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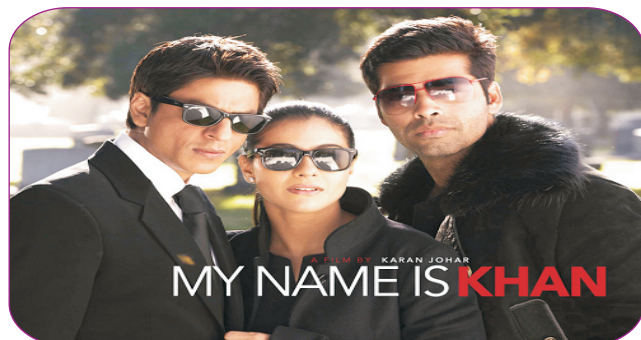
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## ISLAMOPHOBIA: A CRITICAL STUDY OF KARAN JOHOR'S MOVIE MY NAME IS KHAN

Samimuddin Khan

Guest Lecturer of Vivekananda Mahavidyalaya.

### ABSTRACT:

**T**he traumas, the violent attacks of 9/11 produced left the entire nation stranded. And a sense of insecurity gripped the USA and the government adopted a stringent internal security measures in order to combat terrorism and thus consequently developed a high degree of skepticism towards Islam and Muslims. For the first time in united state, an entire religion is not only subjected to widespread public suspicion but also to governmental surveillance of its activities and associations. Many poets, novelists and film makers has addressed the hard times the Muslims face in America and through the whole western world after 9/11 and 7/7 attacks. And like many other artists Karan Johor has also made a film on the same theme. The film is My Name is Khan where he has projected the picture of a Muslims life and shows how an innocent person like Rizwan, an emotionally challenged fellow, is suffering only for his religion. The very objective of my paper is to make a critical study on one of the burning issues, Islam phobia on the basis of the film entitled My Name is Khan.

**KEYWORDS:** terrorism, skepticism, Islam, 9/11 and 7/7 attack, insecurity.

### INTRODUCTION

In a secular country like America, people of various religions live side by side harmoniously. It seems that America is a country with unity in diversity where different races, cultures and religions lead their lives happily. Through its history, United States has characteristically remained a country of two things: a country of immigrants and a country of unmatched religious diversity. And yet when compared with the rest of the world – where these two very factors alone had so often engendered horrible religious wars and decades of enduring conflict – the history of religious conflict in the United States seems almost nonexistent. But such peaceful stability does not remain for a long time. The 9/11 attacks in America, made by al-Qaeda, an Islamic terrorist organization trembled the whole America. The attacks not only destroyed the twin towers of world trade centre but also killed thousands of people. The traumas, the violent attacks produced left the entire nation stranded. And a sense of insecurity gripped the USA and the government adopted a stringent internal security measures in order to combat terrorism and thus consequently developed a high degree of skepticism towards Islam and Muslims. For the first time in united state, an entire religion is not only subjected to widespread public suspicion but also to governmental surveillance of its activities and associations. Many poets, novelists and film makers has addressed the hard times the Muslims face in America and through the whole western world after 9/11 and 7/7 attacks. And like many other artists Karan Johor has also made a film on the same theme. The film is My Name is Khan where he has projected the picture of a Muslims life and shows how an innocent person like Rizwan, an emotionally challenged fellow, is suffering only for his religion. The very objective of my paper is to make a critical study on one of the burning issues, Islam phobia on the basis of the film entitled My Name is Khan.

As my paper is going to concentrate on the topic of Islam phobia we need to have some clear cut

knowledge about Islam phobia. Islam phobia is defined as "intense dislike or fear of Islam, especially as a political force; hostility or prejudice towards Muslims". The term was first used as a neologism in the 1970s, then it became increasingly salient during 1990s, and it reached public policy prominence with the report by the Runnymede Trust's Commission on British Muslims and Islam phobia entitled *Islamophobia: A Challenge for us All* (1997). The introduction of the term was justified by the report's assessment that "anti-Muslim prejudice has grown so considerably and so rapidly in recent years that a new item in the vocabulary is needed. The word islamophobia is formed from Islam and Phobia, a suffix used in English to form a sense of fear. The compound form Islam-contains the thematic vowel -o-, and is found in earlier coinages such as Islamo-Christian from the 19th century. According to Oxford English Dictionary, the word means "intense dislike or fear of Islam, especially as a political force; hostility or prejudice towards Muslims" and arrested in English as early as 1923. The Berkeley University Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project suggested the working definition: "islamophobia is a contrived fear or prejudice fermented by the existing Eurocentric or Oriental global power structure. It is directed at a perceived or real Muslim treat through the maintenance and extension of existing disparities in economical, political, social and cultural relations, while rationalizing the necessary to deploy violence as a tool to achieve 'civilizational rehab' of the target communities (Muslims or otherwise). Islamophobia reintroduces and reaffirms a global racial structure through which resource distribution disparities are maintained and extended" Many critics express their view of the true definition of Islamophobia. Johannes Kaadel in a 2006 comment wrote that Islam phobia "is a vague term which encompasses every conceivable actual and imagined act of hostility against Muslims" Jack straw defined it as "an outlook or world-view involving an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination". Mattias Gardel defines it as "socially reproduced prejudices and aversion and practices that attack exclude or discriminate against persons on the basis that they are or perceived to be Muslims and to be associated with Islam". One early use cited as the term's first use is by the painter Alphonse Etienne Dinet and Algerian intellectual Sliman ben Ibrahim in their 1918 biography of Islam prophet, Muhammad writing in French, they used the term islamophobic. The first recorded use of the term in English, according to the Oxford English dictionary, was in 1923 in an article in *The Journal of Theological Studies*. As with parallel concepts like homophobia or xenophobia, islamophobia connotes a broader set of negative attitudes or emotions directed at individuals or groups because of perceived membership in a defined category.

The term Islam phobia is highly popular in 21st century. Question may arise why does Islam phobia become a serious threat to the post modern world. There are some remarkable causes which we cannot ignore. Major of them are the terrible incidents of 9/11 and 7/7. If we talk about racial violence and international terrorism we can hardly forget the traumatic effect of 9/11 incident which not only shook the root of the U.S.A government but also left a long lasting imprint of horror and doubt almost on everybody's mind. It was an attack made by the Al Qaeda, an organization of Islam terrorist group, no doubt about that, but one should find the cause of the attack. American diplomacy was also responsible for their own destruction. One of the famous Indian writer-activists, Arundhati Roy in one of her most controversial essays *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001) has depicted how American foreign policy and its resulted on such a catastrophe. She opines:

But who is Osama Bin Laden really? Let me rephrase that what is Osama Bin Laden? ...He has been sculpted from the spare rib of a world laid to waste by America's foreign policy: its gun boat diplomacy, its nuclear arsenal, its vulgarly stated policy of 'full-spectrum dominance', its chillins disregard for non-American lives, its barbarous military interventions, its support for despotic and dictatorial regimes, its merciless economic agebda that has munched through the economics of poor countries like a cloud of locusts (Roy, 71).

But we cannot ignore the barbarity of the terrorist attack. Whatever is the reason one should not destroy the mass so brutally. The accident may have been represented in words but the damages, the traumatic experiences of the victims and its witnesses cannot be put in words so easily. This 9/11 also initiated an anti-Muslim sentiment among the Americans and it made them believe that, anyone who belongs the Muslim religion could be a terrorist. Although, one cannot compare 9/11 to an event as horrific, enormous and apocalyptic like the Holocausts, it is considered certainly as one of the biggest traumas of the Twenty-first century. In constructing the theoretical form work of this paper we must consult Cathy Caruth's book *Unclaimed*

Experience: trauma, Narrative and History (1996). If we consider the etymological meaning, the Greek word 'trauma' means originally an 'injury inflicted on a body' (Caruth, 18) rather than on the mind. However Caruth comments:

"in its most general definition trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response of the events occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled and repetitive appearance of hallucination" (Caruth, 15).

The primary feature of this trauma is that the victim is not aware of the trauma at the time of its occurrence because of the unexpectedness of the accident and there remains always a gap between the occurrence of the trauma and the return to full consciousness. Further, Caruth goes on explaining "the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival" (Caruth, 64). Therefore the course of traumatic event of 9/11 brought about a radical change in America's behavioral attitude towards world. The other major event that compelled the whole world to accept Islam phobia is 7/7 attack in London. The 7 July 2005 London bombings, often referred to as 7/7, were a series of coordinated terrorist suicide bomb attacks in London, United Kingdom, which targeted civilians travelling on the city's public transport system during morning rush hour.

The aftermath of the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001 resulted in a massive increase in security at airport, port, railway stations and land borders. As Jocelyne Cesari puts it in his *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States*:

"For perhaps the first time in the United States an entire religion is not only subjected to widespread public suspicion, but also to governmental surveillance of its activities and associations" (80).

These are the visible parts of entry at the limits of a sovereign territory where the desirables are granted conditional entry and the undesirable face a closed door. Although other forms of bordering have also an ordinary part of our life like electronic surveillance, exceptional policing powers and profiling, the airport and the railway station are perhaps the most common borders where the travelers most obviously experience rigid security methods, sometimes obtusely intrusive, such as full body scanning, visual strip search, x-ray scanning, and other kinds of physical and psychological harassments. The policies and practices of the airport and the railway station security have radically altered in the past 14 years, being driven by governments international aviation bodies, security guards in railway station and airport management. In the wake of, the European countries tightened up security measures and, like us, they also began to suspect the immigrants. In doing so, they singled out Muslim immigrants and made them victims of various forms of discrimination and harassment. In his article "The War on Terror and Muslims in the West" rightly does Mahmood Monshipouri points out:

'In Europe counterterrorism measures have led to discriminatory policies towards Muslim immigrants, especially in the case of nationality or citizenship test, which tend to undermine the efforts of those Muslims who have sought to bridge their faith with western values'. (45-46)

After 9/11 and 7/7, the countries in the west conceived of Islam in negative terms, considering it to be solely their enemy they even went so far as to stereotype the Muslim immigrants as terrorists. They suspected Muslims of having links to terrorists outfit and having knowledge of terrorist's plots and plans, and in the process they rob them of their civil liberties. After 9/11, Louise Cinkler observed:

"Muslims were persons who, if not terrorists themselves, might be hiding terrorist or covering up their knowledge of brewing terrorist plots. So constructed, Arabs and Muslims in the USA were not really part of the American nations, they were the 'them', and thus not fully eligible for its package of civil and constitutional rights".

If the world changed after 9/11, the world of art and literature also took a remarkable turn with it. Many authors and film makers across the world have tried to portray the effects of those catastrophic events in their own perspectives. The media plays a pivotal role in society today and its ubiquitous presence signifies the potentiality it has to transfer the information and to mould the views perceptions about what should be and what should not be the reality. Arguably the audio visual media like film has greater impact on its viewers than the news paper on other aspects of medias; and in 9/11 Bollywood has also taken interest in representing the traumatic effect of 9/11 and how it initiates a great deal of torture and harassment to the people, mainly who

belong to the third world country. Definitely the response of Bollywood movies to 9/11 is bound to be different in many ways from that of Hollywood movies as their perspectives and experiences regarding this event are quite different in nature. Here is my paper, I choose a popular Bollywood movie *My Name Is Khan* by Karan Johar which was released in 2010. How in the attitude of western towards Muslim basically in the United States.

The Bollywood film, *My Name Is Khan* (2010) is the story of an Indian Muslim man, Rizwan Khan (Sahrukh Khan), with Asperger's Syndrome but is very talented and high functioning. Rizwan and his mother are very close and she gives him a lot of more attention which leaves her son Zakir to go to the United States to live with his wife Haseena. Rizwan begins to work with his brother with business as a herbal salesman and during his work he works meets with Mandira (Kajal). Mandira is a hairdresser and also has a son named Sam, from a previous marriage who is best friends with their next door neighborhood Reese. He marries Mandira and is leading a happy life. But in the wake of 9/11 Sam is killed in a racist attack, and Mandira rages at Rizwan for being Muslim. She demands that he leaves and Rizwan, who takes her at her moral, begins tracking the president down so that he can deliver his message. He fails in Washington and starts his journey for San Francisco. He has to face checking harassment in the airport. He has to remove his jacket, shoes, open his captons and each and every luggage and to pass through the whole body scanning machine. Even he does not get place in a Motel as he is a Muslim. He works in many places for his ideal. Bring a 'goodman' said by his mother he obeys all rules and disciplines of Islam. Then he meets with doctor Fazal Rahaman who is a 'badman'. He misinterprets Islam. But Rizwan correct their mistakes. Next he goes to meet with the president. He is put into jail. Even in jail he has to suffer. At last he is released from the jail with the help of two Indian reporters. Then he goes to Filimina for the help of the distressed who were in danger for heavy rain. Finally he gets attention of all the American and meets with the president – "My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist"

At the very outset of the movie we see a picture of airport where the passengers are being checked by the American police authorities. This is an effect of 'fear' or 'phobia' towards Islam after 9/11 and 7/7 attacks. The protagonist of the film *My Name Is Khan*. Rizwan reaches at San Francisco International Airport he has witnessed an all together different experience from rest of the travelers and when the film begins we find how in the airport every travelers has to remove their jacket, shoes, even their laptops each and every luggage and pass through the whole body scanning machine. But Rizwan, a person who has Asperger's syndrome, gets confused and starts to pray the Koran and immediately he gets suspected by an American girl who finds that he is a Muslim and his 'language' is different from them and reports to the airport security system. Rizwan is taken to a private office where his bag is opened and things which he carried with him, from a simple book to a journal he use to keep, from his praying cap ('taqiyah') to his video recorder everything has been thoroughly checked. But they do not stop here. Next his clothes have been removed and his different parts of body including his hair, inside of his mouth, tongue, teeth and even nostrils have been searched and no doubt this process of searching seems quite torturous and painful to Rizwan. Further he is interrogated again and again about his purpose of his meeting with the president 'what is your message, Mr. Khan?' as the airport security agents have suspected him as a terrorist and thought that he could be a menacing threat to the government. And finding no single trace of any offence done by Rizwan they free him finally but already Rizwan has missed his last flight and he feels that it causes a loss of both his money and time. The same picture can be traced in Dharker. So we see here how a man belonging to Muslim community has to be harassed in America same is the situation with Intiz Dharker. She is an Indian writer. In fact many Indian diasporic writers have responded to the discriminatory policies and measures of the western governments after 9/11 and 7/7. Dharker addresses the hard times the Muslim immigrants face in the western societies after 9/11 and 7/7 in her book *The Terrorist at My Table* (2007). In the section titled "These are the Times we live in" Dharker uses a number of collages to show how British Muslims are suspected to be terrorists and, as a result, are robbed of their civil liberties as British citizens in the immediate aftermath of the 7/7 attack. In the poem "These are the Times we live in I" written against the backdrop of the failed 21/7 attack, Dharker captures the pictures of a Muslim passenger being suspected and harassed by the British security agency in an airport:

You hand over your passport. He  
 Looks at your face and starts  
 reading you backwards from the last page  
 (...)  
 you shrink to the size  
 of the book in his hand (1-3,9-10).

In the same poem Dharker further writes about how the security agent gets prejudiced against this Muslim passenger :

You can see his mind working  
 Keep an eye on that name  
 It contains a Z, ... (11-13).

From the passport the security agent comes to know of the Muslim identity of the passenger. The Muslim name immediately evokes in his mind all the negative images that are associated with the Muslims in the common perception of the west. When the security agent is confirmed that the name with a letter Z is a Muslim person's name, his suspicion increases. They think Muslim with the letter Z in his name can be a terrorist. She writes:

In front of you  
 He flicks to the photograph,  
 Looks at you suspiciously (20-22).

The act of harassing the Muslim passenger by the security personnel in the following manner amounts to torture and at the same time produces tactile sensations that make the passenger own body alien to him :

They changed your chin  
 And redid your hair  
 They scrubbed out your mouth  
 And rubbed at your eyes  
 They made you over completely. (26-30)

So we see Muslims are suspected either of being terrorists or the agents of the terrorists and often become the victims of late crimes. Even Bollywood star Sahruxh Khan also faces the same problem when he goes to America. The experience for him is too upsetting and he says to himself:

"Whenever I start feeling too arrogant about myself, I always take a trip to America. The immigration guys kicked the star out of stardom" (The Times of India, 13 April, 2012)

In the film he says "It is not my message, I have to say to him, my name is Khan and I am not a terrorist". When at childhood he listens some persons saying some bad and evocative statements "Haram Khor o sob ke sob ko goli mar deni chaiye", his mother explains to him the difference between 'good man' and 'bad man'. As the movie progresses we can trace the effect of the Islam Phobia and how it brings catastrophe in a common man like Rizwan. His life becomes at stake only for being a Muslim. He goes to the United States for staying with his brother Zakir after the death of his mother. He is a simple common man as we look in this film. He even tells the truth always. We get this picture when he goes for selling cosmetics to Mandira (kajal) .He does not cheat anybody. He says "Beauty product se srf cheraha nikharta ha, khubsuruti nahi banti". He easily loves Mandira. The love relationship in this movie reveals that how much he can love to Mandira. He is even so intelligent. It is proved by his finding out the names of the animals easily at the game show. But all their happy conjugal life is broken with the news of attack 9/11. It works in such a way of Islam Phobia or hatred that he has to suffer in United State. We get his picture that he is undoubtedly a simple common man. But what is fault in him is that he is

a Muslim. The very identity of being a Muslim strikes us. We have already seen the airport scene. As the film progresses we see a lot of examples of sufferings and tortures of Muslim communities by the Americans. When Rizwan goes to a motel for staying there, he has to be harassed. Some unknown attackers shoot at them and the motel manager blames towards the Muslims "Rascle rascle a sob musulman logon ki waja se ho raha ha, kuchi sal pahele world trade centre uraia or yad kare ham". It is clear that the persons who live in America are not tolerated by the white men. Whenever they get chance they torture them. It is also clear that the attack was organized by some Muslim terrorist groups. But why will the whole community suffer? The motel manager as well as the white men blames the whole Muslim community. Rezwan clarifies his statement : "My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist". But we get also the dislike towards Islam when Rizwan goes to the prayer in memory of the deaths who were victims of 9/11 attack. At prayer he utters some lines from the Koran and the white men who were by him depart quickly from that spot. Here he is a victim of hatred by the America. We see also the evidence of damages by the Americans to the Muslim living there. Many Muslim shops were destroyed at that time. Even we see the Muslims harassed by the whites. They comment various bad and evocative words at them whenever they go to market or to any place. They can not bear with the Islam. They are going through a trauma or phobia. Even it is most shocking that Muslims has to change their identity, I mean they hide the basic appearances of their body. We know that beard and mustaches are the elements that bear the testimony of their religion. But we see many Muslims are compelled to hide it. They are deprived of their liberty. Teachers in their schools or any institutes of education make aware the students of the Muslim "Of all religions Islam is the most violent"

At that time when Mandira looks at her shop or saloon named as 'Mandira Khan', it shocks her. The very title 'Khan' is panicky. Even Mandira apprehends of damaging or mishaps in her life. Hasina, the wife of Zakir is also victim of harassment. At college she is insulted for taking 'purdha'. She also rejects it for her safety. So we see how the whole Muslim community is going through a problem of identity. But what change the whole pattern of the movie is the murder of Sam by some American students at play ground. They behave with him in such a cruel manner that he has to sacrifice his life for being a son of Muslim. He is badly kicked and hospitalized but he is declared as dead. Mandira gets totally shocked. She can not bear with the reality. She behaves like a mad. She blames Rizwan that Sam dies for being the title 'Khan'. But Rizwan clarifies "Musalman hona buri bat nahi ha". So we see in all these events are effect of the hatred and dislike towards Muslim. It is totally an injustice towards Muslim or Islam. We should not discriminate between Hindu or Muslim or Christian, rather we should differentiate between two terms –'good man' and 'bad man' said by Rizwan's mother "wo koi farak nahi hai". For some 'bad man' a whole community should not be blamed. It is clear that the terrorists belonged to Muslim community but how can we say the all Muslim are bad?

In this film we get another counter attack that proves that Muslim is not a bad religion. It is proved by the activities of Rizwan and his family. From childhood he is a brilliant student. He has some special instinct quality. We see he never speaks a lie. He takes care of Mandira and Sam. He even maintains the rituals of Muslims. He says "hum honge kamyab ek din" (we shall overcome some day). Rizwan claims that in Islam it is said that when an innocent dies, at that time all human beings die. When he was going to meet with the precedent he says "namaz jaga or logo se nehi neyet se pari jati hai". Even most striking feature being a common citizen of the whole world or we can say it cosmopolitan that he goes to Georgia for helping Mama Jenny. Due to heavy rain the condition of Gorgia was very bad. They were in a very bad condition. Rizwan goes to them and supports them. In this film we can see how a common good man only being a Muslim has to suffer. But he is a good like other people. So Islam Phobia proves to be a false notion in America. So how can we say all Muslims are bad.

Finally, it can be held that one should not believe in the concept of totalization. As human beings are not like the boiled rice in the same pan, they can be varied from each other. Each of them is different in attitude and in personality. So a single person or a group of person cannot represent the whole community. And we should not judge a person on the basis of action done by others of his community. The desirable judgment will be practiced when human being will be divided into good one and evil one and this should be done on the basis of his or her action, not the basis of his gender, culture, ethnicity and religion. A woman can be good or evil; a man too can be good or evil like that a Hindu can be good or bad and a Muslim or any person with any religion can be good or bad.

So we should not generalize any idea or speculation. We should identify the evil one without considering his or her religion and punish him or her as hard as possible. At the same time we should protect the innocent ones like Rizwan in the film My Name is Khan from all the odds and obstacles of the skeptics.

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