

[연구논문]

# The (Un)wanted American: A Visual Reading of Arab and Muslim Americans

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## Introduction

In one of the key scenes in *My Name is Khan* by Karan Johar (2010), Rizwan Khan, an Indian Muslim immigrant who suffers from Asperger's syndrome, takes his wife's words literally and, in the wake of the events of 9/11 after the death of his stepson, embarks on a journey across the U.S. to inform the president that his name is Khan, and that he is not a terrorist. Ultimately, he ends up in jail, as indeed a terrorist suspect. When his name is eventually cleared and he is released, the investigating officer, refusing to believe in his innocence, threatens to keep him under surveillance, an act which Khan reciprocates, both physically and metaphorically, by promising to keep his own eyes on the officer as well. The officer is momentarily taken aback by the unexpectedness of the behavior of Khan, who sheepishly waltzes his way out, feeling both elated at having crossed a line that

usually remains uncrossed yet at the same time unsure of the consequences for having done so. Khan's reaction seems to surprise both the officer and himself, and in a way the audience too since it projects a different image of the immigrant from the one we expect to encounter in reality or read about and see on screen, in literary and artistic renderings of the life of minority groups.

The history of the U.S. has always been associated with different forms of discrimination--racial, ethnic, religious, etc.--against minorities perceived as non-American, which has forced these communities to struggle against practices of marginalization and perpetual feelings of being unwanted, sometimes on their own land. From the founding days of the new world all the way to 9/11 and later events, evidence points to a history of continual struggle to overcome prejudice exercised against those perceived as a threat to American culture and ideals. From the African-Americans to the Italians, from the Jewish Americans to the Chinese and Latinos--all are examples that have been considered at one time or another as (un)wanted Americans. A painful condition since it implies a duality: being both an insider and an outsider to a society, both accepted and unaccepted, with all the implications that accompany such a status. Arab and Muslim Americans are the most recent groups to suffer from such a condition. In *How Does It Feel To Be A Problem*, Moustafa Bayoumi explains that:

[S]ince the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Arabs and Muslims, two groups virtually unknown to most Americans prior to 2001, now hold the dubious distinction of being the first new communities of suspicion after the hard-won victories of the civil-rights era.<sup>1)</sup>

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1) Moustafa Bayoumi, *How Does It Feel To Be A Problem? Being Young and*

Like all other minority groups, Arab and Muslim Americans have suffered from practices of marginalization that have made it quite challenging for them to maintain a decent level of assimilation within mainstream American society. They have also been exposed to misrepresentations and stereotyping in American politics, culture, and media way before the events of 9/11, but with more focus in the wake of the terrorist attack and the subsequent war on terror. However, despite such glaring focus they could very well still be seen as non-existent:

They appear as shadowy characters on terror television shows, have become objects of sociological inquiry, and get paraded around as puppets for public diplomacy. Pop culture is awash with their images. ... They are floating everywhere in the virtual landscape of the national imagination, as either villains of Islam or victims of Arab culture. Yet as in the postmodern world in which we live, sometimes when you are everywhere, you are really nowhere.<sup>2)</sup>

In response to such abstraction, shadowiness, and stereotyping, Arab and Muslim Americans have been voicing their grievances against acts of persecution by projecting a different image that attempts to rectify mis-concepts and address the condition of being (un)wanted in their own country. Yet despite these attempts, marginalization still prevails to a great extent. The numerous incidents of outright discriminatory practices committed against Arab and Muslim Americans under the pretext of national security are constantly encountered—from airports to academic institutions—and splashed all over different media channels. On the other hand, we have recently been witnessing efforts

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*Arab in America* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 3.

2) *Ibid.*, 5.

to counter such marginalization that reach out to Arab and Muslim Americans, acknowledging their rights as American citizens, and condemning such practices of marginalization:

[F]rom Japanese-American groups speaking out against today's wartime policies, to prominent civil-rights activists fighting for due process for Muslim and Arab clients, to ordinary people reaching out to one another in everyday encounters. ... but such events too are often obscured, drowned out by the ideology of our age.<sup>3)</sup>

In this paper, I revisit the image of the Arab and Muslim immigrant as it is projected in recent films produced in the last three or four years. The films include *The Visitor* by Thomas McCarthy (2007), *Amreeka (America)* by Cherien Dabis (2009), and *My Name is Khan* by Karan Johar (2010). The three films represent a variety of cinematic genres and production processes. Similarly, the three directors come from different backgrounds: Thomas McCarthy is an American writer, actor, and director who produces independent films; Cherien Dabis is a Palestinian American director, producer, and screen writer; and Karan Johar is an Indian director and producer. Their films each project an alternative vision, one that contradicts stereotypical representations of the Arab and Muslim immigrant common in Hollywood cinema. This is probably one of the reasons for the popularity of these films, their attempt to offer a fresh reading of stale representations of anti-Arab, anti-Muslim sentiments. In all three films, the Arab and Muslim immigrant appears as both wanted and unwanted. This ambivalent

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3) Ibid.

condition in a way is appealing because it is a closer reflection of reality as experienced in everyday American life. Moreover, it does not require them to take sides since the binary of self and other is no longer clear cut. In *The Visitor*, as well as in *Amreeka*, and *My Name is Khan*, unlikely characters end up on the same side, which invites the audience to reconsider preset ideas. I will attempt to read the ambivalent image of the (un)wanted American as it appears in these films against arguments that maintain that works of resistance that attempt to rewrite dominant ideologies from within (ie. to produce different versions of reality) only succeed partially.<sup>4)</sup>

#### Stereotypical Representation of the Middle East:

More than half a century has passed since the production of the Egyptian film *Amrikani Min Tanta (An American from Tanta)* 1954. The film, like many other films to follow produced by Arabic and particularly Egyptian cinema, presents the typical image of the immigrant who forfeits his/her country in pursuit of the American dream, only to end up disillusioned, enjoying a comforting feeling of self pity and a well-earned sense of victimization. In most of these films the typical East-West, self-other binary is clearly projected through images of inept and regularly oppressed Arab and Muslim characters, and the supremacy of a controlling U.S. Likewise, Hollywood cinema has also produced the same binary of self and other, this time by capitalizing on the image of the “reel bad Arab” to justify U.S. foreign policy and national security measures.<sup>5)</sup> Such stereotyping

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4) Margery Fee, “Who Can Write as Other,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 244.

5) Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Interlink Publishing Group, 2001).

projected in both East and West cinemas has naturalized prejudices enjoyed on both sides, creating further suspicion and antagonism especially after the events of 9/11.

Much has been written on Hollywood's representation of the Middle East and the depiction of politics in the region. More recently, the depiction of this theme is gaining more attention in Eastern cinema industries. Lina Khatib argues that while it is important to study how the West perceives the East, it is equally important that the East gets to be fairly represented by allowing it to present and interpret itself, and 'write back' its own perception of the West:

Comparing Hollywood's and Arab cinemas' engagement in filming the modern Middle East both affirms and disturbs the focus on Western dominance often witnessed in discourses on the East. Moreover, juxtaposing Hollywood with Arab cinemas establishes a link between discourses of the "West" and those of the "East." This breaks away from the more common frameworks of victimization or celebration of the "East" as well as from the analysis of regional cinemas in isolation.<sup>6)</sup>

However, most scholarship tends to focus on the image of the Arab and Muslim as represented in the West, following Edward Said's seminal discourse on Orientalism and the construction of power relations between East and West. Interpretations of the East-West binary construct are based on Said's concept of the oppositional relation between the Orient and the Occident: the Orient being uncivilized, irrational, inferior etc. and the Occident, being the opposite and

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6) Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (London & New York: I.B.Tauris, 2006), 4-5.

therefore superior to the Orient. This binary opposition has allowed for a hegemonic relation to prevail between East and West, whereby the former can only define itself in relation to the West, which in turn perceives the East as an abstract entity to be dominated, disregarding differences in religion, culture, and value systems.<sup>7)</sup>

On the other hand, questions dealing with gaps within Edward Said's theory of Orientalism are being entertained by scholars, and different readings attempting to deconstruct the East-West binary have been undertaken (see for example Windschuttle).<sup>8)</sup> However, as Lina Khatib argues, the shortcomings of Said's theory on Orientalism have had an impact on the kind of research produced by the East. In discussing the representation of the modern Middle East cinematically, she argues that:

The number of studies done on the way the Middle East represents itself cinematically, namely the way it represents politics, is comparatively infinitesimal. Part of the problem lies in the culture of victimization that has spread across the Middle East, and that has catalyzed several projects on the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims, but has turned a blind eye to the other side of the formula.<sup>9)</sup>

Khatib explains that as a result, these studies have maintained the legacy of Orientalism by sustaining the stereotypical images of a weak and defenseless East in conflict with a superior, dominating

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7) Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978).

8) Keith Windschuttle. "Edward Said's 'Orientalism revisited,'" *The New Criterion* Online 17 (1999), accessed June 5, 2011, [http://www.travelbrochuregraphics.com/extra/orientalism\\_revisited.htm](http://www.travelbrochuregraphics.com/extra/orientalism_revisited.htm)

9) Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East*, 10.

West. In other words, such scholarship reiterates the stereotypical binary of “we” versus “them”.<sup>10</sup>) Many of the non-western films produced post-9/11, for example, have been gaining more critical attention because they are perceived as acts of resistance since they attempt to subvert the center from their position on the margin. Such a reading of these films, however, fails to break free of the center-margin paradigm, and unconsciously recreates it. That these films nevertheless currently elicit such a reading demonstrates the difficulty that faces filmmakers when they attempt to project the relation with the West in any other form except that of polar opposites. In a previous research paper entitled “The Image of America in Egyptian Cinema,” in which I examined the socio-historical relations between Egypt and the U.S., I raised the issue of the effectiveness of employing Occidentalism as a counter discourse to Orientalism, concluding that what Egyptian filmmakers offer is merely a reductionist reading of the relationship between Egypt and the U.S., because their cinema insists on maintaining the binary opposition of East versus West.<sup>11</sup>)

Margery Fee in “Who Can Write as Other?” denies the ability of the Other to free itself from dominant ideologies, explaining that works of resistance struggle to rewrite the dominant ideology from within, in an attempt to produce a different version of reality. Ultimately, however, such resistance succeeds only partially despite

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10) Ibid.

11) Mounira Soliman, “The Image of America in Egyptian Cinema: A Socio-political Reading,” *CASAR Second International Conference Proceedings: Liberty and Justice: America and the Middle East* (Lebanon: American University of Beirut, 2008).



appearances to the contrary.<sup>12)</sup> Fee cites Said when he explains that even when writing about the oppressed, Conrad can only see

a world dominated by the West, and-of equal importance-a world in which every opposition to the West only confirms its wicked power. What Conrad could not see is life lived outside this cruel tautology ... not controlled by the gringo imperialists and liberal reformers of this world.<sup>13)</sup>

Through the analysis of the image of the Arab and Muslim immigrant in the following three films: *The Visitor*, *Amreeka (America)*, and *My Name is Khan*, I will examine whether or not these films—all of which are perceived as acts of resistance to a dominant ideology—have been able to create a paradigm shift that projects a different relation between East and West, one that does not necessarily express itself in binary forms. I will focus on reading *The Visitor* and *Amreeka* in parallel, and conclude with a brief overview of the image of the (un)wanted American in *My Name is Khan*, examining how much it sheds light on the other two films.

## The Image of the (Un)wanted

The three films, as mentioned above, were very well received, and widely acclaimed. They were all nominated for different awards, and won many of them. They also received very good reviews. One of the posts on *Amreeka*, for example, the reviewer on the Internet

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12) Fee, “Who Can Write as Other,” 244.

13) Ibid.

Movie Database (IMDb) expresses how “heartening [it is] to be able to see a movie about Arabs that portrays them simply as people instead of terrorists, and is honest about the kind of racism they face in this country on a regular basis.”<sup>14)</sup> Similarly, another reviewer of *The Visitor* on the same site expressed his sentiments: “[while] watching this movie I felt some panic and anxiety. What if that was me in those detention centers? I’ve done nothing wrong. I’m no criminal. I am a U.S. citizen ... just like Tarek”.<sup>15)</sup> Perhaps the best review that summarizes the way the audience identified with these films is the one which calls upon Americans to go watch *My Name is Khan*: “this Soul-Tearing movie which forces you to re-think about the myths of religion, classes, communities & genders in which the human beings are classified every now [and] then.”<sup>16)</sup> It is obvious from these reviews and many more that the three films created a contrary impression to the expectations of the audience, which had the effect of making them stop and rethink many of the pre-concepts they have. Cherien Dabis, director of *Amreeka*, explains that this was her main reason for wanting to become a storyteller:

I wanted to do something that would change the way the media related to Arabs, to change the way we were represented. To also change the fact that we are underrepresented. I simply wanted to get our stories out there because we have so many and I thought if people could see it from our point of view they would realize how funny and absurd it is.<sup>17)</sup>

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14) The Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1190858/>

15) The Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0857191/reviews>

16) The Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1188996/reviews>

17) Melissa Silverstein, “Sundance Interview: Cherien Dabis, Director of *Amreeka*,” *Racialicious*, January 29, 2009, accessed June 5, 2001, <http://www.racialicious.com/>

Indeed, this is the reaction which these films instigate. The audience, just like some of the characters in these films, identifies with the Arab and Muslim American protagonists and with their dilemmas, and ends up on their side. In *The Visitor*, for example, Walter Vale, a professor of Economics at Connecticut, travels to New York City to attend a conference. Upon his arrival at his flat, he discovers that it has been sublet to an Arab/Muslim couple—Tarek Khalil, a Syrian drummer, and his Senegalese girlfriend, Zeinab, a jewelry maker. Their encounter immediately creates an atmosphere of tension. The apartment, which is occupied by two illegal immigrants—Tarek and Zeinab—suddenly turns into a site of resistance when it becomes unclear who “the visitor” really is. Tarek and Walter ironically swap roles. However, against all odds, the two men bond, finding a common ground in music. As Tarek shows Walter how to play the African drum, a paradigm shift happens and the two men end up on the same side. It is very significant, however, that the events of the film take place in New York City, one of the most multicultural cities in the U.S., allowing for the unique relationship between Walter and Tarek to develop. But it’s also an ironic setting, including both Ground Zero and the Statue of Liberty, with all the implications that both symbols carry. As events develop and Tarek ends up in a detention center, from where he is eventually to be deported back to his country, the question of whether or not he is a victim poses itself. It is quite easy to read Tarek as the typical Arab/Muslim victimized character. Indeed, he is projected in a very

appealing and charming manner. We are told by Zeinab, his girlfriend, how he enjoys seeing the Statue of Liberty, jumping up and down, and pretending that they have just landed on U.S. soil. As the relationship between Tarek and Walter develops, the difference between him and his girlfriend becomes clear. Zeinab, in contrast to Tarek, is inaccessible. Whereas Tarek reaches out to Walter, Zeinab is unable to bridge the gap that obviously separates her from someone like Walter, and insists on maintaining the distance between them, at least at the beginning of their encounter. In fact, Zeinab's reaction to the whole situation, and her relationship with Walter, is much more realistic than Tarek's, which is presented in an idealistic and romantic fashion. The scene when Walter joins Tarek at the drum circle in Central park, (in fact very reminiscent of the Benetton United Advertisement), is exemplary of this atmosphere which is further emphasized through the relationship that develops between Walter and Tarek's mother.

Tarek, just like many others, is certainly presented as a victim of the immigration system in the U.S., and therefore it is very easy to identify with and feel for him. Thomas McCarthy, the director of the film, comments on his own experience when he started visiting detainee facilities: "you just get really involved emotionally [with] their stories, if it's one visit or a hundred visits, you almost immediately realize that you are that detainee's window to the outside world literally."<sup>18)</sup> But that is only one side of the story. If

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18) Edward Douglas, "Exclusive: Thomas McCarthy's *The Visitor*," Comingsoon.net, April 8, 2008, accessed on June 5, 2011, <http://www.comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=43639>

the U.S. is implicated, so is Syria, a country that drives its citizens to seek asylum in another country. Tarek and his mother do so after the death of Tarek's father, an anti-government journalist who was imprisoned in Syria for seven years, and died upon his release from jail. To protect her son from a similar fate, Tarek and his mother flee to the U.S., seeking the freedom and protection enjoyed by citizens of that country. However, from that point onwards, Tarek becomes indeed a "visitor": no matter how long he stays, he is destined to return to his homeland and forfeit the illusionary freedom that was never given to him in the first place. In the same way, whatever relationship develops between him and Walter and between the latter and Tarek's mother is also destined to end, or maybe remain unfulfilled. It is true that the audience does not know how things will progress after Tarek and his mother return to Syria but it seems more likely that this is the end of his relationship with Walter, especially when all we see is Walter getting on with his own life after being touched and energized by his brief encounter with Tarek.

Similarly, in *Amreeka*, we also witness brief encounters between unlikely characters. Muna, a Palestinian, Christian, single mother who lives in Bethlehem, leaves her homeland against her wish and immigrates to the U.S. to provide her son with better opportunities. Her decision is certainly informed by the intolerable situation she lives in under Israeli occupation and her son's desire to seek a better life for the two of them. Muna and her son arrive in the U.S. immediately after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and experience the same anti Arab-Muslim sentiments. A similar scenario like that in *The Visitor* takes place. Muna is another (un)wanted American,

accepted into the country but rejected by the society that perceives all Arabs as Muslims and therefore terrorists. It is certainly a country that accepts Palestinians on its own ground while supporting the occupation of their homeland. Against all odds, though, Muna bonds with the principal of the school her son attends, Mr. Novatski, an American Jew of Polish origin. He sympathizes with Muna and her son and identifies with them. An affinity is certainly implied here between the fate of the Polish Jews who fled the concentration camps of Nazi Germany to settle in the U.S. and the Palestinians who flee from the inhumane situation they are subjected to at the hands of the Israelis. They both suffer the same fate of racism and discrimination though when they arrive in the U.S. However, Muna is a strong and resilient character; she insists on having a share of the American dream, even if that dream is merely an illusion. A banker in her homeland, she is reduced to working as a waitress at the White Castle, a fast food chain. And embarrassed of her job, she lies to her family, leading them to believe that she works at the bank next door to the White Castle. Interestingly, one of the relationships that develops in the film is the one between her and the woman clerk who works for that bank, and who becomes her accomplice in maintaining the lie. The two women bond on a very humane level. It is a relationship quite similar to the one that develops between Walter and Zeinab in *The Visitor*. Despite the fact that these relationships are not given as much attention as the central relationships between Tarek and Walter on the one hand and Muna and Mr. Novatski on the other, they are in fact much more realistic and sincere. In contrast, the relationship between the American Jew

and the Palestinian woman has a propagandist dimension that is hard to ignore. In fact, the last scene in the film is rather tacky to say the least: the Arabs and the Jews come together for a brief moment, forgetting all that separates them, and enjoying the pleasure of food, music, and dance. It is a typically Orientalist scene, complete with belly dancing and water pipes, which leaves the audience wondering as to how Arab and Muslim Americans perceive themselves. It is rather ironic that even though Cherien Dabis is aware of how easy it is to project the same stereotypes that one sets out to deconstruct, she ends her film in the exact way she criticizes:

People can be lazy in their storytelling and then characters become one dimensional and easy to villainize. Then it becomes the story of good vs. evil rather than people are people. I think it is much more difficult to create characters that are complex, rich and multidimensional and it's easy to fall back on the formulaic stereotypes.<sup>19)</sup>

As Marjory Fee argues, it is not possible to assume that a work has freed itself from the dominant ideology simply because it is written by an Other, even if it is a politicized Other.<sup>20)</sup> Indeed, the relationships that develop between Walter and Tarek in *The Visitor* and Muna and Mr. Novatski in *Amreeka* are meant to deconstruct the binary of self and other by putting the two on the same side, and creating a space where the audience can question informed ideas and stereotypes. The two films manage to do so only partially but the equation does not fully add up since the (un)wanted immigrant is a

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19) \* Silverstein, "Sundance Interview".

20) \* Fee, "Who Can Write as Other?" 244.

binary in itself. These relationships at the end remain individual responses. As much as Walter identifies with Tarek, the U.S. government insists on deporting him. Again as much as Mr. Novatski identifies with Muna and her son, the whole country, and the small community they live in, insists on ostracizing them. In the end, Walter and Mr. Novatski fail to change the American mindset, leaving Tarek and Muna caught up in the same struggle of Us versus Them.

In response to the timeliness of her film, *Amreeka*, Cherien Dabis comments:

Absolutely. We have a president with an Arab middle name. He's the first African American president. There is a feeling of hope. It's a new era. Barack Obama represents the new America and in some way my film represents the America that this country should be-what this country could be if people were a little more open, friendly, trusting and accepting like Muna.<sup>21)</sup>

But even in *My Name is Khan* (2010) when we supposedly get the opposite reaction through the support of President Obama, i.e. the official support of the government, it is still an individual response because Obama, just like Rizwan Khan, Tarek, and Muna, is in so many ways an (un)wanted American himself. In fact, the scene with which this paper begins (between Khan and the officer) undermines the reaction of Obama at the end of the film. Just as in *The Visitor* and *Amreeka*, Obama is as romantic a figure as Walter and Mr. Novatski, promising a new beginning for the Arab and Muslim population in the U.S. that is not necessarily supported by the

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21) Silverstein, "Sundance Interview."



country. By all indications, the U.S. is likely to continue discriminating against Arab and Muslim Americans. Indeed, the reaction of the investigating officer referred to earlier, as well as that of the airport officer is in fact an indication of how things are likely to develop for Khan. Parallels between Obama and former U.S. administrations is further exemplified through the enactment of a Katrina-like hurricane and the government's tepid reaction to the catastrophe, which leaves Khan in the position of becoming a savior of the African American community. Ironically it is the same role played by Tarek and Muna through their brief encounters with Walter and Mr. Novatski respectively. In teaching Walter to play the African drum, Tarek opens up a new window on life for Walter, and saves him from the boring, lonely life he's been leading since the death of his wife. Similarly, Muna and Mr. Novatski, two divorced people, find comfort in each other as Muna draws him slowly into her family, therefore satisfying his need for companionship. It is interesting that in attempting to present a different ideology, the three directors swap the age-old role that has governed the East-West relationship, ending up with another constricting binary. One of the most memorable conversations between Khan and his mom in *My Name is Khan* emphasizes the plight which faces any attempt to think beyond inherited ideologies:

RAZIA KHAN. Remember one thing, son. There are only two kinds of people in this world. Good people who do good deeds. And bad people who do bad. That's the only difference in human beings. There's no other difference. Understood? What did you understand? Tell me. Tell me  
RIZWAN KHAN. Good people. Bad people. No other difference.

## Conclusion

At the time of writing this paper, U.S. media carried the news of two Muslim scholars, a professor of Arabic at the University of Memphis, and an Imam at the Islamic Association of Greater Memphis, who were pulled from a Delta flight while heading to a conference on American fears of Islam. It was reported that the pilot had refused to fly with them aboard. Moustafa Bayoumi explains how young Arab and Muslim Americans today occupy a space between acceptance and fear, which has a direct impact upon all aspects of their daily lives and their futures. To him this is an indication of two very important issues: first, the obvious split within American society and, second, the extent to which the living conditions of Arab and Muslim Americans is dependent upon U.S. foreign relations.<sup>22)</sup> In his speech on the Egyptian revolution after the ousting of Hosni Mubarak, Obama, inspired by the Egyptian scene in Tahrir square, concludes:

We saw people of faith praying together and chanting—"Muslims, Christians, We are one." And though we know that the strains between faiths still divide too many in this world and no single event will close that chasm immediately, these scenes remind us that we need not be defined by our differences. We can be defined by the common humanity that we share.<sup>23)</sup>

Despite such notes of hope, incidents like that experienced by the

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22) Bayoumi, *How Does It feel to be a Problem*, 261.

23) "Obama's Speech on Egypt and the Fall of Mubarak," February 11, 2011, accessed on June 5, 2011, <http://www.enduringamerica.com/home/2011/2/11/video-and-transcript-obamas-speech-on-egypt-and-the-fall-of.html>

two Muslim scholars still recur, and quite frequently. In their own way, they emphasize the legitimacy of posing such questions as “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and “Who Can Write as Other?” Obviously such questions are still in need of substantial answers.

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**Abstract**

**The (Un)wanted American:  
A Visual Reading of Arab and Muslim  
Americans**

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As a consequence of its efforts to round up suspected immigrants after the attacks of 9/11, the U.S. government has ended up ostracizing a whole community. Indeed, at a recent gathering in New York City (02/18/2010), the Arab American Association organized a town hall meeting in Brooklyn to voice their concerns over the U.S. immigration system which insists on stereotyping Arab and Muslim immigrants, looking upon them suspiciously, and exercising forms of discriminatory behavior against them. Nine years after 9/11, the Arab/Muslim community poses valid questions pertaining to their status as the unwanted American.

For many years, pre and post 9/11, Hollywood films have capitalized on the image of the “Reel Bad Arabs”, partly to explain practices of discrimination committed in the name of national security. On the other hand, the image of the victimized immigrant who leaves his/her country in pursuit of the American dream only to end up disillusioned has become very popular, particularly in Arabic cinema, especially after 9/11. With time such stereotypes have naturalized the prejudices of both Americans and Arabs, creating more suspicion and antagonism on both sides.

In this paper, I will analyze the image of the Arab and Muslim immigrant as it appears in some recent films (produced post 9/11) that attempt to counter the stereotype of the terrorist Muslim and the victimized Arab. Some of these films include *The Visitor* by Thomas McCarthy (2007), *Amreeka (America)* by Cherien Dabis (2009), and *My Name is Khan* by

Karan Johar (2010). By comparing the portrayal of the Arab and Muslim immigrant in these films, I question the production and propagation of the image of the unwanted American.

**Key Words**

Arab and Muslim Americans, Stereotyping and discrimination, Binary condition