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## The Symbolic Aspects of *Tilism*\*

You are the meaning and what lies outside  
you is the word.  
You are the treasure and the rest of the  
world a *tilism*.

—Faridu' d-Dīn 'Attār, *Asrār Nāma*

When active heavenly forces combine with passive terrestrial potentialities strange and rare things occur. He who knows the mysteries of these things can construct a *tilism*.

—Muḥammad 'Alā at-Tḥānvī,  
*Iṣṭalāḥāt al-'Ulūm al-Islāmīya*

The world is a *tilism* created by a seer.  
How believe in a cosmos which has no  
basis.

—Mīr Taqī Mīr

LOVE is the motivating force in most of the *dāstāns*. It compels man to set out on long journeys full of strife and struggle, thereby providing a clue to the multi-layered meaning of life and the cosmos and bringing into play the total human potential. Love is the binding or attracting force through which the mutual relationship of God, the cosmos and man is explicated. However, a long sequence of *dāstāns* has been built up around the central

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\* *Translator's note:* The following is a fairly close, but not literal, translation of the third and final chapter of Suhail Ahmad Khan's published doctoral dissertation *Dāstānōn kī 'Alāmātī Kā'inār* (Lahore: the Punjab University, 1987). The first two chapters deal with the concept of the hero and the phenomena of metamorphosis.

symbol of *ṭilism*. In these *dāstāns* the entire cosmos is a battlefield where the monotheists clash with the animists and the polytheists. In the architectonics of these *dāstāns* the heavenly spheres, the stars, the planets and other cosmic phenomena occupy a central place, and the four elements, that is earth, air, water, and fire, also represent various stages. Metaphysical mysteries are usually related with reference to the cosmology. *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*, which has the status of an endless wonderland in our Urdu literature, is the most distinguished of these *dāstāns*. *Bōstān-e Khayāl*, which Mīr Taqī Khayāl wrote in Persian and which has been rendered into Urdu by a number of translators, is another long sequence of more or less similar *dāstāns*.

What is more, the *dāstān*-tellers or *dāstān*-writers belonging to Lucknow and Rampur also singled out various peripheral stories from these *dāstāns* and attempted to retell them in their own style or to create further *ṭilisms* along similar lines. So the huge cycles of these tilismic *dāstāns* are a part of our literary history.

The element of love is present as a savor to liven up the tilismic *dāstāns*. Similarly, even in *dāstāns* of a general nature the symbol of *ṭilism* is seen as an ordeal which the traveller on a mystic path must face. However, in that stupendous cycle of story-telling, which manifests itself as a boundless sea in the form of tilismic *dāstāns*, the symbolic parameters of *ṭilism* are viewed on a vast scale. Those who initially took notice of *dāstāns* generally tended to see them in a social perspective and therefore came to regard the extrinsic glitter of cultural trappings, like details of dresses, jewellery, fairs and festivals, as more important. Attempts were made to find examples of humor in *dāstāns*. Notice was also taken of the diversity of prose styles or the astonishing richness of vocabulary. Some critics limited themselves to examining the peculiar idiom and traits of female characters. There were some research scholars who investigated the various texts of *dāstāns* and others were venturesome enough to point out that the magical weapons employed in the wars of *dāstāns* no longer seemed incredible when compared with the sophisticated armaments of the modern age. We do not wish to belittle these approaches. The effort put in by the critics and researchers, who thought *dāstāns* worthy of examination, is certainly important and significant because it came at a time when the genre as a whole was often viewed with a great deal of bias. There were those who sneered at *dāstāns* as being redolent of decadence. Others found the infusion of the supernatural quite unpalatable. But while we applaud the endeavor of the critics who looked favorably upon *dāstāns*, we must not lose sight of the fact that they allowed themselves to

be entrapped in the exterior of what they read. The intention may have been to look at the *dāstāns* in the light of social and historical consciousness. Even so, the *dāstān* contained many different things which lay beyond ordinary social dimensions: for instance, the different periods of Muslim history and the troubles which afflicted them; the conflicts between various sects and classes; the clash between Arabian and Persian interests from the Fatimid era onwards; and also many stories of cultural antagonism the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent was heir to. The sociological study of the *dāstāns* still demands a relatively deeper consciousness of history. In any case, it is an altogether different avenue and, for the time being, we are not going to explore it.

Isn't it cause for surprise that very little attention has been paid to the central symbolism of the *ṭilism*? It is dealt with in a few lines and then swept aside, as though it had no particular significance in the tale. Most people tend to think that a *ṭilism* relates only to magic and are taken aback when told that *ṭilisms* were created by "sages" also, and they are basically linked to some intellectual or philosophical tradition. The extreme lengthiness of tilismic *dāstān* taxes the patience not only of readers but also of the critics. That is why tilismic *dāstāns* are rarely mentioned even by those critics and creative writers who are generally interested in *dāstāns*. Keeping in mind such a state of affairs it may be very difficult to trace the meanings attached to the symbolism of the *ṭilism*, but an effort in such a situation must be made if we are to relate meaningfully to this vast literature of *dāstāns*.

A *ṭilism* is often set up to secure a treasure or some fabulous objects. The time at which a given *ṭilism* has to fall is known in advance, as is the name of the *ṭilism*-vanquisher. The details of how to bring the *ṭilism* down appear from time to time on the tablet (*lauh*) of the *ṭilism*. The vanquisher, following the instructions conveyed to him through the tablet successfully negotiates the various stages and triumphs over the *ṭilism*. The instructions received via the tablet indicate that the *ṭilism*-vanquisher's progress can also be viewed as an act of initiation. The names of *ṭilisms* themselves often convey a sense of close relationship to the heavenly bodies and the material cosmos. It would suffice to name a few *ṭilisms* to establish this fact.

*Ṭilism-e Ajrām-o-Ajsām* (The *Ṭilism* of Heavenly and Terrestrial Bodies); part of *Bōstān-e Khayāl*.

*Ṭilism-e Davāzda Brūj va Haft Kavākib* (The *Ṭilism* of the Twelve Zodiac Signs and Seven Stars); part of *Īraj Nāma*, a volume of

*Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza.*

*Ṭilism-e Nairāng* (The *Ṭilism* of Strange Wizardry); part of *Bālā Bākhtar*, a volume of *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*.

*Ṭilism-e Taḥtu 'l-Arḡ* (The Subterranean *Ṭilism*); by Saiyad Mīran Rizvī Ābrū Lakḥnavī; exists only as a manuscript, if still safe.

*Ṭilism-e Kun fa-Yakūn* (The *Ṭilism* of Be and It Became); 'Āshiq Ḥusain Bazm; exists only as a manuscript, if still safe.

Titles such as these identify the *ṭilism* with the cosmos. There are some critics who see the *ṭilism* as a model of the world. However, the various levels of meaning inherent in the concept haven't merited much consideration. Can the conquest or subjugation of the *ṭilism* be regarded as equivalent to mastering the cosmos? It is worth remembering that the cosmos of the *dāstāns* is a traditional one, in which it has the status of a macrocosm, and that man himself is a microcosm. And everything in the macrocosm has its correspondence in the microcosm. In this way, to overcome nature is to overcome in a spiritual sense also, and this overcoming is governed by metaphysical precepts.

In the *dāstāns* this wisdom usually exists as an undercurrent. The upper crust of the story serves as a source of entertainment for the general public as well as the discerning reader. The story's narration, therefore, is of paramount importance, calling upon the *dāstān*-tellers to make full use of their narrative skill. They not only portray the various classes of men and their habits and customs but also give free rein to their fancy. This combination of realism and fantasy creates a lot of interest. From a *dāstān*-teller's or *dāstān*-writer's point of view it is this stylistic excellence which makes him either more or less important. But the total meaning of a tale can only be perceived when due attention is paid to its philosophical underpinnings.

The word *ṭilism* is of Greek origin and simply meant an emblem possessing magical or protective powers. But we intend to take a close look at far more complex types of *ṭilisms*. One of the earliest appearances of a *ṭilism* is in "The Story of Jaudar" in *Alf Laila*, but its phases are relatively simple. Now let us turn to our own *dāstān*-tellers or some of the translators of the tilismic *dāstāns* to find out what they have to say concerning the concept of *ṭilism*.

The world also resembles a *ṭilism*, and this *ṭilism* as a fabrication would come to an end on Doomsday, the reason being that those people who are trapped in it would return to their real abode when it breaks up. Those

among them who are damned would go to hell, and those who have been saved would proceed to paradise, where in accordance with “*va hum fihā khālidūn*” they will live forever. And the passage through the spiritual dimensions by which one enters this *ṭilism* called the world is as follows: first of all the angels, acting on the command of the Absolute Seer, place the embryonic matter below the Empyrean. There it is provided with the heart. Then it is carried to the Throne and furnished with the breast. From there it is taken to the sphere of the Sun to receive its vital heart. Next it moves to the seventh heaven, the seat of Saturn, which is a garden and the place of intellect. Then it is conveyed to the sphere of the Moon where it is invested with physique and life. Its next stop is the sphere of Jupiter where it receives knowledge. Then it proceeds to the sphere of Mercury and is endowed with the faculty of thought. From there it is taken to the sphere of Mars to be provided with fancy, and finally it becomes the possessor of imagination when it gets down to the sphere of Venus. From Venus it is transported to the sphere of fire and receives its share of the yellow bile. It then moves on to the sphere of air to receive blood. The sphere of water provides its phlegm. In the end it comes to the sphere of earth to get the black bile. This is how one enters the *ṭilism* called the world; and one leaves it via the grave.<sup>1</sup>

The world is also a *ṭilism*, and the Founder of this global *ṭilism* is the Absolute Sage, that is, the Nourisher of us all. And because a *ṭilism* is bound to break up and come to an end at an appointed time, a time has also been set for the dissolution of the world. It is known as the Day of Judgment. And every *ṭilism* has a *ṭilism*-conqueror. The conquerors of this particular *ṭilism* are all the people who inhabit the world, and the heart of every person is a *lauh* (the guiding tablet). The hidden dimension of this *ṭilism* is the domain of nothingness and its visible dimension is the physical world. One enters the visible *ṭilism* via the maternal womb and leaves for the hidden *ṭilism* via the grave. “The visible *ṭilism* consists of three mountainous strongholds. The first stronghold is the state of childhood, the second the state of youth, the third the state of old age.”<sup>2</sup>

It is possible to provide more quotations to emphasize this point. What these quotations clearly reveal is that the society to which these

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<sup>1</sup> *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* (Kānpūr: Maṭba‘-e Munshī Naval Kishōr, n.d.), vol. I, pp. 928–9.

<sup>2</sup> Āshiq Ḥusain Bazm, *Ṭilism-e Kun fa-Yakūn* (unpublished). The quotation has been taken from Gyān Čand Jain, *Urdū kī Naṣrī Dāstānēn* (Karachi: Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū, n.d.), pp. 521–22

*dāstān*-tellers belonged, was aware that the concept of *ṭilism* had symbolic implications. There was no need for the *dāstān*-tellers to come up with these explanations. Such explanations, however, do serve a purpose. Even those who usually regard the *dāstāns* as lacking in any deep meaning are taken aback for a while when they come across such passages. The symbolism which the *dāstān*-writers describe is linked to *Sufi* teachings. We should, therefore, turn to the Sufis themselves to find out how they used the symbol of *ṭilism*. In this connection I quote a passage from *Ta'lim-e Ghaṣṣiyya*, compiled by Gul Ḥasan Qādirī. The book is a compendium of the teachings of Saiyad Ghaṣṣ 'Alī Shāh Qalandar, a famous *Sufi* of the nineteenth century. Obviously this exposition must have been current in the *Sufi* circles for a very long time. The passage comes after the Seven Valleys of the Way have been described. The passage itself explains, in allegorical terms, how man comes into the world and acquires esoteric spiritual knowledge. As a first step God commands man to reach an understanding of the esoteric reality of Muḥammad, the Holy Prophet. Thereafter ensue the stages which put him in touch with the esoteric human reality. The human reality directs man to enter "a country full of *ṭilisms*," which is known as "The World of Bodies and Living Beings." To make it easy for man to undertake the journey the real nature of the world is explained in advance. So what we have here is both the allegory and its interpretation.

At first you would come to a tilismic city (that is, the human body). Two rivers (blood and water) flow through it, and there are seven mountains in it (the seven main parts of the human body) and three stages (childhood, youth and old age) and four levels (that is, the four elements). It has two ramparts, an outer one and an inner one. Each rampart has five portals and each portal is guarded by a sentinel. The first door of the outer rampart is "touch" and its sentinel is "the faculty of touch." He sits over blood. He alone causes harmony and discord and, by virtue of the powers delegated to him by the city's ruler, looks after the *ṭilism* of the hardness and softness of things. The name of the second portal is "sight." Its sentinel is "the faculty of sight" which, by virtue of the powers delegated to him by the city's administrator, controls the *ṭilism* of beautiful and ugly things.

The name of the third portal is "hearing" and its sentinel is "the faculty of hearing." He sits on fire and guards the *ṭilism* of euphony and cacophony. He is the spy of the city and keeps himself informed of all that happens in it. The fourth portal is called "taste." Its sentinel is "the faculty of taste." He sits on a terrace of fermentation. He looks after the *ṭilism* of the good and bad taste of things and is the counsellor of the city. The

name of the fifth portal is “smell.” Its sentinel is “the faculty of smell.” He sits on air and keeps himself informed of the city’s sanitation. He commands the *tilism* of good and bad smells.

The first portal of the inner rampart is known as “the collective sense.” The sentinel’s name is “the faculty of collective sense.” He sits on water. By nature inclined towards humidity, he rules over the *tilism* of forgetfulness. He can answer every question put to him but doesn’t retain it in his memory. The name of the second portal is “imagination.” Its sentinel is “the faculty of imagination.” He sits on earth. By nature inclined towards dryness, he possesses the *tilism* of obtuseness but if he understands something he never forgets it. In that rôle he is known as the memorizer. The name of the third portal is “fantasy.” Its sentinel is “the faculty of fantasy.” He sits on air. By nature inclined towards frigidity, he possesses the *tilism* of falsehood, mischief-making and senseless talk.

The name of the fourth portal is “thought.” Its sentinel is “perception.” Fiery-tempered and inclined by nature towards heat, he displays angelic and satanic traits by turns. He controls the *tilism* of wonderful and exotic things, glamor, legerdemain, alchemy, the art of creating illusions, the power to control the baser elements of the planets, wizardry and sorcery. He brings together things of various kinds and different natures and then separates them. The name of the fifth portal is “memory.” The sentinel is known as “the faculty of memory.” The *tilism* of remembrance is under his command, but he is swayed by the emotions of deceit and guile. He sits on a heap of fermentation. He is even-tempered and very trustworthy and acts as the guardian of the city.

Various types of people live in the city. There are some who burn up things which are raw. There are others who cook or bake raw things. Some act as distributors, doling out refined things to the refined and coarse things to the coarse. There are others who make everything they receive part of themselves. There are some who collect and arrange the necessary material in order to buoy themselves in repairing the city. A person of dreadful and terrible appearance would also be found there who specializes in flattery. Then you will come across a strange, wrinkled old woman called “The Crone.” As cunning as she is ruthless, she has at her fingertips thousands of illusions and tricks. It is rather difficult to escape from her clutches. If you manage to get past all these demonic entities you would reach the four stages (i.e., the religious way, the spiritual way, reality and esoteric knowledge) and the seven deadly valleys (i.e., longing, love, esoteric spiritual enlightenment, resignation, unity of God, wonder and poverty by choice-cum-annihilation-cum-permanence). All these are filled with huge *tilisms*. If you, God forbid, get trapped in any of these it would all be over for you. Verily we belong to Allah and would return to Allah. Eternal separation would become your lot. It is absolutely

impossible to get past these stages and valleys without the assistance of a perfect spiritual guide. If, by the grace of God, you find a man of holy wisdom all your difficulties will vanish. If it doesn't happen, sit down and mourn your bad luck. Now go and God be with you!

So acting on the command of the vice-minister he girded up his loins and

In this boundless sea and billowing storm  
We cast our hearts, in Allah's name, we sail and  
put to anchor

set off, and after negotiating the various stages and stations with the help of a perfect spiritual guide, reached the state of esoteric spiritual knowledge. And then as he opened his eyes and looked around him he realized: "The Beginning and the End, the Manifest and the Hidden, the Ruler and the Ruled, the King and the Ministers, the Spiritual Guide and the Disciple, the Stages and the Stations all consist of Me. There is no one else besides Me."

It is traditional thought rooted in a comprehensive metaphysical system. One sees here at work not analytical rationalism, but a wholesome intellect, which gives everything in the cosmos a befitting place in its system. Moreover, it establishes interconnections among the various zones and phenomena of the universe. Our critics try to interpret traditional wisdom with the help of analytical thought and fail to make any sense of the various forms through which such wisdom expresses itself. In the end these critics pronounce that such forms belong to the childhood of man's mind. As a matter of fact, traditional thought has not only found a way to link up the whole universe on the level of consciousness and intellect but has also managed to transform the mutual relationship of God, cosmos and man into a great unity. It is impossible to make any sense of the symbol of the *ṭilism* unless one first becomes aware of the fact that in this metaphysical setup and traditional thought, cosmos and man are seen as a unified whole. In this codified cosmos, the heavens, the planets, earthly phenomena and man's inner life are not separate equations. Seen from a superficial point of view they do seem to stand apart from each other, but symbolically they are interlinked and are one another's mirror image. The fabric of which *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* and other tilismic *dāstāns* are made is a product of this traditional thought. One can see the whole cosmos at work in these *dāstāns* as a boundless allegorical design. In *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* the allegorical use of language, the names of the characters and the overall structure of the story constitute a coherent symbolic level.



Although many *dāstāns* tend to be prolix and *dāstān*-tellers may not be equally skillful, this symbolic level never disappears completely. In the *ghazal* and the *dāstān* the idea of the *ṭilism* is bound up with the illusory nature of the cosmos and the enchantment of the elements and its symbolic intent is generally acknowledged. The passage through a *ṭilism* is a symbolic representation of a voyage across the vast reaches of the living universe.

To pinpoint this significance we need to take a look at the symbol of *ṭilism* in various *dāstāns*. We must also note that it is surrounded by a symbolic cosmos. Different aspects of this symbol can be seen in *Bōstān-e Khayāl* which Mīr Taqī Khayāl wrote in Persian in the eighteenth century. The Persian text has never been published, but several Urdu translations or renderings of the Persian original exist. Even a great poet like Mirzā Ghālib was one of its admirers. Actually it is an attempt to create a separate dastanic tradition modelled on *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*. Mīr Taqī Khayāl didn't have the kind of profound imagination we see at work in *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza* and he tried to make up for it by being overtly pedantic. That is why his series of *dāstāns* couldn't match the popularity enjoyed by the cycle of *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*. Nevertheless its importance in the context of Urdu *dāstāns* is undeniable. Nothing else in Urdu, apart from *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*, can match its scope. There are countless big and small *ṭilisms* in *Bōstān-e Khayāl* and their symbolic content also is quite evident as the following brief quotations will show.

As the person trapped in the *ṭilism* drowns he finds himself in a house and sees a damsel with flaming cheeks, sitting on a throne. He falls in love with her at first sight. She promises to give herself up to him on Wednesday and until then makes him work very hard, as if he were a menial. But when Wednesday comes round, her face undergoes a terrible transformation. The person is filled with dread and passes out. When he comes to his senses in the morning he sees her again as lovely as ever and begs to let him make love to her. She again promises that come Wednesday his wish would be granted. For the next six days she makes him work like a slave but, as before, on Wednesday she turns into an *'ifrīt* (demon). In this way the life of the *ṭilism's* prisoner passes away.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>(The *Ṭilism's* Prison), *Bōstān-e Khayāl*, an abridgement by Nādir 'Alī Saifi, vol.1, pp. 64–5. I quote from the abridged version in order to concentrate on the essentials of the *ṭilisms*.

Malik Sāṭū' said: "Once upon a time King Jamshed paid a visit to the mountain of Qāf, accompanied by one hundred wisemen. At the end of his excursion he constructed a *ṭilism* to commemorate his visit. The *ṭilism* is known as The *Ṭilism* of Jamshed's Revellers. It is also called The *Ṭilism* of the Magic Bowl of Jamshed. One of the outward signs of the *ṭilism* is a stream. Above the source of the stream stands a pomegranate tree and from one of the branches of the tree is suspended a bejewelled cup. Anyone who eats the pomegranate seeds becomes thirsty. He dips the cup in the stream to quench his thirst. Immediately a throne appears, borne aloft by fairies. A lovely woman sits on the throne. She takes the person away with her. No one knows where she goes. On a number of occasions some of the fairies tried to chase her but their wings caught fire. Next day she returns and leaves the person near the stream. When he fills the cup again and drinks from it the same throne appears, but with a different woman on it. She also takes him away. In this manner six lovely women appear and take him away in turn. If the person remains content with his six visits his outward appearance and complexion become remarkably healthier, his physical strength increases ten-fold, and he suffers no longer from any disease. But he simply can't resist drinking from the cup a seventh time. As soon as he drinks again he becomes raving mad and wanders about for seven days. On the eighth day he throws himself into the stream and is never seen again."<sup>4</sup>

In these quotations the symbolic content of the futility of action, lust and the attractive damsels can be easily identified. However, if we wish to comprehend the immense significance of the *ṭilism* in *Bōstān-e Khayāl* we would have to view "Ṭilism-e Ajrām-o-Ajsām" as something exceedingly characteristic. The *ṭilism* as a whole owes a great deal to astrology and ancient astronomy. It is a very vast *ṭilism* and Prince Mu'izu 'd-Dīn is told right at the beginning:

An encounter with the various stages of the *ṭilism* would put the fear of God into your heart. You would come to know the trickiness of time and the characteristic nature of circumstances. In other words, in this *ṭilism* everything from the earthly sphere to the highest heavens has been given the form of the material world, and the paradigms of both worlds exist in it.<sup>5</sup>

In this way the metaphysical nature of the *ṭilism* is made plain right

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<sup>4</sup>(A Description of the *Ṭilism's* Exterior), *ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 80.

away. To regard the world as a *ṭilism* amounts to understanding this mystery. In the *ṭilism* mentioned above the planets and the four elements also exist on an esoteric level. The prince makes his way through stages (or ordeals) of water, earth, air, and fire. That's how he becomes aware of the wondrous nature of the elements and searches for the "the Bird of Mysteries." During his passage through the stage of air he, at a certain place, comes to know that both "the Bird of Mysteries" and "the Great 'Anqā" (a fabulous bird) live in "the City of Wisdom." The metaphysical significance of this journey is, therefore, beyond doubt. The search for "the Bird of Mysteries" charges the whole quest with a spiritual and symbolic significance. This pursuit of "the Bird of Mysteries" and the admittance of the prince in the presence of "the Great 'Anqā," and the fact that "the Great 'Anqā" has his abode in "the City of Wisdom," gives a symbolic color to the story. It also makes it perfectly plain that the meaning of all these symbols can only be sought with reference to Sufism.

In *Manṭiqu 'l-Ṭair*, the famous *maṣnavī* by Farīdu 'd-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (1180?–1220?), thirty birds set out in search of the Simurgh and travel through seven valleys. Towards the end, when all obstacles have been overcome, the Simurgh appears as the embodiment of the birds themselves. The search for "the Bird of Mysteries" in the *ṭilism* is similarly allegorical. Having passed through the stages of the four elements the prince is also required to proceed through the stations of the various heavenly bodies. It enables the prince to take a panoramic view of the colorful illusions set in motion by the entire cosmos. Having become aware of the actual nature of the cosmos, he travels on towards the Absolute Reality. He has to pass through the *ṭilism* of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and the Zodiac. Every *ṭilism* has a color of its own and different properties. The symbolic ambience surrounding all these stages clearly derives its meaning from Sufism. While in the *ṭilism* of the Zodiac the prince asks:

"What is the name of your king?" He is told, "We don't even know his name. All that we know for certain is that only one king rules over the cosmos of the *ṭilism*. However, the king himself is a subordinate of the Being blessed with divine attributes. He is known as "the Great 'Anqā of Wisdom" in the *ṭilism* of the Elements. In the *ṭilism* of the Heavenly Bodies his name is "the Pearl of Sagacity." In the *ṭilism* of the Throne and the Zodiac he is known as "the Jewel of Gnosis." Maybe in the *ṭilism* of the Empyrean he is known by some other name." The prince asked,

“Have you ever seen him?” Maḥfūz replied, “Keeping in view the fact that we don’t even know his name, how can we aspire to see his majesty.”<sup>6</sup>

Take note how the constituents of *the ṭilism* turn into symbols of the various stages of a metaphysical system. The stages revealed in the *ṭilism* are closely related to this metaphysical sense. Once we take all this into consideration we realize how our critics have repeatedly blundered by failing to understand the symbolic meaning of the *ṭilism*. This has caused much misunderstanding concerning the *dāstān*. Ancient genres of literature regarded the world as a *ṭilism* and saw its outward aspect as an illusion or a phantasmagoria created by the elements. Similarly, man’s inner being was seen as an enchanting *ṭilism*, but one in which lay hidden many an awesome ordeal. The real nature of all these big and small *ṭilisms* is made manifest by the wisdom which is the basis of traditional thought. It has now been clearly explained how in *Bōstān-e Khayāl* a *ṭilism* becomes a symbol of a sojourn through the different zones of the cosmos; we also learn how this sojourn is connected with man’s esoteric self. As the author of *Bōstān-e Khayāl* is keen to show off his learning, he goes on explaining the meaning of the symbols himself. But even in *dāstāns* in which no particular care is taken to explain in detail such meaning, the symbols are rooted in the same system. In this connection here is another quotation from *Bōstān-e Khayāl*.

At last he respectfully greeted the preacher of the ninth pulpit. After returning his greetings, the preacher asked, “Who are you, man, and what do you desire of us?” The prince said, “I am a guest of the *ṭilism*’s cosmos and wish to proceed to the highest destination.” The preacher showed great respect for him, shook hands with him and went on to say, “Inasmuch as this intention of yours is a laudable one, say, by the grace of the Highest, and move to the first stair of the pulpit.” As soon as the prince stepped onto the first stair, it rose in the air and drew near the first heaven. As the prince looked around him he saw everything lit up by the light of the moon, and there were lots of handsome people, clad in green, busy in praising the Almighty. He also saw thousands upon thousands of green-colored mansions everywhere from whose balconies hundreds of damsels, beautiful as the moon and dressed in green, beckoned to him hurriedly with peculiar coquettishness. The preacher said, “Young man, move up to the second stair now.” The prince did so. The second stair rose much higher than the first. A blue-black star rose from the staircase

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 127.

and climbed into the sky, illuminating the world with its glow. He then moved onto the third stair. On this occasion a bright star of white color rose into the sky and all the houses appeared resplendently white in its light, and in each house was seen a damsel, with her brow as bright as Venus, sitting alone and busy praising the Almighty. When he proceeded to the fourth step he saw the light of the Sun illuminating the entire world and everything looked brilliantly yellow. In short, he saw a white star from the fifth stair, a sandalwood-colored star from the sixth, and a black one from the seventh. And they all rose separately into the sky, and each star lit up the world with its light, so that all things seemed to be bathed in its peculiar hue. The prince assumed that from this vantage point he saw the entire heavens collectively, whereas the previous visions, on the contrary, were of separate units. Later on, as told by the preacher, he moved to the eighth stair. No star rose from there, but he saw a vast panorama of stars of various shapes and hues arranged together to form a great medley. He also saw, right in front of him, “the City of the Throne” and all the cities of the citadel grouped as four triangles. Moreover, it seemed to him that the stations from the sphere of the Moon to the sphere of Saturn were situated below the staircase, but it should be taken for granted that the declivity conformed to the order of the spheres. Meanwhile the preacher said in a loud voice, “Dear guest, please move on now to the ninth stair so that I can meet you.” The prince did so. The preacher made him sit down by his side and said: “Young man, the pallor of your face indicates that you are in love. Let me, therefore, know, as we sit face to face, explicitly the nature of your love. Are you in love with the Supreme Reality or is your love of an illusory nature, also known as mere fancy?” At first the prince hesitated, but recalling the saying that “love of the illusory phenomena is the bridge which leads to the love of the Supreme Reality” he said to the preacher, “I am in love with the Supreme Reality.” The preacher exclaimed, “Hurrah! You have given a sensible answer.”<sup>7</sup>

There are far too many *ṭilisms* in *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza* and *Bōstān-e Khayāl*, with one *ṭilism* leading to another. But there are many *dāstān*-tellers who have taken up one *ṭilism* from these cycles and narrated it in their own way; and some have gone to the extent of inventing new *ṭilisms* for themselves. Some of these narratives are of great help in appreciating the significance of the *ṭilism*. Munīr Shīkōhābādī’s (1814–80) *Ṭilism-e Goharbār* belongs to this category. He has stated in the published version of his book that he wrote the *Ṭilism-e Goharbār* in 1877 at the behest of the Navāb of Rāmpūr. The first edition, published in Agra in 1887, is

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. IV, pp. 105–6.

extremely rare. Even researchers seem to be completely unaware of it. It has, however, been recently edited and republished.<sup>8</sup>

The various stages of the conquest of the *ṭilism* have been described so exquisitely in *Ṭilism-e Goharbār* that the meaning of such tales becomes crystal-clear. It also makes us aware of the fact that even those stories, which research scholars of *dāstān* tend to dismiss in a few bold lines, are worthy of close attention. *Ṭilism-e Goharbār* is part of the great tilismic cycle of *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*. The *ṭilism* narrated by Munīr Shikōhābādī belongs to the third tome of *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza*, known as “Bālā Bākhtar.” In “Bālā Bākhtar” the *ṭilism* is dealt with rather briefly, whereas Munīr Shikōhābādī has described it in great detail. In “Bālā Bākhtar” the *ṭilism* is no more than a secondary happening, but Munīr Shikōhābādī treats it as a separate and complete *ṭilism*. That is why there is more artistic concentration here, and the *dāstān*-teller refrains from digressions while describing the various stages of the *ṭilism* conquest. On the symbolic level another thing worthy of note is that the *ṭilism*-conqueror is a very young prince, a boy in his early teens. In *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza* the *‘ayyārs* (tricksters) play an important rôle in bringing the *ṭilism* down. There are a few *‘ayyārs* who provide some help in *Ṭilism-e Goharbār*, but their rôle is peripheral. One of the reasons for this could be that the *ṭilism*-conqueror is very young and lacks the craftiness of a grown-up person. In the *ṭilism* the prince also falls in love at times, but even here the impression that he is too young to fully understand the nature of physical attraction is very evident. His youth also reminds one of Jungian psychology in which the archetype of the child is of considerable relevance. But in order to comprehend the spiritual significance of the child it is necessary to quote from Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240), the great mystic. This quotation is a must if we wish to see *ṭilism* in its correct intellectual perspective. Ibn ‘Arabī, while commenting on the pharaoh’s order to kill children, says in “The Wisdom of Moses” in his *Fuṣūṣu ’l-Ḥikam* that as a child has newly separated from God he possesses more perfection. He writes:

Dost thou not see how the little child influences the adult by the attractive power which is innate in him, so that the adult puts aside his dignity to amuse the child, to make him laugh, and he puts himself at the same level as the childish intelligence. It is that he obeys unconsciously the power of the fascination of the child, who thus obliges him to occupy

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<sup>8</sup>By Bookmark (Lahore, 1996). Page numbers following the quoted passages refer to this edition. —*Tr.*

himself with him, to protect him, and to procure for him that which he needs, and to console him too, so that he feels no anguish. All that is part of the influence that the young one exercises on the adult; the cause is the power of the state, for the young one is more directly attached to his Lord, because of his primordality, whereas the adult is more remote. Now, he who is nearer to God makes himself served by he who is further away...<sup>9</sup>

While dealing with the meaning of the *ṭilism* the *dāstān*-tellers see the cosmos as a prison. The moment a man steps into a *ṭilism*, that is, the cosmos, he finds himself imprisoned. As a child he belongs to the *ṭilism*. The very young prince in *Ṭilism-e Goharbār* symbolizes this concept. As soon as a person is born he sees the universe spread out before him in the form of a *ṭilism*. In *Ṭilism-e Goharbār* this sense is carefully made clear by underlining the youth of the prince. There are several instances where the *ṭilism*-conqueror gets into trouble because he is too fascinated by the spectacle unfolding before him and fails to take the necessary precautions. In other tilismic *dāstāns*, where the *ṭilism*-conquerors happen to be grown men, they commit mistakes for some other reasons. In *Ṭilism-e Goharbār* the prince is simply captivated by what he sees and learns too late that he has been outwitted. It is just another image of how a person is lost in wonder when he comes face to face with the magical pageant of natural phenomena. In *Ṭilism-e Goharbār* are found several tilismic spectacles, tilismic birds and animals, rivers of milk, canals of black blood and a variety of wild places. Right at the beginning the prince is married to a tilismic bride. She starts weeping when the prince tries to make love to her and dissolves away in tears like a lump of salt. It is a way of saying that natural phenomena tend to be ephemeral. The wonder and terror which such scenes evoke possess a charm of their own, but if we wish to understand the meaning of this particular *ṭilism* we must look closely at the various stages which the prince encounters and overcomes. These stages, taken together, draw up a very peculiar map pertaining to the conquest of the various zones of the cosmos. It has already been stated that in these tales the conquest of the cosmos is not merely an overt act but takes place simultaneously on external and internal planes and on psychic and cosmic levels. It is easy to identify the various stages of *Ṭilism-e Goharbār* in the light of Sufism.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Wisdom of the Prophets (Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam)*, tr. from Arabic to French by Titus Burckhardt and from French to English by Angela Culme-Seymour (Aldsworth, England: Beshara, 1975), p. 97.

The young *ṭilism*-conqueror of *Ṭilism-e Goharbār* is Prince Nūru 'd-Dahr, the son of Badi'ū 'z-Zamañ and the grandson of Amīr Ḥamza Ṣāhib Qirāñ. The founder of the *ṭilism* appears to the prince in a dream and tells him, much to his delight, that he is destined to conquer the *ṭilism*. Among the things the prince encounters is the obstacle of the poisoned melon-field and after that the "Stage of the Convolution within the Convolution." There are powers which recognize the prince for who he is, the *ṭilism*-conqueror, and help him on his way. He also has to face elements inimical to his quest. During his progress he comes across a wilderness of music and merriment. No one who comes there can keep himself from singing and dancing. He next encounters "The Hanging Mountain of One Thousand Threads." It is a magic mountain made up of a spider's web, from which hang down a thousand threads. Only one of them is real, the rest illusory. Once the prince gets hold of the real thread and kills the spider, the magic mountain is smashed to smithereens. The whole scene has been described with great skill by the *dāstān*-teller.

As he reached the place the prince saw thousands of spidery threads hanging down. Each time he reached out to take hold of a thread it turned into a hissing she-snake. Finally, he recited the blessed words, suggested by the *laub*, which enabled him to identify and grasp the real thread. As soon as he did so the mountain went into a spin, and the thread, entwining round him, picked him up, swung him around and tossed him up on the mountain. When the prince opened his eyes he saw that there was a big depression in the mountain. He was sitting in the depression and above him, guarding the entrance, loomed a gigantic spider which had one hundred and one legs. As the prince regained his senses he saw the spider move, and each of his legs discharged an evil or vile object, all of a different nature. From one of its legs emerged snakes, from another scorpions, and from others venomous lizards, six-dots (a poisonous beetle), chameleons, fire-brands, lions, bears, leopards, cheetahs, tigers, panthers, dragons, elephants, demons, goblins, jinn, ghouls, evil spirits of women who had died during pregnancy, she-vipers, speckled pythons, small ants, large ants, snake skinks, black beetles, hornets, poisonous cicadas found on swallowworts, honey bees, lightning, hail stones, falling snow, poison glands of snakes, sparks of fire, needles dipped in poison, big knives, scalpels, steel splinters, cutlasses, the heads of spears, arrowheads, showers of blood, severed heads, rotten livers, tripe, lungs, intestines, bones, dead rats, geckos, burnt biers, rags soiled with menses, mud, steel caltrops, quills of porcupines, bullets, cannon-balls, stones, drops of scalding oil, hot ash from hearths, embers, shards of glass, scimitars, rapiers, sabres, daggers, curved daggers, poniards, swordsticks, stilletos with curved



blades, various diseases, etc. All these, terrible to behold, rained down on the prince. But thanks to the *lauh*, which acted as an aegis, nothing touched him and vanished after drawing near. Although a brave lad, the prince shivered with fright.

After this onslaught by one hundred and one evil things was over, the ‘Ankabūt (Spider of the Thousand Threads) tried to escape by flying away. The prince recited the right incantation, took aim at the red spot on its belly and shot an arrow. At once a terrible commotion was heard with voices crying out that “‘Ankabūt, the magician, has been killed.” The mountain split into pieces. One of the pieces with the prince on it, who had passed out, went flying through the air. When the prince opened his eyes he found himself standing at the entrance to a garden. (pp. 102–3)

In traditional wisdom the spider’s web is a metaphor for the labyrinth of the soul.

After successfully negotiating this stage the prince encounters “The Stage of the Assembly of Kings.” Great emperors from the past put in an appearance. For this stage the instructions of the *lauh* are: “Simply look on, don’t speak. If anyone says something to you, keep quiet.” It is a journey through history, and various eras of the past are revealed to the prince. It seems as if he were watching them happen. Great figures from Iran’s mythic past, like Kaymoores, Faridoon, Iraj, Tehmoures, Tur, Salm, Minuchehr, Nauzar, Kaiqabad, Kaikawoos, Kaikhusrao, Rustam and Afrasiab appear before the prince, and he also has a glimpse of their achievements. This also is a stage full of magic and wonder, where the prince triumphs over the past. The triumph is, in every sense, purely symbolic. Having subjugated history the prince has to pass through another stage. There he has to overcome other manifestations of time. Indeed, if the intention is to triumph over one’s inner being, the conquest of time is of vital importance. Here we have an excellent example of the *dāstān*-teller’s visionary approach. The symbolic meaning of this stage, through which the greater significance of time is desired to be conveyed, is very profound. The stage is collectively known as “The Night Within The Day.” The prince travels through morning, noon, evening, and night, which are metaphors of time’s changing manifestations. The prince first conquers the hour of morning and thereafter that of noon. Thereupon he reaches the confines of evening. He conquers evening. Next lie the precincts of night. His arrival there marks the beginning of night’s conquest. In this manner all four aspects of time are subjugated by the prince. The narration of this stage is excellent. Munīr Shikōhādī has depicted the various aspects of time in a picturesque manner. (It should

be kept in mind that in Sufism the traveller of the sacred way who is able to control his moods is known as the “Father of Time.”)

When he next opened his eyes he found himself in the middle of the plain and just ahead of him was the hour of midnight. The prince consulted the *laub*, and having reassured himself that nothing was amiss, stepped into the darkness. Utter silence reigned over the jungle. He heard the owls, the screech-owls and the horned owls hoot. Lights moved from place to place in the distance. Demons, frequenting the places where the dead are burnt, were heard crying out. Goblins went about tossing burning coals. It was past midnight now. The dew had started falling. The forest rustled eerily. One could hear the tigers roar. The wolves were out, carrying off a goat here, an infant there. Bands of highwaymen and bandits lay in ambush. Mounted postmen, riders, vehicles, torch-bearers, and baggage-carriers were on the move, marching in ranks.

In some of the gardens could be seen the bullock-carts of merchants and corn-sellers, loaded with grain and cotton. Bonfires were burning. Some people were puffing at the hubble-bubble, some were smoking the small hand-held hookah. Mounted soldiers, sentinels and watchmen armed with bows, arrows and nooses were on the road, out on their beat.  
(p. 119)

Munir Shikōhābādī continues in the same vein showing us different images of the city at night. During this particular adventure one can see collectively many correspondences of nature and human life relating to the hours of night. The different scenarios of morning, noon and evening have been presented in a similar fashion. On an ordinary level these descriptions can be read either as pageants of social life or for the excellence of prose; but on a deeper level this conquest of the various aspects of night and day suggests that time, with all its possibilities, has become subjugated to the prince, and therefore it is a symbolic act. After this conflict with history and time, the prince comes upon “The Dreadful Wilderness.” Beyond the wilderness lies “The Stage of the Laughing Heads” where severed heads of men and women, young and old, of boys and girls and infants are on display. It is a fairly lengthy episode. Next comes “The Stage of the Forty Chandeliers” where stars as bright as the moon fall from above to enter the chandeliers and then shoot off back into the sky. Here the prince sees moonlight and darkness as distinct territories, and as the prince advances towards the moonlight it retreats as if eluding him. So at this stage one comes across light and darkness as opposites, and a cosmic function seems to be prevalent. Ahead of this stage stands an outer hall with three doors, lined with mirrors in which

the objects of the world are being reflected. Much to the prince's amazement he can't find his own reflection. After consulting the *lauḥ* the prince repeats a holy incantation and breathes upon one of the mirrors. Immediately a huge tree rises in the mirror with songbirds of every hue and kind sitting on its branches. Soon afterwards a parrot appears in the mirror and informs the prince that what he sees is but a passing show, and the speech it makes explains the secret meaning of the scene.

You who wander through these wonderlands, you who look at these tilismic marvels, who regard this hospice attentively, traveller who has put up at this inn, consider the pageants you behold as mere bubbles on the surface of water and reckon life and all its manifestations as dreams and fantasies. Behold all this to admonish yourself, recite the verse from the Qur'an, "Be admonished, therefore, you who are full of understanding," and after that stroll about and travel around.

O you who live beneath the roof of the  
perfidious heaven  
How long would you grieve for your wife  
and children, city and country?

Those who are silly enough are enamoured of the entertainment they see here, but the wise regard this place and the world at large as one and the same thing. No one will ever live again in all the set-ups, well-constructed and fully furnished, which you have left in ruins right from the beginning, in the environs and the middle of the *tilism*, to this very spot. No one will dwell again in all the mansions you have laid waste. All the hustle and bustle and the crowds which marked them once are no more. The same is the case with the world. There are places which become settlements and are then abandoned. More things go wrong by the hour, and prosperity declines. Sorrows increase, delights diminish. Regality rhymes with calamity. Here you must have one foot in the stirrup, ready to ride away on a journey at a moment's notice. Men are heir to thousands of adversities, and nets and cages and small shot await the birds.

The fowler fills us with grief, the gardener with fear.  
We have built our nest in a dyarchy. (p. 168–9)

Meanwhile the prince witnesses an act of extermination as a bird of prey swoops down and carries the parrot away. With this the veil of forgetfulness is lifted from the prince's eyes; he sees himself reflected in the mirror and proceeds onwards. One of the characteristics of *Ṭilism-e Goharbār* is that the different zones of the cosmos have been dovetailed with the various stages of the *tilism*. Having subjugated time and history

and after overcoming the obstacles mentioned above, the prince comes upon “The Stage of the Seven Tents” or “The Seven Regions.” Here he enters the sphere of geography. The seven tents contain seven great empires of the world. Each tent reveals a different empire, and during the course of his narration the *dāstān*-teller recounts its unique characteristics. The first tent stands for the picturesque Kingdom of China. The second tent represents Byzantium, the Eastern Roman Empire, the third Turkestan and the fourth Iran. There are seven further obstacles in Iran which the prince has to overcome. The fifth tent shows Zanzibar, where the black races reside. The sixth stands for Babylon and the seventh for India. The prince faces some lengthy ordeals during his sojourn in India. Two of the stages which the prince has to go through are known as “The Stage of the Trap of Deception” and “The Stage of Self-Forgetfulness.” He is up against Talbīs (deception), a magician, in “The Stage of the Trap of Deception.” A careful consideration of these stages makes their allegorical significance quite clear. These stages and Talbīs the magician make sense only when interpreted in light of the Sufi system of thought. In this particular system it is a must for one who takes the sacred path to get rid of the deceptions and illusions set in motion by the self. We also take cognizance of the fact that the journey doesn’t merely represent the conquest of the outer dimension but also implies the conquest of the inner dimension. All things lie hidden in man’s inner being, the past ages, the kingdoms and empires of the world; and all these exist as codified forms of various spiritual modes.

The prince deals next with “The Stronghold Where the Sight is Beguiled and Marvels Spring Up” and “The Stage Where Blood is Shed.” The quest now takes him to “The Stage of the Region of Great Darkness and the Water of Immortality.” The stage is an important one. The prince who has progressed through the zones of history, time, and geography now approaches the stage of immortality. Right from the beginning he has been made to identify the great achievements of the past. Afterwards he subjugates the various modes of time and cosmic forces. Then he is taken through the kingdoms of the world. The prince finally emerges triumphant from “The Stage of the Region of Great Darkness and the Water of Immortality” and also sees the water of immortality for what it is, a substance of magic. This is not the end of his journey. The next stage is the conquest of the lunar and solar eclipses. A clear implication that the prince has gone beyond the limits of mundane life and stepped into the greater cycle of the cosmos. In traditional wisdom the moon symbolizes the self, the sun the soul. The moon is seen threatened

by a dragon. The prince has to climb into the sky to fight the dragon. Much as it would like to escape, the dragon can't shake off the prince. In the end it swallows the prince. In this way a very old motif of *dāstāns*, that is, the hero's disappearance in a dragon's maw, is reenacted. In the stage of the solar eclipse the prince removes the darkness from the sun's surface, only to discover that it is a mirror, made to look like the sun by magic. The cleansing of the sun implies the purification of the soul. In this manner the whole cosmos becomes a vast illusion. Towards the end we also come to know that a masked person who had been helping the prince all through these stages is, in fact, Ajroos Jinni, the heir-apparent of the *ṭilism's* monarch. It is an implied acknowledgement of the fact that the dominance of the hostile forces within the *ṭilism* is over, and in the future everything will happen according to the prince's dictate.

I have referred briefly to the stages of *Ṭilism-e Goharbār* in this survey. However, the survey, brief though it is, makes it quite plain that the significance of the symbol of *ṭilism* is not only very profound but also has many layers. In the prose *dāstāns* which deal with *ṭilisms* and in traditional Urdu poetry the cosmos has been described as a *ṭilism* in which appearances tend to deceive. The stages of the conquest of a *ṭilism* are in fact the stages of acquiring divine knowledge. In the cosmos the different stages of human life, that is, childhood, youth and old age, are like *ṭilisms* within *ṭilisms*. Man's being is a *ṭilism* in itself, and therefore the conquest of a *ṭilism* is equivalent to the conquest of one's inner self. In the background of this symbolism stands that concept of reality on which our traditional literature is based. □

—Translated by Muhammad Salim-ur-Rahman