

A LIVING TEXT:
DASTAN-E-AMIR HAMZAH AS AN ORAL TRADITION

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Abstract

Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah is a collection of tales depicting the legendary adventures of the heroic Amir Hamzah as he fights demons and brings peace to the magical realm. The legend was originally narrated in the performative style typical to *dastan* storytelling in sessions where audiences gathered on successive nights. This particular style of narration is known as the art of *dastan goi*, which stands out from conventional forms of storytelling. In 19th century Lucknow, the *dastan* of Amir Hamzah, which had until then mostly existed in its oral form, was put into writing and finally published as a compilation that remains in circulation till present.

A close evaluation of the textual version of Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah reveals obvious and inherent stylistic features that indicate its original form as an oral tale. For instance, the passages of poetry intertwined with prose that allow for a dramatic shift in narration and detailed descriptions for the purpose of setting the mystical atmosphere. This research will focus on the *dastan's* literary techniques and narrative style to explore how, in its form and style, it is literature specifically suited for oral dramatic storytelling (*dastan goi*). It will also examine the ways in which the transition from oral to written form has modified the *dastan's* literary scope. A particular emphasis will be laid upon the impact of the Subcontinent's colonisation on this transition and, further, on the *dastan's* revived place in present day world literature.

Introduction

Envision tales of enchantment, mythical creatures, bloody battles, and extravagant courts brought to life through the animated actions and dynamic voice of a narrator performing for an enraptured crowd gathered in the middle of a bustling bazaar. This scene might help us put into perspective how Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah was originally presented through *dastan goi*. ‘*Dastan*’ is a Persian genre of storytelling in which serialized stories of extensive length are orally narrated in the *dastan goi* style. *Dastan goi*, literally Persian for ‘storytelling’, is a performative form of narration in which the narrator enacts the story primarily through gestures and dramatic dialogue delivery. With its evocative language laden with exaggerated metaphors and the instances of poetic expression that cause emphatic shifts in the narrative tone, the *dastan* in itself is a story-form fitted for oral performance.

The ‘Tales of Amir Hamzah’ is one of the earliest and most renowned *dastan* that is in circulation today. Its rediscovery as an invaluable and foundational part of fantasy fiction in the Urdu literature has led to its translations as well as compilations in more concise forms for the contemporary reader. The tales speak of the legendary Amir Hamzah, a character based on the heroic persona of Prophet Muhammad’s (P.B.U.H.) uncle, and his adventures against evil forces. Together, the series of adventure stories constitute a fantasy epic of boundless dimensions, boasting vividly descriptive wars with hybrid monsters and magical illusions performed through artifacts of trickery.

This paper aims at exploring the ways in which the form and literary techniques inherent to the *dastan* make it especially suited for oral narration. Through a study of textual renditions of the *dastan*, its language, use of literary devices, poetics, and imagery, the paper will attempt to recognise certain features of the text that are indicative of its original oral form. Moreover, Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah’s existence as a fantasy epic will be analyzed through a study of its characteristic ‘*dastan*

themes' and the various mystical elements it borrows from the diverse cultures it was influenced by as it journeyed through different parts of the world. Furthermore, this paper will analyze its transition from oral to textual form in order to understand how the rigidity of the written form limited its original *dastan* style at the same time as it helped popularize it. The British colonial context will also be taken into account to analyze its textualization and propose an explanation for its demise in the 20th century. Finally, by assessing the present-day modernization of the *dastan* through translations and the revival of *dastan goi* as an art form, the paper will briefly examine the evolution of Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah.

The Performative Art of *Dastan goi*

Considering that, originally, Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah was formed and transmitted through oral storytelling alone, a brief description of the *dastan goi* practice becomes essential for understanding its literary dimensions. The extensive series of tales that make up the *dastan*, first published in forty-six volumes, was never plotted as a single story and put into writing (Farooqi, 2000). Instead, it originated and cultivated via the minds and mouths of different narrators as they repeated the tales and subjected them to their own innovation. The *dastan* never existed as a single narrative with a fixed storyline, but was malleable and subject to continuous alteration and improvisation by its narrators (Farooqi, 2000). Therefore, it is vital to understand the link between its content and its medium of narration, which is verbal, as the two cannot be separated because the *dastan* exists through a combination of both. Gosain, Kant and Das (2018) identified a '*dastan goi*' as the performer-narrator of the *dastan*, who tells the story not only through her words but also through actions as well as expressions. In a performance with one person enacting an entire story, the plot progression, change in atmosphere, character dynamism, all become subject to the narrator's conduct of her entire body, such that the narrator becomes the *dastan*

(Gosain et al., 2017). As an oral tradition, naturally the Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah travelled through word of mouth carrying across borders over time. According to Farooqi's (2009) research, its origins can be determined in Arabia in 7th century where the actual Hamzah ibn Abdul Mutalib resided, and its journey can be followed through Persia, India and even parts of Central Asia. Owing to its mobile nature, the *dastan* was ever-evolving; incorporating influences from cultures and mythical folklore of every region, resulting in a rich, exotic legend (Farooqi, 2009).

Literary Analysis of Musharraf Farooqi's '*Tilism e Hoshruha*'

Having established the significance of the orality of the *dastan* for its very existence as a storytelling genre, it would be intriguing to explore its transformation from a dynamic verbal form to a contained and fixed body of text. Analyzing the text may help identify how, even in written form, it reflects its unique habitation of a performative literary art form. For the purpose of this analysis, we will study excerpts from Musharraf Ali Farooqi's translation, '*Tilism e Hoshruha*'.

Magical creatures, objects of trickery, heroic warriors, and a well-constructed realm of magic are essential features of this *dastan*. The element of magic is integral to it and is woven into its very language which exquisitely sketches the tales of fantasy for the audience. What immediately stands out in a reading of the text is the enchanting imagery, lengthy descriptions of beautiful princesses and heavenly gardens not only setting the scene for action but also creating an enchanting atmosphere. The descriptions comprise of exaggerated comparisons and extended metaphors that paint an exotic picture so removed from reality that it is almost unimaginable to the mind's eye; a trait that only adds to the *dastan*'s sense of magic. For example,

It [a garden] was adorned with beautiful promenades and esplanades, paved with jewels instead of bricks. The trees were wrapped in gold cloth. The hedges of henna plants and grapevines decorated the silken grass bed. Like a drunken guest in a wine house, the breeze kept crashing into the ewers of the trees. The goblets of flowers brimmed with wine of freshness and beauty and exhaled a captivating redolence. (Jah, 2009, p. 13)

In an oral performance, establishing a captivating atmosphere is essential to mesmerize the audience and to help them envision the magical world in detail. Besides the magic, beauty in the form of heavenly gardens and otherworldly dyads is also made more enticing through lush descriptions. While in text, the lengthy descriptor lines may appear redundant, in oral form it only adds to the wonder. The rich imagery usually dwells on representations of beauty, allowing for a sense of serenity, a peaceful lull that settles through the extensive evocation of pleasant images. In contrast to this are the renditions of bloody battles with ferocious monsters that are thrilling and exciting to the senses. In this way, the *dastan* remains in momentum, never falling dull, ideal for a dramatic performance that keeps the audience on its toes. The shift from peaceful scenes laden with beautiful descriptions to those of exciting action allows for instances of thrilling drama. An enemy in disguise unexpectedly slits the throat of a queen, and a couple of lovers fawning one second are swallowed by a three-headed serpent the next are some examples. The pace and language of the *dastan* reflects the dynamic shifts in tone. The force of its action scenes are aptly conveyed through the wavering language, which paces up and then halts in tune with the action in the story (Oldfield, 2007). The dynamic language attempts to transmit the narrator's animated gestures and adaptive voice manipulations that would bring the drama to life in an oral performance.

The passages of poetry are a more obvious indicator of the *dastan's* original form as an oral tradition. The instances where poetry intertwines with prose occur at points in the tale at moments of passion depicting the extent of love and for descriptions of such images that are best represented through poetic verse. In an oral performance, the rhythm of the metric verse, intermittently spaced through the narration, would lead to a delightful shift in tone adding a melodic ingredient to the mesmerizing atmosphere. However, it must be noted, as the translator, Farooqi (2015), explains, that in the translation process the original metric verse was converted to free verse.

Also characteristic to the Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah is its structure of repetitive plots over different chapters in the series. As Oldfield (2007) pointed out, repeated plotlines work by creating familiar situations for the audience and increasing the stakes through heightening conflict or introducing a sudden twist for a dramatic turn of events. Further repetitions in text may have resulted from the way the *dastan* was narrated over successive sessions of *dastan goi*, where, in each session, the narrator may have launched into descriptions of the previous one to re-establish the atmosphere and continue the story from where they had left off (Oldfield, 2007). This can also provide an explanation for the length of the descriptions in it; setting an atmosphere and enrapturing the audience under the spell of the *dastan's* magic is essential to the *dastan goi* experience. Moreover, its prolonged length was a demand of the audience and the narrator strived to fulfill it through continuous inventions in wordplay and extensions of the narration (Pritchett, 1991).

Themes and Mystical Influences

Themes of '*ayyari*' (cunningness), '*tilism*' (magic) and '*bazm o razm*' (extravagant gatherings and wars) essential to the *dastan* genre are all found in Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah. These themes emphasize the

fantastical nature of its literary style (Khan, 2015). A *dastan* is a tapestry of magical elements sewn together from local myths, superstitious traditions, fictional folklore, spiritual beliefs, religious mysticism and wild imagination. It is meant to be as absurd as possible in the sense that the pleasure of the legends lies in their removal from reality and the pushing of boundaries to carve realms of magic where rules of the physical world are broken (Oldfield, 2007). It should also be considered that it is possible that the *dastan* appears more unreal and fantastic in retrospect. Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah is millenniums old and for earlier audiences it may not have been as unfathomable as it appears to its modern receptors (Khan, 2015).

Its origin in 7th century Arabia and journey through Persia as well as Mughal India accounts for the heavy influence of Islamic mysticism in it. In Islam, God is known by ninety-nine sacred names, each indicative of one of His attributes. In the *dastan*, God is frequently referred to by His different names and is held as the highest power, the force driving the characters' destinies, and to whom all creatures of good turn for supplication. Furthermore, the legend behind Amir Hamzah's superpowers dictates that his ability comes from his knowledge of the Most Great Name of Allah, a mysterious one not known to anyone but the Prophets (Farooqi, 2015). At the same time, the *dastan* is not without its share of blasphemy. For example, beastly characters like the monster Laqa are given the title of God that goes against the fundamental principle of God's unity in Islam. However, the existence of multiple gods is prevalent in polytheistic religions such as Hinduism. This, in my view, suggests that despite being recognized as part of Arab or Islamic literature, it is truly a shared product of various cultures and cannot be by classified under a single category.

Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah in Writing

The combination of myth and spiritualism that characterizes the

enchanting genre of *dastan*, within which reality is turned on its head may explain its original existence as an oral tradition. I believe, the *dastan* may have eluded the text form because its inherent lawlessness and deviation from reality was better suited to the fluidity of oral narrations than the confinements of written word. Constant making and re-making owing to influences from traditions of different regions over changing times and societies, natural to the art of *dastan*, was possible because of its mobility as oral stories.

Further, writing was not popular as a medium for literary expression until the British Enlightenment when the written text became determinedly superior in its soundness of knowledge and authenticity. Under the East India Company's Orientalist regime, Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah was put into writing in the 18th century as a part of their initiative to encourage vernacular literature and studies by setting up Anglo-Indian institutions and publications (Navalli, 2014). However, there are accounts of earlier compilations in Persian, based on which its Indian manuscripts were written. There were many versions of the *dastan* because, as mentioned earlier, as an oral tradition, the *dastan* had no fixed story preserved in one place, rather, it existed as a compound of multiple tales varied across regions and cultures, and altered by individual narrators (Oldfield, 2011). Ghalib Lakhnavi's Urdu compilation completed in 1855 and it was the first time that the Amir Hamzah *dastan* was bound together in a single, large volume (Khan, 2015). Lakhnavi's compilation remains intact and soundly traceable to its origin making it the most authentic and accessible version. It was for these reasons that Lakhnavi's volume was chosen and translated into English by Farooqi, thereby popularizing Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah as a renowned work of Urdu literature in the modern period. Even though, the *dastan* was translated into other languages, such as its rendition through the Hindi *devanagari* script, it remains acknowledged as a part of Urdu literature, for it was the Urdu texts that gained the most recognition (Farooqi, 2009). Categorizing it as belonging to one language restricts its vastly diverse and multi-cultured quality by

the unavoidable imposition of fixed social and political perceptions that are associated with each language.

The Demise and Rebirth of Amir Hamzah

The *dastan* tradition, along with the art of *dastan goi*, enjoyed immense favor in the 19th century, especially in areas like Lucknow, which had aspired to a cultural hub where local arts and literature flourished (Futehelly, 2002). New editions of the Amir Hamzah *dastan* were published and sessions of *dastan goi* moved from the status of a bazaar pop-up show and courts into elite social gatherings. This was the period when the rich and literate elite North Indian class acquired a taste for *dastan* sessions and hired personal *dastan gos* (Pritchett, 1991). However, the development of *dastan goi* as an art was soon lost; by the 1930's *dastan goi* was no longer a popular profession and the influence of western literature, particularly that of the genre of realistic novels, had arrived (Pritchett, 1984). Famous Urdu poet, Altaf Hussain Hali, wrote in detail about the question of morality in literature in which the wicked beasts and evil witchcraft that the *dastan* is comprised of was criticised (Pritchett, 1984). As Pritchett goes onto suggest, the age of fantasy epics dramatically performed for colorful audiences was overshadowed by the reign of text. Soon, the Amir Hamzah *dastan* fell out of circulation even in text form and was relinquished to *dastan* status of an ancient tale.

It appears that the *dastan* survives and flourishes more through the medium of oral narration than the inscribed text, for even in present times, its popularity takes root in the rise of *dastan goi* performances in India and Pakistan. The modern *dastan goi* takes the quality of an art form in the sense that it has been reinstated as a dramatic performance defined by its own rules and terms that carve its place alongside other popular art like theatre or stand up shows. Gosain et al. (2018) described present day *dastan goi* as a performance on dimly-lit stages

which features two *dastan gos*, clad in sufi-style white garbs, narrating the Amir Hamzah tale in the sophisticated, formal, and poetic Urdu reminiscent of the *dastan's* olden glory with a modern twist to appeal to today's audience. The narrators pausing to explain concepts in the *dastan* defunct over time or relating the ancient story to current affairs and popular culture are ways in which the revived *dastan* becomes relatable for the modern spectator (Gosain et al., 2018). The medium of *dastan goi* is also utilized for newer stories meant to convey social realistic messages, for instance, '*Dastan e Taqsim e Hind*' on the subject of partition (Gosain et al., 2018). With the revival of *dastan goi*, the Amir Hamzah *dastan* is once again achieving its versatile and ever-evolving attributes, realizing its full potential as an oral tradition. However, it must also be acknowledged that that translation of the textual compilation of the *dastan* played a significant role in bringing it to light in modern world literature, where it stands as an ode to the one of its kind ancient Indo-Arab literature.

Dastan and Dastan goi as Modern Art

Moving onto a discussion of the *dastan* in print today, the two most popular versions are the 'Adventures of Amir Hamzah' by Ghalib Laknavi and Jah Muhammad Hussain's 'Tilism e Hoshrubah'. The English translator, Musharraf Ali Farooqi, who played a significant part in popularizing Amir Hamzah around the globe and whose work has been referred to above, claims the second version, Tilism e Hoshrubah, to be unoriginal. According to him, a group of writers in Lucknow, towards the end of the 19th century, fabricated tales based on the original *dastan* and published it as a part of the Amir Hamzah *dastan*. Nevertheless, it is highly interesting to note that although Farooqi acknowledges the work as faux, he still commits to translate it completely holding it in high regard as a brilliant literary accomplishment. Farooqi has been deeply invested in researching the

dastan genre by studying ancient Persian and Arabian magic folk tales and finding differences between the original versions of the *dastan* and ‘Tilism e Hoshruha’ (Farooqi, 2009). According to him, *Hoshruha* stands unique in its own kind in many ways, for instance the construction of an entire universe of magic such as the land of ‘Hoshruha’ did not exist substantially in earlier versions. Therefore, it can be argued that the original orality of the genre of *dastan* makes it flexible even beyond the practice of *dastan goi* and allows for altering the static nature of the text rendering Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah as endless as its magic.

Conclusion

It is evident that Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah is as rich in history and culture as it is in its aspect of fantasy. Its journey over time through different regions and consequently changing social and cultural conditions influenced its shape-shifting form into a wondrous interplay of diversity and uniqueness. The continual shift from oral to text, while compromising its fluidity in some ways, further added to its magically stretching fabric both in form and content. It is, therefore, understood that the Amir Hamzah tales are not a string of events but an active, dynamic force as it remains moving and evolving through time. The force of its magic is best exhibited in its oral form but also remains vitally present in its textual versions. Whatever changes and adaptations it went through, its revival not only brought the world in contact with a marvelous legend of fantasy fiction but also gave birth to a new form of expression in the modern era. *Dastan goi*, as an art form constantly under evolution, holds promising potential for both the future of literary art and the ever-growing tradition of Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah.

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