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Depictions of Post-9/11 South Asian Racial Profiling in Indian Cinema

Abstract:

Events that took place in USA on 11th September 2001 had a profound influence on the American culture, politics and society. It is very often said, that “nothing will be the same after 9/11” and in my article I would like to examine one of many 9/11 consequences, which is a shift in the image of many races and ethnicities. The attacks caused not only a great shift in homeland security, which resulted in many civil right violations, but also a return of large-scale racial profiling. The victims of such practices, apart from Arabs and people of Arabic descent, were also South Asians. In their cases “racial profiling” has become more of a “color profiling” (according to J. Angelo Corlett) which resulted in a series of hate crimes (such as the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi) and other forms of hostility. There are many Indian films concerning the problem briefly described above, but in my article I will focus on three of them: *New York* (2009, Kabir Khan), *My Name Is Khan* (2010, Karan Johar) and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012, Mira Nair). All of them portray the issue of post-9/11 racial profiling of South Asians, but each focuses on a different aspect of the subject.

Key words: 9/11, USA, South Asians, racial profiling, Indian cinema, Bollywood

Introduction

The events that took place in the United States on 11th September 2001 had a profound influence on American culture, politics, and society. It is very often said that nothing will be the same after 9/11 and this is not an overstatement. In this paper, I would examine one of the many consequences of 9/11, which is the return of large-scale racial profiling and a significant shift in the image of South Asians living in the U.S. Until the tragic events of 2001, the phenomenon of racial profiling applied mostly to African-Americans and Mexicans, who were stereotypically considered “a dangerous element” that was prone to violence and criminality. However, after 9/11 the biggest fear was raised by people of

Arabic descent and all those who happen to have “Arabic” (in the broadest and most common meaning of the word) features. The problem of racial profiling of American South Asians was depicted many times in films, especially those made in India or by Indian directors. Of the plethora of titles, I have chosen three that will establish a base for my study: *New York* (2009, Kabir Khan), *My Name Is Khan* (2010, Karan Johar), and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012, Mira Nair). All of them portray the issue of post-9/11 racial profiling, but each of them focuses on a different aspect.

South Asian Americans

Firstly, it is necessary to explain the term “South Asians” in the title of this paper. The definition below comes from a brochure entitled “In Our Own Words” as a response to the problem of post 9-11 racial profiling by organizations such as: New York City Profiling Collaborative; DRUM – Desis Rising Up and Moving; The Sikh Coalition; United Sikhs; South Asian Youth Action (SAYA!); Coney Island Avenue Project; Council of People’s Organization; and above all SAALT (South Asian Americans Leading Together). The handbook states, “The South Asian community comprises individuals who trace their ancestry to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka; in addition, members of Afghan and Pastun communities”.¹

In time, similarly to other ethnic groups, South Asian immigrants have become important members of American society and worked, studied, and lived in the United States. Many of them felt like fully-fledged U.S. citizens, especially the young generations, which identified themselves both as Americans and South Asians (they had a kind of “flexible citizenship”). However, their perceptions changed in the days after 9/11, which were filled with intolerance, hatred, and prejudice. Subsequently, “flexible citizenship can be a tenuous, or even potentially dangerous strategy for Muslim immigrant youth, for transnational ties and shifting national allegiances are precisely what have come under scrutiny for Muslim Americans by the state in the era of the Patriot Act”², writes Sunaina Maira in her study of South Asian Muslim Youth in Post-9/11 America.

American society has essentially been divided into two groups: allies and enemies. Previous modern and progressive views on immigrants’ nationalities have ceased to exist and the world has once again become black and white. This might seem like a simplification, as it is well known that attitudes to immigrants in the US have always been paradoxical.

America is built on immigration, needs immigration, and is at the same time massively suspicious of strangers, in a perfect incarnation of what Derrida calls “hospitality”. There is always a delicate balance of hostility and hospitality in

¹ In Our Own Words, http://www.issueclab.org/resource/in_our_own_words_narratives_of_south_asian_new_yorkers_affected_by_racial_and_religious_profiling, date accessed 19 August 2016.

² Sunaina Maira, “Flexible Citizenship / Flexible Empire: South Asian Muslim Youth in Post-9/11 America”, *American Quarterly* 60:3 (2006), p. 712.

acts of welcome”. Therefore, it can be said, “the stranger-foreigner is always both desired and rejected.”³

However, the great shift mentioned above was obvious for most Americans, and especially those whose lives totally changed after the attacks on WTC. A great description of this change is provided by the already quoted publication “In Our Own Words”:

In the eyes of the world, New York City serves as the quintessential emblem of the vibrant diversity within the United States and the gateway to the American Dream. Amid the city’s mosaic of residents – including African Americans, Asians, Europeans, Latinos, Middle Easterners, and those from the Caribbean – South Asians have long established an indelible presence in the city. Yet, after the devastating attacks of September 11th, 2001 on the World Trade Center, Muslims and anyone perceived to be Muslim became the public enemy literally overnight. New York City soon shifted to become one of the epicentres of systemic racial and religious profiling against these communities. (...) Since September 11th, South Asian community members continue to encounter government scrutiny based on their race, national origin, and religion in various arenas.⁴

Racial Profiling

Everyday impediments, harmful racial profiling, and even acts of violence that touched South Asian Americans after 9/11 were not directly and unambiguously sanctioned, or inspired by law. Even the infamous Patriot Act, an Act of Congress that was signed into law by President George W. Bush on October 26, 2001 whose full title was "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001", consisted of many notations on tolerance and peaceful coexistence with Muslim Americans:

Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and Americans from South Asia play a vital role in our Nation and are entitled to nothing less than the full rights of every American. The acts of violence that have been taken against Arab and Muslim Americans since the September 11, 2001, attacks against the United States should be and are condemned by all Americans who value freedom. The concept of individual responsibility for wrongdoing is sacrosanct in American society, and applies equally to all religious, racial, and ethnic groups. When American citizens commit acts of violence against those who are, or are perceived to be, of Arab or Muslim descent, they should be punished to the full extent of the law. Muslim Americans have become so fearful of harassment that

³ David Simpson, “After 9/11: The Fate of Strangers”, *Americastudien / American Studies* 57:2 (2012), p. 201.

⁴ In Our Own Words, http://www.issuelab.org/resource/in_our_own_words_narratives_of_south_asian_new_yorkers_affected_by_racial_and_religious_profiling, date accessed 19 August 2016.

many Muslim women are changing the way they dress to avoid becoming targets. Many Arab Americans and Muslim Americans have acted heroically during the attacks on the United States, including Mohammed Salman Hamdani, a 23-year-old New Yorker of Pakistani descent, who is believed to have gone to the World Trade Center to offer rescue assistance and is now missing.⁵

The same kind of thought was expressed many times by the President George W. Bush, Jr., who said in the Address to the Joint Session of Congress, delivered on 20 September 2001:

I also want to speak tonight directly to Muslims throughout the world. We respect your faith. It is practiced freely by many millions of Americans and by millions more in countries that America counts as friends. Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself. The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them.⁶

Unfortunately, appeasing statements, such as this, which were ineffectual preventive measures against the outburst of violence towards Muslim Americans, did not sound convincing enough for many Americans, who desired palpable revenge. Apparently, it did not sound plausible for the government itself. For example in June 2002, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced a “Special Registration” requirement that all males from a list of Arab and Muslim countries report to the government to be registered and fingerprinted. According to the May 2011 statement by the American Civil Liberties Union, the program has never led to a single terrorism-related conviction despite tens of thousands of people forced to register.⁷

This is why, after 9/11 the security practice known as “racial profiling” began on a large, almost incomparable scale, which is, basically (according to the definition provided by Mathias Risse and Richard Zeckhauser): “any police-indicated action that relies on the race, ethnicity, or national origin and not merely on the behaviour of the individual”.⁸ It might be also said that racial profiling entails racist stereotyping of those targeted⁹, but that actually is not a general rule: sometimes it is just and based on statistics. For example, if the police is looking for members of a certain gang which is known to include only young Mexicans, that is the group which naturally should be targeted first in the investigation.¹⁰

⁵ The USA PATRIOT Act, https://www.justice.gov/archive/ll/what_is_the_patriot_act.pdf, date accessed 19 August 2016.

⁶ American Rhetoric, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911jointsessionspeech.htm>, date accessed 19 August 2016.

⁷ Watson Institute, <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/social/rights/profiling>, date accessed 19 August 2016.

⁸ J. Angelo Corlett, “Profiling Color”, *The Journal of Ethics* 15:1 (2011), p. 25.

⁹ J. Angelo Corlett, p. 25.

¹⁰ J. Angelo Corlett, p. 21.

However, the current cases of intolerance and prejudice that can be observed all around the U.S. are (in the majority) not just; moreover, according to J. Angelo Corlett, they are not really *racial* profiling, but rather *colour* profiling.¹¹ “So strictly speaking, not only is racial profiling not taking place in law enforcement, it ought not to, that is, so long as it is conceived in popular terms. What is really happening is colour (and/or other morphological) profiling, which is believed erroneously by many to indicate the “race” of a suspect. However, at best it is a *prima facie* indicator of race. At worst, it is rather misleading”.¹²

Corlett draws the attention to a very important issue. Not many people are experts at indicating someone’s race and ethnicity and what is more, even the concept of “race” itself is very problematic.¹³ This is why it also enfolded people of South Asian descent, who were frequently taken as Arabs. An excellent (and at the same time gruesome) example of such mistakes was the treatment of Sikhs after 9/11, who were taken for Muslims (or even Islamic terrorists) because of their traditional headgear *dastaar*, which is a certain kind of *turban* covering their uncut hair (*kesb*).

The targets of their post-September 11 bias incidents have included anyone who is perceived to be Arab or Muslim. Thus, non-Arabs such as Indians, Pakistanis, and other South Asians have been affected, as have non-Muslims such as Indian Sikhs and Hindus and Arab Christians. Sikh men in particular, readily identifiable by their turbans and long beards, have borne a disproportionate burst of the violence (...).¹⁴

The most well-known case was the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh-American gas station owner from Arizona, which was officially acknowledged as the first of several cases across the United States that were supposed acts of retaliation for the 9/11 attacks. Balbir was murdered by 42-year-old mechanic Frank Silva Roque, who mistook him for an Arab American. “In a series of racist statements that began when the World Trade Centre collapsed, Roque announced his murderous plans and told a co-worker that he had been treated rudely at a gasoline station on University Drive by «a towel-head or a rag-head»”¹⁵

Racial profiling has grown to an impressive scale. The total number of reported hate crime incidents in the US decreased by over 18 percent between 2000 and 2009, but during the same period, the percentage of hate crime incidents directed towards Muslims increased by over 500 percent. The number of hate crimes against Muslims has been increasing more slowly since 2010.¹⁶ This kind of crime also involves another, paradoxical feature: egalitarianism. It affects both affluent and poor members of society, so it does not

¹¹ J. Angelo Corlett, p. 25.

¹² J. Angelo Corlett.

¹³ J. Angelo Corlett, p. 26.

¹⁴ Ahmad Munner, “Homeland Insecurities: Racial Violence the Day after September 11”, *Race/ Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 4:3 (2011), p. 341.

¹⁵ Rediff: India Abroad, <http://www.rediff.com/us/2003/sep/03sodhi.htm>, date accessed 19 August 2016.

¹⁶ Watson Institute.

matter if somebody is a well-educated doctor, IT specialist, shopkeeper, or unemployed. The only thing that counts is the skin colour and other aspects of appearance.¹⁷

American South Asian themselves listed expressions of racial profiling directed towards them:

- South Asians are frequently questioned about their faith or national origin by government officials.
- South Asians are often questioned by government officials about their immigration status, which is used as leverage to pressure individuals to inform on fellow community members.
- South Asians subjected to profiling often feel being viewed as “suspects” by the general public, within their community, and even within their families
- South Asians encounter profiling so routinely that many have altered their behaviour in an attempt to avoid additional scrutiny.
- South Asians report that profiling has caused them to lose faith in the government’s ability to protect them in times of need.¹⁸

Looking for historical references to the scale of racial profiling after 9/11, it is necessary to move back to the times of Second World War, when a similar mechanism was implemented towards Japanese Americans. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the FBI arrested more than 2,000 Japanese, suspecting them of links to the attackers. On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which announced immediate evacuation of all Japanese Americans from the West Coast (many believed that Japan might soon strike there) to internment camps. 110,000 Japanese Americans (2/3 of whom were American citizens) were forced to move and as a consequence suffered great hardships and had to hurriedly sell their homes or businesses and relocate to crowded camps. Although there were more German, and Italian Americans living in the country than Japanese Americans, there was less hostility displayed towards them.¹⁹

Indian Cinema on 9/11 Racial Profiling

“The Western view of mainstream Bollywood is one-dimensional”,²⁰ writes Burhan Wazir in his article “Bollywood for Grown-ups”. Extremely differentiated Indian cinema is mostly perceived through masala-movies, produced in Mumbai, but it is a harmful simplification. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that:

The Bombay [Mumbai is official city’s name since 1995] industry actually produces about 150-200 films a year. Feature films are produced in approximately 20 languages in India and there are multiple film industries

¹⁷ Ahmad Munner, p. 344.

¹⁸ In Our Own Words.

¹⁹ James R. Giese, Matthew T. Downey, Mauricio Mazón (ed), *The American Century: A History of the United States in Modern Times* (Cincinnati: West Educational Publishing) (1999), p. 527.

²⁰ Burhan Wazir, “Bollywood for Grown-ups”, *The World Today* 68: 6 (2012), p. 47.

whose total output makes India the largest film-producing country in the world. The cities of Madras and Hyderabad are homes to the Tamil and Telugu language film industries which are equally, or more prolific than the Bombay industry in terms of the number of films made per year²¹.

Secondly, masala movies, especially recently, are not the only kind of films produced in India, and also look different from what the audience was used to, with titles such as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001, Karan Johar). The term masala movie:

Alludes to the whole range of genres and emotions that one can expect to find in a Bollywood film. It is widely accepted that the spices used release different flavours, which find their parallel in what Sanskrit scholars call Rasas or «feelings». (...) The popular Hindi film is a unique blend of different moods and itself composes a specific genre because its constitution is so fixed. From the story line to the direction, these films are entirely grounded in melodrama. (...) The characters are strong stereotypes. These films are pure escapist material, blurring out the hard-knock reality of everyday life and what they do best is to provoke a huge emotional participation from the masses, who loudly manifest their reactions.”²²

However, contemporary Indian cinema does not entirely look the way it is commonly perceived. Many movies deal with serious political or social issues, and draw public attention to previously ignored matters. “Hindi cinema can be political about the personal. A film that explores homosexuality or religious intermarriage will have an impact. However, it will always be done through the melodramatic form of the film, which should not detract from the argument, as entertainment is the way to reach large audiences”, says Rachel Dwyer, professor of Indian cultures and cinema at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.²³ These issues can be immigration (*Swades*, 2004, Ashutosh Gowariker), gender-based discrimination (*Chak De India*, 2007, Shimit Amin), social class (*English Vinglish*, 2012, Gauri Shinde), teenage pregnancies (*Tere Sang*, 2009, Satish Kaushik), or even the problem of racial profiling after 9/11, broadly described above.

From many Indian films regarding the issue of racial profiling after 9/11, I have chosen three that depict the problem in an exceptionally interesting way. The first was directed by widely acclaimed Indian female film director Mira Nair, known for *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), and *Vanity Fair* (2004). One of her recent films, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012), tells the story of a young Pakistani man who moves to USA and works in a finance company. Changez Khan (Riz Ahmed) is a skilled professional who is valued by his supervisors and has a great career ahead, but unfortunately, after 9/11 his life changes completely. As a Pakistani, he is perceived as a danger for American homeland security and this attitude is expressed many times in the film. Changez is

²¹ Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood. A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (New York: Routledge) (2004), p. 3.

²² The "Masala" Film Recipe,

<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/pakistan/literature/rushdie/takhar20.html>, date accessed 19 August 2016.

²³ Burhan Wazir, p. 47.

subjected to humiliating personal inspection at airports, is called “Osama” by random people on the street, and eventually comes to the upsetting conclusion that “I didn’t have to pick a side after 9/11. It was picked for me”. Surprisingly, in opposition to the domineering tendency, the protagonist does not try to hastily westernize himself and fit into American society after what happened. He grows a traditional beard, resigns from work, and goes back to Pakistan, where he starts to work at Lahore University. Until the very last scenes of the film, the viewer does not know whether Changez is just a random victim of racial profiling or a real, dangerous fundamentalist who was recruited by terrorists. Notwithstanding, Mira Nair is convinced that Changez deserves to be heard, and expresses that by introducing the character of journalist Bobby Lincoln (Liev Schreiber), whose basic task is to listen to the main hero’s story.

Another film that depicts the problem of post-9/11 racial profiling is Kabir Khan’s *New York*, a seemingly typical Bollywood masala-movie, but with a very contemporary and bitter touch. Again (similarly to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*), the narrative structure of the film is in the form of a retrospective. Young Indian Omar (Neil Nitin Mukesh) is arrested by an FBI agent Roshan (Irrfan Khan) for illegal possession of firearms. Soon it is unveiled that the detention was just a provocation, done in order to force Omar to inform on his best friend Sameer (John Abraham), who is suspected of terrorist activity. After a long period of persuasion, harassment, and blackmail, Omar finally agrees to report on Sameer, but only in order to prove his innocence. Unfortunately, his friend is not entirely blameless and is, in fact, preparing a large-scale terrorist attack. It may seem impossible and absurd, but in the film Sameer’s motivation is very reliably explained and related to another social problem. At some point he says, “Everything changed after 9/11, people stared at me on the street like I was a terrorist”, which is interesting, because by this point of the plot, Sameer was just a regular young American of Indian descent who was trying to start his own life with a woman he loved (Katrina Kaif). However, things changed after an illegal and accidental arrest, as a result of which Sameer landed in prison, which looked very much like Guantanamo Bay. This innocent film character was subjected to humiliation and torture such as sleep deprivation, water boarding, and music torture. In addition, that was exactly where and when Sameer met for the first time a real terrorist who, through the cell bars, invited him to join a terrorist sleeper cell in New York. After release, broken and mentally changed, Sameer decided that if he is treated a terrorist, he might as well become one and take revenge on the United States, which had treated him so horribly. This interesting plot twist suggests that to some degree it is the U.S. that is guilty in the “War on Terror”.

The third title, *My Name is Khan*, is definitely the most well-known, also because of the appearance of superstar Shah Rukh Khan in the main role of Rizwan Khan, an Indian immigrant suffering from Asperger’s Syndrome. After the death of his mother, Rizwan—unable to live by himself—moves to the USA to live with his brother Zakir, a successful businessman who sells beauty products. While working for Zakir, the protagonist meets a charming single mother Mandira (Kajol), and after some time marries her and adopts her son Sameer (Arjan Aujla). Their happy life is disrupted by the 9/11 attacks, which once again change their lives totally. At some point Rizwan says, “In the western world, history is marked simply by BC and AD. Now however, there is a third distinction: 9/11”. To make matters worse, young Sameer is killed due to racial hatred exhibited by his school

colleagues. The happy marriage of Mandira and Rizwan is over, but the husband decides to repair the relationship by visiting the president of United States and telling him in person: “My name is Khan and I’m not a terrorist”. Rizwan starts to follow George W. Bush Jr. and seeks to meet him. Unfortunately, he is taken for a terrorist, arrested, and put in a prison, in which he experiences violence and torture. Even his condition—essentially a mild form of autism—does not help him to be released. Finally—thanks to a crew of student filmmakers—Rizwan is freed and gains the opportunity to meet the president. However, he meets not the distant and cold George W. Bush, but the warm and friendly Barrack Obama, who treats Rizwan as a hero and hails him as an example of human endurance and determination.

Conclusions

Although the films mentioned above are primarily a form of entertainment (especially *New York*, which is rich in songs and romance, and *My Name Is Khan*, brimming with great Indian movie stars), they also focus on unpopular and complicated issues related to the life conditions of South Asians after 9/11. They do it in a surprisingly comprehensive and intelligent way, trying to depict different angles of the problem simultaneously. At the same time, they also do not revert to simplifications and one-dimensional treatment of their heroes. They are subordinated to one, maybe a little naïve and idealistic rule: everyone deserves to be heard no matter what their descent, background, religion, or even the crimes they have committed.

However, the problem is that this idea is complementary to the mistakes committed by the USA itself, prior to the tragic events of 9/11. They both represent the same level of naivety and idealism that cannot possibly exist in the real world. The false delusion of a tolerant global village in which all people live happily, are proud of their decent, and can reunite in a world without borders, had fallen alongside the two towers of the World Trade Center. The world was once again reminded that the idea of modern, secularized state is impossible to achieve.

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that some issues highlighted by films such as *New York*, *My Name Is Khan*, and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* are important and should be kept in mind. The focal point of all the movies is not only post-9/11 racial profiling, but also its consequences, such as unlawful and violent treatment of South Asians, who were arrested without any explicit charges and without respect to their human rights. This reflects reality, in which there have been many cases of people detained for several years without charges, legal counsel, or representation. After 9/11, the classic rule of presumption of innocence changed to treating suspects as guilty until proven innocent. This undermined the very foundation of law. This definitely should not be a starting point for rebuilding a country after an enormous tragedy such as 9/11.

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The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2012, Mira Nair)

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