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Classics Revisited

The Mind-Blowing Wonderland

During the latter half of the nineteenth century many of the traditional arts in the undivided subcontinent were withering under a cloud or were on the verge of extinction. Indifferent patronage, changes of outlook and the onset of the industrial age conspired to create a cultural disorientation. For instance, the professional story-tellers (*dāstāngōs*) found the shift in attitudes increasingly inconvenient. Books, magazines and newspapers, made possible by the advent of the printing press and now readily available, provided a cheaper counter-attraction to which the story-tellers, hitherto largely dependent on the support of the princely states or rich burghers, had no answer.

As things looked very gloomy indeed for the story-tellers, help arrived from an unexpected quarter. Munshi Nawal Kishore, one of the most enterprising publishers Urdu has ever known, hit upon the happy idea of commissioning a number of *dāstāngōs* to write down or dictate their repertoire of *dāstāns* in order to make them available to a reading public keen to lay its hands on fresh material.

The venture smelled of success from the outset. All in all, the Nawal Kishore Press published forty-six oversize volumes covering almost the entire Amir Hamza cycle. Amir Hamza is a legendary hero. None of these volumes, I believe, consists of fewer than 800 closely printed pages. Several volumes are much larger. The centerpiece of this gigantic publishing feat is *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* with its seven or eight volumes (depending on how you count them). The name itself, which literally means "The Mind-Blowing Wonderland," has become a byword for an altogether bizarre place or story of titanic proportions, blitzing the mind into a suspension of disbelief.

But what exactly is a *ṭilism*? The question is easier to ask than to

answer. The word itself is of Greek origin but its present sense in the Urdu literary context has been arrived at after so many changes that etymological investigation can serve little purpose. Suffice it to say that the *ṭilism* is a symbolic structure, a *manḍala*. It should be kept in mind that in mystical denotations the cosmos too is a symbolic formation and so is man himself, as microcosm. Both real and unreal, the *ṭilism* is an illusory locale created thaumaturgically by a *ḥakīm* (sage, savant) or by a number of *ḥakīms* to safeguard a priceless treasure. Thematically some of the aspects of the *ṭilism* can be spotted in age-old fiction, as for instance in the tale of Gilgamesh, *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius, some stories of *Alf Laila* or miscellaneous Persian romances, but it was the *dāstān*-teller of the subcontinent who took up the idea and transformed it into a distinctive genre. What made them do it? What catalytic energies, what affinities and disassociations went into its making? Here is a problem that needs solving.

The *ṭilism*, largely inhabited by witches and wizards, is part of the everyday world and yet stands outside it. A place, so to say, where consciousness is constantly brushed by the Unconscious. At the center of the *ṭilism* lies a rich treasure. Only a chosen heroic quester can conquer the *ṭilism* and come upon the riches it holds in trust. The presence of the treasure deep within the *ṭilism* is significant. On the one hand it points to the Prophet Muhammad's tradition (*ḥadīth*) in which Allah says that He was a hidden treasure and wished to be known, and on the other hand it pointedly suggests that the conquest of the *ṭilism* resembles the mystic's progress on the long, hazardous journey culminating in self-realization. The quester's way is barred by his own desires and delusions, which, assuming various shapes, attempt to waylay or mislead him. The weirder, more breathtaking and more deceptive the hurdles facing him, the more fascinating the quest becomes.

Why must a *ṭilism* house witches and warlocks in such large numbers? Simply because they are illusionists par excellence. In mystical terms the world or reality as we perceive it is an illusion (*majāz*) and one must see through or smash the illusions in order to make contact with the supreme reality (*ḥaqīqat*). This is exactly what a *ṭilism*-buster is required to do.

These meanings are intrinsic to the *dāstāns* although one does not have to keep them in mind to enjoy what he reads. But there is a cogent reason for directing some light at the symbolism at work here. *Dāstāns,* with their fairy tale atmosphere and an accentuated sense of the supernatural, have been held to ridicule so often by hard-nosed realists that it becomes necessary to show that these traditional stories carry

within them, like hidden treasures, a wealth of symbolic and psychic implications.

Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā is the biggest *ṭilism* of them all, a leviathan among the minnows. Almost a continent in itself, it is divided into two regions, one exoteric (*ẓāhir*), the other esoteric (*bāṭin*). A magical river of blood, across which extends a bridge of smoke, keeps them apart. Bonnie prince Asad (lion), one of Amir Hamza's grandsons, sets out to conquer the *ṭilism*. He is accompanied by five *'ayyārs* (tricksters), one of them Amr, the arch-trickster. There are dissidents within the *ṭilism* opposed to the rule of Afrasiyab, its King, and they join forces with Asad. It is a long-drawn out struggle, marked by fantastic battles, marvelous adventures and fluctuating fortunes. In the end, Afrasiyab, having used up all his resources, is killed in an Armageddon and the *ṭilism* falls.

This, the baldest of summaries, can hardly do justice to the immense diversity of *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā*. The difficult part, of course, is how to put in a nutshell a tale spread over 8,000 pages and honeycombed with digressions! In order to be properly savored *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* should be read from cover to cover.

Everything in the book appears to be invested with a larger-than-life glow. It is, of course, in the first instance an irrepressible fantasy but paradoxically one that is rooted firmly in human life and experience. Like all *dāstān*-tellers worth their salt, Muhammad Husain Jah and Ahmad Husain Qamar, the authors of *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā,* were alert observers of their society and possessed an excellent ear for dialogue. Very little escaped their attention. The life style of the princely and the rich has been portrayed with obvious gusto, but the delineation of the poorest of the poor is no less authentic. They see with all the clarity of a sharp-lensed camera, capturing vignettes from life with a vividness which even those Urdu writers who came later and swore by realism were unable to match.

The result is a mosaic of great diversity, lit up by the interplay of reality and fantasy. Landscapes, whether idyllic or dreadful, possess a miniature-like scintillance. The heroic battles, in which the combatants wield unheard-of weapons, bear strong resemblance to the futuristic wars depicted in science fiction. The tricksters delight with their bag of tricks, comical mannerisms and endless disguises. The wizards and the witches, with their sultry looks, are much given to lechery, a failing which often leads to their undoing. There is no reticence about matters sexual. Bawdiness comes as comic relief. Some scenes of amorous dalliance show unbelievable tenderness of touch.

In between the hurly-burly of magical adventures we see glimpses of

high and low life of the nineteenth century as observed by the *dāstān*-tellers. We come across the royalty, the nobility, knights, warriors, soldiers, servants of every hue and description, courtesans, peasants, cooks, gardeners, washermen, fakirs—in short, a remarkable line-up of men and women. We are conducted through fairs bustling with life, festivals, gardens, bazaars and encampments. It is a crazy wonderland. The story is like a mammoth glossy surge, filled with cascading reflections, and underneath the shimmer of its unending pell-mell one can discern, as if through a distorting mirror, the lineaments of its symbolic configuration.

Everything in *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* is on a large scale. The faults too are glaring. For one thing it is far too long. Its prolixity also adds to the reader's displeasure. The impact of the narrative is muffled by diffusion. The symbolism is in constant danger of getting washed out. There is a reason for all this, however. Jah and Qamar were *dāstān*-tellers, not writers. Writing is a different discipline and they never got the hang of it. Rather, they never tried, which made sense. By trying their hand at writing they might have made a mess of things. So when we read *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* we are not really reading a book but an oral version. *Dāstān*-tellers tended to be prolix, delaying the denouement by constant padding. Maybe their livelihood depended on it. "Make it last" must have been their private motto. A *dāstān* which went on and on, avoiding a climax, may have been able to give the listeners the impression that it was as seamless as life itself and, in the final analysis, just as inconclusive.

Of the two, Jah is clearly the superior story-teller. He wrote the first four volumes before falling out with the publisher. Qamar took over from him, completed the job and went on to write a few more *ṭilisms*. About their lives we hardly know anything—a lacuna in our knowledge of which Urdu scholarship should feel thoroughly ashamed. Two other very long versions of *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* by Munshi Ghulam Raza and Mirza Aleemuddin Haya exist but have not been published. In fact, no one seems to have studied them.

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A Depth of Meaning

The adventures of hatim tai, which goes by the insipid misnomer *Arā'ish-e Maḥfil* in the Urdu translation, is an example of entertaining story-telling at its best. Indisputably a masterpiece of world literature, the book is richly reminiscent of the mesmeric influence that *Alf Laila* exerts on its readers.

The story itself is very old, with accretion upon accretion of what initially may have been shamanic experiences, in states of trance, of alternate realities, depicting inner journeys in search of life's meaning. What we possess now is the end product of a long process of elimination from and addition to a nucleus. We read a streamlined version, a sort of distillation. Our forefathers probably heard it millennia ago, under some other name, in languages now forgotten. And as we read it, we seem to hear and see something profoundly ancestral, indeed visceral, with great clarity.

It must however be emphasized right away that the important thing here is the story itself which, with its bag of bizarre incidents, helps to rivet the reader's attention. The narrative, encapsulating the esoteric meaning, is effectual on its own. Nothing ensures a message's preservation as well as a brilliantly told story. What a preservative it is! The most effective medium of transmission of ideas devised by mankind. The message can be put in the story; those knowledgeable will be able to decode it, those who are not will still enjoy the tale. Philosophies may be forgotten and canons obliterated, but a good story never. It has more lives than the proverbial cat.

A paragon of generosity in our folklore, Hatim in these adventures assumes the role of a prince fired by a unique sense of altruism. He cannot bear to see anyone in distress, not even animals, and is always more than ready to go out of his way to set matters right. Primarily he is, like Sindbad, a compulsive traveler fired by insatiable curiosity. Other similarities between them can also be noted. For instance, Sindbad made seven voyages in all; Hatim also had seven different missions to carry out. One can also spot a shadowy Odysseus in him, but they differ from each other in a significant way. Odysseus may have been keen to see the world but his wanderings were forced on him by circumstances. Hatim travels by choice. By choosing to be an adventurer with a mission he opts for freedom—an act suggestive of existential demeanor. Odysseus wandered around for nearly ten years before making his way back home. And it is difficult not to smile when one reads in *Arā'ish-e Maḥfil* that Hatim

returns to Arabia Felix, his homeland, after an absence of ten years, seven months and nine days. Exactitude such as this may be naïve but has a peculiar meaning. No matter how unearthly Hatim's adventures, they do not, it is insisted, take place outside the frame of earth-bound time. It is a reminder of his—and our—mortality.

The framework of the story is simple enough, but as is often the case in classical Eastern fiction, with its propensity to Chinese box-arrangement, episodes continually telescope into each other. Husn Bano, a lovely, highly eligible and extraordinarily rich woman, is a bit of a tease. She has devised a set of seven baffling problems. Anyone wanting to marry her must solve them first. Muneer Shami, a prince, falls madly in love with her but the very first problem completely boggles him. Overwhelmed by despair, he doesn't know what to do. Hatim comes across him and, moved by pity, agrees to help him out. In this way begin his seven long journeys into the unknown. He does not have a clue to go by at any time but trusts his luck and succeeds against all odds.

What memorable adventures mark his fabulous quests! The book is crowded with unheard-of places and all sorts of imaginary beings and creatures, but ultimately it is *man* and his daring that defies them and overcomes their terror. Here are giants, fairies, sorcerers, love-sick princes, haughty princesses, dragons and monsters, animals and birds able to talk, rivers of molten gold and silver and fire, enchanted pools, fantastic caves, the Magic Mountain of Summons, the Whirlwind Bath, the Angel of Death in its endless disguise, a sultry mermaid, dead men who come alive at night, severed heads which hang like fruit on an elfin tree and laugh, a land of bears where Hatim has to marry a she-bear! The panorama is hard to sum up.

It is entertainment to delight the heart. However, once the euphoria subsides certain questions arise. What is it all about? Is it merely a gripping tale? Or does it carry some deeper meanings? Both these questions would have to be answered in the affirmative. Schiller said: "Deeper meaning resides in the fairy tales told to me in my childhood than in the truth that is taught by life."

Clearly Hatim's quests mirror stages in man's long and perilous journey towards self-awareness and enlightenment. This is particularly apparent in the earlier part of the book where Hatim is not only in rapport with the animal world but is physically and even sexually involved in it. This is possibly the deepest stratum of the story, the trail going back to a time when the barrier separating man's world from that of the animals was no more than a blur.

In the final analysis the different quests are symbolic in nature and constitute a kind of initiation. The progress is not linear. The story spirals upwards. The symbolism is the DNA here, forming the basis of the story's organism. It is possible to write a full-length book on the symbolic ramifications of Hatim's adventures. Those interested in a relatively detailed examination of Hatim's role as a hero are referred to the first chapter of Suhail Ahmad's short but perceptive *Dāstānōṅ kī 'Alāmatī Kā'ināt* (1987).

I have no idea how many Persian versions exist of Hatim's adventures or which is the oldest. The Urdu translation by Haidar Bakhsh Haidari, first published in 1805, is not only available but also readable. Apart from an occasional quaintness of expression, Haidari's translation is remarkably simple, straightforward and altogether without frills.