

# DAY 6: Interview - 'Pari' star Melika Foroutan

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## *Pari*

Another one about missing family members... This time, an Iranian mother, Pari, heads to Athens to find her missing son. She is faced with a new and intimidating environment that will lead her discover what exactly happened to him. Siamak Etemadi's familial drama takes its cues from Greek tragedy, turning a mystery into a journey of emancipation and rebirth, without falling into stereotypes linked to clashes encountered by Muslims faced with Western turmoil. It's suspenseful, beautifully shot and utterly compelling, featuring a knock-out performance by Melika Foroutan.

Siamak Etemadi's first feature-length film **Pari** is one of our must-see picks from this year's Panorama section. The writer-director takes his cues from Greek tragedy and turns an engaging mystery into a journey of rebirth. It's suspenseful and multifaceted story that addresses familial love, migration and longing in a truly compelling way.

At the center of this beautifully shot drama is a stunning performance by German-Iranian actress Melika Foroutan, who plays the titular character. We sat down with her to talk about her character, the challenges of filming in Athens and the way Etemadi's film challenges stereotypes when it comes to representing Muslim women on screen.

### **Can you describe the film for our readers?**

It's the story of an Iranian couple travelling to Athens where their son studies. They haven't seen him in a long time. When they arrive, their son isn't waiting for them at the airport. In fact, he is nowhere to be found. *Pari* is a family story, a dramatic quest to find someone you love, but also a movie about Europe.

### **In what way?**

Greece is not just a country, it's the cradle of Europe, the cradle of democracy. My character has high expectations about this journey, but when she arrives in Athens there is disappointment. She sees poverty. She sees rage and riots. She has to deal with that sentiment of alienation, as well as the fact her son, who she loves, isn't there. There is a search, not only for the son, but for something else she might find there that she didn't expect. What we see through her eyes is a Europe in turmoil.

### **You're essentially in every single scene in *Pari*. How did you go about preparing for this challenging role?**

I had a coach, an Iranian actress who also works as a cultural coach. We lived together for seven weeks during the pre-production of the movie. We would get up in the morning, have Iranian breakfast, listen to Iranian music, dance, and talk strictly in Farsi. She also gave me lessons how to properly wear the chador, like somebody who has been wearing it for her entire life.

### **How did you negotiate the physicality of *Pari* whilst wearing the chador, which can restrict movements?**

It really requires practice. There are a lot of everyday movements you really have to get your head around if you are not used to wearing a chador. But once I figured this out, it somehow gave me a feeling of protection. The awkwardness just kicked in once we were shooting in the streets. I suddenly realized first-hand the hostile looks you get if you wear a chador publicly. It gave me a sense for how women must feel who have to deal with this kind of instant hostility every day.

### **When we meet *Pari* at the start of the film, she's conditioned in a way in her environment and traditions. But she goes through so many stages of change, to the extent she seems like a completely different person by the end of the film...**

There are so many things we use to define ourselves in this life. In the beginning of the story, for *Pari*, this is being a mother, a wife and the environment she lives in. But during the course of her quest, all these definitions get stripped away from her. Ultimately, it's a journey of self-discovery. What is identity, once that all these defining aspects fall apart? Who is *Pari* going to be at the end of this process? Some people who have seen the film consider the ending to be a sad one, while others say it's very liberating. What did you think?

### **I thought it was full of hope. Without going into spoilers, *Pari* goes through so much and it feels like a rebirth of sorts.**

Yes, she might find a different life. Will it be a better one? I don't know. She has a decent life. And yet, she longs for something else. In that regard, the character reminded me a lot of Madame Bovary. Flaubert's character also has this strong disparity between her expectations and the reality that surrounds her. And just like *Pari*, her struggle is very much an internal one of introspection and self-analysis.

**Pari does say at one point in the film about her son's life: "I always wanted to live this life".**

Yes, and she also says she didn't have the courage to live this life. Maybe she will find the courage now. Think of the famous lyrics by Janis Joplin: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." This is what I see in her: at the end she has nothing left to lose. She's free, but I don't know whether this kind of freedom gives her peace.

**You touched upon an aspect of the film I appreciated, which is the depiction of Muslim women. Was it important for you to play a character like this one, who defies the often-reductive image that Muslim women can have in films?**

Yes, it was very important to me. I really have a huge problem with the stereotyped depiction of the oppressed Muslim women, especially in many Western movies. I was grateful when I read Siamak's description of a strong, interesting, complex female Muslim character. Did you see Pari as being suppressed?

**No. For me, the character goes against the typical depiction we so often see that states that all women from Iran are oppressed.**

Right. In the beginning of the movie we see a woman wearing a chador. And there is this instant link in our heads - this woman is an oppressed woman! But as we get to know her better, we realize that our assumption was wrong. In Western countries, we are obsessed with the discussion about chadors, hijabs and burkas, for us these are the only symbols of oppression. Hence, who wears them cannot be free. I see a lot of very free women wearing a headscarf, and a lot of very suppressed women without one. There are more aspects to the term "freedom" than a piece of fabric. The feeling of security. Having a job. To be able to put food on the table for your family. To give your children the opportunity of an education. Sometimes I wish these aspects would be more important when discussing oppression and freedom in our society.

**There's a particularly memorable scene in the film where your chador catches on fire during a riot scene in the streets of Athens...**

For that scene I had to put on a suit which was covered in a soapy liquid that was fire resistant. It was freezing cold! The stunt man told us that I would be OK in that suit for two to three minutes max, and then it was important to get me out of it and get warm again. I have to admit - I was not particularly keen on setting myself on fire, but we all wanted it to look great! In the end we had to do it eight times. I wish I would have nailed that scene a little faster. (Laughs).

**The riot scenes are impressive to watch too. Were those sequences difficult to shoot?**

They shot some of the scenes in which we don't appear one-year prior during real riots in Athens, shot with hidden cameras. That was very dangerous. And then something else happened during our shoot as well. In the scene where we're coming into the son's room for the first time, there suddenly were so many tears in my eyes. I didn't know what was going on - and I told Siamak that maybe I was nervous. But he just laughed and said: "You don't know Athens! That's the tear gas coming from outside. We're used to this because it happens every weekend!" There's such a strong anarchist scene there. Kreuzberg is nothing against Exarcheia! (Laughs)

**You're well known in Germany for roles on TV and in series like KDD – Kriminaldauerdienst (KDD – Berlin Crime Squad). Do you prefer working in TV or feature length film projects?**

The best thing that can happen to an actress is to have work! Shooting this film was great, and sometimes having 16-hour days when everybody is so into it is exhilarating. But I also just finished a Netflix show. That was a completely different experience. But also very exciting.

**Can you tell us more about this upcoming Netflix show?**

It's a dystopian sci-fi show called Tribes Of Europa. I can't say too much, but it's coming out later this year.

**You've lived in Berlin for many years, and now *Pari* is in the Berlinale. That must be exciting...**

Yeah, it's so exciting to have a movie at this festival, in a city you know and love. It makes me very happy to know that it's going to be shown here.