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Interview With Atiq Rahimi Returning to the Source: 'The Woman' as Cultural Epicenter

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, August 7th, 2013

Golshifteh Farahani as the Woman and Hamidreza Javdan as the Man in The Patience Stone / Photo by Benoît Peverelli, Courtesy Sony Pictures Classics

Atiq Rahimi was awarded France's most-prestigious literary prize, the Goncourt Prize, for his novel *Syngué Sabour* in 2008. The film adaptation of his novel, *The Patience Stone*, which Rahimi directed and co-authored with screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière, was Afghanistan's official entry for the Best Foreign Language Oscar this past year.

The Patience Stone tells the story of a young woman who struggles to survive while caring for her injured husband, a Jihadist soldier who has fallen into a comma as a result of a bullet wound to his neck. Abandoned by family, all of whom have fled the village under siege, the woman keeps vigil with her husband, praying for his recovery and confiding to him all the secrets that she has heretofore held hidden deep within her heart. He becomes her syngué sabour, or patience stone: a type of magical confessor as seen in Persian mythology.

Rahimi was born in Kabul and fled Afghanistan in 1984, eventually landing France, where he resides in Paris today. Like Rahimi, Golshifteh Farahani – beloved Persian actress of film, television, and theatre, and persona non grata in her native homeland Iran – also makes her present day home in Paris. Farahani delivers a *tour de force* performance as the Woman in *The Patience Stone*.

During the San Francisco International Film Festival, I had the opportunity to chat with Rahimi about his film, his life as a filmmaker and a writer, and his insights regarding the situation in Afghanistan.

Sophia Stein: Your screenplay is based on your best-selling, award-winning novel. What was the inspiration for the story?

Atiq Rahimi: In 2005, I was invited to a literary meeting in Herat, an Afghan city on the border of Iran. Just as I was getting ready to depart [from my home in Paris], I received a telephone call telling me that the meeting was cancelled on account of the assassination of Nadia Anjuman, a poetess who was one of the organizers. "Was it the Islamists who assassinated her?" I asked. "No, no, no, it was a family matter." It was her husband, an enlightened man and a lecturer at the University, who apparently had killed her. *Why her husband?* I wondered. Some weeks later, I left for Afghanistan to meet the family of the poetess, but the family refused to see me. They did not want to be questioned about the matter. Nadia's husband, who was in prison, had attempted suicide, injecting himself with kerosene from the heater in his jail cell. He was in a coma. I could not speak with him. I saw him only from afar, lying in his sick bed. In that moment, I thought, if I

were a woman, I would stay close to this man in the coma and just talk to him; tell him all that a woman has in her heart. Voilà. That is the situation that inspired me. The story *The Patience Stone* has nothing to do with the life of this poetess, per say. The story is purely from my imagination. I wrote the novel in French in 2008. It became a best-seller and was translated into over forty languages, which prompted a producer to approach me about making it into a film. I hesitated at first, because I needed some distance from the story to consider how to adapt it. I needed to think about how the film adaptation would necessarily be different from the book. Almost all of the action takes place in one room; the woman talks and talks and talks. I needed to find a cinematic language for the retelling of the story on film. It was screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), who pointed out to me how *The Patience Stone* is such a cinematographic story, with a solid dramatic crisis. He wrote the first draft of the screenplay, which I then reworked, and that became the film. I made the film to give another life to this 'Woman' with whom I fell in love. It's true, I am in love with my character. I wanted to give her a second chance in life, and also a handsome man. A book can leave many things to the imagination of the reader, but in the cinema, one cannot. Contrary to what one would think, the cinema is more political than literature. In the end, I could not leave the viewer in ambiguity. I wanted to imagine that this woman will leave her life to begin anew, elsewhere.

S2: There is this Persian myth of the "syngué sabour" – the magic stone – that you reference in your title. In what context did you first hear this myth?

AR: I always knew this story growing up; there were even songs about the patience stone. The story of an imaginary, magic stone gets told all over – in Afghanistan, Iran, Tajikistan. As soon as one finds the stone and sets it down, one begins to speak to it, and the stone listens and absorbs everything. One beautiful day, the stone bursts, and on that day, one is delivered. Everywhere in the world, there is a tale of such a stone. In all the religions and civilizations one tells their secrets to the stone, buries it in the earth, and the earth guards these secrets.

Golshifteh Farahani as the Woman in The Patience Stone / Photo courtesy Sony Pictures Classics

S2: You are both a novelist and a filmmaker. As a creator, which process do you prefer?

AR: For me, literature and cinema are two different forms of writing. I write in order to make films. I make films in order to be able to write. In the writing, I am looking for words to express my feelings, my emotions. In film, I am looking for feelings and emotions to match the meter of my words. When one makes a film, one becomes a spoiled child – one shouts, there are a hundred people at your disposition, buh-buh-buh-buh… And then, in writing, you are condemned to be alone. It's solitude. And there, your ego really takes a very good beating. You write word after word and cry, and there is no one there to share your doubts, your incertitude. You are there, you are nothing in front of the words, there is nothing. You must be very humble in literature. If not, you cannot write. By contrast, in cinema, it is necessary to be arrogant, to be extremely narcissistic, extremely selfish. I am a filmmaker by training. I began with the cinema — with documentary films, commercials, and industrial films. I came to writing very late, in 1996. It was the year when the Taliban had taken power in Afghanistan. It's the year where I had a child, a girl. It was the year when I obtained my French citizenship. But the event that was the most important, was the death of my brother. I am part of a very unique family: my father was a monarchist, my brother was a communist, and my mother and sister were mystics, so I had no other choice than to be an anarchist. I created a lot of distance from the family, so I could make my own life. I left Afghanistan clandestinely, in 1984, just like that. After walking nine days and nine nights, I

crossed the border into Pakistan, and then continued on to France. In 1992, my brother was killed by Islamists. However, it was not until two years later, that I learned of his death from my father. I was in France, in exile, and I could not mourn my brother's death. I questioned, "Why, why had my father and my mother not told me about his death earlier?" From this was born my first book, *Earth and Ashes* (*Terre et cendres*), which came out in France in 2000. It was an immediate success, the result of which producers asked me to direct a film version.

S2: How did you get into the mindset of your female protagonist at the heart of your story?

AR: How was it that Dostoyevsky was able to put himself in the head of Raskolnikov, in order to kill? He had never killed, how did he do it? It is not me who enters in the head of that woman; it is rather that woman who enters into my head. For me, the writer is like that patience stone. He travels, he meets, he listens, he observes, he collects – everything, everything, everything. A good day breaks; he writes, and on that day, he creates literature. How to arrive at that day? It's a mystery. It's fortunate that it remains a mystery.

S2: You have observed that in Europe and the United States, the question is: "To be or not to be?" But in Afghanistan, with a dictator, the question becomes: "To say or not to say?"

AR: For century upon century – be it from politics, religion, or family tradition – in Afghanistan, one has not had the liberty to say everything one wished to say. Each word could cost your life. Speech became something existential in our homeland. At the point where the dictators, or the religion, makes it forbidden to say certain things, the word has a existential value. It's complicated, living a life between what one thinks on the inside and says on the outside. One's internal and external lives take on completely different meanings.

Golshifteh Farahani as the Woman in The Patience Stone / Photo by Benoît Peverelli, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

S2: This film takes on material that is threatening to the Taliban and possibly the Muslim world. Do you feel as though that puts you at risk?

AR: If I considered the risks, I wouldn't write. Writing literature, in and of itself, is a risk. Forgetting, we must jump, saying things as though we were born in any other place. What is the difference between me and the others? At a given time, it is necessary to challenge taboos, to break the silence. This is the very reason why one writes, precisely to say things that matter.

S2: You've said, "Change doesn't come through guns, it comes through culture, and women change the culture." What is the basis for your conviction?

AR: This makes how many centuries that men have governed the world? One sees war and violence, and I ask myself, how does this come to pass. What would happen if we turned things over to women? I cannot say, yes or no, that things would be better; the women might one day make things even worse then the men.

S2: We shall see. [Laughing.]

AR: We shall see. [Laughing.] No, it's not a question of this. To condemn women to the margins, this creates a society where half the society is paralyzed. I cannot say all the men are wicked, and all the women are victims. For me, the two are necessary and complimentary beings on this earth. If I show women as agents of progress for now – it's because I love them, for starters, very simply. Islam denies the importance of women. In the Muslim religion, despite claims to the contrary, there is no equitable treatment. I do not believe the hypocrisy. Even in the Koran, women do not have

their rightful place. The most important figure for me is Khadija, the first wife of Muhammad. She was a wealthy merchant, free, economically autonomous – in this epoch, imagine! Older than Muhammad, she took him for her husband. It was Khadija who taught Muhammad that he was a prophet. Why don't they speak about her? I didn't invent this. It's not a provocation. Return to the source of your religion, I tell you.

S2: You have compared the burqa to the experience of being alive in jail for a woman. How do you believe that progress will be possible?

AR: In the film, 'The Woman' exists in a small room, surrounded completely by the blue walls. Like the veil of Afghan women, the room is a sort of prison. For me that room represents the interior of 'The Woman.' 'The Man' who is asleep, who is paralyzed, metaphorically represents the power of the phallocratic system of the religion and the society. Yet even in Afghanistan, it is not only the men who hold responsibility for the plight of women. I return to the story of that Afghan poetess who was assassinated by her husband. I heard that this man was driven to kill her by her own mother. It's not a question, if you will; only of the phallocratic system oppressing women. Women have internalized that oppression. If there will be a change, it will be because Afghan women annihilate that that phallocratic figure from within themselves.

Golshifteh Farahani as the Woman and Hamidreza Javdan as the Man in The Patience Stone / Photo Courtesy Sony Pictures Classics

S2: Where has the film screened to date?

AR: The Oscar nominating committee presented *The Patience Stone* at the cinematheque in Kabul last year, and it has circulated on DVD and on the internet throughout Afghanistan and Iran. Golshifteh Farahani, who plays 'The Woman' won the prize for Best Actress at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival. (Women there had to organize a screening for women only, that not even I could attend.) It also screened in Tajikistan (Grand Prize Winner) and Turkey, and for the European community at the Price of Human Rights Conference. Ironically, it has not yet played in Morocco. All the interior scenes were filmed in Casa Blanca. We chose Morocco for two principal reasons: firstly, we shot with an Arri Alexa digital camera, which requires a large technical crew, and I did not have the budget to fly all those technicians over to Afghanistan. Secondly, there was the question of security. To stay two or three months to shoot a film in Afghanistan would have been a risky, particularly given that this was an adaptation of a rather controversial book. The exterior scenes, the childhood of the woman, and the quail fight were all shot in Afghanistan over two weeks; everything had to be scheduled very tightly. I could not say that I was going to film a part of my narrative feature in Afghanistan; rather, I claimed that I was making a documentary about quail fights.

S2: The cinematography is exquisite. How did you work with your cinematographer? What parameters did you discuss in preparation?

AR: I was so lucky to have the chance to work with Thierry Arbogast, one of the five best cinematographers in the world. He shared my sensibility for the look of the film. I showed him, many references to paintings that had inspired me. 'The Man' lying down, elongated as he is, references *The Lamentation of Christ* by Mantegna. The interior scenes were inspired by de La Tour and Goya; the neighbors who have been killed clinging to their guns, that's a reconstruction of a tableau by Goya. I adore the great Yugoslavian filmmaker, Danis Tanovi, who commented that *The Patience Stone* is "fifty percent good story, fifty percent beautiful images, fifty percent talented actors, fifty percent outstanding production design, fifty percent wonderful music, fifty percent good editing." For me, everything is important in a film.

S2: At age 16, you had your first experience in exile. You traveled to India, and also you spent some time traveling alone. How did that journey change you?
AR: The first question that I asked myself was: *if I had been born in India, who would I be then?* One is born – by accident, by fate – in a particular place, about which one has no choice. However, I am able to change my religion, I am able to change my society – those choices are within my power, my personal liberty. Why must I belong to my family? Why must I belong to my society? Why must I belong to a single religion? For me, that awareness was a revelation, and *voilà*, I became that which I am. One thing that struck me profoundly: the Indians whom I met said, "that which a man thinks, that is what he becomes." I believe that.

Golshifteh Farahani as the Woman in The Patience Stone / Photo courtesy Sony Pictures Classics

S2: Do you feel more at home in France or in Afghanistan, now?

AR: Now, I am based in France. When I go to Afghanistan, it's to work or to help people, if I can. It's true that I don't have many friends any longer in Afghanistan. Since 2008, what with the book and the film, I travel all over. Yes, today, I am a vagabond. I am a citizen of the world.
S2: More and more, for all of us.

AR: Yes, I don't know. I don't know a paradise lost…
S2: Regarding the war in Afghanistan, you observe that it's a war between humanity and international fundamentalists.
AR: The war in Afghanistan cannot be defined as the war against the Afghans. All the Afghans are not Taliban, and all the Taliban are not Afghans. It's a war against massive international terrorism, based on the frontier of Pakistan, created in 1984 by the Saudi rebels, the Saudi Arabian Taliban, who came in seized power, and paved the way for the Afghan resistance when they imposed their law. The war is the war of humanity against obscurantism. Simultaneously, the Afghans have another ongoing internal conflict, and that's another story.
S2: What can we look forward to as your next project?

AR: I have two books in the works and three films: there is an adaptation of a novel by Rabindranath Tagore, that's called *Kabuiliwala*, which takes place in India; I have a film project with Carole Bouquet, a French actress, that takes place between Paris and Calcutta; and a third film project, a rather large and crazy one, that concerns the death of Alexander the Great. Voilà!
Note: This interview was originally conducted in French and was subsequently translated into English by the interviewer. The film is in Farsi with English subtitles.
"The Patience Stone" opens August 14, 2013 in NY and LA. More details here.

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