

CHAPTER ONE: QISSA AND DASTAN

In Urdu, both “**qisṣah**” (from the Arabic) and “**dāstān**” (from the Persian) mean “story.” Both words, however, have been used more specifically in Persian literature, as names for a traditional narrative genre. William L. Hanaway, one of the few scholars to have seriously studied this genre, describes it as a form of orally recited prose romance “created, elaborated, and transmitted” by professional narrators. The qissa, or dastan, genre¹ had a universal appeal: it was cultivated in royal courts, and was also the chief form of medieval Persian folk narrative.²

Wherever Persian speakers went during the medieval period, their qissas went with them. As Persian-speaking rulers gained an increasing foot-hold first in northern India, then in central and southwestern India, qissa-narrators were among their entourage. These professionals practiced their art of narration, called qissa-khvani (**qisṣah khvānī**) or dastan-goī (**dāstān goī**) before small private parties, or at a single patron’s command. They were welcomed at the Mughal court: Jahāngīr, for example, had a qissa-narrator from Shiraz whose art he greatly enjoyed.³

One narrative in particular, the **Qisṣah-e Ḥamzah** or **Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah**, became far more popular in India than it had ever been in its homeland. Its nominal hero was Ḥamzah ibn ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, a historical figure who was the Prophet’s paternal uncle. But if Ḥamzah was historical, the magical and romantic encounters ascribed to him definitely were not. In Annemarie Schimmel’s view, the Ḥamzah story “must have been popular in the Subcontinent from the days of Maḥmūd of Ghazna” in the early eleventh century.⁴ It was told at the Quṭb Shāhī court of Golconda.⁵ And it was a special favorite of Akbar’s: he not only had it narrated before him, but told it himself in the harem. He also conceived and supervised the immense project of illustrating it—a project which “envisaged the production of a total of 1400 very large miniatures, and looms large in any study of the origins of Mughal painting.”⁶ By the eighteenth century, this qissa was so well-known that it inspired an indigenous Indo-Persian imitation: the massive fifteen-volume **Bostān-e kḥiyāl** (1756).

With such popularity in Persian, it is not surprising that qissa became an Urdu genre as well. Early Dakkani Urdu, cultivated in central and southern India, may have been, as was Persian, a medium for oral qissa narration; there is little evidence either way. But Dakkani Urdu could certainly boast the qissa-like prose romance **Sab ras** (1635), and the Ḥamzah-influenced verse narrative **Ḳhāvar nāmah** (1649). The latter in particular is full of battles in which Ḥaḏrat ʿAlī, the Prophet’s son-in-law, “fought with Devs [demons] and Parīs [fairies], and confronted dragons, tigers, and **bhūts** [ghosts]”; the action also included “wars with hundreds of kings, and

¹For the purposes of the present study, the generic names “qissa” and “dastan” will be treated as English words.

²Hanaway, “Formal Elements,” pp. 139, 142-143; see also his **Persian Popular Romances Before the Safavid Period**. Hanaway’s **Love and War**, and Southgate’s **Iskandarnamah**, offer examples of the genre.

³Hanaway, **Love and War**, p. 19; Gyān Chand, **Urdū kī naṣrī dāstāneñ**, p. 106.

⁴Schimmel, **Classical Urdu Literature**, p. 204.

⁵Rāz Yazdānī, “Urdū meñ dāstān-goī,” p. 6.

⁶Pramod Chandra and Daniel J. Ehnbohm, **The Cleveland Tuti-Nama Manuscript and the Origins of Mughal Painting** (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Gallery, 1976), p. 13.

in between, some romantic episodes.”⁷ The Ḥamzah story itself exists in a late Dakkani prose version called **Qiṣṣah-e jang-e amīr Ḥamzah** (The War of Amir Ḥamzah) (1784). The work is probably a direct translation from the Persian; not too much is known about its background. Dakkani Urdu also includes a number of other, generally shorter qissa narratives with the typical themes of magic, romance, and adventure. These qissas were produced from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries; the earlier ones are mostly in verse, the later ones in prose.⁸

Urdu was not cultivated as a literary language in North India until the early eighteenth century, and even then prose developed much more slowly than poetry. Ordinary people were illiterate, and literate people wrote in Persian. Except for a few late and heavily Persianized works, whatever Urdu prose existed during the eighteenth century has left no written traces. It is easy to imagine an oral folk narrative tradition, with simple Urdu tales told in the bazaar. Schimmel writes of this period, “Popular prose was, of course, always there; romantic fairy-tales or heroic legends were never lacking; although even those were more often than not converted into poetry.”⁹ We know equally little about pre-nineteenth-century Hindi story literature. R. S. McGregor makes assumptions similar to Schimmel’s: “It is very probable that alongside this poetry prose tales or fables based on the same sources or on the prose story cycles of early Urdu literature, or on everyday life, came to be circulated orally in some sort of standardized form, but little such material has come down to us in writing from this period.”¹⁰ Speculation is thus plentiful, but evidence scarce.

When we come to written qissas, however, we are on firm ground. With the exception of the obscure and highly Persianized **Nau tarz-e muraṣṣa**, (ca. 1780), the first written North Indian qissas were those produced at Fort William College, Calcutta, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. We will have more to say in later chapters about Fort William’s series of commissioned publications. Prominent among them were such classic works as **Qiṣṣah-e chahār darvesh**, **Qiṣṣah-e Gul-e bakāvalī**, **Qiṣṣah-e Gul o Hurmuz**, **Qiṣṣah-e Gul o Ṣanobar**, **Qiṣṣah-e Ḥātīm Ṭāḥ**-and Kḥalīl ,Alī Kḥān Ashk’s **Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah** (1801), based on the Dakkani **Qiṣṣah-e jang-e amīr Ḥamzah**. Fort William College may actually have fostered the art of oral qissa narration as well. Its Hindustani Department included a “qissukhaun” (**qiṣṣah khvān**), or qissa-narrator, but we have no record of his tales.¹¹

As we have seen, Persian qissas, especially **Qiṣṣah-e Ḥamzah**, had been enjoyed by the Persianized North Indian elite for centuries. And now, as Urdu prose developed, the way was cleared for Urdu qissas to become the widely popular entertainment in North India that Persian qissas had always been in their own country. After a thorough review of the available evidence, Rāz Yazdānī concludes that professional Urdu qissa narration began in Delhi around 1830, and that as the influence of Persian declined, “qissa” as a name for this narrative genre was increasingly replaced by “dastan.”¹² In Persian the two terms described the same genre, with

⁷Farmān Fathpūrī, **Urdū kī manzūm dāstāneñ**, p. 90.

⁸Farmān Fathpūrī, **Urdū kī manzūm dāstāneñ**, pp. 118-120; Gyān Chand, **Urdū kī naṣrī dāstāneñ**, pp. 130-139.

⁹Schimmel, **Classical Urdu Literature**, p. 203.

¹⁰McGregor, “The Rise of Standard Hindi,” p. 142.

¹¹Siddiqi, **Origins of Modern Hindustani Literature**, pp. 123, 159-160. One of the Fort William qissas names qissa narration among the performances taking place in an idealized bazaar, but it is hard to know how much weight to assign to such evidence: **Siñhāsan battīsī** (Hathras: N. S. Sharmā Gauṛ Book Depot, 1971, 120 p., Hindi), p. 2.

¹²Rāz Yazdānī, “Urdū meñ dāstān goḥ,” pp. 6-7.

“qissa” the more common. In Urdu, after 1830 the two terms came to be differentiated most often on the basis of length: dastans were “long qissas,” and qissas were “short dastans.”

For about a century, from 1830 until 1930, dastan narration (**dāstān goʻf**) reigned in North India as an enormously popular, highly sophisticated “art of extemporaneous speech.”¹³ Professional narrators demonstrated their fluency, virtuosity, and power to hold an audience by prolonging the dastan: a longer dastan narration, like a longer tight-rope walk, was inherently superior to a shorter one. This prolongation was made possible by such characteristic devices as the use of catalogues, to enumerate all items of a certain class as exhaustively as possible; the insertion of verses, rhymed prose, and elaborate plays on words; and the multiple repetition, with only slight variations, of typical adventures and encounters that befall the hero.¹⁴ Such orally narrated dastans relied on the imaginative appeal of fantasy--enhanced by the opium preparations which both narrator and listeners customarily drank.¹⁵

In 1858, when Munshī Naval Kishor founded his famous Lucknow press, the creation and publishing of written Urdu dastans began in earnest. ,Abdul Ḥalīm Sharar, the famous historian of Lucknow, described the story of Amīr Ḥamzah as the “dastan-narrators’ real and essential arena,”¹⁶ and most written Urdu dastans indeed consisted of multi-volume expansions, adaptations, and imitations of parts of the Ḥamzah cycle. The crowning glory of Urdu dastan literature, the forty-six-volume **Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah**, was produced by the Naval Kishor Press between 1893 and 1908. Its most popular portion, the eight-volume **Ṭilism-e hošhrubā** (The Sense-stealing Enchantment), remains in print (in both abridged and serialized forms) to the present. This “Sense-stealing Enchantment” is the realm of Amīr Ḥamzah’s enemy, the powerful magician Afrāsiyāb.

In this Enchantment are three areas: The Hidden Place of Darkness, the Inner Enchantment, and the Outer Enchantment. In the Hidden Place of Darkness live venerable elders like Afrāsiyāb: Emerald-colored Fish, Four-handed Sun, etc. In the Inner Enchantment live vazirs, nobles, and those close to Afrāsiyāb, like Madame Amazement, etc. In the Outer Enchantment live the common people and the noble residents of the city. Between the Outer and Inner Enchantments he has made a magic river called the River of Blood. Over it there is a bridge of mist, and two tigers stand on it in the mist. On the bridge is a building of three tiers. On its first tier Parī youths are standing with pipes and horns at their lips. On the second tier stand Parī maidens, shaking bags filled with pearls so that the pearls fall into the river, and the fish swim around with their mouths full of pearls. On the third tier very tall young Ethiops (ḥabshī) stand, drawn up in ranks, with naked swords, and fight among themselves. The blood flowing from their bodies falls into the river, so that the river-water is that same blood, and it is thus called the Blood-flowing River. The bridge is called the Bridge of Parī Youths. Afrāsiyāb strolls in every part, and everywhere are gardens, buildings, and promenades constructed by him.¹⁷

¹³Taḥsīn Sarvarī, “Mīr Bāqir ,Alī,” p. 72.

¹⁴On length as “the first principle of dastan composition” see Suhail Buḫārī, “Urdū dāstān,” p. 86.

¹⁵For a vivid account of one such dastan narration, see Ashraf Šubūḥī, “Mīr Bāqir ,Alī,” pp. 49-63.

¹⁶Sharar, **Guzishtah Lakhnaʻi**, p. 188.

¹⁷Raʻfʻs Aḥmad Ja,frī, ed., **Ṭilism-e hošhrubā**, pp. 9-10. Afrāsiyāb was an evil human character in the Persian national epic **Shāh nāmāh**; see William L. Hanaway, “The Iranian Epics,” in **Heroic Epic and Saga; an**

The language is rhythmic, repetitive, almost hypnotic, and gives the narrator's vision a dream-like power and authority. The eerie, sensuous elegance of the Enchantment--the tigers in the mist, the fish with their mouths full of pearls, the mysterious combatants--is dastan at its best.

Other enchantments from the Naval Kishor Ḥamzah cycle also offered unusual artistic possibilities. One female magician, Malikah Bahār (Mistress Spring) maddened her victims with the ecstasy of spring, and thus brought them under her power. Another enchantment, the “**ṭilism-e nādir-e farang**” (unique European enchantment), featured a platoon of European soldiers saluting with rifles, then doffing their hats, while an organ played. The Naval Kishor Ḥamzah edition was a limit case: full of the most extraordinary enchantments, the most inventive use of magic, the greatest predominance of marvelous combats with magicians or demons, over ordinary combats with rival kings or evil human beings. “The limit which magic has reached in the **Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah** is such that the mind can't go beyond it.”¹⁸ The classical Urdu dastan became so inconceivably long and so elaborately fantastic that it almost exhausted its own possibilities; the Naval Kishor Ḥamzah edition was both its crowning glory and its *coup de grace*.

By 1905, the era of dastan writing was essentially over. Sharar is very clear about the reason: the displacement of dastans by novels in (educated) readers' taste.¹⁹ Many of these early novels themselves, in both Urdu and Hindi, in fact borrowed heavily from dastan literature.²⁰ Oral dastan narration survived a bit longer, and died with the last famous professional narrator in 1928.²¹ **Dāstān gof** is a fascinating subject for literary and historical study; justice has never been done to its artistry and sophisticated appeal, or to its influence on the life and literature of its day.

For our purposes, however, the features to be noted about dastans are those they share with the shorter qissas drawn from the same Persian tradition. Dastan heroes are always handsome, virtuous, gallant, and nobly born; they are almost always princes. The ladies they love are their counterparts in every respect, except that they may be Parī princesses rather than human ones. Parīs are beautiful, winged spirits, almost always female, attracted by human beauty, usually helpful to humans (unless slighted in love), and possessed of many magical powers. The less interesting Devs are little more than ogres: they can often fly, and they have terrifying, mountainous bodies, and usually horns as well. They are man-eaters by nature, monstrously strong, and almost always hostile.

Equally hostile are the magicians, who are served by magically animated puppets (**putle**) and by many powerful spirits (**bīr**) whom they have subjugated. They deal in rivers of blood, rings of fire, showers of stones, frightful illusions, deadly palaces, enchanted armies; they see into the future, and inherit occult knowledge from the past. Each has his preferred kinds of enchantment (**ṭilism**). These and other dastan characters are “conceived of as filling certain functional roles” in which “no question of development or change” and “no gradations of

Introduction to the World's Great Folk Epics, ed. by Felix J. Oinas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 82.

¹⁸Gyān Chand, **Urdū kī naśrī dāstāneñ**, pp. 540-544, 570.

¹⁹Sharar, **Guzishtaḥ Lakhnaḥ**, p. 188.

²⁰On early Urdu novels see Russell, “The Development of the Modern Novel in Urdu.” On early Hindi novels see Majṭhiyā, **Hindī ke ṭilasmī va jāśūsī upanyās**, especially the discussion of Devakīnandan Khatrī, pp. 32-75.

²¹Taḥsin Sarvarī, “Mīr Bāqir ,Alī,” p. 73.

passions or ambiguities in individuals” can arise. Thus characters often have names or epithets expressive of their roles.²² In fact the characters are so equated with their roles that in the last part of the Urdu Ḥamzah cycle, the original heroes and villains are all replaced by their sons or even sometimes grandsons, without any particular change in their mutual relationships.²³

Events in the dastan world consist of adventures which the heroes and their allies encounter. The details of life between adventures, and the process of getting from one adventure to the next, are treated cavalierly. Thus the dastan world seems to consist of a series of separate “islands” in space and time, each containing one or more high peaks of adventure. Though the hero may seem to wander haphazardly from one such “island” to the next, his progress is not ultimately random: the whole narrative is the history of his attempts to accomplish one or more major quests. Not all his episodic encounters are directly related to his quest, but they are all brought about by his role as a traveler and seeker. When he achieves his goal, he reaches a secure and happy state in which his desires have been fulfilled, and further hazards are not to be expected--unless another quest looms up before him.

Quests may have various goals: the answer to some mysterious question, the possession of some magic object, the destruction of some deadly enchantment. But the “most commonplace” kind of quest is “the search for union with some beloved.”²⁴ Stories like **Lailā Majnūn** and **Shīrīn Farhād**, in which passionate love appears as the central obsession of the lovers’ whole lives, have been a minor, though persistent, part of the qissa tradition. As a result, love in the dastan world is like an illness for which the beloved is a magic cure. It is a sudden illness, with unmistakable symptoms: “lover and beloved, wounded by each other’s glance, fall fainting where they stand.” While fainting is appropriate, “to cause love to increase by showing all the stages of its progress is absolutely impossible, and to describe at length merely the lover’s and beloved’s fancies and thoughts is completely dry and devoid of interest.”²⁵ The beloved may appear at intervals in the course of a hero’s adventures, but she soon disappears again. Through whatever dangers and difficulties, she is always faithful in her love. But only if she is a peripheral figure, a bonus acquired in the course of some other quest, is she sometimes won before the end of the narrative--and in that case, she promptly vanishes into a harem for safekeeping while the hero continues to pursue his real objective. Sometimes he may acquire several women in the course of his adventures; at the end of his quest he collects them one by one from wherever he has left them, and marries them all.

The dastan hero lives in a world full of marvelous events. John Stevens divides such events into three categories: “mysterious” events are “unmotivated, unexplained and inexplicable”; “magical” events are controlled by man; and “miraculous” events are controlled by God.²⁶ In a sense the dastan world fits this typology, for it rests on the strong opposition between the (black) magic controlled by men, which must always be evil in the eyes of good Muslims, and the miraculous events ultimately controlled, however obscurely or indirectly, by God. Magicians work through spells and charms to create their enchantments. But the dastan hero is aided by the arcane powers of **pīrs**, **faqīrs**, and other holy personages and divine

²²Hanaway, “Formal Elements,” pp. 154-155.

²³Gyān Chand, **Urdū kī naśrī dāstāneñ**, p. 530.

²⁴Gyān Chand, **Urdū kī naśrī dāstāneñ**, pp. 60-61.

²⁵Suhail Buḡhārī, “Urdū dāstān,” p. 92.

²⁶Stevens, **Medieval Romance**, pp. 99-101.

emissaries. He may be given a magic object, a talisman which grants some power or wards off some danger. He may be told the secret Name of God (**ism-e aẓam**) which when recited destroys all enchantments; in which case his enemies will try to prevent him from remembering or reciting it. Or he may somehow discover the predestined counter-spell which dissolves one particular enchantment. Thanks to such special help and to the superhuman ingenuity of his clever spies and secret agents (**,ayyār**), the hero is able to overcome magicians without personally indulging in magic.

Analyzing Persian qissas, Hanaway notices a steady increase in marvelous events over time: as qissas “evolved away from the austerities of the epic, they became more and more extravagant, and manifestations of supernatural power became more frequent.”²⁷ In Urdu dastans this trend reaches its full glory. Not only is the **Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah** full of the marvelous, but it grows progressively fuller--and its best section is the fullest of all: in the **Ṭilism-e hoshrubā** “it’s as though there’s nothing but magic.”²⁸ Viqār ,Aẓīm goes so far as to make the marvelous the single defining feature of the genre. “Those facets of amazement and surprise, and beauty and variety, which are outside the world of reality and the limits of nature, are necessary elements of dastan narrative; and the presence of these elements makes dastan, dastan.”²⁹

These marvelous events have, as Tzvetan Todorov argues, a fundamental value to the story-telling process itself. To Todorov it is no accident that the magic-filled fairy tale “gives us the first, and also the stablest, form of narrative.” For even the most elementary narrative “includes two types of episodes: those which describe a state of equilibrium or disequilibrium, and those which describe the transition from one to the other.”³⁰ The basic narrative question “Then what happened?” cannot be answered without introducing such “transitional” episodes to break into every established state of affairs and advance the story. Marvelous events recommend themselves for this transitional role: they happen arrestingly and unmotivatedly, and can be arranged to create a wide variety of striking effects. They thus offer a pliable and powerful raw material for **dāstān gof**, and narrators have made the fullest use of their possibilities.

In fact, narrators make so much use of marvelous events that in a sense they lose their marvelousness and become the “normal”: the predominant, common, expected, everyday events of the dastan genre. Dastans are “formulaic” works which create pleasure by intensifying a familiar experience: through repetition, they teach us how to enjoy their imaginary world without constantly comparing it to our own real one.³¹ Accustomed to marvelous events, the hearer or reader comes to accept them as proper to the dastan world--in effect, as natural.

Andre Jolles, in quest of the “simple forms” which he believes to underlie all literary genres, describes a narrative form in which “the marvelous is not marvelous but natural.” To him, this form expresses the rebellion of a naive morality against what is seen as “immoral” reality. To pursue its rebellion it resorts to a far-away place and a long-ago time, for too much

²⁷Hanaway, “Formal Elements,” p. 153.

²⁸Gyān Chand, **Urdū kī naśrī dāstāneñ**, pp. 531-532.

²⁹Viqār ,Aẓīm, **Hamārī dāstāneñ**, p. 249.

³⁰Todorov, **The Fantastic**, pp. 162-164.

³¹Cawelti, **Adventure, Mystery, and Romance**, p. 10.

historical accuracy would break the power of the “natural” and necessary marvelous”³² If this notion of a moral rebellion against the limitations of reality is extended to include an esthetic rebellion as well, it takes us into the heart of the dastan world. Humans should be able to cultivate heroic virtue in a world that is morally responsive and sensuously satisfying. Their dignity should be recognized by the great powers of the universe: non-human beings of all species should be strongly moved to seek them out and influence their destiny. Humans should take great risks, struggle gallantly--and succeed in achieving lasting, worthwhile goals. In the dastan world, all these marvelous things happen.

It is thus unnecessary to maintain, as does Mia I. Gerhardt, that medieval Muslim audiences hardly made any sharp distinction between natural and supernatural. For such audiences, Gerhardt says, “on the outskirts of the earth the known and explored regions gradually merged into ‘other-worlds’ of demons and fairy beings; but these were still conceived as terrestrial, and if need be, visitable.”³³ Children and the credulous may in fact have approached dastans with such naiveté. But dastans were also enjoyed by the sophisticated, as an elegant and voluptuous kind of escape literature. The great Urdu poet Ġhālib wrote to a friend that he was “in clover”:

A volume of the *Tale of Amir Hamza* has come--about 600 pages of it--and a volume of the same size of *Bostan i Khayal* (The Garden of Fancy). And there are seventeen bottles of good wine in the pantry. So I read all day and drink all night.

‘The man who wins such bliss can only wonder
What more had Jamshed? What more Alexander?’³⁴

Any reader of Tolkien might say as much.

The free play of the uninhibited artistic imagination was thus the basis of the dastan world and the source of all its marvels. But as Northrop Frye rightly says, “the uninhibited imagination, in the structural sense, produces highly conventionalized art.”³⁵ We will discuss this point at length in later chapters. But certainly the basic narrative framework of qissas and dastans, from the shortest to the longest, is made by repeating and recombining a limited stock of narrative elements in a limited number of ways.

As an example I offer an adventure of Amīr Ḥamzah’s. Translating such long excerpts is necessary, since the originals are neither well known to Western scholars, nor readily available. But it presents some special problems as well, for the originals are often (as in this case) totally unspaced, unpunctuated, and, by the nature of the scripts in which they are written, devoid of capitalization as well. I offer a compromise: punctuation and capitalization have been imposed, but paragraphing has not. The implications of such a lack of typographical aids will be discussed in Chapter Eight. In translating too, I have tried to retain significant stylistic features (tense shifts, repetitions) where they exist, while smoothing out minor problems (misspellings, confusion of gender and number, etc.). In this adventure Amir Ḥamzah meets a Dev, or demon, named ,Ifrit.

³²Jolles, *Formes Simples*, pp. 192-193.

³³Gerhardt, *The Art of Story-Telling*, p. 193.

³⁴Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, trans. and eds., *Ghalib, 1797-1869; vol. 1: Life and Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 255.

³⁵Frye, *Fables of Identity*, p. 27.

From that cave comes the sound of a drum. When the Amīr went into that cave he saw that ,Ifrīt is sleeping soundly and the drum-like noise of his snores travels a long way, making the beholders utterly terrified. Amīr Ḥamzah said in his heart, “To kill a sleeper is the height of unmanliness, great pitilessness.” Having taken out the dagger of Rustam from his belt, he thrust it so forcefully into ,Ifrīt’s foot that it penetrated to the hilt. ,Ifrīt, flinging out his foot, said, “The mosquitoes are pestering me! Where has this army of mosquitoes come from, who don’t let me sleep my fill? They absolutely don’t stop biting even to breathe!” Amīr Ḥamzah said in his heart, “Good God! If this rascal takes such a blow for a mosquito, then what effect will more thrusts have on him? How will this wretch even perceive them?” The Amīr, having seized both his arms, forcefully held him down and raised the cry “God is great!” so forcefully that he terrified the whole of Mount Qāf and the magicians. ,Ifrīt, fearful, arose; confused by dread of that cry, in the stupor of sleep he thought that the earth had opened or the sky had fallen on the earth. When he rubbed his eyes and looked, he saw the face of the Earthquake of Qāf [Ḥamzah]. Then consternation overtook him; he began to tremble like a willow and say, “Oh mortal, I know, and fully recognize, that you are the bearer of my death. My life will be lost at your hands. For this reason I had come and hidden here, that perhaps hidden in this corner I might be saved from your hand, and staying here I might find peace. But you’ve come here too, and you’ve subdued me. However, now I may die or live, but I won’t leave you alive either! I won’t turn aside from encountering you.” Having said this, he fell upon the Amīr like a tall tree to which some millstones were attached, and showed the Amīr his demonic power. The Amīr, having stopped him with the Name of Solomon, cut him in two. Then the Amīr, without even taking a breath, put a hand on ,Ifrīt’s waist and pushed him down. ,Ifrīt had indeed been cut in two, but one tendon still held, so that his breath stayed trapped in his body. ,Ifrīt said, “Oh mortal, you’ve killed me. Now put out your hand so that this tendon that has still held may be separated, and my soul, leaving the body, may find release from this distress and affliction.” Amīr Ḥamzah put out his hand once more and fulfilled his request. The tendon had no sooner separated, than both halves flew up into the sky, and from there, having become two more ,Ifrīts, descended before Amīr Ḥamzah. In short, in the space of an afternoon thousands of ,Ifrīts were born, all kinds of Devs like mountains were born. Amīr Ḥamzah grew extremely worried. Seeing the situation, he became quite astounded: “Oh God! Whichever one I kill becomes two and confronts me, and consumes my force and power!” Just then, from the right came the sound of a greeting. The Amīr found help from God. When Amīr Ḥamzah turned and looked, he knew that it was Ḥazrat Ḳhizr, on whom be peace, the prophet of fortunate destiny. Amīr Ḥamzah, having replied to his greeting, made his plea, and having kissed his feet said, “O Ḥazrat! My two arms have grown weak with killing and killing. But it’s a strange thing, such that my intelligence is astounded, and my heart is sorely anxious, for whichever one I kill becomes two and confronts me. Not even one of them, when wounded, goes to hell.” Ḥazrat Ḳhizr said, “Oh Amīr Ḥamzah, you brought this grievous labor upon yourself, and were careless in every matter. Otherwise it would not have been thus, you would not have lost your resources for nothing. You know that this is a **ṭilism**. Without looking at your tablet, you do whatever your heart desires! And you do not fear the workshops

of magic and enchantments! Now do one thing: breathe on an arrow the Name which I tell you, and the observance of which I teach you, and shoot it at that one among the Devs on whose forehead a spot like a cornelian is shining, and whose face is glowing like a ruby. The demon will be repelled, and your life will be saved from the magic of these Devs.” Amīr Ḥamzah acted on Ḥazrat Ḳhizr’s command, he used that auspicious Name and an arrow accordingly. He saw that there were no Devs, that same ,Ifrit was lying in two pieces, the whole field was empty, there was neither Dev nor any other demon.³⁶

This adventure is a suitable one for study, for it comes from the Urdu dastan with much the longest continuing history.³⁷ The text is based on the work of Ḡhālīb Lakhnavī (Calcutta, 1865)--as plagiarized and modified by ,Abdullāh Bilgrāmī and published by the Naval Kishor Press in 1871. This same version was revised in 1874 and again in 1887,³⁸ and many times reprinted; it has been kept in print by one of the heirs of Naval Kishor almost up to the present.

And the text remains quite close to the Persian--not merely the Indo-Persian, but the Iranian. The Urdu Ḥamzah has many adventures very similar to those of the Iranian Ḥamzah; the adventure translated above is one of them. Moreover, in the dastan Ḥamzah fights, and eventually kills, Safed Dev (the White Dev), an important demon killed by Rustam in the Persian national epic, the **Shāh nāmāh**; he also, as we have seen, carries Rustam’s dagger.³⁹ Examples could be multiplied.

The effect of its closeness to the Persian, its early date, and its relative shortness (544 pages) is to keep this text free of the elaborate style and even more elaborate enchantments cultivated in late-nineteenth-century Urdu dastans. It enables us to see the sort of simple narrative framework upon which these dastans embroidered. And it is a simple framework indeed. Ḥamzah successively subjugates all manner of human kings and warriors, interspersed with all manner of demons; he also marries a number of beautiful women. Since he spends much time in Mount Qāf, legendary home of magicians, Parīs, Devs, and other races, he has many chances to encounter such demons. Frequently he is able to subdue the demons through his own efforts, in straightforward combats featuring swords, huge boulders, and giant trees.

But in this case, the demon is too much for him. At first the honors seem to be evenly divided. Ḥamzah is dismayed when ,Ifrit mistakes a deep knife-wound for a mosquito bite, and ,Ifrit is terrified by Ḥamzah’s ferocious battle-cry. Both reactions are emphasized; the reader is obviously being invited to share them. When the actual battle begins, however, the initial success falls to Ḥamzah: invoking the power of Solomon, legendary conqueror of demons, he cuts ,Ifrit almost in two. But he then performs an act of misguided generosity in separating the two halves completely, which permits each half magically to regenerate. Without learning from experience, Ḥamzah continues to cut demons in two until he is battling thousands, and growing more and more hard-pressed and anxious.

³⁶Bilgrāmī, **Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamzah**, pp. 282-283. While in Arabic story literature “,ifrit” is the name of a species of demons, in this text ,Ifrit is the personal name of one particular Dev.

³⁷Pritchett, **The Romance Tradition**, pp. 29-36.

³⁸Viqār ,Azīm, **Hamārī dāstāneñ**, p. 160.

³⁹Hanaway, “Formal Elements,” p. 157; Hanaway, “Iranian Epics,” p. 82; Bilgrāmī, **Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah**, pp. 282, 334, 525.

His rescuer, Ḥazrat Ḳhiẓr or Ḳhvājah Ḳhiẓr, is a divinely appointed guide and helper to those in need; he is a traditional figure of Islamic story literature. Ḳhiẓr reproaches Ḥamzah's folly: instead of showing a healthy fear of the powers of magic, and seeking the appropriate counter-spell or other remedy on the tablet he had been given, Ḥamzah has been fighting enchanted demons as though they were "ordinary" demons! "You know that this is a **ṭilism**," Ḳhiẓr reminds him. And while almost anything may happen in a **ṭilism**, at the magician's (and the story-teller's) pleasure, **ṭilisms** do have a few rules of their own. No ordinary human actions are effective against them, and they cannot be escaped from. The only way to destroy a **ṭilism** is by bringing some powerful magical counter-force to bear on it. In this case, the counter-force is "miraculous," since it is sent by God. And its action is just as arbitrary as that of the **ṭilism** itself. A specially consecrated arrow shot at a special mark on the forehead of a special Dev is instantly and totally effective.

The privileged status of **ṭilisms** becomes clear when we look at another, superficially similar adventure from the same text. It describes Ḥamzah's encounter with Samandun Dev Hazār-dast (Samandun the Thousand-armed Dev).

Out of fear, Samandun threw a many-ton boulder at the Amīr's head. The Amīr, having warded it off, gave such a sword-stroke that seven of the Dev's hands were cut off by the blow. When they saw this, the other Devs felt their hearts sink. That Dev, disappearing from there, returned after a moment, cured, and again confronted the Amīr and began to fight him. In short, this went on over and over all that day till the evening. At nightfall the Dev went off into the fort, and the Amīr went to sleep under a tree. In a dream Ḥazrat Ḳhiẓr said to the Amīr, "In the fort is a fountain of the water of life (**āb-e ḥayāt**). First go and close it up, then fight him. Otherwise you'll fight like this your whole life and he won't be killed, he won't come beneath your sword." The moment the Amīr had this dream, he awoke with a start. Then having gone into the fort and emptied that fountain, he closed it up with wood. He acted as Ḥazrat Ḳhiẓr had said; and having returned, he went beneath the tree as before, confidently spread his bedding, and remained there. In the morning Samandun, taking his army, came out of the fort. Coming to the field, he had his troops form ranks, and as on the first day, threw a many-ton boulder at the Amīr's head. The Amīr, having warded it off, gave such a blow with one hand that half the Dev's neck was cut through and hung dangling. He ran from the Amīr's presence. The Amīr followed him, and saw that the Dev, when he couldn't find the fountain, beat his head on the ground and died.⁴⁰

In this case a **ṭilism** is not involved; neither any Name, nor the tablet of counter-spells, nor Ḳhiẓr's intervention is required. Ḳhiẓr merely speaks to Ḥamzah in a dream, giving practical advice about ordinary physical actions. Boarding up the fountain of the Water of Life is tactically sensible; it is no more marvelous, in this context, than any other way to cut the enemy's supply line. Ḥamzah acts promptly and confidently and shows not the least surprise at the results. We are back to "ordinary" demons, to the simpler and more "natural" events of the dastan world--as perceived by its inhabitants.

The elements of these adventures--the brave but limited human hero, the demons, the single combat, the Water of Life, the powerful helper, the efficacy of names and spells, the swift changes in fortune, the desperate danger culminating in sudden total triumph--are among the

⁴⁰Bilgrāmī, *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah*, pp. 499-500.

most basic narrative elements of dastan: varied, recombined, elaborated, but always recurring. Sometimes they occur as parts of a **tilism**--a special narrative sub-world which seems supernatural even to dwellers in the dastan world. But often they occur as natural parts of the dastan world, appearing truly “marvelous” only to one who has not assimilated the conventions of the genre.

In addition to their marvelous adventures, heroic quests, and romantic encounters, all the dastans we have, both Persian and Urdu, share significant structural features. Most fundamentally, they are all told in the third person by a particular kind of narrator. As Hanaway writes,

The narrator is omniscient and sets himself at one remove from the events narrated by the constant use of conventional opening phrases. These phrases consist of variations on the pattern “The tellers of stories and the narrators of tales relate that...” Occasionally the presence of the narrator is felt directly. This can be through his direct comments on the action such as “and thus you can see that a bad character leads to bad action,” or by the use of a first-person verb in a phrase such as “and now we will return to the story of so and so and tell of his adventures.” Otherwise the narrators do not participate in the story. The narrators nevertheless project a clear and consistent set of values and opinions.

And, whatever the length and proliferation of detail they may display, in the most basic structural sense all dastans are exceedingly simple. They are, again in Hanaway’s words, linear, open-ended, flexible, and unsophisticated in structure. The stories begin at the beginning and proceed in a fairly straight line to the end. There are, with one minor exception...no flashbacks. The stories are never begun *in media res* or worked backward and forward as they are in modern literature.⁴¹

The implications of this kind of structure will be discussed in Chapter Eight.

During the later nineteenth century the long dastan, in all its elaborate glory, was much more esteemed than the short dastan, or qissa. But short qissas were always present, and they endured. Qissa as a printed genre has flourished and developed in the twentieth century, while the art of **dāstān gof** has been lost forever.

⁴¹Hanaway, **Love and War**, p. 15; Hanaway, “Formal Elements,” p. 142.