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Global Muslim Audiences' Polysemic Reading of "My name is Khan": Toward an Emergent Multiculturalism

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Global Muslim audiences' polysemic reading of "My name is *Khan*": Toward an emergent multiculturalism

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In this study, we learn how audiences make sense of a non-dominant text that is conveying a non-Western story about the Global War on Terror (GWOT). The audiences affective narratives affirm Deuze's argument that media is not separate from our lived experience; we live in media rather than with media. This study was conducted on an urban campus in the Pacific North-West, with film audiences of over fifty Saudi Arabian, Baharanian, Iranian, Iraqi, Yemeni, and other Arab and non-Arab Muslims. Multiple screenings of Hindi language film, My Name is *Khan,* shows that it speaks to a global, transcultural, primarily Muslim audience that has lived in the pall of a world changed by 9/11. As audiences, they weave an oppositional narrative of security, multiculturalism and Muslim identity. While their visas define them as students, their experience as simply Arab or Muslim women and men situates them, in a wider articulation of their transnational identity.

Key words: Media, audience, ethnography, qualitative research for media, Muslims, Islam, Indian cinema, transnational, Bollywood.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars believe that current discourses of multiculturalism, as doctrine for modern urban life, (Madood, 2013) are co-opted by forces of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, which relies on market forces to bring social equity, suggests new strategies of governance that minimize cultural rights, signal the advent of civil society, and downplay the importance of intercultural equality (Hale, 2005).

The discourse of multiculturalism, an ideal of sorts, seeks to shun persistent racial hierarchies. Ironically, however, it introduces new systems of domination that align well with existing hegemonic relations or dominant-subordinate dialectics that have persisted since Western

European empires began the period of colonialism in the seventeenth century. In the United States, multiculturalism is fast losing its value as a guiding principle for domestic and foreign policy. Therefore, it must be critically re-examined, especially in the context of homeland security, immigration, racially motivated policies, and the expanding scope of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Recent developments in these areas threatens the peaceful ways in which migrants and refugees have crossed borders while also undermining historically marginalized communities that have maintained amicable working relations with the power majority. In the public sphere, the spike in hate-based crimes reflects social

realities such as Islamophobia, targeted killing, harassment of migrants and of people who are mistaken for migrants, decimation of indigenous rights, ICE raids on Latinx families, desecration of farmworker graves and an emergent Black Lives Matter movement that highlights police profiling and the unwarranted killing of Black and Brown youth (Ortiz, 2017). Individual citizens and government organizations including police departments as well as well as the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services have broken with legal convention to wrongfully target and surveil Arabs and Muslims (Alsultany, 2013) and in turn, all "brown folk" who look the same to these surveilling eyes.

This trend has laid the groundwork for violent attacks on persons of Indian origin, especially gurdwaras, since 9/11 (Grewal, 2005). Further, we have seen an accompanying upswing in the stock markets and growth of transnational companies, almost as if the financial market has high tolerance for grassroots inequity and protest without needing to address much of it. Consumer industries continue to commoditize difference and grassroots mobilization as in the case of the recent Pepsi advertisement (Solon, 2017), which invoked the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, and the Black Lives Movement.

Hale (2005), terms the relationship between the newly articulated avowal of cultural rights and neoliberal political economic reforms as neoliberal multiculturalism. While mediated texts like the Pepsi ad command power in a neoliberal securitized mediascape, so does global cinema and its vast audiences. Cinema often gets associated with product placement and sponsorship, yet the cinematic text bears meanings other than the obvious commercial ones. It is polysemic by virtue of its diverse audience and their diverse lived experiences. Paying attention to polysemy is an effective way to open up the meanings of a text in order to understand social relationships that are fraught with power struggles (Ceccarelli, 1998; Fiske, 1986).

Non-Hollywood fare and oft-ignored audiences: Viewing a multicultural film as a multicultural activity

This study proposes to understand how a blockbuster Bollywood text, with its aggressively marketed glitz and melodies, is able to speak to a global transcultural audience that has lived in the shadow of a world changed by the communal and hate infused events following the attack of 9/11 in New York City. The study was conducted in 2011 to 2013 on the urban commuter campus of a University in the Pacific Northwest when a large number of Saudi Arabian nationals were admitted to learn English and transition as students into U.S. universities. Others interviewed were from Baharain, Iran, Iraq, Dubai, Kuwait, Yemen, Palestine and other Arab and non-Arab Muslim states. While their visas define them as students, their common experience as Arab or

Muslim women and men suggests a much more complex global identity. My Name is *Khan* (*MNIK*) was screened in venues that were open to the public and in large Intercultural Communication classes on multiple occasions. Over 60 persons were interviewed over a two-year-period about their memories of 9/11, their audience-response and connection to *MNIK*, and their beliefs about religion, democracy, media and life in general. Over 40 respondents are Muslims from the Arab/majority Muslim world (Dubai, Bahrain, Yemen, Kuwait, Iran, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia). Varied participants from the U.S., North Mariana Islands, China, Chile, and India were also interviewed. The participants were self-selected and signed up or gave me their contact numbers so I could reach out to them for conversation. The words of a small cross-section of the participants help capture the depth of the study group's discussions of religion, multiculturalism and gender. We learn (1) how film with no Hollywood antecedents is understood by a world audience and (2) how audiences make sense of a non-dominant Hindi language film text that is conveying a non-western story about the GWOT [i]. The audiences as travelers and cosmopolites are disadvantaged by the ongoing racial social discourse disfavoring Islam. It remains difficult for them to find a forum to articulate their lived experiences. Therefore, their audience status provides a way for a researcher to understand their identity vis-à-vis their own social, religious and geographical positioning, which then presumably leads to richer narratives of resilience, strife, struggle and protest.

In this media study of audience and filmic text, the participants view the blockbuster *My Name is Khan* (directed by Karan Johar in 2010), to intertwine an oppositional narrative of security, multiculturalism and Muslim identity. The film, *MNIK,* for its multi-star cast, and expat-defined Bollywood hero Shah Rukh *Khan*, who coincidentally, was held up by airport immigration officials at New York's Kennedy Airport for his distinctly Muslim name, seemed the most compelling film for a global audience whose experience transcends South Asia (the origin of the film). *MNIK* weaves a tough socio-political climate of hate into a multicultural story of love, hope, racial unity, and healing. The film argues for its own version of multiculturalism through its dialogue and dramatic scenarios. It asks the question: can urban Western society actually overlook race, religion and nationality in the legal, social, policy and political spheres? Audiences of film, in turn, question multicultural policies and philosophies, express empathy with religious "others" and try to transcend the legacy of hate and terror handed down to them through modern national politics.

At its core, this study offers to audience studies an understanding of how global, transnational audiences view a Hindi language film. *MNIK* becomes a specific cultural product that mediates the multiple cultural shifts that occur when traveling Arab and Muslim audiences are brought in to watch a text that talks back to Western

multiculturalism by advocating embracing the "other". Film industries, most specifically Hollywood, have produced filmic representations of the U.S led Global War on Terror (GWOT), but none from the point of view that *MNIK* espouses: the lived experience narrative.

In less than a decade (1990s to the 2000s) the paradigm of a passive audience shifted to one of an actively engaged audience whose personal mythologies, and political beliefs often subverted the meaning of the text. Abu-Lughod (2005), Mankekar (1999), Ang (1991), Lull (1990) and Morley (1986) incorporate postcolonial, transnational, and audience-based analyses. Their studies pave the way for shifting the attention from textual television and film critique to that of active audiences who construct their everyday lives and identities in opposition and negotiation with media artifacts. For this purpose, a qualitative, in-depth interview approach was employed in order to understand the relationship between shifting borders of media and text, and of audience and actors, during a political climate that silences them and presumably other marginalized populations in the United States (Kaufer and Al-Malki, 2009). On the side, this study addresses what conversations around media, terror, and Islam might be like for sojourners and migrants who are not fully adept or acculturated in the rules of sociality of their adoptive country.

Personal experiences are missing or silenced in the vast accounts of transnational exchange and travel, between the Middle-East and the U.S., especially during this politically potent time (Kaufer and Al-Malki, 2009). Travelers, like domestic audiences, are consumers of media fare from around the [ii]world. In order to capture their intimate thoughts and conversation that a dominant Hollywood text is not able to, I was drawn to a non-Western media text, *My Name is Khan* (*MNIK*) with its own vision of a multicultural society and a strong statement against terrorism and intolerance. By choosing a non-Hollywood media artifact, one can unsettle several stable notions of media (as mainstream or Hollywood-produced) and audiences (primarily U.S.-American).

The Indian film industry has responded with great regularity to the subcontinent's need to resolve its own intolerance toward Islam and re-establish its constitutional obligation as a secular nation. Hindi language films such as *Fanaa* (2006), *Kurbaan* (2009), *New York* (2009)*,* and *Tere Bin Laden* (2010) preceded the success of *My Name is Khan*. Indian cinema has also addressed the impact of post 9/11 policies of surveillance insinuated via U.S. foreign policy upon nations with significantly sized Muslim communities. The U.S.'s own record of surveillance of Muslim communities in homeland security measures is checkered (Said, 2015; Rashid, 2013). Yet, foreign policy has required that the U.S. get greater buy-in internationally so as to create alliances and allies in its Global War on Terror. At the same time, presidential and central politics garnered the language of *Axes of Evil* and *Allies,* which set the tone for the national and racial partiality under which certain migrant communities are forced to operate when they relocate to the United States. On an episode of PBS's *News Hour* in mid-April 2017, even NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reaffirmed his support for building local capacity against homegrown terrorism in the U.S. and Europe-echoing the sentiments of President Trump, and before him of the Bush administration. This would mean greater vigilance toward immigrant communities.

SECURITIZATION OF POST 9/11 HOLLYWOOD AND GLOBAL MEDIA AND FILM

As a premier Culture Industry, Hollywood sought right away to dramatize stories of the war and post 9/11 militarized security, portraying stories of terrorism and armed combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Other national cinemas followed suit although communication scholarship has paid most attention to studies done on Hollywood media texts (Crawford and Al- Malki, 2009; Wilkins, 2011). The traditional understanding of 'security' and its conception of 'threat' (as studied in International Relations) has changed with time to constitute world politics (Balzacq, 2011). A comparatively newer term *securitization* is attentive to the language of war as it is insinuated in every facet of our lives, including media. The notion of *securitization* is more suitable to this study because of the discursive ways in which media attends to conflict, peace and war. Securitization is displayed in the rapid adoption, by the media, of the U.S.-led "war on terror" logic in understanding national and international crises. "For the purposes of understanding securitization…. what makes it distinctive is the fusion between national security and national identity," writes Vultee (2011). Especially with respect to the vast offering of war, espionage, and conflict in the media, the term "securitization" can define far more phenomena than the simple term "security," as it is a dynamic concept taking into consideration its audiences (Balzac, 2011). Media studies are replete with critiques of post 9/11 television and film cultural artifacts (drama and action series) that have dramatized 'blood and gore' via network news, setting the televisual stage for a popular audience to imagine 'terror' (Crawford and Al-Malki, 2009; Saha, 2016; Wilkins, 2011). Studying post 9/11 television entertainment drama, Spiegel (2004 p. 235), notes that in the month following the tragedy, for sincere or cynical reasons, and for considerations of "tastefulness," television decided to pull "action" films like *Collateral Damage*, *The Siege*, and *Lethal Weapon* that dealt with home-based terrorism and internal violence. Furthermore, Spiegel (2004 p. 235), is critical of the alternate Hollywood dramatic choices for rerun after 9/11: "TNT replaced its 1970s retro lineup of *Superman, King Kong*, and *Carrie* with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Grease* and *Jaws* (although exactly why the blood-sucking shark in *Jaws* seemed less disturbing than the menstruating teen in *Carrie* already begs questions about

exactly what constitutes 'terror' in the mind of Hollywood executives" (page reference?).

The eventuality of 9/11 gradually configured the U.S.-based media industry's own understanding of terror narratives and set the stage for an array of programming after those initial few months of reflection, loss, and being caught unawares.

Hollywood, ubiquitous globally, is not a lone industry serving political fare as entertainment. Distant, but laying claim to telling a different story is the Indian film industry, fully awake to the discourses of war, terror and Jihad (Vaish, 2011). While the U.S. is the undisputed leader and financier in the global war on terror, the geopolitics of the GWOT are not confined to U.S. shores, impacting several countries internationally. India, for instance, is home to a large (172 million, according to the 2011 census) Muslim community. Bangladesh and Pakistan are majority Muslim neighboring countries. [iii]Pakistan is formally recognized as a U.S. ally in the GWOT. The Trump administration is currently re-evaluating that status as terrorist attacks in the region have not abated (Haqqani, 2017). Other South Asian nations have separate alliances with the U.S. under GWOT protocols, but these are entangled by individual national ambitions, namely, sponsorship to the United Nations Security Council by one of the Veto-ing nations. Absorbing the socio-political context and regional imperatives, Culture Industries in South Asia have turned post 9/11 film into richly textured stories.

These storied media artifacts fall neatly under the overarching rubric of GWOT discourse, in the absence of which the narratives and the experiences they try to capture would make no sense.

MY NAME IS KHAN AS AN ALLEGORICAL GLOBAL ARTIFACT

The film and the popular buzz it generates

Through the popular text of *My Name is Khan,* Hindi language cinema asserts itself as popular global artifact. The storyline of the film often facilely conflates, as much as it problematizes, complex categories of nationality, history, Muslim personhood and globalized discourses of terror. *MNIK* employs the first person narrative, bringing to audiences a rare filmic representation of lived experience of a Muslim family at the time 9/11 becomes the single biggest touchstone (for hostile encounter) in the U.S. We see an equally powerful depiction of everyday life of a single mother and her two young sons living in Bombay (Mumbai later) at the time of Hindu-Muslim rioting in 1992-1993.

Even though the protagonist is South Asian Indian, the film takes on matters that impact Muslims globally and not just those in India, making the film a global[iv] text. The Muslim audience of my study decodes the polysemic text in their own way. They are residing in the west at the time of the study, yet they are located differently in status (audiences are not dominant White American). Additionally, *MNIK* was the highest grossing Indian film globally[v].

The immigration and religion-centered content of the film has remained politically charged since the time of its release. The discussion generated by the box office success of *MNIK* has lasted more than [vi]seven years since its release (Hindustan Times, 2017). *MNIK* marked the maturing of the terror genre and gave Shah Rukh's celebrity status greater currency. Later releases such as *Raees* (2016), *Fan* (2015), and *Zero* (2018) built upon the growing stature of Shah Rukh's storytelling and acting in Hindi cinema. He remained the highest paid actor in 2017, earning over $38 million (Wikipedia, 2017).

A TEXTUAL READING

A route full of obstacles

Rizwan *Khan*, the chief protagonist of the film, is a picaro character echoing the tradition of the early English (Victorian) novel, where the naïve wanderer finds himself culturally and emotionally through his travels. *Khan*'s journey doubles for an elite education he could never have acquired through formal education in India. *Khan* immigrates to the U.S. after his primary caretaker, the mother, dies and the brother sponsors him to the San Francisco Bay Area. *Khan*'s job as a traveling salesman of women's beauty products acquaints him to a beauty spa worker, widowed with son. She accepts his marriage proposal and both adoptive son Samir and Mandira change their last name to *Khan*. Rizwan's autism and immigrant status complicate his path in his adoptive land. Rizwan's autism is not engaged with deeply in the film though his unusual manner becomes the reason he is interrogated by airport security. He misses his flight to Washington D.C., where he hopes to petition the president to clear his name of being a terrorist. Without the money to buy a second air ticket, he begins his obstacle laden trip toward the country's capital.

As a Muslim, displaying the ritualistic practice of *ummah* or charitable giving, Rizwan civically engages with fellow citizens and disaster victims in Wilhemina (Erndl, 2016). This ritual act of giving recalls Van der Veer: "ritual can…be seen as a form of communication through which a person discovers his identity and the significance of his actions (1994 p. 84). Rizwan also mends property, fixes gadgets (the placard he bears on the highway says, "repair almost anything"). While a dominant trope, the Picaresque sheds light on the nature of his travels, Kathryn Erndl's scholarship on Turner's concept of liminality provides deeper insight into Rizwan's changing engagement with his community and society in general. *Khan*'s experience is *liminal.* After going through

an initiation ritual, *Khan* is extricated from normal social life and promised to return with a reformed status [vii] (Erndl, 2016). Rizwan's path leading to the President in D.C. is metaphoric of a longer journey of life that does not unravel without struggle. He is not afraid to confront his adversaries. He takes an oppositional stance against a preacher in a mosque, seeking to radicalize youth through his fiery speeches and a partial reading of the Koran. Rizwan's refrain recalling his mother's dictum, "there are good people and bad people," challenges the prevailing jihadist thinking at the mosque.

India Studies scholars Erndl (2016) suggest the possibility of *tirtha* or pilgrimage which has resonance in Eastern religious practice. The *Haj* in Islam and the *tirtha* in Hinduism, is a very important rite of passage in a devout person's life, signifying ritual and religiosity. At the end of the *Tirtha*, one expects *darshan* or a chance to visit and behold the deity. *Khan* has a similar mission: to meet the president of the U.S. and head of state. This earnest quest makes his journey akin to the beholding of a deity during *Tirtha*. The meeting with the president has the magic only Indian cinema can conjure as it marks the completion of his emotional journey where he declares "My name is *Khan* and I am not a terrorist". The president is shown to be an Obama lookalike cheered on by ecstatic onlookers. *Khan* wins Mandira back and his family reunites. This reunion is marked for the collective civic spirit his friends and family display when navigating floods in Wilhemina to rescue its flood victims. Adversity seems to pull communities together and unites them.

Khan shapes this movement of the devout in order to find his own political voice. And indeed, his long journey (not unlike the travel undertaken by the Muslim and Arab audiences) from suffering to redemption ends with a meeting with the president of the United States-the newly elected Barack Obama. He has found his voice or has *come* to voice. The doctrine of "hope" reigns supreme.

Secular project of the postcolonial state and religion

As context of why Islam is a significant presence in India; she holds on to its identity as a secular democratic socialist republic after over 200-years of British rule. The country has also seen bitter communal riots through the 1990s (Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid riots in 1992; Bombay riots of 1992 and 1993, respectively) and more recently in Godhara, Gujarat (2002). These communal incidents expose the tainted, secular project of postcolonial India. The project of secularism that needs re-examination through fair public debate gets seriously interrupted by India's participation in GWOT-inspired security protocols.

MNIK provides us an entry into the discussion of religion, politics and film. In communication studies, religion is seldom an analytical category that is used to understand the way in which a faith is lived and experienced by people on a daily basis. For that reason

scholars do not present religion as an exceptional phenomenon but "as one deeply embedded in the lives of the people" studied (Bradley, 2009). Rizwan, as a child, develops a heightened sense of religiosity derived from his late mother, who muses, "there are two kinds of people in this world. There are those that are good and those who are bad". She tutors her son carefully to look upon the world as comprising equal shares of good people and bad people, the sum of which should not hold us back from our duty. In marriage, Rizwan and Mandira are not particular about their individual faith until the time Sameer is bullied and kicked to death on the soccer field. *Khan*'s last name is adopted by Mandira and Sameer as an act of love, but now their love stands to be brutally politicized by the transnational reception and nature of religion in the U.S.

METHODOLOGY

The audiences actively engage through conversation with the film *MNIK*. MNIK is a multi-textured film into which audiences bring their own cultural contexts and lived experience. This dialectical interaction (audience/text, travelers/U.S. multiculturalism) brings reading methods such as polysemy to the forefront. Polysemy's aim is to foreground the multiple meanings and interpretations of any cultural text, namely film, taking into consideration the vast number of reader subjectivities and points of view (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1986). "Polysemy is the intentional opening up of meaning in a text" (Edelheim, 2006). McKerrow (1989), like Fiske (1986) before him sees it as an instrument of the oppressed used against the interests of the dominant classes. Ceccarelli (1998) reminds us that polysemy is itself polysemous and does not mean the same thing for all scholars. The approaches to polysemy serve rhetorical criticism for scholars Ceccarelli and McKerrow, and align with critical theory and cultural studies for theorists Hall, Fiske, and Newcomb. Scholars are divided about how one can break free from textual analysis debates of the 'ideological closing' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944/1972; Althusser, 1971), and the 'ideological openness' of media texts (Hall, 1986a, 1986b, 1993; Fiske, 1986). The latter model relevant to this study states that texts are ideologically *open* and not *closed*, therefore marking the *active audience* approach of Stuart Hall and Fiske. A film or media artifact becomes a text once an active audience or reading subject gives it meaning. Hall (1986b) says "meanings occur only in the encounter between texts and subjects." The nature of this exchange explains why texts and subjectivity cannot be controlled by the dominant ideology alone as well as why social change and subversive readings can be a strong possibility, surmises Hall.

This methodological insight into how meaning is created by polysemic readings of the text is used to understand the themes that emerge from audience conversations that are termed narratives. The audience members are called narrators. In-depth interviews were conducted to understand *MNIK*, a large polysemic text. Arab and Muslim audiences are marginalized in the public sphere of entertainment. This study captures some important comments by Muslims about their identity, critique of multiculturalism and their political perspectives. Through the narrators' words, the robustness of a multicultural society was gauged by how it creates social conditions that include people of all faith. Select themes were discussed based on the discussions of a subset of my narrators or interviewing subjects. Themes were drawn from transcribed interviews that directly spoke to multicultural issues (terrorism, worship, Islam in the U.S./India, gender) in the film *MNIK* and in contemporary politics (Islamophobia, intolerances

in urban public spaces).

Themes were understood as enduring, when certain clusters of words and meaning stood out based on the force of emotion shown by the narrators, and numerically, based on the number of times the events occurred in the narrators' words. The themes were seen recurring in the narrators' transcribed interviews skirted around different facets of multiculturalism as it is received and understood in city-based life.

Themes dealing with narrators' emotional reactions to treatment by strangers who are non-Muslim, the significance of a mosque versus a church, the wearing of a Hijab, the true meaning of Islam, and religious identity became primary themes that demanded attention. These themes that are central to the narrators' questioning glance toward their treatment in everyday life, and their perceptions of Islam as opposed to a statist version that trickles down from security discourses such as GWOT, offer a powerful critique of values of co-existence (multiculturalism) in urban areas around the country where migrants tend to populate. One does not necessarily turn to film to learn politics, yet film informs our sense of contemporary politics and calls on us to take action. In a way, it impacts us in the same way that other forms of mass media do, by providing us with a common sense understanding and reaffirmation of the notion of popular politics, as well as rubrics for its interpretation. After all, Gramsci's concept of common sense was as "obvious, confused, episodic, or contradictory," yet that is how ideas gain legitimacy in modern societies (Hall et al., 2013, preface). The reference in particular is on the security-inflected rhetoric of the GWOT that we usually receive from statist sources such as network news, Doordarshan [state-owned Indian television channel], or commercial channels that may present breaking news, but do not question the logics of terror or war. Cinema in India adopts a questioning stance due to its independent and discursive sources of income. In this vein, Hall et al. (1978, 2013) argue that: "When a ruling class alliance has achieved an undisputed authority… when it masters the political struggle, protects and extends the needs of capital, leads authoritatively in the civil and ideological spheres, and commands the restraining forces of the coercive apparatuses of the state in its defense-when it achieves all this on the basis of consent…we can speak of the establishment of a period hegemony or hegemonic domination" (Hall et al., 1978, 2013).

Hall and Gramsci thereby urge us to re-examine society by questioning media institutions through an inductive method of gathering audience stories and conversation. Audience conversations serve as an important social critique and provide a voice to marginalized communities. Islamophobia is a complex phenomenon (Halliday, 1999; Lengel and Smidi, in press, 2018; Sheridan, 2012; Smidi and Lengel, 2017), [viii] thereby urging researchers to seek out an active-audience-response method than a textual study. Despite being a commercial filmic text, *MNIK* provides a contrast to Hollywood terror rhetoric that is presented in television and film as a glamorous visual aesthetic, with an over-abundance of fierce, dead, male, Muslim bodies, broken promises of modernity, and a restatement of U.S. foreign policy among global allies (Kundnani, 2014; Said, 2015). Yet, the methodological conundrums of the study are not over with the choice of the interview method. Certain structures of interpretation operate outside conscious awareness or the ability [of the interviewee] to remember, therefore the interview is not a foolproof way to understand the structures of power that underpin either the creation of visual filmic text or the interpretation of that text (Hall et al., 2013).

Therefore, apart from interviews, local and national press, other films, especially *MNIK* contemporaries, *Three Lions* and *Tere Bin Laden*, as also conversations with Muslim friends, students, and select faculty were examined. While the interview method is not exhaustive, conversation provides richness to the understandings embedded in a dense text such as a film. The screening of the film in public spaces creates a critical public conversation that we are unable to enter easily in other spheres of our lives.

Hall (1980), reminds us that the reader has a right to decode the mediated text in ways that the audience can make sense of, given their "frameworks of knowledge", "relations of production", and "technical infrastructure" (p.130). Audiences defy the denotative meaning of visual codes and enact active transformations which exploit the polysemic values of the text. He further critiques traditional semiotics that neglects the work of interpretation, whereas that is what indicates broadcast practices or production practices in all films. He invokes Terni's theory of interpretation, stating "by the word *reading* we mean not only the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into a creative relation between themselves and with other signs; a capacity which is, by itself, the condition for a complete awareness of one's total environment" (Terni cited in Hall, 1980, p. 135). Audiences are thus able to seize their own meanings of religion and religiosity, democracy and freedom, while critiquing multicultural society, and as active participants, rather than as passive victims of war (more notably, Arab and Muslim respondents).

THE AUDIENCE, DIFFERENCE, AND INTERPRETATION

The audience is important to this study as the debate on securitization is not possible without the active input of viewers. Reception studies remind us that we are not merely searching for the essential meaning of the text, or involved in hermeneutic truth finding (Staiger, 2005). Staiger (2005) poses questions salient to the study: "How does a text mean? For whom? In what circumstances? With what changing values over time?" (p. 2). In addition, Harindranath's studies yield that we must not understand filmic audience responses as a function of discrete ethnic groups, or race, as this presupposes that interpretations are arranged simplistically along those lines.

Furthermore, Harindranth writes:

A lot of these problems stem from epistemological inadequacies. It is a mistake to conceive of 'race' as a determining category in the exploration of the practices of consumption of the media and how these are linked to identity formation. A significant contribution to such conceptualizations is the lack of an adequate theoretical explanation for the link between social groups and media reception, that is the answer to the question, how do social or cultural factors impinge on the way people respond to film or television? One can equally pose the question the other way round: in what way do particular kinds of responses to film and television characterize social or cultural factors? (2009, p.221).

Harindranath wants to avoid the uncritical usage of race as a defining factor when multicultural audiences' responses are taken into consideration. Transnational diasporic audiences, in their advent, transcend borders, and forge their own identities separate from, but linked to, those defined by the borders they have left behind. As sojourners, their material histories, class positioning,

gender, and their experiences in the host culture also have a bearing on their response to filmic content.

This study codes the cosmopolitan meeting with Arab and Muslim students as a diasporic encounter and not just one bound by the metaphysics of ethnicity and race. Gilroy (2000), understands diaspora in vibrant ways. Diaspora for Gilroy is a concept that breaks free from a confined understanding of audiences as determined by race, class and ethnicity. Mankekar (1999) on the other hand contributes to reception studies by arguing that it is vital to understand the fragility of the *popular* when audiences who vary in economic status and gender interpret the same text. This audience dependent study employs insights on audience and popularity by Gilroy and Mankekar in its interpretation of audience narratives and the filmic text in the following paragraphs.

Theme 1: Understanding terrorism, affect, Islam, and asserting Muslim identity

Numerous scholars have shown the easy conflation between Terrorism and Islam (Hasian, 2001; Shaheen, 2000). Said (1978, 1992, 1981), addresses the many facets of this issue authoritatively and eloquently in his trilogy - *Orientalism*, *The Question of Palestine* and *Covering Islam*. The trilogy provides the theoretical backbone for any study on media and Islam. He demonstrates how Orientalism is a project that continues to expand based upon Western desire for ascendancy. Legal scholars alert us that the problem lies with terrorism never having been defined politically or legally. Without coming to an internal and international understanding of terrorism, it becomes a tactical match between two parties who are trying to wrest power from each other. According to Acharya (2009), it becomes a "war of terrors". By declaring GWOT without bringing it before the Security Council of the United Nations, the Bush Administration, missed the opportunity for seizing legitimate global leadership on the matter of terrorism. "In this modern age of globalization of terrorism, it is important that we conduct a historical evaluation and determine not *who* is a terrorist, but *what* is a terrorist act" (Acharya, 2009). Some narrators from the study speak out about this instant juxtaposition of religion and terrorism.

"Erin (European American): You know violence and stuff is not in the Koran, it is not what…good Islamic people believe…I've seen my share of bad Christians and bad Jewish folks… I couldn't blame somebody's religion over it. I just…that seemed just wrong…you know Timothy McVeigh…who cares what Timothy McVeigh's religion was…he killed so many people (lines 180-186)."

"Bdour (Syrian): The news…don't give the true image of what [sic] going on in …Syria…and Gaza…these places…people are suffering there and [not] all of them

are Muslims [news media presents all Syrians as Muslim]. Syria not all of them [are Muslim] but still they're human and we respect humanity….Not because we're Muslim…not because I'm Muslim…I'm telling you that don't kill these people even though they're Christian or they're Jewish…and these are people and they deserve to live peacefully[ix]. Media is the main problem…if they make it positive [portrayal of Islam] people will take it positively if they make it negative people will understand in a negative way" (lines 176-189).

Theme 1a: Mosque versus the Church

Bdour (Syrian): In my opinion so they [in the film *MNIK*] didn't focus on the Mosque as they focus on the Church…know what I mean?

Q: What was the difference between the Mosque and the Church portrayals?

Bdour: They pictured like the Mosque is the main place where terrorism come[s] from. And they picture the Church—I respect the Church and the Christian people and I was very happy that when Khan help the Christian people…that's amazing. I was okay they picture it good. But they don't present Mosque as the Church where the peace come from [sic] you know what I mean? They don't make balance between these two (lines 247-257).

Narrators Erin and Bdour are raising questions beyond the legal and the political. Erin draws on her experience with media representation and domestic terrorism and provides an intertextual[x] example for how terrorism and religion are juxtaposed to create a dangerous and enduring stereotype of the errant Muslim. As an Arab and as Muslim, Bdour faults the Western media for a negative view of Islam. While the respondents of the study do not deny that there are malcontents who are Muslim, one of them points out that most Muslims would easily wish Christians and Jews peace. Yet, there is no media event that will cover positivity.

Bdour incisively points out the distinction between the portrayals of the Mosque and the Church in *MNIK*. The Mosque is desecrated by being depicted in *MNIK* as the seat of terrorism (the fiery cleric who preaches violence to youth), reinforcing what the Western audience already believes. A Church is never depicted in this manner: "Church--where the peace come[s] from" one narrator adds. In *MNIK*, the inclusion of the mosque scene becomes the directorial touch where *Khan* can meet other Muslims in his symbolic journey to Washington DC, from despair to hope. Yet, this observation by Bdour clearly marks the way in which inter-faith distinctions are made between Islam and Christianity in mass media. Even a tactical film such as *MNIK* that advocates a peaceful Islam falls prey to this tendency. Narrators display and describe affect and emotion when recalling

9/11, while discussing *MNIK*, terrorism and religion.

Theme 1b: Affect and identity

Monty [U.S., identifies with *Khan* and autism in his interview]: I just remember my heart sinking in my chest and being just…literally sick to my stomach and feeling tears well up in my eyes at the same time. An[d] the only thing I could say was…h-how and why would anybody do this? (.5) It was like really…kinda beyond my—I'm getting emotional [is choked for words] even now talking about it I was like it was beyond my grasp. Why would anybody perpetuate that much horror and pain on anyone for any reason?…um religious fervor to that level…I…I think that's- ya you I think that all religion has value…I jus[t] broke down; I was sobbing, I was like [emphasis mine] (lines 190-191).

Q: How do you respond when you see in film…Muslims presented only as terrorists?

Bdour: Umm. Emotionally…I have a big emotion about Muslims and Arab…not feeling negative about other people but I respect who I am and my identity…I always Muslims and Arab…not feeling negative about other people but I respect who I am and my identity…I always feel like I'm proud of that [emphasis mine] (lines 174-177).

Majid, [Saudi Arabian]: My father's best friend passed and I remember…he was on the table and we were washing him and I started to cry. I remember that clearly…My grandmother died I remember I weeped…But in a movie I find it hard for me to let myself be moved that much but it [the film] was so moving…the part when he was in prison…You know what if that was-that could be so easily me [emphasis mine] (lines 472-482).

Lana [U.S. resident, Jordanian]: And I actually thank you for doing that [public screening of MNIK] 'cause you're going to change them … how people think about Muslims… no one's here to listen to us just cause we are Muslims and that's wrong…Just like Muslims there are Christians who are extremists and…no one seems to have anything against that you know (lines 252-261).

The emotion-driven tapestry of *MNIK* goes thus: a)Hindu-Muslim riots in Mumbai, b) Rizwan's passage to the U.S., c) the diagnosis of Rizwan's Asperger's Syndrome, d) the loss of *Khan*'s son to bullying brutality, e) his encounter with extreme Islam in a mosque, f) incarceration in a U.S. prison reserved for terrorists, g) journey through the U.S., and his role in the climate crisis in a uniquely segregated Mississippi town. All these powerful instances gave rise to the above cited intensely moving thoughts and identifications among audiences. Majid gives two instances, other than the film, that move him to tears-his

grandmother's death, and the funerary rites of a family friend. The prospect of being incarcerated just because he is Muslim moves him. Majid's identity as a Muslim feels under fire. The linkages he makes to the personal and global leave him feeling vulnerable and emotional. *MNIK*'s wrongly imprisoned Rizwan serves as a trigger to recall the many political instances of Muslims who were, and are, locked up illegally in Guantanamo and in other nameless prisons, without legal representation, as well as the atrocities meted to Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib. Many audience members had kept these thoughts to themselves in the years following 9/11, and had never talked to anyone outside their community or close circle of friends about terrorism, religion or identity. I was often thanked for either showing *MNIK* in class or holding a public screening of the film. This audience response made me aware that this particular act of film screening elicits conversations that most would not easily have. I learned to value the trust that all the narrators had placed in me.

Theme 1c: The Hijab, state rules, and Muslim identity

The head covering that many Muslim women wear is known by several names based upon region and language spoken. Muslim and Arab women are used to the strident judgement upon their modest garb only because it contrasts starkly with clothing and fashion regimes in the West. Even though the West often presents itself as the savior of Muslim women, individual citizens in contact with Muslim women are unable to stave off the scorn they receive when they might seem docile or dressed differently than others in the U.S. (Ezekiel, 2006; Ho and Dreher, 2006).

Nora [Saudi Arabian]: Like people around the world have religions and their religions… have rules and regulations…and they practice them…freely…no one tells them anything… Hijab, why Muslim? Why our like they kept saying Hijab is limiting their rights or taking their rights…like if I want my rights I would take it off ?..I don't want anyone forcing me to put it on.

Q: And it is not required in your country to…

Nora: The abaya is required like nowadays…it's one of the critiques that I would say about my country which is they took some of the religious things and made them tradition…So people might wear the abaya and the Hijab because they don't want other people to say, 'Oh she didn't because it's tradition but inside herself she's not convinced that that's what I wanna do, you know?' That's why some of them they wear their Hijab in Saudi Arabia for example. And when they came to the United States they take it off because they are not convinced (lines 233-249).

Nora is responding to the scene in *MNIK* when *Khan*'s sister Haseena's head covering is pulled off by a miscreant at the University. Her husband consoles her by saying that god is merciful even if she does not wear her hijab. Haseena does not talk about leaving the country or relocating to a safer haven, but acknowledges the need for American Muslims to conform, or "look like everyone else." The decision to conform or not to Western clothing remains one of the key conundrums of modern life. What becomes Nora's philosophy of respect for others' religion(s) provokes us into thinking about how we conduct our lives at a time when there is deep disrespect and distrust for Islam and its conventions ("Hijab, why Muslim? Why our like they kept saying Hijab is limiting their rights or taking their rights"). This climate of intolerance and judgement of their practices has allowed Muslim women, specifically, to see the fissures in Western modernity and the discourse of multiculturalism. *MNIK* ceases to be just an "Indian" text, making a case for cinema(s) as not just "national" but global and transnational.

Metatheme: Emergent multiculturalism(s)

The dialectical exchange between the filmic text and the audience narratives provides a deeper understanding of multiculturalism in these war-torn and neoliberal times. Some themes are clear, and others, hydra-like, break away from central themes to provide side commentaries that have a significance of their own. I will discuss just a few.

First of all, the political context of the recorded narratives cannot be ignored during the time period of the study (the Arab Spring began in 2011). The opportunity to speak with Arab and Muslim youth at a time when there was, and is ferment in the political and media landscape in the Middle East, is a fortunate conjuncture for this project. Many narrators remark that "changes" are underway in their countries. As youth who enjoy transnational mobility, they demand to see positive change in Muslim representation. A Yemeni exchange student remarked at a social gathering, "our governments do what they want and cannot even control the image of their citizens as terrorist!" Narrator O. Wants to see more global films like *MNIK*; others simply want a better portrayal of Muslims in mass media. The earnestness, effect, and passion with which scores of narrators conveyed this to me, is tough to reproduce in words. Their sentiments were heartfelt and it was almost as if the narrators' very existence was threatened if media-evoked racial narrative against Muslims did not change.

Secondly, the portrayal of places of worship, the Church and the Mosque, receives strong reaction from the narrators of the study. While *Khan* finds the devil (*shaitan*) in Dr. Faisal Rahman, he protests his efforts to distort the peaceful message of the Koran. He throws his worry-bead stones at him in much the same way Satan is shunned during the Haj pilgrimage in Mecca (Erndl, 2016). In this sense, *Khan*'s journey to Washington D.C. possesses the purpose of a pilgrimage. It is the contrast with the Church in Wilhemina that audience member Bdour objects to. The Church provides refuge from the floods and an abode where *Khan* meets with "crazy hair Joe" and "Mama Jenny." Here, the symbol of the Church is depicted as a center for the devout. *Khan* bonds with the African American community to the background music of "Hum hongae kamyab" (a song to honor the nation, taught in all schools in Postcolonial India) also known as "We shall overcome" (anthem of the Civil Rights movement). Coming together through song and shared history of subjugation signifies the bond of empathy that South Asians and African Americans can rightfully claim (Erndl, 2016). This is where the textual reading must bow to audience interpretation, especially if they are neither Indian nor American.

The third emergent theme of gender is most significant to the constant exchange between narrators, text, and real-life occurrences. Three Arab women narrators provide an oppositional reading of the incident of the hijab in *MNIK*. By *oppositional* I mean that the dominant or authorial intention of the text is subverted by a reader to yield another (Hall, 1986b; Lull, 1990). I asked Nora, A., and B. their thoughts about this incident. Both Nora and B. express extreme disapproval and discontent about the way this incident is depicted in *MNIK.* They are not shocked at the incidence of the hijab being pulled from Haseena.

Outside of their own country, Nora and B. are forced to accept the desecration of closely held Islamic practices such as modest clothing choices for women. Reports from larger cities such as New York City are replete with tales of, for instance, Muslim women's garb being lit on fire (Parascandola and Slattery, 2016). Others report having their hijabs pulled off in public spaces (Carregawoodby and Parascandola, 2016). Nora and B are discontent with the husband's role in the Haseena-incident, both of them suggesting that it is not Zahir's place to pacify his wife or to tell her, "all is well". B. says "you don't need for other people to respect you, you first respect yourself [emphasis mine]." She doesn't believe that Haseena's husband, Zahir, needed to *give her respect*-at best a middle-class virtue that many Arab women are not bound by. The rules of life in Saudi Arabia (her country of origin), and the rules of religiosity, do not call for the male as final arbiter of this, or any similar incident.

Furthermore, she looks upon the hijab as a personal weapon, the possession of which gives the wearer immense strength. In the film too, Haseena returns to wearing the hijab explaining that it is not just her religious duty but also her (*wajud*) reality (Erndl, 2016).

Narrator A, says people from around the world ask her why she wears a hijab. They wonder if she has any hair underneath the hijab. The outward manifestation of the hijab makes it a unique symbol of womanhood

unsupported in the West.

And here, narrator Nora comments on the more practical and material aspects of the hijab--its inconvenience, for instance, when traveling through airport checkpoints. She says: When I went to Florida [during] in the Christmas vacation [sic]...I found myself like I'm a stranger there like hijab was not familiar in the area especially if you go to Miami…people look at me and one of the men tell me that 'Hey girl' you don't like men? [She begins to provide an explanation] I'm wearing for a purpose, for other purposes [sic]…It was weird and this was the first time for me to experience something like that. This verbal exchange in Miami, Florida, is received with much dismay and incredulity by Nora. An "open" multicultural society comes up short in the judgements it heaps on women who are covered, recalling Alsultany's (2013) critique of U.S. imperialism in the Middle-East with its accompanying assumption that metropolitan multiculturalism must liberate women merely through the presence of Western dominant forces. By their own accounts Muslim and Arab women continue to break down dichotomies and binary oppositions embedded in stereotypical language employed to describe them. Classic binary oppositions such as *traditional-modern*, *secular-religious* are used most often (Erndl, 2016).

Conclusion

Balzacq (2011) defines securitization as a "set of interrelated practices, and the processes of their production, diffusion, and reception/translation that bring threats into being" (Balzacq, 2011). This definition does not allow issues of national security and human security to become a realists' tale or a normative act by a politician--of pursuing or aborting a tangible menace. The concreteness of threat merges with the intangible risk perceived by citizens. Security must take into account the social construction of reality and the perception it creates among citizens before they, oftentimes, take the law into their own hands. The Trump presidential era has seen unfortunate and bitter consequences of securitization that have unfairly laid the blame on migrants from bordering nations and war torn nations-many of them poor, agricultural and/or Muslim.

Present times echo the Bush era coinage of *Axes of Evil* when describing sovereign states in the Middle East, highlighting the long-term Orientalization of non-Judeo-Christian religions, namely Islam, and the demonization of Muslims via the media-commercialization—culture industry complex. This persuasive volley of visual artifacts through mass and social media taint the perceptions of citizens such that they take it upon themselves to root out evil as they perceive it, often by violence toward immigrants, new and old (Alsultany, 2013; Grewal, 2005; Ortiz, 2017).

Clini (2015) calls these phenomena of neo-orientalization "new Orientalist fears". Alsultany shows a strong connection to citizen-on-citizen crimes, for instance the spate of off-loading incidents of Arab and Muslim passengers on domestic and international Airlines, to popular media representational strategies that she calls *simplified complex representations*. She argues that "simplified complex representations are the representational mode of the so-called postrace era, signifying a new standard of racial representations...and contribute to the multicultural or postrace illusion" (Alsultany, 2013). There is a constant interplay between media representation and the myriad ways in which these images damage the fabric of trust among communities in a society. Films such as *MNIK,* produced in the global South, serve as foil to such constructions, presenting Muslims and immigrants as active and positively faith driven.

Hollywood media is a Culture Industry with a monopoly on global audiences. Yet a South Asian film is able to displace dominant narratives by presenting a strong vision of co-existence and peace within a society that avows multicultural values. It is through the broadened understanding of multiple cinemas that this audience-centered study unsettles our understanding of what a "national" cinema(s) is. The audience narrators of global film, bring us an awareness of the shortcomings of neoliberalized multiculturalism when security discourses abound. The messages of peace and tolerance in Islam and other religions, and the participation of Muslims and Arabs in daily economic, political, and cultural life in the U.S., move us further toward a doctrine of hope rather than despair. The polysemy of a film like *MNIK* would not be exhausted by examining just its textual meaning.

Audience responses move us from simply an orientation of empathy to that of *implicature* (Dace and McPhail, 2001), reminding us of our connectedness and common humanity. We are implicated in each other's lives (for example, audience member: "this [*Khan* being water boarded in *MNIK*] could easily have been me"). As Dace and McPhail (2001), point out, "Implicature extends the notion of empathy from the psychological to the physical by acknowledging that self and other are never separate and distinct but are always interdependent and interrelated".

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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[i] The Global War on Terror is the term coined during the Bush era as a way to envision the post September 11, 2001 security strategy to go after domestic and international terrorism. The coinage has become a permanent reference to the U.S. initiated wars, since 2001, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria, where old European alliances during WWII (the Allies) came together to support the U.S. in their effort to rout terrorism globally. Many other countries such as India, and others in the developing world have pledged their support. The global war on terror also establishes U.S. supremacy and leadership in many spheres of existence that rely on the war economy or the story of the war that is told and retold, such as in the Hollywood Film Industry. The perspective of this Industry that produces the war film is more likely than not aligned with U.S. foreign policy.

[ii] The media fare that transnational travelers consume and the kinds of media in use (social media, broadcast media, film, television etc) are equally transnational and discursive (un-unified disparate elements characteristic of the 'Culture Industries'). 'Discursive' has several meanings in English, but used here, and throughout the paper, it is derived from socio-linguistics' poststructuralist turn and Foucault's notion of discursive practice wherein discourse (most likely linguistic practices) is immersed with cultural meaning and cultural context. Discursive practice is any process that may reveal the progression or course of dominant reality or power. Foucault is concerned about state, quasi-formal, and commercial institutions such as the hospital, clinic, law, schools, prisons, gender or neo-Marxian 'Culture Industries' (large commercial media outlets).

[iii] The nation-states of South Asia have tried to influence European and U.S. governments to tailor their foreign policy to suit regional, internal, and border politics. These efforts by the nine contiguous nations have yielded variable results.

[iv] In an interview, film scholar Rachel Dwyer asked a successful Indian film director, Vidhu Vinod Chopra, whether or not India is aware of the rest of the world more than the rest of the world is aware of India, capturing how the mood in Bollywood is cosmopolitan. Bollywood perceives itself as the political center of the modernizing world and a pulse for hot button issues.

[v] The Film's worldwide release grossed a total of $ 45.5 million, a box office record for Indian films in 2010. 'Three Idiots' broke this record in subsequent years (Wikipedia, 2017).

[vi] Paulo Coelho of *The Alchemist* fame tweeted on the seventh anniversary of the film's release in February 2017 that Shah Rukh Khan (SRK) should have received an Oscar for his role in *MNIK*. SRKs position as an undisputed superstar (Baadshah) of Hindi Cinema was further established with the success of the film.

[vii] While the 3 step structure of Turner's rites of passage work for Erndl's textual study on MNIK, it works as a partial frame for an audience based study such as this one.

[viii] Scholars believe that even though racism has been addressed in scholarship, religious intolerance in many facets of everyday life, is not.

[ix] [Bdour doesn't believe that American media conveys his sentiments as a Muslim wishing peace upon Christians and Jews]. Since my interview with Bdour was almost an hour long, I have paraphrased the context in parenthesis.

[x] Intertextuality relates the filmic text with other mediated and real life instances of terrorism for the MNIK audience to make meaning. Audiences create meaning based upon multiple images, stories, lived realities, and cultural texts.