



Demons *and Deliverance*

My grandfather, a scholar-adventurer from the Punjab in British India, arrived at the end of the nineteenth century in the court of King Abdur Rehman the Second, in Kabul, with whom he found favour by taking charge of his correspondence (in English) with the British Raj. The King was in the process of conquering and massacring the Hazara tribes and handing out their noblewomen to his courtiers as part of the spoils. My grandfather was a recipient of some of this largesse at about the same time that Khadim Ali's Hazara great-grandfather was killed. Ali's family was from a village named Deh Roshan, or Shining Village, renowned for two things: its dairy cream and its hand-woven velvet called *khassa*. The Persian speaking Hazaras have a long history of persecutions, purges and pogroms. Their origins have never been ascertained but, as is apparent from their physical features, they had Turkic and Mongol ancestors. Today, the Hazara communities are spread across Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Belonging to the Shia sect in Islam, they have suffered unrelenting sectarian discrimination in Afghanistan, and now Pakistan. But King Abdur Rehman's subjugation and enslavement was perhaps the worst in recorded history. Ten thousand prisoners were 'sold' to the British Raj, disappearing without trace. Periodic purges and carnage continued and Khadim Ali's family escaped to Quetta in Balochistan during one of these episodes.

His grandfather fled with only two prized possessions: his Quran and his copy of Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmah*, the *Book of Kings*. It was the latter that became an abiding influence upon Ali's life and imagination—it continues to resonate in his imagery today. Many versions of the illustrated verses of the tenth century epic poem exist, but its vast audiences have been created through oral tradition. Ali heard the stories of the great heroes of the book at his grandfather's feet, as did the extended family and the community, sitting together at dusk in the local mosque. The epic would unfold as his grandfather sang and recited the tales of combat and victory, and of deceit and daring. The illustrations in the book seemed to light up as the poem wound its way round the exploits of the protagonists, Rostam and Sohrab.

In Afghanistan, the family's village eventually came under siege, the Taliban having swept to power after the Soviets departed, and the Hazaras were now very much the infidels. Brutality was expanding, as Ali discovered first-hand on a visit to his ancestral lands, the Hazarajats in 1995, and returned promptly to Quetta. Many Hazaras found refuge in Iran, where their situation was no better, even though being fellow Shias. Hounded by ethnic prejudice and undisguised intolerance, their community has been consistently and economically underprivileged. In search of employment, Ali moved across the border from Pakistan to Iran. He worked as a labourer, mended shoes, tilled the fields, doing anything to survive. Good fortune brought him to the attention of a drawing teacher, who grudgingly took on the diligent Ali as his apprentice. He earned respect for his talent and was soon assisting his "*nstaad*", painting public murals featuring the Great Ayatollah and the slain heroes of the Republic. Unaware that he would soon train to be a miniature painter, Ali became adept at working on a heroic scale.

Forced from Iran when he was discovered without legal papers, Ali returned to Pakistan. Again, good fortune intervened in the form of a scholarship to study at the celebrated National College of Art in Lahore (NCA). Not unsurprisingly, he discovered his artistic oeuvre in the miniature-painting department. His final project provided the opportunity to engage an intimate issue, the destruction of two monumental sixth-century Buddhas in Bamiyan (in Hazarajat), by the Taliban in 2001, as part of their campaign to wipe out idolatry. Shattered by the loss of these repositories of collective historical memory, Ali was astounded by an equivocating world. His series of miniatures based on the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas traced the outlines of the Buddhas, the cliffs pockmarked by the caves of long-forgotten worshipping priests. Overlapping the void (left by this destruction) in one work was a delicate tracery of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (c. 1490), a reminder of the universal in humankind, a still hoped for ideal. There was a contrived disconnect between the violence perpetuated on the heritage site and the formal qualities of his exquisite, diminutive paintings. The destruction of Palmyra by ISIS was more than a decade in the future.

Ali's NCA graduation series *Roʻz e Niyayesh (Day of Worship)* (2003) could easily be linked to the traditional Moghul manuscript in which battle scenes overflowing with wounded or dying warriors and animals are painted with great finesse and elegance. Ali's dexterity with the medium set him apart from other young painters emerging from the NCA. His career as an artist was assured as his work began to travel within Pakistan as well as abroad. But issues of greater concern were unfolding in his hometown Quetta, where violence against his community was growing at an unprecedented pace. Under the patronage of the Pakistani government the Taliban were now entrenched in the city, having been pushed out of Afghanistan after the post-'9/11' war against them and al-Qaeda. His family was directly affected when his cousin was killed in the bombing of a football match. In Quetta he was helpless; the recourse lay in his work. As a child, Ali had visualised himself as Rostam, warrior of warriors. The subliminal fierceness that lay beneath the surface was personified by the appearance of Rostam as a tangible image. Decisively moving away from the repose in his previous work, the scale now became larger, the figures became animated, surrounded by reminders of layered histories in jeopardy. He began using calligraphy as a volatile presence, not to be deciphered as text but as an agitated marker of identity.

As the eruption of bloodshed became a daily occurrence, the Hazaras were on the move again, not in large groups, as they were known historically, but as unobtrusive, single individuals or families. Ali struggled to find a place in the wider world. He visited Australia for the first time in 2006 for an exhibition and contemplated a more permanent move. Ali's successful application as "Distinguished Talent" to Australia provided an unimaginable deliverance from fear, though this was as yet an untested promise of freedom and mobility. As a young man born and raised in Quetta, he was questioned at length about his citizenship status when applying for his Pakistani identity card. Officials insisted he was a refugee, ignoring documents that proved he was a second generation Pakistani. His ethnicity always made him suspect. Would things be different elsewhere?

His arrival in Sydney caused both elation and infinite sadness. As he stated, "Who was I? What was my country?"¹ His parents' home in Quetta was bombed, but his visa status prohibited his return. For hours he believed them dead. Only when a friend stood over the rubble with his phone and beamed the video of his mother crawling out, did Ali believe they had survived. As he recalled, "There was red all around her, which I thought was blood, until I realised that it was the red carpet in our home."² An intense recollection of red remains with him, though insisting colour is not his forte. He concedes, however, that red is the most significant colour for Hazaras in Afghanistan. He writes

about the Taliban beheading 10,000 Hazaras in the open fields of Mazaar-e-Sharif.³ Such figures are considered an exaggeration by impartial sources but the blood and bones apparently fertilised the land in an unprecedented way to produce a rich harvest of red poppies that year. It is from such episodes that myths evolve and penetrate the seams of Ali's image making. In the Moghul painting tradition, earth-shattering events of the time are recorded in meticulously planned, courtly vocabulary, which evolved in their Indian empire but drew upon conventions flowing from Iran and Central Asia alongside indigenous codes. Ali strives to probe these visual protocols and bend them to fuel his personal imperatives.

Ali insists that their harrowing histories have cultivated a collective meekness in Hazaras. He fulminates against this and searches for probable reasons. One cause he dwells on is the internalisation of the label "infidel" which plagues the Hazaras; it exhorts a vision of sub-human species maligned as unclean demons, born only to serve. The catastrophes that have historically beset the Hazaras should have ended with the dawn of the twentieth century, but in contemporary Afghanistan and Iran, they are considered expendable and encouraged to enroll in militias to fight the Daesh or ISIS in Syria and find martyrdom. Representing the dark side of the Islamic faith as visualised by Ali, the demonised Hazara paradoxically becomes a powerful friend in Ali's works, a figure representing all minorities. Sent by his father to a Christian school in Quetta, Ali studied side by side with Hindus and Christian children, a rare experience. It prepared him for life in Australia where cultural alienation was quietly accepted in exchange for his parents' medical treatment and security for his child. The animosity towards the Hazaras is sublimated in images of golden-headed demons in his paintings, symbols both of shame and dominance.

It is pertinent to recall the oral narratives that infuse the imagery employed by Ali. The *Shāhnāmah*, the *Falnama* (16-17th century) and other epics provide a fertile framework, a superstructure or safety net of sorts, which prevents disturbing penetrations into meaning and allusions. The *Hamzanama* in particular heralded a highly animated new spirit in its time. Action-packed tales that could easily be memorised by soldiers and ordinary denizens alike were rendered with a visual directness that appealed to the intended audience. The exploits of the great Hamza excited the young Moghul emperor Akbar, who commissioned the ambitious illustrated manuscript, probably in 1572.

Some of the paintings in Ali's January 2017 exhibition *The Arrivals* at Milani Gallery in Brisbane seem curiously linked to the seafarers in *Hamzanama*. Led by Hamza, they brave the waves, battle the sea monsters, surrounded by elements that threaten to engulf and destroy. Ali's boat people in their medieval style ships wear life jackets and are grim-faced. The inference is unmistakable. The world is becoming immune to images of humans crowded into vessels, drifting along the shores of the Mediterranean or in Australian waters. As Ali says, "They are considered demons that threaten the social order."⁴ He explains the symbolism that inhabits his works; collapsing dreams are the badges all migrants carry. His people are ever at risk, always fearful, melancholic and powerless. Ali's figures personify displaced populations. One group sits under a tent, an oblique reference to the Jungle migrant camp outside Calais in France, destroyed by fire in April 2017. Ali met one of the survivors who described his tent as a meeting place, decorated with mementos and tokens from home. For refugees gathering in the communal tent, it was a place to share memories and stories, to weave dreams of imagined futures.

In Australia, the Hazaras continue to huddle in groups and find comfort in ghettos, steeped in nostalgia and longing to be elsewhere. Ali laughingly notes that they describe the Australians around them as "*keharaji*" or outsiders, a term used for non-locals or foreigners in Afghanistan. One painting, which appears to be a manuscript, carries the number fifteen, which brands it as a passport page.

The golden-haired and demon-like figures muse upon something, their memories wrapped in parcels hidden by leaves of the gum tree. The Eucalyptus leaves flank all the figures in the paintings like streamers at a celebration. There are no celebrations here. The artist seems ambivalent about the characters that populate his work. They live with claustrophobic encumbrances in an alien environment, which presses upon them. The foliage is never comforting, flames encompass, and there are no companions, only fellow sufferers. Woven into these narratives of dejection are visible endeavours to prevail upon circumstances. Glimpses of exhortations to confront collective fate appear now and again.

A floor-based work in the Milani Gallery exhibition that incorporates rows of bull-headed maces is intriguing. It suggests the possibility of latent power and struggle. The maces were crafted by Ali's father, once an accomplished carpenter, who kept depression at bay in his suburban Sydney home by working on these signifiers of power of the great warriors from the legends of *Shāhmāneh*. It is said that the child Rostam felled a lion with such a mace, and the killing of a bull was the ultimate test of strength. These maces are supine on the blood-red satin carpet, connected by Australian coins threaded to one another. Ali collected the coins from charity boxes kept in Afghan shops, into which virtuous Hazaras drop their pennies to help send their brethren to join the jihad against ISIS or Daesh in faraway Syria.

One can question the retaining of a traditional vocabulary by the artist to address contemporary issues. His references and allusions may be critiqued for being overly oblique at times and glaringly overt at others, as in the banner with the Australian flag. Ali is not unmindful of his need to merge established traditional practices, spatial conventions and figurative treatments with political compulsions relevant to the world he is experiencing. He states emphatically that, "It is my diction."⁵ Moving from the manuscript format to carpets and mural painting was a major shift in scale, but one that was carefully considered. It provided opportunities for collaboration and economic benefit to his community in Kabul. Ali was familiar with carpet weaving, which was a family occupation for many Hazaras in Quetta and Kabul. Women and children were compelled to work long hours, this being the only economic activity during the most difficult of times. For a period during the Soviet occupation, the most favoured were the so-called 'war carpets' which depicted tanks, helicopter gunships, Kalashnikovs, rocket launchers, and other unfamiliar contraptions.

Today, Ali collaborates with a workshop where traditional carpet weavers follow his complicated designs, providing a steady livelihood. Being figurative, the carpets have to be shielded from public view, it being uncertain who may suddenly label them unIslamic. The demons—that Ali is forever in two minds about—wrestle, rise, struggle and fall in combat. The flames rise up in rhythmic patterns echoing visual sagas from antiquity. Khadim Ali's accomplished and engrossing narratives hint at the cyclical nature of human societies, their inability to overcome the barbarism of the past, and their unending struggle to change the course of our collective histories.

Notes

¹ In several conversations with the author 24-30 April 2017

² Ibid.

³ Kadim Ali, Salima Hashmi and Rachel Kent, *Khadim Ali*, Sydney: ARTAND Publishing, 2016

⁴ In several conversations with the author, op cit.

⁵ Ibid.