
Processing Post 9/11 Trauma through *My Name is Khan* and *Reign Over Me*

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Abstract: The catastrophic 9/11 terror attacks have deeply affected both the personal and collective psyches of the world. Literature and cinema have since emerged as crucial mediums to represent, process, and understand trauma. While much 9/11 scholarship explores the political aftermath of the attacks, less attention has been given to how cinematic narratives enable emotional and cultural healing, especially in transnational contexts. This paper explores the representation of post-9/11 trauma in *My Name is Khan* (2010) and *Reign Over Me* (2007), analysing how each film articulates grief, identity reconstruction, and resilience. It aims to examine trauma as both a psychological rupture and a cultural phenomenon that shapes collective memory and belonging through qualitative, comparative methodology informed by trauma theory—particularly the works of Freud, Lacan, and contemporary trauma theorists.

Through close cinematic and narrative analysis, it investigates how memory, identity, and emotional expression unfold in visual storytelling, emphasising both cultural specificity and universal human responses to trauma.

Findings suggest that both films depict trauma as a layered and continuous experience, highlighting cinema's capacity to foster empathy and cross-cultural understanding. The paper concludes that cinematic narratives are not only reflective but reparative tools for healing in post-traumatic societies.

Keywords: 9/11 Literature; Trauma Theory; Cultural Trauma; Transnational Cinema; Identity; Racial Trauma; Genre Studies; Diasporic Trauma; Memorialisation

Introduction: The witnesses who saw the twin towers shattering on the morning of September 11, 2001, had one common observation to make, and that was, 'it looked like a movie'. The headlines flashing on countless TV screens had the same statement in bold letters. The immediate response of comparing the horrifying terror attack to that of a film scene became the testimony to the unbelievable truth of that morning. Around 3000 people lost their lives, and millions of people are traumatised till date. These historical events have not vanished in contemporary times and are often revisited through literature and cinema.

The reverberations of chaotic, catastrophic historical events echo in the stories, novels, poems, and films written in contemporary times. But with the advent of the 21st century, the hopes of entering into a new world were shattered on Sept 11. The debris of the World Trade Centre buildings, the Pentagon and the dark fumes rising from ground zero paved the way for an era that would witness the burden of the past, where the understanding of trauma would be redefined.

Trauma theory tries to explore the void that was left by the horrifying incidents, the holocaust and now 9/11. Incidents like these leave individuals to place humanity in a questionable position. It is not mandatory that the family members of the victims will experience this trauma, but sometimes trauma seeps deep under the skin of a particular community, giving rise to cultural trauma.

Literature Review: Trauma studies tend to cross paths with psychoanalysis, history, literature, and cultural theory. Nineteenth-century trauma theory terms like "delayed," "fragmented," or "disruptive" experience can be traced in Sigmund Freud's *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1915), where he develops trauma as a psychic wound that resists immediate integration into consciousness, evoking delayed symptom formations. Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud both studied trauma as a disruption of the symbolic order and its disruption of the established linguistic structures. (Johnston, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; Yansori, *Psychoanalýza Dnes*). One cannot explore identity fragmentation and memory ruptures without investigating the psychoanalytic roots.

Cathy Caruth's book, *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), adopts Freud and Lacan's theories and proposes that trauma cannot be directly represented but is only seen in inchoate, fractured forms. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub develop the theory further in *Testimony* (1992) by asserting that witnessing and testifying to trauma are key processes in the recovery process—specifically relevant here in *Reign Over Me*, as narrative functions to be a redemptive process.

Trauma theory has also moved beyond the individual psyche to a more universal cultural model. Jeffrey C. Alexander's *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004) theorises trauma as a socialised process that reconstructs community identity rather than as an individual emotional process. Films have become an imperative space for the representation and interpretation of trauma. Guy Westwell's *Parallel Lines* (2014) emphasizes how post-9/11 cinema navigates national trauma through narratives that dissolve the distinction between personal grief and collective mourning. Kelly Hurley's article "Trauma and Horror" (English Language Notes, Duke University Press) describes how the excess and horror aspects in film enable a cathartic transmutation of trauma. These analyses are crucial in understanding how *My Name is Khan* and *Reign Over Me* portray traumatic memory and the healing processes through the vehicle of visual narrative.

Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr's *Backlash 9/11* (2009) foregrounds the racialised trauma of Muslim and South Asian communities in post-9/11 America — a necessary context against which *My Name is Khan* is situated. Another parallel example is to be found in Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011), which foregrounds the importance of memorials in communal healing, parallel to the personal and communal memorial practices shown in both films.

Lastly, Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt* (1996) theorises the discourses of trauma as being inherently resistant to endings, positing that the negotiation of memory and suffering is a continuous and dynamic process. This comprehension is essential to the reading of the open-ended and dynamic paths of characters such as Rizwan and Charlie, who experience their traumas without ever arriving at a resolution.

Thus, the paper brings together psychoanalytic, cultural, film, and narrative models of trauma and positions *My Name is Khan* and *Reign Over Me* within a cross-disciplinary dialogue on memory, recovery, and reconstruction of identity in the post-9/11 context.

Research Methodology: The paper brings a qualitative comparative research design on trauma theory and psychoanalytic criticism to bear on the paper of post-9/11 trauma as cinematic representation in *My Name is Khan* (2010) and *Reign Over Me* (2007). Drawing heavily from the classics by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, along with contemporary new-age trauma theorists like Jeffrey C. Alexander and Michelle Balaev, the paper interrogates trauma through the lenses of psychology, cultural studies, and narrative styles.

The main sources of this paper are the films themselves, which are read through a close-reading methodology that is both textual and visual in nature. Attention is paid to narrative form, character development, symbolic representations, and memorialization strategies. *Reign Over Me* makes trauma an acutely personal and psychological battle with memory and loss, as a western individualist narrative. *My Name is Khan*, by contrast, situates trauma in the locations of racialised identity, diasporic displacement, and socio-political marginalisation, and highlights the cultural transgression of trauma. This paper is directly engaging with Freud's theory of the “talking cure” and Lacan's theory of the unconscious as structured like a language to examine the interruptions trauma makes to identity, temporality, and relations of community.

Accordingly, the present paper is theoretically grounded in Jeffrey C. Alexander's *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004), Michelle Balaev's *Trends in Literary Trauma Theory* (2008), and critical analysis by scholars such as Guy Westwell, Kelly Hurley, Emily Joyner, Anny Bakalian, Mehdi Bozorgmehr, and Amy Waldman. These studies in aggregate position the films under discussion within wider socio-cultural and historical contexts.

The following paper addresses exclusively fictional onscreen depictions of trauma. The paper is neither a clinical assessment nor an empirical psychological analysis. Interpretation derived from narrative, symbolic, and aesthetic analysis is applied to two chosen films. The results pertain to contexts and are not meant to extend to all 9/11 trauma.

Thus, through the confluence of close-reading techniques with interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, this paper attempts to explain how narratives in cinema work as instruments of emotional, cultural, and communal recuperation following collective trauma.

Trauma can be defined as a normal response to abnormal events that shatter the consciousness of the subject. The traumatic events, at first, are external, but they gradually become incorporated into the human mind, and as a result, the subject loses the rational sense of differentiating between reality and imagination. When serious attention is not given to this sense of loss, it gains the capacity to render the ego and the consciousness. Sigmund Freud refers to trauma as a wound inflicted on the consciousness (the cogito). Trauma, for him, is

“An event in the subject’s life, defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organisation.”

(Freud, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*)

The ego acts as a shield that protects the human psyche from external stimuli. Some events puncture the psyche, and as a result, the pleasure principle is disturbed. Freud’s theory offers a foundational basis for the understanding of trauma theory through the psychoanalytic approach. Memory, especially traumatic memory, acts as the primary cause for the repeated pain experienced by the subject. The flashbacks experienced, the memories associated with a person or place, trouble the subject and this phenomenon is referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The responses and symptoms shown by the subject are different from the normal expectations. They include delayed processing of truth, uncontrolled hallucinations and the loss of realisation of time and place.

Terror’s trauma is not easily identifiable by the existing medical models because it functions at a wider scale. The victim may not react like he would when his loved ones depart, but the effects of terror trauma on an individual can be both fleeting and enduring. 9/11 was, of course, not the very first terror attack, but it sparked violent repercussions in contemporary politics, culture and life. President George W. Bush launched the “War on Terror” as the immediate response to the attacks. The shocking capacity of terror to commence trauma that can affect innumerable bodies far beyond the reach of any singular terrorist attack is used by terror organisations for political reasons. Therefore, it is very important to understand trauma through both affective and psychological perspectives. Terrorists not only shatter the future of the families of the victims, but they end up wounding the social, economic, political and cultural fabric of communities. This is another reason why 9/11 trauma narratives are at once individual and societal, immediate yet gradual and visible yet un-narratable. Traumatic effects cross national boundaries and are present in both

personal and political domains. It is as collective as it is individual and therefore gives birth to collective or cultural trauma.

My Name is Khan (2010), directed by Karan Johar and *Reign Over Me* (2007), directed by Mike Binder, deal with the post-9/11 trauma that controls the lives of the respective protagonists. One of the primary problems faced by cinema is the realist portrayal of violence that looks so horrifying that it affects the lives of the characters at a deeper level. Cinema belongs to the visual medium. So, the makers have to be conscious of the needed cathartic response that can only be triggered when the scene is visually disturbing as well. In *Reign Over Me*, the story of the traumatic event comes alive through the protagonist's actions. There is no scene involved that showcases the real or cinematic representation of what happened during that horrifying morning. On the other hand, *My Name is Khan* incorporates real images and videos of the 9/11 attacks in the form of a News Bulletin that shook not only the Americans but the whole world. These attacks were quite different from other traumatic events because the images of the two planes cinematically crashing into the Twin Towers, fumes rising from the Pentagon building, the debris and the falling bodies were no longer a figment of cinematic imagination. People saw the real horrifying images with no additional cinematic effects needed. Now it was the collective responsibility of the producers, directors, novelists, painters, and poets to mimic this unexpected traumatic experience in their art and make it sublime. This is because art became the foremost weapon adopted by the people to initiate the processing of trauma. Trauma is intrinsically linked to a narrative, and therefore, literary and cinematic representations help people explore their wounds in a layered manner. Theorists often claim that non-literary narratives like those of newspaper reports, documentaries and archival accounts fail to capture the effects of trauma in an elaborated manner. Therefore, films and novels based upon traumatic experiences are preferred by readers to decode trauma and understand pain through an emotional and investigative approach. These narratives act like the tapestries woven by Philomela to articulate her pain to her sister. Photographs, paintings and memorials become a site where the victims process their trauma and others empathise with it. They become the active agents that help in the conceptualisation of trauma. Thus, the inarticulate nature of trauma finds a sense of articulation through art. How Rizwan, Mandira and Charlie Fineman react to get over their traumas is strikingly different despite having a common originating point. 9/11 not only changed the manner in which the global political domain transformed, but it also affected the private and public spheres. Mandira sought justice for her son's murder by doing anything she could to send the white American teens behind bars. Rizwan's way of dealing with his trauma is more complex, and for that, he undertakes a journey. Fineman, on the other hand, opts for denial. He did not like talking about his dead family and alienated himself from his relatives. The characters are seeking "purgation" or catharsis that will lend a sense of relief to them. Both films end with a progressive approach where the characters reach a reasonable and logical position where the disruptive and traumatic event becomes a platform for new beginnings at both personal and social levels.

Literary trauma is investigated through various approaches. One such approach is the Enlightenment mode, which understands trauma to be a rational response to an abrupt change. The painful stories of the people include logical actions through which they conquer their anxieties and the sense of loss eventually. This approach emphasises an individual's capabilities of dealing with their trauma somehow, and there comes a point when they actually become successful. The film's central theme revolves around how resilience and growth can also be the possible aftermath of a traumatic experience. Instead of becoming a hindrance, it creates a sense of social cohesion and a renewed sense of collective identity. *My Name is Khan* presents an America that has seen order (pre-9/11), disorder (9/11) and eventually re-order (post- 9/11). The effect of trauma works at two levels, individual and collective. As discussed above, individual trauma is a rupture of ego and collective trauma, on the other hand, is a distortion of the foundational values upon which a society is constructed. The bonds of different communities are affected adversely, and the notion of "us" and "them" becomes problematic. This is one of the reasons why the Enlightenment approach to trauma studies was criticised by some critics and philosophers. Rizwan is a patient with Asperger's syndrome, and that is why he can neither talk about his loss with a sympathetic listener nor release his traumatic memory. The need to "get over" or "deal with" the pain is one of the first steps when it comes to healing. Therefore, he is unable to process his trauma like the people around him. *Zakir bahut khushnaseeb tha. Vo ro sakta tha*, which translates to "Zakir was very lucky. He could cry." (*My Name is Khan*, 18:27:00)

Unlike Mandira or Charlie, Rizwan is burdened with double responsibilities. First, he has to deal with the loss of his stepson Sam and second, he has to prove his identity as someone who should not be hated on religious grounds. The film proceeds through flashbacks, and the sense of distorted present and past represents the temporal hybridity, which is one of the most common symptoms of a PTSD patient.

Cultural trauma originates when a community or a collectivity feel that they have been exposed to a sudden, horrendous event that leaves deep marks upon the collective consciousness and evokes a feeling of uncertainty. The construction of cultural trauma offers an opportunity for people to come forward and share their sufferings. Trauma should not be believed to be residing in the event itself. But it is the meanings derived from a particular event that evoke feelings of anxiety and loss of self. The destabilised structure of meanings makes the subject confused about his/her identity. Rizwan is the victim of such an identity crisis. Collective trauma is independent of any geographical and cultural limitations, and therefore, the post 9/11 anxiety has transgressed not only Manhattan, Pennsylvania and Washington DC but also the whole nation. The film offers an Orientalist paradigm to the theory of trauma. This is the reason why *My Name is Khan* highlights the binary opposition between the West and the other world. The Khan family is cornered on religious grounds in the film. It questions the shallowness of the American Dream, which is defined as "*that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to their ability or achievement.*" (Truslow, *Epic of America*). Rizwan's brother sheds light on this vision when he brings him to the office.

In the context of America's racial regimes, being a non-white always exposes these marginalised communities to a vast array of traumatic experiences, ranging from daily racial discrimination to episodes of shameless racial violence against blacks, Arabs, Muslims and other minorities. This is another reason why 9/11 trauma is not merely limited to the families of the people who lost their lives in the attacks. The harsh Otherisation of a community by the majority community perpetuates the traumatising elements of American racist culture. Rizwan's son gets murdered by a group of white American teens. This is a matter of serious concern because the children are conditioned by the institutions of family and education. The flawed or incomplete teachings were responsible for the lack of judgment in children's minds who resorted to bullying a Muslim boy. Muslims became pronounced targets of suspicion and hatred. *My Name is Khan* explores the traumatic journey of individuals and how they react to it. Mama Jenny's loss is equated with Rizwan's loss. Sara (Mandira's neighbour) loses her husband when he visits Afghanistan for work. Therefore, it is not just Muslims who are bearing the pain, but trauma affects everyone equally in the film. But, the central character's journey, of course, witnesses more coverage.

A grand memorial and a museum stand over ground zero today. It acts as a connecting link that brings mourners and the nation together. Every society emerging from a traumatic event needs to put the collective past behind in order to function efficiently. Memory cannot be controlled that simplistically, and to process trauma and get over it, it is necessary to remember. Amy Walden's notable novel *The Submission* also insists that a memorial is important to let the mourners and future generations come together and process pain. For Mandira, the high school soccer ground becomes her own memorial that plays the role of processing the loss of her son. When she first visits that ground, she experiences a painful emotional breakdown. She blames Rizwan's religion to be the reason behind Sam's death. The same soccer ground appears again in the latter half of the film, where she processes the trauma of Sam's death and releases balloons as an act of remembrance. "*I love you, Sam*" (*My Name is Khan*, 02:26:56). Mandira accepts Sam's demise and includes his memories in the conscious state of the mind. Certain personal objects of remembrance become the key factor that can help a victim to process their personal trauma, too. Sameer's shoes and Charlie's family photographs are two such objects that fulfil the role of remembrance for Rizwan and Charlie, respectively. But the effects of both these objects are strikingly different in both films. For Rizwan, the shoes were the driving force that kept him motivated throughout his tiring journey to meet the President.

Reporter: A long, tiring journey, Rizwan. What kept you going?

Rizwan: Oh! My son's soccer shoes...

(*My Name is Khan*, 02:24:03-02:24:08)

Rizwan's inability to articulate emotions becomes one of the reasons why he cannot put the importance of his son's shoes that clearly. But the soccer shoes act as an object of remembrance for Rizwan. On the other hand, Charlie prevents any possible encounter with the happy past and how it was eventually shattered. His in-laws try their best to show the

family pictures in order to make Charlie accept the bitter fact of the family's death. As the film approaches the climax, the court scene where the lawyer smacks Charlie's table with the happy photographs of his daughters and his wife, he loses control. The forced confrontation yields a negative result on Charlie, and he breaks up. His mother-in-law's indirect comparison of Charlie to an animal for not keeping the photographs reflects a harshly judgmental stance. The photographs, here, instead of becoming an emotional aid, act as an inducer of tremendous pain for Charlie Fineman.

One of the most effective ways of reducing the pathological symptoms of trauma in such a survivor is to promote the conscious narration of the traumatic event. A narrative language offers a platform for the smooth integration of traumatic memories with existing reality. One of the first aims of a trauma therapist is to bring the survivor to a comfortable position where he can recall the reason for his pain. Absence of such a confrontation affects the victim in an adverse manner. Freud terms this as "talking cure", through which a trauma victim can be healed.

Charlie Fineman, in *Reign Over Me*, keeps himself away from the confrontation with the past and ignores his in-laws. At first, Fineman appears to be a normal middle-aged White American who rides the electric scooter and shops at the local hardware store. But when his college roommate Alan Johnson visits his apartment, he gets to know about the secluded life he is living. His way of escaping from reality is through playing games, listening to music, quitting his dental profession and renovating his kitchen multiple times. The only reason he continued being friends with Johnson was the fact that he did not know much about Fineman's dead family. Fineman felt safe with Johnson because he hoped that Johnson would not talk about the day his family died. But, with time, Fineman eventually talks about his family, which comprised two daughters and a loving wife. He chose Johnson to discuss his traumatic memory because of the trust and the level of comfort he shared with him. After the emotional breakdown in Angela's therapy clinic, Fineman stands up with teary eyes and claims "*I don't like this! I don't like remembering.*" (*Reign Over Me*, 01:17:44). The narration of one's own memories in front of a sympathetic listener or to even one oneself is a key element in the formation of the identity. According to John Locke, the self is constructed with a set of continuous memories, and the narrative of one's own past keeps on extending with each new experience added over time. Trauma ruptures the victim's understanding of the self by offering a hindrance to the ongoing linear narrative. This becomes the troubling reason because of which the trauma gets permanently engraved in the human mind, due to which he/she cannot label the event as "past." Therefore, the traumatic impact of the crisis becomes elevated because of the un-narratability of trauma. The un-narratability of Rizwan's traumatic experience of losing his son was even more complex due to Asperger's syndrome, in which the patient cannot even share the basic emotional feelings effectively. But he understands the pain of Mandira, Sara, Mama Jenny and his sister-in-law quite well. When one shares the emotions of grief and loss, it becomes the unifying factor that brings people of a community together. Rizwan understands Mama Jenny's pain of losing her son and it is for the first time that someone asked him about Sam after his death.

In the remembrance speech, he says “*Par main itna achha dad nahi ban paya. Doosro ke dad apne bachhon ki zarooratein mehsoos karke unhein poora karte hain. Lekin mujhe ankahi baatein mehsoos nahi karna aata toh main unhein poora nahi kar paata tha.*” (But I could not become a good father. Other fathers can sense their children’s needs to fulfil them. But I never knew how to feel the unsaid wishes, so I could not fulfil them.) (*My Name is Khan*, 01:45:47- 01:46:05). Rizwan cannot understand his own pain because the phenomenon of trauma is located beyond the paradigm of words. Language connects individuals by enabling the sharing of experiences and preventing isolation. Trauma disturbs that link, and as a result, for a person already dealing with Asperger’s syndrome, the post-traumatic experience becomes more horrendous.

The victims do try to re-establish their lost sense of identity and the feeling of meaninglessness associated with the whole crisis. Some victims put their trust in the state to seek justice (as in the case of Mandira from *My Name is Khan*). Some victims embark on a journey to seek answers for the anxiety, fear, and insecurity rooted in the rubble of the attacks, which ultimately consume entire communities (as in the case of Rizwan). Some trauma victims try to deny the horrible truth of the loss of the innocent loved ones, which yields no productive result upon their psyche (as in the case of Charlie Fineman in *Reign Over Me*). Trauma, then, is not merely restricted to the city where the attacks happened in the first place. Instead, it keeps on transgressing the cities, country borders and even time. Individual trauma, if not processed efficiently, can affect the person’s ability to function well and can give rise to several physical problems. On the other hand, cultural trauma gets inherited by future generations via their elders, who have experienced tremendous collective pain. The institutions of family, education, judiciary, mass media and art play a very significant role in eradicating the traumatic fear and anxiety from society. The act of processing trauma should not be confused with the act of forgetting. This is because memory is intrinsic to the human psyche and cannot fully erase a traumatic event. It is imperative to reconsider how trauma and its victims are perceived in society. The films studied play a vital role in helping audiences understand the nature and aftermath of personal and cultural trauma. Love and friendship become a catalyst in the healing process. Also, it is very important to let these people be on their own for a measured period of time to let them find a way among the unleashed psychological, social and political chaos launched after a massive terror attack like this. The 9/11 attacks completed 20 years in 2021, and ex President George W. Bush’s speech at the Pennsylvania 9/11 memorial hints at the timelessness of trauma. He said, “There are many (citizens) who still struggle with a lonely pain that cuts deep within.... We vividly felt how every hour with their loved ones was a temporary and a holy gift.”

Therefore, one becomes conscious of the fact that some historical events can reach into the moral depths of the human condition. Trauma has no nationality, colour, ethnicity or religion and should be thus treated with a non-biased lens. It is the collective duty of the people to lend their support to the traumatised individuals and communities in whatever ways possible. It must also be acknowledged that the story of every cultural trauma is unique yet

universal in nature. This is the reason why a certain traumatic event becomes a domain of investigation for all the cultures present in the globalised contemporary era.

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