eighth and the end of the twelfth century,[12] fairly shortly after their conception. The *Arabian Nights* too

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[11]*Ibid.*, pp. 114–5, 660.
[12]Tr. William Alfred, Helen M. Mustard, and W. S. Merwin, *Medieval Epics: Beowulf, The Song of Roland, The Nibelungenlied,* and *The Cid* (New York: The Modern Library, 1998), pp. 9, 93, 218, 457.

had begun to be written down relatively early. In the tenth century Ibn al-Nadīm had seen more than one complete copy of *Hazār Afsāne*, the Persian version of the collection. And this collection existed more or less in its present form as early as the late thirteenth century,[13] which may have also given these stories a definitive course.

The *DAH* remained in the purgatory of human imagination, and enjoyed a long gestation period. Human fancy played long with it, unlike the European epics and the tales of the *Arabian Nights*, which, once penned, became static and impervious to any major shifts in narrative. The considerations that had led the rabbis to argue against writing down the Jewish Oral law also applied in the *dāstān*'s case. With every encounter between the narrator and his audience, it developed and expanded; and a single volume narrative of possibly Persian origin filled up forty-six massive volumes when one of its versions was printed.

The earliest known *Ḥamza-Nāma* in India was illustrated in Jaunpur around the late fifteenth century.[14] Emperor Akbar who suffered from dyslexia commissioned a monumental illustration of the *Ḥamza-Nāma* (ca. 1562–77) comprising some 1400 miniatures, which were held up for him while the *dāstān* was recited. Some of these paintings show mnemonical text. The scriptoriums built for the execution of this project influenced the course of Indian miniature painting.

An Indo-Persian manuscript of Ḥamza's story, *Zubdatu 'r-Rumūz*, is dated ca. 1612. This summary of the several manuscripts of the Persian *Rumūz-e Ḥamza* was compiled at the orders of Sulṭān ʿAbdu 'l-Lāh Quṭub Shāh of Hyderabad by a Persian *dāstān-gō*, Ḥājī Qiṣṣa-Khvān Hamadānī, who had brought these manuscripts from Iraq. The poet Ghālib in answering a query by the Navab of Rampur mentioned that *Rumūz-e Ḥamza* had been compiled in Iran in the reign of Shah Abbas II (1643–68). According to another tradition, *Rumūz-e Ḥamza* was first written in India. A Dakkani manuscript version, *Qiṣṣa-e Jaṅg-e Amīr Ḥamza*, preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and probably

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[13]Husain Haddawy, "Introduction," *The Arabian Nights* (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990), p. xii.

[14]Karl Khandalavala and Moti Chandra, *New Documents of Indian Painting—A Reappraisal* (Bombay: Board of Trustees of Prince of Wales Museum, 1969), pp. 50–5. This MS. is in the collection of Sitzung Preussicher Kulturbesitz, Tübingen, Germany.

based on one of the Persian texts, was completed in 1787.[15] The important aspect in this history, besides the widespread popularity of Ḥamza's story in India, is that Ḥājī Qiṣṣa-Khvān Hamadānī had carried more than one manuscript of the story to the Hyderabad court. It suggests that the *dāstān* had variants at that early stage in the Persian tradition too; and, as the oral narrative was being transcribed, a different interpretation of events had already begun.

In Urdu the *DAH* was first printed in a one-volume version. Its earlier compilers were Khalīl ʿAlī Khān Ashk (1801), Ghālib Lakʰnavī (1855) and Maulvī Ḥāfiẓ ʿAbdu 'l-Lāh Bilgrāmī (1871). Briefly, these versions recount the adventures of Ḥamza, a character who assumes the name and identity of the Prophet Muḥammad's uncle in certain instances. Bestowed with holy gifts Ḥamza undertakes to spread the True Faith and falls in love with Mehrnigār, the daughter of the Persian king Naushērvān, under whose tutelage Ḥamza had been raised. Ḥamza's adventures range from the isle of Ceylon to the fabulous realms of Mt. Qāf. At Mt. Qāf he is betrothed to Āsmān Parī, as foretold. Ḥamza also marries Mehrnigār. Except at Mt. Qāf, Ḥamza is accompanied in his adventures by his childhood friends ʿAmr ʿAyyār and Muqbil Vafādār. The former is a trickster of the first water; the latter an archer without peer. Together they overcome obstacles, and exterminate enemies with their companions' help.

With the exception of the *THR*, the Persian *Rumūz-e Ḥamza* influenced the several *daftar*s of the *DAH* that were compiled at Rampur (1849?–1939?).[16] The *DAH* was also printed by the Naval Kishore Press, Lucknow, in eight *daftar*s, comprising forty-six volumes (1883–1917) as one cycle. Its compilers were Muḥammad Ḥusain Jāh, Aḥmad Ḥusain Qamar, Shaikh Taṣadduq Ḥusain, Ismāʿīl Aṣar and Pyārē Mirzā. Its history has been discussed by Gyān Čand Jain who also provides a bibliography of the 46 volumes.[17] Jain's list is available in English with some amendments based on S. R. Fārūqī's research.[18] The latest work on its history has been

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[15]For much of the information in this paragraph, see Jain, pp. 134, 482–3.

[16]See *ibid.*, pp. 490–509.

[17]*Ibid.*, pp. 470–529, 759–60.

[18]For which, see Frances W. Pritchett, *The Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures from the Dāstān of Amīr Ḥamzah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 270–71.

published by Fārūqī himself.[19]

This longer version of the *dāstān* showed a marked shift from the one-volume Persian *dāstān*. It not only included the adventures of Ḥamza, but also of his progeny. To Mt. Qāf were added several fabulous enchanted lands. Only a seed of the theme of the Persian *Rumūz-e Ḥamza* was present in these *daftars*, and in the case of the *THR*, even this was absent.[20] This most famous and popular fifth *daftar* of the *dāstān* will be discussed in greater detail in the following pages.

### *Dastan*—A Genre Today?

Until the first quarter of the twentieth century, a class of professional storytellers in India known as the *dāstān-gō*, practiced *dāstān* narration. The text of the *dāstān* was essentially written to be used as cue-notes, or consulted as mnemonical text by the *dāstān-gō* before or during *dāstān-gō'ī*. But by the close of the first half of this century, the profession of *dāstān-gō* disappeared from India, and the tradition of *dāstān-gō'ī* came to an end. The various, complex reasons for its demise, some of which are discussed by Fārūqī,[21] are outside the scope of this essay. What did not disappear with the tradition of *dāstān-gō'ī*, however, was the text of some of these *dāstāns*. Therefore, in the absence of the *dāstān-gō'ī* tradition, our relationship with the *dāstān* text should also be redefined. The diagram on refers specifically to the *DAH*, the most popular of these oral *dāstān*s.
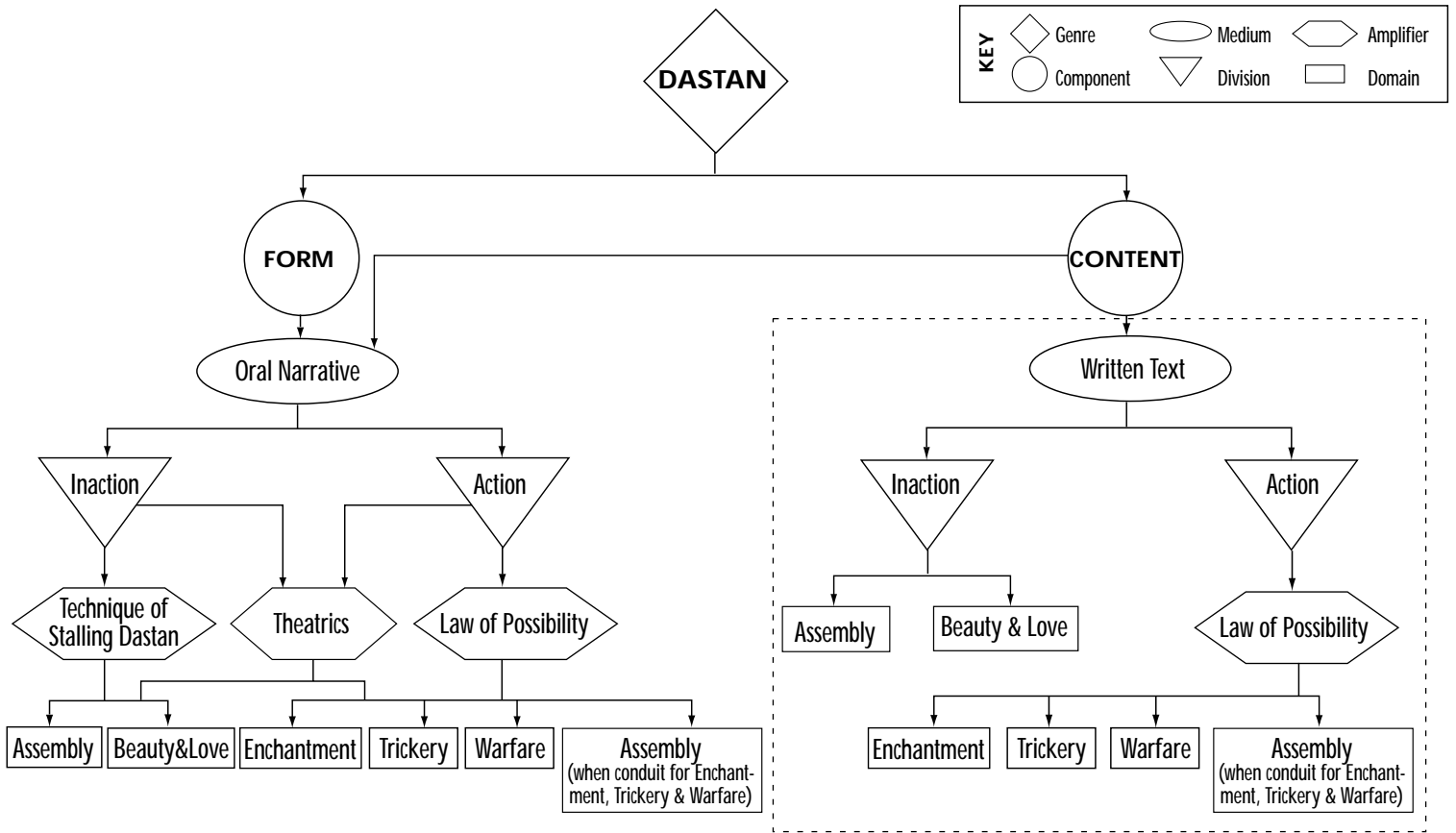
In its early days, when the *dāstān* "tradition" was alive, the *dāstān* "genre" had both components—"form" and "content." Its form was the delivery or narration, and its content was the story and adventures of the character Ḥamza and his companions. But the form of the *dāstān* was imbedded in the tradition of *dāstān-gō'ī*. And when the tradition ended, so did the form. And besides sparse, fragmentary records of what that

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[19]See his *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza: Zubānī Bayāniya, Bayān-kuninda aur Sāmi'īn* (New Delhi: Maktaba-e Jāmi'a, 1998), pp. 20, 101–29.

[20]Jain, p. 488.

[21]*Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*, pp. 63–4.

# The Dastan Tradition



**KEY**
- ◇ Genre
- ○ Component
- ⬭ Medium
- ▽ Division
- ⬡ Amplifier
- ▭ Domain

**DASTAN**

**FORM**

**CONTENT**

Oral Narrative

Written Text

Inaction

Action

Inaction

Action

Technique of Stalling Dastan

Theatrics

Law of Possibility

Assembly

Beauty & Love

Law of Possibility

Assembly | Beauty&Love | Enchantment | Trickery | Warfare | Assembly (when conduit for Enchantment, Trickery & Warfare)

Enchantment | Trickery | Warfare | Assembly (when conduit for Enchantment, Trickery & Warfare)

form was, we are left with nothing to comment on its structure. What remains now is the outlined section (RHS in the diagram); the "text" of the *dāstān*'s content—a relic of the *dāstān* tradition. However, this text is just a brief compilation of an experience that could be stretched by a virtuoso *dāstān-gō* over an incredibly long period of time. The tension, the gestures and flourishes of the narrator, his many modulations of the voice, his mimicry—the "theatrics"—are all absent when we read the text today.

Jain has compared a *dāstān-gō* to the actor of mono-theater, who had two additional tools of vast knowledge and eloquence.[22] While we may compare the *dāstān-gō* to an actor, we can not draw a parallel between *dāstān* and Theater—although in both genres text is used in the performance. A play cannot perpetuate itself endlessly. Improvisation is permissible, but cannot be an end in itself. It has a definite beginning and end, and if the performance is to make sense, it cannot begin from any point in the narrative, and must come to a determined close. However, none of these rules apply in *dāstān* narration, as we shall discuss further on.

Therefore, if we argue that the text of the *dāstān* is a relic of the *dāstān* tradition, and propose to study it as such, we must understand the limitations of such a study.

The Taj Mahal in Agra is a far greater work of art than, say, a Mughal dagger. The study of the Taj tells us a good deal more about the state of Mughal architecture, masonry, calligraphic arts, enameling processes and mosaic work than the study of the steel dagger. But the dagger too could reveal to us—besides our inheritance from father Cain—methods of tempering blades, and the sculpting and smelting processes used several hundred years ago in Mughal India. In their essence then, the magnificent Taj and the seemly dagger are both debris of the Mughal civilization. When we regard either object, only some aspects of the Mughal age are revealed to us; the entire age is not resurrected.

Therefore while we can discuss the text of the *dāstān* as an aspect of the *dāstān* genre, we cannot discuss it as a complete genre in itself—any more than we can develop a full understanding of the Mughal age by simply measuring out the dimensions of the Taj Mahal and learning about the techniques employed in its architecture. So any criticism of *dāstān* would be limited in its scope, and must first address the text.

If we agree on this line of reasoning we must then outline the main

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[22]P. 108.

function of the *dāstān*, so that the text can be defined in its framework.

The clue to understanding the function of the *dāstān* is found in the term "*dāstān rōknā*," used by the *dāstān-gōs*. Literally the term means "to stop the *dāstān*," and it conjures up the image that narration has stopped. However, that is not the case. In instances where the term was used, the narration continued with great gusto. Only "action" came to a standstill. Therefore we translate the term "*dāstān-rōknā*" as "stalling the *dāstān*."

Jain writes of this technique and illustrates it by narrating an episode:

> It became an art with the *dāstān-gō* to keep his audience awaiting the end. The term evolved for this art was "*dāstān-rōknā*." A *dāstān-gō*'s art was judged in that at what point and for how long could he stall the *dāstān*. The technique for it was to stop the action at a particular point, and to prolong the narrative from that point. The only condition being that despite the extraneous descriptions, the charm of the story is not compromised.

> Once in Lucknow two master *dāstān-gōs* decided to match their skills, so as to see who could stall the *dāstān* longer. One of them stalled the *dāstān* at the climactic point where the lover and the beloved were all but brought together and only a curtain separated their craven hearts and hungry eyes. Once the curtain was parted, they would meet. The listeners were anticipating the lifting of the curtain and the meeting of the lovers to proceed, but with his deep knowledge and eloquence, the *dāstān-gō* kept learnedly expounding on the emotions on the two sides, and the veil that hung between them. Quite a few days were spent in this exercise. Every day the audience came hoping that of a certain the curtain would be lifted that day, as conceivably nothing else had remained to be described. However, as they returned home each night the parting of the curtain had not yet taken place. In this manner, the past-master kept the *dāstān* stalled for more than a week…This art was confined to oral *dāstāns*. One did not see its display in the written *dāstāns*. (pp. 56–7)

It becomes clear then that the technique of stalling the *dāstān* meant suspending the action. The parallel of the *dāstān* stalling technique is found in Jazz. A jazz-musician who has mastered the circular breathing technique can hold a note almost indefinitely. A similar thing happens in the *dāstān* stalling process. The situation (note) does not change, it is only prolonged. In coining the term "*dāstān-rōknā*," the *dāstān-gō* held the *dāstān* as synonymous with action. Therefore, our first clue to understanding the *dāstān*'s function is that it narrates action.

The technique of stalling the *dāstān* is ideally suited to describe Beauty and Love (*ḥusn-o-'ishq*), and the situations of Assembly (*bazm*)—two "domains" which admit of "inaction." Enchantment (*ṭilism*), Trickery (*'ayyārī*) and Warfare (*razm*), on the other hand, are built around action and movement; hence their dynamics tend to be less hospitable to the techniques of stalling. While action could be delayed, it could not be delayed indefinitely. Oral narrative has its own aesthetics and a clever narrator would not tarry too long giving details in places where he is mainly concerned with describing action, and where there is no room to develop interest in secondary details, unlike the case of a pending meeting between separated lovers, where the expectations and fantasies of the audience could be exploited.

Now when we consult the text in the one-volume *DAH* and in the volumes of *THR*, we find that while it has several descriptive passages of Beauty and Love and Assembly, their content is limited. Reading out even the lengthiest of them will not take much time. Perhaps the longest such decorative passages are those describing Mehrnigār's beauty and Ḥamza's affliction upon regarding it.[23] On the other hand, passages which describe action in the domains of Enchantment, Trickery and Warfare, could go on forever. This further demonstrates that the text, while it allows for some description of inaction, is mainly focused on action. Therefore in the *dāstān* text Beauty and Love and Assembly will have limited play, because they comprise descriptions of inaction in the story. The technique of stalling the *dāstān*, since it was used to establish a narrator's command of language and his mastery of vocabulary, had no function in the *dāstān* text, unless some of its components were used in a limited way to decorate a few passages.

## Variorum of Fancy: *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* as the Total Book

The *DAH* was an oral narrative cultivated by the imagination of successive generations of storytellers. It existed not in a handful of manuscripts, but in the memories of an unknown number of men. Each narrator made his own choices in the narration. Muḥammad Ḥusain Jāh, the first to be

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[23]Maulvī Ḥāfiẓ 'Abdu 'l-Lāh Bilgrāmī, *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza Ṣāḥibqirāṅ* (London: British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, Reference # 306.24.B.21; Lucknow: Munshi Naval Kishore Press, 1871), pp. 135–50.

commissioned by the Naval Kishore Press to compile a text of the *DAH*'s longer version; beginning with its fifth *daftar*, the *THR*, quotes his numerous sources and incorporates themes from some of these narrators in his own version. In one place Jāh acknowledges his debt to his contemporary narrator, and includes his additions to the *dāstān* in his own narration (*THR*, vol. 3, p. 493). In another place he quotes the different versions of narrators who had authored some *daftars* of the *DAH* compiled at Rampur (*ibid.*, pp. 427, 432–3, 795, 798, 800; vol. 4, pp. 102, 573), states the choices he has made, acknowledging that the possibilities of the narrative are limitless, and leaves it to the discretion of the individual narrator to deal with them as he sees fit (*ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 937; vol. 3, p. 437). It demonstrates the process whereby, with each rendition, the *dāstān* was enlarged to become a variorum of fancy. We also discover that despite the very best care that the narrator takes in maintaining continuity, sometimes tracking down all these many traditions becomes impossible. The narrator realizes that he himself might have dropped a link. But instead of despairing, he acknowledges the lapse in a resigned voice, summarily makes necessary amends, and valiantly soldiers on with the narrative (*ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 297, 701).

Besides adhering to the rules of *dāstān-gō'ī*, referring to earlier texts also signified the narrator's awareness that there is ever more to tell; something he could aim at, but not consummate. It suggests that what he is telling is a part of the whole, not the whole itself, and therefore what exists outside his version of the *dāstān*, and is not part of his own rendition, is also valid. If a narrator allowed himself aesthetic choices and certain licenses, as we shall see further on, he allowed them also to his peers. Jāh realizes that if his contemporary narrator has added a passage to the *dāstān*, that too has become a part of the whole, and therefore could not be excised, or set aside. With these references Jāh not only provided the first organizing principles of the oral *dāstān*, his approach also showed a mind acutely aware of the dynamics of orality.

In the course of an oral narration, the mind continuously explores situations. Every time a detail is mentioned, it produces a host of possibilities. But the narrator can make only one choice, if he desires the narrative to proceed. As he moves on with the narrative, he leaves in his wake all the unexplored possibilities. Presently another narrator comes by, and happens upon one of them. The first narrator is galloping happily on the highway of the narrative when he hears hoofbeats and finds another narrator speeding after him, mounted on another charger of possibility. But they do not meet, and the first narrator sees the second disappear in

another direction behind a cloud of dust. Maybe someday they will cross paths, but for now they are parted.

We invent the "Enchanted Snooker" to explain the array of possibilities produced during oral narration. This game differs from the real snooker in that it is played on a table of cosmic proportions; we have an endless supply of racks; and after the first rack is broken, any of the several object balls from it could become a cue ball to break the next rack of object balls.

With the cue of his mind the narrator drives the cue ball of the narrative at the rack of object balls of possibilities. The cue ball breaks the rack and from among those object balls of possibilities, he chooses one to be his cue ball, and drives it at another rack of object balls. We must understand that the narrator is not obliged to pot a ball every time. Moreover, he could pot the cue ball itself without incurring penalty, then choose another to be his cue ball, and thus go on playing.

We immediately see that this game has no end. Nobody can say that the game does not progress; only that it has a different principle of progression than the real snooker, a principle which brings us back to the oral roots of the *dāstān*. At the beginning of the *THR*, Jāh condenses what has passed in the previous four *daftars* into some three hundred words. When these *daftars* are finally written down, their contents spread over several thousand pages. We could argue that Jāh's minuscule summary was enough because the characters and events were well known to the audience. But another argument is that a game which always remains in the Present has no need to dwell on the Past. Whether we are joining the Enchanted Snooker now, or playing at it for several days, we have not missed a thing. With each move the game progresses, and also begins anew. This was the reason why recitals of the *DAH* did not have to start at the beginning, but could begin from any point in the narrative, and end likewise. Again, since the whole *dāstān* remained in the memory, it could be accessed at any time from any point—a principle known to the CD-ROM user. It was because of the *dāstān*'s strong roots in the oral tradition that it was possible for the fifth *daftar* of the cycle, the *THR*, to be written before its first *daftar*.

## Law of Possibility in an Enchanted World

Having understood that the basic function of the *dāstān* is to narrate action, that the narrative remains focused on the Present, and that the

possibilities which occur in oral narration are infinite, we can attempt to explain how the Urdu *DAH* developed so many different traditions; what was the reason that it kept on expanding, and how did this *dāstān*, instead of being a slave in the hands of the narrator, end up being his master.

Faruqi writes:

> The reason behind the continuous expansion of the *dāstān*, and its demonstrating a cascading effect, is that it is recited orally. Therefore, instead of the Law of Causality, it is subject to the Law of Possibility.[24]

The subjection to the Law of Possibility becomes clearer when we define the coordinates of the operant. As Borges has remarked:

> [There are] two chains of cause and effect: the natural, which is the incessant result of endless, incontrollable processes; and the magic, in which—clear and defined—every detail is an omen and a cause.[25]

We therefore know that the Law of Possibility had a wonderful playground in a tale whose theme was Enchantment. It is only in a magical world where every cause produces an array of possibilities. Therefore, the *dāstān* operant (Law of Possibility) compliments the *dāstān* function (narration of action). We understand now why the enchantment content in the later *DAH* grew to such huge proportions; while we find it in a very modest dose in the Persian version—in which it has a secondary role—and in the one-volume Urdu version derived from that Persian text.

But we also find that while the domain of Enchantment is central to the *DAH*, those of Trickery and Warfare also contribute to its structure in an equal measure. This throws us back to the original comment made by Ghālib Lakʰnavī, in his Introduction to *Tarjuma-e Dāstān-e Ṣāḥib Qirāṅ*: "…this *dāstān* has four features: warfare, assembly, enchantment, and trickery.…"[26]

We therefore venture to suggest that if Trickery and Warfare too constitute equal parts of the *dāstān*, it is likely that they too are subject to the same Law of Possibility which operates in the domain of Enchantment, but may have other, different dimensions.

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[24]*Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*, p. 39.

[25]Jorge Luis Borges, "Narrative Art and Magic," in Emir Rodriguez Monegal and Alastair Reid, eds., *Borges—A Reader: A Selection from the Writings of Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981), p. 38.

[26]As quoted in Fārūqī, *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*, p. 39.

If we could demonstrate, as proposed in the diagram, that the Law of Possibility indeed influences the domains of Enchantment, Trickery and Assembly, we would have learnt how the content of the *dāstān* grew to its momentous proportions. And since during its oral narration, both action and inaction could equally contribute to stretch the *dāstān*, through the amplification devices of the Law of Possibility and the technique of stalling the *dāstān*, respectively; and the theatrics of the *dāstān-gō* could influence its course in a like manner, we can build an understanding of how the *dāstān* became a never-ending story.

As we set out to explore this possibility, we first make a stop at the domain of Enchantment itself, to understand how the Law of Possibility functions here, and to study also the many unique attributes of the enchanted world of the *DAH*.

In what follows, the word "*dāstān*" is used to denote the one-volume version of the Urdu *DAH*, as well as its longer version. The word "enchantment" is used to define both magic and the lands of the *THR*. However, the arguments are founded on the original 1871 one-volume *DAH* emended by Maulvī Ḥāfiẓ ‘Abdu ’l-Lāh Bilgrāmī; and the eight volumes of the *THR*, written by Muḥammad Ḥusain Jāh and Aḥmad Ḥusain Qamar. It is in the latter text that the elements of Enchantment and Trickery came to full bloom. I have mentioned other *DAH* volumes—*Naushērvān-Nāma, Haumān-Nāma, La‘l-Nāma, Aftāb-e Shujā‘at* and *Ṯilism-e Haft-Paikar*—through references to them in Shamsu ’r-Raḥmān Fārūqī’s essay "Dāstān kī She‘riyāt kā Dībāča" (introduction to the poetics of the *dāstān*) and in Gyān Čand Jain’s book *Urdū kī Naṣrī Dāstānēṅ.*

## 1. Enchantment (*Tilism*)

### *Dramatis personae*

We stumble upon a clue to the poetics of the *dāstān* in the mythical nature of its characters. We round up a few names at random, and briefly look into their twin histories—as narrated in the *dāstān*, and as recorded in empirical history.

The word Naushērvān means someone "having an immortal soul," and it is an honorific attached to a name. In the *dāstān* it refers to Khusrau I (531–79 C.E.), son of Qubād I, the most illustrious king of the Sassanian dynasty of Persia. Aṣ-Ṣa‘ālibī who gives Naushērvān’s complete and

unbroken kingly pedigree, fourteen generations into the past, and three generations into the future, also tells us that Naushērvān was one-eyed.[27] But the Naushērvān of the *dāstān* is whole of body. Also, while Buzurjmehr was Naushērvān's vizier, the two never had any commerce with Ḥamza.

The Ḥamza of the *dāstān* is the son of Khvāja 'Abdu 'l-Muṭṭalib and the uncle of Prophet Muḥammad. But this is as far as the similarities go. The name of the real Ḥamza's wife was not Mehrnigār but Salma bint 'Umais al-Khath'amiyya.[28] The historical Ḥamza dies fighting in the Battle of Uhud, at the hands of an Abyssinian slave, Vaḥshī. Later, Ḥamza is disemboweled by an Arab woman Hindah, who exacts this revenge from Ḥamza for the slaying of her kinsmen. The Ḥamza of the one-volume *DAH* is killed in an ambush on his way back from a campaign, and his killer is also called Hindah; however, this Hindah is the mother of an Indian prince (p. 750).

The character of 'Adī Ma'dīkarib might be based on the one mentioned by aṣ-Ṣa'ālibī. This Ma'dīkarib acted treacherously towards the people of Mahra, with whom he had a peace treaty. He broke the agreement and raided them, so they killed him and slit open his belly, filling the cavity with pebbles.[29] Ibn al-Kalbī also mentions him, reporting that an idol named Nasr was delivered to a man named Ma'dīkarib.[30] But 'Adī Ma'dīkarib of the *dāstān*, originally a bandit, converts to the True Faith and participates in Ḥamza's exploits. He does not meet the gruesome end of his analogue in life, but dies fighting in Ḥamza's service.

Afrāsiyāb was a Scythian or Turk by birth, a celebrated king, and the sovereign of Turan. He may well have dreamt of a life like the Afrāsiyāb of the *dāstān*, but it was not a luxury allowed him in real life.

As we read the *dāstān* we learn that this dual existence is not the monopoly of human creatures alone. Animals, goddesses, fire-temples and cities, too, carry this cross.

Ashqar was the name of Bahrām Gōr's horse, and we can be reasonably certain it was not a djinn. Emperor Qubād Kāmrān swears by

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[27] Aṣ-Ṣa'ālibī, pp. 72, 93.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 74–5.

[30] See Abu 'l-Munżir Hishām b. Muḥammad b. al-Ṣā'ib b. Bishr al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* (The Book of Idols), tr. with introduction and notes by Nabih Amin Faris (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 50.

Nimrod's fire-temple and the goddesses al-Lāt and Manāt in the same breath. Nimrod, the title of King Suriyus, said to have cast Abraham into fire, is mentioned in the *dāstān* as the God of fire-worshippers. However, it was Cyrus, the king of Persia, also known as "Kai Khusrau," who had erected a temple to the sun or fire, to commemorate his slaying of the dragon Gā'oshīd. In the *dāstān* however, the fire-temple of Cyrus and the great fire of Nimrod are one and the same thing. And the pre-Islamic goddesses al-Lāt and Manāt become Nimrod's confederates. The Ctesiphon and Makka of the *dāstān* also become mythical cities when Buzurjmehr, while interpreting Naushērvān's dream, announces that Makka is to the west of Ctesiphon: whereas the real Makka was situated to the south of the real Ctesiphon.[31]

In the end we are left with a confounding list of names and dual histories, widely scattered in time and space, and even the most fantastic imagination could not reconcile the two to bring them together as a group. Therefore, we draw the only possible conclusion: While the *dāstān* in its germ might have been based around one or more real characters, in its present shape all those past references have been altered. And in the context of the *dāstān*, names do not have a history outside of the *dāstān* itself. The purpose of using familiar names is to orient the reader with a familiar function. Evoking the name of someone like the Prophet Khiẓr immediately brings the reader up to date with a situation, and the *dāstān* could then move forward and narrate action. Therefore, our first coordinates of the Khiẓr of the *dāstān* are built on our knowledge of the real Prophet Khiẓr's name, his guise (usually a green robe, which is what the word means), and his function (of guiding the lost and succoring the helpless). Once that much is established, the Khiẓr of the *dāstān* begins to assert his own identity, and at times even his predictions don't come true. For example, at one point Khiẓr clips the wings of Ashqar Dēvzād and shods him with those wings. When Ḥamza asks how long a horseshoe made of wings might endure, Khiẓr predicts that the wings would remain attached to Ashqar's hooves as long as he (Ḥamza) lived: Ḥamza's cup of life would become brimful when the last wing falls (*DAH*, p. 534). But this is not what actually happens. Ashqar is hamstrung, causing Ḥamza's fall and his martyrdom by the infidels.[32]

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[31]See R. R. Palmer, ed. *Rand McNally Atlas of World History* (New York: Rand McNally & Company, 1957), p. 35, E10.

[32]*Ibid.*, p. 750.

**Dinosaurs and conflict of time dimensions**

Once we accept that everything in the *dāstān* exists in a mythical plane, we make some further queries. Is a dual, mythical existence allowed only to the creatures and objects of the Past? Or is it allowed also to characters and things that exist in the Present? And if the answer to the second question is yes, what purpose does this function serve in fantastic art?

Gary Larson is the creator of the *Far Side* cartoon series. One of his cartoons shows a solitary baby dinosaur looking wistfully at the entrances of three caves, where no one is in sight. The caption reads: "Suddenly, Bobby felt very alone in the world!"[33]

If these sparse details alone were shown, the illustration would no doubt evoke in our minds the metaphysical horrors of solitude. But we see Bobby sporting a baseball cap and glove, with the bat casually tucked under his arm. And the cave entrances display the notice, "Sorry, Extinct." Therefore, instead of being thrown into philosophical speculations, our minds are led directly to the comical possibilities at the end of the Cretaceous Period. We never once question the presence of the baseball paraphernalia; nor do we ask who its manufacturers, suppliers and sellers were—that the little dinosaur had obviously contacted to obtain them. And if the baseball cap had displayed the Nike insignia (it does not!), we would not have given that much thought either. We see a further example of this in another cartoon. Three dinosaurs are lighting cigarettes, and smoking. The caption reads: "The real reason dinosaurs became extinct."

An enchanted world is droll and full of hope. If the reader of Kafka's "Metamorphosis" shudders with dread it is only because in the real world redemption seems—and more often than not is—impossible. But transport Kafka's giant bug-human into fairyland, where every few instants humans are converted into apes and swine, and again into human shape, and nobody would find "Metamorphosis" a direful tale. Add to that enchanted world the contemporaneous idiom, and costume and culinary details, and the fantastic world becomes even more comic.

Therefore, we say that a fantastic world admits of a dual, mythical existence for all objects and creatures, irrespective of their place in Time.

In other words, the fantasy of the storyteller is the rabbit hole which

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[33]Gary Larson, Entry for "Thursday, February 11," *1999 Off-The-Wall Calendar* (FarWorks, Inc., 1998).

could transport not only Alice, but also her surroundings, into Wonderland. Now, if we regard the Ḥusainu 'd-Daula Imāmbāṛa (*THR*, vol. 6, p. 600) or a platoon of European soldiers marching up and down with drawn sabers, and the Brigadier installed in a chair (*ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 320), we are not surprised. *Naushērvān-Nāma* describes a "Ṯilism-e Nādir-e Farang" where organ-music is played, the European soldiers salute by firing a volley into the air and taking off their caps.[34]

The Imāmbāṛa has a complex existence outside the *dāstān*, but here it has only the traits which are defined in the text. Similarly, the troop of European soldiers does not represent anything more than what they display of their form and activity at that particular juncture. Also, we can assume that the verses of Anbā Parshād (*THR*, vol. 3, p. 879), Jāh's verses sung by 'Amr 'Ayyār (*ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 681), and Qamar's verses sung by the magic nightingale (*ibid.*, vol. 5, pt. I, pp. 182–3), all exist in the realm of the mythical, and cease to have any connection with the real world or their real authors. They may have an existence and function outside the *dāstān* as well, but that other existence has no bearing on their existence inside the *dāstān*.

In like manner we remain nonplussed at the display of British goods in the trinket shops (*ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 950), and the parade of flintlock and matchlock guns in the *dāstān* as Alqash makes an offering to King Qubād (*DAH*, p. 11). Interestingly, not only are the characters in the miniatures of the illustrated *Ḥamza-Nāma* commissioned by Akbar clad in Mughal dress, in at least three of them we see soldiers carrying and firing guns.[35] One page of Akbar's *Ḥamza-Nāma* in the Victoria and Albert Museum shows the fallen images of idols in the Ka'ba in the wake of the auspicious birth of the Prophet Muḥammad. These idols are unmistakably Hindu, and not pagan Arab.

From the fifteenth century verisimilitude was beginning to be discarded, at least in the visual arts, by artists working in India who until then depicted local color in both visual and literary arts. The Jaunpur *Ḥamza-Nāma* which shows women wearing local Indian dress was executed in the late fifteenth century when

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[34]Jain, p. 570.

[35]Gerhart Egger, *Der Hamza Roman: Eine Moghul-Handschrift aus der Zeit Akbar des Großen* (Vienna: Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst, 1969), plates 3, 10, 12.

the indigenous painters were fusing Persian motifs into indigenous tradi-
tion and endeavoring to narrate a story pictorially, not according to the
traditions of Jain hieratic art, but with simple if somewhat naïve
naturalness.[36]

This tradition had matured by the advent of the seventeenth century,
if not earlier. An album leaf in the manuscript of *Jōg-Bashisht,* dated 1602,
and executed for Jehangir at Allahabad where he had rebelliously set up
his own court before his official accession to the throne, shows the funeral
procession of Alexander the Great. Alexander's bier is covered with an
Ottoman silk textile and the members of the procession are not only clad
in Mughal dress, some of them also resemble the members of the Mughal
court, who make a formal appearance in the Windsor *Pādshāh-Nāma*
(Jehangir was known to enjoin miniaturists to paint himself or Akbar or
his sons into manuscripts).[37]

The preference for local color in artistic portraiture is a well-estab-
lished tradition. When portraying Mary and Jesus, Western painters
generally ignored their Semitic features. In the collection of the Tretyakov
Gallery in Moscow there is a Novgordian icon of the second half of the
fifteenth century in which Prophet Daniel appears in the somber garb of
an old Russian scribe. Neither is this artistic license limited to visual arts:
"the expressions and mannerisms of the Greek and Roman characters in
Shakespeare's plays belong in Elizabethan England, not ancient Greece or
Rome."[38]

But above all *dāstān* was—as it still is—a talisman to shut out reality:
a "rollicking rumpus created by the dulcimer of delightful verbiage and
the lute of enchanting yarn."[39] Verisimilitude was not the center around
which the fantastic world of the *dāstān* revolved. Should he value his life,
verisimilitude was well advised to look not only right and left, but *also*
fore and aft, when crossing the highway of narrative.

### Layers of enchantment: the reader-narrator symbiosis

We witness two sorceresses combat. Queen Hilāl belongs to Ḥamza's

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[36]Khandalavala and Chandra, pp. 50–5, plates 117–26.

[37]J. M. Rogers, *Mughal Miniatures* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993),
pp. 86–7. This MS. is preserved at Chester Beatty Library, Dublin (Ref # MS
Ind. 5).

[38]Fārūqī, "Dāstān kī She'riyāt," p. 195.

[39]See pp. 218–9, below.

camp, Queen Suhēl represents the camp of the infidels. Queen Suhēl throws a magic-egg at Hilāl, but the latter calls it by its right name, whereby its evil is neutralized. Next Suhēl throws a magical steel ball. Hilāl diffuses it by calling it a wax pellet, and it becomes one. When it is Queen Hilāl's turn to attack, she pulls out a strand of her hair, and tying it on a twig makes it into a bow. Then drawing the magical arrow of a straw, she lets fly at Suhēl. That enchanted straw-arrow kills Queen Suhēl and wreaks havoc on her camp (*THR*, vol. 4, pp. 90–1).

This demonstrates that within the enchanted world itself there are two layers of magic: one in which all things exist, and the other produced by the reality to which they subscribe. While all are dependent on the first layer for their existence; the second could be suspended by one or more of the characters, by resorting to a "sub-reality." We use the word "sub-reality" here because the whole of reality cannot be accessed from within the confines of the enchantment.

The first time Queen Hilāl repulsed the attack by taking recourse in reality and by suspending the enchantment. The moment reality intruded, one layer of enchantment ceased to function. The egg had magical properties only while it was something more than an egg: in this case, an instrument of destruction. The moment the enchanted egg was called a plain ordinary egg, it lost all its magic. Queen Hilāl then restored the enchantment to use it to her advantage, and upon her turn to deal the blow, used it again to destroy her adversary. On the other hand, Queen Suhēl never once suspended her second layer of enchantment. When Queen Hilāl shot at her with a straw-arrow from a twig-bow, Suhēl saw them—like her magic-egg—as instruments of destruction. Hilāl already regarded and proclaimed them as such. Therefore, confirmed in their enchanted existence from both layers, the twig-bow and the straw-arrow became agents of destruction and caused Queen Suhēl's death.

This mechanism has a direct bearing on the important narrator-reader symbiosis, which could be theorized as: For the *dāstān* to be successful, the enchantment woven by the narrator's fantasy, needs the second layer of the reader's own fantasy to sustain it.

Vanity is a contraband item in the enchanted world of the *dāstān*. Like a discreet Moses the reader never questions the better judgment of his Khiẕr (the narrator), even when he does not fully understand the latter's motives. Belief in the narrator is a core principle for the one who must enter the world of enchantment. And continuous belief in the narrator is imperative if he intends to explore this world further. The narrator wishes the reader to remain suspended in his (the narrator's) reality,

which is always moving forward. It is always in the Present, but always changing too, as we saw in the game of Eternal Snooker.

If Queen Suhēl is the narrator, the reader is Queen Hilāl. Queen Suhēl is successful only where she is supported by Queen Hilāl. If the reader does not believe in the conjuration raised by the narrator's fantasy, he may nurse his sanity, but can no longer derive any pleasure from the *dāstān*. To enjoy the *dāstān*, he must again plunge himself into the world of the narrator.

While the egg was repulsed by recourse to the sub-reality, if this sub-reality had not been canceled by Queen Hilāl, the plain steel ball, even after the loss of its magical properties, might still have harmed her; and the arrow would have remained a bit of straw. It was only after the enchantment was restored that the steel ball could undergo a magical function to become a wax-pellet; and the straw-arrow could find its mark.

To substantiate this theory we use an example from cinema. The villain of *The Nightmare on Elm Street* and its various sequels, the redoubtable Freddy Kruger, exists in the world of dreams. But as we learn, he inflicts harm in the real world too. However, since he does not exist in the real world, to exorcise him and counteract his evil, the hero or the heroine must descend into the world of his/her dreams. That is, in order to put an end to Freddy and his naughty business, his existence—although nightmarish—must be acknowledged: moreover, he should be fought on his own turf—in the world of nightmares.

Therefore we reiterate that belief in the narrator (Freddy) is a core principle for the one who must enter into the world of enchantment (nightmares). And a continuous belief (uninterrupted sleep) is necessary if this world is to be explored for pleasure (to put an end to Freddy). The moment reality intrudes (sleep is interrupted), the *dāstān* ceases to afford pleasure (Freddy is at large, out of the power of the hero/heroine).

**Orality as enchantment**

In the episode of Queen Hilāl and Queen Suhēl we witnessed that if real life functions are attributed to objects in the realm of Enchantment, one of the layers of enchantment ceases to function. But in some cases we see an exception to this principle. It applies to things that do not have a material existence, either in this world or in the enchanted world of the *dāstān*: things which exist in the spatial realm of fancy for the characters of the *dāstān*, as well as for the characters in the real world. In such cases the identity of these objects is universal both within and without the enchantment.

We refer to two instances in the text where the earlier *daftars* of the *DAH*, viz., the *Naushērvān-Nāma* and *Īraj-Nāma*, are mentioned by their names. We may contend that the enchantment was not broken because these *daftars* are as much a part of the narrator's fancy as they are of the reader's. At the time they are mentioned in the story neither has been written, they exist only as part of the Total Book of the *DAH*. Therefore not only do both layers of enchantment continue to function, to them is added another layer, that of the reader's own fantasy. Then it becomes unimportant whether it is Jāh, or Barq Faraṅgī and Z̤arghām, who are referring us to *Īraj-Nāma* (*ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 589), and with absolute credulity we could listen to Jāh/'Amr 'Ayyār refer Afrāsiyāb to the *Naushērvān-Nāma* (*ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 120).

An allusion to them does not destroy the illusion here, even though they are identified by name. Unlike the magic-egg—that has two destinies within the *dāstān*, and one outside it—these *daftars* have only one incorporeal existence, both within the *dāstān* and without. At this point in the *dāstān*, the author appears alongside the narrator, and the voices of the author, narrator, and character overlap. The fantasies/realities of all participants, the reader included, become one, and this linkage sustains the enchantment.

It is an instance of our peering into the crystal balls of our imaginations and seeing there not just an image of the character, but an image of him staring into *his own* crystal ball. What he stares at is *our* world—with ourselves inside. We also come across something similar to this theme in Mīr Taqī Mīr's poetry:

> *Čashm-e dil kʰōl is bʰī 'ālam par*
> *Yāṅ kī auqāt khvāb kī sī hai* [40]
>
> Regard too this Universe
> Like a dream which exists
>
> *Ghaflat sē hai ghurūr tujʰē varna hai bʰī kučʰ*
> *Yāṅ voh samāṅ hai jaisē keh dēkʰē hai kō'ī*
>    *khvāb* [41]

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[40] Shamsu 'r-Raḥmān Fārūqī, *She'r-e Shōr-Angēz*, 4 vols. (New Delhi: Qaumī Kānsil Barā-e Farōgh-e Urdū Zubān, 1990–1994), vol. 1, pp. 179–80.

[41] *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 106–7.

The conscious eye perpetuates its deception
And passes for this world, a world of dreams

And as Fārūqī points out in his commentary on the above verse,[42] this theme also occurs in Borges, in the last sentence of the story "The Circular Ruins," where we read: "…he understood that he also was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him."

But while both Mīr and Borges had to posit this thought with specific statements, the *dāstān* narrator successfully portrayed it through a dialogue which never touched upon the thought proper. This is where we see his advantage. Orality too becomes an enchantment, as only an essentially oral text like the *dāstān*, could refer back and forth into past and future events, without disturbing our own fantasy, as seen in the example of the CD-ROM access principle. The whole exists in the memory, so any point referred to is always seen in the context of the immediate Present. We already know that a magical theme is essential to producing an endless array of possibilities. We now learn that the *DAH*—a magical theme developed in oral tradition—is strengthened as a genre by the very nature of the oral medium.

We can say that this theory could be severely tried if the eccentricities of an individual narrator were taken into account. In several places Aḥmad Ḥusain Qamar, not content with slipping in his verses, also asserts his personality in a most conspicuous manner. In the *THR*, we read:

> Laqā said: "What idle chatter is this! Whose verses you recite! Whose opening strophes you remember!" Bakhtiarak replied: "Those excellent poets in Lucknow who are the past-masters in their trade—Munshī Aḥmad Ḥusain Qamar Ṣāḥib, who is peerless and unsurpassed in *dāstān* narration; Mīr Ẓāmin 'Alī Jalāl Ṣāḥib, the poet-grandee; Mīr Żakir Ḥusain Yās Ṣāḥib, the pride of Heavens; and Mīr Shaukat Ḥusain Ṣāḥib, who is a great learned scholar and goes by the *nom de plume* of 'Seḥr': we keep company with all these learned and distinguished men, and it is their verses we remember!" (*THR*, vol. 5, pt. 1, p. 274)

To rationalize such passages would stretch any theory to unreasonable limits, but nobody can deny that this excerpt produces a comic effect. After reading it we cannot help but smile. We know that Qamar is doing with words what Jehangir ordered done with the image. When

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[42] *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 180.

Bakhtiarak claims to keep company with the poets in Lucknow, we realize that Wonderland has flooded the rabbit hole and spilled out into Alice's own world.

**Cause and effect in enchantment**

The world of Enchantment is contrary in its nature, we are clearly told (*THR*, vol. 3, pp. 874–5). Therefore it is plausible that events therein do not follow a logical course. Also, while the world of enchantment shares the cause-and-effect mechanism with the real world, there might be other mechanisms that are unique to it. At one point in the narrative, Barq Faraṅgī 'Ayyār is beheaded by Afrāsiyāb, but hardly have we gone ahead a few pages than we see Barq Faraṅgī in the distance, coming towards us (*THR*, vol. 4, pp. 880, 1023). It appears a howler, and may well have been one, but we know better.

Muḥammad Taqī Khiyāl says:

> Indeed the way to create an [enchanted world] is that no aspect of it should be rationalized, but should be contrary to reason. How else could a man who drowns in a well or a spring find release from it…[43]

And according to Borges:

> [M]agic is not the contradiction of the law of cause and effect but its crown, or nightmare. The miraculous is no less strange in that world than it is in the world of astronomers. All of the laws of nature as well as those of imagination govern it.[44]

However, this is not to say that the text is error-free. At Ḥamza's birth, in the Bilgrāmī version, Buzurjmehr mentions the death of Ḥamza's mother, but after Ḥamza has defeated Munżir Shāh Yamanī, he asks his leave by pleading that his mother would be looking his way. If we wish to be unreasonable, we can also say that Ḥamza made a lame excuse to be rid of Munżir Shāh, and perhaps the latter guessed it, since he immediately insisted upon accompanying Ḥamza, expressing the desire to perform the Ḥajj, and to wait upon 'Abdu 'l-Muṯṯalib.

So how do we distinguish between a textual error and the miraculous

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[43]As quoted in Fārūqī, "Dāstān kī She'riyāt," p. 34.

[44]See his "Narrative Art and Magic," in Rodriguez and Reid, eds. *Borges—A Reader*, p. 37.

of the enchanted world? We suggest the reader play it by ear, but even a personal criterion would remain at best tentative until the *dāstān* is read at length, and one learns the nature of these apparent disparities and also learns to call them by their right names.

**By the Faithful, for the Faithful, from the Faithful!**
Almost halfway into the third volume of the *THR*, we encounter a singular aspect of the enchantment in the lands of the *THR*, which clearly gives it divine roots, if not divine legitimacy in its present status, as we come across a stone on which are engraved the following words:

> We had wrought this Enchantment for the professors of the True Faith; we philosophers too were among those who professed the True Faith, and well knew that after our times [this Enchantment] will be run over by infidels; and thus converting to heathen worship, the entire land of the Enchantment will come to be called the Country of the Faithless; finally the Destroyer of the Enchantment, a True Believer, will arrive.… (*THR*, vol. 3, pp. 400–1)

Thereafter the formulas for unraveling the enchantment are described, but we leave the Destroyer of the Enchantment to figure them out, and instead wonder at the import of this new insight.

We realize that an enchanted world does not necessarily mean evil and therefore we cannot show the *DAH* to be an encounter between magic and faith. Although *THR* is now become the domicile of the faithless, it had had a divine foundation, just as the Earth before the creation of Adam and the rebellion of ʿAzāzīl was the sanctum of the divine. The rebellious ʿAzāzīl is now Iblīs, but he too is, like Adam, the handiwork of God. If Amīr Ḥamza derives his power from divine sources, the infidels represented by King Afrāsiyāb, too, have some residual access to a divine source in the power they yield, which is derived from the enchantment. That is, if Adam is the Vicegerent of God on earth, Iblīs too is not at large without divine decree. Until the enchantment is broken, the source from which Afrāsiyāb derives his power could not be destroyed. Similarly, Iblīs will not be checked in his machinations while the earthly life continues.

However, the similarities between the theologian's world and the world of enchantment end here.

After the destruction of the world Adam is forever restored in Heaven, and Iblīs locked forever in Hell; and the archetypes of the cosmic hero and the cosmic villain perish alongside. But this does not happen in

the world of the *dāstān*. After breaking one enchantment, Amīr Ḥamza moves on to another enchantment, and villainy too continues, although the villain may also have, like the hero in some instances, a new face each time.

In the Islamic concept of the Hereafter, evil is contained, and is not endless; since the world is not an enchantment, but a material reality, as are Heaven and Hell. In the enchanted world of the *dāstān*, however, not only is the immediate world an enchantment, the subsequent ones are too. Therefore, there are manifest possibilities here of the progression of the conflict between good and evil along a never-ending path. We shall discuss this further when we look at the aspects of Warfare in the *dāstān*, and learn the unique relationship between the *dāstān* hero and its villain, which also produces the opportunity for an endless conflict.

Having learnt that the world of Enchantment has divine attributes, we can now understand why the Most Divine Name (*Ism-e A'ẓam*), otherwise capable of warding off or destroying a spell, is ineffective before an enchantment, or before a creature Enclosed-Within-the-Enchantment (*ṭilism-band*) (*ibid.*, p. 436), or his evil. We therefore say that the Most Divine Name could suspend the second layer of enchantment—as we saw Queen Hilāl do—but not the first, basic layer, since the mythical Ḥamza, along with his mythical Most Divine Name, derive the validity of their existence from that first layer of enchantment. The one who is Enclosed-Within-the-Enchantment has his entire existence locked inside the first layer. What appears in the second layer is an image, nothing more. However, like Freddy Kruger, it could still harm others whose existence is distributed between the two layers. Only a thing devised in the basic layer of enchantment could be the key for the destruction of the one Enclosed-Within-the-Enchantment—as the enchanted sword is in one case, obtained by the recitation of the Holy Names of God (*ibid.*, p. 431).

Although the Enchantment has divine roots, once it is corrupted by the rule of infidel magicians, it has to be purified. Islam suggests several ways of purifying material things that have been corrupted by coming into contact with foulness and filth. Depending on its nature, mass and the degree of corruption, a thing is purified by throwing away a part of it—as for instance in the case of a well of potable water in which a dead goat is discovered; or by destroying all of it—as in the case of an amphora full of water in which a dead mouse is found. The Enchantment in the *THR* has become so corrupted with the infestation of evil that it could not be redeemed by divesting it of a few parts. The whole must be destroyed, and towards this end Ḥamza and his companions exert

themselves.

However, even in its corrupted state the Enchantment shows divine attributes. Once we have learnt that the Enchantment was wrought by divine decree, we no longer insist that it is inherently evil; that when the Most Divine Name or other Holy Names of God are recited on it, the evil is defeated and the way opens up. We also consider the possibility that doors open and monsters give way because the recital of holy words cause the inherently benign Enchantment to revert—temporarily or in part—to its initial benevolent state. The world of the enchantment, therefore, is also a tragic world, condemned to be evil despite its benevolence, in the hands of the evil force that now drives it. When this world is destroyed, we know we have been witness to a tragedy.

To sow humor in such a terrain, and to reap not one, but countless full harvests, was the work of genius.

## 2. Trickery (*'Ayyari*)

We have proposed that the domain of Trickery in the *DAH* is also subject to the same Law of Possibility which applies in the domain of Enchantment. But before we proceed to explore this possibility, let's look at the figure of the Trickster in literature and then study the very special archetype of the Trickster (*'ayyār*) represented in the Urdu *dāstān*.

### Trickery in Literature

There are many varieties of cunning in classical and contemporary literature. For instance there is the cunning of the character Loaysa in Cervantes' short-story "The Jealous Extremaduran" which produces tragic results. In *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes*, by an anonymous writer, poor Lázaro's cunning revolves around securing a morsel of food. The cunning of Svejk in Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Svejk*, is rooted in his innocence, and is an equal threat to himself and his friends. The character of the fox in the European fairy tales is also mostly that of a villain, with the possible exception of the fox in St. Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, where it appears as a symbol of Exupéry's beloved. The character of Golem in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, although quite slithery, is unsuccessful and a bit tragic too. The equally slithery and suave Chrysophylax (the Rich), the greedy dragon in Tolkien's story *Farmer Giles of Ham*, is also a failure in the end, although less so than the Golem in *Hobbit*. In Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, as well as in the *Heptameron* of Marguerite of

Angoulême, cunning is generally tied up with the theme of lust, and is an instrument either of its requital, or of revenge. Pīr-e Tasma-pā (Thong-legged Dotard) of the *DAH* (p. 172), and an identical creature from the fifth voyage of Sindbad the Sailor in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, are also cunning, but sinister, and are speedily dispatched to Hell in both cases. In the latter book we also come across a villainous chief-of-police. He was

> a little old man, blind of the right eye and lame of the left leg. This official was a very devil among spies; he could unravel a spider's web without breaking the threads, steal a sleeper's teeth without waking him, coax the mouthful from a famished Badawi, and bugger a Negro three separate times before the man could turn around.[45]

But when we study these sly and insidious characters, whose principal trait is cunning, we always find them either in the role of a hero, or that of a villain. The trickster of the *dāstān*, however, differs from these conventional characters in a very fundamental way. While he remains a very prominent character in the *dāstān*, one who influences the course of the *dāstān* in a very substantial way, and one without whose presence the *dāstān* would be a dreary read indeed, he remains throughout a pawn. Even when ʿAmr ʿAyyār rebels against Ḥamza, he becomes a pawn of the rival interests.[46]

In ʿAbdu 'l-Fatḥ al-Iskandarī of the *Maqāmāt* of al-Hamaẕānī (d. 1008) we see a seed of the trickster of the Urdu *dāstān*, but he practices his cunning and deceit on some gullible desert dwellers, not against the magic of sorcerers and warlocks. We could say that the cat of the fairy tale "Puss in Boots" also comes close to this archetype, but again, the fairy tale thrusts heroic stature (however well-deserved) on the cat.

The archetype of the trickster as depicted in the Urdu *dāstān* is far more complex than the archetypes of both *dāstān* hero and *dāstān* villain. That the same archetype is also employed in the infidels' camp, makes it even harder to explain. It is only in the Urdu *dāstān* that we find such a focused function of cunning. The tricksters and the trickstresses (*ʿayyāras*)

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[45]J. C. Mardrus, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, tr. Powys Mathers (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1995), "Tale of Young Nur and the Warrior Girl," vol. 3, p. 316.

[46]Cf. Shaikh Taṣadduq Ḥusain, *Īraj-Nāma* (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, 1893), vol. 1, pp. 69–71.

in both camps are never innocent, yet they are innocent of villainy. They are constantly on the alert and ready for war, but for them war is also a sport, and at times they feel it beneath their dignity to opt for the easier way to gain the upper hand or an end, indeed they go out of their way to create a more complex and droll situation (*THR*, vol. 2, pp. 112–5, 929). For the most part they are successful in their undertakings; and remain comical characters. The only exception to this jocose crowd is perhaps the somber Mehtar Qirāṅ, always ready with his cleaver to deal the *coup de grace* to sorcerers and sorceresses.

The listeners to a tale or the readers of a story have definite images of good and evil, heroes and villains, in their minds before they sit down to listen to or read a story. It is this expectation that restricts any very radical shifts in the central traits of the archetypes of the hero and the villain. However, the trickster of the *DAH* is totally unencumbered of such expectations, since in his characteristics he is an entirely new tradition. From our understanding of the *dāstān*'s basic function, viz., narration of action, we can surmise that character development was not a task of the *dāstān*. Personal lives of the characters were only significant inasmuch as they influenced the story in some way and formed part of the action which the *dāstān* described. If they did not contribute to the action in the story, they were left out from the narrative. But the details of 'Amr 'Ayyār's childhood were an exception to this rule. These details were perhaps a device to establish the central archetype of the trickster. The success with which this archetype is introduced, manifests itself in the reader's own understanding of the trickster's complex identity. Whether a trickster accomplishes his task through a quick, harmless act of cunning, or by indulging in elaborate treachery and carnage, the reader just nods his head and says, "That's an *'ayyār* for you!"

The *dāstān* also established a clear link between trickery and nonage as compared to malfeasance and dotage. When the attributes of cunning and trickery are found in youth, they create a humorous and droll character, but when found in old age, they underscore depravity and malfeasance, and thus become the precursors of villainy. In the *dāstān*, the respectable attributes of old age are piety and wisdom. Trickery and cunning become the ebullience of youth. But when the same tricks are practiced by crones and codgers, their doings have a menacing aura.

King Afrāsiyāb summons five sinister harridans, who were the limit in sedition and fomenting mischief. They arrive dressed in the livery of treachery, all in their dotage, the oldest among them being the most vicious (*ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 621–2). We compare them now with the young

trickstresses who, when summoned by the same Afrāsiyāb, arrive dressed in the livery of trickery, all in their nonage, and all ravishing beauties (*ibid.*, p. 192). Villains, as we all know, are soon routed. Therefore, the five harridans; like the thong-legged dotard, and the villainous chief-of-police in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, are all packed off to Hell before long.

### ʿAmr ʿAyyar's magical gifts

Looking for clues that could point to the existence of the Law of Possibility in the domain of Trickery, we could argue that at least in ʿAmr ʿAyyār's case, he is gifted with several divine gifts, foremost among which is the privilege that he shall not die until he himself asks three times for his own death. This gift makes him immortal in a way. Among his other gifts there is a cloak which makes him invisible; a bag (*zanbīl*) that could carry the whole world in it and remain light; countless other wonders concealed within that bag—such as slave djinns who could be called upon in an emergency to manumit themselves by performing a task. This clearly brings in enchantment and the Law of Possibility begins to apply. But this argument precludes all other tricksters and trickstresses who lack the magical gifts. It would be a very limited representation of the Law of Possibility in the domain of Trickery if we only took into account the special status of ʿAmr ʿAyyār. So we search for some other clues.

### The "Promotion" principle

As we read the *dāstān* we come to realize that the magicians and sorcerers in Ḥamza's camp, besides being limited in number, are not quite as powerful as their adversaries who pledge loyalty to Afrāsiyāb. Therefore Ḥamza's companions accord a very warm welcome to one who breaks ranks with Afrāsiyāb, whereas Afrāsiyāb remains nonplussed, always comforting himself with the thought, "There is plenty more where that one came from!" It often happens that the great majority of sorcerers and sorceresses in Ḥamza's camp are defeated by Afrāsiyāb's sorcerers, or taken prisoner by the trickstresses and tricksters in his camp. It is then left to the tricksters in Ḥamza's camp to do the dirty work, and secure the release of their imprisoned comrades.

Here it might be useful to refer to the principle of "Promotion" in the game of Chess.

"Promotion," is the removal of a pawn that has reached the eighth rank, also called the "promotion square," and its substitution as a part of the same move by a queen, rook, bishop, or knight of the same color. A

player might possess two or more queens or three or more rooks, bishops, or knights, once promotion has taken place.

Broadly speaking, the tricksters in the *dāstān* have two functions: to kill the sorcerers sent by King Afrāsiyāb, preferably before they have had a chance to inflict destruction on Ḥamza's camp; and to liberate any sorcerers or commanders of Ḥamza's camp taken prisoner by the sorcerers or tricksters and trickstresses of Afrāsiyāb. It is in the latter function that they resemble the promotion of the pawn in Chess, with two differences. In this case, the pawn reaches the promotion square, but does not turn into a higher piece itself; instead it remains a pawn and revives the one lost. Also, while there are a finite number of pawns in Chess, and they are imminently susceptible to defeat, the unending Chess of the *dāstān* supplies a continuous function for the tricksters—pawns who almost never fail to reach the promotion square.

Again, since the function of the *dāstān* is to narrate action, and the trickster is almost immutable, the sorcerer must then become the vanquished party in an encounter with the trickster. Therefore we see sorcerers appear in quick succession, how they are quickly defeated and killed by the tricksters, and a continuation of such encounters—all of which serve the function of the *dāstān*. As to the sorcerers themselves, their fifteen-minutes of fame is deemed compensation enough for their existence.

Thus the tricksters are not as dependent for their survival on magicians and sorcerers as the latter are on them. Without the tricksters the limited number of Ḥamza's group of magicians would be wiped out by the numerous terrors that Afrāsiyāb could unleash. The handful of tricksters compensates for Afrāsiyāb's countless. Thus trickery becomes not only the force on which magic relies for its existence, it also gives Ḥamza's camp the immutability of numbers vital for its survival. This is in itself a magical function of trickery, and therefore engenders possibilities.

The trickstresses of Afrāsiyāb's camp, who are more of a defensive force, guarding his court from the infiltration of Ḥamza's tricksters, compliment this magical property of Ḥamza's tricksters. When they sometimes go on the offensive—in retaliation, or to even scores—capturing commanders from Ḥamza's camp, they again trigger the process that unleashes Ḥamza's tricksters. They once again set out, like the pawn in Chess, to liberate the commander(s), that they might see action again.

### Appearances are deceptive

We also discover that the effects of deception wrought by the trick-

sters could have a magical influence. Just as a magician makes from a tiny straw a deadly arrow; the trickster too could work a deception through his consummate skill in the art of disguise which will engulf not only the characters in the *dāstān*, but at times even the narrator himself.

At one point when Čābuk ʿAyyār disguises himself as a woman, the narrator alternately alludes to him using the masculine and feminine gender (*ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 490–3). Here the narrator is initiating us in the poetics of the narrative itself, and again reminding us to keep our belief in a permanent state of suspension. We have already explored the layers of enchantment. We are now introduced to one further layer. The action takes place in the same basic layer of enchantment in which all characters are rooted. But the deception spills into the stream of the narrative, that layer of enchantment which the narrator's own imagination creates. We know that Čābuk is a man in the first layer of the enchantment, but we are obliged to view him as a woman since the narration describes him as such; telling us that the disguise is so perfect, and the illusion so strong, that the narrator too is momentarily swept away by its force. We are being asked to remain in the Present, as the narrator does himself; neither sliding into the Past nor jumping into the Future. When the narrator is reminded that Čābuk is a man, he resumes calling him a man, describing his actions as a man's actions although Čābuk still remains in his womanly disguise; but after a while the deception again overrides his senses, and the narrator goes under once more.

The narrator uses the same technique again later on, with an added twist. In this instance, holy metaphors are used to describe the beauty of a damsel, who is no other than ʿAmr ʿAyyār in disguise (*ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 1138–9). Here we witness the narrator give legitimacy to his own illusion using these metaphors and lead the reader into further deception by giving credence to ʿAmr's disguise. We may also argue that since a trickster's power of deception is a category of enchantment—and as the enchantment in the lands of the *THR* has divine roots—the narrator is justified in describing this deceptive beauty using holy metaphors.

The equally convincing effects of disguise in books by the Urdu detective-fiction writer Ibn-e Ṣafī point to an influence closer to home than the traditions of British and American detective-fiction.


### 3. Warfare (*Razm*)

Before discussing how the Law of Possibility applies in the domain of Warfare, it is well that we first examine briefly the status of the hero and villain as depicted in the *dāstān*.

**The hero as a composite of heroes**

The deeds of the heroes are assembled in one hero. Ḥamza combines the qualities of Alexander, Rustam, and countless other unknown heroes. It is a common technique in fiction to combine the qualities of many unknown individuals in a single character, but in the tradition of the *dāstān*, the hero establishes himself as one by performing the known deeds of the known heroes, sometimes quite conspicuously.[47] This was the reason that the *dāstān* dwelt on the particulars of Ḥamza's childhood, as some details of his childhood establish the concept of the *dāstān* hero. In other words, a *dāstān* hero would not be a hero if he did not have all the known attributes of known heroes, and more. Therefore we see allusions to Rustam, Isfandiyār, Sām and Narīmān in connection with Ḥamza and his companions. Since this is a polarized world, the villain asserts himself in the name of Shaddād, Nimrod, Samerī, etc. And it is in the fitness of things that the pious Khvāja Bakht Jamāl should die when he expresses a wish to share in Shaddād's treasures, and it is the villainous Alqash who receives them. And Ḥamza receives the accoutrements of prophets and champions.

**Love as a means to wage war and the demands of narrative**

Goethe had remarked about the heroes and heroines of the *Nibelungenlied* that they went to church only to start a fight. In the *DAH* it is ʿAmr ʿAyyār who raises our suspicions about Ḥamza's motives for professing love for Mehrnigār. Naushērvān, although unwilling to wed his daughter to Ḥamza is forced into accepting Ḥamza as his son-in-law. But Naushērvān's vizier, Bakhtak, with his sovereign's blessings floats rumors that the Emperor's tributaries had refused to pay the dues and have declared that if the fire-worshipping Emperor of Persia had sunk so low as to accept the Arab Ḥamza as his son-in-law, he might as well send Ḥamza to collect the tribute. As expected by Bakhtak, Ḥamza takes up the false challenge and decides to advance against Naushērvān's tributaries. Naushērvān offers that Ḥamza may wed Mehrnigār before leaving on the campaign, but Ḥamza refuses to do so until he has routed the alleged

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[47]See Bilgrāmī, *DAH*, p. 110.

recalcitrants. ʿAmr ʿAyyār then chides Ḥamza that his love for Mehrnigār is nothing but hogwash, and that his true love is warfare.[48]

ʿAmr's suspicions may well be true, but we also realize Ḥamza's dilemma. What is more important for a hero? Requital of Love or Honor? The flesh is susceptible to all sorts of weaknesses, but as a hero Ḥamza cannot possibly succumb to weakness of any kind. Also, there is more to it than Ḥamza's (questionable) sense of honor. The demand of the narrative is to describe action. Ḥamza's nuptials would delay that function, and therefore conditions are created whereby Ḥamza leaves on his campaign, and the narrative moves from the domain of Assembly into the domain of Warfare where it has an excellent opportunity to narrate action. Thus the basic function of the *dāstān* influences the course of events. We can conclude that one reason why Warfare contributes a great deal to the *dāstān* text is that the function of the *dāstān* is biased in its favor, as it is a domain of action.

### The hero as a parasite of the villain

Fārūqī has discussed why the *DAH* has a seemingly unending flow, and suggests that the continuation of the *dāstān* is a metaphor which denotes that Existence and Life do not end: that the passage of Time is not their measure.[49] But in addition to this—as well as the seemingly endless array of causes which, as we have seen, is a function of the domains of Enchantment and Trickery in the *dāstān*—the extension of the *dāstān* is also a function of the relationship between its hero and the villain. We read:

> Qāhir Kōhī submitted: "Should you so desire I would go and attend to the menace of Laqā!" Amīr Ḥamza replied: "Keep it for some other day! Right now he is in hiding, and you would not know where he might be holed in. But the dastard will never be outside of our reach. The advantage in his remaining alive is that through their support to Laqā, all the infidels and heathens of the environs, whom it would be the devil's own work to find, become exposed and known to us, and we wage Holy War against them." (*THR*, vol. 3, p. 613)

This confession by Ḥamza explains the relationship between the hero and the villain in the *dāstān*. In an elusive way Amīr Ḥamza is acknowl-

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[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 250–2.
[49] See Fārūqī, "Dāstān kī Sheʿriyāt," pp. 214–5.

edging that he owes his existence to Laqā. The former's life has a meaning only in the context of the latter's existence. Once the villain is eliminated, the hero must also retire from the scene. In discussing the divine attributes of the Enchantment, we had also discussed how, after breaking one enchantment, Amīr Ḥamza progresses to another, and the villain too continues. However, if the villain is removed from the scene, the hero would lose, in the absence of a conflict, the legitimacy to perpetuate himself. And the *dāstān* would come to an end, since the absence of a conflict ultimately means absence of narratable action.

But since "Life and Existence" are continually renewed, we have an unending array of villains, and despite his martyrdom in *La'l-Nāma*, Ḥamza comes to life again in *Aftāb-e Shujā'at*. Ḥamza's reentry in *Aftāb-e Shujā'at* is also symbolic because in it he is shown to have retired from the pursuit of war, conquests and breaking enchantments; the central characters in these books are Ḥamzah II, Badī'u 'l-Mulk and 'Ādil Kivāṅ Shikōh.[50] Also, the book in which he is martyred and the book in which he returns, were both compiled by the same author, Taṣadduq Ḥusain.

The warfare waged by the tricksters and the trickstresses is similarly cyclical. One of the most pleasant reads in the *dāstān* is a passage where the five trickstresses are dispatched by Afrāsiyāb to counter the menace of the five tricksters, and the deliciously riotous details of the combat between the two groups (*THR*, vol. 1, pp. 192–7). We learn that at their very first encounter the tricksters fall hopelessly in love with the trickstresses, and that this amorous traffic is a two-way affair. 'Amr 'Ayyār and his fellow tricksters pledge never to harm each other's beloveds, and similar vows are exchanged also among the trickstresses. However, appearances must be kept, and therefore the war continues, but only on the surface. There are instances when a host of tricksters descend on Afrāsiyāb's camp to kill some sorcerer, or to free some of their comrade(s). If Afrāsiyāb's trickstresses find themselves outnumbered on the occasion, they quickly make themselves scarce from the scene, though not without cursing their lovers. Sometimes, realizing their strategic or numeric advantage, the tricksters themselves make their presence known to the trickstresses, cautioning them to keep their mouths shut, or else. While the *dāstān* hero and villain extend their conflict on the basis of enmity, the tricksters extend it through love.

Does the good reader now seek to contain the lovers' quarrel, or

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[50]See *ibid.*, pp. 212–3.

expect an end to it?

## 4. Assembly (*Bazm*)

If we return to the diagram on page 129, we will see that Assembly too has been described as, conditionally, subject to the Law of Possibility. We shall suffice to say that in the *DAH*, while Assembly is essentially a domain of inaction, it is also a conduit for, and remains under the shadow of, the three domains of action, viz., Enchantment, Trickery, and Warfare. A sorcerer is often on the way to visit a calamity upon the adversary's camp-equipage, or to kidnap a sorceress that would lead to the outbreak of hostilities. Tricksters are waiting in the wings to pounce with drawn daggers upon the assembly. More often than not, the one singing is also a trickster in disguise. The Assembly therefore displays an overlap of the other three domains, and their magical properties, which makes it under these conditions subject to the Law of Possibility as well.

## 5. Oral Narrative

Even an interim theory of *dāstān* poetics, which this essay attempts to develop, would remain incomplete if we didn't take into account how the medium of oral narrative influenced the *dāstān* content in the way it shaped the ideals of the *dāstān* characters, and allowed room for aesthetic choices to be made by the narrator.

We have already seen how the medium of orality is one of *dāstān*'s strengths as a genre. Now we discuss some further aspects of this medium.

**Theatrics**

Theatrics are a device which the *dāstān-gō* uses to create an illusion of the real for his assembled audience. In the diagram, theatrics connect action as well as inaction to the domains of Assembly, Beauty and Love, Enchantment, Trickery and Warfare. This theory could be supported by three separate episodes from the performance of Mīr Bāqar ʿAlī Dehlavī (1850–1928), India's last famous *dāstān-gō*:

> [Mīr Bāqar ʿAli] never recounted the least episode from the *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza* in less than three hours. When he described a battlefield it seemed that the expanse of the *dāstān* has become a battlefield; a pitched

battle is being fought; Mīr Ṣāḥib himself is wielding *talvār, kʰāṅḍē, qaraulī, guptī, khanjar, dashna* and hundreds of weapons. The narrative took on a powerful tone and Mīr Ṣāḥib would change sides and make flourishes to imitate the imaginary, and convert that assembly into a battlefield.… [W]hen he described the tricksters, one would roll down laughing to the floor. Mīr Ṣāḥib would become an image of the trickster and narrate delightful episodes in such a tone of voice that the audience would turn into tumbler-pigeons from laughter.…

Any scene that [Mīr Bāqar 'Alī] described was unrivaled. A scenery that he presented was matchless. When he described war, no aspect of the techniques of warfare escaped mention. Observance of etiquette, the arrival of ministers and nobles, imperial grandeur, courtly discipline, the vociferation of the mace-bearers… such an effect he created with the words that the whole picture would be conjured up before [the audience's] eyes. When he broached the imperial-kitchen, he would enumerate seventy different varieties of the *pulā'o*… the etiquette at the *dastarkhvān*, the voice of the *bismillāh-khvān*, in short every situation that he described was replete with details, and a marvel of consummate artistry.…

[Mīr Bāqar 'Alī's] manner was most captivating. He was a virtuoso of vocalization and gesturing. He would describe a battlefield as if he had just returned from witnessing the fight between Rustam and Isfandiyār. When he would describe the voluptuousness of the Assembly the air became suffused with sensuality. He went beyond describing the emotions and became the emotion itself.[51]

We can judge from these examples that the illusion created by the theatrics applied to both action and inaction. Not only was a charging elephant the subject of theatrics, but also a damsel reclining on the couch. If the audience felt the behemoth shaking the pillars of the earth with its terrible advance through the barricade of caltrops; they also became drunk on the redolence emanating from the beloved's bosom. In a situation such as this, not only does the illusion become a reality for the assembly of the audience, it also becomes a reality for the narrator. We have seen in the discussion of Trickery how this illusion enchanted even the narrator as he described the disguise of Čābuk and 'Amr 'Ayyār. A similar situation develops when the narrator himself "becomes an emotion." And the

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[51]Jain, pp. 108–9.

moment it happens, the charging elephant and the reclining beauty develop wills of their own. Once conjured up, the elephant may prove a handful and the encounter might drag on; the maiden may make her lover suffer a bit longer than conceived. The *dāstān* then could twist and turn in any number of ways.

Unlike a magician, the *dāstān-gō* does not match his wits against his audience. And as his story is also well-known, he has no surprises for his audience either. The aim is different. The audience is there to see the elephant and the beauty come alive through narration. To that end the narrator uses theatrics to conjure up the beast and the maiden. Just as the reader and the writer become one to sustain the fantasy, so do the audience and the narrator; in jointly exerting their imaginations to see the animal. It is no wonder then that before long the shaking of chains and the sound of trumpets are heard, and, flapping its ears, a dark cloud appears on the horizon.

**First archetypes of amiable villain and detestable hero**

A subjective overlap comes into play when the *dāstān-gō*, while narrating a *dāstān*, constructs ideals of heroes and villains which mirror the ideals held by himself and his society.

But the final decision regarding the ideal that a character must aspire to rests solely with the narrator. While this ideal could change with the audience in the hands of a dexterous narrator, when the *dāstān* is written down, he must consistently allay himself with one of the two possible ideals. That was perhaps the fundamental difference between Muḥammad Ḥusain Jāh and Aḥmad Ḥusain Qamar. While both chose a high literary expression in their *dāstāns*, Jāh made sure that the ideals and idiom of the characters corresponded to their rank in the social hierarchy presented in the *dāstān*, but Qamar ignored these distinctions. That is the reason why often in Qamar's volumes of the *THR*, Afrāsiyāb "cuts the figure of a green-grocer, and Queen Ḥairat, that of a tavern-keeper."[52]

Afrāsiyāb is also the intermediary villain in the *Dāstān*, in which the real villain is the god-giant, Laqā. But Afrāsiyāb—although of less ultimate import than Laqā—is far more majestic. At one point in the *dāstān* when Afrāsiyāb fulminates against his Lord Potentate Samerī—whose Book of Samerī advises against the wisdom of Afrāsiyāb's plans—the tension suddenly rises, for such is the might and majesty of Afrāsiyāb, the

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[52]Fārūqī, "Dāstān kī She'riyāt," p. 220.

King of Warlocks, that his angry clamorous boasts sound plausible—not just empty threats (*THR*, vol. 3, p. 697). It is also in the order of things then, that while 'Amr 'Ayyār could any day shave off Laqā's beard lathered up in his piss, when he approaches the unconscious Afrāsiyāb with a similar dishonorable intent, the earth shakes and cleaves asunder; magic slaves pop up; or a trickstress screams to proclaim the impending danger, and avert it in one way or another. And while the god-giant Laqā has only one manifest presence, Afrāsiyāb has several, and always remains hidden behind mirrors.

In one place we see the villain Afrāsiyāb create the magical image of one of his warriors who had laid down his life in his service. Afrāsiyāb then sends this image to the warrior's father with a message that he has ordained by a magical decree that the image should live for forty days in order that the father may see his son for a last time, and seek consolation from his companionship (*ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 340).

Afrāsiyāb might have been a usurper (*ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 773, vol. 3, p. 689) and a villain, but he is not a monster, and shows a magnanimity and sensitivity more commensurate with the status of a hero than a villain. It is a sophisticated ideal of the villain not only in Urdu, but also in nineteenth-century world literature. And in one respect it surpasses the complex villain of modern literature.

Borges writes: "The very act of perceiving, of heeding, is of a selective order; every attention, every fixation of our conscience, implies a deliberate omission of that which is uninteresting."[53]

While the anti-hero and the hero-villain of modern world literature started out as the product of one man, or one writer, Afrāsiyāb's magnanimous deed is born not from the decree of one man (the narrator), but by the decree of a whole society (the audience). Oral tradition continuously sifts out the spurious from the necessary, and a theme's endorsement by the audience—whether pronounced or silent—is as much a part of this process as the narrator's own ideals.

This sophisticated ideal was the result of the *dāstān*'s oral tradition. The very fact that this episode in Afrāsiyāb's life has survived in the *dāstān* tradition, is proof that the ideals of a sophisticated audience were reflected in the characters. We already have two examples of it in the ideals and idioms used by Jāh and Qamar. We could therefore say that the study of

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[53]"The Postulation of Reality," in Rodriguez and Reid, eds. *Borges—A Reader*, p. 31.

the *dāstān*'s text could even help us establish the variety of audience it had.

Just as Afrāsiyāb is a complex villain, Amīr Ḥamza's companions and princes become the archetypes of the anti-hero, when we become witness to their malignant acts and deeds. In one place 'Adī Ma'dīkarib rapes Bakhtak's young daughter, and she dies from the violence of his enormous phallus. Fārūqī also points out the horrible acts of Ḥamza's princes in Qamar's *Ṭilism-e Haft-Paikar*.[54]

### Hierarchy and characters

Jāh records an aesthetic choice in his decision to digress from the available traditions of a certain event in the *dāstān*, when Čābuk 'Ayyār of the enemy camp tricks Ḥamza's tricksters. Jāh informs us that the traditions available to him describe how Čābuk 'Ayyār dupes Čālāk 'Ayyār, who is the son of 'Amr, the Prince of Tricksters (*THR*, vol. 3, p. 493). But Jāh found it beneath the dignity of Čālāk, and an insult to his special status as 'Amr 'Ayyār's son, to be tricked so easily. Therefore, the narrator acknowledges replacing, in violation of the established tradition, the name of Čālāk 'Ayyār with Żarghām 'Ayyār, who is also a consummate trickster, but of a lower rank than Čālāk. While he does not record other such aesthetic decisions, we can imagine that Jāh may have made similar choices in portraying the two villains, Afrāsiyāb and Laqā.

Jāh could take these licenses with the text because in the oral narrative the *dāstān* was not an immutable text. When the *dāstān* was being set to print, Jāh decided to establish a tradition which improved the balance in the hierarchy of characters. Here we see an instance of how the oral narrative becomes refined through the nature of its medium.

## Summary

– Oral poetry became the canon in Arabic literature when its organizing principles were defined. Until its compilation, the *Qur'ān* was an oral book, and the nineteenth-century society of India shared this view of the oral book.

   – The *THR* was the model which invested Urdu *dāstān* with an identity separate from its Persian counterpart.

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[54]Cf. "Dāstān kī She'riyāt," p. 217.

– The *dāstān* was a genre of oral narration. Therefore it manifested itself fully in the *dāstān-gō'ī* tradition. After the end of this tradition, a critique of the *dāstān* must distinguish between *dāstān* as a genre and the written text as a record of its content. And as today we only have access to the text, any critique must begin from it.

– *Dāstān*'s basic function is to narrate action. Since the greater part of the *DAH* is located in an entirely fictional and enchanted land, every cause produces a host of effects, and the *dāstān* operant, viz., the Law of Possibility, plays a dominant role and compliments the *dāstān* function, viz., the narration of action. The domains of Enchantment, Trickery and Warfare built around action and movement are most influenced by the operant. To a lesser degree the domain of Assembly also shows its influence, but only when it becomes a conduit for domains of action. The operant therefore extends the narrative with its influence on these four domains.

– In oral recitals the narrative is also extended by employing the techniques of Stalling and by the Theatrics of the narrator. In the written text Theatrics do not figure. The main purpose of Stalling is to demonstrate the linguistic virtuosity of the narrator and his command of vocabulary, therefore it does not have a function in the written text, unless some components of this technique are used to embellish the text.

– Beauty and Love and Assembly are the two main domains of inaction. While in oral narration their function is augmented by stalling the *dāstān* and by the Theatrics of the narrator, in the written text they have a limited role.

– During an oral narration, while Stalling operates in the domains of Beauty and Love and Assembly alone, the Theatrics influence the domains of inaction, as well as the domains of action.

– In view of the last mentioned three factors it is established that the oral *dāstān* and its text have different dynamics.

– All characters and details in the *dāstān* are fictional. Familiar historical characters are used to define functions: e.g., Khiẓr as the succor of those in need, Ḥamza as a valiant man, etc. Their existence outside the *dāstān* may not correspond to contemporary reality, but inside the *dāstān* they receive remarkable integration and unity. While outside the *dāstān* they have a multifaceted existence, in the *dāstān* it is restricted to the traits or properties that they manifest therein, and nothing else besides.

– In view of the above, the question of verisimilitude does not arise. Also, in artistic creations conventions of art are given preference over considerations of verisimilitude. Sometimes verisimilitude is also discarded to

produce a comic effect. The Urdu *DAH* could be said to have been influenced by both of these factors.

– The narrative of the *dāstān* addresses the Present of a situation. Events and situations are described as they occur. The narration undergoes changes as and when the course of the events is influenced by the changing reality in the Present. Sometimes the narrative also undergoes change if the enchanted world and the narrator's reality overlap, e.g., Čābuk and ʿAmr ʿAyyāṛ's disguises and how these affected the description of their gender in the narrative.

– The *dāstān* does not necessarily follow the cause-and-effect principle of the real world. It has its own dynamics. Portraiture of reality is, therefore, not a function of the *dāstān*.

– The reader makes a pact with the narrator to compliment the narrator's fantasy with his own. If this pact is broken the pleasure of the *dāstān* is compromised. Similarly, if real life functions are attributed to objects in the realm of Enchantment, one of the layers of enchantment ceases to function. The only exception being objects that do not have a material existence, and therefore have a universal identity in both worlds.

– The *dāstān* is strengthened as a genre through the medium of orality. Since the whole narrative is stored in the memory, it could be accessed from any point. Sometimes this exercise creates an overlap of the realities of the narrator, the character and the reader, which sustains the enchantment, e.g., the case of the character regarding our world in his crystal ball.

– Essentially, the *DAH* is not an encounter between magic and faith since the creation of enchantment is not counter to faith (at least, in the world of the *dāstān*). The metaphysics of the real world and the enchanted world overlap in some respects, but in Islamic cosmogony the real world and evil are both finite since the world is not an enchantment but a material reality. Therefore, the conflict between good and evil is also limited. In the world of the *dāstān*, however, the real world and the subsequent worlds are all enchantments; and therefore, the progression of conflict could be endless.

– The trickster in the Urdu *DAH* is a new archetype and does not reflect the traits of the trickster in classical and contemporary literature.

– In the *dāstān*, the attributes, of cunning and trickery create humor when they are components of youth, but foment villainy when ingredients of old age.

– In the *dāstān*, Trickery is often a force on which magic is dependent for its existence. As the archetype of the *dāstān* trickster endlessly mimics

the function of the pawn in the Promotion principle in Chess, Trickery also insures immutability of numbers, and maintains a balance in power which further extends the conflict.

– While the *dāstān* trickster is a new archetype, the *dāstān* hero establishes himself by performing the known deeds of the known heroes, and the *dāstān* villain may share features with other known villains.

– In the enchanted world of the *dāstān*, more than in the real world, the hero has a parasitic existence on the villain. If the villain is removed from the *dāstān*'s world, the hero would have no function in the absence of a conflict, and as there would be no action to narrate, the *dāstān* would also come to an end.

– This cyclical conflict is also common to the tricksters' warfare. But while the conflict between the *dāstān* hero and villain is based on enmity, the tricksters extend the conflict with their main rivals—the trickstresses—by falling in love with them. And as their passion is returned, a situation develops where neither could be annihilated; the war is waged mainly to keep appearances.

– The complexity of the *dāstān* archetypes—for example, the compassionate gestures of Afrāsiyāb, the vile deeds of the hero's companions and his successors—is not the product of one man, but of a whole society, because they belong to the oral medium which only preserves details that are interesting and pertinent to a society. In this respect these multidimensional characters are a unique creation of *dāstān* literature, unlike characters that are fashioned by an individual writer.

– In the oral tradition the text is not immutable. Therefore it undergoes refinements in its own unique way: through its medium of delivery, by the judgment of the narrator.

### *Dastan* criticism

Until the publication of Gyān Čand Jain's *Urdū kī Naṣrī Dāstānēṅ* in 1954, many critical questions about the Urdu *dāstān* had neither been properly formulated nor answered. While Jain's ideals of reasoning in discussing *dāstān*'s structure could be dispensed with, nonetheless his book was a seminal work on the sources of the Urdu *dāstān*. Moreover, Jain made some important points: he distinguished that the *dāstān* was not some pre-evolution form of the novel: that while the novel aimed at portraying reality, the *dāstān* aimed at shutting it out (p. 663). He hinted that the overlap of Avadh's nineteenth-century culture with the pre-Islamic lands

of Arabia was a device of the *dāstān-gō* to make his audience identify with the narrative, and that it was the same technique that was used by the *marṣiya-gōs* (p. 567). In an elementary way he also discussed the difference between the genres of *qiṣṣa* and *dāstān*, and also commented on the general structure of the latter (pp. 47–65).

A major step in *dāstān* criticism was the publication of Shamsu ’r-Raḥmān Fārūqī’s groundbreaking essay "Dāstān kī She‘riyāt kā Dībāča" in the early 1990s. It discusses the *dāstān* with a contemporary sensibility, employs the tools of linguistics, and points out that there are several theoretical issues in the study of the Narrative for which the *dāstān* remains a reference point. He further discusses the dynamics of the *dāstān*, the special ways in which its characters are developed, and its freedom from the cause-and-effect principle. He points out that the greatest distinction of the *dāstān* is that while it is unchanging and anti-mimetic in its concept, it is mimetic in its details. In his Nizam lecture, *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza: Zubānī Bayāniya, Bayān-kuninda aur Sāmi‘īn* (1998), he further develops these thoughts, and demonstrates through textual analyses how the *DAH* grew from the sketchy details of the Persian text, to its longer version in Urdu.

Criticism was leveled at the *Alf Laila va Laila* almost three hundred years ago, that it was the indulgence of the lower classes, and that the plebeian wallowed in these stories of kings, beggars, eunuchs and ravishing beauties. Similar words are sometimes used in the criticism of the *DAH*. The criticism of *Alf Laila va Laila* suddenly became muted when these stories were accorded an enthusiastic reception following the publication of Galland’s French translation of the work, and later those of Edward Lane and Richard Burton into English and yet another French translation by Dr. J. C. Mardrus. Ironically it was these more or less adulterated French and English translations on which some of the Arab and Hindustani versions of the book were later based.

But the West too had its prejudices in literature. The Novel, embraced later as Europe’s native genre, had fared no better or no worse than the *dāstān*. At least the *dāstān* enjoyed popularity already during the lifetime of its practitioners; it was condemned only later. The Novel was sent to Hell at its inception. As Mario Vargas Llosa puts it,

> [U]ntil [the nineteenth century] the novel had always been considered to be the most plebeian, the least artistic literary genre, the sustenance of pedestrian minds, whereas poetry and the theater were the noble, elevated forms of creation. There had been novelists of genius, of course, but they

had been intuitive geniuses, who willingly acknowledged their role as second-class creators (sometimes after failing as creators of the first rank, that is to say, as composers of poems and tragedies), whose mission, in view of the popular tastes of their public, was to "entertain."[55]

Uninformed criticism based on petty rationale has kept Urdu fiction from exploring the powerful content of the *dāstān* for its narrative strategies. The same attitude has also resulted in the non-preservation and, hence, in the destruction of many *dāstān* texts. The Urdu *DAH* evolved, even if it were to be taken at its face value of a fantastic tale, an entirely new theory of an enchanted world, one that influenced the narrative itself and developed it through the play of the Law of Possibility.

Urdu is one of the world's youngest languages. Ghālib wrote his *ghazals* only in the last century. Only eight decades separate us from the time when the last of the *dāstān*'s forty-six volumes was printed from Naval Kishore Press. Therefore the language of the classical literature is still accessible to us, and the modern reader does not need a degree in classics to enjoy the *DAH*.

Āsmān Parī was Ḥamza's fantasy which took him away from the Mehrnigār of his earthly existence, to an enchanted land—a land full of demons, but one which had its own joys. Those joys were such that they gave a new meaning to Ḥamza's existence. But the oppressive charms of his Mehrnigār—charms for which he too had a weakness—brought him back to its clutches. Ḥamza was not the first to indulge in his fantasy, but he was the first to wed it, and may have learnt that the virtue of this mistress is eternally renewed. Similar is the virtue of the *dāstān*.

Only a Total Reader could do justice to a Total Book. And just as the Total Book does not exist in a single version, nor is its text bound to one particular era, so the Total Reader is not comprised of a single man, or a particular generation. A last reader of the *DAH* still lies in the future. ❒

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[55] *The Perpetual Orgy: Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, tr. Helen Lane (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), p. 218.