

Seeking Father Khaliq Synopsis

Kareem al-Busiri is a tenured professor of philosophy at a prestigious Egyptian university. A woman whose eyes alone are visible, invites him to meet a Princess Basheera. After doubt and discussion, he agrees. Princess Basheera asks al-Busiri to find Father Khaliq, who is apparently her very old father, and she suggest that he find him on the Hajj.

Kareem is a secular Sunni Muslim, a widower, with three children: Naqib, the oldest is a leftist lawyer and secret member of the Muslim Brotherhood; Wahida, like her late mother is a Copt, working for the Red Crescent; Kalifa, a handsome, principled conservative plans to be an army infantry officer. Adeeba is a winsome widowed Copt, Kareem's late wife's best friend, professor of archaeology, and an expert in ancient Coptic history, culture and language. Adeeba's younger adult daughter, Sagira, has a romantic interest in Kalifa.

On the Hajj, which Kareem undertakes with Hafez, a busy-body, agnostic colleague, there are near encounters with Father Khaliq. The religious fervour of two million pilgrims, and the mystery of the Hajj make an indelible impression on al-Busiri.

Princess Basheera encounters Kareem on several occasions, appearing unexpectedly, wearing casual clothing, but always a niqab, exposing only her eyes. She discusses his findings, she suggests new pilgrimages, and there is often an exchange of views on the ideas of important Arabic philosophers. Kareem wonders: *Is she real, or do I imagine her?*

On a trip to Medina, al-Busiri visits the Prophet's tomb and finds that, next to the Prophet is a vacant tomb reserved for the second coming of Jesus. He narrowly escapes a suicide bombing in the Date Market, and hears a woman crying out for Father Khaliq.

Persuaded to go on Arba'een, the pilgrimage of over twenty million to the Shia shrines in Karbala, Iraq, Kareem joins eleven Shia scholars from the University of Bagdad. He becomes caught up in the intensity of the emotion at the tomb of Ali, the Prophet's grandson and Shia icon. During the return to Bagdad, the professors are taken hostage by a violent ISIS cadre and held for ransom. Locked in an abandoned house in Ramadi, they are rescued by a Shia militia in a bloody shoot-out during which four of the Iraqi professors are killed.

On his return to Cairo, Kareem finds that Kalifa has been posted to north-eastern Sinai, where the army is engaged in almost daily skirmishes with *Wilayat Sinai* (the ISIS affiliate in Egypt). Wahida suspects that her older brother's law firm is providing material support to the terrorists. Kareem reports the law firm, anonymously, to Egyptian intelligence, and meets with his son in an attempt to moderate his increasingly strident views.

With Hafez, on a trip to Jerusalem, the great mosques on the Noble Sanctuary, the Western Wall, the Jewish Quarter, and a Druze settlement on the Golan Heights are visited. Again, there is the illusive Father Khaliq. Kareem walks the Via Dolorosa with a Christian guide.

Kalifa and Sagira are married in jubilant Coptic and Islamic ceremonies.

Adeeba takes Kareem on a trip to Rome where he is impressed with the splendour of Christian pageantry, music and art, and the two become lovers. She tells him she has found that 'Khaliq' is one of the lesser-known of Allah's ninety-nine names.

Kalifa is killed in an attack on his base with a rocket which *Wilayat Sinai* was not known to have. Wahida suspects that Naqib was involved in the supply chain. Kareem washes his son's body for burial; a grieving Naqib appears at the burial. Wahida finds damning circumstantial evidence, which she passes to an intelligence officer, of Naqib's involvement with the terrorists. Naqib, and his law firm partners, are arrested, tried in secret, sentenced to death, and hung. Again, Kareem washes the body of his son.

Kareem is grief-stricken, and visits his mosque for prayer. He hears a voice offering reassurance. Is it Allah? Adeeba, whom he has now married, suggests that he must seek a new identity in his remaining family and his profession. In a vacant classroom, Princess Basheera appears once again. She debates

with him the meaning and relevance of an idea of the philosopher Ibn Sina. Kareem understands her message; she disappears.