

CHRISTINA OESTERHELD

Qissa-e Mehrafroz-o-Dilbar

THE material presented here is the result of my involvement with the history of Urdu literature for teaching purposes. My research interest so far has been centered on contemporary Urdu fiction, and, to a lesser degree, poetry. Therefore, I will not be able to offer any profound observations of textual and historical importance but just a few impressions and questions which occurred to me while reading the *Qissa-e Mehrafroz-o-Dilbar* (hereafter referred to as the *Qissa*).

A critical edition of the *Qissa*, with introduction and notes, was published by Mas'ūd Ḥusain Khān in 1966 in both Urdu and Devanagari scripts (2nd Urdu edition, 1988). Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to get hold of the Devanagari edition. A comparison of both editions would without any doubt help clarify questions concerning writing errors, the interpretation/reading of certain words, and the pronunciation of archaic forms, which is not always clearly indicated in the Urdu script. To reach any final conclusion concerning the accuracy and faithfulness of the critical editions, both of them would have to be compared with the only extant manuscript, held in the private library of Āghā Ḥaidar Ḥasan at Hyderabad, Deccan. I've had to rely exclusively on the Urdu edition which seems to be quite faithful to the text and free of obvious manipulations. However, the spelling of certain forms has been modernized according to contemporary usage (e.g., *us* instead of *ūs*), as indicated by the editor (pp. 35–6).

Both Gayān Čand Jain in his *Urdū kī Naṣrī Dāstānēn*¹ and Jamīl Jālibī in his *Tarikh-e Adab-e Urdū*² refer to the printed Urdu edition by Mas'ūd

¹(Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdū Akādami, 1987), p. 189.

²Vol. II, Part 2 (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab, 1982), p. 1083.

Ḥusain Khān. To my knowledge, no study of the *Qiṣṣa* has so far appeared in English.

According to Mas'ūd Ḥusain Khān, the *Qiṣṣa* was written between 1732 and 1759. Jamīl Jālibī, too, assumes that the *Qiṣṣa* dates from the middle of the eighteenth century or slightly earlier. The name of its author is given as Navāb 'Īsvī Khān Bahādur, who is also supposed to be the author of the Braj Bhasha *Ras Čandrikā*, a prose commentary on the *Satsaī* of Bihārīlāl, written around 1750.³ The language of the *Qiṣṣa* points to the writer's thorough knowledge of and proficiency in literary Braj Bhasha. It is closer to Braj and Bundeli than any other contemporary or later Urdu narrative. The question may arise: should we call it Urdu at all, simply because the manuscript is written in the Urdu script? Let us return to this question later.

The only available MS of the *Qiṣṣa* held in the library of Āghā Ḥaidar Ḥasan was found in Gwalior. Jālibī agrees with Prakāsh Mūnis and Gayān Čand Jain's conclusion that the author lived in a small state (Narwar Rāj) in Gwalior. On the other hand, Mas'ūd Ḥusain Khān feels strongly that the numerous references to the architecture, lifestyle and customs of the Red Fort in Delhi contained in the work rather hint at the author's contact with the Mughal court. He is reluctant to accept the author's ascription to Gwalior, unless the MS of *Ras Čandrikā* in Urdu and Devanagari scripts, said to be preserved in the Ṭikamgarh State Library (M.P.), is made available and thoroughly analyzed. Apart from these speculations, is it not possible that the writer lived in different places at different stages of his life? The short quotation from *Ras Čandrikā* given by Jain is indeed very close to the language of the *Qiṣṣa*.⁴ Moreover, Gwalior was one of the centers of medieval literature. McGregor mentions it as the place where romances of western (=Rājasthānī) origin gained currency outside Rajasthan and were partly or entirely adapted into Braj Bhasha.⁵ The cultural atmosphere of the place might have been fertile enough for just such an oeuvre.

At any rate, all these scholars regard the *Qiṣṣa-e Mehrafroz-o-Dilbar* as

³Cf. R.S. McGregor, *The Language of Indrajit of Orchā: A Study of Early Braj Bhāṣā Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 212.

⁴See Jain, p. 194.

⁵Cf. his *Hindi Literature from its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984), pp. 60–1.

the first known Urdu *dāstān*.⁶ Its composition includes the well-known *dāstān* ingredients and it is influenced by the Persian work *Ḥātim Ṭā'ī*, but the combination of the elements is original. Along with this Persian background, the significance of the tradition of verse romances in the “vernaculars” as forerunners of the *Qiṣṣa* should not be underrated. This process started with the Avadhī romance *Āndāyan* by Maulānā Dā'ūd (1379), in which the Persian *maṣnavī* became “fully Indianised,”⁷ introducing numerous motifs from Indian folktales and imagery from Indian literary traditions. Later Avadhī romances composed by Ṣūfī poets like Quṭban (*Mirgāvātī*, 1503/4), Malik Muḥammad Jāyasī (*Padmāvātī*, 1540/1), or Manjhan (*Madḥumālātī*, around 1550) appear “as the product of a composite culture in which Muslim and Islamic elements have been Indianised.”⁸ As far as I can see, the Ṣūfī component has been reduced to the imagery, though, in 'Īsvī Khān's work. Its outlook appears to be predominantly secular. At any rate, this question deserves further investigation.

In addition to the Avadhī romances, a later tradition of narrative poetry and prose is that of Dakhinī/Dakkinī. The *maṣnavī Gulshan-e 'Ishq* by Nuṣratī (d. 1674) starts off with almost the same story as the *Qiṣṣa* of 'Īsvī Khān.⁹ A prose work based on similar stories also exists in Dakhinī, Mullā Vajhī's *Sab Ras* (1635), which is an allegorical tale containing lengthy didactic passages. However, it is unlikely that 'Īsvī Khān drew any inspiration from *Sab Ras*. He may not even have been aware of its existence. The two works are completely different in structure and style. After the customary invocation, “*bismillāh ar-raḥmān ar-raḥīm*,” 'Īsvī Khān begins narrating the story without the conventional preliminaries of the *maṣnavī* and *dāstān*, without, that is, the praise of God, the Prophet, the king, or information on the author and the occasion/reason for writing the story. The story itself is free of any didactics, these having been relegated to the section called the “*Naṣīḥat-nāma*.” There is not the slightest attempt at creating rhyme, unlike *Sab Ras*, which is written in rhymed

⁶*Dāstān* is used as an umbrella term by these authors for both the shorter *qiṣṣa* as well as the longer, more elaborate and complex *dāstān*, without the differentiation made by Frances Pritchett in *Marvelous Encounters: Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi* (Delhi: Manohar, 1985).

⁷McGregor, *Hindi Literature*, p. 27.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁹Cf. Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 55.

prose. In spite of the considerable temporal distance between the two works, they do share a number of linguistic features: archaic forms of nouns, like *nāñv* for *nām* (cf. Old Braj *nāñu*, Apabhr. *naum*), and of postpositions like *sūñ* and *sēti* for *sē* or *kūñ/kōñ* for *kē*, etc.; nasalization deviating from the standard Hindi/Urdu; insertion of *v* after verbal stems; plural nouns ending in *-āñ* (as well as in other endings). This fact is not surprising, since Dakhinī corresponded “to the Zabān-e Dihlavī and to the regional dialects located around Delhi, such as Dehātī Khaṛī Bolī or Kauravī, Hariyānvī, Mevātī, western Braj Bhāṣā, but partly also to Panjābī, as these were spoken about 1300 AD.”¹⁰ Mutual influences must have continued to a certain degree at all stages. Nevertheless, many archaic forms survived in Dakhinī which were eroded in the North Indian languages and dialects.

Along with these narrative traditions, the influence of Braj Bhasha *ritikāl* poetry is very evident in the story; this could be one more proof of the fact that the author of the *Qiṣṣa* and the author of the *Ras Čandrikā* are the same person. Moreover, the remarkably identical descriptions of female beauty in both works illustrate this point further.

‘Īsvī Khān’s *Qiṣṣa* is made up of two parts: the story proper (113 pages in the printed edition) and a “Naṣīḥat-nāma” (Book of Counsel, 52 pages). It tells the story of a king without a male heir who renounces the world, after which a faqir blesses him and a son (Mehrafrōz) is born to him. When grown up, Mehrafrōz and his friend Nekandesh, the son of the *vazīr*, go out hunting. Mehrafrōz follows a beautiful bird, gets lost in the jungle, falls in love with the *parī* Dilbar, etc., etc. After many adventures, the lovers are happily united and return to Dilbar’s kingdom. The main story is interrupted by six subplots containing further love stories, adventures and magical events (*ṭīlism*). There is nothing new or striking about the story as such. In contrast to later *qiṣṣas* and *dāstāns*, however, not a single verse is included in the text.

The language bears the marks of the period, of different languages and dialects and of different styles. Some peculiarities in wording, morphology and syntax, apart from those mentioned above, are:

¹⁰Sriram Sarma, as quoted in H. Nespital, “The Development of Literary Urdu in Delhi in the 17th and 18th Century with Regard to Changes of its Language Structure,” in *Tender Ironies: Festschrift für Lothar Lutze* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994), p. 145.

Vocabulary:

- frequent use of *kē tā'īn* for *kō* (cf. Braj *tāīn*) as well as *taiṅ* for *tū* (as in Braj) and of *yah* for the 1st person singular when the speaker is female
- use of *kitē* for *kitnē*, *itā* for *itnā*, and *jitē* for *jitnē*, etc.
- forms like *āgūn* for *āgē*, *jad-tad* for *jab-tab*, and *kadhū* for *kabhī*, along with the standard forms; *tabān* for both *jahān* and *vahān*
- numerous words of Indic origin not used in standard Urdu (see below: *nak^b sik^b*)

Morphology and syntax:

- forms of pronouns: *vis* for *us* etc.; *vē* and *yē* for the plural of *vah* and *yah*
- irregular plural endings of nouns, adjectives and participles
- verbal forms deviating from the modern standard:
 - absolutive in *-e* (*jā'ē kar*) or *-y* (*magvāy kē/kai*) with verbal stems ending in *-ā* (which is quite close to the forms ending in *-i* or *-y* in Braj, e.g., *dikhāi kai* or *dikhāy kai* in Nanddas's, *Bhānvargīt*)¹¹
 - subjunctive 3rd pr. sing.: *hōē*, in the future tense: *hōēgā*
 - *čāhiyatī* or *čāhiyatā* instead of *čāhiyē*
 - occasionally *kari* instead of *kī*
 - *dījai* functioning as imperative or subjunctive passive
 - imperative forms ending in *-iyō/ījō*
 - forms resembling/constituting a synthetic passive, like *lē jā'iyatā hai* (p. 84)
 - one occurrence of a form ending in *-iyē* in imperative-subjunctive function (*aur čāhītē kā nāñv jō rāt dīn raṭiyē tō bhī dil na bhārē*, p. 96) with apparent stress on the subjunctive (conditional) meaning
 - occasional use of present tense forms comprising the “Old Present”¹² and an auxiliary: *niklē hai, gāvē hai, bōlē hai, pukārē hai*
- attributes, especially genitive attributes, following the noun

¹¹Cf. also V.P. Liperovskij, *Ocerk grammatiki sovremennogo Bradscha* (Moskva: Nauka, 1988), pp. 131–2.

¹²Cf. C.P. Masica, *The Indo-Aryan Languages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 272–5.

- referred to (a practice very common in poetry and in Urdu prose of the nineteenth century, often explained by Urdu commentators as a Persian influence, though this feature is common in early Braj poetry as well; this usage is absent in *Sab Ras* (see, e.g., *sair bāgh kī kūn mashghūl*)
- several subordinate clauses beginning with different conjunctions often subordinated to one main clause, thereby obscuring the whole construction
 - imperfect participle instead of the infinitive with postpositions (*pānī pīvtē sē*)
 - perfect participle instead of infinitive before *čāhiyē* (*dēkhā čāhiyē, ummīd kī tadbīr kī čāhiyē*, p. 76); this usage is prevalent in Old Braj as well; it is quite common in later Urdu writers too, as, for instance, in Ghālib's poetry
 - the agentive marker *nē* sometimes omitted in ergative constructions.

Compared with the general present as formed in modern standard Hindi/Urdu, the use of the present in the form demonstrated in the above examples occurs rarely. Nevertheless, the fact that it does occur may point to (1) the period in which the *Qisṣa* was written and (2) the author's contact with Delhi. Nespital assigns the *occasional* use of the respective forms to the literary Urdu of Delhi in the period 1720–40, contrasted by what he notices as a *frequent* use thereof in the period 1740–80.¹³ He is of the opinion that the use of such forms is the consequence of the growing influence of the Delhi speech and, indirectly, of Dehātī Kḥaṛī Bōlī or its Delhi variant on the literary language.¹⁴

The excessive use of the “Old Present” as subjunctive in the “Naṣīḥat-nāma” is really striking. In almost all cases it is in conformity with the standard use of subjunctive forms in advise, admonition, requests etc., being, thereby, fully in line with the aim and nature of the text. It seems to me, however, that in certain conditional clauses its meaning borders on the indicative; in other words, where in modern usage we would rather expect to see present or future indicative forms. Look at the following examples:

¹³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 156–7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

tō āp jis kē gunāh kiyē hō tis sē bhī bakshish chābē (p. 156)
 against whom you have sinned yourself, from him, too, you (will)
 want forgiveness

*aur jō naukar siyānē aur sipāhī hōn aur dōstī sē dil lagā kar naukarī
 karēn tō bādshāhī sāt dīp ki ḥāṣil hō* (p. 157)
 and when your servants are experienced and brave and serve you
 with friendship and devotion, you may/will conquer the seven
 islands=the whole world

*kyōn ki jō kām bhauñh čarḥā kar karnē mēn āvē agar vah sar anjām hō'ē
 tō kām lēnē vālē kō baṛī khushī hō'ē, aur jō kām sar anjām na hō'ē tō
 dohrī āzardagī hō'ē* (p.202)
 for, if you do a work with raised eyebrows, when it is done, the
 person who ordered the work will not be very happy, and if it is
 not done, there will be double anger)

The use of these forms as present or future indicative would correspond with the late *Hindavi*, as found in the works of the Delhi poet Fā'iz (Navāb Ṣadru 'd-Dīn; 1690?-1738?).¹⁵

Such common features would support the hypothesis of 'Īsvī Khān's contact with Delhi. On the other hand, as Rupert Snell remarks, the "usage of the subjunctive-present is often indistinguishable from that of the general present" in Braj.¹⁶ Here we find the use of the plain stem representing (unmarked) "non-perfectivity," "which could be used not only for 'non-completed' (imperfective) action but (with or without further Tense-indication) for action not yet begun (future or hypothetical)."¹⁷ McGregor stresses, "the timing of the sense shift from indicative to subjunctive of the reflexes of the old present indicative forms is an uncertain factor, which can only be ascertained, if at all, for a particular text by a detailed examination of each of its examples in their context."¹⁸ For general statements, the use of this form can be found right into the twentieth century; cf. the following sentence in Premchand's short story "Gilli

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁶ *The Hindi Classical Tradition: A Braj Bhāṣā Reader* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1992), p. 11.

¹⁷ Masica, p. 272.

¹⁸ *Language of Indrajit*, p. 172.

Ḍandā”:

*vahān kē angrēzī iskūl mēn kō’i māstar laḥkōn kō piṭṭē tō qaid hō jā’ē*¹⁹
if in the English schools over there a master would beat a boy he
would be arrested/he would have to go to jail

Marked forms of imperfectivity (general present using the imperfective participle), however, clearly prevail in the story-telling part of the *Qisṣa*. The more ambiguous “Old Present” seems to have been preferred by the author in more ambiguous, open contexts (advise; code of manners; general assumptions, presumption), that is, in contexts where conditional clauses would be in the subjunctive mood in modern usage as well. McGregor draws the same conclusion for seventeenth-century Braj: “but occasionally, use of the general present appears from the context to express a more vivid, positive presentation of the condition, and use of the subj.-pres. a more tentative one.”²⁰

It should also be noted that the author frequently switches over from one tense to another even within one sentence. Sometimes, a change into the present tense may be meant to create a dramatic effect, in other cases, no motivation for the switch is discernible.²¹

Another form comes very close to Braj: *mujḥē naīn čāhiyatā* (for standard Hindi/Urdu *mujḥē naīn čāhiyē*, I should not) somewhat resembles the synthetic passive of Braj.²² One more example of this usage is: *mardōn kō istiqlāl čāhiyatā hai* (men should be steadfast; p. 63).

Forms like *dijai/dijē* correspond with Braj *dijai*; both McGregor and Thiel-Horstmann interpret them as passive rather than imperative, though they concede their ambiguity.²³ This ambiguity can be observed in the *Qisṣa*, too. In some cases, the form clearly stands for an imperative, as in the following example:

¹⁹ *Vāridāt* (New Delhi: Maktaba-e Jāmi’a, 1961), p. 133.

²⁰ *Language of Indrajit*, p. 205.

²¹ Such seemingly unmotivated shifts occur no less frequently in Premchand’s early writings.

²² See Snell, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²³ McGregor, *Language of Indrajit*, p. 175; M. Thiel-Horstmann, *Crossing the Ocean of Existence. Braj Bhāṣā Religious Poetry from Rajasthan* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), p. 43.

yah dōr (dōr) ničēn karēgī, tain us dōri sē dōr bānd^h dijēldijai, main dōr k^hēnč lūngī (p. 81)

I will let a rope down, you knot a thread to the rope, I will pull the rope up

Another example is more ambiguous:

kuč^h rūpyē bādshāhzādē kō bhējtī hai aur kabā ki dō ghōṛē us kē lijē/lijai (p. 78)

she sent the prince some money and said he should buy two horses for this sum/two horses should be bought for the sum

In the next example, subjunctive passive meaning is more likely:

aur dāntōn kē tā'in jō anār kē bij ki upamān dijai tō anār kē bij us ki nāzuki-o-patlā'i kō kabān pahūnčtē haiñ (p. 57)

and when her teeth are compared to the seeds of a pomegranate, so how can the seeds of the pomegranate compare with their delicacy and neatness?

There are scores of sentences in which the form is applied in this way. Imperative forms ending in *-iyō* or *-ijō* are found in sentences like:

aur hukm kiyā ki us ādamzād kō bhī lē ā'iyō (p. 89)

and he ordered that this son of Adam should also be brought

tis sē bādshāhzāda jō iskā tum^hārē vahān qaid mēn hai sō isē č^hōṛ kē yahān bhēj dijō (p. 90)

therefore you set free his prince who is your prisoner and send him here

These informal imperative formations are not rare in later Urdu literature, either. See, e.g., the following sentences from Naẓīr Aḥmad's novel *Taubatu 'n-Naṣūḥ* (1874):

*ki tū duniyā mēn dil mat lagā'iyō aur is tarah rahiyō*²⁴

do not attach your heart to the world and live in such a way

²⁴(1874; New Delhi: Maktaba-e Jāmi'a, 1991), p. 42.

aur kabā ki un kō b'ēj dījīyō (p. 77)
and said: "Send them here!"

In the first example, Allah addresses man, and in the second a master speaks to his servant.

The contemporary Urdu writer Intizār Ḥusain frequently uses such forms while presenting dialogues, especially when the speakers are elderly women. Husain was born in a small town in the Meerut region. The language of his female characters shows many particularities of the dialect spoken there, most prominent among them being the use of the "Old Present" with auxiliaries, but also with imperatives in *-iyō*:

*allāh khair, musāfirat mēn ābrū qā'im rak'hiyō!*²⁵
Allah have mercy, safeguard our honor while we are traveling!

It seems that in the *Qissa* these forms may sometimes still be interpreted as passives whereas in later texts they function as imperatives only.

On the whole, the flow of the language resembles a breathless stream of words. The story was probably written down as it was being told or dictated. This pace is maintained in the story itself as well as in the "Naṣīḥat-nāma." The latter is a hotch-potch of advices on all kinds of matters given in a most unsystematic manner. It combines several Persian sources (*Akhlāq-e Nāsirī*, *Akhlāq-e Jalālī* and *Akhlāq-e Muḥsinī*; see preface, p. 23). The systematic approach found in these works is given up in the *Qissa* for an apparently spontaneous account, as might be presented in informal speech. Much of the contents of the "Naṣīḥat-nāma" draws on Indian material as well—what is presented as common wisdom about the unreliability of women, for instance, goes back to the oldest didactic tales which have been related time and time again. Nevertheless, the style varies considerably between the story telling on the one hand and the "Naṣīḥat-nāma" on the other, and also within the story. In the passages describing a person's beauty, a festival or a feast, very ornate language is sometimes used, drawing on Persian and Indic (mostly Braj) sources. Especially in the description of female beauty (*nak^b sik^b*), the sentences often become complex and long, with numerous subordinate clauses. The following description of Dilbar, which is presented when Mehrafrōz, in

²⁵Intizār Ḥusain, *Qissa Kahāniyān* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mil Publications, 1990), p. 399.

hiding, sees her for the first time, will illustrate the point:

*ēk mānind āfiāb-e darakhshān kē hai ki jō baiḥ^hī čalī āvatī hai jis ṭarah
ki sūraj kē tēj mēn āgūn kō'ī usē nahīn dēk^h saktā, tisī ṭarah is kē tēj kē
āgūn kō'ī isē nahīn dēk^h saktā (p. 53)*

one is coming, sitting like the radiant sun, and just as nobody can look into the sun because of its radiance, so nobody can look at her because of her radiance

*nānv tō us kā Dilbar hai lēkin har ēk aṅg us kā dilbar hai, tō bāl us kē
kaisē haiṅ ki syāmatā'ī us kī miṣāl nahīn rakḥtī. sučiknatā us mēn aisī hai
ki 'āshiq kā dil jō shu'la pakartā hai sō usī kī čiknā'ī sē (p. 53–4)*

her name is Dilbar [=Heart-Ravisher] but her every limb is heart-ravishing, and as to her hair/how is her hair, so it is black beyond compare. She is so smooth and sleek, that when the lover's heart is inflamed, it is by her very sleekness

There is a play on the various meanings of *čiknā'ī* (*čikā'haṭ*) here which is practically impossible to reproduce in translation: the word denotes “oiliness” or “oil, grease” as well. (These are, in fact, the primary meanings.) Only this meaning makes the connection with fire understandable, but it would not be understood as a compliment for the lady when used in the translation.

The description is continued in this manner stretching over seven pages in the present edition. Almost half of each of these pages is, however, filled by footnotes explaining words no longer understood by the average Urdu reader/speaker. Some of them are archaic forms, others simply belong to the cultural realm now covered by Hindi. The use of complicated abstract nouns of Indic (OIA or MIA) origin is typical of the author's style when describing his heroines. Hyperbole is a characteristic feature of such descriptions, mostly created in comparisons. The pattern 'Īsvī Khān follows is repeated, on a reduced scale, for all central female characters. He compares a particular part of the heroine's body with an object of nature (plants, animals, precious stones, stars, the moon, the sun, etc.), just to state in the next sentence, that the beauty of the heroine exceeds by far the beauty of the object with which it is compared. Look at the following example:

*aur jō us kē pān'ōn kūn kaṅval kī miṣāl dijē, tō kamal unḥōn kī khūbī kō
kahān pahuč saktā hai. kaṅval čahtā thā ki maiṅ us kī khūbī kūn*

pahučūñ, sō is kē vāsṭē sūraj kī ṭaraf muñ^b khōltā hai ki is kī kuč^b krānt mū mēñ āvē tō pahučūñ. par jō us kī khūbī kūñ na pahučā, tad p^hir sharmindā hō kē muñ^b č^hupā[’]ē shām kūñ nīčī gardan kar kē rah jātā hai (p. 59)

and when you compare her feet with the lotus, so how can the lotus reach their beauty! The lotus wanted to reach their beauty, therefore it opens its face to the sun, so that some of its radiance may enter its face, but when it fails to reach her beauty, it feels ashamed and, hiding its face, it has to bow/lower its head

The strict adherence to this pattern in the description of all attributes of female beauty leads to a sequence of sentences of identical structure without the slightest stylistic variation, all connected by “and” (*aur*). Moreover, the rather pedantic way in which the items of beauty are named and described makes the language completely flat and largely monosemantic. There is very little ambiguity, no poetic condensation. These seem to be the most striking limitations of this attempt to create a literary prose style.

On the other hand, there are numerous descriptions of places (forests, gardens, palaces) in a very simple style, which uses short sentences and colloquial words. Where action is reported, the language is equally simple:

tis kē tā’īñ dēk^htē hī amīr-o-vazīr bahut sē khush hū’ē aur bādshāh sē jā’ē kē kahā ki bādshāhṣēk faqīr bahut ṣāhib-e kamāl nē is ṭaraf ā’ē kē guzar kiyā hai, aur ma’lūm aisā hōtā hai ki ṭālī’ tērē rujū’ hū’ē aur murād tēri ḥāṣil hōgī. bādshāh yah bāt sun kē bahut khush huā aur khush hō kē us faqīr kē pās gayā. pās jā kē faqīr kē qadam bōs kiyē (p. 41)

Seeing this, the nobles and vazirs became very happy, went before the king and said: Oh, king, a very accomplished faqir has passed through/by this place, and it seems, that your fortune is on the rise and that your wish will be fulfilled. Hearing this, the king was very happy and went to the faqir. When he arrived before the faqir, he kissed his feet.

This style is quite similar to later *vārtā*-literature in Braj.²⁶ It clearly is a forerunner of the famous *Bāgh-o-Bahār* by Mīr Amman Dehlavī (ca. 1801–3). The existence of this earlier prose work helps to qualify some of

²⁶Cf. “Vaidnavan kī Vārtā,” in Snell, pp. 71–83.

the perceptions of the role of *Bāgh-o-Bahār* and other writings produced at the Fort William College in Calcutta. Neither was the new, simple prose style a product of the Fort William College, nor did it stand outside the tradition, as Muhammad Sadiq claims:

Fort William literature has aroused a great deal of attention on account of the service it is believed to have rendered to the cause of Urdu. That, in a way, it marks the beginning of modern Urdu prose may be conceded. But it is important to remember that it stands outside the main current of Urdu prose and as such has no place in its evolution. It did not grow out of the soil but was artificially cultivated by a few scholars working under official instructions.²⁷

In his last point, Sadiq is obviously mistaken. Up to the beginning of the eighteenth century, there was no “main current” of Urdu prose, as far as we know, but only a few literary texts (Mīr Muḥammad Ḥusain ‘Aṭā Khān Taḥsīn’s *Nau Tarz-e Muraṣṣa*, ca. 1775; Mehr Čand Khatrī Mehr’s *Nau Ā’in-e Hind*, 1788, and Shāh ‘Ālam II’s *‘Ajā’ibu ‘l-Qiṣṣa*, 1792–93) displaying a variety of styles, perhaps in search of a style appropriate for prose narration. Mīr Amman adopted the colloquial style, but even his proclaimed adversary Mirzā Rajab ‘Alī Bēg “Surūr” wrote quite a number of passages in his *Fasāna-e ‘Ajā’ib* (1824) in the same simple and straightforward style, a fact conceded to even by Sadiq.²⁸ Sadiqurrahman Kidwai therefore counters Sadiq by stressing that

[t]he works of the scholars of the College of Fort William could never have gained so much significance, had they not been deeply rooted in the Indian soil. The prose models of the writers of the college were not just the intellectual adventures, they were based on the living language of that time, the language of the most popular poets like Mir, Sauda, Insha, Mir Hasan, etc.²⁹

Kidwai treats the early prose works like the *Qiṣṣa-e Mehrafyōz-o-Dilbar* as “exceptions, as there is no further evidence that this was the current

²⁷P. 291.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 202.

²⁹*Gilchrist and the Language of Hindoostan* (Delhi, 1968), p. 33.

literary style of those days. Such works only remind us of an age when Urdu was not considered fit for serious expressions.”³⁰ The *Qissa* as well as later pre-Fort William stories testify, however, that a change in the attitude towards Urdu was underway, and writers had started to experiment with new modes of expression, based on different colloquial *and* literary styles.

Here is a last example from the text to illustrate the completely casual mixing of vocabulary from different sources so evident throughout the text. The effect of Dilbar’s beauty on the lover is described in the following way:

*gōyā bijlī t̄bī ki čamak gā’ī aur ‘āshiq kē dil par parī yā shāhīn hai ki
‘āshiq kē hans-rūpī man kō shikār kiyā* (pp. 60–1)

it was as if the lover was struck by lightening, or as if she is a falcon that has preyed upon/hunted the lover’s mind-goose

Here images from the Perso-Arabic and the Indic traditions are blended without any reservation. (The combination of *hans* and *man* is quite unconventional, as far as I know. One would rather expect *ātmā* instead of *man* here.) It appears that for the author both traditions were equally relevant and that the origin of the images for him did not really matter. The concept of love (carnal and divine?) is presented as shared by both traditions. A synthesis of this kind or extent is absent in later Urdu prose and poetry (cf. *Bāgh-o-Bahār* or the much later *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*), an exception being lyrical poems called *gīt* by twentieth-century poets.

Although the author uses imagery typical for describing the pain of separation felt by the heroine, in his own work he speaks in the voice of the male lover only: It is the hero who is suffering from *birah*, he is “burning in the fire of separation,” he is reduced to a frame of bones (*sūk̄h gayā*) due to his suffering (see pp. 92–3). Females (especially *parīs*) do fall in love, but their feelings are wound up in one or two sentences. Where the author paints the suffering of a female lover in detail, it looks like a caricature: the unequal love of an ugly, monstrous *dēvni* for a fair prince. So, as a whole, the cultural atmosphere of the Persian narrative tradition prevails in the story and in the “Naṣīḥat-nāma.” The impact of Indic sources and especially of *rītikāl* poetry becomes dominant only in the

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

descriptions of female beauty (*nakḥ sikḥ*).³¹ Even here, we find traces of the Persian *sarāpā* as well. Despite numerous archaic and Braj Bhasha forms, the language bears the clear stamp of Kḥaṛī Bōlī. Therefore, the work can rightly be called an early specimen of literary Urdu prose.

The very existence of the story and its shape may allow for the following conclusions:

1. Story telling in fairly colloquial language must have been popular not only among the common people but also among the nobility of the eighteenth century.

2. Urdu based on Kḥaṛī Bōlī was about to acquire the status of a literary language not only in poetry but also in prose. The texts produced at the Fort William College in Calcutta were the result of a tradition of some fifty years of experience in story writing, based on a much older tradition of story telling.

3. The cultural atmosphere prevailing in the story is that of a composite Indo-Muslim culture. Every attempt is made to avoid a religious bias, though the author does use certain Islamic terminology—such as *ṣavāb*—now and then. Throughout the “Naṣīḥat-nāma” he speaks of the creator as “*paidā karnē vālā*,” a term equally acceptable to all communities. This fact may support the hypothesis that ‘Īsvī Khān served a Hindu ruler. At the same time, it speaks of a lack of the cultural divide that becomes visible in the nineteenth century. □

³¹So much so that in the present Urdu edition many of the nouns used for describing female beauty are explained in footnotes because the editor assumes that the Urdu reader will not be able to understand them. At some places, these notes fill half the page (see, e.g., pp. 55–6).