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## **A Study of the Pictorial Nama Traditions in the Medieval Period with Special Reference to the *Hamza Nāma*: From Orality to Audio-Visuality through Trans-mediality**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to look at how the *Hamza nāma* fits within the model of trans mediality from one literary form to another that is the oral, from oral to the illustrated manuscript version and finally its compilation into the printed form. It will start with an attempt to go through the historical background of the various nāmas present before the Hamza project was commissioned and how the new model of an audio visual medium is coming up through this project. After this it will move on to a detailed discussion of the *Hamza nāma* itself and finally conclude with the connectivity between orality, painting and writing and how these three different genres fit in and give rise to an entire new form of amalgamated product of audio-visual and textuality.

### **Keywords**

*Hamza nāma*, Trans-mediality, Nāmas, Medieval Period, Orality, Audio-visuality

This paper is an attempt to look at how the *Hamza nāma* fits within the model of transmediality from one literary form to another that is the oral, from oral to the illustrated manuscript version and finally its compilation into the printed form. It will start with an attempt to go through the historical background of the various nāmas present before the Hamza project was commissioned and how the new model of an audio visual medium is coming up through this project. After this it will move on to a detailed discussion of the *Hamza nāma* itself and finally conclude with the connectivity between orality, painting and writing and how these three different genres fits in and gives rise to an entire new form of amalgamated product of audio-visual and textuality. To begin with, first a historical study of different nāmas has been looked upon to understand what is a nāma and how are they connected, next it will talk about the *Hamza nāma* story in details and its different versions and finally through the commissioning of this project how two different mediums were merged through their transactions which is the main crux of this paper will be discussed.

### A Brief Study of the Namas

Nāmas as such do not have any fixed definition and means a chronicle which keeps in record the biographical deeds of a person. The word chronicle comes from the Greek word, “*khronika*” which means the “*annals of time*”, and it is different from a memoir since it does not cover only one specific aspect of a certain incident of a person, but chronologically talks about the subject’s entire life and focuses on a certain timeline. Except a few like the *Razm nāma* and the *Hamza nāma* or the *Nimat nāma* all of the nāmas exhibit a common characteristic, they all have elements of former Persian and later Urdu romances which also coincides with the meaning of Romance in the Western world during Medieval period and they all speak about the glory and valour of the protagonist be it historical or fictional. Since the work deals with the medieval timeline it will try to look at the different forms of nāmas and specifically orally transmitted stories during that period. Epic poetries, prose romances, legends and folklores which form the genre of pre-modern popular literature have always attracted the audience more than the portrayal of the grim reality. The main point is that most of the human beings are by nature very imaginative, so imagining and fantasizing something which cannot be accomplished in real life always gives a gravitational pull towards itself. It is kind of what we cannot do or become in our real life gets fulfilled in our imagination and fantasies. And all these stories found expression when they were narrated orally and performed also in some cases, this popularity of the oral stories both among literate and illiterate crowd led them to be documented later in the written form. Mainly four important

themes like warfare, trickery, enchantment, love and beauty worked as the background of these stories. According to the culture, language and region these orally transmitted stories got manipulated along with the historical background also. But this is the overall description of chronicles and how they were transferred orally from place to place. Coming to the introduction of *nāmas* as already said above they did not have any particular definition. May be explaining it with the example of some *nāmas* will make it clearer. They served both as a form of autobiography and chronicle. To start with the *Eskander nāma*, it is a story revolving around the birth and conquests of Alexander the Great. It exists both in prose and poetry forms and in many versions other than Persian though it was first composed in Persian. It is also known as the Alexander romance, and it does not deal with any fictitious character but with the real life deeds of Alexander. Dated between 3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C. and 3<sup>rd</sup> Century C.E this tale has a bit of controversy as to who composed it, because at first it was ascribed to Callisthenes (qv) but later it came out to be not so, thus it is assumed that it was composed by some pseudo Callisthenes. (Merkelbach: 2) The geographical backdrop of the tale is Alexandria and the first Greek text was translated into Latin in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century C.E. Among the various translations of the text it is assumed that the text which got translated into Syrian and Pahlavi, found its way to the Middle East, Central and South Asia. The Syrian version became the source of translation into vernacular languages like Chinese and other South East Asian countries. All of these are assumptions since the exact source is not clear and how it reached the Sassanian ruled Persia is even more unclear. Theodore Nöldeke suggested that the Syrian version might have got translated from a now extinct Pahlavi version but he was challenged by Richard N. Frye (185-88) who questioned the existence of a Pahlavi version, holding the view that philological evidence of that version of Pahlavi casts doubt on Nöldeke's thesis and that the Syrian version of the tale probably descends from a much older Syrian translation of the Greek Pseudo-Callisthenes and not from that supposed lost Pahlavi version which Nöldeke spoke of. Anyways it can be assumed that the story of Alexander reached the Persian land through the means of orality and cultural exchange only and thus it got divided into two versions according to the beliefs and need of the audience. The first was the Greek version where Alexander was portrayed as a hero and the other was the localized version inspired from Zoroastrian priestly tradition where Alexander was regarded as the "cursed evil" and often equated with *Žahhāk* and *Afrāsīāb* who were the greatest enemies of Persia at that time. (*Nāmag*: 76-77) *And in this version with the influence of the local story telling tradition of Persia, Alexander's birth is the result of an illicit union of the Egyptian Pharaoh Nectanebos and Philip of Macedon's wife Olympias and is also referred to as the*

son of King Darius II or Dārāb in the other Persian versions, a reference of which can be found in Firdausi's *Shah nāma* also. With time as different Persian story tellers started narrating the story it slowly departed from its original Greek version and became localized with one version in a different tongue meant for the elite and court audience and the other for the local listeners. These versions varied mainly according to their form and intended audience, the one that was supposed to be narrated in the court was in *maṭṭnawī* verse while the other meant for the local audience was in prose. Neẓāmī's (535/1141-605/1209) Alexander romance, completed ca. 599/1202, is divided into two books entitled *Šaraf-nāma* and *Eqbāl-nāma* or *Ḳerad-nāma*. Neẓāmī introduced significant formal innovations in his Alexander story. One is that he begins major sections of *Šaraf-nāma* with a *Sāqī-nāma* and major sections of *Eqbāl-nāma* with a *moğannī-nāma*, each of which is two lines of *maṭṭnawī* verse calling on the cupbearer or musician to bring the poet wine or play for him. After this there follows a short section called *andarz* (advice), and then the actual narrative begins, called *dāstān* (tale, story). In *Eqbāl-nāma* the *dāstān* is the story of Alexander and a similar section of narrative called *afsāna* is a narrative about some other character. The *dāstān* usually ends with a moral or an interpretation of the preceding action. The oldest surviving example is *Eskander-nāma*, written down between the 6th/12th and the 8th/14th centuries.



Fig.1 – An image of the Talking Tree from the *Eskander nāma*

Source: <http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/shahnama/images/F1935.23det.jpg>

Since the main aim is not to summarize the stories of various nāmas it will now move on to the next set of nāmas which are common in two aspects, the common themes of warfare and love and their transmission through orality. All of these are basically chronicles produced or rather compiled in an autobiographical format. The next in series is the most important one which is till date considered to be the greatest of all Iranian epics and that is Firdausi's *Shah nāma*. *Shah nāma* meant the *Book of Kings* and was completed around 1010 C.E. Firdausi, the name meaning *Man of Paradise* was derived from Ferdous the Avestan pronunciation being *Pairi-daeza*, later *Para-diz* then *Par-des* and *Par-dos* which in Arabic pronunciation became *Fer-dos*. Firdausi's book was apparently the fifth *Shah nāma* as the first four manuscripts were composed in the Samanid dynasty, in the 10th century. These books were written by Masudi Marvazi, Abu Moayyed Balkhi, Abu Mansur Mohammad and Abu Mansur Daghighi, two of which were in prose and two in verse. The *Shah nāma* of Firdausi was composed in verse. The epic consists of approximately 100,000 lines and 50,000 rhythmic couplets or bayts according to Persian each consisting of two hemistiches or misra, sixty two stories and nine hundred and ninety chapters. This was several times larger in volume than Homer's *The Iliad* which was composed in 977 C.E. It took thirty years for Firdausi to complete the work during which the empire of Iran had passed from the Samanids to the Turkoman Ghaznavid who based themselves on the north eastern provinces of Khurasan as Ghazni their new capital. So it is also assumed that Firdausi dedicated his epic to Mahmud of Ghazni the ruler who was ruling during this time. Firdausi wrote *Shah nāma* at a time when the new Persian was emerging from the middle Persian which was more Pahlavi than Persian and the preferred language for literary texts was Arabic. So he himself claimed that through this epic, Persian language would again regain its glory and fame as he used classical Persian language by minimizing the use of Arabic only to certain words and phrases and as far as sources are concerned if the transliteration of Firdausi is correct then he used the term Parsi to name the Persian language and not Farsi which was the Arabic term for Persian. He wanted to establish classical Persian in such a beautified and glorified form that it would supplant Arabic as the court language in the Indo Iranian provinces. The most interesting fact about the *Shah nāma* is the source which Firdausi referred to in the original manuscript which unfortunately is lost. He credits to a certain paladin who in Firdausi's words "*ransacked the earth*" to keep the information garnered from the Zoroastrian priests alive by memorizing and telling their legendary story of the "epic cycle". According to Firdausi's biographer, Nezāmī-Ye-Abruzzi, Firdausi's work was based on the work the *Khodai nāma* or *Khvatay nāma* which was written in middle Pahlavi during the rule of the Sassanian king Khusrau I

(531-579 C.E) who patronized it. It was a compilation of the history of the kings of Persia and the work continued till the time of the last Zoroastrian monarch of the Sassanid Empire, Yazdgerd III (633-649 C.E). The *Khodai nāma* was entirely based on memory, stories and legends gathered from Zoroastrian priests and some accounts of legendary stories from the holy book *Zend Vestan*. Again, since no proper source is available, it is an assumption that the paladin that Firdausi had referred to in his *Shah nāma* could have been from the *Khodai nāma* who collected the epic cycles memorized by the Zoroastrian priests known as Mōwbēds and Arch mages. The *Khodai nāma* unfortunately does not have any copy in the present and it might be because of this reason that Firdausi in the prologue to the *Shah nāma* stated that he needed to finish the work quickly in order to keep both history and past legends alive. The predecessor of the *Khodai nāma* is assumed to be another book based on the first evolution of man on earth to the revelation of the Zarasuthra known as the *Chhirdad*. It was one of the books of the entire *Zend Avestan* which got destroyed along with other texts. No original source of the *Shah nāma* is also available to us, that is the original copy of Firdausi's handwritten text but since this book *Chhirdad* is mentioned in the middle Persian Zoroastrian text, *Dinkard*, people have come to know about it. The *Shah nāma* posthumously became so popular that it has been translated into more than thirty languages. The above mentioned are the first compilation of Nāmas and how the idea of nāma spread and came to India.

### **Nāmas in India: *Babur nāma***

In the Indian subcontinent the nāma tradition first started with the Mughal Emperor Babur who wrote the *Babur nāma*. He had written this book about his own life that is as a chronological autobiography in Chagatai language, as he himself was a descendent of the Mongol family. The Chagatai language was the language of the Andijan-Timurids and since Babur did not have an affiliation for Persian he wrote it in Turkish language though the morphology, sentence structure and vocabulary contained many phrases in Persians. Later it was during Akbar's rule that the *Babur nāma* was translated into Persian by Abdul Rahim in 1589-90 A.D. The *Babur nāma* is now kept at the National Museum at Delhi.



Fig. 2 – An illustration from the *Babur nāma*

Source: <https://cdn.rbth.com/468x312/0x98/648x432/all/2016/07/22/56.jpg>

### *Akbar nama*

After this came up the *Akbar nāma* commissioned by Akbar himself and the renowned Abul Fazl, one of the nine jewels of Akbar's court. It gives a vivid account of Akbar's whole life including the marking of the era of Jahangir's ascension to the throne along with details of his contemporary times. The book took seven years to be completed and also contained miniature paintings to support the text which were illustrated by forty nine artists of Akbar's atelier including those from Basawan during c. 1592 and 1594 A.D. The *Akbar nāma* had three volumes, the first two dealing with Akbar's birth, the family tree of Timur and about the reigns of Babur and Humayun and the Delhi Sultanate. It set a historical background for the coming texts. The second volume dealt in details about Akbar's reign till 1602 and all the important events taking place during this time. The final and the third volume were known as *Ain-i-Akbari*, which dealt with the entire administrative system during Akbar's reign. It also gives a detailed statistical account of the number of crops harvested in each year, the prices, wages and revenues of workers and also about the culture and tradition of the people at that time. The most striking fact about the *Ain-i-Akbari* is the division of time. Time is not shown in a linear fashion but there are certain sections where it is divided into hours and even minutes also. May be it is because of this finesse that Abul Fazl's work is so recognized.



Fig. 3 – Akbar hunting Black buck: an illustration from the *Akbar nāma*

Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e6/Akbar\\_Hunting\\_Black\\_Buck-Akbarnama.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e6/Akbar_Hunting_Black_Buck-Akbarnama.jpg)

### ***Jahangir nāma***

The next in line that followed was the *Jahangir nāma*, the autobiography of the Emperor Jahangir who wrote it till the seventeenth year of his reign and then entrusted the task on Mu'tamad Khan who continued it to the beginning of the nineteenth year of Jahangir's rule. The entire span of Jahangir's rule was from 1569 -1627, which was covered entirely in this autobiography. From the nineteenth year of this text it was again taken up by Muhammad Hadi who continued it till his death. This text is said to be a continuation of the tradition of chronicling as started by Jahangir's great grandfather Babur, the only difference being his text was in Persian while the *Babur nāma* was not. The *Jahangir nāma* was first printed by Saied Ahmad at Ghazipur in 1863 and later at Aligarh in 1864.



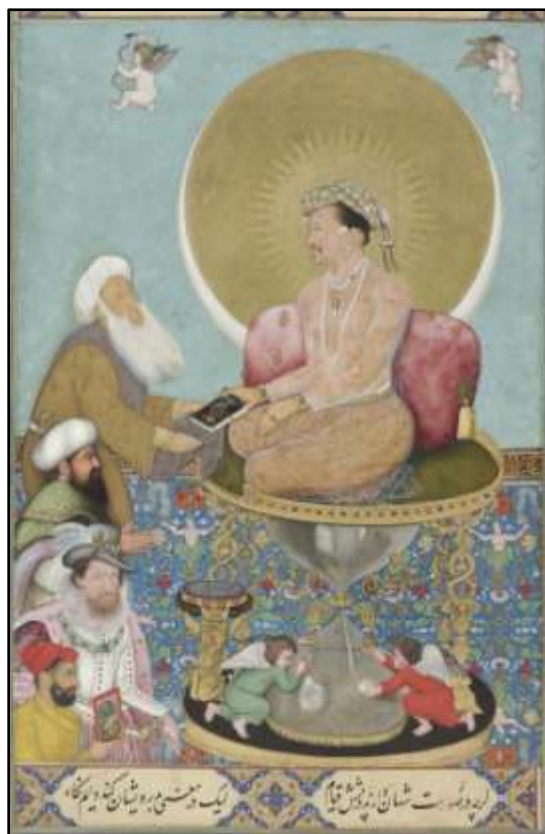


Fig. 4 – An illustration from the *Jahangir nāma* where Jahangir meets a Sufi saint

Source: <https://benjaminpbreen.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/6592e-jahangir-preferring-a-sufi-sheikh-to-kings-bichitr-1618.jpg>

### *The Hamza nāma*

The brief description about what is a *nāma* and the tradition of the *nāmas* was necessary to come to a detailed discussion about our main topic, the *Hamza nāma*. As it is seen, *nāmas* were basically chronicles in autobiography form. There is a very subtle difference between memoir and an autobiography. While a memoir covers only one aspect or incident of the writer's life, an autobiography covers the entire life history of the writer's life in a chronological order. Before moving on to what was the *Hamza nāma* and the decision to paint it, an introduction to two other illustrated manuscripts is necessary to have a better understanding of the literary culture prevalent in Akbar's court. The first one is the *Razm nāma* or the *Book of Wars* which was the Persian translation of the Indian epic the *Mahabharata*, which as per the myth goes was written by Lord Ganesh in Sanskrit and narrated by Vyasa. The *Razm nāma* was an illustrated manuscript translation of the long 100,000 versed *Mahabharata*. It is now placed at the City Palace Museum at Jaipur, Rajasthan in India. It was completed between 1584 and 1586. In 1574 Akbar established a

translation workshop popularly known as the *Maktab Khana* at his capital city, Fatehpur Sikri where he commissioned the translation of many Sanskrit texts like the *Rajatarangini*, Valmiki's *Ramayana* and also the *Babur nāma* from Turkish to Persian since Persian was the court language of Akbar. The *Razm nāma* had two copies originally between which the second oldest copy is more accessible as some of its pages were exhibited at public and private collections in India, Europe and North America.



Fig. 5 – An illustration from the *Razm nāma* showing the churning of the ocean

Source: <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/Cp4tjo2WcAAhGwc.jpg>

Next in this list of illustrated manuscript is the *Tuti nāma* meaning the *Tales of a Parrot*. It was a series of fifty two stories in Persian written in 14<sup>th</sup> Century by a Persian Sufi saint, Nakhshabi or Zeya-al-Din-Nakhshabi who migrated to India's Badayun in Uttar Pradesh in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and wrote this in Persian language. The source of this text is assumed to be an earlier anthology of *Seventy Tales of the Parrot* in Sanskrit named as *Sukasaptati* dated 12<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. Both in Persia and India, parrots were considered as great story tellers in many fictional stories because of their ability to talk. The *Tuti nāma* is a collection of fifty two adventurous stories recited by a parrot consecutively for fifty two nights and poses a similarity with the story telling structure of the *One Thousand and One Nights* or *Kitab-alf layla wa-layla*. The *Tuti nāma* illustration was commissioned by Akbar shortly after he ascended the throne during the latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The small book of short stories fascinated Akbar so much that he wanted them in the illustrated format and

two Iranian and Abdus Samamad created the illustrations embellished with stories within a span of five painters who were invited at the Mughal court by Akbar's father Humayun, Mir Saied Ali and Abdus Samamad created the illustrations embellished with stories within a span of five years.



Fig. 6 – An illustration from the *Tuti nāma*, the merchant's wife talking to the parrot

Source: [http://www.art-prints-on-demand.com/kunst/mughal\\_school/kujista\\_merchants\\_wife\\_talki\\_hi.jpg](http://www.art-prints-on-demand.com/kunst/mughal_school/kujista_merchants_wife_talki_hi.jpg)

Thus, the one thing that is clear is that the tradition of Miniature painting, storytelling and manuscript illustration was very much a dominant trend during Akbar's reign. It is within this entire framework that the *Hamza nāma* will now fit in since the only and huge difference between the *Hamza nāma* and other *nāmas* is that it was not written down when it reached Akbar's court and it was the largest project commissioned by Akbar till date. It is through this oral medium that the *Hamza* stories reached Akbar's court and he himself at times narrated the story at his *Harem* where all the female members resided. Why the oral stories were painted to give a vision to one's imagination? The answer is in the nature of the form of

Persian Epics. Description of action is a traditional epic story telling form in Persian. And secondly the decision to paint the Hamza can have many assumptions as there is no concrete source to prove any one of it. Akbar had dyslexia which made it difficult for him to read or write, still out of sheer interest and will power he learnt many epics and patronized art and literature to a great extent, secondly anything which appeals to us visually or if there is a form attached to something abstract it starts to make more sense to the eyes, ears and finally the brain. So Akbar might have wanted the illustration of the Hamza stories which would appeal to the audience both visually and aurally since the stories were still then not in print form, a professional story teller or *Naqqali* was employed to recite the episode and the folio was displayed at the background. This paved an entirely new ground for a new emerging trend of audio visual story telling or in technical words, *Trans media* storytelling.

### **Trans media Storytelling**

Trans media story telling uses different platforms to narrate a story in such a way that each story stand alone in its own way and this was exactly in case of the Hamza folios. Each folio individually narrated a different story, so if one missed the previous story there was no difficulty in trying to relate or searching for continuity, each story was independent and self-fulfilling in its own way. The entire process being a cumulative one adds richness to each of the individual stories and characters and plots all become very alive and appealing with no secondary stories. It breaks the gap between reality and fiction and in its new audio visual mode takes the audience and listeners in their very coveted imaginary land. They kind of persuade the audience to engage their brain and be a part of the intense mode of communication at all the three levels of sense, intuition and execution. As a result of this the audience connection increases and reaches a different level of bonding with the characters of the stories since the stories have different entry points which effectively help in expanding the horizon of expectation of the audience. According to Henry Jenkins, trans media story telling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and entertainment experience. He also tells that *Trans media* stories need not to be based on individual characters or specific plots but can rather build complex fictional worlds which would include multiple inter related characters and their stories. The two translated texts used for this work are *The Adventures of Amir Hamza: Lord of the Auspicious Planetary Conjunction* (2008) by Musharraf Ali Farooqi which is the English translation of *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza-Sahibqiran* in Urdu by Abdullah Bilgrāmī and Ghalib Lakhnavi and *The Adventures of*

*Hamza: Painting and Storytelling in Mughal India* by John Seyller as the secondary sources, and the illustrations that are used in this chapter has been taken up as the primary ones. To begin with a historical background about the *Hamza nāma* and some more details and finally along with the illustrations the trans mediality and amalgamation both will be tried to be discussed. The *Hamza nāma* or *The Adventures of Hamza* is a collection of action filled stories of a historical character who is also supposed to be the Prophet's (*Peace Be Upon Him*) paternal uncle. But only the character was historical may be to keep parity with the *nāma* tradition, all the other virtues attributed to him were fictional to keep the tinge of Romance in it. It is considered to be an important work of the popular Islamic literary tradition as the hero Hamza-ibn-Abdul-Mutallib started his journey from Arab with the flag of Islam and became a "stalwart champion" (Seyller: 12) of Islam latter on. He first featured prominently at the battle of Badr in 624 and died in 625 at the battle of Uhud in the hands of an Abyssinian named Washi. Another Hamza whose story is also assumed to have inspired the *Hamza nāma* was one Hamza ibn Abdullah who lived at Sistan in Iran in the late eighth and early ninth century and who led the battle against the Caliph Harun ul Rashid. Anyways since none of the sources about who was the actual Hamza whose story is narrated or whether someone by this name even existed or not is not clearly confirmed it is taken that the tales of Amir Hamza are a collection of entertaining adventure filled stories and neither a historical biography nor a religious account of how Islam spread worldwide. It was a collection of tales just for the purpose of entertainment and this is where it differs from the known meaning or definition of *nāmas* which are usually autobiographical in nature and not meant for entertainment purpose only. Apart from being apart from the other *nāmas* the most important thing that makes the *Hamza nāma* unique is that it was born from the Persian tradition of oral storytelling and performing especially meant for illiterate audience around camp fires and some urban coffee houses where someone would narrate the story dramatically. The tradition of folk lore, epic prose romances of accomplished heroes with extraordinary capabilities have always captured the imagination of the common mass. And it is through the oral medium only that makes these stories popular enough to occupy a place in prose and poetry and later become accessible in print. The original Hamza stories which were Persian absorbed various indigenous local colours to it when it travelled from one place to another and from one culture to another. This is the specialty of orality; it is very rooted to its lineage and helps in spreading as well as glorifying the individual and cultural achievements and lessons from the past. It also increased the level of tolerance and mutual respect for each other's culture, language and its history because in a world where people had very little ties with the written

culture, storytelling and exchanging was the only source of knowledge and entertainment for them. Since orality is completely based on memory the characters of the stories were often infused with regional and cultural backdrop of the region where the stories were narrated. The events were also manipulated and coloured with the imagination of the story teller himself to keep the attention of the audience intact.

The four themes of the Amir Hamza story are Warfare, Trickery, Love and Beauty and Enchantment. These themes materialize through the geographical expanse of the Middle East, Persia and India and act as a background of all the action and inaction taking place in the course of the narrative. The *Hamza nāma* follows a very straight forward action filled narrative mode on stories of legendary heroes which is very unlike the standard notion of Persian poetry replete with metaphors and rhyming pattern or even the Mughal prosaic tradition of high flown propaganda. The tales of Hamza form one of the oldest and most popular romances in the Persian tradition and is thought of to be older than even Firdausi's most celebrated tenth century epic *Shah nāma* but the problem with *Hamza nāma* is that it remained confined to the oral tradition only and never was an attempt made to canonize it before Akbar's initiatives to do so. In the foreword given by John Seyller we come to know about the legends of *Hamza* and the fact that till date it was one of the grandest manuscripts commissions produced in the mid-sixteenth century during the reign of Emperor Akbar. This grand manuscript has a total of fourteen hundred folios which describe tales replete with monsters, demons, heroes and villains. Legend goes that Akbar had a great liking to listen to the tales of *Hamza* as a kid and that is why with special interest he granted this monumental expression while he was still in his teenage years. Talking about the various heroic cycles and their circulation and narration Malcolm Lyon remarks:

From the time of the Homered, the 'singers of embroidered words', such reciters, together with their techniques of performance as well as of composition or adaptation, have been familiar to students of literature ...The Ozidi Saga from Africa is introduced as having no fixed text. All that each teller of the story has is the plot, a grand design to which, like a master builder, he proceeds to give body and full expression (2-3).

Abul Fazl in *Ain-I Akbari* mentioned about the *Hamza nāma* to be made into twelve books. Abdul Qadir Badauni in his book *Muntakh-e But Tawarikh* and Mirza Allaudaullah Qozaini's *Nafa-e SulMaasir* also tells about the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*. According to Badauni, the story of Amir Hamza was in seventeen volumes illustrated for over a period of fifteen years. The folios were arranged in fourteen volumes each of them kept in a large box. On one side of a

folio, within a large, gold flecked and colour toned paper frame there used to be a typically colourful painting about 69 centimetres long and 54 centimetres wide. The painting was done on cotton fabric that formed the main support for the heavy, multi layered folio. The other side of the folio was bordered with a rectangle framing 19 lines of Arabic script on gold flecked paper. Today only 170 of these folios are available but that too spread out among art collections throughout the world. It is clear from the size and format of the text that it was used in the royal court and the writing on cream coloured paper flecked with gold was something strikingly unusual of the Mughal Miniature features. Each page of the folio had a text of exact nineteen lines with proper spacing between individual lines and words. It seemed more like a guide to the calligrapher though some pages have some crowded lines at the end of the pages and sometimes even wrapped around the left end of the page. This must have been intentional because of the narrative which the artists did not want to leave in the middle or continue on the next page with an interruption. This made each folio completely separate from each other even being a part of a single manuscript. The *Hamza nāma* was constructed as a compliment of the oral story telling tradition and that is why the paintings are very large in size in comparison to the general size of manuscripts which visually appeal to the audience from a distance. Unlike the Persian manuscript style, where the text is integrated into the paintings, almost every folio of the *Hamza nāma* has a painting on the front side and a corresponding illustration of the episode painted on the back page. Also the separate production of text pages and paintings were more effective and less costly so they took time to make it for seven years but made it in such a way that it stood distinctive from all the other illustrated manuscripts till date. The *Hamza nāma* was the birth of a new project and by the time it was finished in 1570, a new style had already emerged. The landscape noticeably diverged from the Safavid models and the colours used were also brighter, vibrant though the pastel shades were still used for defining proper proportionate lines, the forms were more loosely painted but more vigorously outlined. And the natural surroundings started to find more space in the paintings like roots coming out from trees, tired villagers slumbering on rope thatched cots etc. Even the clothing of the characters changed from four pointed *Jamas* to native Indian dhotis and loin clothes to swarthy complexion from the perfect figure and Mongoloid features. And most importantly the expression, all the figures have some recognizable animated facial expression rather than solemn expressions found in the Persian Miniatures. The standard red, orange was slowly supplemented by more subtle colours like brown, dark green and shades of blue which was clearly an influence of the

European painting which had already started entering Akbar's court in the form of gifts from missionaries.

Douglas Galbi in his work, *Sense of Communication* has written that the *Hamza nāma* testifies to the importance of personal activity and circumstances, independent of narrative and information transfer, for making sense of presence. He also writes that the sensuous choices which are incorporated in the *Hamza nāma* are both challenging and open for an understanding to see and interpret more as Akbar himself was a man who relished the sense of the world. Shamsur Rahman Farooqi commented in a review,

The Persian Dastan-e Amir Hamza arrived in South India from Iran during the last quarter of the 16th century. It reached the court of Emperor Akbar, far into the North, by 1590. Akbar was so enamoured of the tale that he commissioned 1400 paintings to illustrate its high points (Review of *Tilism-e Hoshruha. Middle Eastern Literatures*.15.2 (2012).

Now some explanation of the illustrations will try to show how the explanation of a certain episode about what was happening or what happened was given in the Mughal court but not in the form of writing but in the form of an oral performance. Thus the oral, painting and print culture comes together in the visual display of the Hamza folios and the oral performance of the story teller or Naqqali. Since the option of oral performance or even a record of the oral narration is not available here, taking the help of translated texts and primary sources of images the following details are listed.



Fig. 7 – A Leviathan attacks Hamza and his soldiers

Source: [https://c1.staticflickr.com/1/45/139113128\\_4ad2b07a03.jpg](https://c1.staticflickr.com/1/45/139113128_4ad2b07a03.jpg)



### **Leviathan attacking Hamza and his Soldiers**

This painting is attributed to Basavanna and Shravana and was painted in c.1567, the size of the folio is 71\*55.5 cm and the number is 69 though the volume is not known. It was also exhibited as a private collection of Christie's at New York in 1990, 3<sup>rd</sup> October. This painting depicts a huge monster rising from the middle of the sea and is so enormous that it could swallow the entire ship. Hamza dressed in orange is standing at the centre and shoots an arrow while his other companions are naturally quite flustered and use every possible weapon to ward off the sea monster. And as destined in all these oral narratives, the Hero gets divine help every time he is in danger, here Hamza also in the light of legendary prowess hits the arrow directly into the right eye of the angry monster. A prince accompanying Hamza takes an aim for the left eye and Umar whirls his sling and prepares to throw stones at the monster. All the other companions of Hamza attack the monster with spears, arrows and swords. The expressions of all the figures are very animated and in a motion, which was the influence of the Indian form of painting. In Persian Miniatures there is normally no facial expression portrayed. And the Leviathan or the sea monster resembles an indigenous Indian alligator known as Ghariyal. This also bore resemblance to a Siyashar, another type of Indian crocodile but very big in size up to four or five yards and its teeth up to more than half a yard in length. The reptiles are represented in a particular style, the ears round, spiny and thorny ridge and streamers. And a Siyashar was also depicted as having fangs projected like thorns on the front of its muzzle. Adventures like this in sea were a common motif of every Romance Qissa or Dastan. Hamza is on his way to the kingdom of Aras with whom he had a challenge in wrestling and it is in the middle of the sea journey that the Leviathan attacks their ship.



Fig. 8 – Zummurud Shah beaten up by guards

Source: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/image/0007/197008/2762-large.jpg](http://www.vam.ac.uk/_data/assets/image/0007/197008/2762-large.jpg)

### Zummurud Shah getting beaten up by Guards

This folio is attributed to Kesava Dasa around July 1567 to June 1568. The painting number is 15 and the size is 68.9 \* 54.7 cm. It is currently placed at the Victoria and Albert Museum at London. It depicts the King of the East, Zummurud Shah getting beaten up by gardeners who mistook him to be some spy. He was an eternal enemy of Hamza and suffered many adversities during his long struggle against Hamza but nothing was more embarrassing to him than this incident where he got beaten up by ordinary gardeners. According to the narration when Zummurud Shah was beaten black and blue, he requested a lot to prove that he was innocent and had entered the garden by mistake. The gardeners refused to listen to him and said that they thought him to be some “*desert ghoul*” because of his huge built who came and ransacked their garden every day. The gardeners stop temporarily listening to his continuous pleading for innocence but start beating him up again assuming an outrageous lie when they hear of his identity as the King of the East. Finally Zummurud Shah gives in and submits to being bound and taken away as a prisoner in chains but his ill fate did not leave him there. The barn where he was imprisoned was meant for cattle which was also not satisfied seeing an intruder and one of them attacked him with a horn and the other one unloaded a pile of cow dung on him. The painting shows great wit in depicting the figures.

Zummurud Shah dominates the whole painting as per his built and yet the artist very cleverly conceals most of the part of his body in the pit from where only his face is visible. The landscape is also portrayed beautifully by the zigzag garden walls, neatly arranged and trimmed grapevines and a tall date palm beyond it giving an illusion of the forbidden fruit and the guilty bears who lustfully watch the fruit, the female playfully withholding a piece of fruit from one of her cubs while the others are staring in amusement from the crook of the tree. The facial expression of the gardeners shows their anger and the sticks and spade symbolize collective occupation, and Zummurud Shah is shown drenched in blood after all the assault.

### Conclusion

The Hamza illustrations embody the very spirit of oral narrative tradition, characterized by tales within tales. Apart from the 'narrative elasticity' that Seyller has rightly observed, the works also represent the multiple realms of real, unreal and surreal elements. These diverse elements inhabit a remarkable range of environments, both natural and man-made. And in the process of doing so, the visual images subordinate history, heroic deeds and personalities, first to their purported illustration of the story and secondly to their visual interpretative leaps. Orality as a genre cannot be fixed and it acts like a disappearing signifier which has the capability to subvert the entire notion of fixity and not get mediated by the written world at all. Orality also has the characteristics of the culture it re-presents and this poses a new question that what was the *Hamza nāma* representing? Or was it representing anything of the Persian folkloric Qissa at all? The moment a thing gets painted or rather it is made static by binding it within a certain frame the sign, signifier and the mode of representation all change. And here in case of the *Hamza nāma* illustrations, not only the mode of representation change it also took a new form in a complete different way. With the illustration of Hamza it becomes an audio-visual mode of representation where the performance is replaced by the paintings. And the most unique part of the Hamza folios is that though they are painted, each folio represents an individual story independent of any other story before or after it. The folios were kept in the backdrop and recited by a story teller, but the actions which the Naqqali showed and the excitement aroused in the audience can be supposed to have been missing when the stories were narrated along with the illustrations. What cannot be anymore articulated in the public space was slowly beginning to structure in the private space. Thus it can be said that a two way process was taking place, a

trans mediation from the oral to the printing tradition and a change of mode of representation within the literary paradigm.

The post-modernist view put forward by Saussure is that the notions of sign, signifier and signified especially in European Naturalist painting act as a means of recognizing the higher truth and ends with the superiority of writing. (Seyller: 30). But the *Hamza folios* unlike the European paintings which were first brought in the Mughal Durbar around 1580 by the Portuguese Jesuits, the characters do not assert their subjectivity by directly facing the viewers like the painting of Mother Mary for example. And thus the truth or the signified wishing to be recognized by the sign and the signifier is completely different from the Occidental mode of understanding and representing the truth in the pre modern Orient. According to Douglas Galbi, respect for truth almost surely shaped the choices that Akbar and his artists made in producing the *Hamza nāma* but Akbar and his artists may not have thought about truth and representation in the way the Europeans and much of the world does now.

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