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*Dastan-e Amir Hamza Sahibqiran:*  
Preface to the Translation

THE one-volume version of *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza Ṣāhibqirān* (*DAH*), translated in the following pages, is attributed to Maulvī Ḥāfiz ‘Abdu ’l-Lāh Bilgrāmī. The text which I have used is preserved in the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library, London.<sup>1</sup> It has four *daf-tars* (books) and it was published by Naval Kishore Press, Lucknow, in November 1871. The colophon identifies it as the version emended by Maulvī Ḥāfiz ‘Abdu ’l-Lāh Bilgrāmī, a preceptor at the Arabic Academy of Kānpūr,<sup>2</sup> but does not say which version Bilgrāmī worked from. However, in his *Urdū kī Naṣrī Dāstānēn*, Gyān Čand Jain mentions an unpublished essay, “Urdū Dāstānōn kā Tanqīdī Muṭāli‘a,” by Saiyad Maḥmūd Naqvī, about the discovery of Ghālib Lakḥnavī’s version of the *DAH*. Naqvī’s essay contains a long excerpt from Ghālib Lakḥnavī’s *DAH*, which is identical with the one found in Bilgrāmī’s version. From this evidence we can safely infer that Bilgrāmī used Ghālib Lakḥnavī’s text as a source for his own version.<sup>3</sup> Bilgrāmī not only embellished Ghālib Lakḥnavī’s text with a grandiose and highly ornate language, but also added his own passages to it. However, plebeian patience soon ran out on this marvel of prose. History came full circle when redactors slowly began to strip Bilgrāmī’s handiwork of its ornamentations, to bring it more in line with the common idiom. The first one to revise this text was Saiyad Taṣadduq Ḥusain Rizvī, an emendator at the Naval Kishore Press, who was responsible for the fourth edition of the *DAH*, which came out in

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<sup>1</sup>Reference # 306.24.B.21; Lucknow: Munshi Naval Kishore Press, 1871.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 752.

<sup>3</sup>(2nd ed. Karachi: Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū, 1969), pp. 510–11. The later edition of this book does not follow the same pagination.

1887.<sup>4</sup> But Rizvī revised the text with a light hand, leaving Bilgrāmi’s text more or less intact. Next Maulānā ‘Abdu ’l-Bārī Āsī made a revision of the text of the tenth edition published by Tēj Kumār Press, Lucknow, in February 1960. The Maulānā purged the text of poetry and mangled most of the colorful passages.<sup>5</sup> The one-volume version of the *DAH* being printed and sold in India currently is the resulting, dispirited—one could almost say, violated—text of what was Bilgrāmi’s highly individualistic creation.

In all likelihood, a misguided sense of conformity and concession to prevalent market tastes dictated this tragic disfigurement of a prose masterpiece. One can understand it, even as one laments it. But one can only wonder about what prompted Frances W. Pritchett to use an assortment of passages from this badly expurgated text for her own English translation of this work. The choice of Āsī’s version for her translation implies an endorsement of what is inevitably a shortsighted approach, an unredeemable impoverishment. Moreover, she also makes a claim in her “Introduction” about this version which is not only contradicted by facts but also by her own earlier words. “By using the most recent edition of the most popular dastan text,” she writes, “I have adopted a number of editorial choices made over time within the [*dāstān*] tradition.”<sup>6</sup> However, a few lines earlier she has already admitted that “[i]t is the eleventh (1969) edition which has been used in making the present translation.”<sup>7</sup>

Now the fourth edition of the *DAH*—emended by Saiyad Taṣadduq Ḥusain Rizvī and printed by the Naval Kishore Press in 1887—came out at a time when the *dāstān* tradition was alive. But Rizvī, as we know, didn’t feel it expedient to excise Bilgrāmi’s additions to Ghālib Lakḥnavī’s text. In fact, he left most of them intact. By her own admission, Pritchett is working with the 1969 edition of the *DAH*. This is the same text which was revised by Āsī in 1960, when the *dāstān* tradition had long been over. So her first claim of adopting “editorial choices made over time within the tradition”—which is an allusion to Āsī’s version—is misleading, unless she believes that the *dāstān* tradition continued until the 1960s. Also, we wonder why Pritchett opted to translate a rather callously expurgated version, when scholarship is, and should be, sensitive to the original texts and sources. Apparently her reason for that was:

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 472.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p72, 511–2.

<sup>6</sup> *The Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures from the Dāstān of Amīr Ḥamzah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

These changes over time have made the story simpler and more translatable; they have certainly given the dastan the shape that it has today—and will continue to have in the future....<sup>8</sup>

While the choice of a version which is “more translatable” may be commendable, the claim that the single-volume *DAH* will continue to have the shape a certain publisher had given it for reasons of marketability, is, at best, disappointing for a serious reader of literature.

Urdu criticism produced during the colonial period reflects a profound skepticism about the value of Urdu humanities in general and the tradition of the *dāstān* in particular. The genre’s oral character further doomed it in the eyes of its critics,<sup>9</sup> who—at least those of them who belonged to Muslim culture—didn’t pause to reflect on the dire consequences of dismissing orality as worthy of serious attention, for the *Qur’ān*—the mainspring of their religious existence—and the *ghazal*—the finest expression of their creative endeavor—were both *necessarily* grounded in orality. But decades after the departure of colonialism, one must fight the urge to give in to ease, to shy away from the difficult. This is the only way to rehabilitate texts and ensure appreciation and longevity for them. If an effort is made to promote the original texts, there is good reason to hope that the original 1871 version of Bilgrāmī would be restored to its due place in Urdu literature. While every age and literature has its Thomas Bowdlers and its ‘Abdu ’l-Bārī Āsīs, it is the task of scholarship to provide the counterbalance to these unwarranted tendencies. Then too, Pritchett sometimes makes wholly gratuitous editorial choices which end up distorting the original,<sup>10</sup> thus diminishing the pleasure of reading, for me at least.

A still earlier English translation of the *DAH* was published from Calcutta in 1892 under the title, *The Amir Hamza: An Oriental Novel*,

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>For an inventory of the jejune arguments and comments of such critics, see Shamsu ’r-Raḥmān Fārūqī, “Dāstān kī She’riyāt kā Dībāḥa,” in *Meḥrāb*, ed. Aḥmad Mushtāq and Suhēl Aḥmad (Lahore: Maktaba-e Meḥrāb, n.d.), pp. 187–221.

<sup>10</sup>Take, for instance, the incorporation of a good part of the narrator’s description into Amīr Ḥamza’s monologue (Pritchett, paragraph 2, p. 90; for the original passage, see *DAH*, pp. 124–5). In some cases, Pritchett has obviously misunderstood the text, as, for example, in paragraph 1, p. 123. It is not Landhaur that Amīr Ḥamza “prepared to stab with a dagger in his proud ribs,” but rather himself, out of shame that he could lift Landhaur only up to his chest and not above the head. (For the original passage, see *DAH*, p. 210.)

Part I, by Sheik Sajjad Hosain. It is an abridgment of the first of the four *daftars*. The translator promises in the “Preface” to “take up the second part as soon as possible.” But posterity has received no report of any subsequent activity. In the “Preface” the translator also makes the following pronouncements: “As is the case with native novelists, the book has been ornamented by numerous exaggerations and colourings...”<sup>11</sup> And:

In writing this book in English, I have avoided as much as possible, the superfluities and exaggerations of the original, so as to make the book inviting and pleasant to English readers, and have sketched out the facts with the air of a novelist, which, I hope, will meet with the approbation of my readers. This being my first labour, I trust, I am entitled to some indulgence for any blunders and inconsistencies that may be found in my writing. I am neither a graduate, nor a man of any significance, but a Mohamedan, born and bred, in the unpopular district of Bhagalpore, where English literature is just beginning to be appreciated by the Mohamedan community.<sup>12</sup>

The significance of Sheik Sajjad Hosain’s translation is merely historical. And his pronouncements—they couldn’t be more charming in their naiveté. Therefore we indulge the translator not only for his shortcomings, but also in his belief that what he was translating “with the air of a novelist” was a novel.

On the following pages I have made a modest attempt to bring to the non-native Urdu reader some flavor, some idea of the richness of a genre which has suffered neglect for a long period. And what I have said on the preceding pages is offered to the non-native and native Urdu reader alike in the hope that it will add in some measure to the small but significant corpus of critical writing on the *dāstān* which has recently emerged, thanks largely to the researches of Gyān Čand Jain and Shamsu ’r-Raḥmān Fārūqī. I claim no finality for my observations and my reflections on the genre, being aware of their distance from formal criticism. Nonetheless I believe a less rigid, more relaxed and even discursive manner of observation has the potential to offer refreshing and novel insights.

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Working from the published edition of a text that is essentially an act of the imagination, it made little sense to clutter its translation with obtrusive notes. In some cases, where explanation seemed unavoidable, I have

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<sup>11</sup>(London: British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, Reference # 14112.bbb.22; Calcutta: Sarat Chandra Bysack & Co., 1892), p. i.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. ii.

supplied it in a bank of Notes relegated to the back of the translation. Some additional exposition is provided in Secondary Notes and Glossary for items marked with an asterisk in the translation. To keep the entries to a minimum, I have glossed only those words whose meanings cannot be determined contextually.

In translating names of textiles and fabrics, I have retained original terms in those cases where I was unable to find a fitting English equivalent. Where the original text gives more than one local/indigenous name for the same flower, I have translated it in the first instance but kept the variants in the original.

Proper transliteration is observed in my article, Notes, Secondary Notes and Glossary, and Bibliography, but dispensed with in the translation itself. The translation is also kept free of the convention of giving non-English words in italics.

The initial letters preceding entries in the Bibliography are used throughout this presentation to identify my sources of information. Thus a “(P)” simply means that the information preceding it is taken from “Platts, John T. *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi and English*. Rpt. Lahore: Saṅg-e Mil, 1994” in the Bibliography.

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I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Muhammad Umar Memon for explaining the Persian verses in the text, and for his unflagging encouragement and many valuable suggestions. For any imperfections in the translation—and I’m afraid there may be some—I alone am responsible.

**PS:**

This is one of those tales which can not be told to everybody, but only to persons of choice intelligence. Therefore I require you to swear, in your own name and your master’s, never to recount a word of it to five kinds of persons: the ignorant, whose gross spirits could not appreciate it; hypocrites, who would be offended by it; schoolmasters, whose feeble and muddy intelligence would not understand it; idiots, for the same reason; and unbelievers, who could not draw from it a profitable moral.<sup>13</sup> □

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<sup>13</sup>J. C. Mardrus, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, tr. Powys Mathers (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1995), “The Adventures of Hasan of Basrah,” vol. 3, p. 156.