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After Love (12a)

Dir: Aleem Khan

**Starring: Joanna Scanlan, Nathalie Richard,
Nasser Memarzia**

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Synopsis: Present-day. Mary and Ahmed, a ferry captain, are a married Muslim couple living in Dover. After Ahmed dies suddenly, Mary discovers evidence that he was having an affair with a woman called Genevieve in Calais. She crosses the channel to confront the other woman but Genevieve mistakes her for a cleaner and invites her into her home, to help prepare for her imminent house move. Mary discovers that Genevieve has a teenage son, Solomon, and that Ahmed is his father. Genevieve and Solomon are unaware that Ahmed has died, and Mary hides her true identity. As she snoops, she discovers more information about Ahmed and Genevieve's affair, about Solomon's love life, and about his relationship with his dad. She even texts Solomon from her husband's phone to comfort him, and cooks for him when his mother is out. When Genevieve and Solomon argue, the boy spits in his mother's face and Mary slaps him. Genevieve asks her to leave. Mary goes to visit them in the new house and tell them the truth before returning to England. Genevieve and Solomon soon come to Dover to visit Ahmed's grave, which is next to the grave of Mary's son, who died as an infant. They look round Mary and Ahmed's home too, and it seems that they may be able to form a new family group.

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 woman's life. She's compellingly broken. In Scanlan's features we see grief and humiliation twisted into possessiveness, vengefulness and misplaced compassion, and 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 setup, but in the hands of writer-director Khan, *After Love* becomes something weightier. Not just bereaved but betrayed, Mary senses her world is crumbling - Khan literalises this with discrete 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 long-standing as those cliffs. Even scenes played out via SMS have their heft - in this film, technology is fragile but useful, in as much 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 somebody 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 servants in Armando Iannucci's political satire *The Thick of It* (2005-12) to ward sister in BBC4's geriatric ward-set *Getting On* (2009-12). In this film, as in, say, Deborah Hayward's *Pincushion* (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 longshot, 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 who she calls Ed. Khan and DP Alexander Dynan (who worked on Paul Schrader's similarly austere and grief-stricken *First Reformed*, 2017) subsequently 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 and made. The music swells to suggest a harmonious future at the film's end, but is swiftly replaced by the sound of waves crashing and girls squawking as the credits roll. Ahmed and his mysterious motivations are lost in the deep, while above ground to women look for a new kind of home.

Credits

Mary Hussain	Joanna Scanlan
Genevieve	Nathalie Richard
Solomon	Talid Ariss
Ahmed	Nasser Memarzia
Farzana	Sudha Bhuchar
Mina	Nisha Chadha
Saadia	Jabeen Butt
Salma	Subika Anwar-Khan
Farooq	Elijah Braik
Imran	Adam Karim
Anthony	David Hecter
Director	Aleem Khan
Writer	Aleem Khan
Director of Photography	Alexander Dynan
Editor	Gareth C. Scales
Music	Chris Roe

UK/USA 2020. 89 mins

Another view

An alum of this year's BAFTA Breakthrough shortlist, director Aleem Khan's debut feature about a Muslim convert's grief is a magnetic tour-de-force, with a remarkable central performance from BAFTA nominee Joanna Scanlan. Premiering at the BFI London Film Festival, it was selected as part of the Cannes Film Festival's Critics Week and has now found a nationwide cinema release in the UK.

Mary Hussain (Scanlan – *Notes On A Scandal*) converted to Islam to marry Ahmed (Memarzia), who works as a captain on a cross-channel ferry. Her world is thrown into disarray when her husband dies and she discovers that he was having a long-standing affair with a woman in Calais. Leaving her life in Dover behind, she arrives in France to surreptitiously meet Genevieve (Richard - *Cache*), only to be mistaken for the cleaning lady she was expecting to help her move house. Slowly infiltrating her husband's mistress' life, Mary strikes up a relationship with her son (Ariss), who is also the son of her late husband. But, of course, the truth of who she is can only be hidden for so long.

Joanna Scanlan is absolutely electric as Mary, a woman who has fully embraced and assimilated into a culture that was not her own. With her entire life revolving around this choice she made for the man she loved, the very fabric of her life is shaken upon the discovery of his betrayal, but she loved him so much that this uncovering of the secret half of his life is almost tinged with as much curiosity as it is hurt. Mary's mental state is portrayed through brief surreal sequences of cracks appearing in ceilings and the white cliffs of Dover collapsing, but the real weight of this comes from Scanlan's extraordinary face, with grief only half concealed behind her eyes.

Nathalie Richard also gives a tender performance as the "other woman", who claims to have no interest in the wife of her lover. While Talid Ariss, whose character's sexuality is a secret from his mother, is a youthful and fervent addition. Together, this dysfunctional triad slowly begin to learn the truth about the man they all had in common and to learn about each other.

This is a tremendously moving film about the complexity of love and grief. Though its title declares this story exists "after love", the implication that their love for Ahmed is over is decidedly not true. Drenched with as much raw emotion as dramatic tension, this is a lean film that manages narrative efficiency and swift pace without losing contemplative nuance too. That's incredible for a debut feature.

Aleem Khan is clearly a director to watch, whose hyper-realistic style is counterbalanced perfectly with psychological surrealism. But best of all is Scanlan, who is a revelation here. As she lies on the beach in Calais with waves washing over her face as she attempts to numb the pain of her loss and betrayal, we see an actress so embedded into her character that her reserved presence quietly dominates the frame. With all these brilliant elements woven together, *After Love* is poignant, melancholy and a stunningly successful film, which is likely to be the best British film you'll see this year.

Ben Turner: The Pink Lens

Our next screening

Friday November 25th, 7.30pm The Quiet Girl (Ireland 2021. Cert 12)

Colm Bairéad's impressive first feature is a beautifully understated story of Cáit, a 9 year old from a dysfunctional home who is sent to stay with a middle aged cousin and her husband while her mother has yet another baby. There, she finds what it's like to be truly loved. Anchored by a truly stunning performance by schoolgirl Catherine Clinch, *The Quiet Girl* is the highest grossing Irish-language film ever (over €1 million at the box office) and is Ireland's entry in the 2023 Oscars.

Our Spring Season

The committee has been debating the 4 films we'll be showing during the spring season and we're pleased to announce they are

- *Compartment No. 6* (Finland 2021. Cert 15)
- *Wild Men* (Denmark 2021 Cert 15)
- *Hit the Road* (Iran, 2021. Cert 12)
- *The Cordillera of Dreams* (Chile 2019 Cert 12a)

Screening dates are

- February 10
- February 24
- March 10
- March 24