

An Open Letter from MPAC About Honoring 'My Name is Khan' APRIL 18, 2010

As-salaamu alaykum,

The ability of the artist to conjure emotion, challenge deeply held ideas, and inspire thought and action are unmatched. For this reason, we honor those who use art and media to create thought provoking, enriching and humanizing portrayals of Islam and Muslims. We created the Media Awards 19 years ago as an avenue to engage the entertainment industry and recognize artists when they produce good work. Almost two decades later, [we've honored](#) dozens of unique, inspiring, and sometimes controversial projects and people we call “voices of courage and conscience” because they challenge the status quo. This year, following a nomination process based on community input and voted on by the board, we selected our 2010 honorees:

- Dave Eggers' non-fiction bestseller “Zeitoun” about a Muslim American family surviving Hurricane Katrina
- Arab American filmmaker Cherien Dabis' film “Amreeka” about a Palestinian immigrant family living in Ohio during the first Gulf War
- An episode of ABC's “Grey's Anatomy” called “Give Peace a Chance,” which features a positive Muslim character
- Bollywood director Karan Johar's film “My Name is Khan” about a disabled Indian Muslim man whose strong faith guides him through challenges and tragedies after 9/11

Why We're Honoring “My Name is Khan”

When Karan Johar's latest blockbuster film starring one of Bollywood's biggest stars Shah Rukh Khan was released in mid-February, it was met with strong reviews from film critics and worldwide audiences alike for highlighting the suspicion and targeting of South Asian immigrant Muslims following the 9/11 attacks. In countless interviews, Johar has described how he made this movie in order to share a serious message about understanding, community and tolerance in a light-hearted way. At its core, “My Name is Khan” promotes mutual acceptance and understanding across racial and religious differences. This message becomes the moral foundation of the film, when the mother of the film's hero teaches him as a young boy that “in life, there are only good people who do good things and bad people who do bad things.” We are honoring “My Name is Khan” because its message is pure and positive, and evokes the Qur'anic verse where God tells humanity, “*We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another...*” (49:13).

The film's hero is a Rizwan Khan, a Bollywood version of Forrest Gump who struggles to feel emotion and connect to people as a result of his form of autism. When he immigrates to America to join his brother in San Francisco, his hijab-wearing psychology professor sister-in-law is the first to diagnose his Aspergers Syndrome, and to help him adapt to his new surroundings. Rizwan takes a sales job with his brother, which is how he meets and falls in love with Mandira, a divorced mom of a 6-year-old son. In true Bollywood fashion, they marry against the odds - in this case, he's Muslim and she's Hindu. (In reality, this plot twist ignited Hindu-Muslim tensions

in India, resulting in more than 1,800 people being arrested for vandalizing theaters promoting the film and 21,000 special police forces being dispatched to protect moviegoers across the country.)

Rizwan and Mandira's happiness is short-lived, because their lives change forever after 9/11. The film demonstrates the devastating combination of post-9/11 ignorance and bad policies when Rizwan gets detained by law enforcement, and when he is subjected to hateful language and threats as a result of his faith. Then, his stepson Sameer is beaten to death in a hate-motivated attack by a group of bullies from his school because of his Muslim last name. In her grief, Mandira blames Rizwan's Muslim faith for her son's death. She tells him to leave and not come back until he has told the President he's not a terrorist.

Rizwan's ensuing quest to meet the President is accompanied by a series of wild plot twists and turns, including when Rizwan lands in a rural shantytown in Georgia. The locals take him in with open arms and open hearts. For the first time, he doesn't experience judgment and rejection by new people. After Rizwan shares his experiences with suspicion and injustice, they end up joining together in a Hindi and English blend of "We Shall Overcome." Sadly, the town residents embody crude, outdated and painful stereotypes of African Americans, right down to their names ("Mama Jenny" and "Funny Haired Joel"). Johar recently announced that a new Director's Cut of the film will be shown in the European release of the film, which is 45 minutes shorter than the original. Given the problematic portrayal of the African American characters in the original cut, we will be recommending that the director and editors revisit the Georgia scenes to reflect a more informed, authentic and multi-dimensional depiction.

When Rizwan later learns a massive Hurricane has hit the town, he abandons his quest to meet the President to come to their aid. He rushes back to the town to rescue these forgotten people, bringing along with him everyone he's met along the way. The parallel to how African Americans were treated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is unmistakable. Ultimately, Rizwan fulfills his pledge and successfully delivers his message to the President - "My name is Khan and I'm not a terrorist" - which wins back his wife, and they live happily ever after.

Produced by a Bollywood film industry that is dominated by music and dance themes and outlandish love stories, Karan Johar's film takes some serious risks in pushing through the Muslim-Hindu divide in India, and in bringing to life post-9/11 backlash and its real consequences for Muslims living in America. While done in a comic fairytale lens, it represents a positive step for Bollywood in dealing with serious subject matter.

Recent Objections to "My Name is Khan"

Some of you may have received an email during the past week containing a letter calling on us to reconsider our decision to honor the film based on a critique of the film as creating a good Muslim/bad Muslim paradigm and promoting anti-black racism. We respect and value the opinions of those who signed onto the letter, which is the first major objection that we have received regarding the film since it was released in mid-February.

We are an open organization, which strives to foster honest communication within our community about complex and timely political, social and religious issues. For this reason, we have been pained by the manner in which these objections have been raised. In the spirit of our faith, differences of perspective should be handled through open and frank dialogue, which is what we hope to now create. With respect to our difference of opinion about the film's overall merit and meaning, we are interested in extending the conversation to include the underlying painful and sensitive issues around race in popular portrayals and within our community.

Moving Forward: Let's Address the Real Issue(s)

We believe this difficult moment provides an important and meaningful opportunity for us to instigate much-needed discussion within our communities around racial portrayals in popular media and racial (mis)perceptions within our own communities.

We are communicating our shared concerns about the portrayals of African Americans in the film with our colleagues at Fox Broadcasting and the makers of the film. We hope that this will enhance the director's understanding of our Muslim American communities and inform his future projects.

We appreciate the open hand extended this week by Tayyibah Taylor and Dr. Ihsan Bagby, who introduced us to the Healing & Reconciliation Program of the [Muslim Alliance of North America](#) (MANA). MPAC and MANA have a shared desire to create opportunities for candid conversations to take place within and between immigrant and indigenous Muslim American communities around the country. We invite you to join us for the Community Reconciliation Town Hall Forums will co-host in Washington, DC and Los Angeles in the coming weeks and months. Our goal is to create a safe and open space where people can share their own experiences and perspectives about race and racism in Hollywood/Bollywood as well as within our own communities. If you care about these issues, we hope that you will work with us to make these open forums a step toward a better future.

On a related note, in January we held an intimate dialogue with the Hollywood legend and Emmy Award winning actress, choreographer, director, and producer Debbie Allen. Ms. Allen has played an important part in advancing Hollywood's portrayal of African Americans, through such ground-breaking TV shows as "Fame," "The Cosby Show," "A Different World," "Fresh Prince of Bel Air," as well as the film "Amistad." Here's what she said of her own learning experiences in breaking through stereotypes and glass ceilings in Hollywood to get better stories told ([see video here](#)):

"There were times I was very angry and frustrated, then I realized that anger was one of the biggest hurdles to overcome because when you are angry, you really can't accomplish anything. You are not walking the path of goodness and light. When you are angry, nothing is going to happen. So I had to let that go and just be patient, persistent and know that this story had a place. People have to have that kind of spirit, determination, tenacity, persistence and belief - that's it."

This is an apt message to conclude with, because it reflects the spirit with which we hope the conversation will continue. We look forward to working with you for the good of our community, our religion, our country, and our shared future. May Allah guide us all as we strive to serve His cause.

Sincerely,

Salam Al-Marayati

Executive Director

Ramsey Hakim

Chair of MPAC Board of Directors