



A review of
**The Broken Spell:
Indian Storytelling
and the Romance Genre
in Persian and Urdu**

Victoria Leslie

The tales of Amir Hamzah occupy a central position in Pasha M. Khan's monograph of the romance genre in Indian storytelling from the 15th to the 20th centuries. The legendary exploits of the Muslim hero in overcoming fantastical beasts and the forces of evil are recounted in the performances of both Persian- and Urdu-speaking storytellers throughout this period. The tale joins a host of other stories known as the *dastan* or *qissah*, a form of 'verbal art' which were performed in an array of settings, from bazaars and villages to salons and imperial courts. Khan's preference for the term 'verbal art' instead of 'literature' draws on the term promulgated by folklorist William Bascom (1955) and later by Richard Bauman (1975) to signify types of folklore influenced by oral tradition and performativity.

Khan's purpose is to re-examine the romance genre and to assess its worth before its decline at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when faced with British colonial worldviews. In competition with the rise of the novel, the *qissah* was seen as outdated and primitive, and even anti-colonial sentiment in the mid-20th century couldn't rescue its reputation. Khan's use of 'romance' as an umbrella term to encompass the *dastan* or *qissah* aligns it with the romance tradition in Britain and reflects upon the cultural hegemony inflicted on India's literary landscape.

What is particularly noteworthy about Khan's approach is the fact that he focuses not only on the stories but on the storytellers, dedicating two chapters to the lives of the most influential Indo-Persian *dastangos* or *qissah-khwans* (storytellers). In these chapters he charts the lives of some of the most renowned Persian storytellers of India from the 16th to 17th centuries before focusing on the revival of Urdu-language storytelling in the 19th century, centred particularly on what was once the Mughal region of Awadh. The significance of focusing on

the tellers and not just the tales, besides being a neglected area of academic focus, is imperative to the understanding of the worth of the romance tradition in India. For Khan, the stories are entangled with 'the voices and bodies of the storytellers who produced, voiced, and embodied *qissah* in their performances'. Though the Persian-language storytellers are hardly mentioned in Urdu sources and vice versa, Khan highlights the similarities for both sets of performers in that they belonged to the higher echelons of society, with their lives and deeds often recorded in court histories, highlighting the importance overall of the romance tradition.

The Persian *qissah-khwans* in particular enjoyed privileged positions in the imperial court. In 1617, Mulla Asad, the storyteller of the emperor Jahangir, was gifted a rank, 200 staff, 20 horses and his bodyweight in rupees. Recognising their careers and material wealth were linked to their performances, the storyteller Takaltu Khan changed a story, refraining from enacting the death of a character to gain favour with the Iranian ruler Shah Isma'il. Storytellers also offered their verbal skills in acts of diplomacy, as was the case with Takaltu Khan's successor Darbar Khan, who, after performing the *Dastan-i Amir Hamzah*, negotiated with rebel forces set against his patron, the emperor Akbar. And when parleying failed, it wasn't unusual for storytellers to assume the role of soldiers, as Darbar Khan did, his 'double role' evident in his official portrait depicting him in the process of drawing his sword.

Khan posits that though the romance genre was not as elevated as other genres, particularly poetry, the treatment of its tellers reveals what a highly prized cultural asset it was. The storytellers of the romance tradition were not only important social figures, involved in politics and warfare, but also powerful advocates of the genre. This is particularly clear in the 17th-century manual for storytellers written by 'Abd al-Nabi Fakhr al-Zamani of Qazvin, entitled the *Tiraz al-akbar (Embroiderer of Accounts)*. In it, Fakhr al-Zamani cites the educational value of *qissah-khwani* for familiarising its listeners in state and world affairs and for improving the language usage of both the listener and speaker. He also highlights the personal advantage for storytellers to gain patronage and the ear of the elite, for 'there is no better medium for the gaining of intimacy with sultans, ministers, nobles and nobles' sons than the romance'. He even goes so far as to argue for the superiority of storytelling over poetry because it involves not merely the recitation of verse but the weaving together of verse and prose organically and contemporaneously to suit the narrative flow and the audience's expectations.

As well as justifying the value of the romance tradition, the *Tiraz* also provided lessons in the composition of storytelling. As with Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights*, the *Tiraz* provides guidelines on how to end an episode on a cliff-hanger – thereby keeping the interest of the audience and ensuring further

patronage. It also served as an anthology of textual fragments which other storytellers could learn and integrate into their tales. These pieces of poetry and prose, originating from a variety of sources, were categorised into four chapters or '*khabars*' – battle, courtly gatherings, beauty and love, and trickery – to allow them to be easily accessible when memorised. The storyteller would learn various intertextual fragments from both oral and written texts like the *Tiraz*, through a process called *munasib-khwani* or appropriate recitation. Khan cites Gerard Genette in referring to this practice as drawing upon a 'repository of hypotexts' – hypotexts being pre-existing texts. These hypotexts would have encompassed many different genres, working in dialogue with the audience's genre expectations and textual memory, resulting in the multigeneric and multi-layered quality of the romance.

Khan's monograph provides a fascinating insight into Indian storytelling in Persian and Urdu, focusing not solely on the stories themselves but on the contextual, historical and narratological factors that influenced and shaped the genre. Focusing on the lives and exploits of the storytellers provides insight into the societal role of the romance, while a detailed analysis of the craft of storytelling anatomises the significance of the textual fragments and highlights the skill of the storytellers in weaving together a narrative whole from so many disparate sources. Khan's application of literary genre theory illuminates his reading of the genre and provides an engaging glimpse of a complex and multi-generic storytelling tradition.

Author: Pasha M. Khan.

Publisher: Wayne State University Press (2019), 324pp.



Victoria Leslie