

## Kafan

Ishy Din

One of my father's last wishes was to be buried in Pakistan, the country of his birth. He had spent over 50 years in England, and yet he always considered Pakistan his home.

My mother, on the other hand, had a very different view of matters.

She was married at a young age, in an arranged marriage. Her own mother died when she was a child, eight or nine. Her father was a stringent character. A religious man, he had performed the Hajj pilgrimage at a time when it was unheard of in what was then rural India. He taught the Qur'an and led prayers at the village mosque. He could read and write when vast swathes of the population were illiterate, and he taught his children to do the same.

There is a saying in that part of the world: 'daughters are guests in your house'. One day they will marry and leave.

My mother was married young to a widower with a child, my half-brother. Her husband, my father, was illiterate. It was a tough life. She lost her firstborn. There was acute poverty, and a woman's lot was not a good one.

But things were about to change. Mangla Dam was under construction, and when it came time to flood the valley, displaced villagers were offered visas to come to England to help rebuild the country. My father took up the offer and arrived in the UK in 1962.

My mother and my elder siblings arrived in 1968. I was born in 1969.

Life was generally uneventful. In the late 1970s, my parents decided to go on Hajj. It was still a huge thing then, and we excitedly helped them pack. I was dispatched, alongside my older brother, to fetch my mother's old suitcase that sat on top of a wardrobe.

When she opened it, the only item inside was what I would describe as a white sheet. She treated this sheet with deference. She gently took it out and put it to one

side, packed her other items, and then returned the sheet to the suitcase. It was going to Mecca and Medina with her.

But why?

I asked and was told, "You're too young to understand."

Many years passed. The white sheet was exiled to the deepest recesses of my memory.

My father passed away. We buried him in Pakistan. Upon our return to England, my mother asked me to bring down her old suitcase from the loft. Miraculously, it had survived – almost certainly because it hadn't been used for decades.

When she opened it, there was the white sheet. The memory came flooding back.

This time, I wasn't too young to understand.

I asked what it was.

'It's my *kafan*,' she replied. Her burial shroud.

I was fascinated. Why had this woman kept such a visceral reminder of her own mortality for so long?

I found out that not long after she was married, she had a raging argument with my father and went back to her paternal village, children in tow. She was met with a frosty reception. 'Your life, and your children's lives, are not here now,' she was told. 'They are back where you came from.' A stark reminder that her life had moved on.

It was a different time, a different culture. Divorce was unheard of.

She returned to my father's village with the realisation that in this hard, hard world one needs to be self-sufficient, prepared, aware.

When she came to England, she brought her burial shroud with her.

She had taken the *kafan* with her on Hajj in order to wash it in zamzam – sacred water drawn from a well in Mecca, revered by Muslims for its purity, healing properties and spiritual significance.

Her religious learning had taught her that Muslim tradition dictates that, ideally, one should be buried where one dies. Speed is more important than location.

I get the sense that she had determined her journey was only forwards now.

Forward from the village of her birthplace to my father's village. Forward from Pakistan to England. Forward from this life to the next.

My father hankered for the past: the country he left, the village he left, the people he left. My mother, on the other hand, invested in the future.

And one of the ways she did this was to have her *kafan*, washed in zamzam, sitting in an old suitcase, on top of an old wardrobe, ready for her final journey.

## Ishy Din

Ishy Din is currently Associate Playwright at the Royal Court and under commission for new plays at The Kiln and the RSC. *Champion* opened at Live Theatre, Newcastle in February 2025. *Approaching Empty* opened at The Kiln in January 2019. In 2016, his play *Wipers*, a Leicester Curve/Watford Palace/Belgrade, Coventry co-production toured to those three theatres. In 2014, his monologue for Company TSU played in double bill *Beats North* at Edinburgh Fringe Fest. Ishy was the 2012 Pearson Writer

in Residence at the Manchester Royal Exchange, and in 2013, *Snookered* won 'Best New Play' at the Manchester.

A recording of this piece can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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