



After love

Director: Aleem Khan

Country: UK

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A review by Mark Kermode for The Guardian:

The debut feature from English-Pakistani film-maker Aleem Khan is a tale of secrets and lies, a portrait of people caught between identities and cultures. At its heart is a constrained yet wonderfully expressive performance by the versatile Joanna Scanlan, best known to some for her comedic work in shows such as *Getting On* and *The Thick of It*, here offering a masterclass in the dramatic power of understatement.



Scanlan is Mary, a white, English Muslim who converted many years ago to marry Ahmed (Nasser Memarzia), with whom she lives near the Dover cliffs. Ahmed's work takes him back and forth across the Channel to Calais and Mary regularly stands on the cliffs, waving at his ship "like a mad woman". But when Ahmed dies suddenly, Mary discovers that the husband she thought she knew had another life in France, a life completely at odds with the home they built together in England, with all its triumphs and tragedies.

Cast adrift, Mary makes the voyage to Calais, the white cliffs crumbling in her mind's eye as she crosses the water into an unknown world. The more she discovers about Ahmed's newly discovered identity, the more she wonders about her own – how she got here and where she now belongs.

Khan, who earned plaudits for short films such as 2014's *Three Brothers*, has talked widely about how growing up Muslim and gay caused him to lead "two very separate personal lives for a long time". That sense of fracturing – of distinct personalities coexisting in secret – runs throughout *After Love*, the title of which seems to suggest both the aftermath of trauma and the afterglow of intimacy and affection. Indeed, over the course of the drama, in which the hesitant and often silent Mary meets gregarious, cosmopolitan Frenchwoman Geneviève (Nathalie Richard) and seemingly stropky Franco-Pakistani youth Solomon (Talid Ariss), we discover that everybody is leading a double life, showing different faces to different people.

Crucially, Mary herself is not exempt from such deception. A scene in which her hijab and somewhat servile demeanour cause her to be mistaken for a cleaning woman allows Khan to pull off an impressive dramatic sleight of hand, effectively investing Mary with the superpower of invisibility. Having accidentally inveigled her way into her husband's hidden existence, she starts to take control of her situation, even as the world around her breaks into pieces.

A bravura extended opening shot sets the tone for what is to come. The cinematographer Alexander Dynan, whose credits include Paul Schrader's *First Reformed*, frames a carefully composed image of domesticity, talk of tea and sag aloo playing out in a darkened kitchen foreground, the frame finally pushing in almost imperceptibly when something devastating happens (off screen) in the more illuminated distance of the living room. This slow movement is matched in the next scene where the near-catatonic Mary sits amid bustling mourners, setting up a series of mirrored images that will reverberate throughout the film. Whether it's the cracks of the cliffs reappearing as cracks in a ceiling, drowning waves echoed in bed sheets or Mary



looking at her own reflection in sharply contrasting scenes of defiance and destitution, *After Love* constantly foregrounds duality, narratively and stylistically.

English, French and Urdu are spoken, but it's notable just how much Scanlan says without words, her eyes telegraphing earth-shaking revelations even as her lips remain sealed. By contrast, Richard speaks and gestures freely, while Ariss does a remarkable job of capturing both the anger (in one shocking scene, he spits in his mother's face) and the anguish of a young man torn between his parents, his sexuality, his home.

An ambient seascape score by Chris Roe, which at times recalls the fluid strains of Nicholas Britell's music for *Moonlight*, adds another layer of tension, evoking the disparate shards of these characters' experiences, occasionally resolving into longed-for moments of warmth, tenderness and harmony.

Watch a trailer for *After Love*.

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