

Religion and
character
development in
moving forward
sideways like a crab



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

According to the Dalai Lama, “ all religions try to benefit people, with the same basic message of the need for love and compassion, for justice and honesty, for contentment.” The need for love, compassion, justice, honesty, and most of all contentment is emphasized in Shani Mootoo’s *Moving Forward Sideways Like A Crab*, and characters with a variety of religious beliefs affirm this. Several different religions are mentioned in this novel including Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, but the significance of the characters’ religious beliefs seems to lie beneath the surface (Mootoo, 36). One scene I found particularly striking is the scene in which Pundit and Anta are discussing Sydney’s funeral arrangements with Johnathan, and Pundit asks Johnathan, “ He... didn’t bring you up as Hindu, eh?” (Mootoo, 246). Prior to reading this scene, I had not considered the significance of religious beliefs in character development, but as the novel concluded I found myself thinking more about the manifestation of Sydney’s Hindu upbringing in his character and the visible lack of spiritual development in Johnathan’s character. In this essay, I intend to examine the way religion shapes Sydney’s character and the way the lack thereof shapes Johnathan.

Sydney’s character is not overtly religious, but because Hinduism is frequently discussed after his death, the manifestation of his Hindu beliefs in his life become more obvious. When considering the significance of Sydney’s Hindu upbringing to his character, it is important to first consider the pillars of Hinduism. The four Purusārthas are the Hindu goals for human life: Dharma is morality, Artha is prosperity, Kama is fulfillment, and Moksha is liberation (Flood, 14-18). While some of these goals appear more important to Sydney, consciously or subconsciously, than others, all four of them

appear in the novel. First, Sydney's search for Dharma appears in his notebook, when he writes that " Johnathan himself... was at the heart of our tug-of-war, and soon I was no longer willing to put him through our struggle" (Mootoo, 5). Sydney's choice to leave Johnathan when he left India is questioned throughout the novel, but this anecdote reveals that although his abandonment was hurtful to Johnathan, it was not selfish--to put a child through a custody battle and attempt to take him away from his biological mother would have been detrimental. Although each character in the novel is flawed, this commentary on his choices serves as a confirmation of his search for morality. His search for Artha is obscured by more overt parts his story, but it is still present: when he moves to Toronto, he allows himself to struggle as an artist in an attempt to find professional and prosperity free of his parents (40-41).

While Sydney's search for financial freedom from his parents lays in the background of his story, his search for freedom from gender constraints is not. Sydney may not have been raised as a man, but he was, in fact, a man, and choice to live as a who he truly is can be considered his search for both Kama and Moksha. In order to be both content and liberated, Sydney must be able to live freely as a man, which is why he chooses to start living as a man after his parents have died. When discussing Sydney's life, Johnathan says that " If he wasn't telling me his tales about his high school friend Zain, who never left Trinidad, he would tell and retell the story of a walk he took one early and snowy morning from his apartment in Toronto's East End to a clinic in the downtown core" (Mootoo, 30). This " center," of course, is the Irene Samuel Health and Gender Centre, which is mentioned countless times

throughout the novel. This walk is so significant to Sydney because despite being an adult, it was when he felt his story truly began. Although he may not have been thinking of his Hindu beliefs as he took that walk, this was the part of his journey in which he was finally able to achieve the slightest amount of contentment and liberation. “Hinduism prescribes the eternal duties, such as honesty, refraining from injuring living beings, patience, forbearance, self-restraint, and compassion, among others” (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica). Although Sydney is not visibly a devout Hindu, his character confirms that his spirituality is unwavering. However, the same cannot be said about his son.

Like Sydney, Johnathan is a complicated character, but unlike Sydney, Johnathan’s questionable morals are never clarified. While Johnathan is not presented as unspiritual or emotionally unintelligent, he is quickly deemed unreligious by Pundit, the funeral director, when he notes that Johnathan was not raised Hindu (Mootoo, 246). He is, however, presented as being focused more on himself and the ways in which Sydney leaving impacted him than learning about Sydney’s life thereafter. As Sydney begins to discuss his transition with Johnathan, Johnathan angrily thinks to himself “All right; then tell me again if you must, but, for the love of God, please also tell me why you left our family” (32). Throughout the novel, his goal is not to find morality, prosperity, fulfillment, or liberation, but to find out why Sydney left him. Wondering this is not selfish in itself, but by focusing on finding answers rather than listening to Sydney’s story in his last days, he proves himself to be a selfish figure lacking guidance. Although Sydney struggled with his identity in a way that Johnathan did not, religion seems to be the clearest

difference between the two, and Johnathan seems blinded by his abandonment because he lacks a strongly-defined moral compass.

Although it is essential to examine the differences in the spirituality of father-figure and son in this essay, of further interest is the role of Islam in Zain's character development. While Sydney's Hinduism is most prominent in death, Zain's Islam is most prominent in her life, especially in her letters. It is possible that Sydney's Hinduism is covert but his spirituality blinding because Zain frequently discussed her opposing religion but similar spirituality in her letters during her lifetime. Despite practicing different religions, both Zain and Sydney's characters develop in a way that proves that " all religions try to benefit people, with the same basic message of the need for love and compassion, for justice and honesty, for contentment," while Johnathan's lack of religious beliefs and consequent lack of overt spirituality cause him to allow himself to wallow in self-pity and present himself as a selfish figure. Had the spiritual Zain and Sydney been his primary parental figures rather than India, his character would likely have developed very differently.

Works Cited

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