

Shamas' search for self in nadeem aslam's maps for lost lovers

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Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* explores the troubled, disadvantaged lives of Muslim, Pakistani immigrants who have settled in an English town that they have renamed Dasht-e-Tanhaii, or "The Wilderness of Solitude". The novel focuses on the lives of Kaukab, a devoutly Muslim woman, and Shamas, her more liberal and gentle, although imperfect, husband. Shamas' brother, Jugnu, and his lover, Chanda, have been murdered by Chanda's brothers in an enactment of Sharia law. Shamas himself has a unique religious background, as his father was Hindi before he became Muslim. Shamas sees the difficulties that issues such as arranged marriages, domestic abuse and internalized prejudices have caused in his community. For this reason, he greatly values his job as a social worker.

As a Communist, he believes that society must begin to operate by a structure that provides more equality, rights and opportunity to all. His multifaceted religious inheritance, his experiences as a Pakistani, and his chosen political affiliations lead him away from the extreme piety that so many in his Muslim community hold in utmost importance. As the director of the Community Relations Council and the Commission for Racial Equality, Shamas mediates between the Pakistani immigrants and the British. Because many of the immigrants cannot speak English, they "require Shamas's help and advice every day" (194). Shamas knows that the people living in this poor, rundown neighborhood do not deserve the circumstances of ignorance and isolation that they struggle through. Because of his "responsibility to his neighborhood" (15), he has "insisted on remaining in this neighborhood" (194), even though he has the means to move out to a better area.

He assists people with legal proceedings, such as his offer to help Suraya obtain custody of her son. Shamas also involves the police when the law has been broken, such as when he walks into the mosque and witnesses a junior cleric sexually abusing a young boy. Shamas even offers to Chanda's parents to help move their sons to another prison after one of them is brutally beaten by white inmates, even though the sons murdered his brother. This represents the value that Shamas places on his work over the hindrances that Islamic law has presented in his life. However, this same drive also causes Shamas to place more significance on his work life than his family life, which tragically complicates his relationship with his wife. During Mah-Jabin's childhood, Kaukab tried to persuade Shamas to give up his political ambitions and "godless ideas" (34).

Kaukab, apprehensive of anything that might endanger Mah-Jabin's chances of marriage, would consistently remind Shamas that he "must place [his daughter] before everybody else" (83). Years ago, Shamas thought of her as "the heroine of the story of his life" (57). However, talking to each other is now "for both of them, frequently another way of being alone" (159).

Ironically, Kaukab clings desperately to Islam, basing her entire life around her religion, whereas it has pushed away the people most dear to her - her children. However, she accuses Shamas of driving them away. She blames him for the emotional, mental and physical pain that Mah-Jabin suffered at the hands of Shamas' "beast nephew", even though Kaukab had greatly approved of this marriage and pressured Mah-Jabin into carrying through with it.

Kaukab fiercely declares that if Shamas had agreed to move to a “ better neighborhood” (337), their family’s prospects would have turned out more favorably. After Kaukab’s children join their parents for dinner, Kaukab berates Shamas for his interest in the town’s documentary photographs of immigrants over “ the one of [his] own family” (338). Kaukab cannot see past her concern for her family and their position in Muslim society.

Therefore, she does not understand the need for Shamas in this community, and she condemns the political philosophies in which he sees real potential and hope. Shamas’ complex religious heritage also causes conflict in his relationship with Kaukab. When a bomb went off near Shamas’ father during his childhood, he lost his memory, forgot that he was Hindi and joined a mosque.

Years later, by the time that he had raised a family, he began to remember aspects of his former life, such as his old name and his previous affiliation to Hinduism. This threw his family life into turmoil, shocking Kaukab especially. While Shamas’ father was dying, he asked to be cremated, which is a Hindi tradition. Kaukab sent Shamas to Pakistan to prevent this from happening, because ““ a scandal like that would do irreparable damage to [Mah-Jabin’s] chances!”” (83). Shamas further strays from Islam in his occasional indulgence of alcohol. He drinks whisky several times a month, and at one point, enjoys red wine with Jugnu and his former white girlfriend at dinner.

During this same dinner, when Kaukab hears Shamas say that he is “ still inclined to believe the scientists...unlike the prophets” (38), she must steady herself against a wall in shock. She laments that her parents married her to

an “ infidel” (60). Shamas also falls prey to his natural, sensual desires; he has an affair with beautiful and young Suraya. However, he will not marry Suraya, because one of the things he finds most “ repulsive about Islam is the idea of a man being allowed four wives” (231). This demonstrates not only Shamas’ “ irreverence for Islam” (192), as disgusted Kaukab calls it, but the value that Shamas does place on his family.

Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* explores the injustices and complications that plague the lives of Pakistani immigrants in the British town that they have rechristened “ Dasht-e-Tanhaii”. The community centers all aspects of their culture and customs, such as finding husbands and wives for their children, on Islam. The murder of the unmarried lovers Jugnu and Chanda, committed by Chanda’s brothers, reflects this. Jugnu and his brother-in-law, Shamas, have complicated religious backgrounds, in that they are not fully Muslim. Shamas works for the Community Relations Council and the Commission for Racial Equality, placing his job over the stipulations and restraints of Muslim culture.

The problems that he sees in his peoples’ lives lead him to favor Communism, a political ideology that completely discounts religion altogether. His multifaceted religious heritage, occupational affiliations and political views alienate him from his extremely religious wife, Kaukab, who is his only real tie to Islam. Shamas’ guilt over his affair with Suraya, and the ironic principle on which he refuses to marry her, reflect the ethical sense that he possesses. His logic and humanity lead him to develop a moral code

that extends beyond religion. Shamas' religious heritage, his experiences as a Pakistani and his chosen affiliations lead him away from Islam.

He takes a more secular path that allows him to focus his energy on what he finds to be more important in life.