



# The Arrival *of the Demons*

At first our eyes are drawn to the centre of the image. Two boats carry a group of identical looking demon-like figures; some of them are looking into the distance. One points in the direction of their possible destination, another towards the sky. Several look towards each other, as if caught in silent deliberation. Wordless, they appear to be awaiting their arrival. Where it is not known. The surrounding scene is one of chaos. The ocean is agitated, losing its boundaries. Perilous and furious, the sea dissolves into the sky. Weightless and impatient, begrudgingly it bears the burden of carrying these demons. The ocean seems bellicose, but the demons appear unaware. This is the next thing that we notice: in the midst of that infernal circus, both the boats and their passengers appear strangely serene; there is no fear in the latter's eyes. Neither moved nor defiant, they appear somehow dignified, poised and still. Despite their unmoved faces, these demons are wearing life jackets, and so it can be imagined they are not where they should be; they are seeking land, in transit. The ocean is for them a mere passage. Regardless of their demon-like visage, wearing life vests suggests that they might perish in this ocean. They are living souls then; souls exposed to death. But if they are human souls, then theirs are hidden behind emotionless, half-human faces, behind demon-looking masks.

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As with many of his paintings, the central figures depicted in this image—the nineteen identical-looking demons—were endowed to Khadim Ali from the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, or the *Book of Kings*: the poet Ferdowsi's (940-1020 CE) epic poem about the history of Persia, just as the continuous tradition of rendering this work in images—the Persian miniature—has supplied Ali with a visual language that he has employed here and in most of his paintings.

With its prickly and bestial features—horns, ears and beard—the central figure in this image appears unmistakable, and anyone familiar with the *Shāhnāmeḥ* will recognise it immediately. It is the *div*, a recurring figure both in the *Book of Kings* and in ancient Iranian folkloric traditions, and one that is generally associated with chaos and disorder. Neither human, nor yet fully inhuman (if we consider its mortal form), the *div* is or represents the personification of evil; and in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, it is responsible for committing all manner of wicked deeds. (And for some interpreters too, symbolically it represents the enemy of the Iranian people: those invading forces from the north that came to threaten the Persian nation.)

The *Shāhnāmah* and the tradition of Persian miniature have provided Ali with a visual grammar and vocabulary, including a cast of characters that appears in much of his work, a visualisation that is rooted in a particular cultural and art-historical tradition. But as in many of his series, Ali has employed this visual language in this image of *The Arrivals* (2016) innovatively, in order to communicate a more contemporary and universal message. The scene depicted does not recall a particular episode from the *Book of Kings*, but rather it evokes an immediate, familiar outlook on an issue of global currency.

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Two boats thrusting out into the ocean, filled with identical-looking demons headed, it might be imagined, towards the shore, their origin and destination uncertain. Clearly reflected in this picture is a layered message and a concrete image, describing the plight of all those that have been forced to flee their homelands, escaping war and turmoil by land and ocean passages that are often just as dangerous as the circumstances they have left behind. It communicates an explicit message of the prevailing global refugee crisis and the conditions that it engenders and reinforces—of a world increasingly marked by unequal geographies and human rights.

Just as this understanding is evident, it also presents the query why has Khadim Ali chosen to communicate this through the particular figure of the *din*? Several possible readings emerge, and while they diverge, they also confirm each other, coalescing in the image of a single subject, albeit imagined in distinct ways. The particular manner in which the subject is depicted is undoubtedly meant to mirror some of our own current judgments and assumptions about those who migrate across the oceans. In Australia, unauthorised arrivals of boatloads of refugees have come to be perceived as those not in search of asylum, but rather as outsiders whose arrival carries another message—a warning about the need to protect social order and the safety of national borders; more so in Europe, where the reality has tended to be eclipsed by another image and narrative.

It is important that we understand the figures in this painting wearing demon ‘masks’, as a reflection of our ignorance and, very often, violence. In a very precise sense, Ali is presenting us with an image of the asylum seeker (or of the outsider more generally) as Other, a dehumanising portrait of the excluded. Ali is pointing to the role of such figures of exclusion in the very (political and psychological) constitution of the self or subject, or the way in which we come to know and define ourselves, and the safe limits of our world, first of all through recognising, and secondly rejecting, that which we perceive ourselves not-to-be. It is a process that is well captured by the notion of the abject, which the American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler describes in terms of:

*[T]hose ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subjected, an abjected outside, which is, after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation.<sup>1</sup>*

The critical issue here concerns the peculiar relationship that is established between the subject-as-inside, and an excluded outside which is, paradoxically, constitutive of the subject, just because this process involves the repudiation—the abjection—of what is recognised as not (or no longer) belonging to the former. And as Butler’s description clearly suggests, it is important to recognise this as a social, as much as an individual, phenomenon.

In more familiar terms it is also possible to read into Butler’s words, and in Ali’s image, echoes of a theme which the Greek-Egyptian poet Constantin Cavafy presents in his well-known poem, ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ (1898). Cavafy describes the disappointment that descends upon the inhabitants of an unnamed city when a group of “barbarians”, whom they are awaiting to greet, fail to arrive. The poem concludes:

*Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.  
And some who have just returned from the border say  
there are no barbarians any longer.*

*And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians?  
They were, those people, a kind of solution.<sup>2</sup>*

Though both their tone and thematic concerns diverge it is possible to draw a connection between Cavafy’s poem and one reading of Khadim Ali’s image, in regard to the meaning and significance of the barbarians in the former, and the latter’s demons. Both groups symbolise Others or outsiders—a real or imagined enemy—that is at once demonised and at the same time needed by the dominant society as it represents for them, in the words of the critic Charles Simic, “a perpetual excuse”.<sup>3</sup> Ruminating upon what might be the contemporary significance of Ali’s *The Arrivals*, one might consider the politicisation of the current refugee crisis and its narrative (re)construction, through which the security of one group has come to be seen (in the eyes of an ever-widening circle) as dependent upon the exclusion of an almost mythically imagined band of outsiders.

There is a coincidental and revealing connection to be drawn between the symbolic meaning of Ali’s demons and the barbarians of Cavafy’s poem. The term “barbarian” in ancient Greece was used to refer to non-Greek speaking people due to the “bar-bar” sound of their language (especially that of the Persians). In classical Greek the term “*barbarous*” was used as an antonym for “*politēs*”, meaning citizen. Aristotle, in his books *Politics*, famously pinpoints the true nature and definition of man possessing language (*logos*) as opposed to a mere voice (*phōnē*), for while the latter might serve to express animal pleasures and pains, it is only through *logos* that man is able to indicate what is just and unjust, as a necessary prerequisite to the formation of the *polis*, or that kind of human community through which man (as a political animal—*ζῷον πολιτικόν*) is able to achieve his full humanity.

An assumption that can be drawn from this is that the Greeks alone possessed *logos* or reasoned speech; the implication being that everybody else—non-Greek speakers and non-citizens—in lacking this capacity were reduced to mere animal, or at least less than fully human, status. In the context of reading Ali’s image this is significant, not only because the “barbarian” Persian-speaking people who, as their dominant Other, came to occupy the opposite pole to the idealised self-image of the Greeks,<sup>4</sup> but also, in light of distinctions that Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben advances—that of *zōē* or “natural life”, and *bios*—referring to that characteristic of the *polis*—political life.<sup>5</sup>

For Agamben, this distinction is crucially important because it underlies the operation of sovereign power. He argues (in terms reminiscent of those used above to describe the state of abjection) that political order is based on the exclusion of “bare human life” from, or its repositioning within, the *polis* (a relation which, for Agamben, corresponds to the same transition from voice to language as described by Aristotle above), in the sense that, it is the sovereign power that decides which lives will be recognised as belonging to the political community and therefore in full possession of certain rights, and which shall be excluded. In other words, it has the power to define the very threshold of human life, now understood in terms of *bios* or qualified political life; and this includes the power to strip those same lives of their rights as citizens through (what Agamben terms) the “relation of exception” or the “sovereign ban”, a move that sees them reduced from being political, to merely living beings, from *bios* to *zōē*, or practically, to animals.

Even though Agamben famously sees this “state of exception” reflected most clearly in the status of the *homo sacer* (or the Roman citizen who, in accordance with Roman law, could be stripped of his rights and killed with impunity), he also finds an essential connection here between this figure and the state of the refugee. Converging his analysis of the fate of the modern nation-state with the problem of human rights, Agamben writes:

*Here the paradox is that precisely the figure that should have embodied human rights more than any other—namely, the refugee—mark[s] instead the radical crisis of the concept. The conception of human rights based on the supposed existence of a human being as such... proves to be untenable as soon as those who profess it find themselves confronted for the first time with people who have really lost every quality and every specific relation except for the pure fact of being human. In the system of the nation-state, so-called sacred and inalienable human rights are revealed to be without any protection precisely when it is no longer possible to conceive of them as rights of the citizens of a state.<sup>6</sup>*

In reading Ali’s *The Arrivals*—the question of the real and symbolic meaning of the depicted demon figures—it is possible to see in their cursed half-animal, half-human appearance a reflection of the condition described by Agamben. Perhaps these are not masks, but rather just what a living being reduce to “bare life” looks like; an image—and one that is more than allegorical—of a group of living beings that dwell at the threshold of life and the political community, situated precariously in relation to the safe haven of the nation, and if not quite stripped of, then at least partially excluded from, the rights and protections that it alone grants them. But one wonders why there is no fear in their faces, if they are indeed exposed to death. For the ocean is clearly intent on endangering them, yet their countenance is somehow still, almost quietly heroic. Certainly their appearance carves the same twisted shapes as the turbulent sea, forming a visual rhyme, suggesting that this is what it takes to face chaos.

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Thus two possible readings of real and symbolic meaning of the figures have emerged. We are presented with two ways of imaging a particular group of excluded subjects: as Other and as *homo sacer*, in each case, representing their exclusion from a defined political community. But then perhaps there is a third reading, that the artist is presenting us with a self-portrait. It is instructive to consider the phenomenon which American sociologist and rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois has described, in terms of a “double consciousness”, affecting the Othered subject, that peculiar sense experienced by such individuals, “of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world

that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>77</sup> In *The Arrivals*, reflecting the experience that it seeks to capture, the image of its subject as both self and Other imperceptibly merge. They are constitutive of its subject, and so the image and visage of these demons should not be seen simply as a mask or projection. For having broken loose from the hostile perception in which it originated, it comes to belong to its subject as a permanent trauma, an open wound. Ali places us in the position of its subject.

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As a child, Ali used to identify with and think of himself as Rostam, the legendary hero from the epic poems of the *Shāhnāmah*. In one famous episode, Rostam embarks on a hero’s journey to save his sovereign who has been captured by the demons. This journey is popularly referred to as ‘Rostam’s Seven Quests’, and it captures both moments of his glory and failure. In Ali’s imagination, Rostam was like Batman, for the children of his generation in the West. The tragic story of Rostam’s death in the *Shāhnāmah* made Ali question everything about life, love and brotherhood. He grew up hero-less, leaving him with an impression that would resurface in his life and work. This perhaps explains why the figure of Rostam never appears in Ali’s work. Rostam’s absence is conspicuous, heightened, in light of the constant presence of the *div*. I also grew up listening to those same stories of the *Shāhnāmah*, imagining them as magnificent painted images. There is something unsettling and disorienting in the way that Ali imagines them, perhaps presenting us with the figure of a re-imagined Rostam. For despite his hero status, Rostam nevertheless is, in the *Shāhnāmah*, imagined in the same way as all its human cast, as wearing different masks that reflect, prism-like, light and dark. He is a human figure, like the rest, and therefore reflects humanity’s limitations. The *div*, however, always represented (for me) everything that Rostam is not, symbolising hostility and darkness. Ali’s images of the *div* appear fearsome and more complex, as if he is trying to understand this figure, presenting a more human face, as though it has become a mirror and vehicle for expressing his most personal concerns; a self-image.

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Having been persecuted in their ancestral homeland, the Hazara have fled to new ones only to face new struggles and degrees of persecution. Re-settling in Australia, as Other or outsider, it is not unexpected that Ali’s concerns about his (and his community’s) self-image and identity should find expression in his art work. He speaks powerfully about the need for a silent language of art to express the suffering and forced forgetting of his community, the collective memory of a society that has been wounded. About his own experiences, Ali has observed, “The history of the Hazara is always related to loss... of their loved ones and losing their motherland. We have lived in a state of mental and physical melancholia, which forces us to live in the memories of the past. We recall our memories in a highly poetic manner, in our visual art, our craft and our music.”<sup>78</sup>

Such recollections of loss and trauma are constantly present in his work—not as an invisible layer but immediately, on its surface. Our appreciation should not give way to a mere symbolic reading that would eclipse the concrete meaning. It is this need “to draw the audience to [his] haunted vision of dark history”<sup>79</sup> that reveals why Ali has presented this figure of the *div*, constantly preserving its terrible image (and therefore acknowledging its fearfulness), while also mutely celebrating it. For it reflects, in part, a certain necessity, as a way of reconciling oneself to permanent danger, of protecting one’s open wounds, while also reflecting how the *div* is perceived within his Hazara community. With its fat belly,

beard and donkey ears, the *div* is celebrated as a sign of wealth and good fortune. After the Taliban usurped Rostam as their own symbol, the *div* has become the Hazara's hero. Given Ali's childhood memories about the death of his hero Rostam, it is clear why he and his community might have come to cling to this figure—the *div* survives.

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There is a final reading of *The Arrivals* that should be considered, of what its final, salutary message might convey. Above the two boats and their passengers there is a line of Persian text, somewhat subdued against the brooding blue-grey sky, but visible, in deep red. Its visual style, and (loosely) its visual vocabulary, is the only distinctly recognisable Persian element that connects this work to the cultural milieu of its subject. The viewer might imagine that whatever the ultimate reading of this image is, then it should be echoed—affirmed—in this line of text. For the Persian reader such as myself, it might be imagined that these lines will transport us beyond the surface, that these words might offer some explanation (as 'inside' readers), and of these demons. But upon closer scrutiny, these lines appear fragmented and unclear. Each word can be read, each has individual meaning, but as sentences they make no sense. The words float dishearteningly, drawing the viewer in, only then to exclude them, with the distinct impression that precisely those readers who might expect to be able to penetrate most deeply beyond a surface understanding of this work are likely to experience its disorienting effects the greatest. Perhaps then this is as it should be, an effect that is intended to elicit a muted sense of what it is like to become exiled, to draw closer, but to never arrive, to remain outside, staring into an abyss of meaning, and observe its void glare back.<sup>10</sup>

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Constantin P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, George Savidis (ed.), Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard trans., Revised Edition, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992. See also <http://www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?id=119&cat=1>

<sup>3</sup> Charles Simic, 'Some Sort of a Solution', review of 'The Collected Poems by C.P. Cavafy', *London Review of Books* Vol. 30, No. 6, March 2008, pp. 32-34; <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n06/charles-simic/some-sort-of-a-solution>

<sup>4</sup> Also in Arabic, the term "*ajam*", meaning at once "silent", "mute" or "being incapable of speech" came to be used in the classical Islamic period, referring widely to foreigners or non-Arabic speakers, above all Persians

<sup>5</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Daniel Heller-Roazen trans., Palo Alto CA: Stanford University Press, 1998

<sup>6</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'Beyond Human Rights', *Open* 15, 2008, pp. 86-89

<sup>7</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York: Dover Publications, 1903, p. 2

<sup>8</sup> Khadim Ali, *The Force of Forgetting* (exhib. cat.), Lismore Regional Gallery, 2011, p. 5

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

<sup>10</sup> I would like to thank Khadim Ali for sharing details of his personal history and his art work, and Timothy Johannessen, University of Melbourne, for his insightful conversations, especially relating to Aristotle and Agamben

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