



## TASKS

- 1 Outline Akeel's memories of his trips to Pakistan. (30 %)
  
- 2 Analyse the means the author uses to convey Akeel's feelings towards Pakistan and London. (30 %)
  
- 3 Choose **one** of the following tasks:
  - 3.1 Explain what "home" means for Akeel and discuss whether his feelings are typical of those of second-generation immigrants. (40 %)

OR

- 3.2 Compare the reaction of Wasi's mother after her son's return with that of a character in literature or film who is confronted with his/her child's decision to lead a different life. Assess how the characters cope with differing attitudes and behaviour. (40 %)
- OR
- 3.3 During your gap year in London you write a speech for a project day against discrimination. In your speech comment on the importance of breaking free from stereotypes using Wasi and his personal development as a starting point. (40 %)

**Text: Excerpt from the novel***The Room of Lost Things*

By Stella Duffy

Note: *Akeel, a young British Muslim, who wants to buy Robert Sutton's dry-cleaning shop in London, has agreed to learn his new trade as Robert's apprentice-partner. The conversations with Robert make him think about different issues.*

[...] Akeel thinks back to all those flights to Pakistan, endurance tests, every one. A dozen or more trips as a child, fewer now he's married, Rubeina and work taking up his time. Less reason to visit, and the added disincentive of paying his own way, his parents no longer so eager to foot the bill, though just as keen he should keep going back home. Home. The house his parents still live in, the Stratford house they moved to when he was eight, Akeel believes that is home. The house he lives in with Rubeina, that's home. Now, halfway through the year, this shop is becoming home as well. The messy cavern of the railway arch where the real work happens, standing at the spot station tamping out stains under Robert's ever-critical eye - a gentle repetitive beating which reminds him of his grandmother beating out her washing on smooth rocks, a memory he thinks is probably half true, half Discovery Channel - all part of the unexpected comfort of being behind the counter, being on this side of the shop. As Robert says, the Englishman's home may be his castle, but the shopkeeper's counter is his moat. These places are home. Pakistan was a holiday destination for boys like him, cousins mocking his accent, aunties judging his clothes, uncles shaking their heads at his prayers, everyone over there so sure he was English, no matter how often he was called Paki here. At home in London there was family and school and mosque and friends, the order changing with the day of the week, or the moon, or the season, but an order that was known, planned for, welcomed or endured. In Pakistan, though, everything was mixed up, so many people wanting to know him, to tell him the old stories and new ones, pump him for return dates only days after he'd arrived. Akeel has heard white friends complain of familial excess on a visit to Uncle Arthur for Christmas, the relatives in Bradford or Basingstoke who demand blow-by-blow accounts of London life, and isn't it time to settle down, and aren't you putting on weight? Everyone's family with the same ability to get under the skin and drive the visitor crazy, but the journey back home takes a lot longer than a day trip to Basingstoke, and gives the traveller far more time to sit with his worries.

As a child, Akeel spent the trip to the airport nervously practising his vowel sounds and working out how not to get laughed at when he arrived, while Wasi, his cousin who usually travelled with them, was jumping up and down, craning his neck for the first view of the mini Concorde, Akeel's dad driving and cursing under his breath as the boys made him miss the exit to the car park yet again. Later, in their teens and travelling alone for the first time, Akeel's nervousness was edged with an extra tension - torn between feeling embarrassment when Wasi insisted they find somewhere to pray, almost never the quiet corner Akeel would have preferred, and yet also proud of his cousin who ignored the stares and simply got on with it. And once he was praying with Wasi, Akeel had to admit it did feel good, special for its very ordinariness. An exaggerated special because half the time Akeel didn't pray at home, not always, his father did, and Akeel was supposed to, but he missed one or two prayers most days, more as he grew older. Hardly any of the Muslim boys he knew at school made all five every day, just Wasi. Though Akeel also noticed how most of the boys who made a big deal of not praying at home often really liked to pray at the airport, carefully taking out a compass and rolling out the prayer rug some old uncle had forced on them, blessings offered up. Praying at the airport felt like a dare to the same guys who also drank beer on Saturday nights and kissed girls they had no intention of ever loving.

Wasi went on Hajj when they were eighteen, moved to Pakistan at twenty, terrified his mother and Akeel's parents with his long letters home about the evils of Western life and then, after a period of

- 40 silence in which everyone expounded their own theories about what he was doing - except for those who smiled quiet and knowing, more worrying for their silence - Wasi confounded them all by coming home, married to and already pregnant with a French girl who had no intention of converting from her own Catholicism. His mother cried for two days. Then she shrugged, thanked God for the safe return of her only child and started making clothes for the baby, a martyr to her knitting needles. Soon afterwards
- 45 Wasi declared his intention to go into politics, to show 'these people' that a young British Muslim could be religious and political and still not conform to any of their tabloid stereotypes. Akeel knew Wasi understood exactly what was meant by those stereotypes, he'd lived them long enough before coming home. [...]

(852 words)

Source: Duffy, Stella. *The Room of Lost Things*. London. Virago Press, 2008, 34, 135-137

### Annotations

#### Lines

3	to foot the bill	<i>here:</i> to pay for the trips
6	cavern	usually a dark hole in a mountain or ground, here: shop in one of the dark railway arches
7	to tamp out	<i>here:</i> to remove
9	Discovery Channel	American TV channel, providing documentary programming focused primarily on popular science, technology, and history
11	moat	deep and wide trench around a castle that is usually filled with water
17	to pump sb for sth	<i>informal:</i> to ask questions
18	familial excess	<i>here:</i> to get more attention/presents than you need/want
19	blow-by-blow	<i>informal:</i> very detailed
25	to crane one's neck	to stretch your neck out to try to see sth
27	to be edged with	to be increased by
38	Hajj	the pilgrimage to Mecca prescribed as a religious duty for Muslims
41	to confound	to confuse