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.1)

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