

Attack and the Aftermath: A Critique on Counter Narratives in Post 9/11 Films

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Abstract

September 11, 2001, or 9/11, as it is widely known, was not just another day. It literally shook the world and the tremors ran deep into the obscure soils of history. The aftermath of the attack has changed the aspects of world politics, business, and life in general. In order to sensitise the world on the effects of the 9/11 attacks, many literary writers wrote novels and poems with 9/11 as the milieu. Few writers also attempted to trace counter-narratives to oppose the dominant narrative. Similarly, as twenty-first century is the age of watching many filmmakers have found a strong substance in the events related to 9/11 to make documentaries, crime thrillers, and family dramas. This has in turn opened the possibilities of undertaking literary analysis on the aftermath of 9/11 attacks on humanity. The proposed research paper intends to make a new historicist reading of *Reluctant Fundamentalist* directed by Mira Nair, an adaptation based on the novel with the same title written by Mohsin Hamid, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a documentary film directed by Michael Moore and *My Name is Khan* directed by Karan Johar. The rationale behind choosing these films is that they belong to different genres including documentary, fiction, and a literary adaptation, which would foster a multidimensional viewpoint to trace the counter-narratives of the 9/11 attack. Further, this study will also analyse the treatment of race and identity in the films of the post 9/11 era.

Keywords: Dominant narrative, Counter narrative, Post 9/11 fiction , Newhistoricist reading.

The World knows how significant is the day September 11, 2001, that changed the facets of world politics, business, history, and life. Immediately after this attack on World Trade Centre and Pentagon, writers accepted the mandate to make the people aware of the reason behind the attack and its consequences, hence many writers used this theme for creating literary works. Few writers made attempts to pin down counter-narrative to argue against the dominant narrative. Thus Post 9/11 fiction as a sub-genre of American literature emerged.

Similarly, film being the popular medium, filmmakers also used this theme of 9/11 to sensitise people on the undercurrents of 9/11. This paper intends to make a New Historic reading of *Reluctant Fundamentalist*, directed by Mira Nair, an adaptation based on the novel with the same title written by Mohsin Hamid, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a documentary directed by Michael Moore and *My Name is Khan* directed by Karan Johar. The reason behind selecting these films is because they be-

long to three different sub-genres of films i.e: documentary, fiction, and literary adaptation. This would espouse several viewpoints to trace the counter-narratives of the 9/11 attack. This paper also analyses the treatment of race, identity in the films of Post 9/11 era. The dominant narrative of the attack is recorded as explained in the official commission report by the federal government on the 9/11 attacks(4). The September 11 attack is a sequence of four coordinated terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda, an Islamic terrorist group. Four passenger airlines bound for California from various cities in the North Eastern part of the United States run by two major air carrier i.e; United Airlines and American Airlines were hijacked by nineteen Al-Qaeda terrorists. North and South towers of the World Trade Centre were crashed by American Airline flight 11 and United Airlines flight 175 respectively that took off from Boston's Logan International airport en route to Los Angeles. The third plane Airline flight 77 that took off from Dulles International Airport smashed into Pentagon which is the headquarters of the U.S Department of Defence at Virginia. The fourth plane United Airlines flight 93, that took off from Newark International airport en route to San Francisco, headed to Washington D.C initially, later collided into the field in Stonycreek Township at Pennsylvania.

The attack had a telling effect on the people of the United States of America. More than 2,800 people were killed in the attack, 6000 were injured. The blasts lead to damage of \$10 billion in infrastructure and property. It is to be believed that few terrorists lived in the US for more than a year and took flying lessons at American commercial flight schools. The 19 terrorists boarded four flights by conveniently smuggling box-cutters and knives through security at the three East coast airports. Immediately after the take-off these terrorists took control over the planes. The then President George W.Bush who was touring at Florida on September 11, 2001, addressed the media at 9 P.M saying,

Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest building, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve. We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed this act and those who harbour them.

Post 9/11films can be divided into two categories. One is based on the events that occurred in September 2001, and the other alludes to the works that talks about other issues that are offshoots of 9/11 attacks. Filmmakers accepted the mandate to sensitise the people and the cause and effect of the attack. Several documentaries, movies, and lit flicks were made based on September 11, 2001 attack. A Documentary is a non-fiction film which is directed predominantly with the intention of instruction, education, and research and for maintaining historical records. Film adaptations are aimed at reproducing literary works in the visual media in order to garner wide reach and popularity. Movies or fictional stories deal with a wide range of themes ranging from romance, comedy, tragedy, thriller, romantic-comedy, tragicomedy. Movies pertaining to 9/11 deal with themes ranging from counter-narrative, identity crisis, race, religion, politics, gender, economy, and trauma.

Sandhu, enlists the ten significant movies which deal with the 9/11 attack as the milieu(2). Here the researcher discussed a few important movies involving 9/11 attack and its aftermath. *9/11* is a documentary directed by James Hanlon. It is based on a real life-incident. *Zero: An Investigation into 9/11*, a documentary directed by Franco Fracassi and Francesco Trento is based on testimonies and investigations. *Voices from Inside the Tower* is a documentary that deals with the perspectives of people who were inside the tower. *Twin Towers* directed by Bill Guttentag and Robert David Port is a movie about two brothers, one a firefighter and the other as a police officer who is remembered for their bravery in New York City on September 9/11. *Flight 93* directed by Peter Markle is a movie about a heroic passenger. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is a film adapta-

tion of a novel of the same title directed by Stephen Daldry. It is about a nine-year boy who is on a quest to unlock the key to the mysterious death of his father at the World Trade Centre.

Fahrenheit 9/11 is a documentary directed by Michael Moore. This documentary criticizes the administration of the then President George W. Bush. It also highlights the possible relationship between George W. Bush and Osama Bin Laden. The documentary also projects the consequences of the Iraq war on its innocent people. *Reluctant Fundamentalist* directed by Mira Nair, is an adaptation based on a novel of the same title written by Mohsin Hamid. It is about the Post 9/11 impact on a Pakistani man named Changez. *My name is Khan* is a movie directed by Karan Johar. This film is about the post 9/11 prejudice faced by Khan's family.

The research tool used by the researcher in the proposed reading of post 9/11 films is new historicism. New historicism focuses on the significance of historical milieu. History, in general, is the coherent narration of events that took place over the period of time. New historicism argues that literature is a worthy source of information and knowledge to reread historical events to trace the counter-narratives and details underpinning the evolution of the dominant narrative.

Traditional historians perceived history as a chronological sequence of events that possess a linear, causal relationship: event A cause event B, event B cause event C, and so on. Further, they believe that humankind is capable of finding the historical events through objective analysis and thus they contribute the world view held by the culture to which the events refer (Tyson). They believe that history is progressive and human beings are developing over the course of time in all aspects of life. However, for new historians, history cannot be understood in a linear progression (283). Consequently, they were trying to evolve a new framework to study literature using historical context.

Eventually, Stephen Greenblatt established the idea of New Historicism, a form of a literary theory whose aim is to understand intellectual history through literature, and literature through its cultural context. He points out that, a literary text does not gain meaning unless it is studied in the historical context (8). According to the new historians both literary and non-literary texts counter and complement each other. New historicism differs from traditional historical criticism in the following ways states Vangoghfan: Firstly, new historicists assume that the traditional historical criticism is way too simple and plain. Secondly, new historicists condemn the prominence of 'order.' Thirdly, new historicism hints that political, social, cultural and economic views are prone to continuous change. Fourthly, new historicism entails that the views of the people are stable and subject to possible change. Fifthly new historicism hints that a literary text is not influenced completely by culture, rather it is partly influenced by it. To put it in a nutshell, new historicists believe that traditional historical criticism is complex, they doubt the assertion of harmony and unity (1). Therefore the essence of new historicism can be understood from the words of Veaser that literary and non-literary "texts" disseminate indivisibly and no discourse gives access to constant truths (xi).

There was a sense of now or never urgency and necessity in the need for critical analysis concerning the event of 11 September 2001. Robin M. Frost, in his book *Nuclear Terrorism after 9/11*, states "... a position that runs counter to the views on nuclear terrorism expressed by many politicians and academics as well as the media" (12). Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit voice equally intense, though, contrasting ideas in their book *Occidentalism; A Short History of Anti Westernism* (25), advocating that "the war against the West was a war against the 'the poisonous materialistic civilization' built on Jewish financial capitalist power" (27). They opine that America

has foes who are skeptical about the idea of “Americanism” (76) and these foes were the ones responsible for the destruction of “symbols of U.S power and wealth; ... symbols of New York City, our contemporary Babylon; ...” (128). They draw parallels between the destruction of the twin towers of New York on September 11, 2001, was an act of hatred from the opposing forces identical to what happened to the great historical city of Babylon. These excerpts implode on the various viewpoints in terms of ideological differences of critics in a Post 9/11 world.

In terms of criticism and analysis of 9/11 films, Dixon in his article *Something Lost - Film after 9/11* attempted to pose the possible questions on the thousands of hours of footage exist of the events on 9/11(24). He had read a few movies on 9/11 to raise and answer questions on the attack. In the article *America Under Attack: Pearl Harbour, 9/11, and History in the Media*, Landy raises questions concerning the means and ends of the monumental media generated histories on Pearl Harbour and 9/11(98). Elouardaoui in his essay *Arabs in Post-9/11 Hollywood Films: a Move towards a More Realistic Depiction?*, looks at the way a number of post 9/11 Hollywood films portray Arabs in America and mentions that there is always a conflict between realistic and unrealistic portrayal of the Arabians in the midst of search for sensation and commercial success (12). Another characteristic feature that is apparent from the study of literature about 9/11 is the broad range of essays which deals with the questions raised against Bush’s administration policy. Jervis (1) in his recent article puts forth the unanswered questions for which the then government had failed to give concrete and absolute answers.

The above-mentioned works strongly advocate that there are gaps, which needs to be filled and one can continue to ask new questions on the dominant narrative of 9/11 attacks and its aftermath on humanity. Certainly, a New Historicist reading of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *My name is Khan*, would initiate groundbreaking questions in critically analysing the effect and aftermath of the attack pertaining to the themes based on identity, race, migration, religion, trauma, and gender, thus making the present study more relevant, consequential and essential in the literary and historical context.

The paper attempts to make a new historic reading of the above mentioned films in accordance with the theoretical underpinnings and the existing research on new historicism and post 9/11 fiction.

Fahrenheit 9/11 is a documentary directed by Michael Moore. Michael Moore has dedicated this documentary to his friend who lost his life in 9/11 attack on World Trade centre. The documentary opens with the statement ‘was it all dream?’ followed by the broadcast of various news channels announcing Al Gore as the President of United States of America. Moore traces a counter-narrative on the declaration of the election result in favour of Bush. Moore claims that the media with a vested interest has tailored the dominant narrative of the election results. The documentary narrates that the Fox news projected George W. Bush the winner in Florida and thus he appears to be the favourite to win US presidency. Following which the other network says; “Hey, if Fox said it, it must be true.” What most people do not know is that the man in charge of the decision desk at Fox at that night, the man who called it for Bush, was none other than Bush’s first cousin John Ellis. Numerous investigations proved Al Gore as the winner but nothing mattered.

However, people voiced out their opposition but only in vain. George W.Bush became the President of the United States of America in 2001. Oppositions against him did not stop, so he went on vacation till September 11, 2001. Moore is often impolite in portraying Bush’s character.

He employs sarcasm and humour throughout the film. He has completely unveiled the political situation that prevailed in America before and after 9/11. Moore points out that “it is pathetic to hear that the president who is to guard the nation is involved in such a deadly act, murdering 3000 odd people with the help of Al Qaeda.” It is even more poignant to hear the loss of innocent people of Iraq who have never attacked the US, never threatened to attack the US and never murdered a single American citizen. The most soul-stirring part of the documentary is the interview with Ms. Lila Lipscomb and her family about their dead son Sgt. Michael Pederson. The alternative narrative as represented by Moore in his documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* shook the strongholds of the dominant narrative and provided a platform for serious research on the events pertaining to the 9/11 attacks.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is a post-9/11 film directed by Mira Nair starring Riz Ahmed and Kate Hudson. It talks about the effect of the 9/11 attacks on a Pakistani American. In this film, the male protagonist Changez is a young ivy-league educated Pakistani American, whose voices were wilfully evaded from the mainstream narrative. Throughout the film his voice is avoided by the Americans and is made silent, thus he is portrayed voiceless. This film calls for the inclusion of a suppressed voice to take the centre stage. He claims for a part in the narrative of the historical perceptions underpinning the position of the people from the Arabian and Middle Eastern nations. Changez is portrayed as the representative of all the innocent Muslims and Arabians who wanted their voices to be included in the prominent narrative. The voice invariably and unanimously reinstates that they love America and articulates that they belong there in America.

Further, Changez during his struggle for identity has to metaphorically answer Bush’s question “You are with us or you are with the terrorists ?”(Youtube). He was characterized to answer the three different aspects of the dominant narratives. Firstly, America and her citizens are innocent. Secondly, there is no space for suspects and people who are considered terrorists to voice their opinions but the character Changez is able to voice his point of view and constraints. Thirdly, this narrative is against the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims as uncivilised, uncultured and poor. This film narrative also includes the struggle of an innocent Muslim in an airport, especially after the 9/11 attacks. However, throughout the film, Changez was able to evolve a micro-narrative of his personal life as opposed to the dominant narrative.

My Name is Khan is a movie directed by Karan Johar casting Shahrukh Khan (Rizwan Khan) and Kajol (Mandira). Rizwan Khan is diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome. He lives with his younger brother Zakir and sister-in-law Haseena at the United States of America. Rizwan works as a product seller at Zakir’s company. He meets a Hindu woman Mandira and develops a relationship with her and they get married. Mandira has a son named Sameer from her previous marriage. After marrying Rizwan Khan, both Mandira and Sameer take Rizwan’s last name as their own. The couple leads a happy and peaceful life till the September 11 attack. They start to face the post 9/11 prejudice because of their religion. Sameer is attacked by a group of people at his school and is killed. Mandira is completely traumatised and blames Rizwan for Sameer’s death and says that she does not want to live with him anymore. Naive Rizwan questions her what should he do to be together, Mandira full of pain and rage replies to him sarcastically to tell the people of the United States of America and the president “My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist.”

Rizwan’s struggle to prove his innocence is similar to that of the struggle faced by Changez to make his voice heard and included in the dominant narrative. Rizwan appears more tragic and pathetic because of his physical ailments and the emotional battle he has to encounter with his wife. Rizwan being naive and innocent starts his journey to meet the President in order to win his wife’s

love back. He faces lots of upheavals during this venture. He befriends an African woman Mama Jenny and her son Joel in Georgia. Later at a mosque, he suspects a Muslim doctor Faisal Rahman for his violent rhetorics and reports to FBI which neglects his complaint. He is arrested for shouting “my name is Khan and I m not a terrorist” at one the President’s public meeting. He is brutally treated in the prison and is later proved to be innocent. Mandira who has now got justice for her son’s death joins Rizwan and they both meet the new president Barack Obama. In their brief conversation with the President, Mr. Obama recognises Rizwan and greets him with the following words “Your name is Khan and you are not a terrorist” Which appears to be a fitting reply, by the newly elected President, to the question Bush kept repeating right after the attack on America “You are with us or you are with the terrorists?” (Bush 2011).

The argument developed in this research paper questions several aspects of the dominant narrative. Firstly, it questions the portrayal of America as a brave big brother of the world who is able to cope with the attack and the keenness of the media in depicting the heroics of America in facing the attack. Secondly, the mentality of the federal government in showcasing all the Muslims and Arabians in a bad light that though they are in America they choose to be with terrorists by which America claims innocence and suggests that her enemies are terrorists. These films also talk about the deliberate attempt of the dominant narrative to silence the suppressed and media has played a vital role in developing an idea and belief pertaining to the historical event. When people are carried away by the tale of the four planes being hijacked, they tend to give the least significance to the argument that media is hijacked to make inroads in the creation of history. Media with a vested interest was able to weave a convincing tale in recreating history.

History per se is evolved as a product manufactured using various ingredients such as photographs, visuals, testimonies, and narrations. It is the people who create history but the term people, here is not inclusive of the voiceless and powerless rather it effectively includes the people in power. On the whole, this new historic reading of select films has facilitated a rereading of the dominant narrative exposing the evident gaps in the narrative which did not give heed to the narrative of the oppressed. *Fahrenheit 911* exposed the possible concealed narrative of the political aspects pertinent to the attack. Whereas *My Name is Khan* and *Reluctant Fundamentalist* was able to throw light upon the characters who had to toil to include their voices in the otherwise prejudiced dominant narratives. The journey of these characters delineated the problems faced by Muslims and Arabians related to race and identity. Certainly, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks had a telling effect on the livelihood of ordinary innocent Muslims. At least they were able to register voices in the fictional world. If these voices are continuously neglected by the powerhouse there is a possibility of inflicting an artificial memory loss to the nation and its narration.

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