



NEW RELEASES

# After Love

Aleem Khan's debut feature *After Love* scrutinises bereavement as a mental health disorder, diving into not just the sorrow but the derangement of grief. As newly widowed Mary, Joanna Scanlan offers a portrait of a woman whose cracked heart wins our sympathy, as she absentmindedly makes tea for two in a hotel room or bursts into tears on her prayer mat, and whose increasingly stealthy behaviour commands our attention as she infiltrates another's woman's life. She's compellingly broken. In Scanlan's features we see grief and humiliation twisted into possessiveness, vengefulness and misplaced compassion, as she plays simultaneously the wronged wife and a cuckoo in somebody else's nest.

Mary and her ferry-captain husband Ahmed are leading the peaceful life of a middle-aged Muslim couple in Dover, supported by a shared faith and a community, when he dies suddenly. Emptying his wallet after the funeral, Mary finds an ID card belonging to a French woman, Genevieve, and then loving messages on his phone from 'G'. It's a soap opera set-up, but in the hands of writer-director Khan, *After Love* becomes something weightier.

Not just bereaved but betrayed, Mary senses that her world is crumbling – Khan literalises this with discreet special effects: the white cliffs of Dover seem to crash into the English Channel, a ceiling cracks open. These are visions, but in the next scene Mary brushes dust from her shoulder.

Those cliffs, which feature prominently in the film as the spot where Mary would watch for Ahmed's return and now waits for something else, take a place in a lineage of stories about mourning women waiting for their men to return from the sea. Much here feels as robust and longstanding as those cliffs. Even scenes played out via SMS have their heft – in this film, technology is fragile but useful, inasmuch as it carries and revives precious memories, from the audio tapes Ahmed posted from Pakistan, to home movies on VHS and the voicemail Mary listens to obsessively. In the end, it's a phone that will betray her deceit, but a granite headstone in the soil that reveals her real secret. Mary and Ahmed's marriage was decades long, and his affair with Genevieve was no fling. Mary and Ahmed began their relationship as teenagers, in secrecy, in the face of cultural prejudice, and that story is about to play out again in the next generation. There is history here, and loss (a dead child, an absent father, an estranged family), as well as a gaping cultural divide.

Mary dresses modestly and wears a headscarf – she converted to Islam to be with Ahmed. She also speaks Urdu and cooks Pakistani food. Genevieve (Nathalie Richard) does none of those things. She is also a modern single working mother, and wears trousers and ruffled, highlighted hair. When we first see her it's a shock, but she's the one who judges by appearances. Mary is poised on her doorstep to confront her over the affair, but Genevieve flexes her own prejudice and takes her for a house cleaner. When Mary accepts the offer to enter Genevieve's home under these false pretences, the film grows an outer skin of intrigue. Later, when Genevieve, unaware of her cleaner's real identity, gestures at her scarf and asks about her faith, Mary's response is poisonous: 'I did something for my husband that no one else could.' Unknowingly, the women have fallen into complementary roles –

complementarily subservient to Ahmed's needs, that is. There's a shadow of Mary's logic in Genevieve's later statement: 'Being with me has made him into a better husband for someone else.'

Richard and Talid Ariss, who plays Genevieve's son Solomon, lend Scanlan impeccable support in roles that call for more thundering histrionics. However, this is Scanlan's film, and her performance is disarmingly sophisticated.

Although she is perhaps known mostly for television comedy, her best roles involve a virtuoso mix of tones, from her exasperated civil servant in Armando Iannucci's political satire *The Thick of It* (2005-12) to her put-upon ward sister in BBC4's geriatric ward-set *Getting On* (2009-12). In this film, as in, say, Deborah Haywood's *Pin Cushion* (2017), Scanlan again fully inhabits a complex role. It takes an actress of a high calibre to express so much, and there's a tangible pleasure to be taken in observing her performance. Much of her best acting is done alone, halting in the middle of her prayers, reconstructing her identity as she rehearses a speech in the mirror, breathing in her husband's scent on another woman's laundry or laying down in the shallows on Calais beach and allowing the tides to mingle with her tears.

Khan's filmmaking is as fastidious and as deceptively restrained as his heroine. Ahmed dies in the background of a long shot, and the slow zoom in towards his body is mirrored by a subsequent shot of the funeral gathering. The film is balanced in time and place too, bookended by two baptisms and taking place in towns that echo each other in location and industry.

The physical gulf that separates the women is a body of water that has two names in two languages, much like Mary, whose Muslim name is Fahima, and Ahmed, whom she calls Ed. Khan and DP Alexander Dynan (who worked on Paul Schrader's similarly austere and grief-stricken *First Reformed*, 2017) frequently return to the cliff edge, the chilly waters, to stress this divide.

There's a sense of liminality, with both women existing on the verge of something whole – sharing scraps of a home, a husband and a father. Chris Roe's score appears intermittently throughout the film but when it vanishes, perhaps Khan intends us to feel its absence, a reflection of the emptiness created by secrets and affections withheld, confessions left unmade.

The music swells to suggest a harmonious future at the film's end, but is swiftly replaced by the sound of waves crashing and gulls squawking as the credits roll. Ahmed and his mysterious motivations are lost in the deep, while above ground two women look for a new kind of home.

**Pamela Hutchinson, *Sight & Sound*, June 2021**

### **Director Aleem Khan on 'After Love'**

Building on a run of British debuts that channel deeply personal stories (Daniel Kokotajlo's *Apostasy*, 2018; Hong Khaou's *Monsoon*, 2019), Aleem Khan's *After Love* is a quietly devastating exploration of loss that troubles mainstream representations of contemporary English identity.

*After Love is quietly political in its way – how did the evolving political situation in the UK shape its five-year development period?*

The film is deeply political for me, but I like that you've absorbed the politics quietly. Over the five years it took to write the film, the refugee crisis in Calais presented itself on our doorstep, and then Brexit happened. Although the film isn't exploring these events explicitly, they absolutely changed the way I thought about identity, nationhood, class and religion. Right now we have a prime minister who refers to Muslim women as letterboxes and, on the other

side of the Channel, France has a president who ushered in a bill that effectively strips Muslim women of their religious autonomy. I have always wanted to see a person as beautifully complex as my mother on screen, and so I wrote a story about a white Muslim convert; an older, larger-framed Muslim woman who is the centre of her own story.

*The premise is so engaging – how much of it was based on your personal history?*

A lot of the details at plot level are not autobiographical, but the emotional guts of the film are much closer to home. My parents lost a daughter, my sister, when she was only six months old. I don't remember anything about her, but the fallout from her death inevitably saturated me and my siblings. In many ways the project has been a way for me to work through a feeling of loss that I've always carried about me but never fully understood. The locations were very close to home, too; I grew up in Kent and my grandparents lived in Folkestone. I spent my childhood summers on those cliffs and I was always intrigued by the proximity of another world 'over there' and just out of reach.

*Joanna Scanlan gives an extraordinary and fearless performance as Mary. How did you approach working with her?*

I always compile dossiers during the writing process based on the social, psychological and physiological aspects of a character. Then I give them to the actors. So Joanna got a massive bundle with her backstory in it, and I included scraps of articles and books I'd read, photography, and a bunch of family home movies. She also met my mum during pre-prep, who taught her how to make saag paneer and roti. My mum gave her a whole bag of her clothes to try on and get used to as well. It was important for me that Joanna knew where this was all coming from. We were lucky to have time ahead of the shoot to visit Dover and for us to establish a history and connection to the landscape for the character.

**Aleem Khan interviewed by Will Massa, *Sight & Sound*, June 2021**

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## AFTER LOVE

*Director:* Aleem Khan

©: British Broadcasting Corporation,

The British Film Institute, After Love Production

*A production of:* The Bureau

*Supported by the:* Sundance Institute Feature Film Program

*Developed by:* BBC Films

*With the support of:* Creative England

*Creative England via:* BFI Network

*With the support of the:* BFI's Film Fund

*Presented by:* BFI, BBC Films

*French Production Services:* Le Bureau Films

*International Sales by:* The Bureau Sales

*Executive Produced by:* Eva Yates, Rose Garnett,

Natascha Wharton, Vincent Gabelle

*Produced by:* Matthieu de Braconier

*Co-produced by:* Gabrielle Dumon, Gerardine O'Flynn

*Line Producer:* Dylan Rees

*Production Manager:* Juliette Cerceau

*Production Accountant:* Patrick Kiely

*Unit Manager:* Paul Young

*Location Manager:* Ben Lee

*Location Manager (France):* Remi Jollant

*1st Assistant Director:* Jeroen Bogaert

*2nd Assistant Director:* Pedro Rilho

*Script Supervisor:* Shaida Kazemi

*Casting Director:* Shaheen Baig

*Casting Director (France):* Lucciana de Vögue

*Written by:* Aleem Khan

*Director of Photography:* Alexander Dynan

*2nd Unit Director of Photography:* David Pearce

*Steadicam Operator:* John Ferguson

*Stills Photographer:* Ran Studio

*VFX by:* Technicolor VFX

*Editor:* Gareth C. Scales

*Production Designer:* Sarah Jenneson

*Set Decorator:* Abbie Kornstein

*Costume Designer:* Niragemirage

*Hair and Make-up Designer:* Diandra Ferreira

*Titles and End Credits Designed by:* Intermission Film

*Colourist:* Tim Masick

*Original Music Composed by:* Chris Roe

*Cellist:* Alice Purton

*Music Supervisor:* Connie Farr

*Production Sound Mixer:* David Giles

*Sound Re-recording Mixer:* Per Boström

*Supervising Sound Editor:* Joakim Sundström

*Fight Co-ordinator:* Matthew Thomas Robinson

## Cast

Joanna Scanlan (*Mary Hussain*)

Nathalie Richard (*Genevieve*)

Talid Ariss (*Solomon*)

Nasser Memarzia (*Ahmed*)

Sudha Bhuchar (*Farzanna*)

Nisha Chadha (*Mina*)

Jabeen Butt (*Saadia*)

Subika Anwar-Khan (*Salma*)

Elijah Braik (*Farooq*)

Adam Karim (*Imran*)

David Hechter (*Anthony*)

Pierre Delpierre (*removal man*)

Jeff Mirza (*voice of Ahmed*)

Aaron Chawla (*voice of young Ahmed*)

Hannah Jeal (*voicemail voice*)

Matthew Walker (*weather voice*)

UK/USA 2020

89 mins

A BFI release

The *After Love* soundtrack, featuring the original score from award-winning composer Chris Roe, released by Thirty Six Minutes, is out now and available on all major streaming platforms.

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## EVENTS & STRANDS

**Preview: In the Earth + Q&A with director Ben Wheatley**

Thu 10 Jun 19:00

**Preview: Doctor Who: Dragonfire**

Sat 12 Jun 12:00

**Relaxed Screenings: The Reason I Jump**

Fri 18 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:10

**Woman with a Movie Camera: Wildfire**

Sun 20 Jun 18:40 (+ Q&A with director Cathy Brady); Mon 21 Jun 18:10;

Tue 22 Jun 14:40; Wed 23 Jun 20:50; Thu 24 Jun 14:45

## BAGRI FOUNDATION LONDON INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL

**LIFF Opening Night: WOMB (Women of My Billion)**

+ on stage Q&A with Srishti Bakshi and film critic Anna Smith

Thu 17 Jun 17:20

**My Beautiful Laundrette**

Fri 18 Jun 20:20

**The Warrior + on-stage career interview with**

**writer-director Asif Kapadia**

Sat 19 Jun 20:30

**Ahimsa: Gandhi the Power of the Powerless**

Sun 20 Jun 15:00

**Searching for Happiness...**

Tue 22 Jun 20:50

**Nazarband Captive**

Wed 23 Jun 20:45

**A'hr Kayattam**

Thu 24 Jun 18:00

**The Salt in Our Waters Nonajoler Kabbo**

Sun 27 Jun 15:00

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## NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

**First Cow**

From Fri 28 May

**Surge**

From Fri 28 May

**After Love**

From Fri 4 Jun (Q&A with director Aleem Khan on Fri 4 Jun 17:30;

Q&A with director Aleem Khan and actor Joanna Scanlan on

Sun 13 Jun 18:40)

**Gunda**

From Fri 4 Jun

**Fargo**

From Fri 11 Jun

**The Reason I Jump**

From Fri 18 Jun

**Nashville**

From Fri 25 Jun

**Ultraviolence**

From Sat 26 Jun

Sat 26 June 14:20 + Q&A with director Ken Fero and

contributor Janet Alder

**Supernova**

From Fri 2 Jul

**Another Round**

From Fri 9 Jul

**Jumbo**

From Fri 9 Jul

**Deerskin**

From Fri 16 Jul

**Girlfriends**

From Fri 23 Jul

**Mandabi**

From Fri 23 Jul

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