

THE RAW AND THE REFINED: COMEDY IN THE URDU DASTAN TRADITION

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The few Westerners who have studied traditional Urdu romances, or dastans, have known at once how to describe them: they are "enormous cycles of medieval romance, closely comparable to those of medieval Europe."¹ The comparison is an altogether natural one, based on broad similarities of structure and content. The following description of medieval European romance, for example, applies perfectly to the Urdu dastan as well:

The medieval romance is a narrative about knightly prowess and adventure, in verse or in prose, intended primarily for the entertainment of a listening audience....The effort to idealize chivalry produces simplified characters, either heroes or villains, without psychological subtleties, and the happy ending is customary....The romancers stress the lavishness and splendor of feasts and other public ceremonies, often with a prolixity irritating to the modern reader, and describe in similar detail the paraphernalia of courtly life....they regularly interpret ancient of exotic stories in terms of the contemporary and the familiar. Another marked characteristic is the conspicuous presence of the supernatural...²

A particular narrative style is another shared trait, and an especially conspicuous one. For the way that medieval romances are put together is so unlike other kinds of narrative organization that medievalists have groped for words to describe it. Finally they have had to coin their own terms: words like "entrelacement" and "polyphonic narrative." Gillian Beer's discussion of this style is so lucid and helpful that it deserves to be quoted in full:

What distinguishes the medieval romances is the way in which they make available and apparent simultaneously all their

preoccupations. Nothing is subordinated. C. S. Lewis suggested the phrase 'polyphonic narrative' for the organization of such works. In music, polyphony is a form in which the various voices move in apparent independence and freedom though fitting together harmonically. This is an apt metaphor for romance narration where very varied characters and episodes move freely while at the same time being interwoven to compose a congruent whole. The action is intricate, often dense, but the polyphonic form means that the intensity is based on the senses (bright colors, sounds, swift changes of scene, beautiful women, elaborate descriptions of architecture and ornament). It is rarely an intensity of plot-climax. The crucial or violent episodes tend to be recorded in the same narrative tone as the descriptions. If we are to understand the romance method we have to abandon the critical metaphors of perspective (with its suggestion of far and near) or depth (with its suggestion that what is deepest is most significant). Instead we are presented with a thronging, level world, held at a constant distance from us, colourful, full of detail and particularity, ramifying endlessly outwards. The characteristic narrative device is that of 'entrelacement,' interlacing stories so that nothing is ever finally abandoned or circumscribed.³

Exactly this "polyphonic narrative," with its vividness derived from elaborately sensuous and sumptuous fantasies, with its interweaving of many strands of adventure into an endless and hypnotic tapestry, is also the characteristic narrative style of dastan; not coincidentally, it is a style well suited to extemporaneous oral composition and recitation.

Like the dastan, the medieval romance takes place, as Auerbach puts it, in a world that "not only contains a practically uninterrupted series of adventures; more specifically, it contains nothing but the requisites of adventure."⁴ And dastan adventures, like those of medieval romance, often involve the "marvelous" in all its senses: exotic, mysterious, magical, and miraculous.⁵ Gallant heroes, helped at least implicitly by divine favor, conquer villains who are embodiments of evil; they love, rescue, and marry maidens of incomparable beauty in the course of achieving one or more appropriate quests. The ending is always in some sense happy: though the hero may die, he keeps his dignity, and is mourned with a gratifying degree of sorrow by all the survivors.

In particular, the comparison is often made between the greatest

heroes of the two genres: King Arthur and Amir Hamza. The latter is, despite all manner of anachronisms, declared to be the same Hamza ibn `abd ul-Muttalib who was the Prophet's paternal uncle and early defender. Both heroes are thus in a strong sense champions of the true faith: as King Arthur conquers the paynim with sword and lance and seeks to convert them, Amir Hamza wrestles kafirs to the ground and usually offers them the choice of Islam or death. Both heroes are surrounded by a court of valiant but unruly champions whose private feuds and jealousies can only with difficulty be held in check. Both have marvelous swords and other semi-magical equipment; both have advisors with esoteric powers who come to their aid in time of need--Arthur has Merlyn and Hamza has Buzurchmihir and Khvaja Khizr. Both heroes are peerless in generosity, gallantry, and strength, and their special destinies lead them to fight and conquer not only the mightiest kings of their day, but also evil warriors, wild animals, demons, and magicians of various sorts; God has willed it so, and makes His presence felt in marvelous ways throughout their earthly lives and at the hour of their death.

Perhaps by their example, both heroes have also been able to inspire story-tellers and story-writers to remarkable feats of endurance: if the Arthurian cycle exists as dozens of episodes in numerous French and English versions, the Dastan-e Amir Hamza has been told in a single awe-inspiring edition of forty-six volumes, averaging around nine hundred pages each, published between 1881 and about 1906 by the Naval Kishor Press of Lucknow.⁶ The Hamza cycle has had many shorter, mostly one-volume versions as well, in Persian, Dakhani (an early form of Urdu), and Urdu, as well as other languages spoken by Muslims all over Asia.⁷ Many more similarities could be adduced between the Arthurian and Hamza cycles, but there is one way in which they differ extraordinarily: in what might be called their sense of humor, and the

use they make of comedy.

It is an obvious choice to take Malory as the premier chronicler of Arthur's deeds. And P. J. C. Field points out in his excellent study of Malory's prose style that Malory "takes no risks with his audience's laughter." He permits few comic situations to occur, and insulates the ones that do: "the explicitly humorous passages are almost all in dialogue, and those few narrated are jokes by the characters, not the author being amusing at his characters' expense." Malory offers a few instances of "active horseplay" among knights—as when Sir Belleus climbs into bed with Lancelot, mistaking him for his mistress—and uses a form of what Field calls "verbal play on unknightliness" provided by Sir Dinadan's pungently expressed disdain for the ideals of chivalry. But instances of both these kinds of humor add up by Field's count to fewer than twenty in Malory's extremely long narrative. Beyond these, Field can point only to a form of knightly "irony and understatement" which usually does not "come near to provoking laughter" but does perhaps provide a touch of humorous "exhilaration." By and large Field seems to find Malory's cautious, wary approach to humor quite appropriate to romance style: "The strong and simple emotional responses which romance educes demand that humor be carefully controlled if introduced at all, or it may deflate the reader's whole reaction."⁸ As an admirer of Malory's, I agree with Field. Humor was not Malory's forte, nor was it the forte of medieval European romance in general. The cast of traditional romance characters was quite limited, and most of the important ones would have lost their larger-than-life dignity at the first touch of ridicule. Nor would Malory's own "naive" narrative style, with its directness, simplicity, and chronicle-like literalness, admit of a narrator with complex or qualified attitudes toward his main characters.

By contrast, the Hamza cycle is full of comic inventiveness, rich in

humor of all kinds from the crude to the sophisticated. The source of this humor lies not in any special stylistic devices or ironically distanced narration—for indeed, dastan narrators are as naive (whether genuinely or as a conscious literary device) as romance narrators, and like them observe the constraints of the oral story-telling situation even in print. Rather, it seems to me that the comic richness of the Hamza cycle is largely due to the notion of 'ayyari, and especially to its preeminent representative in the cycle, 'Amar 'Ayyar. Amir Hamza's intimate relationship with 'Amar has no parallel in Arthurian romance—unfortunately for King Arthur, who could certainly have profited by the services of a first-class 'ayyar when it came to dealing with Mordred. In this paper I want to examine, in at least a preliminary way, the comic fruitfulness of 'ayyari.

A preliminary examination is an undertaking in itself, for none of the Urdu Hamza cycle has ever been translated. I have therefore provided two literally translated excerpts: in Appendix A, the story of the birth of Hamza and his milk-sharing "brothers" 'Amar and Muqbil; and in Appendix B, a chapter describing some typical events of their early manhood. The version of the cycle from which these excerpts have been taken is a one-volume one dating from the middle of the nineteenth century; it has been repeatedly edited and reprinted and is still in print today.⁹ The Urdu text is utterly unpunctuated—with an effect quite archaic but not as strange as it would be in English—and full of rhymed prose, only a little of which I have managed to capture in translation.

From the birth stories in Appendix A we can at once recognize Hamza as a predestined hero: his birth, though it takes place in an obscure corner of the Persian empire, is prophesied and eagerly awaited. Buzurchmihr, the emperor Naushervan's wise vizier, seeks Hamza out and joyously proclaims his

future glory. Also prophesied and sought out are two companions for Hamza, whom Buzurchmihr names Muqbil the Faithful, who will be a fine archer, and `Amar, who will be the greatest `ayyar of the age: "sharp and fleet," "full of deceit," "greedy and treacherous," but an absolutely faithful friend to Hamza. `Amar's very birth heralds his nature: it is, in a grotesque way, comic. `Amar's father, a lowly camel-driver, demands that his seven-months-pregnant wife give birth at once, so the baby can be the newborn Hamza's companion, and the lucky parents can be richly rewarded. His wife indignantly refuses, and scolds him vividly in women's language for foolishness; angered, he launches a vicious kick at her stomach which causes `Amar's premature birth--and her death. Wrapping the newborn baby in his sleeve, the father rushes off to present him at court. Greed, violence, impetuosity are in `Amar's genes, along with a penchant for making undignified, ludicrous, crude scenes that the dastan audience can laugh at from a comfortable position of superiority. At once `Amar begins to live up to his heritage: the first act of his infant life is to steal the ring from Buzurchmihr's finger--an act at which Buzurchmihr laughs, and which he declares to be the beginning of `Amar's career.

Just what sort of career was it, in fact, to be an `ayyar? Any answer we can give must be based on extrapolation, for nowhere do we have a definitive origin-myth or code of rules or handbook for `ayyari. The Urdu dastan treats it as a special kind of profession, passed on from master to pupil, and seemingly regulated by a sort of guild also, for there is `ayyari dress and an `ayyari language by which members of the profession can recognize their peers. (Interestingly, Hamza too knows this language, for he and `Amar are described as using it for secrecy in times of danger.) `Ayyars seem to be a normal part of a courtly retinue, and can defect to another king of feudal lord if discontented; kings have whole troupes of them, though only a few

emerge as individuals. They specialize in reconnaissance, espionage, disguise (impersonating young girls with implausible ease), commando tactics (scaling walls, tunneling into fortresses, killing sentries, knocking enemies unconscious with drugs), and other forms of guerrilla warfare and "dirty tricks." They help the dastan heroes, who as good Muslims cannot deal in magic, to overcome enemy magicians: they are in practice, though never in theory, magicians of a sort themselves. Sometimes they are given semi-magical weapons and devices by venerable benefactors who are, ultimately, agents of God's will. Ayyars are not really part of the feudal elite, and so have less dignity to uphold; they are tremendously given to playing practical jokes, especially vulgar ones, on each other and on their enemies. Bausani refers to them as "trickster figures"¹⁰—which is, if anything, an understatement.

Let us look at the further exploits of the 'king of the ayyars of the age," Amar, as described in the chapter translated in Appendix B. First of all, he figures as a foil in a brief comic anecdote involving Adi's incredible appetite, a stock motif in all traditions of folk humor and one which must surely have delighted the dastan audience. Elsewhere in the dastan Adi's appetite becomes a weapon, as he eats an enemy out of house and home; but it is a double-edged weapon, for in Hamza's absence he later deserts to the enemy when Amar claims to be unable to feed him. Here the scene is set for such future episodes, with a bit of tension between Amar and Adi, resolved with a great show of the Amir's generosity. This is a rare episode, for the humor is generated by a stock comic character, almost the only one in the dastan and not by Amar.

Next Amar humiliates the two emissaries from Naushervan who have brought an insulting letter to Hamza. By a pun on their names, elaborately explained in the text but really quite farfetched, one emissary is identified

as an ass and the other as a dog. At the formal banquet given in their honor, `Amar insists on treating them accordingly, first offering them grass and bones to eat, later presenting them with a pack-saddle and a dog-blanket in lieu of robes of honor. Hamza himself tries to prevent him, and indeed all those present remonstrate with him, but in vain; `Amar has his way, and with impunity. He arranges a jest which both is foolish (inappropriate, undignified) in itself, and makes the hated emissaries look foolish by heaping scorn and ridicule on them. The dastan audience can thus laugh both at `Amar, and with him. `Amar is the raw in the midst of the refined: he does what no one else would dream of doing, but everyone secretly loves to see him do it.

When `Amar next appears, it is in order to be first thoroughly and comically humiliated, then restored to an even greater state of pride. Buzurchmihr sends `Amar an "ayyari outfit" through his son Buzurg Ummid, who persuades `Amar to strip in order to put it on. But then he keeps `Amar standing naked for an hour while he reproaches him for his greedy haste and immodesty. `Amar weeps and begs for his clothing; finally Buzurg Ummid laughs and says, "Oh father of all the runners of the world, you will make many people naked and anxious, and take off the clothes of many; therefore I made you naked, so you will remember this time in the future." `Amar replies, "I am Your Lordship's pupil." An elegant little exchange, nicely ambiguous on both sides: is Buzurg Ummid affectionately chastening Amar, as one might first conclude, or honing him into a more highly motivated tormentor of his enemies? When `Amar claims to be Buzurg Ummid's pupil, what lesson has he learned? The humor in this passage is of a complex order.

But Buzurg Ummid then proceeds to clothe `Amar in his new ayyari gear, and what a marvelous array it is! It includes a novel sort of codpiece (or jock strap?) for which `Amar is duly and humorously grateful, and a variety of other practical and elegant items which create a sumptuous,

voluptuous, thoroughly delightful effect that cannot be captured by brief enumeration: see this passage in Appendix B for an example of Urdu dastan at its best. `Amar then rushes to report to Hamza, telling him of the arrival of Buzurg Ummid and the gift of the new outfit all in one breath, as eagerly and excitedly as a five-year-old. Even the syntax shows his comically exaggerated pride and delight. Hamza's own pleasure is expressed with proper decorum, and Buzurg Ummid is formally welcomed into the city.

Placated by Buzurg Ummid's visit, Hamza, `Amar, Muqbil, and their entourage then return with him to Naushervan's court. En route, Hamza and `Amar, all alone, encounter a huge lion. `Amar at once climbs a "splendid big tree" and calls urgently to Hamza to join him. Hamza laughs, and accuses `Amar tauntingly of trying to frighten him; he then challenges and kills the lion. `Amar's raw, very human fear is juxtaposed to the Amir's deliberate, willed courting of danger. The audience laugh at `Amar to deny that they share his fear, to align themselves instead with the heroic Hamza.

But once the lion is dead, `Amar is in his element. Out of mischief he stuffs and mounts it, takes it along to Mada'in, and poses it artistically on a hillock, where it terrifies first a crew of hapless grass-cutters, and finally all the citizens, whose panic is made comically vivid. Naushervan and all his champions themselves are intimidated, although they look, trembling, from a place of safety. `Amar has gotten his own back: if he feared a live lion, he has caused others to fear a dead one; if his fear was laughable to Hamza, theirs will be worthy of universal ridicule. His trick has also served to emphasize both the conspicuous cowardice of Naushervan and his champions, and the undemonstrative courage of Hamza's other milk-brother, Muqbil, who passes by, sees the lion, matter-of-factly approaches to kill it, and spots it as a fake. He guesses the trick to be `Amar's work, tells Naushervan so, and

is rewarded with gold coins and other gifts.

But he pays dearly for his increased prestige: he at once falls foul of `Amar when they chance to meet. If he is a little hasty and arrogant to `Amar, `Amar is thoroughly obnoxious to him, and in fact is "just looking for an excuse" to quarrel. The two trade insults, and `Amar suddenly pulls out his ayyari-slingshot and strikes Muqbil's forehead with a stone at close range, drenching him in blood. Muqbil complains to Hamza, who demands an explanation. In a speech which is a masterpiece of chutzpah, misrepresentation, and humor, `Amar plays the injured innocent, blaming Muqbil for the whole incident since Muqbil initially had not greeted him with sufficient warmth! Hamza seeks simply to reconcile them, but `Amar continues to sulk: Muqbil is "a gentleman of glory and splendor," he says with heavy sarcasm, while he himself is merely "a wretched commonplace ayyar. Finally Muqbil, the injured party, is obliged to bribe the ever-greedy `Amar with a box of gold pieces in order to achieve a reconciliation! Hamza and Muqbil, as adults, are giving each other meaningful looks, and humoring `Amar as they would a perverse child inclined to tantrums--a sense of their toleration of his antics emerges clearly from the scene. `Amar is dangerously powerful, but emotionally immature and utterly selfish; through Hamza's loyal protection he is sheltered from the discipline which adulthood forces on most of us. `Amar does exactly as he pleases, and instead of being punished for it is rewarded--how the children of all ages in the audience must have relished this fantasy of power without responsibility!

For `Amar cannot be punished. He is an intimate part of Hamza's greatness, as can be seen from the splendid description of Hamza's army drawn up in full array to greet Naushervan, with kings at Hamza's right, champions at his left--and `Amar in front, brilliantly equipped and making a great deal of musical (?) noise. Much later in the dastan, Hamza does once try to punish

`Amar: he has him whipped for disobeying a direct order. But `Amar retaliates in kind, and this traumatic, impossible enmity between them soon ends in what might be called a draw, with both realizing that they have gone too far and Hamza retaining only the slightest moral advantage. `Amar and Hamza are the contrasted halves of a whole human personality--`Amar is so very raw, and Hamza so very refined, that they cannot do without each other. Throughout the dastan they are inseparable: even if they must remain physically apart, they send each other dreams in time of need, to warn each other of danger. The dastan is shaped by `Amar's powers of `ayyari and Hamza's powers as a fighter. `Amar's feats are often vulgar, even scatological, reflecting his love for humiliating his enemies with laxatives, nakedness, sexual insults, etc.--though he is frequently and casually violent as well. Hamza's feats are always impeccable, chivalrous, performed strictly according to the rules: even on the battlefield he will not attack until he has been attacked three times.

This paradoxical pairing of Hamza and `Amar works particularly well within the traditional narrative structure common to both romance and dastan: the entrelacement, the polyphonic narrative described by so many medievalists is excellently suited to an alternation of elements, to shifts from the courtly to the crude and back. A great variety of comic effects can be achieved without the least threat to the dignity of the courtly characters. (Loyalty to a faithful dependent and indulgence toward an adopted brother are, after all, feudal virtues which Hamza can quite properly show.) `Ayyari permits a wonderfully multivalent kind of comedy, wild but controllable, which is abundantly present in the Dastan-e Amir Hamza but quite absent from the Arthurian cycle. If King Arthur and Amir Hamza had met, they would have taken to each other at once, and Amir Hamza would certainly have sent King Arthur a

few good avvays.

NOTES

¹Ralph Russell, "The Development of the Modern Novel in Urdu," in The Novel in India: its Birth and Development, ed. by T. W. Clark (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970), pp. 102-141. P. 106.

²Helene Newstead, in A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500, ed., by J. Burke Severs (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967), p. 11.

³Gillian Beer, The Romance (London: Methuen and Co., 1970), pp. 20-21.

⁴Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, tr. by W. R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 136.

⁵John Stevens, Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1973), pp. 99-101.

⁶The standard reference source on the Urdu Hamza cycle is Gyan Cand Jain, Urdu ki nasri dastanen (Karachi: Anjuman-e Taraqqi-e Urdu-e Pakistan, 1969; 2nd ed.).

⁷For a discussion of the spread of the story see "Hamza b. 'Abd al-Muttalib," by G. M. Meredith-Owens, in the Encyclopedia of Islam (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1963-), vol. 3, pp. 152-154.

⁸P. J. C. Field, Romance and Chronicle: A Study of Malory's Prose Style (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1971), pp. 109-112.

⁹Dastan-e Amir Hamza (Lucknow: Tej Kumar Press, 1969), pp. 35-39 (Appendix A) and pp. 70-81 (Appendix B).

¹⁰Alessandro Bausani, "An Islamic Echo of the 'Trickster'? The avvays in Indo-Persian and Malay Romances." In Gururajamanjarika: studi in Onore de Giuseppe Tucci (Naples, 1974), pp. 457-467.