

# Essay on my name is khan, and i am one of many

[Society](#), [Terrorism](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Some movies are meant to be taken lightly, while some others pretend to be as monumental and deep as to stay in spectators' memory for many years to come. Among the latter bunch, there are only a rare few films that live up to this expectation. My Name is Khan, a 2010 Bollywood production directed by Karan Johar, is definitely one the cinematographic masterpieces that, to a some degree, transforms its audience's interpretation and evaluation of "the otherness" in our own society and illuminates the phobic aspects of the U. S. political reality in the aftermath of 9/11, as well as brings hope to establishing acceptance and mutual understanding among people of different religious and political views.

Complexity and multitude of the underlying leitmotifs in My Name is Khan are hard to describe in just a few words. On the surface, it is a story of Rizwan Khan, a Muslim man with Asperger's syndrome, who moved from India to the United States, to join his younger brother in San Francisco. At the outset of his immigrant life, Rizwan is happily adjusting to the new way of life and, as it seems, is very quickly achieving the inspiration of so many, the American Dream. He met a woman of his dreams, Mandira, a Hindu woman and a single mom who is raising an adorable son, Sameer. Their love story looks perfect and unfolds against a gorgeous backdrop of San Francisco. However, soon after the tragic events of 9/11, the crystal castle of Rizwan family's well-being is being shattered in the million pieces. Verily, as Rizwan had said, "In the Western world, time had always been divided into two periods, B. C. and A. D. That was until the third period, 9/11, was added." This third period, or the tragic events of 9/11, brought a lot of grief to millions of people in the United States, as well as to people around the world.

As the result of this heinous monstrosity, the U. S. political atmosphere of ensuing fear and paranoia re-shaped the national self-identity to such a degree that people internalized the sense of danger from the Other – in this case, from any Muslim – which eventually led to “ the acceptance of increased spending on the military, the draft, security, surveillance, and, basically, the construction of the worldview that had danger at its center” (Enloe, Cuthis. *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1993).

The main conflict, portrayed in *My Name is Khan* through the prism of Rizwan’s story, is that, after 9/11, our society set up exclusionary boundaries to the followers of Islamic religion and, thus, defined otherness as the immediate threat and, in a way, a demeaned state of being. At the most beginning of the movie, when Rizwan is standing in the airport security-screening line, a young woman who overheard him reciting a prayer, in an unknown to her language, didn’t have a speck of hesitation to report him to security officers. As a result of her “ vigilance,” Rizwan was pulled aside, to undergo a very long and humiliating search, and missed his flight. The sense of the threatening image of Islam, which became firmly associated with terrorism, is at the core of the conflict, so poignantly depicted in *My Name is Khan*.

Besides the main protagonist’s story, there are also other instances of paranoid realism happening to his fellow Muslims, which illuminate the shameful nature of this conflict. Rizwan’s sister-in-law was a subject of a hate attack, when her hijab was forcefully taken off and she was thrown on the ground. A popular TV producer, who later on helped to unveil the truth

behind the Rizwan imprisonment, was so much in fear for own safety and comfortable way of life that he stopped wearing the Sikh head cover, shaved and, in the end, completely changed his public image, in order to look as a majority of people around. Based just on a few examples shown in the film, we can only imagine how much grief, injustice and persecution were inflicted on thousands of Muslims – as well as Muslim-looking and bearing Muslim names – in the United States, many of whom immigrated to this great country in pursuit of “liberty, equality and justice” for all. However, post-9/11 America’s treatment of Muslims turned this noble aspiration into a sheer travesty, which is so eloquently depicted in the film.

The pinnacle of the personal Rizwan’s story unfolding after 9/11 is the tragic destiny of Sameer. First, his best friend, Reese, started to avoid him only because Sam’s last name, Khan, is associated with Muslims, who are to blame, from Reese’s point of view, for the death of his father, a reporter who was killed in Afghanistan. Second, when Reese and Sameer had an argument on a soccer field, the latter was beaten up by a gang of older boys, and later died in a hospital. Through this racially and religiously motivated crime, the film director sheds the light on the main conflict mentioned above and shows that children in our society are the first victims of a phobic social reality created by adults. Losing Sameer and being blamed by Mandira for his death – who told her husband that he is not to come back home until he meets the U. S. president and tells him, “My name is Khan, and I am not a terrorist!” – Rizwan undertakes a personal crusade to do exactly just that. In order to win Mandira’s love back, Rizwan travels across the country, meets different people, including a radical Muslim group in one of the mosques,

reports the group leader to FBI, and, at some point, finds himself in a crowd greeting the then-president, Bush Jr., and shouts, “ Mr. president, my name is Khan and I am not a terrorist!” The mere sound of the word “ terrorist” had an immediate reaction of danger and panic, when the president is frisked away in his car and Rizwan being arrested on the spot. The conflict unfolds through showing how the innocent person is being interrogated and confined in a narrow prison cell, with his jailers trying to break his spirit through various, indecorous means. Later, Rizwan is being freed only because two student reporters videotaped his actual words, right before he was arrested, and because they engaged the help of a Sikh TV producer, who – in his program – proved that Mr. Khan is not a terrorist, rather the opposite, because he identified and reported a dangerous Muslim fanatic who tried to incite his fellow Muslims for violent actions.

Continuing with his effort to meet the president, Rizwan resumes a cross-country journey, and, on his way, he was befriended by people in Wilhelmina, Georgia – Mama Jenny and her son Joel. When hurricane hits Wilhelmina, Rizwan interrupts his mission and takes a detour in order to help his new friends. Mr. Khan’s personal crusade inspires many people around the country, who – in fact, many of them – understood that even if someone follows Islamic tradition and has a Muslim-sounding name, it doesn’t mean that this person is a terrorist. Conclusion of the movie is a happy ending for Rizwan and Mandira, who are reunited and, after meeting a president-elect, Barack Obama, going back home, hand in hand.

Before watching My Name is Khan, I had a preconceived notion that Muslims are being very much exclusionary in terms of their marriages. I thought that

Muslims are allowed to marry only Muslims. However, in this movie Rizwan fell in love with a Hindu woman, Mandira, and he married her despite his younger brother's objections, who didn't even show up at their wedding. Viewing this film definitely deepened my understanding of the Islamic culture – followers of the Islamic religion are people just you and me, who fall in love, marry, dedicate their lives to their families, and who love their country as much as all of us do. There is a very important moment in the film, when, while living still in India, young Rizwan overheard some hateful words said by Hindu man about all the Muslims. Disturbed by these words, he comes home in distress, but his mom calmed him down by the following wisdom: “Remember one thing, son. There are only two kinds of people in this world. Good people who do good deeds, and bad people who do bad. That's the only difference in human beings. There is no other difference. Understood?” Along with Rizwan, who understood that it doesn't matter if people are Christians, or Hindu, or Muslims, as long as they do good things, I gained more understanding of this view and, thus, gained a new perspective on the people in our country and around the world. The only difference in human beings is exactly what Rizwan's mom said, there are “good people who do good deeds, and bad people who do bad.” There is no need to judge people based on their religion, or race, or country of origin, but only by their deeds. The brilliance of My Name is Khan is that it shows, in many ways, a transformation of post-9/11 social reality, which shaped, sometimes violently and very often “quietly and only half consciously, the way the people of a society interpret and evaluate their common experience, both past and ongoing events” (Mona Harrington, The Dream of Deliverance in American

Politics. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986). What happened in the movie also happened to many people immediately after 9/11 and is still happening nowadays – a personal turmoil, re-evaluation of our society as it is, as well as the transformation of the worldview and the U. S. stance in the world. On a personal plane, my mental horizon had broadened to such a degree that I became more open to Islam in our society. As it happened with people in the film, who embraced Rizwan and his cause – and even came, in throngs, to help him to rebuild Mama Jenny's hometown – my personal stance these days is to include Muslim members of our society in our everyday life and not to judge them based on their native language, tradition and religion. Local current events show that there are more and more people who support the Palestinian cause and also protest some of the U. S. wars abroad – at least in the past, there were thousands of local protests against the U. S. intrusion in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unfortunately, it seems that these protests thinned down last few years, perhaps because of the economic turmoil and numerous other reasons, either personal or social. However, as thousands of people in the film gathered to protest Rizwan's imprisonment, our local events show evidence of people's solidarity, when, for example, they support the BDS campaign – boycott, divestment and international sanctions against Israel, in support of Palestinians.

Unfortunately, as it is the case in the film, it should also be noted that there are still numerous cases of prejudice and even persecution against the Muslims, who are very often an easy choice for airport searches, whose places of worship being targeted, and who undergo all other sorts of unfair treatment. While on a personal level it is easier to be open to “ the

otherness” of Muslims-neighbors, on the national level, alas, our government’s political campaigns are redolent of military rhetoric, presenting terrorism as an imminent danger not only to the military or economic might of our country, but also to people around the world. “ By instilling threat of unknown enemy, generally called ‘ the terrorist,’ who could strike from all sides and in any place, the government demands obedience to its conjured rules and regulations” (Bauman, Zygmunt, In Search of Politics. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). Given all the above, it is no wonder that these days our citizens enjoy only remnants of the erstwhile public freedom.

The world current events clearly show that there is less respect toward our country abroad, because our posture of moral superiority and narrow focus only on the Other’s alleged wrongdoing and the inability to see our faults not only desensitize us to the Other’s suffering but also alienate the rest of the world from us.