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## ENCOUNTERING A NEW SOCIAL THREAT: ISLAMOPHOBIA IN KARAN JOHAR'S BOLLYWOOD FILM MY NAME IS KHAN

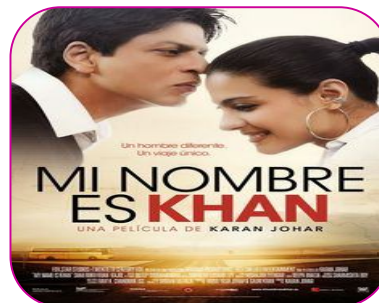
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### ABSTRACT

Media plays a very important role to present any kind of idea. It is only the media which is able to popularize any idea or notion either positively or negatively. For this so many problems arise among the people of the whole world. The Westerners have some stereotypical ideas about Orientals. Among so many other problems Islamophobia is a burning problem in the whole world. For this the Muslims, more particularly, the immigrant Muslims are not considered sometimes as human beings. There is a kind of negative impression about the Muslims that they all are terrorists— media has a great contribution to promote this idea. They are deprived of religio-socio-political and civil rights.

Karan Johar in his film *My Name is Khan* has brilliantly portrayed this idea. This paper endeavors to make a critical study on the burning issue of Islamophobia on the basis of the film *My Name is Khan*.



**KEY WORDS:** Terrorists, Stereotypical ideas, Islamophobia, Negative impression about Muslims.

### INTRODUCTION:

Johar's film *My Name is Khan* is a protest against Islamophobia. This paper will try to portray the pathetic condition of the immigrant Muslims in a foreign country like America especially after the 9/11 attack. There are some references of orientalism and diaspora studies in this paper. *My Name is Khan* is a film which is set in the pre and post 9/11 US. It is an attempt on the part of the director to break the stereotypes about the Muslims.

According to Oxford English dictionary Islamophobia is "Intense dislike or fear of Islam, especially as a political force; hostility or prejudice towards Muslims" (OED Web). "The term Islamophobia is highly popular in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Question may arise why Islamophobia becomes 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 anybody'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" (Khan 2). "Six months before the release of MNIK, on Aug 14, 2009, Shahrukh Khan, while on a trip to the U.S to promote the film and to participate in Indian Independence Day Celebrations, was detained and Questioned by Homeland Security in the Newark airport because his name, Khan, had triggered a security alert (Shahrukh depained ...,2009 ). In Mumbai, India, the opening of the film was threatened by militant Shiv Sena demonstrators, who accused SRK of treason for his comments about Pakistani cricket players (Marpakwar and Dube ,2010). These two incidents ironically mirroring the theme of the film, relate directly to its intended audiences and messages"(M.Erndl 1-2). Karan Johar has very beautifully portrayed this burning problem of Islamophobia. The condition is so bad that even the famous superstar Shahrukh Khan is

also under the suspicion that he is connected to some terrorist groups. If this is the condition of a superstar then we can very easily understand that how much pathetic and worse is the condition of the immigrant Muslims in the foreign country like U.S.

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 experience 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 to 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 framework 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) [Khan 2-3].

"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 full consciousness.

Further, Caruth goes on explaining "the peculiar about perplexing experience of survival" (Caruth, 64). Therefore the course of traumatic event or 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 Islamophobia 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 [Khan 3].

The aftermath of the 11 September attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001 resulted in a massive increase in insecurity 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 wide spread public suspicion, but also to governmental surveillance of its activities and associations" (80) [Khan 3].

The condition of the immigrant Muslims is totally changed after the 9/11 attack. They are not considered human beings. The notion of Islamophobia goes to that extent that the innocent son of Rizvan Khan (played by Shahrukh Khan), Sam (played by Arjan Aujla) is killed because of anti-Muslim biasness. Not only that even at every school of U.S the lesson was taught to the students after the 9/11 attack that "of all the world's religions Islam is the most violent and aggressive". (Johar *MNIK*). When in the memorial service of those people who died in the 9/11 attack Rizvan utters quotes from Quran and for this the other people who were present there became afraid of him, at that time Rizvan says some very significant words. He says that-- "In the Western World, history is marked simply by BC and AD. But now, there is a third distinction. 9/11". (Johar *MNIK*). Mandira (played by Kajol) is also facing problem in getting job as her surname has become Khan after her marriage with Rizvan.

The Islamophobia has created so much terror within the westerners that the immigrant people were forced to change their course of life, as did the journalist Bobby Ahuja. He used to wear turban and kept beard as he belongs to the Sikh community but after the 9/11 attack he no more uses his turban or keeps beard because of the fear that if his identity is revealed then he will face problem in this foreign country. Rizvan's brother Zakir (played by Jimmy Sheirgill) has asked his wife Haseena (played by Sonya Jehan) not to wear the head coverings (hijab) as she was attacked in her work place because of her Muslim identity. The attacker says after attacking her "Get out of my country" (Johar *MNIK*). Everyone is busy to hide his/her markers which may reveal that they are Muslims. Abdul, who has an electronics shop, has become a victim

of bullying by some western men. In Brooklyn, New York a Sikh person and his daughter have become a victim of islamophobia. From the news bulletins we come to know that the person was attacked because he wore a turban and for this he was considered a Muslim, though he actually was a Sikh. The motel manager Jitesh is a Gujrati. He has a motel in Bowling Green, Kentucky which was also attacked by some Western men. There is another man Dr. Faisal Raheman who practices in St. Benedict Hospital and works for a terrorist group. For some Muslim people suffer all the Muslim community, and that is why when the motel manager Jitesh says that “All this is because of the lousy Muslims” (Johar *MNIK*), Rizvan says that “My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist” (Johar *MNIK*). Not only the westerners but the other immigrant people are also in terror. There are two types of terror among the people in the Western countries—the terror of the western people about the immigrants on the one hand and the immigrants are also in terror of the westerners. The people have become so much Islamophobic that even a journalist like Komal (played by Sugandha Garg) is afraid of Muslims. When Raj (played by Arjun Mathur) says that he wants to cover the story of Rizvan Khan, Komal says “I don’t want to get into this Khan story. I’m scared” (Johar *MNIK*).

At the very opening of the film *My Name is Khan* we see that how Rizvan Khan is suspected as a terrorist and how he is tortured by the Western security agents in the San Francisco International airport. He was suspected because he was uttering quotes from Quran. When the prejudiced British officer comes to know his Muslim identity, all the negative images which are deep rooted in his racial unconscious are evoked in his conscious self. During the time of cross-examination he was bodily tortured by them. It causes a great pain to him. When the British security agents come to know that he is going to meet the President of U.S to give a message and the agent John Marshall asks him – “What is your message Mr. Khan ?” (Johar *MNIK*), Rizvan says, “I have to say to him my name is Khan and I am not a terrorist”. (Johar *MNIK*). The issue of islamophobia is so relevant that not only in the film but in the world of literature also, this theme has been presented by so many writers. One of them is obviously Imtiaz Dharker. Dharker in her series of poems “These are the Times We Live in” has portrayed the theme of islamophobia. The Muslim passenger in the poem “These are the Times We Live in 1” has to go through that kind of torture which Rizvan Khan also experiences in the airport, at the very opening scene of the film. Dharker says that the Muslim passenger is not only suspected as a terrorist but he is also physically tortured by the guards:

You hand over your passport. He  
Looks at your face and starts  
reading you backwards from the last page.  
(...)  
they changed your chin  
and redid your hair.  
They scrubbed out your mouth  
And rubbed out your eyes. (Dharker 1-3, 26-29)

Rizvan goes to Los Angeles to meet the president of United States as his first attempt was a failure. In that crowd he was wrongly considered a terrorist and taken to the jail. In the jail he was tortured both mentally and physically by the British officers and they wanted to know from him about al-Qaeda which was a Muslim terrorist group.

The Europeans or Westerners have a deep hatred towards the Muslims. There are some stereotypes of the Europeans. There is a kind of ‘us’-‘other’ binary in the minds of the Western people which is depicted by Edward Said in his book “Orientalism”. Media also has a great contribution to promote these stereotypes. The Western film directors are interested to project Muslims stereotypically as ‘Other’.

On the other hand, Bollywood cinema joins the bandwagon in disseminating the idea of mistrust and suspicion towards Muslims. In some cases, it reinforces stereotypical image constructions that Muslims are, by and large, more aligned to a foreign territory, and more loyal to religion than to patriotism and national unity (Islam, 2007). Islam (2007) further states that characterization of Muslim is fundamentally related to the ‘other’ agenda of media producing, mystifying, stereotyping the Muslim ‘Other’ and as such, Bollywood cinema also creates the stereotypical image of Muslim characters with peculiar forms of cultural symbols

like 'beard' and 'caps' besides portraying the Muslims either as feudal landlords or terrorists, villains and gangsters. [Balraj 92-93].

In the 1970s, most films, including *Muqaddar Ka Sikander* and *Sholay* had Muslim men who wore the sherwani, chewed paan and recited Ghalib's poetry in almost every scene they appeared on. In the 1980s and 1990s the Muslim don mirrored real stories of the Mumbai underworld, either as victims (the 2008 film *Aamir* directed by Rajkumar Gupta) or as criminals, a time-tested Bollywood tool used effectively by Danny Boyle in *Slumdog Millionaire* in 2008.

According to Sharma (2010), Nasreen Munni Kabir, a documentary film-maker and author who has chronicled Hindi cinema, says: "I am not sure that there are many Muslim characters in the movies beyond the 'bad guys' and 'terrorists' to have a real scene of whether the Muslim characters have evolved or not" [Balraj 93].

These symbols are often imposed to create a stereotypical and mythical image and then sold as an idealized form (Islam, 2007) therefore the media, playing under the structures of the image industry, has its own clientele and it just tries to satisfy the demands of the specific clientele (Hussain, 2007) [Balraj 92-93].

Johar has presented many incidents beautifully and positively to break the stereotypical presentation of Muslim in film. At first we see that Razia Khan (played by Zarina Waheb), the mother of Rizvan is giving him a moral lesson by saying that "There are only two kinds of people in this world. Good people who do good deeds. And bad people who bad", and Rizvan follows this lesson all through his life. Another very important role is played by Rizvan when he contributes in the feed Africa fund raiser. The lady there says – "This is a Christian's only event". (Johar *MNIK*). When Rizvan says that he is contributing the money because it is a fund raiser for the draught in Africa, the lady goes back return the money by saying that it is for Christians only but Rizvan then very interestingly says to keep the money and it is for those who are not Christian in Africa. Though he was not able to meet the then president of US George Bush, but the next president of America himself met with him. At the very end after his release from the hospital Rizvan wants to meet the president when Mandira says "You don't need to do this now" (Johar *MNIK*), then Rizvan says "I have to meet the President. Ammi had said, 'A Khan always keeps his word!'" (Johar *MNIK*).

The cultural symbols of Muslim characters are reinterpreted in a new way by Johar.

During his travel in the bus Rizvan meets a couple (Imran and Sajida) who share their food with him. In the restaurant when Rizvan says that its prayer time, then Imran says—"Now ? Here ? you should pray depending upon the place and the people around" (Johar *MNIK*). Rizvan then says by protesting him that "Prayer should never depend upon the place or the people. It should depend only on your belief" (Johar *MNIK*). Another very important symbol for Muslim women is their 'hijab' (head covering). Rizvan's sister-in-law Haseena was attacked for her using of head covering and later she says that her head covering is not just her religious identity rather it is a part of her existence [Erndl 16].

The quotes of Quran are used here to prove that like all other religion it also talks about peacefulness and love. Rizvan says—"In chapter five, verse 32 of the Quran, Allah has decreed that the death of one innocent is equal to the death of humanity" (Johar *MNIK*). In the downtown mosque Rizvan meet Dr. Faisal Rehman who was misleading the other Muslims and wrongly interpreted the meet of Abraham and Issac before them who were present there. Dr. Faisal Rehman says during his interpretation that "Mighty Allah has even asked Ibrahim to sacrifice his son. And without asking a single question, Ibrahim agreed to sacrifice him. It's our duty to let our blood flow for the cause of Islam. That is what Allah demands! That is what Islam demands!" (Johar *MNIK*). But Rizvan gives the actual interpretation of this, he says—"Saint Ibrahim did not doubt the compassion of the Lord. The story is an example of his immense strong faith and belief. .... He was sure Allah would never allow the blood of his progeny to be shed" (Johar *MNIK*). Rizvan later helps the police to arrest Dr. Rahman who was associated with some terrorist groups.

After the 9/11 attack all the people throughout the world especially of United States started to believe that all Muslims are inhuman and Islam is the most violent religion all through the world. But Rizvan proves this notion futile. After his release from jail Rizvan goes to Wilhemina in Georgia to save Mama Jenny and Funny hair Joel as hurricane has hit Wilhemina. He tries his level best to save all the people of

Wilhemina though he could not. He becomes the issue of every news bulletin. The reporters report that “Rizvan Khan by the sheer force of his actions has elevated the entire humanity in the eyes of God” (Johar *MNIK*). The PBC news reports that “Just recently this man was arrested and tortured for being an enemy combatant of this country. Wonder what the government officials would call this Muslim enemy combatant today? As he selflessly tries to save the remaining lives in Wilhemina. Just a few days ago this man was called a terrorist and tortured mercilessly. Today we wait for the response of the government officials as he tirelessly strives to save innocent lives” (Johar *MNIK*). Rizvan inspires America. If the people of Wilhemina is rescued later by the American government then it is only because of him, as it is reported in the news that “Looking at him as an inspiration today many Americans have rushed to Wilhemina and its neighbouring towns to help in rebuilding the destroyed town” (Johar *MNIK*).

Both the two words ‘diaspora’ and ‘islamophobia’ co-inside with each other.

Islamophobia is in a way a xenophobic idea or notion. Here we see in this film that how the fear of the Western people for the Muslims is transformed into other religious people. In Samuel Huntington’s the *Clash of Civilization*, we find the clash between the Western civilization on the one hand, and Islam on the other. In this film we do get the story of the immigrant Muslim people who are marginalized in this foreign country. Like them the African-American people who live there in Wilhemina are also marginalized and that is why during the time of their disastrous condition in Wilhemina, the American government did not come to help or rescue them from that unbearable condition. It is a marginalized Muslim who tries to rescue them and that is why it is reported in the news bulletin “While several hurricane hit areas have suffered from government inaction .... The US government may have forgotten the flood inflicted area of Wilhemina, Georgia but one man has refused to be indifferent to the plights of its inhabitants” (Johar *MNIK*). As diasporans they all think this country to be their own but the Westerners are not ready to accept them. During his release from jail, when Rizvan has been taken to the outside of the jail, the British officer make a gesture through his fingers to Rizvan which suggests that in future you will be always under surveillance. It is very clear from this that the diasporic or marginalized people are always under watch. They always try to adjust in that unbearable condition and also want to overcome from it—the song “We shall overcome” suggests that.

The notion of islamophobia is just a creation of our mind. We should not promote this idea that all Muslims are terrorists and Islam is the most violent religion in the whole world. In contrast to the character of Rizvan Khan there is another character Dr. Faisal Rehman, who is a bad man. It is Dr. Faisal who tries to pollute the Islam religion by misinterpreting the message of Islam. But all his attempts fail because of Rizvan’s loving and peaceful attitude. A very important message is given here by Karan Johar which we can say is the ultimate solution of this problem. There are actually two kinds of people—‘good’ and ‘bad’. If that lesson can be taught in every school of the world then there will not be the concept of islamophobia and in this way the other problems can also be solved. We should not blame the whole community for some person’s wrongful act. When we do that we do injustice to that whole community. Johar has proved through this film that the notion of islamophobia is just a creation of our mind and we should not encourage that notion. We should keep in mind that all Muslims are not terrorists.

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