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The Poetics of Amir Hamza's World: Notes on the Ghalib Lakhnavi/Abdullah Bilgrami Version

Mechanisms of Fate and Predestination

THE LEGEND OF AMIR HAMZA became known to many cultures from the seventh century of the common era, but it was the Indo-Islamic *Dāstān-e Amīr Hamza* that exploited the mechanisms of fate and predestination to make them the driving force of the story. We encounter these devices from the very beginning in the series of events that precede the hero's birth.

The story opens in the city of Ctesiphon around the sixth century CE, during the reign of the Persian Emperor Qubad. He was, we are told, "unsurpassed in dispensing justice, and so rigorous in this exercise that the best justice appeared an injustice compared to his decree. Prosperity and affluence thrived in his dominions while wrong and inequity slumbered in death ..." (Lakhnavi 2007, 3).

Translated into plain English, life in Ctesiphon is rather boring. After reading such a categorical account of Emperor Qubad's rule, it seems reasonable to think that the baddies must be having a hard time getting about the business of their lives. But as soon as Emperor Qubad's minister Alqash appears on the scene, this impression is dispelled. He murders his teacher and best friend, Bakht Jamal, who had instructed him in the occult arts.

The funny thing about the murder is that the culprit had himself foretold the impending misfortune to his victim—and to all appearances, in good faith. However, the perpetrator did not know about the part he himself would play in the event. He had advance knowledge only of his victim's destiny. Bakht Jamal's death was predestined. Alqash was only an instrument of fate. Still, he must pay the price for the crime. He is fated too, as we find out.

In the meanwhile, Alqash continues to party with his ill-gotten riches. Many years pass and the murder remains undiscovered. During this time Bakht Jamal's son, Buzurjmehr, grows up. He learns divination and finds out about his father's murder in the *Jamasp-nama*, a book of occult knowledge authored by his maternal grandfather, Jamasp. He also discovers that he is destined to avenge his father's killing and become the Emperor's minister. The same book also reveals to him the identities of brigands, murderers and thieves flourishing under Emperor Qubad's reign. Shocking as it is to find out that they inhabit the same Ctesiphon where crime was supposed to be nonexistent, even more scandalous is the way Buzurjmehr goes about extorting and blackmailing these criminals to provide a comfortable living for himself. Interestingly, it does not affect the greater scheme of things in the story, in which Buzurjmehr is to play a central role as a representative of the forces of good.

In time Alqash finds out about Buzurjmehr's gift of divination and that he knows the details of his father Bakht Jamal's murder. Obviously, Buzurjmehr must be knocked off, too. Alqash decides that the best way to go about it would be to cannibalize Buzurjmehr. By doing so he would not only get rid of Buzurjmehr, he would transfer Buzurjmehr's gift for divination to himself by ingesting him. The plan seems appetizing to him as well because Buzurjmehr is already in his power. However, Buzurjmehr uses his occult knowledge to slip away from Alqash's clutches without him finding out.

Shortly afterwards, Emperor Qubad has a dream but, upon waking, he is unable to recall it. He summons his ministers, as King Nebuchadnezzar did the Chaldeans (Daniel 2:1–48), and asks them the interpretation of the dream he had forgotten. Everyone, including Alqash, fails to guess and interpret the dream. Then Alqash realizes that Buzurjmehr must have escaped his clutches. Since Buzurjmehr's gift of divination alone could save Alqash's neck, he asks for Buzurjmehr's help and he agrees. Like the Biblical Daniel, to whom he traces his lineage on his father's side, Buzurjmehr relates the dream and its interpretation to the Emperor—except the dream and interpretation were not revealed to Buzurjmehr in a night vision but rather in the occult text of the *Jamasp-nama*. Moreover, Buzurjmehr interprets the dream in a manner that results in Alqash being incriminated in Bakht Jamal's murder and being put to death.

In this manner, Bakht Jamal, Alqash and Buzurjmehr all fulfill their destinies. However, the chain of events set in motion by Bakht Jamal's murder does not end here.

Buzurjmehr protects Alqash's grandson, Bakhtak, and helps him to be appointed a minister to Emperor Qubad despite the Emperor's own

reservations about the matter. After Qubad, his son Naushervan becomes emperor and Buzurjmehr and Bakhtak continue as his ministers. Before long Emperor Naushervan has a dream in which he first sees a jackdaw fly off with his crown and then a hawk kill the jackdaw and restore the crown to his head.

In interpreting this dream Buzurjmehr declares that the hawk represents Hamza, the protagonist of the story, who will save the Emperor's kingdom from a raider represented by the jackdaw. Buzurjmehr also announces Hamza's imminent birth. The symbolism and interpretation of the dream persuades Naushervan to proclaim Hamza his protégé.

As Buzurjmehr departs for Mecca to await Hamza's birth, all the earlier events present an interesting backdrop: Alqash's fated murder of Bakht Jamal, Buzurjmehr's birth and his learning occult truths from a book only he was fated to open, Buzurjmehr's revealing his occult powers to Alqash and his escape, the Emperor's ominous dream that forces Alqash to bring Buzurjmehr to the Emperor's notice, Alqash's destined retribution and Buzurjmehr's announcement of Amir Hamza's birth and his revealing how the Emperor's fate was tied to Hamza.

Fate was not acting blindly, after all. It had a well-drafted agenda. But why does Buzurjmehr also protect and promote the scoundrel Bakhtak who is inimical towards Buzurjmehr himself? A simple answer is that the story needed a villain to keep things bubbling. But until now Fate has been the axis on which this story turns. What if Fate has some master plan through which the conflict is created, sustained and prolonged?

Buzurjmehr—Shadowy Agent of Fate

We find out in the story that a character may learn about a future event, but he cannot know how it will come about or affect him. Just as Alqash did not know how his own fate was tied to Bakht Jamal's, we can say that perhaps Buzurjmehr also did not see himself as raising a villain. But since Buzurjmehr continues to protect Bakhtak even after his evil nature is known, an answer has to be found in Buzurjmehr's complex character. While Buzurjmehr is a mortal and therefore subject to the dictates of his own fate, he seems to occupy the middle ground between this world and the Future State. Even his ancestry is wrought with occult history, with connections to both Daniel and Jamasp.

Amir Hamza and his companion often receive miraculous gifts and weapons from prophets and holy beings. Buzurjmehr is the only mortal

who provides them with such aids. He constantly drives the hero along his destiny, indifferent to Amir Hamza's immediate personal interests. When Amir Hamza's impetuous passion for Naushervan's daughter Mehr-Nigar threatens Buzurjmehr's standing at court, he sends the hero far away on a series of missions. And, as if Bakhtak alone was not enough, Buzurjmehr himself tries to sabotage these missions. However, Amir Hamza triumphs in all these conflicts and wins even greater prestige and renown because of the many obstacles placed in his path. Apparently, these impediments were integral to the fulfillment of Hamza's destiny.

While Buzurjmehr prods Amir Hamza along the road of his destiny, his own existence is of interest to the story insofar as it influences Amir Hamza's fate. Nothing of Buzurjmehr's personal life is revealed to us. After Amir Hamza's birth Buzurjmehr's own existence becomes a shadow. While he continues to support the cause of Amir Hamza and his companions, he is no longer the focus of the story. Towards the end he melts away as if he never existed.

In the light of this evidence, Buzurjmehr appears more like a human incarnation of Fate. Perhaps as a reaffirmation that Buzurjmehr is connected to the cosmic forces of good, a cure is sent from the Future State after Bakhtak blinds him to avenge his grandfather's killing.

Fate Makes the Man

By the time Amir Hamza appears on the scene, his fate or destiny is already revealed to us in many forms: horoscopes, prophecies, divinations and in interpretations of dreams. When he sets out on his missions, this destiny is validated by his feats of strength, as well as through affirmations by humans and creatures he meets. It is also affirmed through inscriptions on tablets and stones and is facilitated by angels, prophets and holy men appearing to Amir Hamza, in person or in dreams, who then assist him with miraculous gifts, weapons, and transportation. Sometimes these figures directly or indirectly bring about the destruction of his enemies. In some cases the hero is helped when his enemies are converted to his cause in their dreams. Unlike *deus ex machina*, however, these helpers cannot overrule Amir Hamza's destiny. They can help *only* to the extent that the hero's fate allows it.

Amir Hamza's destiny is so rigid that even when a chance presents itself for him to leave Mount Qaf before the appointed time, he can be relied on to sabotage the chance himself. We wonder if Hamza faces so many hardships in his love for Emperor Naushervan's daughter Mehr-

Nigar because that relationship was not fated, unlike his relationship with Aasman Peri the daughter of the Emperor of Qaf.

We also find that as long as Hamza minds his own fate, he enjoys a free hand in his other actions. Just as Buzurjmehr's extortion and blackmail do not interfere with his appointed destiny, Amir Hamza does not sink as a hero when, to his everlasting shame, he marries the beloved of his friend Karvan while on a chivalrous mission to win her for this very friend. While Amir Hamza is generally chivalrous, there is also a pronounced selfish streak in him. The story also relates graphic accounts of murder, rape, scatology and sodomy—often performed or orchestrated by Amir Hamza's allies and companions—which, nevertheless, do not cause their fall into disgrace. This pattern is also repeated for Amar Ayyar. He is Amir Hamza's closest friend and childhood companion. He cons and tries to rob holy beings, justifies rape, and orchestrates sodomy yet remains a favorite of the heavens.

On the other hand, there is Hashsham—Amir Hamza's first prominent adversary. Portrayed as a villain, he is apparently an honorable man who rebels against Naushervan's extortion, but is fated to die a condemned man.

While the story chose the classic model of the forces of good triumphing over forces of evil, it eagerly sabotaged this model in its choice of the characters that represented these forces.

Composite Hero

Amir Hamza is a composite hero in the sense that he establishes himself as one from the outset by performing the deeds of the known heroes of classical literature, such as Rostam of the *Shahnameh* and Alexander of the *Adventures of Alexander*.

Whole Transcends the Sum of Its Parts

In one respect, however, Amir Hamza excels all other heroes. While their adventures are terrestrial, Hamza travels to the land of Mount Qaf, which lies beyond the world of humans, and triumphs there against the villainous *devs* and other creatures. This is a singular achievement not only in heroic but also religious literature. In Judeo-Christian literature, Enoch achieved the distinction of traveling beyond the human world. In

Islamic lore, Prophet Muḥammad's flight (*mi'rāj*) is the only example.

Hero as Super Soul

As Amir Hamza approaches the end of his destiny, his world begins to disintegrate. His loved ones are killed and his followers begin to show signs of internal discord. Amir Hamza himself feuds with his childhood friend Amar Ayyar. Finally, the whole camp disappears in death and destruction without a trace. They were a part of Amir Hamza's life and when his destiny was fulfilled they, too, had to go.

New Histories—Approach to Character-Making

Although the *dāstān* relies heavily on the choice of familiar characters, icons, and legends to create scenes and situations, it eliminates the characters' actual or legendary histories and reassembles them anew in the story. We also see an example of this in biblical literature:

The English Bible follows the Greek ordering by placing Daniel among the prophets rather than among the Writings, as in the Hebrew Bible. Such variations can affect interpretations. Instead of being a sage and a visionary, Daniel is joined to the "goodly fellowship of the prophets" and becomes, therefore, more important in the Christian traditions than in Jewish.

(Carroll and Prickett 1997, 367–68)

Something similar happens to the character depicted as Khizr. According to Islamic legend, he is a guide to lost travelers. But in the *dāstān* he is a prophet and a brother of the Prophet Ilyās (Elias), becoming a more powerful presence as well as a more delineated personality.

How Narrator Brings the Dastan to a Climax

In the universe of the *dāstān* where everything is known beforehand, events do not build up to a climax. However, something like a climax is met in the anticipation of how knowing one's fate may jeopardize a character's chances, and what part of an event or a destiny was *not* revealed in an annunciation.

Anytime a particular fate is directly revealed to a character, things may not happen exactly as prophesized. To both know one's future and

have power over it is to have power over Fate. This runs counter to the whole scheme of the story's universe. Therefore, during Amir Hamza's struggles in Qaf, he jeopardizes his chances by not following the expressly worded commands of Prophet Khizr.

Similarly, what is revealed of the future or a destiny never presents a complete picture. Alqash does not know how his own fate is tied to Bakht Jamal's. A great deal is made of Naushervan's dream about the hawk restoring the crown on his head but the story soon becomes an account of the warfare between the savior and the saved. Neither the dream nor its interpretation was wrong. They never mentioned what the hawk would do afterwards, or how Naushervan would himself treat the hawk. When Bakhtak challenges Buzurjmehr's powers of divination, Buzurjmehr predicts correctly but fails to notice a simple detail that endangers his life. Likewise, Amir Hamza attains his destined renown by conquering the *devs* of Mount Qaf, but spends eighteen years quarreling with the daughter of the emperor he had gone to help.

Anachronism and Mystical Perspective: Timeless Order of Things

So why does the Amir Hamza story use fate and predestination as narrative tools and what purpose do they serve?

One answer can be found in the Islamic concept of the eternal God Who embodies and transcends Time, and all events governed by Time are knowable to Him. In the divine perspective, the past, present and future converge in a single point—visible at one and the same time. In the story as well, the essence of holy beings transcends the limitations of Time. Prophet Muḥammad appears in the company of ancient prophets before his advent. His son-in-law and Islam's fourth caliph, 'Alī, makes a similar miraculous appearance. We see another example of this in the anachronistic elements in the story: decorations, dresses, and references from Mughal Indian culture abound.

It seems that the story exploits the concepts of fate and predestination in trying to create a literary model of this cosmogonic tradition. Perhaps these devices influence the Urdu version of *The Adventures of Amīr Ḥamza* because of a very strong Sufi tradition on the Indian subcontinent. Since the boundaries between past, present and future do not exist in the Islamic mystical cosmos, anachronism as a concept has no meaning in that cosmos.

However, since the story is also a creation governed by Time, ultimately it is also subject to the knowability of the past, present and

future. It submits to this law in its own way, through declarations about the future by instruments of fate and destiny. However, the aim in the story was clearly not to create a devotional or religious text. While Fate is a prime force in the narrative—with its central role in the structure of the story, in the distribution of destinies, the development of the hero, and in propelling the story forward—it is not the only driving force.

Dastan Art of Fiction-Making

As mentioned earlier, the *dāstān* relies heavily on the choice of familiar characters, icons, and legends to create scenes and situations. The Amir Hamza of the story is presented as the son of ‘Abdu’l-Muttalib and an uncle of Prophet Muḥammad who was known for his bravery. But that is where the similarities between the real person and the Amir Hamza of this story end. By using Amir Hamza’s legend to describe the hero’s bravery, the names of idols and legendary villains of Islamic history to denote his enemies, the rivalry between the Arab and Persian cultures to set up the conflict, Khizr the legendary, holy, green-clad guide to describe Amir Hamza’s helper, and so on, the story constantly evokes specific historical, cultural and religious identifiers that allow it to narrate action without creating histories and legends. Like Amir Hamza, these characters, too, do not have a history beyond what is attributed to them by the story itself.

Infidels and True Believers—Appearance and Reality

Despite its apparent theme of followers of the True Faith arrayed against the infidels, *The Adventures of Amīr Hamza* is not a religious text. Amir Hamza’s own life is unencumbered by any strict religiosity. He says his prayers, but he also imbibes wine and cavorts with women and peris. Many of Amir Hamza’s earlier campaigns are fought in the service of the fire-worshipping Naushervan, not in the cause of the True Faith. The story exploits the metaphysical concepts of fate and predestination for the purpose of creating fiction. It does something similar with its characters by eliminating their actual or legendary histories and reassembling them anew in the story. To supernatural creatures such as jinns, which are part of the religious belief system, the story added *devs* and peris—creatures

borrowed from the cultural belief system of folklore.¹

Over time folk legends continued to be grafted onto the legend of Amir Hamza. The seemingly contradictory claims about the origins of the story attest to this phenomenon. □

Works Cited

- Carroll, Robert and Stephen Prickett. 1997. Explanatory notes to *The Bible, Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*. Edited with an introduction and notes by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lakhnavi, Ghalib and Bilgrami, Abdullah. 2007. *The Adventures of Amir Hamza: Lord of the Auspicious Planetary Conjunction*. Translated by M.A. Farooqi. New York: Modern Library.

¹It should be pointed out that the concept of jinns itself was incorporated into the Islamic belief system from Arab folklore tradition.