

Review

The Broken Spell: Indian Storytelling and the Romance Genre in Persian and Urdu, Pasha M. Khan, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2019, ISBN 978-0-8143-4599-3 (pbk), 312 pp.

In *The Broken Spell: Indian Storytelling and the Romance Genre in Persian and Urdu*, Pasha M. Khan offers an evocative portrait of the history of the *qissah*, also known as *dastan*, an orally transmitted tale whose recitation was an art form in South Asia from at least the sixteenth century. While *qissahs* were told in many languages, Khan's focus is on Persian and Urdu manifestations in northern India from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. Often translated as "romance," an equivalence Khan takes issue with, the *qissah* is a tale of wonder, frequently encompassing the use of magic, fantastic beasts, and parallel worlds, united by special narrative techniques like lists of exotic foods or goods, thrilling accounts of battle, or long descriptions of a character's beauty. The best storytellers were said to know exactly when to stop to keep their listeners wanting more. In much modern Urdu literary historiography, under the influence of colonial attitudes, the *qissah* has been considered the frivolous, infantile precursor to the novel, modernity's true prose art form. Khan is open about his motives: building on the work of Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, he wants to rehabilitate the *qissah*, and to do so, he focuses on how genre works to determine the value of texts in different cultural milieus.

In his introduction, Khan employs an “outside in” perspective on the *qissab* genre, rather than working “inside out” to identify its generic characteristics. Such polyvocal texts resist essentialist categories; instead, Khan argues that genre is in the eye of the beholder. Using Todorov’s theory of the genre code, Khan sees genre as a mark applied by readers (who may also be producers of texts). Genres are not natural, but historical and ideological; they imply value and have real, material consequences for texts’ producers and performers. Genres exist side-by-side in genre systems, and their value is assigned relationally. These systems are reflective of the worldviews of their society and, as such, texts can shift genres or the value of a given genre can change over time. This is not simply the kind of throat-clearing one encounters in an introduction to absolve the title of its problematized words: Khan uses the rest of the book’s chapters to illuminate the history of the *qissab* in light of his theory of genre, as well as to use the *qissab* as a case study of how genre works, providing insights applicable to a variety of contexts.

Chapters 1 and 2 develop the theme of genre as marking value, grounding the idea of genre competition in the lives of storytellers. While Chapter 1 focuses on Persian storytellers at the Mughal court, Chapter 2 shifts focus to Urdu storytellers in the nineteenth century, attending to the strategies they used to secure patronage and remuneration in the new colonial context. Using the framework of cultural capital, Khan details how the storytellers argued for the usefulness of the *qissab* as a pedagogical tool for correct moral formation. In the Mughal context this often meant reciting to young princes who might continue to patronize the storyteller as their power grew. Persian storytelling was also a valuable tool for teaching the Persian language. Later *qissab* reciters made similar arguments as they sought patronage at Fort William College in Calcutta, where orientalist employed Persian-literate intellectuals and scribes to produce texts for the teaching of Indian languages, and in the new cultural center of Lucknow, where a Muslim urban culture of public performance developed.

The hard facts of having to seek income through patronage are undeniable, as Khan’s vivid description of Mir Baqir Ali Dastango (1850–1928), “the last storyteller of Delhi,” selling his chapbooks outside the railway station makes abundantly clear. Yet Khan’s cultural-capital framework can occasionally stray into instrumentalism along the lines of an economic competition-for-resources model. It might have been more exciting to take more seriously what Khan calls the “linguistic-exemplary” value of the *qissab* rather than view such claims through a functionalist perspective inclined to see them as simply boosting storytellers’ “market value.” An argument for a link between *adab* and the *qissab*, its oral recitation context perhaps offering a dimension of ethical training not conferred by reading “mirror for princes” texts, seems especially viable given the intertextuality Khan later establishes between *qissabs* and *akhlaq* texts of ethical instruction.

Chapter 3 makes use of a seventeenth-century storytelling manual in Persian, the *Tiraz al-akhbar* of ‘Abd al-Nabi Fakhr al-Zamani (usefully translated and excerpted in an appendix), composed of fragments of prose and poetry to be inserted extempore as into any *qissab* at an appropriate juncture. Representative of genres like *akhlaq*

(ethics), *tarikb* (history), and *madb* (panegyric), the fragments illustrate how the orally delivered *qissab* artfully stitched together different kinds of written texts. This variegated quality allowed storytellers like Mir Baqir Ali to make claims about the *qissab*'s usefulness in imparting ethical instruction or Sufi ideas, for example. The assumption that each genre had associated "effects and uses," and audiences were socialized into *feeling* the effects of particular kinds of texts when they heard them, is provocative and merits more attention. Yet Khan's focus here is genre, and his choice of source neatly makes the point—that genres are interdependent and all texts multigeneric—on which the subsequent chapters build.

In the latter part of the book, the value of Khan's theory of "genre systems" becomes especially clear. Chapter 4 looks at the *qissab* in relation to the *tarikb* or history, and Chapter 5 considers it in relation to the novel. Khan uses the Persian *Shahnamah* (as it was received in the Indian context) as a "generically ambivalent *qissab*" and colonial-era tellings of the *Tale of the Bakawali Flower* to illustrate a strand of epistemology in which history did not necessarily exclude events that seemed impossible. According to Ibn Arabi's concept of *tajalli*, since God was always creating, nothing was outside the realms of the possible, and fantastic stories could provoke wonder at God's creation. Khan turns to the concepts of *'aqli* and *naqli* historiography in the Islamic tradition to argue that a text might be considered true based on its chains of transmission (*naql*) to the exclusion of rational thought (*'aql*). What was important was not truth so much as the author's sincerity. The use of devices such as chains of transmission (*isnad*) in a *qissab* produces what Khan terms a "sincerity effect," rendering it possible to perceive the text as historical.

Making the *Shahnamah* central to a book about Indian tales may seem counter-intuitive, but this is exactly what makes Khan's choice to treat Persian and Urdu in the same book so valuable. Not only does his reception history chip away at the association of the *Shahnamah* exclusively with Iranian national identity, it also reorients Urdu literary historiography toward the Persianate milieu of personalities like Ghalib, Urdu's most famous poet, on whose letter about the *Shahnamah* the chapter hinges. Khan is not interested here in claiming whether or not we should see the *qissab* as Islamic, but grounding the reception of the *qissab* in concepts like *'aql* or conventions like *isnad*—reminiscent of Shahab Ahmed's framework of Islam as engagement with the Pre-Text, Text and Con-Text of revelation—helps to place Urdu in what Khan calls its "Indo-Islamicate" epistemological context, shared with Persian. Such a move avoids the pitfalls of particularizing the Urdu literary tradition along lines determined by colonial language politics and postcolonial nationalism, an approach which has circumscribed much English-language scholarship on Urdu to the problematically reductive question of whether the language is basically secular or Muslim. Khan's book charts a path out.

Focusing on the colonial encounter in Chapter 5, Khan is keen to avoid an overly simplistic account in which the "irrational" precolonial tale is disenchanting by colonially inflected rationalist ideas. Instead, he argues, the new concept of a "natural law" introduced by colonial forms of knowledge, which delimited the boundaries of the

possible in contrast to the *naqli* tradition, resulted in the devaluation of the *qissah*. Colonially influenced Urdu literary critics and reformers dismissed the *qissah* as unnatural, unlike the novel, and thus lacking the latter genre's capacity for moral improvement. Noting that the *qissah* was devalued based on a colonial conception of Indo-Persian decline, Khan resists tolling its death knell. His theory of genre allows for its thread to be picked up once again, or espied in texts not marked by its generic label. His decision to end the conclusion with a summary of part of the Pakistani serialized novel *Devta*, whose resonances with conventions of the *qissah* the reader is now equipped to observe, gestures at useful ways in which his book might be received.

Khan's framework for the study of genre is a valuable tool in the study of the Persianate literary ecosystem, particularly in South Asia's multilingual environment. The task of scholars who work on this period is to be true to the polyvocal and intertextual nature of its literary texts, as well as the orality of their transmission, even when the structure of today's archives obscures these important aspects. Refusing to see genres as fixed entities helps us to do this. At the same time, it is important not to overstate the fluidity of boundaries; to seriously attend to the distinctions that the primary sources make and take for granted (for example, *tarikh*, *qissah*, and *dastan*), even as they shift in different contexts. Khan's dexterous use of a wide range of sources, including letters, memoirs, and voice recordings alongside the *qissahs* he has access to, succeeds admirably in teasing these out. His treatment of the *Tiraz* in Chapter 3 should be instructive to all scholars facing the challenges of seeing orality in written sources.

The book is a delight to read: paying respect to his source material, Khan himself turns storyteller when introducing us to the scene at Mir Baqi Ali's house as he slows down his voice to introduce a new character, or the spectacle of a hundred Englishmen on elephants slowly navigating the jungle of the Bakawali flower. *The Broken Spell* encourages the reader to see the literary environment of precolonial and colonial northern India as peppered with stories and storytellers, only a small slice of whose output has come down to us. Khan's plea to look for clues to their world in the archive we have, and find their ghosts in perhaps unexpected texts, not only makes for a wondrous tale but also provides enchanting possibilities.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2021.1928954>