

ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to unveil the oriental aspects in sense of “othering” proposed by Edward Said in the movie *My name is Khan* (2010). The current study exhibits how the movie stands as a picture of East in America in particular to Muslim identity. The study has been accessed through qualitative mode of inquiry, probing the discourse analysis of the movie through visual semiotic analysis. The theoretical framework that supports the study is postcolonial theory. The study ends up discovering the oriental aspects in the movie and it also unfolds the distorted portrayal of Muslims in the East (America).

Key words: Orientalism, Edward Said, Muslims, Othering.

INTRODUCTION

The world knows that West has a very different image of East which is poles apart from reality. There is always a sense of otherness that exists between East and West. West has always tried to exhibit a very negative image of East in their movies, arts and writings. McLeod (2000) affirms that the orient is mostly delineated in a series of negative terms that serve to reinforce a sense of the West’s strength and superiority and if the West is taken as the throne of learning and knowledge, then it will be assumed that the orient is its counterpart and opposite and is the place of naiveté and ignorance.

Said (1979) proffers three claims for the aforementioned statement.

Firstly, he affirms that orientalism is an, esoteric disinterested and objective chain of ideas whereby the overall purpose of it is to serve political ends.

Secondly, he states that these tools are significant in helping the West to define its image and to build and maintain the “others.”

Thirdly, Said believes that orientalism has built up false description and representation of Islam and is a belief that it is possible to describe unconditionally the qualities of Islamic culture and the people within it.

My Name Is Khan (2010) is a Bollywood drama film about the life of Muslims in America after the collapse of World Trade Center in 9/11. It is delineated by a voyage of a Muslim who lives happily and peacefully in New York until the attack and how the life changes into a nightmare because of 9/11. This movie was released on 10 February 2010. The story revolves around the lives of Rizwan Khan, Mandira and their son Sam. They live a happy life until the attack of 9/11 which distorts and disfigures their lives. 9/11 paints a new but worse image of Islam and Muslims in America-leaving every Muslim to be identified as terrorist. Rizwan sets out on his journey to rid himself of the allegation that he is not a terrorist. Throughout the movie he says, “My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist.”

The study concerns the depiction of Orientalism in the movie *My name is Khan*, through which Muslims are depicted as ‘others’ in America after the attack of World Trade Center. The investigation pays close attention to the events, symbols and conversations which depict the sense of otherness in the movie. The theoretical framework opted for this study is Edward Said’s Orientalism which is an objective way of

seeing the East, for example, it exaggerates and distorts the distinction and differences of Arabs' and Eastern cultures as compared to that of the U.S and Europe. It states that everything Eastern is bad and exotic that Easterners need taking care of, that they are uncivilized and barbaric (Said, 1979). The methodology which has been chosen for this particular study is Visual Semiotic Analysis. Visual semiotic analysis tries to scoop out the implied and realistic elements present in the movie *My name is Khan*.

A number of researches have been conducted on Orientalism and *My name is Khan*. Orientalism has been studied using books and novels of the Westerners but the present study evaluates Orientalism in terms of symbols, dialogues, and conversations. The movie *My Name is Khan* has been worked upon using the theory of Orientalism of Edward Said by Balraj (2011), which has a very limited description of the theory and has only mentioned the Muslims in passing without lengthy descriptions. The present research has a different methodology than Balraj's, he has used simple analysis of the movie whereby the current study uses Visual Semiotic Analysis.

It is a very undeniable fact that West has always portrayed East using unsuitable adjectives. They have always constructed an identity of East which is merely away from reality. The concern of the study is to show how the Muslims are depicted as terrorists, what are the ways through which East Asia and Muslims' depictions are contributing to Said's theory of Orientalism (1979). The current study aims to center around the following two objectives: to see the orientalist aspects in the movie *My Name is Khan* and to assess how orientalism has been used to show the East in America, particularly the Muslims, in the movie *My Name is Khan*. The current study signifies the presence of Orientalism in the mass medium and in Hollywood, which has become the means to transfer information and facts to international viewers, and in this way a distorted version of East is being presented to the people worldwide. This study implies that Orientalism has not only been depicted in novels, dramas, poems, but has become a trend mass-media. The study rejects the common ideology of West about East in particular about Muslims. The current study is solely limited to the depiction of Muslims in the movie *My name is Khan (2010)*, approached by visual semiotic analysis and is supported by oriental aspect of "othering" proposed by Edward Said.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Balraj (2011) states that the media has a significant role and a pivotal ranking in society of today, and its omnipresence signifies the credentials that media has in spreading information about day to day issues to the masses of the world. The mass-communication does not only spread information, but has the potentials and ability to distort the viewers' understanding and perceptions about what is connotative and denotative reality. In recent years, Bollywood has taken a great interest in the depiction of Muslims in the movies. This paper tries to look at how Muslims are depicted in *My Name is Khan*, post 9/11 attack drawing on to Edward Said's 'orientalism' idea.

Contrary to the famous belief, Orientalism is still prominent in many well-known movies created in this modern era. Many young children that grew up and lived in present generation started their early years of life while being targeted by Orientalism whether they believe it or not. Disney cartoon movies, like *Aladdin*, *the thief of Bagdad* have always been favorites of many children, but what was never thought over or realized was that these movies depicted certain places of the world in a fixed and stereotypical way. After pondering over these movies again and again, one will really begin to take the Arabs that they are exactly like the characters of *Aladdin*. This not known sense of Orientalism in a child's brain is then strengthened when in fact visiting the Disneyworld, which makes it possible that when a child goes to the world, he will have the same orientalist lenses to see the world through (Mott, 2008).

Toe (2014) threw light on the historical evaluation of how learned men and scholars have taken use of Saidian Orientalism to evaluate and analyze the representation of Muslims, Middle East, the Arabs, and North Africa in the popular trends and culture of America from the revolutionary times to the present day. A new form of orientalism seems to be guiding a large part of the cultural production today where East is represented as polarized between darkness and light. By taking the example of representation of India, and analyzing the work of some contemporary documentary photographers who have worked on this country, the author tries to uncover the implications of this new discourse and finally advocates for an unorthodox use of the medium. (Calia, 2001). Wijngaarden (2015) examined the representation of the "Other" in Muslims in two movies and two novels: South African director Gavin Hood's movie *Rendition* (2007), British director Paul Greengrass' movie *United 93* (2006), U.S. author Don DE Lillo's *Falling Man* (2007), and Pakistani-British writer Nadeem Aslam *the Blind Man's Garden* (2013). This hybrid combination of 4 works is destined to show a range and a variety of representations and interpretations of and perception on the 9/11 attacks amongst international novelists and film directors. It has investigated if, and if so, to what extent, these four works succeed in countering Orientalist preconceptions and stereotypes, or if, instead, they reinforce and perpetuate them.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology chosen for this study is qualitative mode of inquiry. Qualitative mode has farther been approached through discourse analysis and it has been narrowed down to Visual Semiotic Analysis. Visual Semiotic Analysis is the approach in which dialogues, conversations and symbols are analyzed to take out the underlying meanings. The theory of Orientalism is applied to the Indian movie *My Name is Khan* (2010), in which the concept of 'othering' is emphasized. The unit of analysis is the whole movie which is *My Name is Khan* (2010). The theory which is selected to access this study is postcolonial theory which is squeezed down to Edward Said's orientalism. Basically orientalism is a discourse of seeing the orient, starting from Middle East all the way to Far East, it is the point of view of the westerners, erotizing and fantasizing the East, making stereotypical representation of the East. This study has only opted the aspect of "othering" from Edward Said's theory of orientalism.

DATA ANALYSIS

As the movie starts, we are made cognizant that a man is travelling somewhere reciting some verses from holy Quran. We can witness the contemptuous looks towards him from the people who are around him. This is the very first oriental aspect projected in this movie. He is despised by the other passengers because he recites verses which show that he is a Muslim. His recitation leads him to an investigation. He is taken away by the corps and is investigated for being a suspect. This refers to the idea of othering as we see that recitation of verses from holy Quran means that you are a suspect. While the investigation is in process, Rizwan Khan reveals that he has some message to convey to the president.

One of the officers mocks him and tells him, *“You want to tell the president where Usama is”*.

We encounter another fake identity set for the Muslims. Being a Muslim doesn't necessarily mean one knows Usama and second thing that meeting the president specifically doesn't show one knows about Usama and is giving the messages of his whereabouts to president. Finally, he misses a flight to Washington D.C. Because the next flight to Washington D.C is very late; the man decides to take a bus ride to reach Washington D.C. Meanwhile, we also come to know that this man wants to meet the president of America for some unknown reason. He starts writing a letter in which he addresses Mandira and tells her that he loves her. We develop an idea that he loves someone named Mandira.

He writes in his dairy, *“I told you that I will meet Mr. President, and I keep trying, keep trying”*. The film moves between past and present life of Rizwan Khan. With the development of the plot we come to know that this man is Rizwan Khan, we also come to know that his mother teaches him the basic difference between human as good humans and bad humans. She tries not to imply the idea of racism, ethnicity or religious differences on Rizwan Khan. Rizwan Khan is sponsored by his brother Zakir Khan who lives in America and is settled there. We are shown that people live very peacefully with one another. The Rizwan Khan goes to one of the motels for stay. The motel owner is a Hindu. Some Americans break into his motel and abuse him for being a Muslim and terrorist. He expresses his hate for Muslims in the following words:

“It's all happening because of Muslims. They blew up World Trade Centre six years back. And we are tolerating the shame of their deed here.”

The statement shows that other than Americans, the other non-native inhabitants too hated Muslims and didn't like to be identified with the word “Muslim”. But then when he feels guilty saying that after he asks Rizwan Khan to stay at his motel and Rizwan answers, *“I am a Muslim and I am not a terrorist”*. This illustrates the point that Muslims are generally given an identity which is quite a torture. And Rizwan Khan strives hard to throw away this constructed identity of Muslims.

Rizwan Khan falls in love with Mandira who is divorced and has a child namely Sam. Mandira and his son Sam shows no objection in having their last names changed to Khan. They have some American

neighbours and have very friendly bonds with one another. But the story takes a U-turn when Mandira receives a call from her neighbor Sera that the World Trade Center has been attacked.

It can be seen in the movie that what the immediate influences of the collapse of World Trade Center in America and in particular on Muslims are. The movie moves to the scene where people are donating money for the families of fire fighters who died in the incident of World Trade Center. Rizwan Khan is witnessed donating money for those departed souls' families. His presence in the memorial service actually shows his love for humanity but as he starts reciting verses for the departed souls, people around him throw him a scornful look and leave the place deeming him responsible for the death of many people. The Muslims are physically and mentally assaulted by Americans and they endure severe contempt. They are abused as terrorists and their shops are broken. The attack makes Muslims change their true identities in order to mitigate the level of torture they face by Americans. A lot of American Muslims change their names and Sikhs are assaulted too as they are mistaken for being Afghani. The movie here shows othering in terms of get up. Anybody who has a get up like a Muslim would be assaulted because their get up makes them terrorists. Sam isn't picked by the school van just because his last name is Khan. The school children start bullying Sam by placing the pictures of Usama in his cabin. He is also seen being attacked by group of children at school cursing him for being a Muslim. Mandira's beauty salon closes down as it has the name "Mandira Khan". The Muslims remove their beard and mustache and their ladies abandon putting on their veils. We also watch the scene where the teacher defines Islam in the following words:

"Of all the world's religions, Islam is the most violent and aggressive. It encourages killing or Jihad as they call in the name of God."

Mandira gets another job and the conversation is somewhat like this:

Mandira: I just want to clarify one thing. My last name is Khan. My husband is Muslim. Wouldn't that be a problem?

Lady: We will see you on Monday.

This conversation has another oriental aspect. We can observe that being a Muslim is equal to being a criminal almost. Mandira has to get it confirmed that her being wife of a Muslim man does not hinder her job. Mandira is invited for a dinner to her neighbor Sera whose husband is going to Afghanistan for war. Unfortunately, his dead body comes home and this makes his son Rise hate Sam and his family. Rise thinks it is Sam and his family who is responsible for the death of his father, Mark. He starts behaving very awkwardly to Sam. Sam tries to speak to Rise in the soccer ground but he is caught by a group of boys who beat Sam to death. Sam dies and the police officer tells Mandira that it was a religious attack. We see that even Mandira thinks of Muslims other way after the loss of her child.

Mandira tells Rizwan, *“We just killed him. All this is my fault. If I didn’t marry you, this would not happen. If Sam were a Rathore, he would not have died. He died because he was Khan. I should have never married a Muslim. He died because of you and your name.”*

Mandira in a fire of rage yells at Rizwan to leave her life. She also tells Rizwan not to return to her until he tells the president of America that he is not a terrorist.

Once again we move to the present where Rizwan Khan donates some amount to the drought stricken people of Africa. The lady looks so disrespectfully towards him and tells him, *“The dinner with president is five hundred dollars.”*

Lady: This is a Christians’ only event.

Rizwan: But it says it’s a fund raiser for the drought in Africa.

Lady: For Christians, honey.

Rizwan: Honey, please keep it for those who are not Christian in Africa.

This conversation now nails oriental aspects once again. The sense of othering is even kept while raising fund. The lady rejects the donation when she suspects Rizwan not to be a Christian. She tries to disparage his sense of humanity just because he isn’t a Christian. We spot another oriental aspect when Rizwan Khan goes to one of the mosques to offer his prayers. In this scene, a group of Muslims have been shown who are planning a jihad against Jews who kill Muslims in Palestine. This imposes sense of othering that Muslims are terrorists who are different from others. Wherever they are, they indulge in Jihad activities and are always busy in mapping plots to take revenge. But then we see that Rizwan Khan depicts a true Muslim in all aspects and informs the FBI about the illicit plan of that group. His information stops a tragedy from occurrence.

Rizwan Khan advances to one of the colleges where the president is expected to come. There is a huge crowd and a lot of reporters. The security is at full alert. As the president arrives, Rizwan Khan starts shouting, *“Mr. President, my name is Khan and I am not a terrorist.”* We again witness the fear of the word “terrorist”. The irony is that people do not focus on what he actually says, but they just shout the word “terrorist” and leave the college campus. Rizwan Khan is arrested and is put behind bars. He is asked if he knows Al-Qaida, he is shown pictures of different Al-Qaida members and is inquired about them. This shows that anybody who is a Muslim, he necessarily knows about Al-Qaida or the terrorist. The second question is that how can they torture someone without any evidence at hand. He is tortured because they discover that he is a Muslim. We see that after the two reporters try to help Rizwan Khan, none of the news channels show interest because he is a Muslim. Zakir says to news, *“We are told to report suspicious people and when we do, we are just put in the jails like my brother.”* His statement actually adds in the sense of othering. Muslims are deemed to be terrorists. Even when they report such people, they are not trusted and they are put in jails for the sense of their patriotism and humanity.

Nobody thinks what is wrong if a citizen wants to meet the president of his country. The question everyone has is why a Muslim wants to meet the president. He is released after a lot of people stand for him and later he is spotted helping people when Georgiana is hit by storm. Rizwan Khan then wins the hearts of millions not because he is a terrorist but because he is not a terrorist. He proves to be a solid rejection to whatever identity he is given and indeed builds up a positive identity of Muslims. His devotion to humanity inspires thousands of other human beings to reach Georgiana to rescue the remaining lives. He successfully wins the battle of his identity. He meets President Obama and tells him, “*My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist.*”

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The attempted study explores how oriental aspects have been projected in the Bollywood movie *My name is Khan*. Muslims have been deemed to be terrorists after the very incident of 9/11, the attacks on World Trade Center. Edward Said has talked about the sense of “othering” which means that West thinks East to be other, wild and violent. The movie *My name is Khan* so beautifully penetrates into the pain of millions of Muslims who are identified as terrorists. The movie has shown the oriental aspects in the attitudes of the people in America. It has shown the oriental aspects through the dialogues of characters, scenes and symbols like facial expressions of people towards Muslims in America. The movie has depicted oriental aspects after the incident of World Trade center. As the attack takes place by a group of so called Muslims, Muslims are treated in a way that is quite inhuman. Rizwan Khan is the man who ties the hope to prove that being Muslim does not make one terrorist. Islam is not the religion of violence and killing as projected by the West, but it is a religion of love, peace, humanity and equality. There is no concept of race, color, language or region in Islam, rather Islam only knows two divisions and that is good and bad human beings. We have also found that how the West identifies Muslims on the basis of their get up to be terrorists. It also portrays that West thinks that if one is a Muslim then it is an obligatory thing to know Usama and Al- Qaida. This research article illustrates that how still othering and oriental aspects are incorporated in movies in order to show what West thinks of East in particular about Islam and Muslims.

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