

Review

“My name is Khan and I am not a Terrorist”: Representation of Muslims in ‘My name is Khan’

Belinda Marie Balraj

Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia. E-mail: belinda@upnm.edu.my.

Accepted 22 March, 2011

The media plays a pivotal position in society today and its ubiquitous presence signifies the potential the media has in transferring information, about every day issues, to the masses. The media not only transfers information but has the ability to mold the viewers’ perceptions about what should and should not be a reality. In recent developments, Bollywood has taken an interest in the portrayal of Muslims in their movies. This paper will look at how Muslims are portrayed in ‘My Name is Khan’ (MNIK) post 9/11 attack using Edward Said’s ‘orientalism’ idea.

Key words: Representation, Islam, orientalism, media.

INTRODUCTION

The technology of the postmodern world, such as ubiquitous media, has accelerated and solidified the potential the media has in transferring information to the masses and also has the ability to mold the viewers’ perceptions about what should and should not be a reality. Although there are different media forms, ranging from traditional press to new electronic sources, their overall impact is evident through their widespread presence and the reliance placed on them as authentic purveyors of news and information (Conte, 2001).

The ‘other’ process or the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ paradigm in accordance to Edward Said’s study is reflected in the media discourse. Edward (2003, 1978: 1) uses the term orientalism as “a way of coming to terms with the orient that is based on the orient’s special place in European Western experience”. He explores how Europeans have developed and used an exteriority or representation of the orient, and not “natural depictions of the orient” (2003), although, he affirms that ‘orientalism’ is fundamentally a political doctrine (p. 204). Nonetheless, the media viewers believe this representation to be objective. By standardizing cultures of the orient, these representations have developed into stereotypes. The technology of the postmodern world, such as the media, has accelerated and solidified this process. Said further argues that the West has misrepresented the East and has made the orient its ‘other’. This paper will focus on the portrayal of Muslims as ‘the other’ in Bollywood films, and in particular on the movie ‘My Name is Khan’. This film was produced to tackle Indian Muslim identity politics

in the post 9/11 incidence in America. By applying Edward Said’s orientalism framework, this paper will put forward that the producers of media contents selectively choose a particular group to treat as ‘the other’.

MUSLIMS IN THE MEDIA

Cottle (2006) argues that the media hold a powerful position in conveying, explaining and articulating specific discourses that help represent (and misrepresent) minority groups. Representations of Islam and Muslim in the media have been of late a topic of discussion amongst scholars. A substantial body of literature and research has illustrated that the images and discourses relating to Islam/Muslims in mainstream Western and Middle Asia media tend to be negative. This literature includes studies examining the concept of orientalist discourses, such as those by Said (1981, 1996) and the specific relationship between media and Islam, for example by Ahmed (1994).

As van der Veer (2004) states ‘being a Muslim and being an Arab has been historicized instead of being understood from some perspective as an essential Islam or Arabness.’ This may be due to the fact that some individuals with Muslim background or names in particular commit hijacking, suicide bombing or *jihad* using the name of Islam (Nurullah, 2010).

Even at present times, the media links any act of violence to Muslims and Islam specifically based on

preconceived stereotypes by the media. Islam and Muslims are historically looked down upon by the West and Middle Asia. Stereotypes about Islam are not new to Western culture. This problem can be traced back to 1400 years. At that time, Islam and Christianity were involved in the 'crusades' in the 1100's and in the Ottoman and Moorish control in Europe. Islam started to threaten the position of the Christian Church and the ruling class. The Western elites, mainly the governments and the churches, became highly involved in making sure that negative images were presented about Islam to their counter parts. As a result, not only were battles fought against Islam, but also a war of words was initiated to make sure that Islam would not have any converts or sympathizers in the West. These kinds of actions and feelings that the West had long ago still seem to be the case in the West today (Hassan, 1995).

However, the negative portrayal of Muslims on media began intensively after World War II, and in particular from the 1960s onwards. With the development of media technology in the West, the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims on media reached the masses around the world, strengthening the phony propaganda. The media coverage of the Iranian revolution is one of such examples. Edward Said has pointed out this fact in his 1981 book 'Covering Islam.' In his book, *Covering Islam*, Said states:

"The term Islam as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing, but in fact, it is in part a fiction, in part an ideological label, and in part a minimal designation of a religion called Islam." Today, Islam is peculiarly traumatic news in the West. During the past few years, especially since events in Iran caught European and American attention so strongly, the media have therefore covered Islam: they have portrayed it, characterized it, analyzed it, given instant courses on it, and consequently they have made it known. Nevertheless, this coverage is completely misleading, and a great deal in this energetic coverage is far from the objective material. In many instances, Islam has licensed not only patent inaccuracy, but also expressions of unrestrained ethnocentrism, cultural and even racial hatred, with deep yet paradoxically free-floating hostility.

There are two other media theories that reiterate Said's (2003) framework: agenda-setting theory and cultivation theory. The agenda-setting theory of the media refers to "the media's capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the mind of the people" (Severin and Tankard, 2000: 219). Thus, the media's continuous repetition of Muslims as terrorist may lead to the belief that Muslims are really terrorists and this opens up rooms for hatred. In this way, the agenda-setting role of mass media causes an issue to be elevated in importance to the public (Severin and Tankard, 2000). The media not only set the agenda for public discussion, but also they strongly suggest how readers should think and talk about ethnic, cultural and

religious affairs (Van Dijk, 1991). Wanta and Wu (1992) found that the more exposure individuals had to the news media, the more they tended to be concerned about the issues receiving heavy media coverage. As such, the media content has the power to mould the perceptions of the public.

George Gerbner and his colleagues developed the 'cultivation theory' to explain the effects of television viewing on people's perceptions, attitudes and values (Severin and Tankard, 2000). Gerbner et al. (1994) argue that heavy viewers of television are being monopolized and subsumed by other sources of information, ideas and consciousness; this produces the cultivation or shaping of a common worldview, common roles and values most frequently depicted on TV. They discovered that heavy television viewers often give answers that are closer to the way the world is portrayed on television (Severin and Tankard, 2000). In this way, the media cultivate the impression on people's mind to look into the nature of reality based on the window of media representation of issues (Nurullah, 2010). This led to the notion that the act of terrorism that happened anywhere in the world was linked to Muslims, although 'many of those attacks were later found to be committed by Christian and Zionist fundamentalists' (Nurullah, 2010). A crucial point in the account of negative media portrayal of Muslims happened in the post-9/11 event, whereby Islam was publicly associated with terrorism, and Muslims as terrorists. Muslims encountered difficult times boarding planes into America due to their attire, appearance and name.

The continuous negative portrayal of Muslims in the media has led many Muslims to believe the media as the enemy in stereotyping them (Siddiqi, 1999). The media has thus become 'the new state religion' whereby the values and ideas of religion is now controlled and manifested by the media (Hoover, 2006). As Mohamad (2002) notes, 'The almost absolute power of the western media corrupts almost absolutely.' The stereotypes against Muslims had been in-built in the US media and it is really an unintelligent idea to refute it (Julian Hollick in Razak and Abdul, 2002). Furthermore, American media covers terrorism in a way that ignores what "we" do and focuses on the behavior of "them" (Dunn et al., 2005).

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 Muslims 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.

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 sense of whether the Muslim characters have evolved or not."

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 this specific clientele (Hussain, 2007).

Orientalism

Taking the late 18th century as a very roughly defined starting point, orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the orient - by teaching it, setting it and ruling over it: in short, orientalism is a Western style of dominating, restructuring and having authority over the orient (Said, 2003). McLeod (2000) in his book 'Beginning Postcolonialism' discusses Said's theory of orientalism.

McLeod (2000) states that the orient is frequently described in a series of negative terms that serve to buttress a sense of the West's superiority and strength. If the West is assumed as the seat of knowledge and learning, then it will follow that the orient is the place of ignorance and naiveté.

Said (2003) offers three claims for the aforementioned statement. Firstly, he states that orientalism is an objective, disinterested and esoteric set of ideas whereby the overall function of it is to serve political ends. Secondly, he sees these tools as important in assisting the West to define its image and to establish and maintain the "others." Thirdly, Said claims that orientalism has produced false description of Islam and a belief that it is possible to define unconditionally the qualities of Islamic culture and the people within it. Assumptions were often made about inherent 'racial' characteristics of orientals: stock figures included the murderous and violent Muslims, the lazy Indian and the inscrutable Chinaman (McLeod, 2000).

MY NAME IS KHAN AND THE REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIMS

In the movie "My Name is Khan" (MNIK), Bollywood superstar, Shah Rukh Khan (SRK), plays the role of 'Rizwan' Khan. He is seen in the opening of the movie struggling to fit in at school and at home - classmates taunt him and his brother is jealous of the special attention his mother and others pay Rizwan. His mother teaches a lesson in morality that haunts the rest of the film. Rizwan's mother teaches her son that the categories of "Muslim" and "Hindu" are not coherent categories with which to judge others, but suggests that categories of "good" and "evil" are more useful. This suggestion then becomes informative to the film, where we as humans are constantly qualifying other Muslims and Hindus with those terms throughout the film. In this movie, Rizwan is portrayed as a character suffering from Asperger's syndrome. In portraying Rizwan with this syndrome, it places Rizwan as 'the other', in that no Muslim can quite redeem himself or even Islam, unless he is mentally or emotionally challenged. The movie provided much impact to educationist that a panel had been set up to discuss the impact the movie had on viewers.

In 2010, The Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies held a panel in Cubberley Auditorium to discuss the relationship between cinematic cultures, religious actions and identity, which was entitled "Naming the Muslim: Cinema and its Religions". Saba Mahmood, an associate professor of cultural anthropology at UC-Berkeley, stated:

"I found most striking the commentary on the portrayal of a 'good Muslim' and the comparison in the film of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims," she said. As this is a central theme in the film, one of the panelists' interpretation, was unique in that it mentioned that the film depicted the necessity for a 'good Muslim man' to be mentally handicapped. Although I did not always agree, but it was a striking interpretation."

The director could have chosen SRK to play a normal 'running round the trees' hero character, but then chooses to portray the main character as someone who is weak and unable to represent himself. It seems here that the director has chosen the role of the West in becoming the 'orient' and suppressing the Muslim hero as the 'other'. The film uses melodrama as a cleverly disguised strategy to highlight the bias against the Muslims underlining that the victimization and oppression of the protagonist is not because he is autistic, but because he is a Muslim. The director places the main character in a position to garner sympathy and make the audience feel that he is victimized due to the character being a Muslim.

With the death of his mother, Rizwan ends up working for his brother in a Muslim cosmetic shop in the US. There, he met Mandira, a Hindu protagonist with a son. Rizwan marries Mandira amidst communal conflict

around the question of religion. Their life is one of happiness until the September 9, 2001 attack. In the wake of the attack, Muslims in America became 'the other.' Vandals looted Muslim-owned stores. A teacher tells her class, including the young couple's son, that "of the entire world's religions Islam is the most violent." Rizwan's sister in law faces discrimination too in her college campus, whereby a man rips off her headscarf and tells her to get out of his country. Mandira goes out of business and starts looking for a job. When she finally finds one, she feels compelled to clarify her circumstances upfront.

Every Muslim was seen in hatred and the crux of the story began when Mandira's son, Sam, was murdered in school by the older white kids. This was due to Sam's best friend's (a white) father being murdered in Afghanistan, while covering the Iraq war. When Mandira finds out from the police that her son was a victim of racial hate, she blamed Rizwan for the death of her son implying that if he was not a Muslim, her son would not have been dead. The film here portrays the Muslim in a bad light. Rather than blaming the terrorist that bombed the Twin Towers, Mandira blames her Muslim husband for being just a Muslim with the last name Khan. Mandira charges him with the task of informing the President that he in fact, is not a terrorist and he is not to return to her until he does this. Here, Rizwan once gain faces discrimination for his religion.

In order to redeem himself with Mandira, he is forced to see the President of the US and prove to the president that even though he is a Muslim, he is not a terrorist. If this is the case, does the director demand that all Muslims should take the journey to the US to redeem themselves and to prove that being a Muslim does not mean that you are only a terrorist?

Rizwan, emotionally troubled, attempts to catch a flight from San Francisco to Washington DC. Carrying a heavy backpack and reciting Islamic prayers to himself as he stands in line to get his bag x-rayed, he is pulled aside by security officers, who proceed to strip-search, manhandle and harshly interrogate him. In this scene, Rizwan is the 'other' as he is looked down upon based on his religion and syndrome by the West. The security officers have somewhat bestowed upon themselves the right to manhandle a human for just being a Muslim. When this ordeal is over, an officer asks Rizwan, what his mission to Washington is. To see the president, he replies, to deliver a simple message: "My name is Khan, and I am not a terrorist."

When Khan finally catches up with President Bush at a rally, he is mistaken for a terrorist and whisked away to a world of handcuffs, windowless cells and clanging doors. His captors subjected the pious and gentle beauty product salesman - made particularly sensitive to visual and aural stimulation by his autism - to freezing cold, sleep deprivation under harsh lights and screaming interrogators (Sadan and Dhume, 2010). It was only

through the efforts of a couple of well-meaning journalists of Indian origin and coalitions of concerned citizens that Rizwan was freed.

Khan is finally released from prison and catches the attention of the president who then invites him up on stage to profess what Rizwan has to say. The story ends with Rizwan being looked upon as the hero.

CONCLUSION

The movie, MNIK, does portray Muslims as the "other" whereby just by having the name 'Khan', one is seen as a terrorist. MNIK does portray the effect of 9/11 and the torments the Muslims in the US had to go through to prove their innocence. Despite the allegations that although, there are Arabs and Muslims who are terrorists, not every Muslim is a terrorist. The media therefore plays a very powerful role in moulding viewers' perception on reality. Thus, the gate keepers or editors should play a pivotal role in selecting representations that are appropriate for viewers without judging a religion or person in particular.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed A (1994). *Living Islam*. London: BBC Books. p. 9.
- Cottle S (2006). *Mediatized Conflict*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press. p. 59.
- Conte W (2001). British media portrayals of Muslims in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Retrieved April 01, 2009, from <http://mit.edu/cms/reconstructions/communications/ukmuslims.html>
- Dunn E, Moore M, Nosek B (2005). The war of the words: How linguistic differences in reporting shape perceptions of terrorism. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*. 5(1): 67-86.
- Gerbner G, Gross L, Morgan M, Signorelli N (1994). Growing up with television: The cultivation perspective. In J. Bryant & D. Zillman (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum Associates. pp. 17-41.
- Hassan A (1995). Invitation to Islam: Islamic Stereotypes in Western MassMedia. <http://psirus.sfsu.edu/IntRel/IRJournal/sp95/hassan.html>
- Hoover SM (2006). *Religion in the media age*. London and New York: Routledge. p. 18.
- Hussain W (2007). "Media and Minorities: A Love-Hate Bond" in M.A. Jawaid, K.N. Jehanger and Shankar Bose (eds), *Minorities of India: Problems and Prospects*, ICCSR and Manak, New Delhi. p. 388.
- Islam M (2007). Papers Imagining Indian Muslims Looking Through the Lens of Bollywood Cinema - *Academia.edu.mht*. pp.403-422.
- McLeod J (2000) *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester University Press. New York. pp. 2-20.
- Mohamad M (2002). Enhancing the understanding of Islam for the media. In A. A. Razak, A. B. Abdul Majeed (Eds.), *Enhancing the understanding of Islam for the media*. Kuala Lumpur: IKIM. pp. 1-11
- Nurullah (2010). Analysis Of '24' TV Series And Portrayal Of Muslims In Media. <http://www.eurasiareview.com/201006203593/analysis-of-24-tv-series-and-portrayal-of-muslims-in-media.html>.
- Sadan S, Dhume ST (2010). My Name is Khan. *Moviefone*. <http://www.moviefone.com/movie/my-name-is-khan/1442617/main>.
- Said E (1981). *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*. New York: Pantheon Books. p. 81
- Severin WJ, Tankard JW (2000). *Communication theories: Origins, methods, and uses in the mass media* (5th ed.). New York: Longman. p. 219.
- Siddiqi A (1999). Islam, Muslims, and the American media. In A. Haque

- (Ed.), *Muslims and Islamization in North America: Problems & prospects*. Maryland: Amana Publications. p. 204.
- Wanta W, Wu YC (1992). Interpersonal communication and the agenda-setting process. *Journalism Q.*, 69: 847-855.
- Van Dijk T (1991). *Racism and the press*. London: Sage Publications.
- Van der Veer P (2004). War propaganda and the liberal public sphere. In van der Veer P (this reference is given as such in the paper I viewed for this study). pp. 9-21.