

## Musharraf Ali Farooqi's Translation of *The Adventures of Amir Hamza*

Reviewed by Colleen Thorndike

*The Adventures of Amir Hamza*. Ghalib Lakhnavi and Abdullah Bilgrami. Trans. Musharraf Ali Farooqi. New York: Modern Library, 2008. 954 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8129-7743-1.

Musharraf Ali Farooqi's translation of *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* from the original Urdu gives readers a look into the fantastic battles and other myriad adventures of Hamza and his companions. Originally part of the oral tradition of pre-Islamic Persia, Hamza's various adventures and encounters with other civilizations and worlds were eventually collected by Ghalib Lakhnavi and Abdullah Bilgrami and published in Urdu. In the introduction to his translation, Farooqi recalls reading these tales covertly at night and reenacting the battles that Hamza fights against the various leaders he encounters throughout his travels. It is because of his memorable experience reading this epic as a child that he decided to translate the tale.

Readers of *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* are immediately immersed in a world of magic, which includes devils, jinns, peris, and giants. Hamza battles various leaders of the Orient, traveling all over Persia. His travels even include a trip to Qaf where he battles devils and dragons. Throughout his adventures Hamza succeeds with the help of his faith and his friends.

*The Adventures of Amir Hamza* is divided into four books. Book One begins before Hamza's birth. It starts with the story of Alqash, Emperor Qubad Kamran's vizier, betraying and killing Khvaja Bakht Jamal, a savant, over buried treasure that Bakht Jamal finds. Bakht Jamal's son, Buzerjmehr eventually uncovers the truth of his father's murder and has the Emperor sentence Alqash to death. Alqash's grandson, Bakhtak, seeks revenge for his grandfather's death, and is set up as a villain in the epic. Buzerjmehr becomes the vizier to Emperor Kamran and, later, his son Naushervan. By the middle of the first book the tensions of the epic have been established. Bakhtak has wormed his way into Naushervan's good graces and acts as one of his advisors along with Buzerjmehr; Hamza and his sidekick, Amar Ayyar, along with Muqbil, Hamza's loyal servant have established themselves as warriors willing to do Naushervan's bidding. Buzerjmehr advises and helps Hamza,

Amar, and Muqbil throughout the epic, while Bakhtak convinces Naushervan that Hamza will try to overthrow the emperor. Book One serves to establish these relationships and tensions and shows how great a warrior Hamza is. He fights and converts armies trying to overtake parts of Naushervan's empire. By the end of Book One, Hamza has amassed a large army and has gained the trust and loyalty of other warriors who he once opposed.

Book Two starts with Bakhtak having convinced Naushervan that Hamza's ultimate goal is to overthrow the emperor and convert everyone to his one true religion. Naushervan sends his army out to kill Hamza. Hamza is imprisoned in Yusef's well in Egypt at one point, but is saved by Amar and Muqbil. Hamza is also poisoned, but is saved Buzerjmehr and Amar. After surviving all of this, Hamza is called to Mount Qaf. Mount Qaf is a parallel land of Jinns, Peris, and Devs. Qaf is ruled by Emperor Shuhpal bin Shahrukh, but the Devs have risen against the Emperor and the rest of the Peris and only Hamza can defeat the Devs. While Hamza is in Qaf, he leaves Amar in charge of the army and of keeping Hamza's fiancé, Princess Mehr-Nigar, safe from harm and from being returned to Naushervan's palace. A lot of Book Two focuses on Amar's trickery and the pranks he plays on his unsuspecting friends and enemies. Amar especially relishes in making the high-ranking officers in Naushervan's army look foolish. His tricks usually succeed in shaming the officers into retreating. Much of this trickery entails low humor, which was included in the oral telling of the epic to keep the audience's interest and provide pacing as well as comic relief to the story.

In Book Three, Hamza journeys back to the land of humans after spending 18 years in Qaf. During his time in Qaf, Hamza married Aasman Peri (the daughter of Emperor Shuhpal bin Shahrukh of Qaf) who makes it impossible for anyone to help him, thus hindering his return to Princess Mehr-Nigar. Aasman Peri, who has a violent temper, doesn't want Hamza to return to his people because she will not see him again and because he loves Princess Mehr-Nigar more than he loves her. Book Four focuses on the re-establishment of Hamza's family. In this book, Hamza's children, from various women, come into the story. Some of his children, who do not know that he is their father, challenge him in battle. Hamza's travels end in Mecca with his meeting the prophet Muhammad and his attaining martyrdom.

Throughout the epic the overarching themes are love, friendship, and faith. Hamza's love for Princess Mehr-Nigar is his guiding force through many of his adventures. Hamza's friendship with Amar, Muqbil, and Landhoor not only enriches his life, but saves it many times. Whenever Hamza is on the losing end of a battle he quickly gains the upper hand by yelling, "God is Great" and keeping a strong faith in this god. While *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* is considered an Islamic epic, it is important to note that the epic is set in pre-Islamic Persia, roughly

during the 600s. And while Hamza is Mohammed's uncle, none of the characters follow any strict or consistent religious guidelines. Although Hamza professes faith in the one true religion and the one true god and is sometimes seen praying, he also engages in much drinking and debauchery, including having multiple wives and children by multiple women, throughout the epic.

This epic provides readers with an escape from reality. Almost immediately readers are immersed in this vibrant world and pulling oneself out of Hamza's heroic world to face the drudgery of the real world is a difficult and sad task. Farooqi's translation of this Urdu epic gives Western readers a valuable piece of literature. This is an epic that should be read by students and lovers of literature to broaden their horizons and give them hours of entertainment. I found this story more engaging, exciting, and accessible than any other epic I've read, because it has a good mix of high and low literary features, including some elevated epic language and great battle scenes, as well as scatological humor. This mix keeps the reader very much engaged in the epic for the duration of the book. Farooqi's translation seems true to the spirit of the epic and as true to the original language as possible. Farooqi includes at the end of the volume a brief history of the epic including possible origins for the tale. Readers will also find a list of characters, creatures, and historical figures to help further their understanding of the epic itself and its place in Persian literary history.