

QURRATULAIN SHIRAZI

## Themes and Motifs in the *Adventures of Amir Hamza* (Student Paper)

### Introduction

*Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza Ṣāhibqirān* (hereafter, DAH), named after its protagonist, is an Urdu story-cycle spanning forty-six volumes. *Ṣāhibqirān* is a title used for kings and monarchs whose rule continued for forty years or more. Such kings are born during an auspicious conjunction of planets. The DAH was produced in the ninth century CE and is the longest Romance cycle in Urdu. It is also considered the most important Indo-Islamic prose epic. Its translation into English by Musharraf Ali Farooqi as *The Adventures of Amir Hamza: Lord of the Auspicious Planetary Conjunction* (New York: Random House, 2007), from the one-volume condensed version set down by Ghālib Lakḥnavī and ‘Abd’u-Lāh Bilgramī, has finally made this important work of oral narrative—with tales and diverse cultural and regional influences from a wide area of the Islamic world—available for the benefit of the Western reader. The oral tradition of storytelling is intimately connected with the idea of spreading and glorifying an individual whose life and works preserve the lessons and lineages of the past. It helps to spread the reputations of ancient celebrities, thereby contributing to the tradition of the oral celebration of cultural and religious heroes. This *dāstān* is a story of the heroics of Amīr Ḥamza whose personality has historical, religious and cultural relevance throughout the Islamic world.

*The Adventures of Amir Hamza* (hereafter AAH) has introduced the modern reader to the world of Islamic aesthetics and creativity. It has received rave reviews from prominent writers such as William Dalrymple and Diana Abu-Jaber. Dalrymple writes:

“The Adventures of Amir Hamza” is the “Iliad” and “Odyssey” of medieval Persia, a rollicking, magic-filled heroic saga. Born as early as the ninth century, it grew through oral transmission to include material gathered from the wider culture-compost of the pre-Islamic Middle East.

(2008, n.p.)

The AAH has been compared to many Western classics as well as to classics from Islamic literature. Elizabeth Hand considers it an “Eastern variant on *Le Morte d’Arthur* or *Orlando Furioso*,” and, in contemporary times, finds its sheer elegance comparable to Isak Dinesen’s Gothic stories (2008, 32). Hand also cites many more examples of its resemblance to literatures emanating from other parts of the world.

The two storytellers of the AAH used the preexisting narrative materials to produce their tales. They included history, folklore and legends—all used freely without any predefined pattern or organization. Apart from this freedom of choice, they had a creative capacity for incorporating new events and materials into the narrative. Thus, they not only used the existing materials, for example, oral anecdotes and stories present in the folklore of every culture as well as stories about historical events, they also invented new stories and interesting events. The AAH is thus a product of the storytellers’ skills in weaving colorful story patterns. These patterns are designed to lure a listener’s or reader’s aesthetic, emotional and rational faculties into the fictitious world of a romance by taking him away from the world of reality into an unreal world of fancy and desire. Therefore, one of AAH’s major characteristics is providing an escape from their immediate reality for the members of the audience.

The idealistic nature of a romance is the main driving force for the telling of the AAH and is also a governing principle in structuring the narrative. All designs and schemes that dominate the structural and compositional plan of the story are subject to the ultimate aim of enthralling the listener. In his effort to woo the audience, the storyteller distorts history, geography, politics, the rules of morality, and religious knowledge in every conceivable way. Farooqi has labeled this feature a manifestation of “idle tales” (2000, 123). The ultimate aim of the storyteller is to prolong the narrative and keep the listener spellbound with relentless anticipation for more action and drama to come. His mastery of different structural patterns and thematic motifs permits him to expand the narrative endlessly. No wonder that the storytellers of DAH have transformed the anecdotal account of Amir Hamza’s life into a full scale, voluminous romance cycle.

### The Story

The story starts with the development of Amir Hamza's character as a pre-Islamic warrior and a brave man. Hamza acquires mastery in martial skills. Meanwhile, Naushervan's empire in Persia is attacked by Hashsham bin Alqamah Khaibri. Hamza, upon reaching Ctesiphon (*Madā'in*), defeats Hashsham in an encounter, which wins the favor of King Naushervan. This victory begins the cycle of Hamza's exploits and he becomes a permanent member of Naushervan's court. At the monarch's palace, he falls in love with Naushervan's daughter Mehr-Nigar. The commanders and courtiers look with displeasure at the respect he is accorded at the court and at his engagement to Mehr-Nigar. To eliminate him for good, Ctesiphon's ruling establishment dispatches Hamza on a mission to extract tribute from India's king, Landhoor bin Saadan. Hamza's departure for India triggers a series of military campaigns against the rebellious kingdoms of Egypt, Greece, China and Ceylon.

As Hamza subdues rebellious rulers in the material world, a political upheaval takes place in the supernatural world of Mt. Qāf. While he spends a good eighteen years on Mt. Qāf, the narrative continues the description of events in the material world. In Hamza's absence, Amar Ayyar assumes command of Hamza's camp, which includes many emperors, warriors and princes, who not only paid tribute to him but were also his riding companions on his mission to conquer lands and exact tributes. Thus the account of Hamza's activities on Mt. Qāf and Amar Ayyar's exploits on Earth go side by side in the narrative. After eighteen years, Hamza returns from Qāf, marries Mehr-Nigar and resumes his activities on Earth. Once back, he reorganizes his army and launches a new series of adventures and military campaigns in different parts of the world. Finally, he reaches Mecca, embraces Islam and attains martyrdom.

### Cultural Influences on the Themes of AAH

The sole aim of the *dāstān* storyteller is to provide entertainment, which originates from the basic purpose of composing popular literature exclusively designed for the common people. The aims and objectives of popular literature are different from those of classical and élite literature. According to Heath, the aesthetic goals of élite literature "tend to be soteriological" and are "founded on a belief in the morally redemptive powers of 'great' literature" (1996, 49). The DAH is an exposition of the ideals of manliness and heroic prowess as found across the cultural and historical

landscape of the Islamic world, which is a melting pot of various cultures and traditions that interpenetrate to constitute a rich and heterogeneous tapestry of folk wisdom, traditions and customs. All of this found expression in the literary landscape, which celebrates the ideals of manliness, beauty, love and mental alertness. Folk and popular tradition imitates the life of the times in which it is composed. It mirrors the reality of life through fiction and idealism. However, in terms of history, philosophy and art, it patently lacks any claim to accuracy.

The AAH, in as much as it is grounded in popular traditions, and aims, primarily, to entertain, lacks the status of *élite* literature. Thus it is consistent with the description of Robert Redfield, namely, that there is a small group, an elite who are official carriers of classical written tradition and they are supported by a large subservient populace which passively accepts its role. The latter are the possessors of folk and popular tradition (1956, 29). And while the (*élite*) tradition is cultivated in schools (education centers) or temples (religious centers), the little (folk) tradition “works itself out and keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered in the village communities” (*ibid.*, 70). Despite this strong division between the *élite* and popular segments of society, interaction between the two simply cannot be avoided. The *élite* and folk traditions overlap considerably as a result of massive urbanization and population growth. This leads to the *élite* segment borrowing material from folklore, precipitating the evolution of a new popular literary tradition which is neither entirely *élite* and classical nor entirely folk in its composition. The AAH is a work of a newly evolved popular tradition, which has qualities of both the *élite* and folk traditions.

The narrative cohesion and integrity in the AAH is established through four important themes worked out through intricate patterns, namely: (a) warfare, (b) trickery, (c) love and beauty, and (d) enchantment. The themes materialize through the Arab Middle Eastern, Persian and Indian cultural values and mores presented as the background that encompasses all of the action and inaction in the story. The religious, cultural, and ethnic dimensions are described in a way that may reflect the tension as well as accommodation within a society and the prevalent culture of the time.

#### (a) Warfare

Composed as a celebration of bravery and manhood, the AAH is heavily indebted to Islamic and pre-Islamic values and draws inspiration and creative energy from them. Its structural and thematic foundation establish it as a significant piece of literature that provides deep insights into the diverse

cultural paradigms of the Islamic world—its point of origin and evolution. Stories of valor and gallantry also satisfy moral and ethical aims. The employment of the Hamza legend to mesmerize the common man has a long historical background. It is embedded in the basic human desire for action, nobility and sacrifice. The AAH recounts its hero's tribulations during his arduous mission of establishing the rule of a sovereign God. This religious aim is arranged in accordance with the tenets and behavioral patterns established by the Prophet Ibrahim. The AAH chronicles the battles, romances, journeys, mistakes, misfortunes and victories in Hamza's life in conformity to this religious and doctrinal perspective.

The theme of warfare, here, assumes a multidimensional character enacted and reinforced in the narrative through such motifs as battle, one-on-one combat, worldwide traveling, daunting trials, and clever stratagems against opponents. This theme pervades the whole narrative as it is the main structural line of action according to which the story unfolds. In a romance, the main objective of the story is to establish the heroic prowess of the protagonist; therefore it is given maximum space in the narrative.

Battle and war expeditions underscore an important instructive dimension of the story, namely, the primacy of warriors of true faith over pagans. The protagonist's righteousness is manifested through his valor, nobility, and clemency. The result of the battles is the conversion of infidels to the True Faith, i.e., Abrahamic monotheism, which consolidates the moral superiority of one side over the other. Apart from that, battles also gave a tremendous boost to the martial prowess of the protagonist's camp because, at the end of each battle, the opponents join the winning camp. However, as the story progresses, it becomes evident that loyalties or enmities do not endure for long and keep fluctuating between the heroic and the iniquitous as demanded by the narrative situation. The battle scenes are important building blocks in the AAH. There are detailed descriptions of them, explained in four important stages: departure, travel, arrival, and action/reaction (Heath 1996, chapter 8).

Within the narrative context, the battle is the result of political and regional strife between two rulers. One of its prominent causes is the raising of the flag of rebellion by a territorial commander or a king against the authority of King Naushervan. Since Naushervan is the Emperor of Seven Climes, his military commander, Hamza, is invariably sent to wage a campaign against the rebels. His trials and adventures form an integral part of the warfare. One important episode of such trials appears at the beginning of the story. Hamza's departure from the court of Naushervan is followed by an account of his trials (natural calamities, extraordinarily powerful monsters, and conspiracies against the military expedition) during the

journey. An example is the account of two storms that engulf Hamza's expedition to India. The first tempest lasts for three days and subsides only after wreaking havoc on the ships. Another trial occurs when Hamza's armies are caught in the *Whirlpool of Sikander*. The calamity subsides only after Amar Ayyar blows the *Timbal of Sikander*. (In the story it is implied that Sikander once blew this timbal.) The allusion to Sikander adds grandeur and pomposity in the otherwise simple story.

Other obstacles besides storms appear in the form of *tasma-pas*—strange supernatural creatures with tentacles for feet—a huge leviathan and a fish as big as an island, all of which Hamza's companions must overcome in order to reach the battleground.

The trials are significant in that they inculcate the virtues of perseverance, resilience and steadfastness in a warrior. The protagonist also uses thoughtfulness and discernment to counter the resistance and opposition of unforeseen disasters and strange creatures—forces that usually far outweigh the human capacity of the protagonist. However, in the end, he overcomes all odds using his sheer physical, rational, intellectual and spiritual powers, and deftly exploits his God-given exceptional abilities. Hamza is blessed with unusual armor, wonderful horses, and extraordinary companions, among them Amar Ayyar, Muqbil Wafadar, and many other reputed warriors and emperors from different parts of the world.

Travel works as an important narrative device and is closely associated with the motif of battle. In AAH travel justifies a convergence of geographical details with the fictional narrative. It also expands the scope of the protagonist's operations in addition to increasing the level of his social and political rank. The storyteller contrives the travel motif as a means of promoting the physical and intellectual prowess of a warrior, so that after he has emerged from them with evident success, his martial prowess is substantially increased.

The arrival at the battleground is an important stage and is usually described at length, with the two opposing sides coming face to face and the battle drums starting to sound. The storyteller gives a detailed account of the two sides to set the scene of the battle. The account is not just comprised of dramatic action, it also describes political and diplomatic intrigues in its attempt to create suspense and horror before the final victory and defeat.

Narrated with meticulous detail, the scenes of battle in AAH reflect the storyteller's immense knowledge of war machinery, troops, weaponry and confrontational skills. This makes them so lively and animated that the audience is quite affected by the power and energy of the conflict. For instance:

When the standard of sunlight flashed in the skies and the imminent ascent of King Sol to his throne was declared, the Sahibqiran said his prayers and prepared for battle alongside his seraphic-faced, impeccably virtuous, upright and pure-hearted troops. On the other side King Landhoor bin Saadan organized his armies in battle array with evil intention, and final preparations were made by the warriors on both sides.

(Lakhnawi & Bilgrami 2007, 246)

The above highlights the narrative point of view of the storyteller, which favors the protagonist. The storyteller makes the contesting sides numerically and morally unequal. The protagonist's side is made familiar to the listener, and the storyteller meticulously garners goodwill for his camp through the use of sympathetic phrases and situations. The descriptions underscore the storyteller's tendency to manipulate his listeners' feelings in favor of the protagonist. For example:

The news spread to the four corners of the world that Amir Hamza, the son-in-law of Naushervan the Just, had arrived to skirmish with the Khusrau of India, King Landhoor bin Saadan, that Hamza's men made up in valor what they lacked in numbers, that every single one of them held Rustam and Nariman and Afrasiyab of no account, and that Amir Hamza himself was a mighty warrior, and a man who had a great claim on power and might.

(*ibid.*, 227)

The storyteller also controls the perception of his audience by leading him into a world whose facts are only known to himself. By recourse to vivid imagination, he manipulates situations and events, and does not subject his narrative to any historical, religious or cultural constraints, being entirely free in choosing the outcome of a given battle from any number of possibilities available to him. Structurally, the motif of a battle is employed repeatedly to give a dynamic quality to the narrative. However, newer situations with different motifs and possibilities are also invented to keep the listeners absorbed in the story. Even though dramatic bloody confrontations between the warring sides are a staple, the warfare remains dutifully focused on the ideal and romantic motive underlying the act of storytelling, that is, the establishment of the protagonist's authority and superiority over his opponents. Hence every conflict ends with his victory and, in turn, paves the way for yet more conflicts, and also for satiating the audience's desire for good's victory over evil.

### (b) Trickery (Ayyari)

The ideal of youthful perfection is not restricted only to the display of physical strength and magnanimity, which unfold in the course of conflict. Mental alertness, vigilance, watchfulness, intelligence and cleverness are also important attributes required for attaining control over the opponent, and they play a decisive role in a battle's outcome, whether victory or defeat. Trickery is closely tied to battle in the AAH. While Hamza is presented as the ideal of gallantry and youthful perfection, a still more dynamic and self-motivated depiction of the latter is reflected in the person of trickster Amar Ayyar.

**Trickery in the Indo-Persian Literary Tradition:** It is important to note that *ayyar* (trickster) and *ayyari* have existed all along in the Indo-Persian literary tradition (Ridgeon 2010, chapter 1). It points to a group of young men (*fityān*) of Arab origin aspiring to attain a better life. *Fityān* stood out for such attributes as bachelorhood, group living, and participation in joint entertainments. Also labeled as comrades, they were bound by a strong sense of group solidarity (*‘aşabiya*). Intelligent, and in some historical records represented as troublemakers, they gained notoriety for harassing and robbing rich merchants, and often went under such titles as *sāter* (adroit), *rend* (rogue) and *luti* [*lūṭī*] (pederast; rowdy) (*Encyclopaedia Iranica* 2008, n.p.; 1987, n.p.).

It is in Badī‘u’z-Zamān al-Hamzānī’s *al-Maqāmāt* that one finds the earliest occurrence of the trickster in Arabic literature. Here, he is noted for his penchant for wanderings and exploits, speaking to assemblies, and is represented as an Abū’l-Faṭḥ, “vagabond scholar” (*Maqāmāt* 1915, 15). In Persian history, an *ayyar* is a “vagabond,” a title which, according to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, is also applied to members of medieval *futuwwa* who are infused with the spirit of “group solidarity” (2013, n.p.). The literary historical background makes it abundantly clear that tricksters were never virtue incarnate and were, at best, pretty shady characters.

Here it would be germane to see how all this goes through a process of modification in the AAH. In the tradition, the *Samak-e-Ayyāri* of Persian *dāstāns* serves as the precedent for the Indo-Persian romance. Its salient feature was the presence of two heroes, the trickster and the prince, with the former being the protagonist of the story. In the Indo-Persian romance tradition of the AAH however, their roles are reversed. Here, it is the prince who is the main character and the trickster his sidekick—but a sidekick nevertheless crucial for the fulfillment of his master’s aims and objectives.

**Trickster in the AAH:** Equally active and competent, the trickster is allocated a major portion of the AAH for the enactment of his antics and heroics.



In the prince's absence, the trickster substitutes for him as commander of the camp. Both characters enjoy a deep friendship and brotherly relations. His whimsicality and waywardness apart, the trickster never betrays his chief commander or his community.

Amar's is a fairly complex character. Not only does he personify the qualities of loyalty and heroism, he is also a master trickster who employs both fair and foul methods to play his tricks and subdue his enemy. In the self-sustaining landscape of the narrative, Amar is allowed to play fast and loose with his part. His character is significant for its decisive role in the narrative progression of the main story. In addition to trickery, he also has sorcery and magic up his sleeve to enchant his fellow humans.

Although the theme of trickery is woven primarily around Amar and his gang, his loyalties still lie with the prince and he participates exuberantly in all the episodes whether they require action or not. Hamza's might and military strength expand and his character develops as a mentally alert warrior as the story progresses, with Amar simultaneously growing ever more skilled as a trickster. His trickery, in ever-newer forms, infuses the narrative with variety and humor, but most of his machinations remain morally ambivalent. He uses them to acquire wealth and defend his camp, and, occasionally, to establish the rule of law. On occasion, he disguises himself as a woman or a singer to beguile his fellow creatures and, in some instances, intoxicates them with sleep-inducing scents in order to rob them clean. An accomplished spy and intelligence gatherer, he enlivens the narrative with his razor-sharp wit and entertaining humor. The storyteller presents the trickster's antics in a positive light because of his close bonds with the prince, and also because during the latter's adventures on Mt. Qāf and absence from the camp, he faithfully assumes the role of commander. Their mutual friendship reinforces the idea of group solidarity and *futuwwa*, and both, in their individual capacity, represent manifestations of youthful exaltation and manliness.

**Trickster's Paraphernalia:** Amar is the proud owner of a fairly elaborate trickster's kit, received as blessings from holy sages. It includes many devices, among them a bag called *zanbil* [*zañbīl*] within which exists a world comparable in size to our world on Earth. It produces on command anything Amar wishes at any given time and accommodates anything that he throws into it. There is also a cloak or *dev-jama* [*dēv-jāma*] which, when worn, makes him invisible while he can still see everyone. Another device he has is the Net of [Prophet] Elias. This net has the miraculous property of carrying any object and making it feel as light as a few pounds even if it weighs millions of tons. And wherever he raises his Pavilion of Daniel and takes

shelter underneath it, no one is able to capture him. Anyone entering it is immediately caught and hung upside down. When he throws the Lasso of Āṣif, it stretches out as far as he commands and nothing can ever slit or snap it. When he wears the *dev-jama*, it changes seven colors, from green to red to yellow and so on, and allows him to disappear in the spiraling mist. All the items of his kit allow him to engage in his various antics and tricks. Holy men frequently visit and bless him with gifts, among them: “five daggers with bejeweled hilts, and forty-four rattles to strap around his waist.” He is taught “twelve musical styles, twenty-eight manners of improvisation, six high-key notes, [and] twenty-four songs.” He is instructed “in six methods of sporting stockings and false whiskers.” He is given a perfume-box “of marvelously intricate pattern full of a remarkable fragrance of delirious power,” “a fly whisk made of peacock plumules,” “a glittering and deadly sword,” and so on and so forth (Lakhnawi & Bilgrami 2007, 128).

**Wit and Humor:** Amar’s pranks provide a good source of humor and wit, but, unlike the protagonist, they do not follow the strict moral code of conduct and honor. He often plays nasty tricks that go against royal decorum and, quite often, resorts to using vulgar language. This gives a rustic and unrefined flavor to the narrative, thereby making it more palatable to the common man, and colors an otherwise solemn story with an exhilarating touch of amusement. His dialogues and exchanges with other characters remain close to the common speech and everyday life. In a certain episode Amar punishes one of his enemies called Akhzar Filgosh by entering his tent, rendering the guards and attendants unconscious, and stealing all the riches and valuables he could find inside. Then he ties up the unconscious Filgosh and slings him over his shoulder. After removing one of the tent’s supporting poles, he plants it in the center of the camp. He lops off one of Filgosh’s ears, blackens his whole body, and makes seven spots on it in seven colors. And this is not the end of his mischief. He goes on to humiliate Filgosh further by hanging him upside down from the pole, driving a staff straight into him, and then sticks a multicolored piece of paper onto the staff as a flag bearing this message:

[...] I, Khvaja Amar Ayyar—known to the world as the King of *Ayyars*, the bearder of infidels, the lopper of the heads of fractious men, the chastiser of those deaf to sense, the ripper of the bellies of knaves and one whose trickery is the dread of all men—am notorious for good reason. I spared you this time with this little warning, and visited only small rebuke on your head. If you cross my path again, you shall find yourself with far worse a fate and shall learn what awful humiliation and disgrace shall become your lot.

(*ibid.*, 428–29)

The theme of trickery is instrumental in grounding the narrative in the popular everyday cultural idiom and life. Its cultural nuances make it familiar and even more popular among the listeners. Amar frequently violates the royal decorum and sobriety that dominates the theme of warfare. His tricks and antics make people laugh and enliven the atmosphere as the story is told. Disinformation, misleading news and propaganda are instrumental in precipitating his subterfuges, and also testify to his presence of mind and the alertness required to carry out tricks effectively. He is referred to in the story by a number of titles, among them: Father of Racers, Lord of Mischief Mongerers of the World, the King of Dagger throwing Tricksters, Lord of Cunning Ones, Master of the Hall of Assembly and Enslaver of Kings. Trickery, as he defines it, "is not accomplished in words alone, but has to do with art and deftness! In this trade speed is at a premium; and alertness and alacrity are its mainstay" (*ibid.*, 138). "Mark me well!" he challenges his opponents. "I am Amar Ayyar! the renown of my *ayyari* has reached the lands and kingdoms of far and near! In me the deceiver finds no refuge for his device, and I give the liar the lie (*ibid.*, 139).

Apart from the tricks of warfare and intelligence gathering, Amar also performs artistic feats. He is an amazing singer and connoisseur of musical instruments. His singing and poetry recitations in royal assemblies enhance the festivities and celebrations.

The theme of trickery depicts life from a different perspective by focusing not just on warfare but also on common and domestic affairs. It is played out in a variety of venues ranging from battlefields to private chambers. Female characters are also given a good deal of freedom to play their part. Thus it brings a fine aesthetic and artistic touch to the narrative. In short, trickery is a significant thematic unit of the story and plays a decisive role in domesticating the accounts of warfare. It works as a dramatic relief for the listeners and also serves as an important structural unit that helps a storyteller to relate new situations and events indispensable for narrative progression.

### (c) Beauty and Love

Beauty and love have been central to the Indo-Persian literary tradition all along. In poetry, this theme celebrates the emotional attachment between love and beauty as an instinctive human attribute. Prose narratives also focus quite a bit on this theme. Lost in the travails of quotidian existence, it is only through beauty that the storyteller and his audience can find their way back to those unattainable ideals that lie beyond time and contingency.

Using a whole range of traditional poetic imagery, the sequences of romance in the narrative function as emotional mirrors reflecting every listener's desire for love and beauty. Thus this theme is used as the most effective attention-grabber to keep the lay audience enthralled. It makes its impact by means of aesthetic, dramatic and artistic overtures.

**Relationship Between Romance and Adventure:** The AAH dramatizes this relationship and explores Hamza's capacity for romance. His weakness for beauty and his intrinsic ability to fall in love give a new dimension to his character. Virtues such as kindness, forgiveness, and resilience arise in him precisely through his predisposition to fall in love. In the Indo-Persian literary tradition, love signifies the strong attraction that draws all creatures to emotional and spiritual harmony. It symbolizes the struggle to attain union with the Beloved even in this life. The struggle, started with a fleeting romantic encounter between two lovers, stretches out over a lifetime in which the lover is obliged to overcome indescribable troubles before reuniting with his Beloved. It is thus only natural that love sets in motion a whole series of events and conflicts. Only after all obstacles have been overcome can a reunion of the lovers come about. However, in the narrative the storyteller deliberately delays the reunion to prolong his account of dramatic events and adventures. The prolongation is a "stalling" tactic (Farooqi 2000, 131, 163) and serves to create anticipation among members of the audience. The episode of romance between Hamza and Mehr-Nigar is an important development which is placed at the very beginning as a device for precipitating oncoming troubles. In short, beauty and love embody the motifs of search, desire, meeting, and short and long stretches of separation between lovers, which constitute the adventurous and romantic dimension of the story.

**Aesthetic and Artistic Dimension in the AAH:** Love and beauty help to develop the aesthetic and artistic aspects of the story and add color and exuberance to it. The storyteller employs the vibrancy of physical beauty to excite the aesthetic sensibilities of his audience. A wide range of beautiful women and royal characters exhibiting celestial beauty are commissioned across the narrative space of the AAH. Glowing descriptions of beautiful places, such as gardens, palaces, royal courts, sumptuous and elaborate banquets, luxurious chambers and festive celebrations, further enhance the sense of beauty. Episodes of love and beauty overwhelm the descriptive detail. To this end the storyteller consciously contrives such scenes as set the atmosphere for romance.

**Manifestations of Beauty:** Mehr-Nigar embodies the most striking manifestation of beauty. She is the goal of the protagonist's pursuit, so the storyteller endeavors to establish her as a paragon of beauty, unsurpassed by any mortal. Her image is drawn through an extravagant use of poetry and prose. The poet uses numerous devices such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, oxymoron, alliteration, rhymes, and repeated decorative images to capture her beauty in words.

Storytellers and poets exploit sensuality to heighten the aesthetic appeal of the narrative. The physical attributes of Mehr-Nigar are described at length to celebrate her feminine splendor. Long, poetic sequences are composed to highlight the minutest detail of her every feature. The odes to beauty are significant exponents of the Indo-Persian literary tradition and are often inserted in a prose narrative to accentuate the aesthetic and romantic effect. For instance, in one place, the poet compares the depth of Mehr-Nigar's dimple to the well in which Yusuf's [Joseph's] brothers had thrown him. What that means is that her dimple is as deep as the well. In other words, her dimple is so enthralling that a captive of her beauty will not seek release from it. And yet she is blissfully free of a beauty that is aware of itself and its power over men. Her physical excellence is delicately balanced by a description of her innocent demeanor:

She has not yet begun admiring herself in the mirror,  
She has not yet estimated her beauty's grace,  
She has not yet fathomed her innate worth,  
She is as yet innocent of these conceits, oh, lucky me!  
No arrogance hath her beauty, her comely aspect shows no conceit,  
Nor is her glance initiated in amorous glances,

(Lakhnawi & Bilgrami 2007, 173)

The poetic passages are reservoirs of rich imagery, allusions to prominent religious and historical events and personalities, similes and metaphors, and highly ornate language.

**Emotional Exuberance in Romance Episodes:** Beauty, described in ideal terms, never fails to excite romantic disquietude in the lover. The poet captures his restlessness in moving lines. The romantic capacity of both male and female characters is described meticulously to create interesting and engaging love sequences. The romantic dimension enables the storyteller to explore the emotional and psychological vicissitudes of the characters. He penetrates their minds and hearts through dramatic visualization and lays bare their desperate emotional condition. Most of the romantic overtures are described through poetic passages in highly ornate prose. These passages underscore the philosophical complexity of love and beauty. For

instance, Mehr-Nigar recites the following lines in one such sequence: “There are no two worse enemies of life than love and beauty,” and “If beauty is the light the creation was endowed with, love is the fire” (*ibid.*, 185).

Touching descriptions of a lover’s toil complements Mehr-Nigar’s ravishing beauty. Both suffer the pangs of separation, recite poetry, and try to overcome the material obstacles that continually thwart their prospective union.

The ensuing drama of restlessness and extreme desire for union, powerfully described in the narrative, creates an atmosphere of anticipation among the audience. But the storyteller stalls, contriving still newer, interesting episodes of the forlorn lover’s attempts at reunion to bring the feeling of anticipation to a boil. Though circumscribed by the framework of romance, these episodes nevertheless remain quintessentially adventurous and dramatic.

**Romantic Encounters:** The first tryst of the lovers is described through poetic sequences interspersed in detailed stretches of prose. In an early episode, Hamza is shown bathing, while Mehr-Nigar, it so happens, is looking out the latticed window of the palace’s upper story. Just then, the storyteller intervenes with his comments in elaborate poetic lines to register the maximum impact of Mehr-Nigar’s conflagrated heart and the highly charged atmosphere of the romantic encounter:

In the reflection of her luminance even a mote sparkled starlike  
And every pore of her lattice window shone bright like a sparkling  
star.

(*ibid.*, 164)

The intensity of the romantic encounter is enhanced by another set of lines which reinforces the impact of Mehr-Nigar’s beauty:

The garden caught fire from the lightning of her beauty’s force;  
Now when the gardeners pick flowers they must needs use fire  
irons.

(*ibid.*, 165)

The storyteller gives some clue to Mehr-Nigar’s restlessness by putting these words in her mouth:

Those arched eyebrows have shot my heart with love’s arrow. It was  
without inducement that I became besotted and was branded by love’s iron.  
It would be a fitting response to give him a taste of his own medicine, as I  
must not allow him to escape retribution.

(*ibid.*)

Conversely, the impact of beauty and love on Hamza is registered as:

Neither did my eyes shed blood tears nor was my aspect wan,  
Nor indeed was my skin enveloped in a cloak of dust;  
(*ibid.*)<sup>1</sup>

The episode of the first romantic encounter concludes with the description of the lovers' separation and their ensuing agony. But this inconclusive first encounter triggers a chain of future romantic episodes.

The protagonist challenging royal authority reinforces the AAH's dramatic impact. In another sequence, Hamza, impelled by his youthful bravado, immediately consents to jump into perilous adventures in order to reunite with Mehr-Nigar. He breaks night vigils several times and dodges the contingent of royal guards appointed to watch over the princess's palace. This combination of the romantic and the adventurous makes the story more interesting and colorful.

**Royal Assemblies:** Another stalling tactic used by the storyteller is describing Hamza's meetings with Mehr-Nigar. These are marked by celebrations in his honor: lavish banquets in palaces, inner courts, and private chambers, where pleasantries are exchanged and the atmosphere overflows with gaiety. Here, lovers enjoy sensual pleasures and this brings the elements of eroticism and drunkenness into play in the story's otherwise fairly sober mood.

These scenes of romantic fun and frolic provide the common man with moments of escape from his arduous, mundane reality. Additionally, they also take away the severity of the battles and campaigns that dominate the narrative, and they reinforce the ideals of physical perfection, emotional vulnerability and observance of the codes of chastity and faithfulness.

#### (d) Enchantment

Supernatural elements and enchantment occupy center stage in the narrative progression, developed through interaction between the human world and that of supernatural beings, which include jinns, *dēvs*, and *parizāds*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For more examples of Hamza's wretched aspect in love see pages 165–66.

<sup>2</sup>Borrowed from the Persian literary tradition, a *dēv* is an agent of evil with unusual physical strength and magical powers, while *parizāds* are legendary creatures and are the male and female counterparts of the fairies that reside in the magical realm, such as on Mt. Qāf.

An arena of jostling rational and magical forces, the supernatural scenes are thrown in for their massive appeal to the popular imagination, which the storyteller manipulates in the extreme. They appear as a major digression from the main plot of the story. Hamza's feats of adventure continue in the enchanted realm of Mt. Qāf as in the terrestrial world. However, the scope of his operations is significantly expanded and the nature of his military campaigns against rebellious kingdoms morphs into breaking the magical spells cast by supernatural beings. For a good eighteen years, Mt. Qāf remains the locale of his operations. During that time he is restricted by enchantment and magical spells from returning to the world of ordinary mortals. The enchanted realm of the supernatural poses a different kind of opposition to him. In its intensity it far exceeds the excesses of the material world. Hamza has to combat supernatural creatures whose antics defy predictability. The storyteller invests them with superior powers, but is careful to neutralize their effect by investing the protagonist with equal supernatural powers as well as succor from on high. As a result, Hamza's trials and tribulations in the enchanted world of Mt. Qāf end up giving him a superior grade of bravery and physical prowess.

**Supernatural Creatures:** Enchantment enables the storyteller to introduce a new range of creatures borrowed from legends and folklore, and is linked, in no small measure, to the storyteller's imaginative capacity. He invents situations and beings that do not exist beyond the framework of the story, such as *gao-pas* (a race of cow-footed creatures), *gao-sars* (cow-headed creatures), *ghols* (imaginary shape- and color-shifting demons that devour humans and animals), *ghur-munba* (horse-headed creatures), and *gosh-fil* (elephant-eared creatures). There are also *tasma-pas* (creatures with tentacles for legs) and *nim-tans* (imaginary beings with only half a face, one eye, one arm and one foot). The male of this latter race has only a right hand, foot and face, while the female, only a left hand, foot and face. When the two come together, they resemble human figures; when separated they run with amazing speed on their single foot and are considered very dangerous. Weird looking and possessed of supra-human attributes, all of these creatures are marshaled to offer maximum resistance to Hamza, who finally subdues them and establishes his physical and moral supremacy.

Some of these creatures are borrowed from folklore, others from mythology, and still others from religio-cultural belief systems. Their presence is underscored by the need to maintain the narrative momentum. Richard Van Leeuwen explains the role of this stratum of supernatural beings in popular Islamic literature as:

They can provide explanations for anomalous behaviour, but they can also



provide the opportunities to prepare the plot of stories, as a *deus ex machina*, or as carefully mobilized forces. They can represent the opposite forces of good and evil, or some pre-human history related to legendary times and the process of creation.

(2007, 120)

Jinns appear in the AAH as embodiments of magical powers. They are able to assume many shapes and can be both malevolent and benevolent. For instance, the jinn ‘Abdu’r-Raḥmān, vizier of the King of Mt. Qāf, carries off Hamza from his earthly abode to the other world of Qāf and guides him through his adventures.

In Persian tradition, a *dēv* is presented as a symbol of anger, passion, deceit, and deception, and as one who deflects humans from the right path. Although intelligent, a *dēv* can be defeated by well-thought-out tricks and presence of mind. Being rebellious, they create nothing but trouble throughout Mt. Qāf. They live in magically controlled palaces—strongholds, really, of immense destructive power. Only the extraordinary fearlessness and courage of Hamza is able to subdue them.

In the enchanted realm of Mt. Qāf, winged creatures (*parīs*) and their offspring (*parizāds*) embody positive energy. They provide helping hands to Hamza. Although residents of Mt. Qāf, they also participate in the activities in the material world.

**Enchanted Realms:** The invention of enchanted creatures complements the invention of enchanted realms and magical domains. They add exotic flavor to the narrative and help imagination take flight beyond terrestrial boundaries. Trickery and deception cast their nets wide to ensnare Hamza every step of the way. The listener is twice deceived: once by losing himself in the enchanted world of the story and then in yet another equally enchanted one enfolded within the first. This twofold enchantment, as Farooqi explains, “is an instance of our peering into the crystal balls of our imaginations and seeing there not just an image of the character, but an image of him staring into *his own* crystal ball. What he stares at is *our* world—with ourselves inside” (2000, 144).

The theme of enchantment exposes a distant, inexplicable world, accessed only by means of the intoxication of the senses and the suspension of the reasoning faculty of the listener. It is an ideal world sought after by man to escape the dreadful realities of his quotidian existence. In the AAH, this world is the equivalent of the fairyland of the Western literary tradition. The rules and regulations observed by its inhabitants are different from those of the material world. They are shrouded under a thick layer of mystery, which never fails to intrigue humans and motivates them to penetrate

it. The storyteller banks on this human desire to unravel secrets and unknown facts. Perhaps, for this reason, Hamza's expeditions on Mt. Qāf constitute the most engaging part of the narrative in AAH.

### Conclusion

*The Adventures of Amir Hamza* has a relevance to our contemporary globalized world. Being a confluence of ideas, values and traditions, it cannot be but inherently syncretic. The plurality of cultural values and traditions depicted in the narrative makes it a hybrid of contesting values and traditions. Thus, its English translation opens to us new avenues of thought and research into the religio-cultural vicissitudes of this work. While maintaining the purity of individual traditions, storytelling, interspersed with poetry and elevated prose, also accepts the authenticity of popular demands and often synthesizes them into newer and richer forms. This corresponds to the contemporary effort to achieve a wholesome synthesis of the diverse values of diverse peoples in a unified, globalized world. The popular literary idiom, in which the narrative of the AAH is grounded, seeks to accommodate both the classical and the modern. □

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