

Dastan-e Amir Hamza in Text and Performance**Shaheen Saba¹**

“Once upon a time and a very good time it was...”

--- James Joyce, *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*²

The basic meaning of *dastan* or *qissa* is a story.³ *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* is an epic romance which is an amalgam of fantastic adventures, wars, conquests, love and heroic deeds of valour. The supernatural, magic and enchantment are abound. *Dastans* were narrated by *dastangos*⁴ in courts, coffee houses⁵ and market places. Frances Pritchett asserts that “it was a widely popular form of story-telling: *dastan*-narrators practiced their art not merely in coffee houses, but in royal palaces as well.” *Dastangoi* is a form of storytelling and also a performative art that was practiced for centuries by practitioners. This paper is an attempt to trace the evolution of *dastan* and the revival of *dastangoi* in contemporary times.

Dastans were usually orally narrated to audiences in public gatherings or in the royal courts and contributed to be a major form of art and entertainment in medieval and modern India. Similar kinds of performances exist in Arab and Iran (in Iran oral performances called *naqqali* are done mostly from Ferdowsi’s *Shahnamah*). It can be traced back to centuries, as early as seventh century when oral narratives of the valour and deeds of Prophet Muhammad’s uncle Amir Hamza travelled through Arabia, Persia and the Indian subcontinent; the expansion of the stories culminated into a marvellous chronicle.

There is a difficulty in chronicling the Hamza cycles as also the Arab ones due to its transposition and metamorphosis through time. Malcolm Lyons postulates:

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² Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*. New York: Viking Press, 1994. Print.

³ Basically the words mean a story. They are often used interchangeably. Frances Pritchett draws a differentiation among them by using *qissas* for the short narratives and *dastans* for the longer narrative.

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⁵ In Tehran it was performed in coffee houses which had a gathering, in Delhi it was performed at the footsteps of Jama Masjid.

As an additional difficulty, whatever the processes of development may have been, there is a clear difference in background between desert cycles, such as those of ‘Antar, and the predominantly urban narrative of ‘Ali al-Zaibaq, as well as between the romance of Saif al-Tijan and the tribal saga of the Banu Hilal. The degree of assimilation varies to the extent that it may not be clear whether the common denominators are of greater importance than the differences.

Such questions are complicated by diffusion. Chauvin noted that in Muslim India ...Hamza here is the Prophet’s uncle, killed at the battle of Badr, whose story belongs to the myth-history centered on ‘Ali b. Abi Talib and other heroes of early Islam. From India this legend passed through Malaya to reach Java, by which time, as is noted in the Comparative Index, it had become confused, in character and detail, with the entirely different *Sirat Hamza* covered in this study. (6)⁶

This excerpt from a letter written by Mirza Asadullah Ghalib to the nawab of Rampur also sheds some light on the roots of dastan. He too traces the origin of *dastan* to be Iran:

On August 21, 1865, he writes to the nawab of Rampur:

‘*The Tale of Hamza* is a work of fiction, written by talented men of Iran in the days of Shah Abbas II [1642-1666]. In India they call it *The Tale of Amir Hamza*, and in Persia *the secrets of Hamza*. It was written something over two hundred years ago, but it is still famous and always will be.

He goes on to say that he has written an ode in the Nawab’s praise, which he encloses, incorporating characters and incidents from the Hamza story. He hopes the nawab will like it. (321)⁷

William L. Hanaway⁸ who has studied classical Persian literature closely, describes the Persian *dastans* as “popular romances” which were “created, elaborated and transmitted” by

⁶ Lyons, Malcom. *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and oral story-telling*. Vol 1. New York: Cambridge university press, 1995.

⁷ Russell, Ralph and Khurshidul Islam. Trans and Ed. *Ghalib, 1797-1869. Vol 1: Life and letters*. London: George Allen and Unwin ltd, 1969. Print.

professional storytellers. He lists the five prominent ones surviving from the pre-Safavid period, (a) stories that grew concerning Alexander the great, (b) Darius- the mighty Persian king, (c) Hamzah- Prophet Muhammad's uncle, (d) Emperor Firoz Shah and (e) Samak the Ayyar. The Hamzah romance turns out to be the most popular one.

It might appear surprising that even the elementary facts of the *dastangos* of the nineteenth century are not available because they have never been chronicled. The uniqueness of *dastan* lies in its oral nature which was brought to print in the nineteenth century. Talking about the genres of narrative in India Dhananjay Singh postulates that, 'broadly speaking, the Indian theoreticians have described three genres of narrative: (a) *Katha* (b) *Akhyayika* and (c) *Akhyana*, which together make up the Akhyana-jati (class of narratives).' (2)⁹ *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* would fall under the category of (b) and (c) if we try to place it on this classification as it is a long prose narrative concerning a legendary hero but yet it would escape the label of genre as *dastan* is a unique entity in itself. Unlike any avant-garde movements or periods in literature, *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* is singularly exclusive mode of narration.

Hamid Dabashi in the introduction to the English translation of *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* titled as *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* postulates:

As soon as you want to nail the fact of a fiction it dodges, evades, and eludes you. Not just the honoured name of the Prophet's uncle but the common name of a Muslim revolutionary of Iranian origin, Hamza ibn Abdullah, a member of the radical sect of the Kharijites, has also been mentioned as the probable origin of *The Adventures of Amir Hamza*. So for Hamza either the Prophet's

⁸ Hanaway, William L. *Classical Persian Literature*. Iranian studies: Vol 31(1998). 3-4. *Google Book Search*. Web 16 Sep, 2014.

⁹ 'The first conceptual term, *katha*, encapsulates a thoroughly imagined narrative (Prabandha-kalpana), either in prose or verse, and is limited in its length and reach. *Akhyayika* is a narrative in prose, and uses, for its content, materials from the tradition or history, and it could either be narrated in first person, or let a narrator relate someone else's story. *Akhyana* is a narrative based on legends or myths, for example, the narratives in the Vedas that form the context of the hymns, like the narrative of Yama and Yami, Agastya and Lopamudra, and Jabali Satyakama. The *Ramayana* is classed as an *Akhyana*, based as it is on the legendary lore of the Rama as the scion of the Raghu race.' Quoted from Singh, Dhananjay. *Fables in the Indian Narrative Tradition: an analytical study*. New Delhi, 2011. p.2.

paternal uncle and the great warrior of Islam, or else the Kharijite revolutionary (take your pick) – either way, the valiant adventures of the fictive Hamza in the visible and the invisible worlds have traces of a Muslim revolutionary fighting for the noble cause of justice. That these bare historical facts have subsequently assumed phantasmagoric and fictive dimensions has to do with the popular sentiments and romantic appeal of these characters for subsequent Muslim generations. (xii)¹⁰

Most of the sources claim Hamza to be the prophet's uncle. The origin of Amir Hamza is also mentioned in an article by Shahnaz Aijazuddin:

The *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* is ostensibly the life of Hazrat Hamza bin Abdu l Muttalib, the paternal uncle of the Holy Prophet Mohammad. Hamza had the reputation of being the strongest man of the tribe of Banu Hashim and fiercely protected his nephew against his enemies from the tribe of Quraish. He followed the Holy Prophet after he migrated to Medina from Mecca. Hamza was killed in the battle of Uhud by a slave Sufiyan. The romance of Hamza may have originated from the story of another Hamza- Hamza bin Abdullah, a Persian rebel opposed to Khalifa Haroon-ur-Rashid. His equally exciting exploits and adventures were the source of many stories that could have been grafted onto the Arab Hamza, thus creating a super-hero who for being the uncle of the Holy Prophet was more acceptable.¹¹

The stories that celebrated the heroism of tribal war lords got a transformation at the advent of Islam, and began celebrating the valiant warriors who were famous before Islam and who upon the advent of Islam, embraced the new religion. Among such figures were 'Antara, Hamza Ibn Abd Al Muttalib and Hatim at Tai. Hamza Ibn Abd Al Muttalib was a member of tribe Quraish in Mecca. He embraced Islam two years after the first revelation. He was famous as a brave warrior and was awarded the title of 'Lion of God'. Hamza's origins are filled with as many probabilities as the text itself. But this has not prevented writers from writing it down, or storytellers from devising proud narrations. *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* is also

¹⁰ Dabashi, Hamid. 'Introduction'. Laknavi, Ghalib Abdullah, et al. *The Adventures of Amir Hamza*. Trans Musharraf Ali Farooqi. India: Random House, 2008. xii. Print.

¹¹ Aijazuddin, Shahnaz. "The Rediscovered Art of Dastan-goi". *Tehelka*. 17 Feb, 2006. Web. 23July, 2013.

a stark example of ‘competition narrative’. These narratives have long existed in the Islamic world.¹² It has in fact vested the text with a halo of ancientness and legendary myth by constant redrafting and grafting.

Parallels of *dastan* and *dastangoi*

A parallel of *dastangoi* is found in the Persian literary tradition. *Shahnamah* found expression as an oral narrative which is narrated and performed by a storyteller or a *Naqqal* (*Naqqal* tells as well as performs the story). The Persian oral tradition is different from Arabic oral tradition as the story is also performed apart from being told. Yamamoto describes the Persian storytelling tradition known as “*Naqqali* is a form of storytelling which includes both spoken and written words as well as performance. By including different versions of the story it provides an invaluable example of how the story is transformed according to different modes of delivery”.¹³ The oral narration of heroic stories mixed with religious and nonreligious content was popular among the common people.

There is a parallel cycle of the nature of Amir Hamza in Arab with similarities of names and places like Anushirwan that corresponds to Nausheravan, the vizier Buzurjmihir who is synonymic to Buzurjmehr, the Persian capital Midan and also jinn of Jabal Qaf. But it will be difficult to prove who has borrowed from whom. In his study of the Arabian epic Malcolm Lyons discusses *Sirat Hamzat al-Pahlawan*¹⁴ as one of the narratives of Arab but does not mention its source or writer; here is a glimpse:

¹² Nile Green in an article titled “Oral Competition Narratives of Muslim and Hindu Saints in the Deccan” observes that- ‘In such narratives the Muslim holy man (generally though not exclusively cast as a Sufi) variously competes in the performance of miracles with the figure of a Hindu, Buddhist, shamanic, or Christian holy man. In other narratives, Muslim saints have been seen to compete between themselves, a tradition in which challengers (murndzi) competed in terms of engaging in miraculous or more simply pious acts. The theme of the contest, often involving a degree of trickery, is of course one of the oldest and most widely found of all folktale motifs and one that is also known throughout the Arab world’. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030336>> . Web. 23 April, 2013

¹³ Yamamoto, Kumiko. *The Oral Background of Persian Epics: Storytelling and Poetry*. Brill, 2003. Print.

¹⁴ Historically, before grounding itself in Urdu, romance’s roots lie in Arabic and Persian literature per se. The popular Arabic romance -the Romance of Antar also called *Sira Antar* heralded the romance tradition besides *Sirat Hamzat al-Pahlawan*. In Arabic literary tradition, the genre of storytelling and romance is popularly known as *sira* or *qissa* in which the pre-Islamic Arab poets and narrators commemorated the heroism and bravery of tribal chiefs. *Sira* was marked with biographical details to

Another apparent confusion between the Persian Chosroes marks the *Sirat Hamzat al-Pahlawan*. This introduces Anushirwan and his vizier Buzurjmihir, to whom it adds Numan of Hira, ...Internal dating makes Hamza about twenty years old at the start of his adventures, which are extended for at least another fifty years.

For the compilers of this cycle, the historical existence of the Persian Empire was of importance...The Persian emperor is advised to get help from Mecca, and from then on the cycle concerns itself with the eclipse of Persian power and the rise of that of the Arabs.

For an audience who enjoyed the battle of Tangier, it was doubtless not much more difficult to accept that Hamza reaches Abyssinia through the barrier of darkness separating it from the jinn of Jabal Qaf...Land of Wonders and from the City of Sunrise...to condition the audience, by juxtaposing or superimposing fact and fancy, to accept the creative 'reality' of the narrative. (18)¹⁵

***Dastan-e Amir Hamza* arrives in Akbar's court:**

Dastan-e Amir Hamza thrived at the court of Emperor Akbar who was so fascinated by the stories that he commissioned illustrations for it. The version from which the remarkable paintings were made during this period remains unavailable. They are representative of the Mughal School of painting. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi comments in a review:

The Persian *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* arrived in South India from Iran during the last quarter of the 16th century. It reached the court of Emperor Akbar, far into the North, by 1590. Akbar was so enamoured of the tale that he commissioned 1400 paintings to illustrate its high points.¹⁶

glorify the heroics of tribal warriors. The advent of Islam revolutionized the genre and tradition of *sira* which mushroomed into a significant literary form and acquired status of a genre for religious writings employed by Muslim writers and scholars to articulate the biography of Prophet Muhammad. Even though *sira* ceased to be used as a genre for oral storytelling the tradition of storytelling sustained itself and thrived throughout the history of Arab tribal era as well as after the advent of Islam.

¹⁵ Lyons, Malcom. *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and oral story-telling*. Vol 1. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.

¹⁶ Faruqi, Shamsur Rahman. Rev. of *Tilism-e Hoshruha*. *Middle Eastern Literatures*. 15.2 (2012). Web. 5 June, 2014. <[http://www.mafarooqi.com/reviews-hoshruba-I.htm](http://www.mafarooqi.com/reviews-hoshruha-I.htm)>

Percy Brown in his book *Indian Paintings* briefs us in this regard and says that the painting's anecdote dates back to the time when Humayun was defeated by Sher Shah and was in refuge in Kabul. Two painters called Syed Ali Judai and Khwaja Abdul Samaad Sherazi arrived at his service in 1550 AD. Humayun ordered them to compose *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* in paintings. This work spreads over hundred pages in twelve books. They returned to India with Humayun after he defeated his enemies. After Humayun, Akbar continued this work in his tenure. In the end Syed Ali Judai departed for Haj and in some years Abdul Samad completed the work. Many have mistakenly accredited Faizi as the author. Brown also remarks that Faizi can be dismissed as the writer of *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* because he was born in 954 hijri. During Humayun's stay in Kabul there was nobody called Faizi.

Abul Fazal in *Ain-I Akbari* mentions *Amir Hamza* to be in twelve books. Abdul Qadir Badauni in his book *Muntakh-e But Tawarikh* and Mirza Allaudaullah Qozaini's *Nafa-e SulMaasir* also hold a record *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*. According to Badauni, the story of Amir Hamza was in seventeen volumes illustrated over a period of fifteen years. Fazal comments that from his early youth, Akbar had shown great predilection for painting, he encourages such activities and upholds them as a means of study as well as amusement.

Sheik Sajjad Hosain in the preface to his translation of *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* also briefs us about the origins of the text:

This book, it is said, was composed during the time of Akber-the-Great by his minister Amir Khusro to divert the Emperor's attention from the *Mahabharat*, the exploits in which had created an impression on his mind. It describes the chivalries of Amir Hamzah, the uncle of our prophet Mahomed, and the practical tricks of his friend Amar. Amir Hamzah was the son of Khajeh Abdul Motulleb, the chief of the Bani Hashim family, and was born in Arabia in the city of Mecca. Before the birth of our Prophet, he followed the religion of Abraham, and extended his arms and brought the idolatrous tribes to a sense of the True God. When Mahomed was born, he assumed *Islamism* and fought for the cause of *Islam*.¹⁷

¹⁷ Hosain, Sheikh Sajjad trans. *Dastan-e Amir Hamza: An Oriental Novel*. Patna: Khuda Baksh Library, 1992.

It was definitely not composed during Akbar's time. What Sajjad Hosain is trying to say here has always been said by practicing *dastangos* repeatedly. They often attribute the *dastans* to some big names in order to make it more established as a literature or they claim to have discovered it in an old trunk belonging to their ancestors and the source remains unknown. But the very fact of lending it an ancient halo marks it as special.

Dastan-e Amir Hamza in nineteenth century

The most widely circulated among the *dastans* in nineteenth century India was *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* contributed by *Abdullah Bilgrami* and *Ghalib Lakhnavi* published by the endeavours of Munshi Naval Kishore in 1871 with which I am concerned. Lakhnavi claimed the Urdu version to be a translation from a Persian one, but the Persian version has never been discovered. But the presence of Indian social life and culture hints us to believe that it was done from a South Asian version of *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*. This version was already in print for sixteen years when Munshi Naval Kishore thought of printing it with amendments by *Abdullah Bilgrami* who added ornate passages and verses to it in Persian. I call it as contribution because none of them wrote the text to its entirety but narrated it to the scribes at Naval Kishore Press. *Ghalib Lakhnavi* translated it to Urdu and *Sheikh Sajjad Hosain* reproduced and translated it to English as an "oriental novel". It was disseminated by folk storytellers and assimilated by individual authors and *dastangos* like *Mahmud Jah*, *Amba Prasad Raza*, *Ghalib Lakhnavi* etc in north India, particularly Lucknow, only to make them more popular and mesmerizing.

It passed on from one generation to other orally by *dastangos* who freely added (mostly added, rarely shortened) to the existing corpus of narrative. In the absence of manuscripts and records we do not have many dates. Initially it existed in the form of *rivayat*.¹⁸ *Ali Jawad Zaidi* writes about the tradition of *hikayat* in Urdu which is akin to fables

¹⁸Popular knowledge of Islam is transmitted in narratives of the lives of saints, extraordinary adventures, pious deeds, and attributes to prophets and saints. In Afghanistan this kind of short prose story recounting more or less concrete historical events is called *riwayat* which means both 'metaphorical short story' on the one hand and 'tradition' and 'transmission' on the other. In Persian (Dari) and Pashto, the words *hikayat* and *qissa* may also be used to describe stories of this kind which are not about specified historical events. The same can be said about stories in Baluchi called *nakl*.

and mythical stories. These forms existed before the short story and the novel sprang up in Urdu in the nineteenth century:

Much before the advent of short stories and novels we come across the voluminous literature of *dastans* and *hikayats* in Urdu. *Hikayat* is a generic term that includes what the western writers have identified as fable, myth and legend, while *dastan* is synonymous with the western concept of early romance. South's major contribution is Wajhi's *Sab Ras*, a metaphysical allegorical *dastan*, but Waqar 'Azim does not count it as a *dastan* because the author had not intended to tell a story. (122)¹⁹

There are variations of the *dastan* such as *Bagh-o-Bahar*²⁰ or *Sab Ras*.²¹ But *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* is unique because of its volume and language. *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* also has a strong mythical backing which other new epics lacked. They were framed on *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* and older Persian epics and myths. Talking in the Indian context Indra Nath Choudhuri holds myth to be associated with *puranas*:

The word for myth in Indian context is *purana* and they are episodic. Here history changes into *purana*, so one cannot find the unity which one derives out of a cause and effect relationship. The *purana* keeps up its subterranean historical origin, but goes on adding, multiplying and expanding its body, aiming to bring home the archetypal meaning of the enduring totality.²²

Dastans also add and multiply like the *puranas*. A famous Chinese proverb says "A story expands by telling". This has been the case with *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*. Faruqi ascertains the

¹⁹ Zaidi, Ali Jawad. *A History of Urdu Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1993.

²⁰ A collection of allegorical stories in four books written by Amir Khusro, the pupil of Nizamuddin Auliya. It is patterned on *Thousand and One Nights*. Akin to *dastans* it belongs to the oral Persian literary tradition. Mir Amman translated it from [Persian](#) into everyday [Urdu](#), under the title *Bagh o Bahar (The Garden and the Spring Season)*. Later, in 1857, [Duncan Forbes](#) retranslated it into English. The first Urdu book printed by a printing press in India was *Bagh-o-bahar* by Mir Amman, published in 1801.

²¹ The first book in Urdu is known to be *Sabras*, written in 1635-36 by Mullah Asadullah Wajhi. It's an allegorical mystical romance translated from the Persian Masnavi *Dastur-e-Ushshaq* and *Husn-o-dil* by Mohammad Yahya Ibn-e-Saibak, written about two centuries earlier. The copies of *Sabras* were handwritten as the printing press had not yet reached India at that time. <https://urduwallahs.wordpress.com/2013/04/12/the-beginnings-of-urdu-writings/>. Web. 21 June, 2016.

²² Vandana Sharma, ed. *Studies in Myth, Orality and Folklore in World Literature*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2013. Print.

birth of *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* to be unknown as it is surrounded by myths and probabilities. It travels from Persian to Arabic and then to other languages. This particular *dastan* has three to four versions of Hamza's death. This variation is a symbolic representation of the brief life in this world, it also shows the fact that people die different deaths. The multiple variations like the *sthalapuranas* went through various issues narrated and compiled by many *dastangos* and authors with the onset of printing in India.

It has been translated into English as *The Adventures of Amir Hamza: Lord of the Auspicious Planetary Conjunction* (2008) by Musharraf Ali Farooqi. He took seven years to translate this thousand page adventure. Farooqi has done this translation from the 1871, Ghalib Lakhnavi and Abdullah Bilgrami version published by Munshi Naval Kishore press. This volume comprises of four books. Farooqi has done a very close translation of the text without disturbing the ornate passages as I have observed while comparing the original with the translation. One of the remarkable features of *dastangoi* was the opening lines that had to be very poetic and beautiful so that they arrest the listeners at once. Farooqi has retained them very well in his translation. This is evident from such openings in the text as quoted from the translation below:

The fingers of ancient scribes straddle the provident dark reed, galloping their mount in the sphere of rhetoric, and in this enchanting wise, speed the fleet gray steed of the pen in the domains of the page. (87)

Or

The imperious pen departs to conquer the dominions of rhetoric, girding itself to trek the blank stretches of paper, and delivers the account of Amir's journey, painting a host of new episodes and choice encounters before the mind's eye. (311)

It influenced Munshi Premchand (original name- Dhanpat Rai Srivastav, 1880-1936) and Devki Nandan Khatri's *Chandrakanta* (1888) - the first prose in modern Hindi. In his childhood days Premchand was fascinated and later on inspired by the stories of *Tilism-e Hoshrubā* that he heard at the tobacconist shop. *Tilism-e Hoshrubā* is the most popular amongst the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* series and comprises the fifth book. It is considered to be highly fascinating as it is filled with magic and enchantment in comparison to the earlier four

books and *dastangoi* narration is mostly done from this book. *Chandrakanta* bears the direct influence of *dastans* as witnessed in the case of eponymous protagonist Chandrakanta who is trapped in a *tilism* and the presence of notable *ayyars*.

Literary roots of *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*

Historical backing of *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* pales in front of the grandeur of the text. The real Hamzah was a hero fighting for a just cause but the volumes of fictional narratives that have sprung from it bear testimony to its sheer fantasy and splendid passages. Like many other adventures and stories this text also draws upon Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. As it has literary roots as well besides the legend it picks from, it is not purely mythological. It is man's tendency to assume literature to be a reflection of life or if not so associating it with some real events or characters to give it firm roots. *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* bears traces of the legendary Sassanid court of Iran, particularly the reign of Emperor Khusrau I (531-79 AD) popular as Khusrau Nausheravan the Just, and his wise minister Buzurjmehr. And as Hamid Dabashi remarks in the introduction to *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* that this royal background is fissured by intervening factors such as the tribal and rebellious origins of Hamza is balanced by the royal and sedentary court of Sassanids. But it does slice through bygone ages presenting a full size mirror of tradition, culture and language. We have many books in Urdu beginning with the word *dastan* (as it means a story) in their title, but that does not make them *dastan* in the compositional manner and matter.

Talking about the various heroic cycles and their circulation and narration Malcom Lyon remarks:

From the time of the Homerdae, the 'singers of embroidered words', such reciters, together with their techniques of performance as well as of composition or adaptation, have been familiar to students of literature ...*The Ozidi Saga* from Africa is introduced as having no fixed text. All that each

teller of the story has is the plot, a grand design to which, like a master builder, he proceeds to give body and full expression. (2-3)²³

Musharraf Ali Farooqi shares an experience of discovering a travelogue at a Pakistani book shop. Titled as *Safarnama-e Makhdoom Jahanian Jahangasht*, it is the travelogue of a 14th century Hindustani Sufi saint Syed Jalaluddin (1307–1384 AD) of the Suharwardiya order. It was translated into Urdu as *Safarnama-e Makhdoom Jahanian Jahangasht* by Muhammad Abbas Chishti Dehlavi (Kanpur: Matba-e Waheedi, 1937). Two earlier editions, probably by other translators, were published from Matba-e Nami, Lucknow, in 1898, and another from Matba-e Ahmedi, Delhi, in 1899. It is the “earliest known travelogue of Europe by a South Asian, and the earliest known literary reference to *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* tradition in South Asia”.²⁴ This gives concrete evidence of the existence of Hamza tradition in the fourteenth century. It is one of the earliest references of *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*. He has translated it as *A Journey to Europe via the Sun and Mount Qaf* (2009) from the Urdu version of this travelogue. The book is divided into four chapters. It is the third chapter “An Account of Mount Qaf’s Two Thrones” that rubs with the Qaf episode in *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*. Hamza has an eighteen year stay in Qaf while in this book it is twelve years.

Dastangoi

Dastangoi is the performative narration of *dastans*. It is usually performed orally by a pair of storytellers or *dastangos* but it could be solo as well before an audience. The role of the audience is to listen and relish these stories with Wah! Wah!. The popularity of *dastan* has been through oral narration primarily. Story telling thrived as a tradition in India. Vishnu Sharma’s *Panchatantra*²⁵, the Jataka,²⁶ the *slokas* from the Upanishads, the Vedas were

²³ Lyons, Malcom. *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and oral story-telling*. Vol 1. New York: Cambridge university press, 1995. Print.

²⁴ <<https://randomhouseindia.wordpress.com/2009/10/06/musharraf-ali-farooqi-a-journey-to-europe-via-the-sun-and-mount-qaf/>>Web. Feb13, 2015.

²⁵ In *Panchtantra* the narrator narrates the rest of the work to the princes. It comprises of five sections. Each section contains a main story, called the frame story which in turn contains several stories emboxed in it, as one character narrates a story to another. It is like a story within a story and the series goes on. Besides the stories, the characters also quote various epigrammatic verses to make their point.

²⁶ These moral fables pertain to Buddhism, it was oral but put to writing so that it might not be lost in the oral tradition.

meant to be orally narrated and memorized, not to forget the *sthalapuranas* that Raja Rao employs in *Kanthapura* (1938). *Kathavachan* (story telling) has been inbuilt in our tradition. However, one must not conflate oral and folk tradition.²⁷ Folklore, are recited, dramatized and sung but orality is not confined to folk traditions only.²⁸ Historical characters are combined with legends and folk traditions to give birth to the popular romance *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* which continued thriving in different parts of the Islamic world and which absorbed different stories and legends with the passage of time. Arthur Compton Rickett asserts that the western epic poem *Beowulf*²⁹ too was recited orally by the minstrels to the soldiers who returned from a hard day and relaxed after dinner besides fire.

In an interview³⁰ with Mahmood Faruqi³¹, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi asserts that in *dastan* the audience and narrator are same. It is not so because of the absence of print media in old days, but because the human mind is attuned to listening story of all kinds- the pair

²⁷ The relationship between folklore studies and oral history has varied in different parts of the world. In England, despite initial links, oral history and folklore studies tended to travel different paths; Paul Thompson argues that English folklore studies “never escaped from the stigma of amateurism”. A shared interest in aurality-fuelled by digital technologies, may be bringing the two fields closer again. The nationalist politics of Britain’s Celtic nations- Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland-have forged closer relationships between folklore studies and oral history, and in Scandinavia folklore studies has had a profound impact upon the development of oral history. Studies of memory and ‘oral tradition’ in non-Western societies and indigenous cultures have also made important contributions to our understanding of the nature and meaning of oral history accounts. See: Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Joseph Calder Miller, ed., *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1980); Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Tradition and the Verbal Arts* (London: Routledge, 1991). Quoted in Thomson, Alistair. “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History” *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Winter - Spring, 2007), Oxford University Press. 49-70.<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4495417>>. Web. April 12, 2013.

²⁸ Malik, Aditya. *Oral Traditions and Folklore*. Koninklijke Brill NY: Leiden, 2010. *Google Book Search*. Web 18 Sep, 2014.

²⁹ The question of whether *Beowulf* was passed down through oral tradition prior to its present manuscript form has been the subject of much debate, and involves more than simply the issue of its composition. Rather, given the implications of the theory of oral-formulaic composition and oral tradition, the question concerns how the poem is to be understood, and what sorts of interpretations are legitimate. However, scholars such as D.K. Crowne have proposed the idea that the poem was passed down from reciter to reciter under the theory of oral-formulaic composition, which hypothesises that epic poems were (at least to some extent) improvised by whoever was reciting them, and only much later written down. In his landmark work, *The Singer of Tales*, Albert Lord refers to the work of Francis P. Magoun and others, saying “the documentation is complete, thorough, and accurate. This exhaustive analysis is in itself sufficient to prove that *Beowulf* was composed orally.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beowulf>. Web. 12 August, 2014.

³⁰ <https://youtu.be/Pux5mqbZbeg>

³¹ A *dastango* and a scholar who along with Danish Hasan has helped to revive the lost art by introducing it to the twenty first century.

could be mother-child or politician-audience or any form of narration and listening. One of the wheels of *dastans* was to leave it incomplete so that the audience will be curious to know the next episode- “Then what happened?”, and the cycle would go on. At times if the *dastango* wanted to keep the *dastan* going, he would drag a scene to unfathomable limits, for instance, at a crucial turn in the plot, the lover and beloved are merely separated by a curtain and have not yet seen each other, this intense scene is paused and other narratives around it are narrated while the curtain remains to maintain the brevity of the narration.

Musharraf Ali Farooqi comments on the tradition of orality in his Simurgh guide:

The daastan was a genre of oral narration. Therefore it manifested itself fully in the daastan-go’i tradition. After the end of this tradition, a critique of the daastan must distinguish between daastan 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. (163)³²

Ali Jawad Zaidi presents a very comprehensive view on the art of storytelling and oral narration in respect to *dastan*:

The age-old tradition of story-telling has enjoyed royal patronage but no effort was made to commit the stories to writing. These survived only through oral tradition, which makes it difficult to determine their age or even the original form. This phenomenon explains how most of the earlier *dastan* became extinct and all that has been passed on to us through the written word in Urdu are translations of stories from other language, with interpolations, variations and enlargements. The oldest extant original *dastan* in the north is *Qissah-e-Mehr-Afroz-o-Dilbar* by Isawi Khan written in 1709 Vikrami era which would correspond to 1647. Isawi Khan was well versed in Sanskrit and Braj Bhasha and is known for his commentary on Bihari’s *Sat Sai* both in Hindi and Urdu. The story, spread over 241 pages, followed by 139 pages of *Nishat Namah*, is

³² Farooqi, Musharraf Ali. “The Simurgh-Feather Guide to the Poetics of Dastan-e Amir Hamza Sahibqiran”, V. 15, *Annual of Urdu Studies*(2000).119–167.

a major work in prose fiction and its non-publication has prevented its literary assessment. (122-23)³³

Although oral narratives have existed both in East and West, the primary difference between them is that the tradition of oral learning or by hearting is more prevalent in Hindu and Arabic cultures than in the West. As Musharraf Ali Farooqi says “The Oral tradition of the pre-Islamic Arabs was manifested in the popular saying: “*ash-shi‘ru divanu l-Arab*” (Poetry is the register/record of the days/battles of the Arabs)”. They have the tradition of memorizing the *Quran*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagvad Gita*. As Indra Nath Choudhuri affirms:

All the important Indian texts whether *Vedas*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and others were initially narrated in the oral tradition and still orally narrated by the story tellers and *dastangoi* of India in the folk form. *Mahabharata* was narrated first by *Vaishampayana*, then *Ugrashrava Lomaharshini*, then *Sanjaya* was *Vyasa*.³⁴

However Indra Nath Choudhuri’s clubbing of *dastangoi* narration in the folk form can be contested as “folk” has its own history. Oral narration is a seminal part of folk form but any oral narration cannot be accorded the status of ‘folk’ as it does not have its root in the tradition and culture of any particular place. ‘The dissemination of the stories among the people was helped by the fact that they were a part of the oral tradition, and hence, the composed narratives either used the elements from the folktales or became absorbed in the folktale.’³⁵ Alok Bhalla in a paper on folklore attempts to investigate the structure of a folktale and to vests each of the three structural sites that are primary constituents of its narrative - emotional, moral and social qualities. He arranges the three structural spaces chronologically. He calls the first term spatial and temporal order that exists “somewhere in the country beyond the river...” and “once upon a time, and calls it “the site of sorrow or the structure of curse”. Human beings are paralyzed accompanied by frozen time. He phrases the second structural element which is central to every folktale as “the artifice of enchantment”.

³³ Zaidi, Ali Jawad. *A History of Urdu Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1993. Print.

³⁴ For more details see Vandana Sharma ed. “Myth, Orality and Folklore in World Literature with Special Reference to Tagore”. *Studies in Myth, Orality and Folklore in World Literature*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2013.8. Print.

³⁵ Singh, Dhananjay. *Fables in the Indian Narrative Tradition: an analytical study*. New Delhi, 2011. 55. D K Print World Ltd, 2011. 55. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.
<http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/17586/7/07_introduction.pdf>

It is uncertain and unmapped. It is a play of time which may be “a succession of instances or an eternity depending on who is recording or who is suffering”. He calls the third structural element of the folktale as “the site of renewal of energies or the structure of *communitas*. It emerges from the realm of enchantment and restores human community. People begin to participate in historical and secular time again but live as if their moments of recovered joy are at one with eternity”.³⁶

Dastangoi narration involves an illusionist’s skill i.e., they deceive our perception of the real and delights at the same time in the presence of active listeners. Tehran coffee-houses held the performances of Hamza story till the twentieth century. It is a two way performance which involves the narrator as well as the audience. Richard Bauman in his seminal article “Verbal Art as Performance”³⁷ states that in performance which is primarily a mode of spoken verbal communication the communicative ability of the narrator becomes important and its competence lies on the knowledge and ability to speak in socially appropriate ways. The storyteller is marked as a subject who is evaluated according to his method and grip on audience. Thus *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* is marked by the interface between the written and the oral. Currently it is narrated orally by *dastangos* like Mahmud Faruqi and Danish Hasan fascinating us every time. They performed a *dastangoi* on Sadat Hasan Manto and *Dastan-e Sedition* to campaign for Dr. Binayak Sen.

The contemporary *dastangos* have revived an art and a literature which was inevitably sinking. They have refashioned it to suit the tastes of today’s audience which is non-Urdu. But yet they have not done away with the ornate passages as they are the soul of *dastans* but rather tried to explain those words in the narration itself:

The *dastangos* began their performances at an interesting point of time in Delhi’s history: the *mushairas* and *sawal-jawab* oral poetry *baithaks* had died out, replaced by the often grimly ritualistic evening of book readings. Few of the readings that were attended by growing numbers of aspiring writers and curious readers in the 2000s ever migrated out of the comfortably narrow

³⁶ Bhalla, Alok. “Lost in a Forest of Symbols: Can Some Animal, Bird, Tree or Djinn help us Understand Myth and Folklore?” *Indian Folklore Research Journal*. vol 10: (2010) <<http://www.indianfolklore.org/journals/index.php/ifrj/>> Web. 13 April, 2014.

³⁷ www.jstor.org/stable/674535. Web. 15 September, 2015.

confines of South Delhi. A handful of events were in Hindi or Urdu and the Sahitya Akademi did its best to bring in writers from across India.

But by the end of the decade, the Delhi book reading was like a *burra khana* for Indian English writers; an evening of chiefly ceremonial significance, as the writer Mukul Kesavan has remarked. Through *dastangoi*, the two performers brought back a much older tradition of storytelling.³⁸

Gyan Chand Jain postulates in *Urdu ki Nasri Dastane* that *dastangoi* tradition dates back to Arab where it thrived as an art. On a full moon night people gathered on the sand after dinner to listen to these stories. Dates were distributed in the end. It was also performed at *chauks* in India and at the steps of Jama Masjid where *dastangos* gathered. We come to know through the anecdotes of Mir Baqar Ali, the last *dastango* of Delhi that their profession demanded a command over rhetoric, delivery, mimicry, ventriloquism and spontaneous composition. *Dastangoi* is the marker of oral narration. Oral narration of *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* was also a popular recreation in central and western South Asia and North Africa since medieval times. Mahmood Farooqui and Danish Hasan, the popular *dastangos* in contemporary times talk about the *dastangoi* performances:

The performances have come about as a result of collaboration between S.R. Faruqi, the foremost living authority on these *Dastans* and the only person to possess a full set of all the 46 volumes, and the performers. Faced with neglect and systematic devaluation we now have very scanty evidence for the way in which these *Dastans* were compiled and performed. Even basic things such as movements, gesticulation, and stage setting are wholly unknown. The current performance is therefore merely an exploration of an Art form which, astonishingly in a culture where poetry was regarded as the supreme art, was considered by some to be of a higher order than poetry itself. *Dastangos* were supposed to be a repository not just of language, common speech as well as

³⁸ <http://urdutoenglish2020.blogspot.in/2012_02_01_archive.html> Web. 12 Sep, 2015.

literary, but also of social mores, craftsmanship, and all other forms of knowledge.³⁹

Hence, today we have an art form which has attuned itself to the modern needs, retaining the aroma of adventure and love splashed pages of *dastan*. The *dastans* remain unchanged, only the mode of delivery has been improvised upon. Several other such literature and performances have been overshadowed today due to lack of awareness among readers and improper archiving. But one can thank the digital world that has helped in organizing and archiving many works of literary treasure which otherwise would have been lost in the labyrinths of time.

³⁹ As explained by Mahmood Farooqui (Director-Actor) in an introduction: “**The Sea of Eloquence**” – **An Evening of *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza***. <<https://bazaarkissakahani.wordpress.com/>>. **Web. 20 Dec, 2014.**

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