

Face and other curses

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Khadim Ali's recent exhibition weaves mythology and memory into a meditation on the burden of inherited histories



Writers of sci-fi, magical realism, dystopian literature and fantasy have conjured up unimaginable worlds, scenarios and surroundings – but perhaps none envisioned a situation in which the human face itself becomes a target. One possible exception is Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which a cross made of ash is marked on the foreheads of Colonel Aureliano Buendía's seventeen sons. The ash settles into a lasting and unmistakable mark, making them identifiable to enemy soldiers who, recognising the sign, hunt and kill them one by one.

For the Hazara community of Pakistan and Afghanistan, this imagined horror has become a lived, fatalistic reality. The features of their faces not only reveal their ethnicity but also mark them as belonging to the Shiite sect. Thus, they live under the constant threat of being targeted by militant majorities – most notably the Taliban and their affiliates. Regardless of gender, age, profession or status, the face of a Hazara in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (particularly in Balochistan) or in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is at perpetual – if not permanent – risk. It is, in effect, a curse.

Artists of Hazara ethnicity have been addressing this existential crisis through their art – particularly those now situated away from the danger zones; in cities such as Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad; or in other countries. Migration is not a new phenomenon for these creative individuals; their families had, in earlier generations, travelled from various parts of Afghanistan in search of a safe haven, often finding it in Pakistan, particularly in Quetta.

Khadim Ali is among those whose life carries the weight of multiple displacements. Born in Quetta – a city his late father always referred to by its ancient name, Shalkot – he later moved to Lahore to study at the National College of Arts. He lived in Karachi for eight years, spent 2004 to 2005 in Bamiyan and then moved to Kabul, where he stayed until 2009, before departing for Australia.

When a person reaches a port of arrival, they must prove their identity – by presenting a passport and looking into the camera on the immigration officer's desk. This is a reminder of the importance of the face in the concept and construction of self. But facial identity can also become a serious concern, a grave threat – a time bomb that may explode at any moment or encounter. This condition is explored by Khadim Ali, not as a personal lament, but as a collective account, powerfully addressed in his exhibition *Faceless* at the COMO Art Museum in Lahore. Curated by Zahra Khan, the show includes work in several formats and mediums, drawn from various stages of his career.

A kind of retrospective, the exhibition helps trace the evolution of Khadim Ali's visual language, allowing viewers to connect the dots across his body of work – to map his ideas and the shape of his aesthetics. A number of recurring motifs appear across traditionally painted miniatures, mixed media on paper, tapestries and brass and steel filigree. Spanning the years 2003-2022, these artworks – some hung on walls, others free-standing, a few draped from ceiling to floor – attempt to describe the fate of a faceless community; faceless, because although they are not the only persecuted group in the country, they bear the most visibly vulnerable form of identity.

Interestingly, all work created before 2019 is devoid of human faces. Some are simply faceless; others depict demon heads or the heads of Buddha sculptures. On one hand, this body of work reflects the Hazara community's need to conceal their physical identity – echoing Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal's famous line about the Somoza dictatorship: "It was a crime to be over eighteen in Nicaragua." Likewise, it is dangerous to possess Hazara features in areas controlled by Sunni extremists.



'The Haunted Lotus' 2013. Gouache ink and gold leaf on wasli paper.

Ali's work also gestures toward the broader Sunni Muslim discomfort with figural representation, which led to the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban in 2001. His gouache-on-wasli paintings from the *Roz-e-Niyayesh* (Day of Worship) series, 2003, and *Untitled I*, 2004, reference the monumental statue of the Buddha – a man who preached peace, compassion and respect for others. These were values that vanished during the first Taliban regime. Khadim Ali captures this loss by depicting the now-vanished sculpture, accompanied by marks of bombardment, splashes of blood and the outline of a lotus flower.

In one particularly powerful gesture, the hollow space of the Bamiyan cliff is filled with (headless) elements from Leonardo da Vinci's drawing *Vitruvian Man*. Da Vinci's Renaissance sketch defined the ideal proportions and movement of the human male figure. Ali's insertion of this classical image into his miniature can be read as a meditation on two vastly different ideals of male perfection – opposed in time, geography and ideology.

In a few artworks – mostly the mixed media on paper – one encounters the Buddha again: traces of his face, his hand (from the *Haunted Lotus* series, 2012–2013), and his body (*Transition/Evacuation IIV*, 2015). In each of these, the historic figure is veiled beneath layers of marks and lines of text in a scarlet hue, or hidden behind the bodies of demons. These demons are winged, horned and bearded – a reference not only to classical miniature painting but also to contemporary religious tyranny. The beard, in particular, was a contentious symbol under Taliban rule, where every man was required to keep a beard of a prescribed length. Hazara men, often unable to grow thick or long beards naturally, were subject to discrimination and punishment.

Ali draws these demonic figures from traditional miniature painting, where such creatures appear as emblems of evil. By blending these archetypal villains with present-day symbols of authoritarianism and brutality, he layers the work with meanings that go far beyond any one ethnicity or locality.

Ali's skill – and perhaps compulsion – for constructing narratives that are architecturally layered and thematically complex reaches its peak in his tapestries that stretch from wall to gallery floor. From earth to sky; past to present; fantasy to documentation; the works span temporal, emotional and cultural registers. In many of these, the upper portions are occupied by traditional, mythological or historical references; the lower sections incorporate fragments of contemporary lived reality.

Focusing on the clash of cultures, beliefs and practices within an interlocked society, Khadim Ali offers glimpses of relevant change, relying on a visual diction often associated with traditionally feminine forms. Using embroidery alongside ink on fabric – joined with brass and steel – his works present a world seen through the eyes of a growing boy, echoing Ali's own memories of childhood in Balochistan. These private recollections are simultaneously preserved through photographs, video footage and newspaper clippings. Interwoven with references to classical art and literature, they form the *raison d'être* of his creations.

With his masterful technique of image-making, Khadim Ali interweaves two cycles or sources of time to suggest the continuity of events, attitudes and outcomes. Take, for instance, his magnificent piece *Zal and Kabul* (2019). It appropriates a medieval illustration from the *Shahnameh* epic. Zal, the legendary albino hero of Persia, fell in love with Rudaba, the princess of Kabul. In Ali's version, Zal – whose sons would later kill each other – is depicted seated on a throne beneath a tent, presiding over a contemporary landscape filled with mullahs, militants, protestors and agitators burning the flags of Australia, the UK and the US in condemnation of the Allied Forces in Afghanistan. And yet, amidst this tableau of resistance and chaos, foreign soldiers in full military gear remain – silent witnesses in an enduring zone of conflict.

The battle, fought on a distant front, was absorbed by a boy living in Quetta and carrying ancestral ties to Kabul – as reflected in another of Khadim Ali's tapestries (*Untitled II*, from the *Home* series, 2021). In this topography of interconnected images, the central scene depicts a king driving a dagger into the chest of a monster. Much of the composition features motifs drawn from traditional Persian painting – golden skies, swirling cobalt-blue clouds, layered rocks in shifting hues and blossoming cherry vines. Yet the lower half introduces elements from the Twenty-first Century: Taliban warriors, clad in their signature garb, stand amidst blooming opium fields, while American soldiers look on from a distance.

In this tense and haunting tableau, a young boy – perhaps the artist himself – flies a kite emblazoned with the Pakistani flag. But there is a quiet rupture in the design: the white band, meant to represent Pakistan's non-Muslim communities, is painted over in green.

This small but potent detail becomes a key to understanding how followers of a faith, religion, or sect that differs from the majority are marginalised – if not altogether erased – not only in Afghanistan, but in Pakistan as well; and not merely through government policy, but through everyday behaviours. It recalls the experience of a friend, who during the last Ramazan went to a local restaurant for *iftar*, only to be denied entry. The restaurant allowed no admittance at 6:35 – just five minutes before the call to prayer.

My fasting friend calmly informed the staff that he was a Shiite – and according to his sect, there were still fifteen minutes remaining before *iftar*. He was eventually allowed in and enjoyed his meal. But the moment lingered, a quiet reminder of how faith can mark you – in public, in policy, in perception.

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