

Elaha [15]

2023 Germany 110 mins

UK released	26 April 2024
Director	Milena Aboyan
Screenplay	Milena Aboyan
Cinematography	Christopher Behrmann
Music	Kilian Oser
Cast	Bayan Layla (Elaha); Hadnet Tesfai (Stella Zahaye); Derya Durmaz (Elaha's mother); Armin Wahedi Yeganeh (Nasim); Cansu Leyan (Berivan); Beritan Balci (Dilan)

"At a certain point in my life, other people controlled me and I didn't have the courage to defend myself, it almost broke me, until I asked myself the right question: are you the woman you want to be?" Following the journey of a young German woman of 22 caught between her own modern ways and the traditions of her family of Iraqi Kurdish descent, Elaha is the well-realised debut feature from Milena Aboyan, unveiled at the Berlinale (in the Perspektive Deutsches Kino section) and screened at the 24th Arras Film Festival in the European Discoveries programme.

"The damage done to the herd is an embarrassment for the shepherd." Elaha (Bayan Layla) knows the key texts and sayings that rule daily life in her very tight community, where everyone lives in the same neighbourhood, knows and supports one another, but where protecting one's honour and avoiding shame are cardinal values, and secrets very difficult to keep. A young woman completely of her time, who works part-time at a dry cleaner's (owned by her future sister-in-law) and attends an access course she hopes will allow her to sit for the Baccaalaureate, Elaha loves to have fun with her friends Berivan (Cansu Leyan) and Dilan (Beritan Balci). But even if the beautiful and lively young woman doesn't

always agree with all the rules, she respects and appreciates Kurdish traditions and is very happy in her family, where her mother (Derya Durmaz) occupies a prominent place. All minds are on Elaha's wedding with Nasim (Armin Wahedi), set for nine weeks from now. All minds, but especially Elaha's, who has a big problem she must solve: she is no longer a virgin. She therefore embarks on a secret and increasingly desperate quest, looking for a way to reconstitute her hymen. A search that will make her face more and more existential questions...

Carried by a charismatic lead actress and succeeding in giving a true identity to all its supporting characters, this debut feature is full of qualities in the intelligent way it tackles its subject without falling into completely black-and-white thinking (or going for a caricature of the young woman trapped into obscurantist traditions). On the contrary, the filmmaker (who also wrote the script) works with nuance and respects Kurdish customs, which only strengthens her message, developed through many well-paced and diverse sequences across a surprising plot. Not everything about it is perfect, but Elaha, beyond being a breathtaking and very moving film, clearly shows that Milena Aboyan is a director to watch closely.

Fabien Lemercier, *Cineuropa*, 9 November 2023

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