

## Aasheyein

Religion is often used as the basis of division in most communities, but something which all religions have their roots in is the idea of humanity. The idea of being good and caring for the people around you and being a dutiful member of society. In the movie, *My Name is Khan*, the protagonist Rizwan Khan, takes a journey to tell the President of the United States ‘*My name is Khan and he is not a terrorist*’. Rizwan’s journey can be referred to as a pilgrimage, because his actions propel humanity to unite, transcending over the limits set by religion, race, and other bases of discrimination.

Throughout the movie, it is established that Rizwan is a Muslim man from India, who is living in the American diaspora. One of the most prominent instances of his faith being shown is when he prays or performs *namaaz* at a rest stop. He is advised by a fellow Muslim man that it might not be the right environment to do so, but Rizwan simply replies that one’s prayers shouldn’t depend on place or people, but on their *niyat*, that is intention or belief. Another instance is when he donates money for 9/11 relief which he terms as *zakat*, which is one of the five pillars of Islam. Rizwan doesn’t shy away from displaying his beliefs and his faith in public, and a lot of that has to do with his diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome. In relation to his syndrome, Erndl states ‘*allows him to express his religiosity without the filter of self-conscious embarrassment that neurotypical people may feel*’ (Erndl, Pg 12), showing how this disorder which in many ways is said to cripple him becomes his strength to be open and be able to see across limitations and boundaries set by society.

By definition, a pilgrimage is a journey which an individual takes for sacred or religious purposes. All religions have different sets of beliefs and traditions, but they are all built upon the idea of love, care, and respect for humanity. Rizwan’s mother Razia taught him that ‘There are only two kinds of people’. Rizwan is rooted in his faith, but in many ways due to his Asperger’s syndrome and

his mother's teachings, he sees people beyond race and religious boundaries. The instance which best defines this is when Rizwan comes to the rescue of the African-American community in Wilhelmina, Georgia in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. He goes there to help the community, keeping aside his personal goal of meeting the president, just so he can help Mama Jenny who gave him care, food and shelter during his travel, and served as a motherly figure to help him grieve the death of his son. He didn't see the race or community which he was helping, he just wanted to help, or as Erndl stated '*Seen through Rizwan's eyes, his friends in this rural community are "good people, who do good things"*'. (Erndl, Pg 16) Another instance where Rizwan's humanity is exemplified is when he reports the political leader, Dr. Faisal Rehman. Rizwan acknowledges and understands that Rehman is a bad person and that he manipulating their shared religion. This is best explained by Erndl when she states that Rizwan acknowledges that '*some Muslims justify violence on religious grounds, while emphatically denying the validity of such justifications*'. (Erndl, Pg 12) and Rehman is trying '*to incite his followers with violent rhetoric*'. (Erndl, Pg 12) He doesn't hesitate to report him despite having this shared faith with Rehman and his followers.

Rizwan's journey is not only based on his humanitarian beliefs, but also in uniting humanity and inspiring people about looking over religious or race-based boundaries, and essentially being a 'repairman' for the image of Muslims in the American diaspora. This can be seen through his actions and the actions of the people he inspired, best seen when Rizwan's efforts to help out Wilhelmina, inspire a group of Indian Muslims which includes his brother and sister-in-law, to travel to Georgia and help out in the restoration of the town. The movie shows that Rizwan is offering hope to all the other towns who might have not received any action from the government, that if people are united, they can overcome the hurdle which has been placed in front of them. The fact Rizwan inspired a group of Muslims to come and help out, also aided in showing the people of America that not all Muslims are radicals and extremists. Rizwan's simple motive to prove that he isn't a terrorist to the

President inspired many Muslims in the American diaspora to be okay to express their religiosity. An example of this is when Hasina decided to wear her hijab again, after not wearing it for a while due to a racial attack on her. She believed that by not wearing it, she was letting go of a part of her which has heavily shaped her identity, and Rizwan's determined actions motivated her to let go of her fear of judgment. Similar to Shah Rukh Khan's character in *Kal Ho Na Ho*, his character Rizwan served as an angelic figure for not only his close family but for a lot of the Muslims who struggled with sharing their religious beliefs publicly due to the racial adversity after 9/11.

Recent events in America have uncovered existing issues of race and culture, which have only perpetuated over time. Rizwan's goal was simple, he wanted to simply meet the president and talk to him. His journey is sacred because he inspired people to be good and see the best in each other, regardless of religion and color. The fact that he had to state that he is not a terrorist, but just a simple man trying to live a life with his family free of judgment, just showed how racism is deeply rooted in our societal norms, that it persists to date. *My Name is Khan* tried to shine a light on how racial and religious attacks divide our community, and that is our humanity which binds us all. Rizwan's actions inspire hope, an '*asha*' for a united community. We are all part of the human race before anything and that we need to let go of our societal prejudices in order to grow as a community.

### **Works Cited**

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