

Challenging the Dominant Discourse: Khan's *My Guantanamo Diaries* and the Rhetoric of the War on Terror

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Abstract: This study juxtaposes Mahvish Rukhsana Khan's powerful memoir *My Guantanamo Diary: The Detainees and the Stories They Told Me* (2008) with the post-9/11 rhetoric of political leaders and the mainstream media in the United States during the first decade of the twenty-first century. In her work, Khan exposes the extreme, dehumanizing conditions endured by military prison detainees – many of whom Khan argues were falsely arrested – and advocates for their right to receive fair hearings. The several examples of evident torture revealed by the interviewed detainees throughout the text contrast sharply with the rhetoric from speeches and interviews of early twenty-first century American political leaders, such as President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, and the news coverage from neoliberal media outlets like CNN and Fox News. Similarly, the brutal representations in Khan's memoir contrast with the largely positive depictions of torture in popular films and television programs. To support the validity of Khan's claims, the article will also consider the available War on Terror-era interrogation logs from the Guantanamo Bay military prison camp. This study seeks to illustrate the ability of prevailing power structures to interpellate consumers of mass media while simultaneously suggesting that literature possesses a unique potential to challenge dominant discourses, as it has done throughout history. Finally, this paper argues that works by Khan and other Muslim American authors have the power to disrupt the current racist and xenophobic episteme and challenge the ideological consensus fostered by mainstream media.

In Sacha Baron Cohen's controversial 2006 mockumentary *Borat*, the title character played by Cohen himself—a journalist from Kazakhstan shooting a film about his experiences in the United States—is invited to sing the national anthem at a rodeo in Virginia before a predominantly

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white working class audience. Before singing what he claims to be the lyrics to the Kazakhstan national anthem to the tune of the “Star Spangled Banner,” Borat delivers a rallying oration in an attempt to relate to the patriotic, presumably conservative crowd. Borat begins by declaring, “We support your war of terror!” (32:00) to a thunderous applause. Initially, the joke consisting in replacing “on” with “of” appears conventional: a foreigner speaks imperfect English. It is a standard comedy device that has been recycled countless times over the years in film and television. However, there is a brilliance to the joke that may elude some viewers. By innocently confusing the word “on” for “of,” Cohen has subversively rebranded the multiple military interventions of the George W. Bush presidency which are more commonly known as the War on Terror. In many ways, as history has proven, Cohen’s word choice is more appropriate.

Borat, of course, is more known for the protagonist’s obsession with *Baywatch* star Pamela Anderson and for his disturbing interactions with racist fraternity brothers than for its limited but effective anti-war rhetoric. Other rhetors at the time were however far less subtle in their criticism of Bush and his perpetual war. Acclaimed and controversial documentarian Michael Moore released his movie *Fahrenheit 9/11* in 2004 to both critical and commercial success. Throughout the film, Moore challenges the legitimacy of Bush’s presidency, questions the corporate media coverage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and features unsettling imagery of Iraqi civilians – several of whom are children – injured and maimed by American military intervention (1:13:00-1:14:20). In the same year, popular punk rock band Green Day released one of their most popular albums, *American Idiot*, in which the song lyrics are frequently critical of the Bush Administration’s policies. Like *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *American Idiot* was well-received by both critics and fans.

Despite the popularity of the anti-war rhetoric of Cohen, Moore, Green Day, and other filmmakers and recording artists of the time, their overall message was mostly overshadowed by the pro-war propaganda of politicians such as Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, along with the news coverage by mainstream corporate media outlets ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, and Fox News. Jingoistic clichés such as “God Bless America,” “We Support Our Troops,” and “These Colors Don’t Run” were ubiquitous, appearing on t-shirts, baseball caps, and yellow ribbon car magnets throughout the country. This concentrated effort to interpellate the American people into a pro-war, anti-Muslim mindset was largely successful during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Although artists like Moore and Green Day found a large audience for their work, the reach of warmongering politicians and corporate media was far greater. Bourgeois white men like Bush and Cheney and the news outlets that largely failed to interrogate them provided the rhetoric that would become the dominant discourse of the era.

Now that we approach two decades since Bush’s War on Terror was officially declared, it is time to reassess this historical period. This undertaking is especially necessary as we currently live in the turbulent era of President Donald Trump. As we have learned from New Historicism, scholars cannot simply examine the dominant discourse of the day to understand the essential characteristics of a time period. Although the aforementioned Moore and Green Day provide thoughtful, insightful critiques of Bush and his War on Terror, they can only provide the perspective of white men of privilege possessing a moral or ethical objection to war. To further understand this troubled era, this study focuses on a less frequently heard but more relevant source of anti-war rhetoric: twenty-first century South Asian American literature. Specifically, Mahvish Rukhsana Khan’s powerful memoir *My Guantanamo Diaries* (2008) depicts the experiences of Muslims who have been marginalized and victimized during The War on Terror. Memoir is a

particularly important genre to interrogate because, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson state, autobiographical writers “are at the center of the historical pictures they assemble and are interested in the meaning of larger forces, or conditions, or events” (14). Juxtaposed against the rhetoric of neoliberal, imperialist politicians and corporate news media outlets, Khan’s work provides a more complete understanding of this pivotal moment in America’s recent history.

Interpellation and the Rhetoric of the War on Terror

Before turning a critical eye to Khan’s memoir, it is essential to review the political rhetoric of the Bush Administration and the mainstream media that ultimately propagated its racist, imperialist agenda. After the shocking September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., the American people sought leadership from their elected officials. Nine days after the attack, Bush addressed both houses of Congress and the nation in a prime time speech, stating, “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated” (“Bush Declares War on Terror” 7:38-7:54). The speech accomplished two aims. First, it addressed the concerns of the vulnerable American people and confirmed that their government would indeed avenge the loss of the more than 3,000 who died on September 11 and that it would act in any way necessary to prevent another attack of that magnitude. Second, Bush’s speech prepared its wide audience for the policy of perpetual war that the administration would pursue and pass on to the administrations that followed. The first aim is not unique, as wartime presidents such as Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt have also addressed – with greater eloquence, of course – their constituents in order to reassure them that the government will protect

them. It is the second aim, namely that of justifying the perpetual war, which is the problematic part of Bush's speech and his foreign policy.

Perpetual war would also be a difficult sell to the American people without an effective yet misleading pitch. In January of 2002, Bush delivered his now infamous "Axis of Evil Speech" before Congress and the American people. After trumpeting military success in Afghanistan, Bush identified potential sources for perpetual war in the following passage: "States like [Iraq, Iran, and North Korea] and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world by seeking weapons of mass destruction. These regimes pose a grave and growing danger" ("Axis of Evil Speech" 7:51-8:00). By identifying these three "rogue nations," Bush hoped to frighten his audience and instrumentalize their insecurities by suggesting that many individuals "out there" wished to bring them harm. The term "axis," of course also conjured up images of the Axis Powers of World War II, Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperialist Japan.

In his influential essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser explains the concept of interpellation and how ideological state apparatuses and repressive state apparatuses reproduce the dominant ideology of a society, rendering individuals as subjects. Althusser explains, "I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing" (118). In Bush's speeches, he interpellates or hails average Americans as subjects and propagates the ideology of imperialism by appealing to the pathos of fear, racism/xenophobia, and patriotism. In both his "War on Terror Speech" and his "Axis of Evil Speech," Bush uses the fear of threatened security to persuade his audience of the existence of an omnipresent enemy. The

constant fluctuations of yellow, orange, and red terror alerts from the Department of Homeland Security contributed heavily to the paranoia that the American nation is constantly under threat

The fear of physical violence was coupled with the fear of the other, tapped into the deep-rooted racism and xenophobia that has been prevalent throughout U.S. history. This approach is not new, of course, as similar tactics have been used by the British Empire, Nazi Germany, and the United States during the genocide against Native Americans, the Japanese internment camps of World War II, and the several hot moments of the Cold War. Bush was more careful in his treatment of race and religion than, for instance, the current president Donald Trump, who, during the 2016 campaign promised to “bomb the shit out of” ISIS and then “take the oil” (“Donald Trump on ISIS” 0:09-0:44). Conversely, Bush claimed to have sent soldiers to invade Iraq “with respect for its citizens, for that great civilization, and for the religious faith they practice” (3:08-3:22). Although careful to avoid rhetoric that could be perceived as overtly racist or Islamophobic (unlike Trump), Bush frequently used coded language, such as a favorite term “evil-doers” and sentences like “we’re gonna smoke ‘em outta their caves” (“Smoke Em Out” 0:01-0:07), appealing to the orientalist notions of the Middle East held by those Americans who perceived Westerners as superior and othered Easterners, in this case Muslims, as inferior and animalistic (Said 42). The use of the word “cave” dehumanizes Muslims and strengthens American negative stereotypes concerning religious otherness, thus rendering Muslims inferior to non-Muslim Americans.

What was unique about Bush’s War on Terror is that it was propagated by a mass media campaign – including traditional print media, 24 hour cable news networks, television programs, and the relatively new medium of the internet – at a scale which had been previously unimaginable. The political rhetoric of the Bush Administration was merely one weapon used to propagate the War on Terror. Mass media was another. Corporate media outlets, such as CNN, Fox News, ABC,

NBC, and CBS, were largely uncritical of Bush's wars, especially during his first term as president. In fact, evidence suggests that the mainstream media largely supported the Bush agenda. Judith Butler explains the role of the media in her work *Frames of War*:

Throughout the Bush regime, we saw a concerted effort on the part of the state to regulate the visual field. The phenomenon of embedded reporting came to the fore with the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, where it seemed to be defined as an arrangement whereby journalists agreed to report only from the perspective established by military and governmental authorities. "Embedded" journalists traveled only to certain transports, looked only at certain scenes, and relayed home images and narratives of only certain kinds of action. (64)

News outlets were given access to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan but only under the careful watch of the United States military. Their access was far more limited than during the Vietnam War when journalists brought the horrors of imperialistic war into the living rooms of middle class families. However, due to significant advances in technology, specifically the utilization of the internet, the coverage of the War on Terror seemed fuller, more complete, ultimately convincing American subjects that they were largely informed about the military interventions in the Middle East.

With the cooperation of the mainstream media, Bush also referred to patriotism in order to propagate his imperialistic agenda. Frequently, he referred to the bravery of American soldiers in his speeches, using pathos to persuade his audience. When announcing the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Bush stated,

To all the men and women in the United States armed forces in the Middle East, the peace of a troubled world and the hopes of an oppressed people now depend on you. That trust is well-placed. The enemies you confront will come to know your skill and bravery. The people you liberate will witness the honorable and the decent spirit of the American military. (“Invasion of Iraq” 0:51-1:16)

In this passage, Bush appealed to the growing cult of hero worship centered around American soldiers. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War when soldiers were viewed unfavorably by many Americans¹, a concentrated effort was made in the first decade of the twenty-first century to honor soldiers as courageous and admirable at every possible moment. The previously-mentioned “We Support Our Troops” yellow ribbon car magnets were ubiquitous for several years, and the mainstream media ran countless stories about the sacrifices of soldiers and their families. The feel-good story of a military father surprising his children with a visit appeared on news programs with the regularity of football scores and the weather report². As a result of this propaganda campaign, anti-war voices were quickly rebranded as anti-soldier, ultimately silencing them. Such was the fate of those handful of journalists who questioned the administration’s policies. *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman was labeled unpatriotic and subjected to threats of violence for writing an article that was critical of the Bush Administration’s claims that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction as its justification for invading Iraq (Booth 130-31).

In their study *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Marxist critics Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno explain that mass media is an economic enterprise which is interested more in profit than in the quality of the material they produce (121). The need to have access to more war zones than the broadcasting competitors determined media outlets to sugarcoat their covering of the war effort

so to suit the government's agenda, a compromise which nevertheless came at the expense of objectivity. In *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, Wayne C. Booth applies this theory to CNN and observes that the cable news giant "started paying more attention to its commercial interests" after being purchased by Time Warner (137). As a result, as Booth points out, "the objectivity in reporting has certainly declined; the CNN that covered the first Gulf War was radically different from what we have observed since the March 2003 strike on Iraq" (138). Regardless of whether the commitment to journalistic inquiry has decreased due to the pursuit of profit, a desire to propagate an imperialistic agenda, or both, mass media, in presenting a perspective that conforms to the rhetoric of the Bush administration, contributed to the interpellation of American subjects while simultaneously silencing the voices of the victims of war.

The Unheard Voices of the War on Terror

As stated in the introduction to this study, there were some mainstream voices of resistance during the War on Terror. Filmmakers like Moore and Cohen satirized the legitimacy of the Bush presidency and pointed out its unjust treatment of Muslims worldwide. Green Day's *American Idiot* album pointed to the disillusionment of youth living during the Bush years with lyrics such as, "Now everybody do the propaganda / and sing along to the age of paranoia" (Green Day). While the aforementioned artists continued to have successful careers after Bush's presidency, others weren't as fortunate, such as country music superstars the Dixie Chicks, who lost their largely conservative fanbase when lead singer Natalie Maines stated at a concert in London that she was "ashamed the president was from Texas," her home state ("Dixie Chicks Pulled"). Despite the efforts of these artists and many others, including veteran rockers R.E.M. and Bruce

Springsteen, the dominant discourse was still largely that of the Bush Administration and the corporate media. Still, these artists were able to find an audience for their rhetoric of dissent. Some notable similarities between the filmmakers and musicians mentioned here is that they are all white, they were not directly affected by the militarism they passionately protested, and they had a forum to express their discontent.

Conversely, Muslim Americans and Muslims abroad found their voices largely unheard during Bush's War on Terror. As threatened as white journalists, filmmakers, and musicians who challenged Bush's policies must have felt, Americans of West and South Asian descent were likely to face a more significant response – often in the form of physical violence – if they dissented. For those who chose to risk their safety and challenge the dominant discourse of the day, their work found a smaller audience than the work of sympathetic white rhetors. James Castonguay argues that the lack of representation of Muslims in the mainstream American media “has served to keep much of the U.S. public ignorant about Arab and Islamic culture, thus paving the way for the dehumanizing and demonizing of the ‘enemy’ as part of the inexorable march toward and the hot and cold wars on terror” (103). Since the narratives of Muslim Americans have been previously ignored, it is now essential for historians, literary critics, and other scholars to revisit these frequently unheard voices in order to understand the conditions that could allow the War on Terror to take place and to work on behalf of social justice activism to avoid a repetition of this terrifying, unfortunate moment in American history.

One such text that sheds significant light on the War on Terror era from the perspective of its victims is Mahvish Rukhsana Khan's moving memoir, *My Guantanamo Diaries*. Khan, an Afghan American journalist, was attending law school when she was hired as a Pashto interpreter at the notorious military prison in Cuba. Her encounters with the prisoners at Guantanamo were

chilling, as she retells their experiences of being falsely arrested and tortured by U.S. military personnel. Khan's decision to publish the stories of these once-silenced victims provides Americans with a perspective previously denied by our president and the mainstream corporate media. Throughout the book, Khan's experiences contradict the prevailing discourse of the time, exposing the War on Terror as a sad fraud and as yet another tragedy in American history.

In his now infamous "Axis of Evil Speech," Bush boasted that "Terrorists who once occupied Afghanistan now occupy cells at Guantanamo Bay" (2:23-2:47). The response from Congress was thunderous applause. Their enthusiastic reaction was echoed by Bush's first Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. When asked at a press conference about the Guantanamo detainees, he replied, "The kind of people held at Guantanamo include terrorist trainers, bomb makers, extremist recruiters and financiers, bodyguards of Osama bin Laden, and would-be suicide bombers. They are not common car thieves. They are believed to be determined killers" (0:34-0:55). With Rumsfeld's explanation here recited frequently by members of the Bush Administration, many Americans had little sympathy for the prisoners in Cuba and were not interested in their rights under the Geneva Convention. Accordingly, the U.S. government determined that these "killers" could be denied basic human rights under U.S. law, such as a right to a fair trial, since they were not American citizens (Khan 39-40). Khan, who several times throughout the book states her love for America and her pride in being a first generation American, rejects this thinking, saying instead that her "country had taken a wrong turn" (2). Khan's repeated expressions of patriotism assure readers that her memoir is not a rhetorical attack on the United States, but rather an attempt to challenge the dominant discourses that have provided an incomplete picture of American foreign policy endeavors.

Besides the fact that the Bush Administration's policy of denying basic human rights to Guantanamo detainees contradicts the values expressed in founding documents and in the overall American mythos of being a haven for justice and equality, the process of arresting these individuals comes under serious scrutiny. In the second chapter of *My Guantanamo Diaries*, Khan introduces readers to Ali Shah Mousovi, a pediatrician from Afghanistan, who was arrested for being "accused of associating with the Taliban and of funneling money to anticoalition insurgents," despite claiming that he was attempting to open a medical practice after being exiled to Iran during the Taliban regime (16-17). Mousavi continued to claim innocence and believed that someone in Afghanistan sold false information on him to collect a \$25,000 reward (Khan 19). Another detainee, Taj Mohammed, a goatherd from Afghanistan, was arrested after a physical altercation with his cousin. The cousin later apologized for turning him in to the American soldiers to claim a reward, but Mohammed continued to be detained in Guantanamo (Khan 72). Yet another detainee, Wali Mohammed, a businessman from Afghanistan, claims to have been "turned in by a former business partner who wanted to avoid repaying a large loan" (Khan 102).

Although these claims are fairly common in Guantanamo, and the U.S. government has argued that these stories are part of the detainees' sophisticated al Qaeda training, there is ample evidence to suggest the validity of these men's claims. Chapter Five of Khan's memoir is titled "Big Bounties," and it contains information that supports the statements of the three men mentioned above and multiple others. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan commenced, the American government offered bounties to the people of Afghanistan, ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000, for information leading to the arrest of individuals associated with al Qaeda or the Taliban (Khan 55). Khan points out that the per capita monthly income for a family in Afghanistan in 2006 was \$300, and the \$25,000 bounty would be the equivalent of \$2.17 million in the United States

(Khan 56). Clearly, there was significant incentive to sell out an old enemy or even a stranger just to profit individually. These leaflets were ubiquitous, or as Defense Secretary Rumsfeld stated, they fell from planes “like snowflakes in December in Chicago” (qtd. in Khan 57). Khan attributes many of these accusations not only to the large monetary award but also to deep-rooted territorial feuds in Afghanistan (57). Also, Afghans who fled to Pakistan were often sold to the American military by Pakistani police looking for an easy profit (Khan 57). Amnesty International has even claimed that Afghan men arrested by Pakistani police were forced to grow out their beards to look more like members of the Taliban before they were turned over to the U.S. military (Khan 57-58). All of this evidence points to a high potential for corruption and unethical behavior.

In addition to the absurdly high financial incentive to sell false information to the American government, there was little to no investigation into the validity of the charges levied against the accused. Individuals were apparently arrested on hearsay alone in many cases. Taj Mohammed was arrested four days after the fight with his cousin. American soldiers appeared at his home, did a quick search, and then handcuffed him and took him to a nearby military base. His was in Guantanamo soon thereafter (Khan 72). Throughout the fifth chapter, Khan reveals that she believes that many of the prisoners – possibly a majority – were falsely arrested and unjustly detained. In her work *Constructing the Enemy: Empathy/Antipathy in U.S. Literature and Law*, Rajini Srikanth concurs, stating,

The likelihood of innocent people having been handed over to the United States is extremely high [. . .]. The bounty hunter would turn over to U.S. or Northern Alliance soldiers alleged supporters of the Taliban or al Qaeda and quickly ‘disappear’ so that there was very little possibility of ensuring that the allegations could be supported. Given that

93% of the detainees were not apprehended by the United States, one can only wonder at the extent of ‘mistaken identification.’ The grim reality is that the lives of hundreds of men are slowly but steadily disintegrating through the corrosive effect of these practices. (160)

The lack of due process coupled with missing investigations into allegations that were rewarded by significant compensation is troubling. Sadly, this information was also relatively unknown to a majority of Americans, who accepted Rumsfeld’s statement about “determined killers” in Guantanamo as fact. Clearly, as previously asserted, scholars must revisit the works of Muslim American authors and artists to get a more complete understanding of the policies of Bush’s War on Terror.

Torture in Guantanamo and on the Screen

Although there were rumors of the torture and the inappropriate conduct of military personnel against Muslim detainees before the release of the horrifying images of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, unsurprisingly, these stories were largely neglected by the mainstream media. However, on the fifth anniversary of 9/11, Matt Lauer did the unexpected and asked Bush about the American use of torture in detention centers for an NBC news segment. Bush replied, “I told our people to get information without torture and was assured by the Justice Department that we were not torturing” (1:16-1:21). Bush’s utterance was contradicted by the tone of his voice and his body language. He was visibly uncomfortable, and he repeatedly pointed his index finger at Lauer while speaking. As Lauer pursued the topic, Bush continued to get angrier and then exclaimed, “We’re at war! These are people that want to come over here and kill your families. And the best

way to protect you is to get information” (3:47-3:55). Noticing that the interviewer was not convinced, Bush resorted to the rhetorical strategies of refusing to answer on the grounds of presenting the enemy with classified information, and then he appealed to the American people to trust his methods because he alone could protect them: “And I’m confident the American people understand why we’ve done that” (3:55-3:57). Polls from that era indicate that many Americans, especially those who were regular viewers of Fox News, agreed with Bush and his methods (Bayoumi 123-24).

Cheney echoed Bush’s answer to Lauer, although with a calmer tone and demeanor, when he stated, “We worked closely with lawyers in the Justice Department to know where the line was – you can go this far and no further – so we didn’t violate any international commitments or obligations” (0:55-1:05). Despite the claims of both Bush and Cheney, evidence suggests that “international commitments and obligations” were indeed violated. Butler points out in *Precairous Life* that the writ of habeas corpus and the lack of due process are two such violations (63). Torture, of course, is another. There are multiple accounts of torture from detainees by American soldiers in *My Guantanamo Diaries*, contradicting the previous claims of Bush and Cheney.

Several of the prisoners Khan interviewed reported frequent beatings from American soldiers. Mousavi, the Afghan pediatrician, claimed to have been “blindfolded, hooded, and gagged” and then “kicked in the head repeatedly” (Khan 17). In addition to the beatings, Mousavi was deprived of sleep for several days and forced to listen to loud sirens with speakers placed next to his ears for hours at a time. In *This Muslim American Life*, Moustafa Bayoumi explains that the use of loud sounds, such as the siren Mousavi was subjected to, is a frequently used method of torture by Americans because of its potential for driving its victim mad (182). In the event that Mousavi was actually able to fall asleep despite the screeching sirens, the soldiers poured ice water

on him (Khan 17). He was also forced to stand up for two weeks straight without rest, he was spat upon by U.S. soldiers, and he was forced to listen as the soldiers said explicit things about his mother and sisters and as they denounced Islam (Khan 17-18). Another cruelty was the redacting of every “I love you” and “I miss you” written by loved ones – especially the children of the detainees – in letters from home (Khan 28). The beatings and the insults were common to all Guantanamo detainee accounts, which makes it difficult to believe that all prisoners are lying. Additionally, it is extremely unlikely that the Bush Administration was unaware of this widespread abuse and dehumanization of Muslims in detention centers such as Guantanamo.

For the most part, it seems as though the tortured detainees in Guantanamo were arrested because of bad luck. Many happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time or they made the wrong enemy. In the case of Sami al-Haj, a Sudanese journalist hired by Al-Jazeera to cover U.S. aggression in Afghanistan, his arrest, detainment, and torture appear to be calculated. After being turned over to the Americans by Pakistani police, al-Haj was hooded and beaten like Mousavi and many others (Khan 182). Although most of the detainees were reluctant to discuss the torture they endured at Guantanamo out of shame, al-Haj, perhaps due to his sense of journalistic obligation, was particularly forthcoming. He first described his time at Bagram Air Force Base before his arrival at Guantanamo as “the worst days of my life” (Khan 182). He stated that he was

severely tortured, attacked by dogs, held in an icy cage, and fed frozen food. He was later moved to a dark prison infested with rats in Kandahar, in southern Afghanistan, where his physical and psychological torture and abuse continued; he was subjected to multiple full-cavity searches, forced into stress positions, made to kneel for long periods on concrete floors, and mercilessly beaten on a regular basis. (Khan 182)

In addition to that, Khan writes, “Amnesty International further reported that the hairs on al-Haj’s beard were plucked, that he was not allowed to wash for months on end, and that he was infested with lice and threatened with rape” (182). He was also subjected to “systematic forced nudity” as a “sort of prolonged degradation” (Khan 192). The experiences of al-Haj are some of the most disturbing in the memoir. Khan asserts that al-Haj was particularly targeted because of his affiliation with Al-Jazeera. In response to this torture, other journalists for Al-Jazeera were more reluctant to report stories that might upset the U.S. government (Khan 196). Not only was the Bush Administration able to control much of the media coverage at home, but it found ways to manipulate reporting abroad.

Khan begins Chapter Fifteen of her memoir with a gruesomely detailed account of a suicide attempt by Jumah al-Dossary, who was arrested in Pakistan while trying to flee the bombing in Afghanistan to ultimately reach the Bahraini Embassy (Khan 214). Al-Dossary’s attempt on his own life was unsuccessful, and it would not be his last. He stated that Guantanamo existed with the purpose of destroying people, and, he was, at that point, destroyed (Khan 211). Like al-Haj, al-Dossary was open to discuss the torture he endured with that hope that it would reach an American audience, so that they could know of their government’s unethical practices. Khan reveals that, just as others had experienced, al-Dossary was beaten repeatedly, and insults were often spoken regarding his loved ones. He was also urinated on by soldiers, was forced to walk barefoot on barbed wire and shards of glass, had a mysterious hot liquid poured on his head, was given several electric shocks, had individual hairs plucked from his beard, was denied sleep for long periods of time, and had cigarettes put out on his foot and his wrist (215-18). He also experienced the previously mentioned loud music and bright lights shining in his face when it was time to sleep,

being placed in a cold room, and being attacked by dogs (Khan 223). In addition to the physical torture, al-Dossary was subjected to religious degradation. American soldiers would curse Allah and the Prophet Mohammed, and they used the Qu'rans donated by the Red Cross as footballs and then urinated on them (Khan 217). These experiences contributed to al-Dossary's desire to commit suicide.

In fact, al-Dossary also experienced sexual humiliation as a form of torture. He recalled seeing an Afghan man in his fifties being sexually assaulted by soldiers while it was videotaped (Khan 218). In one of the most disturbing passages of *My Guantanamo Diaries*, al-Dossary revealed his own gruesome experience with sexual humiliation at the hands of four soldiers with masks covering their faces, including a female interrogator and a soldier videotaping the encounter. Al-Dossary was instructed to confess his connection to al Qaeda. When al-Dossary did not comply, he was shackled and then stripped naked. The female soldier then stripped down to her underwear and stood over him. When she pulled off her underwear, al-Dossary said that she was wearing a sanitary pad, and her menstrual blood dripped on his body. Then, she smeared her menstrual blood all over his face. The female soldier cleaned herself up and put her clothes back on, and then the soldiers finally left him alone in the room, still shackled, naked, and covered in menstrual blood (Khan 223-25). As shocking as al-Dossary's story is, Khan states that the same situation was described in Sgt. Erik Saar's book *Behind the Wire*, lending credence to al-Dossary's claims.

Al-Dossary's experiences are the most striking and disturbing in *My Guantanamo Diaries*, especially the passages about sexual humiliation as a form of torture. In addition to the testimony of the detainees interviewed by Khan, members of the U.S. military have confirmed that sexual humiliation has been used in detention centers. After the Abu Ghraib scandal made headlines worldwide, the U.S. military was forced to find out exactly what happened, so Army Major

General Antonio M. Taguba was assigned to investigate (Khan 219). Taguba claimed that “Americans haven’t seen a fraction of what happened at that Iraqi prison” and believed that orders originated from high ranking officials (Khan 219). He also told *The New Yorker* that he saw a video of a female detainee being sodomized by a male American soldier and that “an Iraqi father and son were sexually humiliated together” (Khan 219). Apparently, the Pentagon was not pleased with Taguba’s findings; he claims that he was forced to retire shortly after his investigation (Khan 219).

The tales of systematic torture in *My Guantanamo Diaries* are disturbing, these accounts have been largely unheard by most Americans. Conversely, many were subjected instead to more glamorous depictions of torture in the U.S. media. In her work *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, Evelyn Alsultany states that “The news media and government officials succeeded in making torture acceptable and necessary, and TV dramas participated in doing the ideological work [. . .] to justify the U.S. government’s actions during the War on Terror” (44). She goes on to say that these TV dramas generated an “intimate relationship” with viewers that created what is “real” to many of them (39). Furthermore, Bayoumi adds that programs like *24*, featuring hero Jack Bauer, who employs torture upon terrorists when necessary, suggest that torture is an effective method for obtaining information from potential terrorists (219). But, as Bayoumi indicates, torture is actually not a successful practice because “a person will say anything to stop the torture, even admitting to things that are blatantly untrue” (219). Despite the inhumaneness of torture and its revealed ineffectiveness, many Americans, especially during the War on Terror era, were willing to condone it because the hero on television proved that it worked. Althusser’s concept of interpellation again comes into play here.

Khan's memoir inevitably brings us to the question Butler asks in *Precarious Life*: "Is a Muslim life as valuable as legibly First World lives?" (12). *My Guantanamo Diary* and the examples cited in this study of popular media during the War on Terror era arrive at different conclusions. While Muslim Americans were portrayed as terrorists and as the primitive other on American television and in cinema, Khan's memoir offers what Smith and Watson call "conflicting models of identity" (239) that insist on the humanity of Muslim Americans and their unalienable rights which, in the case of Guantanamo detainees, were utterly disregarded. The discrepancy between possessing esteemed values but only applying them to certain privileged individuals could be the result of oversimplified, dichotomized media coverage that reports "good guys" vs. "bad guys" as news (Shaobin and Qingyang 35). Or it could be due to America's legacy of perpetual racism and xenophobia.

Conclusion

When he announced the invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush stated that "In this conflict, America faces an enemy that has no regard for conventions of war or rules of morality" ("Invasion of Iraq" 1:17-1:25). Although Bush described Saddam Hussein's regime in this passage, he could have very easily been talking about his own administration, as *My Guantanamo Diaries* indicates in multiple moments. As we have seen from past iconic texts such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1883), *The Jungle* (1905), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), literature has a unique ability to advocate for social justice. In the twenty-first century where racism and xenophobia against Muslims is all too prevalent, Americans must turn to texts by Muslim American authors such as Mahvish Rukhsana Khan in order to see the world from the perspective

of the other and obtain a critical perspective onto the islamophobic bias of mainstream media. As historian Howard Zinn puts it, “the future of democracy depend[s] on the people, and their growing consciousness of what [is] the decent way to relate to their fellow human beings all over the world (682).

Bush’s War on Terror – or War of Terror as Borat more accurately described it – was a dark period in this nation’s history. But it is one that must result in learning and the appropriate reaction to similar challenges in the future. It was difficult for those of us living through the Bush years to see past the jingoism and the propaganda of the that administration and the corporate media, but we must now be mindful that we cannot rely solely on the dominant discourse of the day to form our opinions and to dictate our actions. This is particularly crucial now that the U.S. is threatened by domestic fascist ideologues. Americans must resist the forces that seek to divide us and remember to listen to the voices that have been previously unheard in order to finally live up to our professed ideals. Reading works like Mahvish Rukhsana Khan’s *My Guantanamo Diaries* is a fine starting place to resist fascism and imperialism and to advocate for social justice for all Americans and global citizens.

¹ According to the Pew Research Center, a poll in March 1973 found that only 32% of Americans had a favorable opinion of the U.S military, compared 87% in a March 2005 survey.

² In his article “I Was a Mouthpiece for the American Military,” Ken Silverstein reveals that journalists were strongly encouraged by the U.S. military to write positive stories about by the war, while it was “impossible” to pursue stories “frowned upon by the military.”

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