

INTERVIEW WITH IRAM HAQ



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**DIRECTOR OF “WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY”
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES****OCTOBER 2019****BY TARA KARAJICA**

Iram Haq studied art direction at Westerdals School of Communication. She has worked for many years as an actor on stage and in feature and TV films. She wrote and starred in the short film “Old Faithful” that was selected for the Short Film Competition at the 2004 Venice Film Festival. Five years later came “Little Miss Eye-flap” that world premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and travelled to numerous film festivals and won several prizes. Her critically acclaimed debut feature, “I am Yours”, premiered at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival, successfully toured the festival circuit and was Norway’s entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 86th Academy Awards.

Tara Karajica talks to Iram Haq about her second feature, “What Will People Say”. The film premiered at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival to critical acclaim and film festival success, won several Amanda awards and was Norway’s entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 91st Academy Awards. “What Will People Say” is a semi-autobiographical story about honour and family, about a father-daughter relationship and about growing up between two opposite cultures.

THIS IS A PERSONAL STORY, PARTLY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL. WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO TELL IT? WHY WAS IT IMPORTANT TO TELL IT NOW?

Well, this is a story I have really wanted to tell for many years. As you know, it’s inspired by my own experience when I was young. I’ve always wanted to tell it, but I needed to be ready for it. It was so much to think about, for me to be mature enough to tell it in a way it did not become a black and white story, and to be emotionally ready to share it with the world. It took me a while before I was ready. Also, I was on a journey when I was writing this story. I was struggling with this story; I wrote it as an angry young woman and I was trying to find a way to tell it with a bigger perspective. I was not in touch with my father but, while I was writing, my father got cancer and only had a short time left. He apologised for what he did and we became closer. That really changed my script. I started to get to know him better and it was easier for me to give the father character in the movie something else than when I had started writing.



“What Will People Say”

WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES OF MAKING THIS FILM? OF WRITING IT? WAS IT THERAPEUTIC?

I think it was hard to write it because it was like opening Pandora’s box, to look at all the problems that I haven’t looked at since I was young. And also, of course, I wanted to try and develop it in a way it didn’t just become my story, but for it to become more a story of many women, and make it give a different perspective than the one we know on this kind of theme. So that was quite hard to work on.

HAVE YOUR PARENTS SEEN THE FILM? WHAT WAS THEIR REACTION?

First of all, my father died before I was finished but he really wanted me to make this film, because he thought it was important to tell this kind of story, as he knew he did wrong. My family have seen it and they are actually very proud. They could see what they did was wrong back then and I am very happy with their support. It was a big surprise for me that they actually supported me in this.

YOU DIDN’T WANT THE PROTAGONIST TO APPEAR AS JUST THE VICTIM AND YOU DIDN’T WANT THE PARENTS TO APPEAR AS JUST THE VILLAINS. DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE SUCCEEDED IN THAT?

Of course, the girl is the person who is mostly in pain, but you can also see her father in pain too. The whole family is in the same prison. They are so much into what other people think that they start to do things where they do not follow their gut feeling, but more out of what people want or what they think people want. So, I think it’s a story about not just Nisha’s story, but also one where the father is a victim of how these

communities work.

YOU CRAFT A STORY AND CHARACTERS WITH IMMENSE RELATABILITY AND YOU BRING A LAYERED FEMALE PERSPECTIVE TO THE COMING-OF-AGE GENRE. CAN YOU COMMENT ON THAT?

I wanted people to understand what a simple sentence like “What will people say?” can do to people, how it is a poison and stops people daring to follow their dream or gut feeling, prioritising what others would like from them.

HOW DID YOU DEVELOP NISHA? HOW MUCH OF YOU IS THERE IN HER?

There is a lot of me in her, but there is also a lot of my wonderful actress – Maria Mozhdah – who did a brilliant job in terms of acting.

HAS MOTHERHOOD BROUGHT IN ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE TO THE STORY WHEN YOU WERE WRITING IT?

Yes, definitely. I’m a parent, but I’ve also been a daughter and I’ve been young. I use my own experience as a mother, but also to see what a mother should not be like.

HAVING A FOOT IN BOTH CULTURES GIVES YOU A UNIQUE INSIGHT, BUT HAS YOUR SENSE OF IDENTITY, OF BELONGING, BEEN CHALLENGED IN TRYING TO RECONCILE THE TWO CULTURES? IT’S ALSO SOMETHING YOU EXPLORE IN YOUR FIRST FEATURE, “I AM YOURS”.

Yes. When I grew up, it was really tough being between two cultures and I had several identity crises. It’s something that is important for me and something I try to explore while I am writing and developing some of my stories.



“What Will People Say”



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CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE SHOOTING PROCESS?

It’s been amazing; it’s been a journey to make the film. We shot in several countries. It has been very, very interesting to work with several teams from different countries and different cultures, and this gave the story even more layers.

THIS IS SOMETHING THAT IS NOT HAPPENING ONLY IN NORWAY, BUT IN A LOT OF OTHER PLACES WHERE HOME BECOMES A PRISON. DO YOU THINK YOUR FILM WILL HELP SHED LIGHT ON IT? DO YOU FEEL THAT PARENTS AND CHILDREN SHOULD SEE THE FILM TOGETHER PRECISELY BECAUSE OF THAT? WHAT IMPACT DO YOU THINK THE FILM HAS HAD?

Yes, definitely, and, unfortunately, there have been a lot of girls who contacted me when they watched the film and could relate to it. I know that in Norway there have been many parents and children – especially mothers and daughters – who watched the film together, so I hope that it had some kind of impact, that



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it made people start to talk and think a little bit more about how they should set their children free.

“WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY” – CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THAT PHRASE? IS IT ONE THAT IS UTTERED IN ORDER TO CONTROL GIRLS? DO YOU CARE ABOUT WHAT PEOPLE SAY?

I think that it is a sentence that is very much used in South Asian cultures – I grew up with it all the time. I think it’s also said in many other cultures and it’s very much a phrase that makes you try to control other people; it’s a manipulative phrase. I am very aware of it, actually. I think I’m trying my very best to not care what other people think.

THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF TALK ABOUT WOMEN IN FILM IN THE PAST TWO YEARS. WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON THE MATTER? HOW IS IT IN NORWAY?

It’s a big discussion. We are still working on it and fighting for equality. I think it’s so important to be aware of it and we need to have gender equality in the film industry, and everywhere.

“The opinions expressed in this interview are those of the director concerned and in no way reflect the official position of the Council of Europe or the Eurimages Film Fund.”