

**MY NAME IS KHAN: BOLLYWOOD'S HOLLYWOOD REACTIONARY  
PERFORMANCE TO THE POLITICAL REALISM IN THE POST-9/11  
(POST-CIVILISATION) ERA**

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**Abstract**

*The following essay is an exposé on the deeper meanings enmeshed within the plot, themes and messages of the film: **My Name Is Khan**. The title of the work is a more concise and economical version of the original thought which reads: 'My Name is Khan: Bollywood's Hollywood Reactionary Performance to the Political Realism in the Post-9/11 (Post-Civilisation) era and **Remember Me** as a subtle corroboration of Khan's equation of 9/11 to Before Christ (BC) and Anno Domini (AD)'. Although a few other films get a mention in elaborating and illustrating various observations, **Remember Me** stands out primarily because of its speechless yet immensely audible reference to September 11, 2001 and how that day altered the dynamics of numerous lives and families in the United States of America and indeed the entire globe.*

*The work interprets **My Name Is Khan** quite exhaustively using both observational and theoretical leads. The implication of the events of 9/11/2001, particularly with regard to international politics where the West openly advertises the impression that it prioritizes national interest and security over ideology, moral concerns and social reconstructions together constitute the essential interest of the film. Indeed, other considerations within human relations including love, family and sacrifice are alluded to; it is the stereotypical gaze upon every one of Islam inclination and belief that is deconstructed by **My Name Is Khan**.*

*The humiliating experience meted out to citizens of countries on America's terror-watch list across western airports is effectively addressed by a lengthy scene involving Khan at an American airport. The combination of this and Khan's momentous equation of 9/11 to BC and AD provides this essayist with a claim at the Post-9/11 era being one*

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*post of civilisation and civility considering the inhumane methods adopted by airports in the West in scrutinizing fellow human beings, albeit of different nationalities, all of which is based on the perception of an over-laboured single story.*

**Keywords:** Bollywood, Hollywood, Political Realism, Post-9/11 Era, Reactionary Performance.

**A brief account of the origins of film theory**

Contemporary film theory emerged from French auteurism, from the intellectual movement called structuralism, and from the mingled influences of Althusserian Marxism, Saussurean linguistics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and feminism (Stam, 1994: 74 – 84).

With the emergence of the film-writing metaphor from the intellectual currents of post-war France, interest progressively shifted from realism to textuality, from the situation or characters to the act of writing itself. The history of film theory is believed to be incomplete without a mention of the movement called structuralism which is a theoretical grid through which behaviour and institutions are seen as analysable in terms of an underlying network of relationships, the crucial point being that the elements which constitute the network have no inherent meaning apart from the relations that hold between the elements. Film analysts are thus required to look for the underlying rules and conventions of film, the systems that made possible their meaning.

The development of film theory forms part of overall intellectual history, the long-range impact of the revolution in thought evoked by such names as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as the more immediate influences called up by the likes of Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, and namesake Jacques Derrida. The theory of film is therefore representative of the major intellectual currents of our epoch (*ibid.*).



## **Introduction**

The trend is obviously toward greater realism, toward a more frequent selection of factual American themes, toward the theory that motion pictures should not only entertain and make money, but should also give expression to the American and democratic ideals... (Ceplair and Englund, 1980: 200)

Perhaps the subtlest yet strongest reference to the significance and place of *Tuesday, September 11, 2001* in the United States of America and indeed amongst today's humanity can be found in the romantic drama film *Remember Me*. Allen Coulter's 2010 melodramatic expression is the ultimate tragic experience in contemporary cinema. A catchy, sit-tight story from the onset, it nonetheless saves the best for last in a rather desperate but expert manner. Set in New York city, its opening scene where Ally's mum (Martha Plimpton) is shot dead at close range having been robbed by two muggers, one of whom felt she enjoyed too much eye-contact for comfort, at a largely deserted subway station in Brooklyn, gets the audience adjusting in preparedness for the remainder of a piece bold to assert its emotional exploitability considering young Ally's helplessness having witnessed the gruesome murder before the arrival of her detective father (Chris Cooper playing Neil Craig).

Although Lass Hallstrom's 2010 romantic drama cum war film of letters *Dear John* attempts a pretentious replica in employing "buildings falling to the ground" (John Tyree in *Dear John*), in hinging its plot so much so that the event of 9/11/2001 is easily the root cause of Savannah's (Amanda Seyfried) shattering decision to call it quits with Sergeant Tyree (Channing Tatum) so as to marry Tim (Henry Thomas) who suffers from cancer, it does not quite convey the day anywhere near the immensely powerful representation of 9/11 in *Remember Me*. Indeed many a critic including those at *Rotten Tomatoes* have described the latter as suffering from a borderline offensive final twist – no thanks to the sudden apparition of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre towards the movie's closure – and "trying to borrow profound meaning whilst only succeeding in upstaging itself so overwhelmingly that its

characters become irrelevant" (Ebert, 2010). It is the paper's view that it is this discarding of the cast in the abyss of oblivion that paves the way for the profundity of the fateful day. For upon this precise observation lies an eloquent message about the symbolism of 9/11 as the latest entrant in the Julian and Gregorian calendars. This much is explicitly stated quite early on along Rizwan Khan's (Shahrukh Khan) wordy narrative in Karan Johar's *My Name Is Khan* (2010).

Still, a disagreement with the critics who contend that the cast of *Remember Me* became irrelevant in the film's quest for meaning ought to be registered. Its central character, Tyler Hawkins (Robert Pattinson), is a moody, directionless 21-year-old auditing student at New York University and working in a bookstore. He has had a strained relationship with his businessman father, Charles (Pierce Brosnan) since his elder brother's suicide on the latter's twenty-second birthday. These circumstances force Tyler into being rebellious, somewhat reclusive and generally being a weirdo as exemplified by his investment in writing letters to his dead brother. Past this, and before he begins to find meaning in life having met Ally Craig (Emilie de Ravin) in a pre-conceived exchange, it is easy to sense loads of similarity between the philosophy of Tyler and those of Johnny (David Thewlis) in Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993). Although Tyler's figuration is not quite as dystopian as Johnny's, there is nonetheless a likeness in both characters as the "acts of losers" (Žizek, 1999: 352). These attributes of one character alongside those of Tyler's kid sister, Caroline (Ruby Jerins), and his very intriguing friend and roommate, Aidan (Tate Ellington), surely make *Remember Me* an unforgettable story about the power of love, the strength of family, and ultimately the triumph of man over fear as the film's final scene shows Ally getting into a train having now overcome a phobia for the subway.

In the same vein, the epic, *My Name Is Khan*, which switches genres as vastly as between mere comedy, romantic drama, and sometimes adventure in various forms, is replete with meanings and implications of and for the realism of contemporary global politics and peaceful co-existence, inter-religious marriages and the value of family as well as the workings of mental illness effectively demonstrated in



Khan's existential struggle and apparent conquest of Asperger's syndrome which afflicts him from birth. Although *My Name Is Khan* is overall a very well delivered piece that makes its point quite firmly, it meets some measure of duplicity through the film's obviously compulsive conviction and unconvincing attempt to address every cadre of humanity by eclipsing its seeming realist boundaries for the realm of magical realism. This becomes particularly striking with Khan's post-human exploits summed up in his unusual sacrifice and selflessness towards Mama Jenny and funny-haired Joel in his second coming to Wilhemina-Georgia following a hurricane!

***My Name Is Khan: Interpretation of plot in summary***

Although *My Name Is Khan* begins with the adult Khan already in the United States narrating his letters whilst he embarks on countless journeys in a bid to fulfil his promise to his wife, Mandira, which is to meet with the American President and proclaim: 'My Name is Khan and I'm not a terrorist', it is more prudent to adopt a chronological approach with regard to Khan's maturation in summarising the film's plot.

Young Rizwan Khan is a Muslim child who grows up with his brother Zakir and his mother in a middle class family in the *Borivali* section of Mumbai. Rizwan is different from the other children and no one, including his mother, can comprehend why. However, he has certain gifts, particularly a special ability to repair things. His difference leads his mother to plead with and obtain for Khan special tutoring from an otherwise reclusive scholar. A combination of this extra attention and its attendant effects ensures a heightened level of jealousy from his brother Zakir, who eventually leaves his family for a life in the United States (Johar, 2010).

The fascination with mental illness is partly an outgrowth of nineteenth-century romanticism, which sought to strip away layers of social convention and lay bare the human soul. Film as a medium seems particularly well suited to this subject. A ticket to the movies opens up a world of fantasy and

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imagination, a world in which the subconscious reigns  
supreme (Raushenbush, 1994: 270).

*My Name is Khan* demonstrates a grasp of the foregoing submission and it explores this with an undertone that is perhaps a comment on the medical advancement of America. This ought to presuppose that India lacks the requisite facility for identifying some medical conditions but the humble background of Khan's parentage puts paid to the assumption.

Despite his early years' resentment, the now successful adult Zakir sponsors elder brother Rizwan to come and live with him in San Francisco after the death of their mother. It is at this time that Zakir's wife, Haseena, diagnoses Rizwan as having Asperger's syndrome. Rizwan also begins to work as a product distributor for Zakir and in the process he meets a Hindu woman, Mandira, and her young son, Sameer or Sam, from a previous marriage. Mandira is a hairdresser by profession. The two easily get along; Mandira having been won over by Khan's interest in Sameer and his success in showing her a picturesque sight of the city she had hitherto never seen (Johar, 2010).

Marriage has always been the premise of personal happiness  
in American films, especially for women who, no matter how  
beautiful or accomplished, wither when they don't marry  
(Mellen, 1994: 261).

In spite of Zakir's hostility to the match between Khan and Mandira, Johar's *My Name Is Khan* ensures love and Khan's resolve in his belief of a world which comprises just "good people and bad people, no more" eventually triumph. He marries Mandira and the duo live together with Sameer in the fictional town of Banville, where both Mandira and Sameer take Rizwan's last name as their own. They also live next door to the Garrick family. Sameer is close to their young son, Reese (Kenton Duty and later Michael Arnold), while Mark Garrick is a reporter and Sarah Garrick is a friend of Mandira (Johar, 2010).

The Khans happy and near perfect existence gets disrupted, however, after the September 11 attacks on the twin towers in New York



City. Mark goes to cover the war in Afghanistan and dies there. At the same time, the Khan family begins to experience post 9/11 prejudice in their community and Reese begins to turn against Sam as well. One afternoon, an argument between them turns into a racially-motivated schoolyard fight between Sameer and a number of older students. Reese tries to stop the fight but is held back and Sam dies from his injuries. A shattered Mandira blames Rizwan for his death stating that Sameer "died only because his name was Khan." She then tells Rizwan that she no longer wants to be with him. When he asks her what he has to do to be together with her again, she tells him that he has to tell the people of the United States and the President that his name is Khan and that he is not a terrorist (*ibid.*)!

The loss of one innocent life is the loss of humanity – (Rizwan Khan quoting the Holy Koran 5:32 in the narrative of *My Name Is Khan*.)

The loss of the young Sameer whom Khan has proclaimed his "son and friend" means the loss of humanity in Khan's view. At this stage, little else matters. There is nothing to live for anymore. He thus sets out on a journey that takes him from one American state to another, all in a bid to meet the President. In between the period while striving for a meeting with the President, the Presidential elections take place just as Khan is in close shave with meeting President George W. Bush and later President-elect Barack Obama. There is further food for thought in *My Name Is Khan*'s representation of the accessibility of the Republican and the Democratic leaders. While the former is depicted as a terror-conscious distant President (in abandoning a state function once his security apparatus sensed the word 'terrorist' in the crowd), the latter comes across as people-friendly and compassionately sensitive (Johar, 2010).

If Hollywood has constructed a pattern of mythical and abstract thinking that is able to instruct our analysis of the real political world through imagery and perception, then it is also critical to our understanding of the medium's influence to

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recognise its contribution to the representation of political ideas; ideas that have long been an intrinsic part of American society (Scott, 2000: 16).

This representation of leaders in separate lights based on their political inclinations follows an established trend in Hollywood's tradition. Bill Clinton's showing in the cancer true life tale – *A Child's Wish* (Waris Hussein, 1997) – readily comes to mind. Although Mr. Clinton enjoys a personal relationship with Hollywood, *My Name Is Khan* may have recorded even more success if its cast had included Barack Obama as himself. This is of course tenable only if the 'Hussein' bit of Mr. Obama is to be ignored in this context. It is this writer's contention that the makers of the film avoided the temptation of such duplicity even though it appealed to Hollywood's taste of the Democrats.

While still on his wife-imposed quest, Khan travels to Wilhemina-Georgia where he makes friends with Mama Jenny and her son, funny-haired Joel who, like him, are bereaved under war conditions. He proceeds to Los Angeles where, in the course of observing his prayers in a Mosque, he overhears violent rhetoric from Faisal Rahman urging his flock to kill for Allah. He reports this to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI but there is no response at the time of report. Later, while waiting in a crowd to meet President Bush and repeating again and again, "My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist," Rizwan is arrested and placed in a prison by the police who misinterpret his statement (Johar, 2010).

While in prison, Rizwan is tortured as a terrorist suspect and meets the psychiatrist Radha who believes he is innocent. He is later released after a media campaign by some Indian student reporters, Raj and Komal and Bobby Ahuja, who prove his innocence by unearthing his attempts to inform the FBI about Faisal Rahman. After his release, he returns to hurricane-hit Wilhemina to help Mama Jenny and her son. His efforts attract media attention and numerous Muslims come to help as well. At the same time, Reese confesses to Mandira and reveals the identity of the boys who beat up Sam to his eventual demise. She informs



Detective Garcia who has been assisting her on the case, and Detective Garcia arrests them although she has earlier pleaded leniency for Reese (*ibid.*).

Following the apprehension of her son's killers, Mandira is sufficiently at peace with her pronouncements about mourning her son's death by not loving Khan and decides to join her estranged husband in Georgia. At the moment she arrives, Rizwan is stabbed by a follower of Faisal Rahman in retaliation for Khan's role in bringing his mentor to justice and is rushed to the hospital. With Mandira's help, Rizwan survives and meets President-elect Barack Obama who tells him: "Your name is Khan and you are not a terrorist" (Johar, 2010).

### **Underlying Observations**

...through the interrogation of the philosophical sources of the idea of meaning, or, "presence," in metaphysics, politics will be transformed (Rothman, 1996: 235).

Beyond borrowing perspectives from some of film's existing theories, particularly those for whom certain movies are condemnable because of hidden vices as the plagiarism of foreign aesthetic, the illusion that forms can be innocent, the acceptance of an individualist mythology based on a classless humanism, and an exaggerated reliance on questionable stylish techniques (Hennebelle, 1974), I have elected to offer mine as additional commentary. *My Name Is Khan* puts itself forward in both metaphor and personification as cinema's contemporary intermission. It makes reminiscent the aphorism of Sir Alfred Hitchcock: "The length of a film should be directly related to the endurance of the human bladder" (*The Observer* 1960) for there is actually a facilitating breather halfway through the 161-minute film.

Within the movie proper, there exists a temptation to perceive an attempt to project Khan as some sort of Christ (Jesus) of Post-Civilisation, Post-Civilisation having been enforced in sequel to 9/11 (addressed later). The character of Khan is hoisted as the cross-carrier of the many persecuted people of Islam faith en route Western states. *My*

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*Name Is Khan* is fearless in its eloquence particularly when it makes a linear reference at BC, AD and 9/11. The shifting identity highlighted with a photograph taken pre-9/11 – showing the British Broadcasting Corporation reporter with his wife and kid all garbed in Islamic attire while he in fact still kept a beard – on his desk at the office only to have shaved it all off and now wears suits to ward off the effects of America's post 9/11 paranoia is further credence to the wittiness invested in the making of *My Name Is Khan*.

Khan himself is a break-away from the original human who is an embodiment of self-preservation, conveniently mercurial and beguiling in his ways. When Khan emulates the chameleon, it is for self-sacrifice, service to humanity. It is not Khan changing his colour (it appears changeless), it is Khan changing his locations. Indeed he takes his colours to wherever his (helping) good heart takes him. The donation of his entire savings for a cause not minding that he would have to wait much longer before meeting with the President, although somewhat in the axis of magic, lucidly buttresses this point.

One may ask whether it is intentions or effects that make a film a political act, and how far this depends on external factors like the audience's way of looking at it, even critics' analyses or the judgement of posterity. How, then, does one discover what implications are genuinely to be found in film? (Furhammer and Isaksson, 1968: 243)

Directing his fourth film, Johar and his gang evidently have massive regard for posterity and are sympathetic to their place in history. In emphasising only and exclusively what he shares with Mama Jenny and funny-haired Joel – being bereaved to forces around terrorism and its reactionary tendencies – Khan turns a blind eye to the visible identity of skin colour to far-reaching effects. Along the same lines, *My Name Is Khan* offers itself as a viable take-off point in an all-encompassing revolution against certain stereotypes. By the film's success and general acceptance, it has come to represent a driving force of possibilities. Who is to stop Middle East Arabs from invoking: 'My name is Hassan and



I'm not a terrorist' or their religious siblings in Northern Nigeria from proclaiming: 'My name is Abdulmutallab and I'm not a terrorist'? *My Name Is Khan*'s stature as a rallying point for breakaways from existing constructions is by no means restricted to terrorism as the average Niger Delta youth of South-South Nigeria equally has the right to declare: 'My name is Timipre and I'm not a militant', just as a German bloke may contend: 'My name is Hitler and I'm not a racist.' Its impact as such is not exhaustive.

The latest allegory is particularly significant with *My Name Is Khan*'s theme for it behoves questioning why for example post World War II generations of Germans are not perceived nor portrayed as devils like their compatriot Adolf Hitler is? If nothing else, it ought to be noted that Germany engaged the world as a state. Millions of Germans at the time believed in, fought and died for Hitler. Terrorists are stateless and faceless. The overwhelming majority of Muslims do not believe in terrorism as an approach in engaging the West. Yet, every Muslim is a terrorist first and everything else about his identity second in today's world. What is the implication of this for the politics of representation? Karan Johar's *My Name Is Khan* perhaps provides a moral for the story.

Despite debates about America's oil interests (as Paul Greengrass' *Green Zone* (2010) depicts), the country's desire for peace and safety for its lands and citizens, and the curious approach of the so-called Islamic extremists given much capital in the Al Qaeda (Networks) brand, *My Name Is Khan*'s audacious questioning of the boundaries of stereotypes soon meets a logjam. This is evidenced in its own consent to an existing stereotype for in its deconstruction of an emergent status quo, it inadvertently and perhaps without a choice, promotes yet another well pronounced typecast – America as the land for the fruition of all dreams. Past this, and past the palpable fakery of the hurricane scenes of Wilhemina-Georgia, there is little else to engage the critic in terms of flaws with regard to the film's formal elements including its plot, characters, production quality, or even of meaning.

Yet it is arguable that the intended message from *My Name Is Khan* is not in all original, as a number of preceding films including

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Jeffrey Nachmanoff's *Traitor* (2008) have shown. *My Name Is Khan* however distinguishes itself and leads the pack amongst this category with a truly postmodernist saviour. Indeed Khan's character is not portrayed as fulfilling a scripture nor does he succumb to the popular propensity of like sacrificial characters which are certain to pass on before the screened film does.

Beyond its portrayal of the United States as a theatre of dreams where everyone and anyone could be successful including, of course, the Asperger syndrome-carrying lead actor, *My Name Is Khan* proceeds to engage with further political discourse wherein it conservatively approves of the Democratic Party over the Republicans as the scenes with George W. Bush jettisoning a function in the fear of a terrorist and that of Barack Obama's actual return to meet with Khan glowingly declare. It is a descriptive that ought to surpass both leaders yet it is just as much about the two. This is another of *My Name Is Khan*'s conformity with stereotype.

**Post-Civilisation - the end of civilisation as we know it**

Civilisation used to be that awareness, conscious and unconscious, which ensured that humanity had evolved into advanced stages of social development. The marks of civilisation ranged from politeness, refinement, sophistication, civility, enlightenment, urbaneness and a general resolve to embrace a culture of acceptable behaviour with peace as its subtext. Not anymore. Post 9/11 has ensured humanity adopts starkly gross and chillingly Orwellian methods on itself. This is the nearest description of the pat ups, pat downs, frisk lefts, frisk rights, the frightening sniffer-dogs with cold noses and menacing grunts, the interminable delays on freezing jetways while security and custom officers slowly, painstakingly, flip through every leaf of a traveller's documents and every item in his bag, the frosty interrogation and chilling probes, the battered egos and assassinated prides, not to mention the body scanners that leave nothing concealed however private a part may be.



Art is a higher type of knowledge than experience – (Aristotle in *Metaphysics*).

Khan's ordeal in the hands of airport officials tells the story well enough and *My Name Is Khan*'s theme aims to convey this reality with a view to generating a current of thought that could proffer correctional recommendations with regard to the sufferings of many "good people" who have religion and nationality in common with the few "bad people" who harbour terrorist motives. In the name of a war on terrorism, in mockingly anti-terrorist tendencies, the 'global' police have taken humanity on a journey into history. By re-establishing age-long concepts of apartheid and slavery as well as bare-faced racism together with bits and pieces of the colonial era which are really what the different nature of checks and scrutiny entail, the West – most adequately represented by the United States – has given theory further volume.

### **Matters Arising**

I think it's an exceptionally relevant time, as the unity of our nation is of paramount importance, and I am very happy to witness such a movement in front of my eyes. We are all coming together to fight for a common cause – called humanity. Everyone knows that terrorism has no religion and it will never have a religion. As a filmmaker, I believe that I have a social responsibility and I promise to fulfil that – *The Times of India* (2009).

The foregoing are the words of Director Karan Johar in response to the after-effects of the film as demonstrated by the **increased unification between Hindus and Muslims in India**. Such observation is credence to the success of the film beyond its monetary turnover. It brings to mind the Brechtian observation that:

Realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and **practical** issue and must be handled as such – as a matter of general human interest (Brecht: MacCabe, 1974: 45).

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