BOOK REVIEWS

Jah, Muhammad Husain. *Hoshruba, Book One: The Land and the Tilism.* Translated from the Urdu with an Introduction and Notes by Musharraf Ali Farooqi. United States: Urdu Project, 2009. 468 pp. $24.99 isbn 978-0-9780695-5-1.

Just looking at the cover, a menacing, red-eyed snake coiled around a mysterious pavilion, one can sense a whiff of danger about this book. For those who dare to open it, they will find a warning:

> You and all the others are gathered for a long, perilous campaign. On the other side of the mountain lies the land of an all-powerful tale—the one you must conquer.
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> (vii)

In these dark days when it is difficult to get people to read at all, few would expect a book to throw out this kind of challenge. But *Hoshruba,, Book One: The Land and the Tilism* is nothing if not surprising. As we join the story, Amir Hamza and his armies have pursued the giant Laqa to the dominions of King Suleiman Amber-Hair on Mount Agate. While out hunting nearby, Hamza's son, Prince Badiuz Zaman, spots a suspiciously charming fawn and follows it into the woods. He gallops for miles after the animal, loses his companions, and finally lets fly an arrow. Suddenly, the earth shakes and a terrible voice proclaims:

> OH SON OF HAMZA! YOU COMMITED A TERRIBLE DEED BY KILLING SORCERER GHAZAAL THE FAWN. THIS IS THE LAND OF HOSHRUBA AND IT IS WELL NIGH IMPOSSIBLE TO ESCAPE ITS BOUNDS.
>
> (8)

Thus, as the surprised Prince is trapped in the *tilism* of Hoshruba, the unsuspecting reader is caught in a verbal web of wonders, an epic that will engage the mind and senses in a realm of dangerous and disruptive magical possibilities.

Flying in on the heels of Musharraf Ali Farooqi's outstanding translation of the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza,*[1] *Hoshruba* gives readers what they really want—more

[1]Lakhnavi, Ghalib and Abdullah Bilgrami. *The Adventures of Amir Hamza: Lord of the Auspicious Planetary Conjunction*. Translated by Musharraf Ali Farooqi (New York: Random House, 2007).

stories about magic, sorcery, and (above all) tricksters. Raising the number of major tricksters to six and complicating the plot with female tricksters from the enemy camp, *Hoshruba* takes off into a world of its own where the laws of sorcery hold sway. While the courage and nobility of Amir Hamza impress all who read his adventures, it is the wily and far from noble schemes and machinations of the trickster Ayyar Amar that create the unique charm and humor of the Urdu Hamza cycle. Written by multiple authors in nineteenth-century Lucknow and based on centuries of oral *dāstān* tradition, *Hoshruba* draws from its past and present to create a narrative so unique it will defy any attempts to classify it.

Hoshruba is not a sequel but an in-quel: the action begins from within the Hamza cycle but quickly spirals off as Ayyar Amar follows Prince Badiuz Zaman (who has meanwhile fallen in love with the Princess Tasveer) into the *tilism* of Hoshruba. Amar is joined by Hamza's grandson, Prince Asad, who we learn is destined to conquer the *tilism.* Asad falls in love with Princess Mahjabeen Diamond Robe, who joins his side, as does the powerful sorceress Mahrukh Magic-Eye. As Asad and Amar (joined by more tricksters) journey through the miraculous landscapes of Hoshruba, they are attacked left and right by powerful sorcerers and sorceresses sent by the usurper Emperor Afrasiyab and his wife Empress Heyrat. The plot really heats up when Heyrat's sister Princess Bahar defects to Asad's camp and Afrasiyab sends the trickster girls, led by Sarsar Sword-Fighter, into the fray. The book ends on a cliffhanger, with Amar caught in enemy hands, leaving the reader to anticipate the next installment of the promised twenty-four volume adventure.[2]

Besides setting himself up for the enormous challenge of translating the next twenty-three volumes, translator Farooqi has also invited some interesting controversy by proclaiming the work "the World's First Magical Fantasy Epic." While this claim is destined to be challenged and may never be fully resolved, *Hoshruba* is so unique that one can certainly say it is the first (and possibly only one) of its kind. An important feature that distinguishes *Hoshruba* as a fantasy from other epics that contain magical elements (the Arthurian legends, for example) is that the action takes place almost completely within the magical realm. The *tilism* of Hoshruba is a complete world—its inhabitants seem to have always lived there, and it has an intriguing and well-defined geography with places such as the Desert of Being, the Dome of Light, and the River of Flowing Blood—one can even imagine an upcoming volume with a map inside the cover. It is not a land of magical chaos; it has laws and boundaries to which all within must submit. We stumble into Hoshruba with our trickster heroes and learn the rules as they do. When Amar kills his first sorceress we learn that magic spirits carry the news to the Emperor, making it difficult for tricksters to knock off Hoshrubans without being noticed. As the tricksters learn the rules of the *tilism* and gain experience in bat-

[2]Working with an Urdu original that consists of eight multivolume books, translator Farooqi plans to break each book into three parts, publishing the whole as twenty-four volumes.

tling magicians with incredible powers, the Emperor also learns how to fight the tricksters. Both sides have a limited arsenal of weapons—where magicians can transform, enchant, and hurl magic coconuts, tricksters fight back with disguise, drugs and the ubiquitous "egg of oblivion." It is a battle of human wits and technology against a magical world that draws power directly from the primal forces of nature.

Among the great pleasures of *Hoshruba* are the individual descriptions of magical beings and their abilities; every sorcerer is unique and presents a different challenge. Many take power from elemental forces, such as Chashmak Zan Lightning Bolt, who can strike as lightning or appear as a beautiful golden woman. Some use brute strength and terror, like Maykhar Rhino-Head, while the sorcerer Falud Drug-Glutton can consume any amount of drugs without being affected (which is especially effective against tricksters). The beautiful sorceress Princess Hasina has the power to enchant anyone to fall in love with her and even traps the son of Amir Hamza in her spell.

My personal favorite sorceress is Princess Bahar, who resides in the City of Mount Solace and rides a flying peacock. Princess Bahar controls the power of spring, capturing whole armies with garlands of flowers that cause them to cavort and shout "Spring is here! Spring has come!" as they find "expansive, luxurious orchards wherever they looked in which the breeze wafted intoxicatingly." She then imprisons them in an enchanted garden of "luminous crystal" with "moon-like cupbearers" and Princess Bahar herself seated on a jeweled throne (188–89). As the narrative turns to a *sarapa* to describe Bahar's beauty, it stops the plot and imprisons the reader as well in an enchanted garden of words:

> Her tongue was the keeper of celestial secrets
> Her mouth the custodian of mysteries divine
> The bright lobe of her ear made the morn of doomsday shy away
> Its dark mole the dark mark on the heart….
>
> (189)

Fittingly, Princess Bahar is herself trapped by beauty when Ayyar Amar disguises himself as a comely youth and compels her with an enchanting song. He then catches her in Danyal's tent (one of his holy gifts), in which she is unceremoniously hung upside-down. Fortunately, Princess Bahar joins the tricksters, confounding the plot and making the war much more interesting, since the Emperor Afrasiyab is married to her sister but is secretly in love with her.

A mark of *Hoshruba*'s heritage in the oral narrative *dāstān* emerges in the frequent elements of repetition in the plot, as sorcerer after sorcerer goes against trickster after trickster. One can imagine the story being told night after night, each night's audience wondering which new sorcerers will come and how the tricksters will confound them, the *dāstān-gō* giving just enough repetition to give the audience a scaffold to hang the new elements of the tale. It is far from simple repetition, however: as Amar and his brethren fight their way through the *tilism*, they encounter more and more magical beings, each more dangerous than the

last, so that the trickery required is constantly upped (somewhat like going to the next level in a video game). In addition, all kinds of elements complicate the plot; the battles are undermined by hidden alliances, sorceresses can suddenly change sides, and the trickster girls who serve Afrasiyab are secretly in love with the trickster heroes. Thus the story creates ever more intricate designs and labyrinths as it progresses. Rather than a simple plot-driven story that moves forward, the narrative architecture of the epic is built by throwing out simultaneous threads that loop and interconnect, with every turn providing a new excuse for a linguistic spectacle.

It is no mistake that "Hoshruba" (as Farooqi points out in his introduction) means *sense ravishing* (xi), for while *Hoshruba*'s plots and patterns are intriguing, it is really the language itself that creates the magical force of this epic; language that speeds ahead, stops suddenly, twists from the sublime to the ridiculous and back again. Relishing the expansive creativity of the narration is the key to really enjoying *Hoshruba*. It is the language of experience rather than of explanation, and one can only hold on and ride as it ricochets from background to foreground, in and out of characters heads, changing point of view constantly like a roving camera. For readers who find this disconcerting, my advice is to relax and enjoy the ride (after all, if you get lost you can look up any character or magical object in one of Farooqi's carefully crafted lists in the back). Not content with the visual, the language also creates worlds of sound, smell, taste, and touch. Because everything is described excessively in thousands, even millions, images seem to reach into infinity and stretch the edges of the imagination, as in this battle scene:

> Everyone on the battlefield saw a magic cloud arise from the wilderness with the standard of Marukh's camp fluttering above it. Next, thousands of sorcerers riding magic dragons came into view, led by sorceress Mehshar, who sat with great magnificence beside Amar on a flying throne.
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> Mehshar's army took position on one side of the arena while she made her war cry and struck sorceress Lamae's army in the form of a thunderbolt, killing thousands. When she regarded this sight, sorceress Lamae stopped attacking Marukh's army and charged at Mehshar. The two became entwined. The spectators saw two entangled, quivering, flashing lightning bolts in the sky and flashing bolts filled the arena. Whenever the lightning bolts struck, sorcerers in Heyrat's camp shouted "O Sameri! O Jamshed!" They tooted their bugles, struck drums and raised and unfurled their colors. The racket resembled the din of doomsday.
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> (304)

English speakers can only imagine how spectacular the language of *Hoshruba* must be in the original Urdu. We must be grateful to Musharraf Ali Farooqi's verbal sorcery for the transmutation of this unique narrative masterpiece into its magic double in English. Farooqi's language is richly expressive and vibrant with a humorous light touch that pervades the work like the fresh winds of

Princess Bahar. One feels certain that this work would not exist in translation without him, and he is due enormous gratitude for the investment of time, research, inspiration and talent that he has invested (and plans to invest for decades to come) into the Hamza cycle and *Hoshruba* in particular. Farooqi's wonderful tale of *Hoshruba*'s creation by multiple authors from the nineteenth-century *dāstān-gō'ī* tradition is one of few introductions I would definitely recommend to read before reading the book. Forewords and afterwords—besides helpful lists such as "Characters, Historic Figures, Deities and Mythical Beings"—include the original preface, notes, the biographies of authors and contributors, and several pages of sources in English, Urdu and Persian.

Finally, we can be thankful to the *tilism* of *Hoshruba* for reminding us that narration is also a magic art of creation. Tricksters prevent sorcerers from casting spells by piercing their tongues so they cannot speak, and *tilisms* are created by writing: "Princess Bahar took out a paper, pen and inkwell from her sorcerer's sack and wrote a *tilism* to create a garden with properties that would enchant anyone who stepped into its bounds" (189). A great story is itself a *tilism*, a magic world in which the reader allows him or herself to be immersed and subject to its laws. As intimated in the introduction, it can indeed be a perilous journey. *Hoshruba* does not offer the novelistic satisfactions of realistic characterization, plot development, or closure. Unlike much fantasy literature, the epic does not offer a world that mirrors our own, providing morals and lessons like the grimly serious Tolkien trilogy. What *Hoshruba* does offer is something much more rare: a chance to lose oneself in an alternate reality built of untamed language that has been freed from any obligations to adhere to moral, logical, or didactic constraints.

So, drop your expectations of what a "magical fantasy epic" should be, pack your protective magical objects, and—if you dare—enter the *tilism* of Hoshruba. But remember, you have been warned. ❑

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Premchand: The Co-Wife and Other Stories. Translated and Edited by Ruth Vanita. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008. 275 pp. Rs. 250. ISBN 9780143101727.

Premchand occupies a unique position in Indian literature. He shaped the genre. of fiction in two language literatures, Urdu and Hindi, by giving it a realistic base, divesting it of its preoccupation with the world of fantasy and romance. It is a common misconception that Premchand began writing in Urdu and, then, for various reasons, switched over to Hindi exclusively as his language of choice. The truth of the matter is that, although he realized early in his career that his books sold much better published in Hindi and that his Hindi publishers were more generous with financial compensation, he continued to write in both languages until the end of his life. This is corroborated by the fact that "Kafan" (The Shroud)

regarded as his last short story (or, at least, his last substantial short story) was originally written in Urdu. However, this issue of an Urdu Premchand versus a Hindi Premchand is immensely complex and has multiple ramifications that defy easy resolution. He wrote novels, short stories and nonfiction in both Urdu and Hindi. If the original was in Urdu, a Hindi version was prepared almost immediately, either by him or by someone else. Subsequently both versions were submitted for publication. Which edition appeared first depended largely on how prompt a particular publisher happened to be, so the publication date of a Premchand work does not always accurately reflect the date and language of the original composition.

Premchand wrote a large number of short stories but they have yet to be published in a definitive edition. For some time the general impression in Hindi and Urdu circles has been that Premchand's complete short stories were collected in the Hindi series known as *Mansarovar*, from which Ruth Vanita has made her selection for the current volume. Of the eight volumes in the series, two came out in Premchand's lifetime from his own Saraswati Press. The remaining six volumes were published by his elder son, Shripat Rai. These eight volumes contain 198 stories. However, it soon became apparent that the *Mansarovar* compilation was not exhaustive. Premchand's younger son Amrit Rai located a large number of stories in old newspapers and journals and published them in two volumes entitled *Gupt Dhan* (Secret Treasure). The latter have fifty-six stories between them. In addition, Shripat Rai and Kamal Kishore Goenka collected another twenty-six stories, that were not easily available earlier, under the title *Apraipya Kahaniyan* (Rare Stories).

In Urdu, about two hundred stories have been available in about fifteen odd collections published over the years. During the period 2000–2004 the National Council for Promotion of Urdu, Delhi, published what was purported to be the entire Premchand corpus in twenty-four volumes under the title *Kulliyāt-e Prēmčand*,, edited by Madan Gopal. Six volumes of this compilation include all of the stories available in Urdu and these number 302. However, this figure too is neither definitive nor without problems because it includes quite a few pieces that read like autobiographical fragments or mere recordings of stray thoughts. Leaving aside the question of numbers, it must be stressed that if we want to arrive at a holistic view of Premchand, we must access both the Hindi and Urdu versions of his works. They are not mere copies of one another and have significant differences that throw up complex questions of authorship, literary tradition, language, translation, and so on. Neither version alone can represent the author in his entirety.

Anthologies of Premchand's short stories have been available in English for a long time, first in a translation by Gurdial Malik and, later, by a string of translators including David Rubin, P. Lal, Jai Ratan, Madan Gopal, and Rakhshanda Jalil. The present volume edited and translated by Ruth Vanita offers nineteen stories from the Hindi original. While Vanita does not discuss the question of a Hindi Premchand versus an Urdu Premchand, her introduction does allude to the different facets of Premchand's genius: "the Gandhian Premchand, the Hindu Premchand,

the Romantic Premchand, the conservative moralist Premchand" (xi), that encompass the thematic concerns in his stories. It is difficult to reconcile all of these facets and we have no choice but to allow him to exist with his contradictions, without trying to gloss over some facets at the cost of others. However, the defining feature of Premchand's genius is his sympathy with the underdog, and most of his memorable stories, such as "Thakur ka Kuan" (The Thakur's Well), "Poos ki Raat" (A Winter Night) and "Kafan," demonstrate an abiding engagement with the plight of the marginalized segments of society. Under the influence of Gandhi and some western thinkers, he identified with the masses, especially the peasants, and used his pen to depict rural life in India—its poverty, deprivation, and the resilience of its people amidst dehumanizing conditions. This aspect of his writing comes through clearly in several stories in the collection. Regarding her choices, Ruth Vanita explains:

> […] I have selected stories that are representative of what seem to me Premchand's major thematic groups: nationalist stories, stories about oppression based on caste, class, gender, age and species; rural idylls; historical fiction; social dramas that often end in suicide; stories imbued with the spirit of folklore […]. My other principle of selection is literary quality, which means that the story selected may not necessarily be the most typical one of its kind, precisely because it is more complicated and interesting than the average story in its category. I have arranged the stories from the lesser known to the better known, which more or less but not entirely, corresponds to chronological order.
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> (xii)

The selection thus gives the reader a fairly good idea of Premchand's thematic concerns and his stylistic varieties, particularly because the editor, in her discussion of the stories offered here, alludes to other stories that could not be included. In addition to the staple plot-theme-character analysis, Ruth Vanita brings insights gained from subaltern and gender studies to bear upon the stories. For example, her remarks about the two Dalit characters in "Kafan" illuminates one aspect of the story not often noticed. It also points to the reductive nature of a strand of criticism emanating from the Dalit school:

> Ironically, in recent years, some Dalits have denounced Premchand as casteist, largely because he depicts two Dalit men in "The Shroud" as wastrels who oppress women. These critics make the mistake of viewing only men as Dalits, thus rendering Dalit women invisible. This, of course, repeats the underlying assumption in male oppression of women, namely, that men are human and women a less important subgroup of humanity. The woman in "The Shroud" is a hardworking victim, oppressed by the men of her family, and she too is a Dalit.
>
> (xiii–xiv)

In a similar fashion, through her selection Vanita demonstrates Premchand's

profound sympathy with animals, with the elderly, with women and children—all marginalized elements of the society in one way or another. The anthology attests to the fact that though in some comparatively weak stories Premchand follows a simple, almost formulaic reformist line, his better stories display great complexity and subtlety in exploring social practices and human relationships.

In her translations Vanita tries to remain close to the original Hindi and yet maintain an appreciable measure of readability in English. Except in some very rare instances, such as translating "Panch Parmeshwar" as the "Voice of God," her translation generally follows the original. Students of Translation Studies will certainly consider Vanita's versions alongside other available versions and I am sure she will shine the brighter for the comparison. ❑

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[Gratefully reproduced from *Indian Literature* 52(3) (May–June 2008). Edited for the *AUS*.]