

Precarious Inclusions; Re-Imagining Disability, Race, Masculinity and Nation in *My Name Is Khan*

Nadia Kanani

York University, Canada

Abstract: This paper will critically examine how dominant cultural scripts about disability are reinforced and complicated in the Bollywood film, *My Name is Khan* (Johar, 2010). An examination of the film's themes demonstrates that *My Name is Khan* allows for a nuanced analysis of disability, race, masculinity and nation.

Keywords: disability, race, nation

Introduction

In February 2010, the Bollywood film *My Name is Khan*, directed by Karan Johar, was released to a transnational audience. The film spans the pre and post 9/11 era and tells the story of an epic journey undertaken by protagonist Rizvan Khan, an Indian Muslim immigrant to the United States who has been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. The film documents how the changing political climate in the United States at this time impacts Khan's life, and the lives of his family. *My Name is Khan* reflects on state-sanctioned violence and the ongoing discrimination against Muslims (and the South Asian diaspora), illustrating the links between criminalization, racial profiling, and the War on Terror. The film also comments on the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Katrina in predominantly African American communities, as well as the American state's inadequate response to it. In highlighting the racialized nature of citizenship in the United States,¹ *My Name is Khan* is a decidedly political, albeit fantastical, film.

My Name is Khan presents a different perspective of diasporic experience than many Bollywood films by focusing its narrative on the challenges faced by immigrants and racialized citizens in the United States. While Bollywood cinema is characterized by its focus on the diaspora's desires, and the anxieties associated with living in a global modernity (Punathambekar & Kavoori, 2008), the films infrequently engage with the day-to-day struggles faced by new immigrants, or their second generation children, in the West (Mishra, 2002). Rather, Bollywood cinema tends to re-imagine and re-produce the diaspora as a "successful," "integrated" yet "connected to its roots" community, a community that enjoys the full rewards of the American dream. As a result, these romanticized representations of the diaspora fail to account for the systemic racism, deskilling, and impoverishment experienced by racialized immigrants. However, Bollywood cinema remains in a position to challenge the distorted representations of racialized people that have become commonplace in Western media.²

Historical representations of Western encounters with the 'East' have cast the inhabitants of these areas as primitive, uncivilized, irrational, violent, dangerously sexual, and as the racial and cultural "other" to the civilized, rational, and morally superior white European (Said, 1978). Imperialist ideologies, which reproduced these discourses about the racialized other in art, literature, and academic publications, have been used to justify and legitimize Western territorial expansion (Said, 1978). These historic constructions of the racialized other continue to shape

contemporary depictions of Muslims and South Asians in the West. In fact, the war on terror has led to an intensification of these orientalist constructions, and to the representation of terrorism as inherently linked to Islam, and to the racialized bodies perceived as Muslim (Mamdani, 2004; Puar & Rai, 2002). By centering and celebrating the object of the imperialist gaze, and exposing orientalist constructions of the racialized other, Bollywood cinema has the potential to subvert the West's representations of the South Asian diaspora, and of the Islamic "other" (Thussu, 2008).

A preliminary viewing of *My Name is Khan* reveals that, like many Bollywood films, it elides the socio-political reality of many racialized people living in the United States. Certainly, at its core, *My Name is Khan* is a story about heroic overcoming, a story of love and human triumph. Rizvan Khan (who is depicted as autistic) is portrayed as overcoming the challenges his disability presents in order to participate in a nuclear family structure, contribute to a family business, and travel across the United States, by foot, bus, train, and plane, to meet the country's President. Khan also triumphs in face of the violence, intense racism, and Islamophobia that characterizes the period following 9/11, surviving both incarceration and brutal torture. Rizvan Khan's relationship with Mandira, his wife, also tells a story of triumph, as their marriage survives the presumed challenges of an inter-faith relationship and the pain of their son's death, the result of a brutal schoolyard beating by Islamophobic schoolmates. Finally, *My Name is Khan* tells a story of the United States' citizenry being able to overcome and over-throw the tyranny of the Bush era through the election of President Barack Obama. The centrality of this notion of overcoming to the film's narrative is underscored by the film's thematic song 'Hum honge Kamyab' a Hindi adaptation of one of the US civil rights movement's anthems, 'We shall Overcome'.

In spite of this overarching theme, *My Name is Khan* also provides a critical representation of American nationalist discourses of citizenship by confronting the precarious inclusion of racialized immigrants in the United States. This paper will examine these representations, and explore the contradictions that are central to the portrayal of disability, race, masculinity, and nationhood in the film. The first section of the paper will discuss the cinematic tropes of disability that are relied on in *My Name is Khan* to further the film's narrative. It will argue that disability is used as a narrative device to underscore epiphanic moments in the film, and as a means of social critique. The second section of the paper will analyze how representations of disability, race, masculinity, and sexuality are simultaneously reinforced and disrupted in the film. This section of the paper will explore how the mutually constituted nature of disability, race, gender, and sexuality are rendered visible in the film, and how the relationships between these categories are articulated through constructions of the terrorist body. In bringing these discussions together, this paper will demonstrate that *My Name is Khan* allows for a nuanced analysis of disability and the nation. Moreover, it will illustrate that representations of disability in popular culture provide a critical means through which understandings of disability can be both troubled and enriched.

Representing Disability in *My Name is Khan*

Cinematic tropes of disability, broadly defined, have commonly relied on the spectacular and on narratives of exceptionalism in their portrayal of disabled characters. Although much of

the research on filmic representations of disability has focused on Hollywood movies, there are clear parallels between these constructs and those employed in Bollywood film. As the works of Martin F. Norden (2001) and Paul Longmore (2001) on representations of disability show, popular culture's representations of disabled people have often spoken to the fears, prejudices, and misunderstandings about disability that are held by mainstream society. For example, depictions of disability in popular film have frequently associated disability with criminality or villainy, with loss of control and emotional maladjustment, and with the loss of humanity (Longmore, 2001). At the same time, some representations of disability, seemingly more positive characterizations, communicate well-worn stories of achievement 'against all odds' (Longmore, 2001). While these narratives may seem more humanizing, they remain problematic in that their portrayal of disability as an individualized phenomenon constructs disability as a personal setback requiring emotional coping and acceptance. Furthermore, the representation of disability as an individualized problem to be overcome through grit and determination conceals the oppressive social forces that shape disabled people's experiences.

Representations of autism in mainstream cinema (in films such as *Rain Man* and *Mercury Rising*), although less frequently analyzed in disability studies, also rely on formulaic depictions of autistic characters. As Baker (2007) demonstrates, autistic characters are often portrayed in film as endearing, innocent, attractively quirky, and vulnerable, and as endowed with special powers or abilities, such as superhuman mathematical skills. These traits, regularly depicted as the redeeming qualities of an otherwise troubling character, are seen as features that distinguish autism from other forms of cognitive disabilities. In addition, since autism does not usually present in the visual terms required by film, excessive physical movement is often used as a means to signal disability in autistic characters (Murray, 2007). These popular representations of the quirks, special abilities, and physicality of autistic characters bear little relationship to the experiences of most people labeled as autistic. Rather, they contribute to common misconceptions about autism, and do little to challenge the dehumanization that people with cognitive disabilities regularly experience.

In *My Name is Khan*, the narrative devices commonly used to tell the story of autism, and of disability more generally, are also present in the depiction of Rizvan Khan. Scenes picturing his childhood reveal that Khan has difficulty understanding social conventions, that the nuance of language can be difficult for him to understand, and that he dislikes physical contact, even with those people that he loves most. At the same time, Khan is portrayed as having the ability to "repair almost anything," anything mechanical that is. However, the representations of his skills at building and repairing complex machinery reduce Khan to an almost machine-like figure himself, robotic with exaggerated movements. His distinct walk, exaggerated and stiff, with his head leaning slightly to one side, and the comedic use of verbal repetition in the film, which Khan seems to do automatically, similarly contribute to the construction of a machine-like persona.

These common tropes of autism are relied upon in a scene in the film where Khan decodes a word-find puzzle, correctly identifying all of the hidden words before the other participants in the game are able to find even one. Significantly, Khan's decoding skills have not, up until that moment in the film, been revealed to the audience. Yet the scene produces no dissonance in the viewer, as it draws seamlessly on assumptions about autism that have become

almost naturalized through popular culture. Fixing things, and solving coded puzzles, are presented as innate skills for Khan rather than something he learns over time. This portrayal, while reproducing common misunderstandings of autism, makes Khan legible to the audience as autistic.

Despite the use of these dominant tropes of disability, Khan is also portrayed in contradictory ways throughout the film. Although his disability remains visible, through visual cues and the use of verbal repetition, at many points in the film his disability is no longer the focal point. As is illustrated through Khan's interactions with many of the characters that are meeting him for the first time on his journey throughout the US, his disability or "quirks" elicit little or no surprise. In fact, disability in these scenes is rendered almost unremarkable despite the fact that the audience is made to feel that disability always structures Khan's behavior (again through cues such as verbal repetition or exaggerated movements). In this way, the use of disability as a narrative device in the film is complicated through the rendering of Khan's disability as almost mundane at some points, and highly visible the next.

Disability, deployed in this manner, is often used to underscore epiphanic moments in film, moments that present a social critique and inspire self-reflexivity in the audience (Quayson, 2007). The use of disability to return the gaze on the audience and their potential inaction in face of national crises is one example of how disability is used for the purpose of social critique in *My Name is Khan*. The inadequate societal response to Hurricane Katrina, and the abandonment of impoverished black citizens by the state, is one of many social commentaries the film presents. The critique of the state's and of American citizens' inaction is clear in the scenes that depict Rizvan Khan's return to the fictional hurricane-hit town Wilhemina. Earlier in the film, Mama Jenny and Joel had taken Rizvan into their home in Wilhemina, Georgia, providing him with food, clean clothes, a place to stay, and a place to talk about the loss of his son.³ Upon hearing of the hurricane, soon after his release from a detention center, Khan rushes to Wilhemina and helps to rescue and rebuild the town. Khan's actions inspire other characters in the film to join him, leading to a dramatic scene where dozens of people are seen wading through chest-deep water, carrying food and supplies for the town's residents. Although disability in this scene is not rendered visible through the cues that were previously relied on, the audience is keenly aware that while Khan directs the rebuilding of town structures, it is his superhuman skill of being able to 'repair almost anything' that enables him to restore the town's infrastructure. At the same time his actions, all the more notable due to his disability, force the other characters in the film (and presumably the audience) to question their own indifference to the struggles of their neighbours.

Although the drama of such scenes are quite compelling, what is most intriguing about the contradictory use of disability in the film is the way in which it renders the relationship between race, disability, masculinity, and nation visible. Of further interest is the way in which the film's narrative works to overcome the troubling excesses presented by the disabled and masculine Muslim body by portraying Khan as a respectable heteronormative and multicultural citizen and, thus, a viable protagonist. This complex depiction of Khan, and of race, disability, masculinity, and nationalism in the film, will be considered in the following discussion.

Re-Imagining Disability, Race, Masculinity and Nation through *My Name is Khan*

Through the cinematic representation of disability in *My Name is Khan*, we see that Khan's character is shaped through racialized, heteropatriarchal (heterosexual patriarchy)⁴, and nationalist orders. And yet, the film continues to challenge these depictions, calling our attention to the ways in which disability, masculinity, and race structure each other, while at the same time highlighting the ways in which the disabled, racialized, gendered and Muslim body must be disciplined in order to be folded into the racialized heteronormative nation (heteronormativity, in this context, refers to the racialized, gendered, and sexualized ideals that underwrite normative, state-sanctioned, middle and upper-class heterosexuality; see Cohen, 2007; Ferguson, 2007).

The opening scene of *My Name Is Khan* begins with a dark screen that reads; San Francisco, November 2007. Next, we see a brown-skinned man sitting in front of the computer, typing and taking notes. A close up shot of the computer screen shows that he is looking up President Bush's travel itinerary. The scene shifts rapidly and we see the man again, carrying only a backpack, arriving at the San Francisco airport. He goes to the counter, purchases a ticket, and proceeds toward the security check. His walking is stilted, his body is stiff, and his head is cocked to one side. The man avoids other people in the airport, deliberately walking at a great distance from them, swerving dramatically away from approaching travelers. Arriving at the airport security check, he stands in line waiting for his turn. The man seems nervous, rocking back and forth on his feet, playing with the rocks that he holds in his hand, and muttering to himself. As his utterances become clearer, we hear that he is repeating a prayer in Arabic over and over again, and while the prayer itself is more difficult to discern we can hear him say *Allah* several times. The woman in line in front of him also hears him speaking to himself and turns around, eyeing him suspiciously.

Not surprisingly, the man is quickly pulled out of the line by a security guard who directs him to an office. White male security guards search through the man's belongings with gloved hands, holding up his taqiyah (a Muslim prayer cap), thereby visually confirming the man is indeed a Muslim. We see the man in the next shot, his shirt and jacket have been removed but he is wearing an undershirt and pants. The security guards bend him over a desk and perform a physical search. The man squints and grimaces as the guards touch him, he's clearly distressed, extremely uncomfortable, angry even. The guards pull at the man's hair and repeatedly and forcefully push his head down, forcing his body to remain bent over the desk. He is then told to open his mouth and while one of the security guard probes his oral and nasal cavities violently, with gloved fingers, the restrained man looks wildly around the room. After the search the man continues looking distressed as he rocks back and forth on his feet.

The scene then cuts to the next shot, where the man is fully clothed again. The security guard in charge looks at the man's plane ticket; an Autism alert card with his name and picture has been included with his plane ticket and boarding pass. We know now that this man is Rizvan Khan. The guards have searched through his records and declared that he is 'clean'. Khan is told that he is free to go and the audience is reassured that this seemingly suspicious character is innocent.

However, rather than responding gratefully to the guards, Khan states that his flight has already departed, that he's lost the money he spent on the flight, and that now he will have to take the bus to Washington, DC. The security guard, who until now has spoken in an aggressive

manner with Khan, changes his tone and speaks to him condescendingly, demanding to know why Khan wants to go to Washington, DC. Khan tells him that it is because he wants to meet the President and convey a message. The guards laugh derisively and ask him whether his message to the president is that he knows where Osama bin Laden is hiding. Khan, however, responds to their mockery with sincerity, saying “oh no no no, that is not my message... I have to say to him. My name is Khan. And I am not a terrorist” (Johar, 2010).

Through this dramatic opening scene, *My Name is Khan* can be understood as powerfully speaking back to mainstream discourses about terrorism that pathologize and criminalize Muslim men. In the absence of the well-known and widely circulated visual signifiers of the Islamic terrorist; the flowing beard, the turban, and the AK-47 (Rai, 2004), the film relies on other cues that enable the audience to read Khan as a potential threat. Certainly, Khan’s research on the President of the United States’ itinerary and his last minute ticket purchase become increasingly suspicious as he makes his way through the airport with only one small piece of luggage: a backpack. However, the most critical signifiers in this scene, the stilted walking, physically dodging other travelers while moving through the airport, the continuous reiteration of the same prayer, and the seemingly nervous gestures of rocking back and forth on one’s own feet and playing with stones, illustrate how discourses about the terrorist body (that are racialized and gendered) are articulated with, and through, representations of disability and pathology. Indeed, it is specifically those behaviors that render Khan legible as autistic in the film, the excessive physical movement, the avoidance of physical contact, and the verbal repetition, that allow the audience to know him as a potential terrorist in the opening scene. To be sure, disability is used as a narrative device in this scene, as in several others, to articulate a critique of the racial profiling experienced by brown-skinned men. However, what is most significant about this scene is how the mapping of constructions of disability, race, and masculinity are rendered visible on the presumably terrorist body.

The association of cognitive inferiority with irrationality, criminality, social threat, and madness has had a long history. To be clear, I am not arguing that cognitive disability, or autism, and madness are the same, but rather that these constructions are fluid and that they work with, and run through, each other. Cognitive disability and madness can be understood as being mutually constituted with race, gender and sexuality, (that is, as shaped through, and intertwined with, constructions of race, gender, and sexuality) (Jarman, 2012; Stubblefield, 2007; Waldron, 2002). Furthermore, a historical mapping of these constructs illustrates that cognitive inferiority and madness are linked to colonial tropes of both the immoral, perverse Oriental and the uncivilized, degenerate primitive (Rai, 2004; Waldram, 2004).

As Amit Rai (2004) has demonstrated, historic ideas about Muslim irrationality and the abnormal psyche have been drawn upon and revitalized in the construction of the Islamic terrorist. The figure of the Muslim terrorist, constituted through discourses of race, gender, disability, and sexuality, is posited against Western colonial notions of the ‘normal’ psyche (Puar & Rai, 2002). Moreover, the terrorist, whose genealogy lies in the racialized and sexualized monstrous figures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, becomes, a projection of the racist fantasies of the West. The terrorist is thus represented as a perverse, homophobic, masculine-effeminate subject, produced through both a failed masculinity and a failed heterosexuality (Puar & Rai, 2002).

The pathologized “psyche” of the terrorist has become the focus of multiple sites of investigation and fields of knowledge production, including the psy disciplines (psychiatry, psychology, and related disciplines). As Howell (2007) illustrates, the psy disciplines have specifically been called upon to render the terrorist, intelligible. Acts of terrorism, in this context, are understood as “...a symptom for the deviant psyche, the psyche gone awry, or the failed psyche; the terrorist enters the stage as an absolute violation” (Rai, 2002, 547). Critically, it is this particular framing of terrorism in relation to cognitive inferiority and madness that allows for the visual cues of cognitive disability, circulated through media and popular culture, to be linked to the embodiment of the terrorist.

It is also important to note that the terrorist figure is a regulatory construct, that is, a construct that allows for the disciplining of particular bodies. Depictions of the monster terrorist enable a disciplining of people of color with the view of creating docile patriots and good citizens (Puar & Rai, 2002). In particular, the construction of the monster terrorist demands a management of the body, and compliance to a set of normalized behavioral and social codes that become linked to the performance of good citizenship. As Puar and Rai state “such monsters, through their very example, provide patriotism with its own pedagogies of normalization”(2002, 136). In the film’s opening scene, it is Khan’s failure to comply with these normalized social codes, his failure to discipline his deviant racialized body, which brings him to the attention of airport security. In this scene, it is the excessive physicality of the brown-skinned masculinized body that inspires terror, and that renders Khan suspect.

Given these widely circulated representations of terrorism, the film *My Name is Khan* must contend with the spectre of the terrorist, and with the construct of a pathological and perverse masculinity, that haunts Muslim and brown-skinned men. In this context, how does the film render Khan’s disabled and racialized masculinity not only relatable but heroic? How is the threat of a dangerous, disabled, Muslim masculinity, which shadows Khan, contained? In the film we see that Khan becomes safely folded into the ideals of national citizenship, and relatable to the audience as a respectable multicultural citizen first, through the disciplining of his excessive sexuality and perverse masculinity, and second, by positioning him in relation to the bad and hate-driven Muslim male.

Narratives of degeneracy, sexual deviance, and sexual menace are common to the racialized constructions of cognitive disability (Jarman, 2012) and the Islamic terrorist. The normalized psyche, on the other hand, is linked to the proper performance of domestic life (Puar & Rai, 2002). The nuclear family unit, which has been a key iconography of the modern nation-state, has further embedded the links between sexuality and domesticity, connecting them to citizenship and patriotic duty. Importantly, because both the terrorist and the cognitively disabled individual have been so fully excised from the national body politic, their entry into spaces of domesticity becomes cause for moral panic. As a result, Khan’s racialized, disabled, Muslim and masculinized body presents a site of considerable trouble, one that must be contained through a heteronormative family structure.

The contradictory construction and containment of Khan’s potentially threatening sexuality is particularly evident in the depiction of Khan and Mandira’s wedding night. The scene that follows Khan and Mandira’s wedding shows Khan and Mandira sitting up in bed, fully

clothed. Mandira turns to Khan, looking slightly concerned, and says, “Khan, we can’t do this without touching.” The apprehension Mandira feels is evident, as the audience knows that Khan does not like being touched. However, to both the audience and Mandira’s surprise, Khan replies, “I know, I know... yes I know, I have read it in this book; Intercourse for Dumbos.” Mandira looks hesitant while Khan giggles and says “nice pictures.” Mandira laughs also and Khan says to her, “I think we should do it. Now. I think we should do it now.” Mandira shakes her head and interjects “one minute...” but Khan interrupts her with “Oh, no, no, no, not one minute. It will take longer than one minute.” The scene ends with both Khan and Mandira laughing. The subsequent scene provides a montage of shots of Mandira, Khan, and Khan's stepson Sameer performing the happy family. Khan and Mandira are shown in their roles as parents and neighbors, living the idyllic suburban middle-class life. This picture of perfect domesticity ends with a shot of Mandira cooking and Khan saying to her, “Mandira, Mandira, can we have sex please?” Mandira asks him if he means right now to which Khan responds, “Now, now is good,” giggles and walks away. Mandira looks down at the food she is preparing, smiles, and follows him out of the room.

What is remarkable about these scenes is that they are the only ones in the film where Khan is depicted as having sexual desires. Significantly, however, no actual physical intimacy, or even physical contact, is shown between Khan and Mandira. The exclusion of any behavior that can be read as sexual or intimate in these scenes is indicative of the anxieties surrounding Khan’s sexuality. In fact, the threat posed by Khan’s sexuality is hidden through his childlike innocence. The portrayal of Khan as having no knowledge about sex and no previous sexual experience (including having to learn about sex from a manual) distances him from representations of the sexually menacing cognitively disabled figure and from the degenerate and sexually perverse terrorist. In addition, by using Khan's disclosures of sexual desire as moments of comedic relief in the film, his sexuality is rendered as more or less impotent. Thus, despite being coded as a properly heterosexual couple, Khan and Mandira never conceive children of their own. This, of course, is a significant departure from the normative trajectory of the heteronormative family unit.

In addition to his participation in the nuclear heteronormative family structure, Khan is represented as a respectable multicultural citizen and a “good Muslim” through the juxtaposition of his character with that of the “bad Muslim” and the terrorist. The film, while presenting a critique of the criminalization and racial profiling of Muslims living in the United States following 9/11, does not disavow the construction of the Islamic terrorist. Rather, the representation of Khan as a good citizen, and a pious and de-politicized Muslim, works to reify the distinction between terrorists and citizens, and between good and bad Muslims.

The construction of the Islamic terrorist relies on, and is sustained through, the construction of so-called “good” and “bad” Muslim citizens (Maira, 2009; Mamdani, 2004). As Mahmood Mamdani (2004) explains, the “War on Terror” has produced a binary construction of Muslims that allows for only two possible forms of citizenship for Muslim Americans. Good citizens demonstrate loyalty to the American nation-state, subscribe to American democratic ideals, and are constructed as enlightened and modern, whereas bad citizens, represented as pre-modern and traditional, are seen to pose a threat to the nation (Maira, 2009).

It is telling that the only character in the film that names the violence experienced by Muslims outside of the United States, referring to massacres of Muslims in both India and Palestine, is portrayed as a “Jihadist” and as a bad Muslim in the film. In this particular scene, Dr. Faisal Rehman, the bad Muslim, is represented as trying to incite men into action through his references to these massacres and through a misrepresentation of Islamic history. Dr. Rehman's comments, and his call to action, are seen as indicative of “jihadist” sentiment specifically through the invocation of a pathological hatred. Thus, as Jin Haritaworn argues, even when “... the causes of hate are understandable, the hateful reaction and subsequent action are not, rendering it immediately atrocious...to hate is to reveal one’s impulsiveness and irrationality as well as one’s failure to perform oneself as a civilized subject...”(2013, 52). Hatred, in this context, becomes inherently associated with the bad Muslim. Furthermore, it is through this hatred, and the irrational violence that it is seen as potentially producing, that the bad Muslim is further constructed as a national threat.

Short as this scene is, it is critical in reaffirming Khan's respectability as a multicultural citizen in the film. Not only does Khan challenge Dr. Rehman's hateful speech, but later he also reports him to the FBI. In fact, it is specifically because Khan helped the FBI locate Dr. Rehman that he is released from a detention facility, where he was incarcerated and tortured after trying to meet the President. In spite of the persecution he has undergone, Khan's loyalty to the nation, and thereby his proper citizenship, is reaffirmed through his naming of the doctor as a terrorist and a bad Muslim. Significantly, it is through these actions that Khan is redeemed as the film's hero.

Conclusion

Popular culture is one way through which people come to know disability. At the same time, popular culture also limits what is imaginable, shaping discourses of disability by delimiting the terms of its existence. The representations of disability in *My Name is Khan* have made use of common cinematic tropes utilized in the depiction of disability in film. The reliance on these representations has led to the reproduction of common myths about disability and autism in the film, such as the notion that disability is a personal setback that must be “overcome”, and the association of autism with “special abilities.”

At the same time, a critical use of the visual cues associated with autism have allowed the film to represent the convergence of discourses of race, disability, and masculinity through the figure of the terrorist, allowing for a re-imagining of the relationship between these categories. Through wide-ranging representations of disability, *My Name is Khan* illustrates that race, gender, sexuality and disability are mutually constituted, often at the service of the nation. Although the critical lens of the film remains constrained by a neoliberal multicultural narrative that continues to distinguish between good and bad citizens (and Muslims), *My Name is Khan* succeeds in both complicating understandings of disability, and its relationship to race, gender, and sexuality, and in highlighting the precarity of national belonging.

Nadia Kanani is a doctoral candidate in the gender, feminist and women's studies program at York University. Her research explores the role of the nation-state in constructing and regulating

disability, race, gender, and sexuality. Her work also examines the ways in which the state utilizes representations of race, gender, and disability in order to reproduce national boundaries.

References

- Alexander, M.J. (2005). *Pedagogies of crossing; Meditations on feminism, sexual politics, memory, and the sacred*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Baker, A.D. (2008). Recognizing Jake; Contending with formulaic and spectacularized representations of autism in film. In M. Osteen (Ed.) *Autism and Representation*, (229-243). New York: Routledge.
- Cohen, Cathy J. (2007). Punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens: The radical potential of queer politics? In E. Patrick Johnson & M. G. Henderson (Eds.) *Black Queer Studies; A Critical Anthology*, (21-51). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ferguson, R.A. (2007). Race-ing homonormativity: Citizenship, sociology, and gay identity. In E. Patrick Johnson & M. G. Henderson (Eds.) *Black Queer Studies; A Critical Anthology*, (52-67). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gabriel, K. & Vijayan, P.K. (2012). Orientalism, terrorism and Bombay cinema. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48(3), 299-310.
- Haritaworn, J. (2013). Beyond 'Hate': Queer metonymies of crime, pathology and anti/violence. *Jindal Global Law Review* 4(2), 44-78.
- Howell, A. (2007). Victims or madmen? The diagnostic competition over 'terrorist' detainees at Guantanamo Bay. *International Political Sociology*, 1, 29-47.
- Jarman, M. Dismembering the lynch mob; Intersecting narratives of disability, race, and sexual menace. In R. Mcreuer & A. Mollow (Eds.) *Sex and Disability*, (89-107). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Johar, H. Y., Khan, G. (Producers), & Johar, K. (Director). (2010). *My Name is Khan* [Motion Picture]. India: Fox STAR Studios.
- Khan, S. (2011). Recovering the past in Jodha Akbar; Masculinities, femininities and cultural politics in Bombay cinema. *Feminist Review* 99, 131-146.
- Longmore, P. K. (2001). Screening stereotypes: images of disabled people. In A. Enns & C. R. Smith (Eds.) *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability*, (1-17). Lanham: University Press of America Inc.
- Maira, S. 'Good' and 'bad' Muslim citizens: feminists, terrorists, and U.S. Orientalisms. *Feminist Studies* 35(3), 631-656.

- Mamdani, M. (2004). *Good Muslim, bad Muslim; America, the Cold War, and the roots of terror*. New York: Three Leaves Press.
- Mishra, V. (2002) *Bollywood cinema; Temples of desire*. New York: Routledge.
- Murray, S. (2008). Hollywood and the fascination of autism. In M. Osteen (Ed.) *Autism and Representation*, (244-255). New York: Routledge.
- Norden, M. F. (2001). The Hollywood discourse on disability: some personal reflections. In A. Enns & C. R. Smit (Eds.) *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability*, (19-31). Lanham: University Press of America Inc.
- Puar, J.K. & Rai, A. (2002). Monster, terrorist, fag; The War on Terrorism and the production of docile patriots. *Social Text* 20(3), 117-148.
- Punathambekar A. & Kavoori, A. P. (2008). Introduction: global Bollywood. In A. P. Kavoori & A. Punathambekar (Eds.), *Global Bollywood*, (1-14). New York: New York University Press.
- Quayson, A. (2007). *Aesthetic nervousness; Disability and the crisis of representation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rai, A.S. (2004). Of monsters; Biopower, terrorism and excess in genealogies of monstrosity. *Cultural Studies* 18(4), 538-570.
- Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Random House Inc.
- Stubblefield, A. (2007). 'Beyond the pale': tainted whiteness, cognitive disability, and eugenic sterilization. *Hypatia* 22(2), 162-181.
- Thussu, D. K. (2008). The globalization of Bollywood – the hype and hope. In A. P. Kavoori & A. Punathambekar (Eds.), *Global Bollywood*, (97-113). New York: New York University Press.
- Waldram, J.B. (2004). *Revenge of the Windigo; The construction of the mind and mental health of North American Aboriginal peoples*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Waldron, I. R.G. (2002). *African Canadian women storming the barricades! Challenging psychiatric imperialism through Indigenous conceptualizations of 'mental illness' and self*. Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services.

Endnotes

¹ It is important to note that *My Name is Khan* offers no representations of indigenous people in the US, despite portraying the experiences of various other racialized groups living in the United States. By failing to include the experiences of indigenous people, the film can be understood as reproducing the American settler-colonial myth that there are 'no indigenous people left' in the US.

² Although Bollywood film has the potential to subvert orientalist representations of Muslims and the South Asian diaspora, the middle/upper-class Hindu male has traditionally been the focus of Bollywood films. Bollywood films have also frequently been used to promote Indian nationalist narratives (and are often influenced by Hindu nationalist narratives) (Gabriel & Vijayan, 2012; Khan, 2011). Unfortunately, a discussion of the political significance of these representations, and the use of Bollywood film to further Indian nationalist agendas, is beyond the scope of this paper.

³ Significantly, the depiction of Mama Jenny, a large, emotional, and maternal woman, is based on the cinematic and racist trope of the Mammy. Her son, Joel, is referred to as 'funny-hair' Joel by Khan and this racist naming of Joel is used as a moment of comedic relief to lighten the drama in the scene. I would suggest that the racism in these encounters is rendered comedic, even innocent, precisely because it comes from the perspective of somebody who is understood as 'cognitively disabled' and who therefore doesn't know any better (relying on problematic stereotypes about autism and cognitive disability, in addition to racist tropes). Through these representations, blackness is turned into a caricature at the service of the narrative. Indeed, it is the caricaturization of blackness in the film that humanizes Khan's struggle and gives credence to his journey. For example, it is not until he is being cared for by Mama Jenny that Khan finally speaks about, and sheds tears over, his son's death.

⁴ I use the term heteropatriarchy to signify the combining of heterosexualization and patriarchy as governing principles of the nation-state; (see Alexander, 2005).