

# HAMZANAMA

(c. 1000 CE)

## Reading

*The Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures from the Dastan of Amir Hamzah*, F. Pritchett, 1991  
*The Adventures of Amir Hamza*, translated by Musharaff Farooqi, 2010

## Cultural significance

The significance of the *Hamzanama* in Indo-Persian culture can hardly be overstated. It is the literary synthesis of pre-Islamic, Islamic and Persian tales and themes, which are then written down, codified and popularised in the Mughal court of Emperor Akbar. And when the Mughal empire collapses, it retains its status as the premier literary entertainment through translations into Urdu, Hindi and other Indian languages. The story continued to be orally transmitted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in parts of north India, and it crossed the seas to become part of the shadow puppet repertoire of Muslim Java. But it is the fabulously painted manuscript of the story, commissioned by Akbar, that best illustrates (no pun intended) the significance of the story. That manuscript not only changed the development of Indian miniatures; it also supplied content for many other types of visual art all over the subcontinent. Akbar's grandfather famously dismissed the story as 'one long far-fetched lie, opposed to sense and nature.' But Akbar was entranced by it. His ambitious commission for an illustrated manuscript, to include 1,400 large paintings, required more than a hundred artists and took more than fifteen years to complete. The finished product was so spectacular that it became as famous as the Koh-i-noor diamond. When the Persian King Nadir Shah sacked Delhi and took the jewel in 1756, he also helped himself to the Akbar manuscript of the *Hamzanama*. Today, fortunately, some of the paintings (though only about 100 of the original 1,400) used to illustrate the manuscript can be seen in museums in Tehran, Vienna and London. Few narratives in world literature can be said to have had a comparable impact on both literary and artistic traditions.

## Overview

The *Hamzanama* (or *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*), often translated into English as the *Adventures of Amir Hamza*, is a chronicle of the exploits of Hamza and his band of heroes as they battle against various enemies of Islam. Hamza is a fictionalised version of the real-life uncle of the Prophet Mohammed. The long Indo-Persian epic (46 volumes and almost 50,000 pages) is a compendium of legends and stories that ultimately derive from Persian sources, although it is believed that the stories were first collected in written form during the reign of Mahmud of Ghazni (around 1000 CE). No author, either historical or legendary, is credited with writing the story down; rather, it was transcribed from oral tradition by various scribes in various Indo-Persian and Mughal courts. The best-known version of the story (and the one discussed here) is the illustrated Persian-language manuscript commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Akbar in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The *Hamzanama* was later translated into Urdu in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into English only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Story

Set in seventh-century Persia and Arabia, the story is told in four books. Book One begins before Hamza's birth with a tale of palace betrayals and murders over buried treasure, which results, two generations later, in two men seeking revenge for the deaths of the grandfathers. One is Bakhtak, who comes across as the villain, and the other is Buzerjmehr, who is on the side of the hero Hamza. When Bakhtak is appointed advisor to the king, Naushervan, he is put in direct competition with Buzerjmehr, who is already an advisor.

The story proper begins with Buzerjmehr discovering that the king's life and throne will be protected by a young man hailing from the city of Mecca. Using his clairvoyant powers, Buzerjmehr determines the identity of this infant and has him raised under his supervision in Persia. That child, of course, is Hamza, who now enters the story. After maturing into a warrior, he gets his chance to display his bravery when the Persian Empire is attacked by Hashsham bin Alqamah Khaibri and Hamza defeats him at Medina. Welcomed into the royal palace in Persia as a hero, Hamza, and his side-kick Amar, become close to Buzerjmehr. When Hamza falls in love with the princess Mehr Nigar and their marriage is proposed, the villainous Bakhtak convinces the king that Hamza is planning to overthrow him.

Book Two starts with Bakhtak having convinced Naushervan that Hamza's goal is to overthrow him and convert everyone to 'one true religion.' Fearful, the king sends his army out to attack Hamza, who is captured and placed in prison, somewhere in Egypt. He is then rescued by his friend Amar but later almost poisoned and saved again, this time by Buzerjmehr and Amar. Having survived these assassination attempts, Hamza leaves the earth and rises up to heaven, where he lives on Mount Qaf. This is a celestial kingdom ruled by Emperor Shuupal bin Shakrukh and inhabited by fairies, demons and spirits. From this point forward, the events take place on two levels, with those in heaven paralleled by those on earth. In heaven, as on earth, the king is threatened by a rebellion that Hamza puts down with military force. Meanwhile, on earth, Hamza has left Amar in charge of his still formidable army and of protecting his fiancé, Mehr Nigar. A good deal of this second book focuses on Amar's trickster-like abilities to both defeat his enemies and safeguard the princess. These sections draw almost directly on oral tales with their slapstick humour and motifs of outwitting the powerful but foolish people of the court.

In Book Three, Hamza returns to earth, having spent eighteen years on Mount Qaf, where he married a fairy princess. This celestial princess is jealous of the earthly princess, and puts many obstacles in the way of his departure. This is the shortest book, but contains many incidents of trickery, disguise and secret conversations. Hamza, it is clear, loves his earthly princess more than fairy one, and, in the end, he succeeds in breaking through the obstacles the former has set for him.

When Book Four opens, Hamza is happily back on earth, but he is overwhelmed with the number of children he has fathered with various unnamed women. The hero clearly loves his princess Mehr Nigar, but obviously that has not prevented him from considerable dalliance with other women. After a series of incidents, in which his large family is established, Hamza marries Mehr Nigar, reorganizes his army and launches a new series of military campaigns in India and China and other parts of the world. Finally, he reaches Mecca, where he meets the prophet Muhammad, embraces Islam and attains martyrdom.

## Themes

**War** An important theme in this romance, as in the chivalric epics of medieval Europe, is war. Battles between Hamza and the infidels are found throughout the *Hamzanama* and function to maintain a degree of narrative coherence. Hamza, as the uncle of the Prophet, is fighting to spread the influence of Islam, but we should note that he usually fights in support of the king Naushervan, who is a Zoroastrian. With that qualification, we can say that Hamza and Islam are victorious in every battle, although sometimes the 'converted and defeated' army turns traitor after a short time, engendering more battles, victories and conversion. It is further interesting to note that the story-tellers (or scribes who wrote the text down) have chosen to describe the battles as one-on-one combat, which is an effective narrative technique for focusing the attention of readers and listeners. War is also a tool of conversion, as many of the defeated kings embrace Islam in the end. The text is thus a celebration of valour and the wider warrior ethic in the defence of Islam, although it draws on pre-Islamic values of valour and sacrifice.

The gallantry, righteousness and clemency of Hamza and his men would not be out of place in a medieval European romance, such as *Morte d'Arthur*, *El Cid*, *Beowulf* or *The Song of Roland*. Where the Indo-Persian story differs somewhat from similar texts is in its precise delineation of the battlefield and the military tactics of the opposed forces. The actual movements of the armies—their assembling, moving, advancing and retreating—are delineated with photographic precision. The heroic Hamza's opponents are sometimes non-human. During his expedition to India, for example,

he battles fierce sea storms, and elsewhere he confronts whirlpools that threaten to destroy his ships and supernatural beings who challenge his authority. In these several ways, the story uses battles and trials to illustrate the bravery of the hero, his perseverance, resilience and steadfastness as a warrior.



(A battle scene from the Mughal illustrated manuscript of the *Hamzanama*, 1560s)

**Faith** The other great theme running through the epic is the importance of faith. Indeed, faith is inseparably linked to the theme of war in the story since, in addition, to his human qualities, Hamza is also a follower of the True Religion. If he is outnumbered by his opponent's army, and he frequently is, he makes up the difference with his faith in God. We can even say that the hero's role is completely absorbed by his function as a trailblazer for the prophet and the spread of the faith. Although the story is set before the birth of Mohammad, it is full of Islamic elements: the *shahada* to prayer, ablutions, references to the Qur'an, conversions and notions such as the 'Oneness of God.' More than that, Hamza is actually visited by the angel Gabriel who gives him near-prophet status as a messenger of Islam.

Whenever Hamza appears to be losing a battle, he quickly gains the upper hand by yelling 'God is Great' and keeping a strong faith in this god. On other occasions, Hamza or Amar receives divine help in the form of a prophetic warning, a magical stone tablet or a miraculous sword. And yet, the *Hamzanama* is not simply an iconoclastic religious text. Although it is presented and received as



'Islamic,' we have to remember that it is set in pre-Islamic Persia, roughly in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. Moreover, while Hamza is Mohammed's uncle, none of the characters follows strict or consistent religious guidelines. Hamza professes faith in the one true religion and the one true god and is sometimes seen praying, but he also engages in drinking and debauchery, ending up with many wives and children. And there is also Hamza and Amar's reliance on magic and trickery. This mixture of the sacred and the profane, the faith and the fool, is surely responsible for the phenomenal popularity of this story.

**Trickery** This profane element, full of humour, deceit and human foibles, provides a third major theme in the story. We can sum it up under the category of trickery, which is largely the activity not of the hero, but of his side-kick Amar, who is as active and competent as Hamza. Although most of the trickery is enacted by Amar during the hero's sojourn on Mount Qaf in heaven, it is in fact a constant presence in the epic. Amar possesses a capacious box of tricks, given to him, mainly, by sages and prophets for his good deeds. One of his chief devices is a bag (called *zanbil*), which contains within its small dimensions a world comparable to our own. This magic bag is put to various uses, producing on command whatever Amar needs. There is also a shawl or cloak that makes him invisible whenever he wears it. Perhaps the most famous of his devices is the 'net of the prophet Elias', which has the property of carrying anything and making it feel light, even if it weighs several tons. Other devices include a magic pavilion and, of course, a magic rope. Allied to Amar's bag of tricks is his humour, which is often employed to ridicule and mock his enemies and anyone in power. This is the classic trickster character, who punctures the pomposity of kings and priests. When these tricks are combined with the magic and sorcery straight out of the *Thousand and One Nights*, we can understand the delight that this story has given to so many people over such a long period of time.

#### **Characters** (main figures only)

**Hamza** Hamza, often honoured as Amir Hamza, is the hero of this romance. He is a fictional portrait of the real-life uncle of the Prophet.

**Amar** Amar, or Amar Ayyar, is Hamza's trusted lieutenant, who is also a trickster character and provides much of the entertainment value of this popular story.

**Buzerjmehr** Buzerjmehr is another one of Hamza's allies, although he is a more sober advisor to the king. A wise and clairvoyant person, he is a Merlin-like figure.

**Bakhtak** Bakhtak is also an advisor to the king, but he has a villainous streak, opposes Hamza's rise in the court and is behind the several attempts on his life.

**Naushervan** Naushervan is the king of the Persian Empire, who is a somewhat weak figure, at the mercy of his advisors.

**Mehr Nigar** Mehr Nigar is the king's daughter, whom Hamza falls in love with and, eventually, marries.

#### **Hamza** (Heroic)

**Character** Hamza is often called Amir Hamza, *amir* or *emir* being an honorific meaning 'leader' or 'commander'. As the protagonist of this fabulous tale of romance and adventure, he is a character as large as the story itself, which roams from Arabia to Persia, Ceylon, India and into the heavens. Only a complex character could hold together all the diverse elements that are thrown into this miscellany of folk-lore, legend and history. One thing is clear: while Hamza is the fictional version of the Prophet's uncle and a defender of the faith, he is not a saint or a sage. He is a military commander of consummate skill and cunning, who does not hesitate to use deceit if necessary to defeat the infidels on the battlefield. As a Muslim, he is opposed to sorcery ('I am the mortal foe of sorcery,' he declares more than once), and yet this does not prevent him from utilising some forms of magic, especially through the agency of his ally, the trickster, Amar. In fact, throughout the story, Hamza is aided by supernatural forces, such as magicians and fairies, who operate in a world far removed from the sober society envisioned by the Qur'an. The integration of Islamic faith with magical powers in the character of Hamza can be interpreted as a symbolic assimilation of the new faith into the cultures that it conquered as it spread east to Persia and India. Another complication in his character is that,

although he is presented as a sober Muslim, he is a handsome devil, who enjoys the pleasures of love-making. We can also see that Hamza's character develops as the epic progresses, from his birth in Medina to his martyrdom in Mecca. The precocious young man becomes, in turn, a wise warrior, a savvy statesman and a learned Muslim. Again, the reason that this story has captivated and instructed people from Istanbul to Calcutta for almost a thousand years is largely the complex character of its protagonist. While Hamza is clearly seen as the chosen instrument in the realisation of God's plan on earth, he is also a wily rascal who time-travels, falls desperately in love and remains loyal to everyone.

**Activities** It is easier to describe what Hamza does not do than to list all of his activities. We have to think of a romantic hero, an adventurer, a defender of the faith and a pleasure-seeking lover, for whom nothing is out of bounds. More specifically, though, Hamza is especially fond of hunting and of sailing. He undertakes long sea voyages to India, Egypt and beyond, in order, of course, to conquer infidel kingdoms. When, in the middle of the story, he is hoisted up to heaven (for his own safety), he enjoys tramping on a high mountain and ogling the fairy princesses he sees bathing in a pool. At other times, we see Hamza the pious Muslim, prostrate in prayer or kissing the feet of an honoured mullah. One odd pastime he has is playing polo, which was popular in ancient and medieval Persia.

### **Illustrative moments**

Defender of the faith As the protagonist of this epic narrative about Islam defeating the infidels, Hamza is necessarily a defender of the faith. That is his primary motivation throughout the story. This fundamental purpose is well illustrated in a scene when Hamza is engaged in 'peace talks' with the king Naushervan, who is a Zoroastrian. There is already considerable tension between the two men. When Hamza was born, sages told the king that he would bring the end of his rule, and later the king is advised by courtiers that the young man's love for his daughter is merely a ruse to gain influence in the palace. For his part, Hamza is intent on conquering and converting the Persian king; indeed, it is for this purpose, that he has come all the way from Arabia. And he has managed to become appointed advisor to the king, but then his distractors convince the king that he is a threat and he is sent packing. Now, after a few inconclusive battles, Hamza and the king are parlaying in the palace. After some polite discussion of palace affairs, Hamza comes to the point and says, 'If you swear to renounce fire worship and hold God as unique and alone, and consider the faith of Ibrahim the True Faith, I will kill all these attendants and destroy the fire temple [Zoroastrian temple]. Then I will settle you on the throne and make all of them show obedience to you.' This hardly seems like a good opening move in negotiations, but we know that Hamza usually simply chops off the heads of any ruler reluctant to accept Islam. The fact that he offers Naushervan the chance to retain his throne is the crucial element in Hamza's offer. The king and kingdom will not change, only the fire temple, as the symbol of Zoroastrianism, must go. Here, in these two sentences we have the crux of the dilemma of Islam's encounter with Persia (and India and other lands): how to defeat the local rulers and spread the faith and, yet, create a stable society. The conversion of the king is the simple answer. Only in this way can state power and divine power be integrated.

Loyal Although Hamza is a steadfast, and sometimes brutal, defender of the faith, and although his ultimate goal is to convert king Naushervan, he is still loyal to him. Having come from Arabia and risen within the Persian court to become an advisor to the king, Hamza does not plan a rebellion. Instead, as mentioned above, he hopes to convert the king but not to kill him. A good example of his loyalty is found in a scene of complex palace intrigue. The mother of Bakhtak, who is Hamza's arch rival, has spread rumours that princess Mehr Nigar (Hamza's lover) has died, the motive being to cause distress to Hamza. It then emerges that the king Naushervan has colluded in this deceitful plan. After a series of disguises, overheard conversations and pranks, the guilty party (Bakhtak and his mother) are punished. Now, Hamza confronts the king and wants an explanation for his involvement in the dishonourable plot. The king makes a few weak excuses, which satisfy no one, least of all Hamza, but he does not condemn the king. Instead, he makes a speech of obedience to him. 'I am fully obedient to your commands' he says, 'and regardless of everything am still faithful to you with all my heart and soul.' Amar, the trickster and ally of Hamza, then questions this declaration of fidelity, and Hamza adds, 'Even though I have received nothing but harm from Naushervan's hands, I will continue to return his deeds with kindness.' With this (and other) acts of clemency, Hamza displays his magnanimity, which is a core requirement of a pious Muslim and an essential quality of a hero. Hamza the hero must be true, to friend and foe alike.

Romantic Hamza is no ordinary man. He is the hero of a great romance, which means that he is extraordinarily handsome and gallant. This swashbuckling, chivalrous hero is a favourite with the

ladies, and he ends up also falling in love with a fairy princess and fathering a horde of children, but most of that can be dismissed as 'supernatural dalliance.' His chosen bride is the princess Mehr Nigar, described as the 'apogee of elegance,' to whose beauty 'even the sun confesses its inferiority.' The moment when these two fall in love is a central scene in the story. The setting is the palace, where Hamza has just taken a bath and is seen by the princess, sitting behind a screened balcony. At that moment, 'the arrow of love for him passed straight through her heart, and she fainted.' Then she takes off her necklace and throws it toward him. When it lands on his shoulder, Hamza looks up, sees the princess and cries out, 'I saw an idol, uniquely elegant, with a rare style and a fairy face...her beauty is like a fierce disaster sent by God to the human race!' Hamza then collapses into the bathing pool and has to be rescued by a friend. Now the story-teller piles on the romance: 'Hamza heaved such a burning sigh that the golden harvest of pleasure caught fire and burned within him, the flame of love began to blaze in his heart, and tears of sadness began to fall from his eyes.' His friend brings him back to his senses, and Hamza resumes his day's work, but 'his mind is elsewhere.' This is a proper romantic hero, so intensely attracted by beauty that he swoons, falls into a pool and, even when rescued, remains distracted.

### **Amar** (Trickster)

**Character** A good summary of Amar's character is provided at his birth by the vizier Buzerjmehr who makes this prophecy: 'This boy will be the prince of all tricksters, unsurpassed in cunning, guile, and deceit. Great and mighty kings and champions will tremble at his mention and soil their pants in fright upon hearing his name. He will be excessively greedy, most insidious and a consummate perjurer...yet he shall prove a trustworthy confidant to Hamza, remaining staunch and steadfast in his fellowship!' Amar is the loyal ally of Hamza, who 'takes over' from the hero when he is sent to heaven for his safety. In a word, Amar is a trickster, that well-known character in world folklore and legend. He is clever, if sometimes a little deceitful, magical and beyond the conventions of society in his risqué humour and speech. He is also a part-time thief. These wayward tendencies aside, Amar is also a loyal friend of Hamza, using his various talents to extricate him from any number of improbably desperate situations. Beyond this, Amar is a wise military commander, who deploys his troops with considerable skill and foresight. One of his special capabilities is linguistic: he speaks (to use the terms in the text itself) Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Kashmiri, Pashto, Maghrebi, Ethiopian, Zanzibarian, English, Portuguese, French, Russian, Latin, Greek, Hindi, Karnataki, Bhojpuri, Deccani, Chinese, Tartar, Rangari, and Sindhi. Not to mention the special trickster-language of the Ayyar community of tricksters and rogues. Not only does Amar provide comic relief from the seriousness of other events, he is also, like other trickster characters throughout history, a teacher of humility. He takes a special delight in deflating those, even his closest friends, who have let pride puff them up beyond their worth. He is a constant reminder to all the characters, and to the reader, of what happens when you think too highly of yourself.

**Activities** Amar is active as a trickster both on the battlefield and in the palace. In fact, he pulls off his first caper while still an infant, when he pilfers a ruby given to another child by its mother. As a young boy, he reluctantly accepts instruction from a mullah (religious leader) but also finds time to play tricks on the hapless, pious man. Amar is often in disguise and seems to have a special liking for cross-dressing, which allows him to enter the women's quarters in the palace. At other times, he throws on his cloak of invisibility and sneaks around to other parts of the palace, overhearing conversations and observing furtive movements. In battle, Amar chooses to ride a beautiful white horse that can fly and disappear in a flash. In addition, Amar has a passion for hunting and is capable of slaying a lion.

### **Illustrative moments**

Trickster Of the many, many incidents that display Amar's ingenious trickery, I would highlight one in which he takes on another trickster, named Mahtab the Moon-Maker. Mahtab conjures up a luxurious house in the middle of a forest, complete with every imaginable pleasure, including golden beds and sparkling carpets. Then he makes a moon out of paper, pastes it on the front door and utters a spell so that it shines like the real moon. Then he retires inside and begins to recite poetry and drink wine. In the middle of his pleasure, however, he realises that his enemies, Amar and his gang, might easily approach because they always use disguises to commit a theft. So he then creates paper sparrows who will come alive and cry out Amar's name if and when the trickster approaches the house.

Amar sees the house shining like the moon and, going closer, views Mahtab enjoying himself inside. Now, he says to himself, I've got to get rid of these nobodies. Disguised as a sorcerer, Amar confronts Mahtab's guards and cut off their heads with a magic sword. Then he befriends the magicians who were also supposed to be guarding the house. When those magicians lead him inside and the sparrows call out his name, Amar calmly puts on his cloak of invisibility and sneaks further into the house. Satisfied that it holds riches worth taking, he goes back to the forest to his friend, a magician named Burq. Burq then approaches the house disguised as Amar. When the sparrows call out his name, Burq is captured by Mahtab and interrogated. Burq maintains that he is Amar, saying, 'If I were really Burq, why would I bring trouble down on my head by claiming I was Amar?' With Mahtab (and the reader) totally confused, Amar is eventually able to sneak into the house and empty it of its riches. This is a good illustration of Amar's trickery because it is morally ambivalent.

**Cruel** One aspect of Amar's trickery is a latent cruelty. A good example of this quality comes in an episode in which Amar punishes an enemy called Akhzar Filgosh. The scene is an army camp at night. Amar enters Filgosh's tent by rendering the guards and attendants unconscious and then steals all the jewels and gold he can lay his hands on. His pocket full, he ties up the unconscious Filgosh and slings him over his shoulder. Next, he uproots one of the tent's supporting poles and plants it in the middle of the camp; he cuts off one of Filgosh's ears, paints his body black, adding polka dots in various colours, and hangs his enemy upside down from the pole. Further humiliation comes when Amar drives another pole straight through his body and hangs on it a brightly coloured piece of paper, like a flag, with this written on it: 'I, Amar, known to the world as the King of Tricksters, the enemy of infidels, the lopper-off of the heads of fractious men, the chastiser of those deaf to sense, the ripper-up of the bellies of knaves and one whose trickery is the dread of all men... If you cross my path again, you shall find yourself with far worse a fate and shall learn what awful humiliation and disgrace shall become your lot.' This vicious punishment was not unusual by the standards of other narratives of the time (and later periods), but it is a side of Amar that is not often commented upon. Typically, he is viewed as the humorous prankster, which he certainly is, but he also has this dark side, too.

**Clever** Amar the dark and sometimes vindictive trickster is also a clever man relying on ordinary means of deceit. Again, his cleverness is almost always utilised in the battle against demons and infidels. And again, there are dozens of examples to choose from, but I would select one in which Amar disguises himself as a surgeon in order to kill an enemy king. The situation is another battle, this time with a ruler named Zhopin. Zhopin has been badly wounded in the previous day's encounter and lies in his tent. Amar becomes aware of this and hatches a plan to kill the infidel. He dresses up as a medical specialist and approaches the camp, where the king's guards lead him to the tent. Trusting in the surgeon's skill and loyalty to him, Zhopin shows him his wounds and ask for emergency treatment. 'Heal me, doctor, and I will make you richer than your imagination can stretch.' Amar nods sagely and quietly examines the wounds, steps back and declares that Zhopin's forehead can be easily healed but not the wounds on his backside. 'However, I have the skill to cure even those wounds, if you have the bravery to bear up under pain.' The king agrees to the treatment and Amar replies, 'Good. Then you must order your men to leave the tent and not to approach you for the duration of five watches, even if you cry out in pain.' After the ailing king instructs his guards in this way, they withdraw, and Amar turns his patient onto his stomach and secures his limbs to the four post of his bed. Selecting a sharp knife, he cuts even deeper into the wounds, which he fills with burning limestone. While the king screams in pain, Amar fills his pockets with pieces of gold and jewellery lying about. This particular incident, one of those illustrated in the Mughal manuscript, became famous, possibly because of the contrast between the guards who slumber peacefully outside the tent and the king writhing in excruciating pain within while Amar gleefully steals whatever takes his fancy. It is a consummate illustration of the clever trickster at work.

### **Bakhtak** (Villainous)

**Character** Bakhtak, the 'bad' vizier, is the villain of the piece. Like the 'good' vizier Buzerjmehr, Bakhtak has an axe to grind: he seeks revenge for the death of his grandfather. Even as a young man, he tells his mother that 'whenever I hear the name of your father, my eyes go red with rage. I will never rest until I have avenged his blood.' This vengeful pursuit means that he is in constant conflict with Buzerjmehr, who he holds responsible for that death, and with Hamza and Amar, who are allies of the 'good' vizier. Bakhtak often resorts to low blows of deceit and bribery in his attempts to destroy his enemies, but, unfortunately, he is never completely successful. This makes him also a

frustrated character, who often wallows in self-pity. At times, we as readers tend to sympathise with this hopeless villain simply because the odds seemed stacked against him. As soon as he comes up with a clever stratagem, his enemies do him one better, usually by invoking supernatural powers. In one particular incident, Bakhtak is committed to trial for theft and is sentenced to have his hands cut off as punishment, but then we discover that he was actually innocent.

**Activities** As a young man, Bakhtak does well in his studies, excelling in maths and geography under the tutelage of Buzerjmehr. Later, once he has been appointed vizier to the king, Bakhtak spends time in the royal palace, often in conversation with the king and other courtiers. Bakhtak also likes to go on hunting expeditions. Although he is a sober and serious person, he is fond of the ladies and competes with Hamza for a princess. In addition, he takes long walks in the palace gardens, usually in order to plan another dastardly plot to harm Hamza.

### **Illustrative moments**

Devious Although nearly all the major characters in the story (including Hamza) resort to deception at one time or another, it is Bakhtak who is presented as the arch villain. He, it is said, is devious not in order to achieve good, but simply because it is his nature. A good illustration of his mischievous character occurs in an early chapter of the epic. The situation is that while Hamza has been defeating armies in Arabia, back home in Persia, the king Naushervan has been attacked by a neighbouring kingdom and defeated. When Hamza hears this news, he writes a letter to the king, offering to help him regain his throne by fighting against the usurpers. When Hamza defeats the usurpers and the king is restored to the throne, the grateful king sends Hamza a splendid robe and a letter full of warm appreciation. This is when Bakhtak acts. He attacks the king's emissaries who are carrying the robe and letter, and he then substitutes an old cloth and a letter full of insults, which he forces the emissaries to deliver. It is an effective scheme, which plunges Hamza into confusion—why would the king insult him in such a public way? The fake letter and gift also poison the relationship that Hamza has with the king. For his part, Bakhtak sits back and enjoys watching his rival's discomfort.

Humiliated More often than not, however, it is Bakhtak himself who ends up being humiliated, usually by one of Amar's tricks. A humorous illustration of how Bakhtak is mocked occurs in chapter that opens in the garden of the royal palace. It seems that the previous night, a thief had entered the garden and stolen some fruit—this is the story that Amar tells the gardeners when they see their trees plucked of all fruit. In truth, the fruit has been taken by Amar himself. The gardeners are now ready to pounce on anyone who might try to enter the gardens again. Next, Amar persuades Bakhtak to do just that, by suggesting that he could meet the princess in the garden at first light. Bakhtak, dressed in his finery, goes through the gate and is immediately seized by the angry gardeners, who strip him naked and tie him to a tree. Now Amar arrives, and Bakhtak begins to beg him to tell the gardeners to release him. Amar tells the gardeners that they have made a mistake, that the man they seized is the king's advisor Bakhtak. But the gardeners don't believe him. 'Not possible, sir. Why would Bakhtak be so stupid as to come here naked to steal our fruit? Let the king come and decide what to do.' This, of course, will be the ultimate humiliation for a vizier, to be seen in such a degrading position—naked and tied to a tree—by the king himself. The king arrives, is disgusted at the sight of vizier and turns away in anger. It is a delicious little scene, in which the devious Bakhtak is given a dose of his own medicine.

Frustrated Bakhtak is ranged against Hamza throughout the epic, on the battlefield and in the court, competing for the king's favour and the princess's hand. And he is always the loser. One can therefore sympathise with him a little, even though he is a thoroughly villainous character. A clear display of Bakhtak's frustration occurs after one of the many battles in which, he (Bakhtak) appeared to have the upper hand only to find himself on the losing side. Lying wounded in his tent, after the battle, Bakhtak turns to one of his commanders and laments, 'Verily Amar spoke the truth when he claimed that the chosen man of God [that is, Hamza] can neither be killed nor imprisoned. Each time heavenly succour comes to his aid, the Creator of this Universe sends him relief, and none may defeat him.' His complaint is understandable. Whenever Bakhtak's forces appear on the brink of victory, some deus ex machina appears to rescue Hamza from the jaws of defeat. It might be a magical sword or a flying chariot or even a natural disaster, such as a thunderstorm, but the result is always the same. Bakhtak is right: it is not a fair fight.