

# Die Fremde

(When We Leave) A film by Feo Aladag

Winner of the European Parliament Film Prize – LUX Prize 2010

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# 1 FILM

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For the first time ever, one film subtitled or adapted in the 23 official languages of the European Union (EU) screened in all 27 EU countries at the same time (May 2011).

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## Foreword

Europe's cultural landscape is highly fragmented. As dynamic as they may be, European sculptures, paintings, music, poetry, dance and literature are difficult to export outside their place of production. Only a few artists and works make it abroad and find an audience outside their place of origin.

Europe's film industry is no exception to this rule. It does admittedly draw its strength and richness from the broad spectrum of European cultures and languages. But this diversity is also a disadvantage in that a film's original language is a barrier to its distribution in a multilingual market.

Therein lies the whole problem of distribution in Europe, i.e. how to overcome the language obstacle in order to make a film accessible to its audience.

To address this problem, the LUX Prize awarded by the European Parliament covers the cost of subtitling the winning film in at least the 23 EU official languages, including an adaptation of the original version for visually- and hearing-impaired people and supplying one digital or conventional copy in each of the EU Member States.

Feo Aladag's first full-length film, *When We Leave*, which won the LUX Prize 2010, is being shown in

**Isabelle Durant**  
Vice-President  
of the European Parliament

**Stavros Lambrinidis**  
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of the European Parliament

**Doris Pack**  
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**EUROPA CINEMAS**  
MEDIA PROGRAMME OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

**LUX**  
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### How the action unfolds: the shift from love to hate

From the moment of Umay's return to her family in Berlin through to her brothers' attempt on her life at the end of the film, what we see is a tragic unravelling of family ties. When Umay and her son, Cem, first arrive they are greeted by the Aslan family in a happy, loving way. Yet very quickly the family's joy is clouded by anxiety. When Umay declares that she will not return to her husband in Turkey, the family want to believe she is just being stubborn and can be brought round to their way of thinking. But Umay's decision is final and she rejects first the advice and then the orders of her parents. After an attempt is made to kidnap Cem and return him to his father, Umay flees and the family disown her. Then finally, when she has managed to achieve the independent existence she wanted, and is hoping to start a family with a new partner, her father and brothers actually try to kill her. This dramatic transition is accomplished in subtle steps. The clash between Umay and her family is played out alongside another conflict – between family love and personal conviction. At some point or other in the film every member of the Aslan family is torn between, on the one hand, love for Umay and Cem and, on the other, the impossibility of compromise with the young woman's position. Umay's father seesaws between feelings of love and tenderness for his daughter and the urge to punish and reject her, trying, at rare moments of equilibrium between these two knee-jerk reactions, to engage in 'sensible' discussion and reconciliation with her. We see him tucking Umay up in bed, laughing with her at something on television, watching her from the window, stopping the attempt to kidnap Cem, and asking his daughter's forgiveness ... but we also see him hitting and insulting her, planning and participating in the kidnap attempt, banishing Umay from the family home and giving the order to kill her. While the father embodies this emotional schizo-

phrenia particularly clearly, it is felt by all the members of Umay's family: even Mehmet, the toughest among them, weeps after the family council where the decision is taken to kill her. Acar, the younger brother, is equally at sea, caught between love for his sister and pressure from family and community. In the scenes on Umay's return to Berlin and the later interaction between her and Acar we see that his relationship with her is especially close. When Acar is given the task of killing his sister, however, he does not refuse it – even though at the last minute he cannot go through with it. The character of Umay's sister, Rana, is more black and white. Caught up in her own young love affair, she is glad to see her older sister again and to confide in her, but her attitude cools after Umay's warning about a relationship that has not had time to mature, and especially so after her own marriage is jeopardised by Umay's desire for independence. The position of Umay's mother is probably the most difficult and she, more than anyone else, although less overtly, is a person torn in two. She is torn between tenderness and empathy on the one hand (hugging her daughter when she sees the marks of blows on her body, giving her a protective talisman, worrying when Umay leaves the house) and disapproval and anger on the other (she tries to make Umay change her mind, she loses her temper and accuses her daughter of shaming the family, and she is also present during the attempted kidnapping of Cem). As a mother, she clearly suffers for her daughter but if, as a woman, she were to accept her daughter's position, then the sacrifices she herself has been forced to make would become meaningless.

### The feminist dimension

By claiming her right to take charge of all aspects of her own independent life, Umay calls implicitly for equal rights for women and men. In theory and in law, such equality already exists, but in practice it is illusory. So in Umay's desire to free herself, and

in the evident solidarity between female characters in the film, we see Feo Aladag making a clear feminist case. She conveys the assumption of male superiority through conversations between the male characters and implicitly, through the importance attached to Umay's son.

### A patriarchal environment

Although the family reaction on Umay's return to Germany is to welcome her in a happy, loving way, her decision not to go back to her husband soon turns their joy to anxiety and then to anger – because a woman is not allowed the freedom to choose her own destiny. It is an unstated prohibition: in an exchange between Umay and her father, for example, Umay reminds her father that he always admired Uncle Bekir, who 'chose his own path in life', but her father refuses to admit the comparison. When Umay asks why, he can only answer 'because that's the way it is' – and the subject is closed. While the father never verbalises his belief that men are free and women must bend to their authority, the reality of male domination is obvious. It is frequently underscored elsewhere in the film. Umay is advised, and then instructed, that her place is by her husband's side and that she cannot take her son away from his father. Her own father, in the face of his daughter's determination, says he wishes she had been born a boy. By contrast, the male members of the family follow their own rules. The father hits Acar for his failure to act 'like a man'; the men go to the mosque together and get together to take important decisions. When he cannot see his way out of the situation, Umay's father seeks the advice of an older man. The role of Cem, Umay's son, is another clear indicator: the story would almost surely have unfolded differently had he been a girl. While it may be wrong to attach too much significance to details like the attention the boy receives from his grandfather and Uncle Mehmet, who play with him, or the fact that they take him with them to the mosque (in a sort

of official introduction to the company of men), it is very likely that the issue of returning the child to his father would not have carried the same weight had Cem been a girl. The family reproach Umay for having taken her son away from his other parent, but they clearly have no scruples about according his father the right to do just that, for the grandparents actually get involved in the kidnap attempt.

### Solidarity among women

The women in this patriarchal world have their own network. Of the members of her husband's family it is her sister-in-law with whom Umay shares the secret of her abortion, and who helps her by looking after Cem while this is carried out. Back home in Berlin, Umay's mother and her sister Rana are the first ones she tells of her decision not to return to her husband; only later does her father learn that she has come home for good. At the women's shelter where she takes refuge, Umay is welcomed by Carmen, a woman with whom she later exchanges a look charged with meaning: empathy on Carmen's part, gratitude on Umay's. Later, it is her female friend Atife who takes her in. The female character who most strongly illustrates this solidarity, however, is Gül, boss of the catering company where Umay is taken on. She actually intercedes with Umay's parents on the young woman's behalf – putting forward arguments that are brave and fundamentally feminist. She begins by challenging the father's claim that Umay wants to have nothing more to do with her family. She then asks him, as the role model for his sons, to set an example, adding that he should care for all his children and suggesting that he now risks losing a son as well as a daughter. In this way, she subtly highlights the father's function while suggesting that he may be making a mistake. She displays both courage, by taking on this paterfamilias, and a sense of diplomacy, by stressing that his example will be followed. Ultimately, when the attempt at dialogue has broken down and Gül is about

# When We Leave (Die Fremde)

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A film by **Feo Aladag**

Germany, 2010, running time 119 minutes  
With Sibel Kekilli (Umay), Nizam Schiller (Cem), Derya Alabora (Umay's mother), Settar Tanriogen (Umay's father), Serhad Can (Acar), Tamer Yigit (Mehmet), Almila Bagriacki (Rana)

## Introduction

The theme that writer, producer and director Feo Aladag tackles in *When We Leave* is universal: the clash between an individual's desire for self-fulfilment and the pressures of family and society. The film portrays a young Turkish woman, Umay, choosing to lead an independent life in a cultural context where women have traditionally had to submit to male authority in the form of husbands, fathers or brothers. By moving the story between Germany (where Umay grew up and to which she returns to live with her family) and Turkey (the country of her marriage, where she lived with her in-laws), Aladag places the theme in the context of inter-cultural adjustment in Europe. This brochure offers some background and ideas for viewing the film from different perspectives. It includes:

- **background** on the reality of so-called honour crimes;
- **an analysis of the plot**, focusing on (1) **the clash between Umay's desire for independence** and the **tradition upheld by her family**;
- (2) **how the action unfolds** in dramatic terms;
- (3) **the feminist dimension**;
- **analysis of some directorial devices** used in *When We Leave*.

Textboxes offer a closer exploration of ideas and issues raised by specific scenes in the film, and ask a number of questions that invite debate about it.

## Background

### Honour crimes: bringing a real-life issue to the screen

Feo Aladag first began to research the subject of violence against women at the invitation of Amnesty International and for the purpose of producing two short awareness-raising films. After these films were released, Aladag's interest in the subject continued. She felt that more questions needed to be answered about what the media regularly labelled 'honour crimes', and she decided to explore the issue in greater depth. The first step was a lengthy process of research. The director talked, in particular, to victims of these crimes, and then drew on her findings to write the screenplay for a feature film. So, while the story in *When We Leave* is fictional, the violence against women – especially in the form of 'honour crimes' – which inspired it is a very real phenomenon.

As a rule, honour crimes are acts of violence committed against women or girls by relatives who consider that the victims have 'shamed' the family. While the notion of 'shame' is highly imprecise and subjective, the practical aim of the crimes is to punish immoral behaviour, real or suspected. In its most extreme form, such 'punishment' can mean the murder of the person concerned; in other cases it can entail some type of assault (mutilation or disfigurement, for example). The allegedly immoral behaviour that provokes it can range from sex outside marriage – defined in some cases as including rape – to refusing an arranged marriage, or in any way evading the authority of male family members.

### How do we relate this scene to the message that the film conveys? What does it say about family values? Does it need to be reinterpreted in the light of the ending?

At Rana's wedding, after being compelled to leave once, Umay comes back and speaks out publicly to claim a place in the family for her son, Cem. It is a bold gesture, though paradoxically betraying Umay's vulnerability, and her father is taken aback: he gets to his feet and begins to step forward, then stops. Mehmet wants to put an end to the unseemly interruption, and brutally throws Umay out. **Imagine what might have happened had the father not stopped: how may he have been about to react? What consequences might his reaction have had?**

In the patriarchal context of this story, a boy's death may be even more tragic than that of a girl. Far from resolving the situation, Mehmet makes it worse through Cem's accidental death.

### How is this likely to affect the various characters and the relationships between them? What would the consequences have been had Mehmet succeeded in killing Umay, and Cem's life had been saved?

## Highly effective cinematography

In terms of cinematographic structure, *When We Leave* deploys various devices to get the audience thinking: enigmatic images, fragmentation and ideas left implicit all cause us to question and speculate about what is happening, to interpret and sometimes reinterpret certain scenes. Cumulatively these techniques, which catch and hold our attention, add to the power of the film. The opening sequence depicts what is actually the final act in the story (although this is not clear until the end) and it is enigmatic on several levels.

Honour crimes take place in many countries, within patriarchal communities. It is not religion but rather the patriarchal system, as a cultural and sociological phenomenon, that is the determining factor. While patriarchy is commonly found in Muslim communities, these crimes cannot be laid at the door of Islam. The problem is an outmoded worldview that requires women and girls to submit to the authority of the men in their families. The United Nations puts the annual number of victims of honour crimes worldwide at 5000 but that estimate is probably too low. It is hard to gauge the scale of the problem because not all such crimes are reported and investigated; many of them are passed off as accidents or cases of suicide; victims and those close to them may feel too ashamed or threatened to speak out; and in some cases the victims do not see themselves as such – they believe they have done wrong and deserve to be punished.

The story of Umay, the protagonist in this film, can be seen as a distillation of several stories, and it is thus a useful illustration of the issues.

## The plot

### The clash between self-fulfilment and cultural tradition

By expressing what she wants, Umay clearly embodies the ideal of self-fulfilment so dear to 'developed' societies. Umay wants to 'have it all': she wants motherhood to be a choice (she has an abortion at the beginning of the film); she wants to leave a husband who no longer loves her; she wants to return to Germany, to live, study and work there and lead an independent life; she wants to be able to meet someone new; she wants her son to continue to live with her; and she wants to retain her family's love and affection.

Out of a black screen we hear a child's voice speak the word 'Mommy'. Then we see, from behind, a young woman and a young man walking side by side down a street. A close-up of the young man's face in profile suggests he is upset and anxious. The young woman, who holds a child by the hand, touches the man's back in a gesture of affection. The man halts. The woman walks on for a moment before turning to find the man pointing a gun at her – and here the narrative fragments: in the next frame, the young man (no longer armed) is running down the street. Then we see him, out of breath, on a bus. He catches sight of something from the bus window and holds it in his gaze.

All sorts of questions are thus posed in the first moments of the film. Who says the word 'Mommy', to whom and why? Who are the people we follow down the street? What is the relationship between them? Why is the young woman suddenly threatened at gunpoint by a man whom she seems to know well? Why does he run away and what has happened? Did he fire the gun? Where is the gun now? What is it that he sees from the bus window? All the questions are answered at the very end of the film.

The techniques of fragmentation and implicit suggestion are also used elsewhere in the film, to particularly good effect in the journey sequence in Turkey, which opens with the image of a bus in the countryside. We wonder whether Umay is on the bus because, in the previous scene, she told Stipe that she is going to leave; but in fact this bus is carrying Umay's father who has travelled to Turkey. He arrives in a village and enters a small, rough house where someone is sleeping. In the next frame, the sleeper, an elderly man, has wakened and the father is looking at him. Then the father leaves. This sequence is wordless: we do not know who the old man is or what passes between the two. Later we reinterpret the images and guess that Umay's father went to seek counsel about the problem of his daughter from an 'elder' (possibly his own father) and that it was this man who advised him to kill Umay.

Her apparent, speaking from within her own frame of reference, is the first to say: 'You want too much'. She tells her daughter to 'Stop dreaming!' – being a woman and a mother means making sacrifices. But Umay's immediate response is to challenge that idea.

As someone who has grown up in Germany, in contact with Western values, it is not surprising that she finds the imperative of sacrifice hard to swallow. Clearly, the ideal of self-fulfilment has struck a chord with her. She is taking charge of her own life, and that puts her at odds with her family and their traditional belief in female submission to the will of men.

The apparent ideal for Umay's family, and the wider community of which they are part, is that of belonging to a group and having one's own – largely gender-defined – place within it. In such a context, individual freedom can find expression only within the bounds of respect for higher authority: for family, for religion and its prohibitions, and for the principle that men come first. Umay's family thus find it hard to come to terms with her leaving her husband, even though they know he was violent. What the community will on no account tolerate, however, is the fact of Umay bringing her son with her and refusing to 'give him back' to his father. Umay's intransigence meets equal intransigence on the part of her family, in turn heavily influenced by the surrounding community, and the outcome is conflict in its most violent form.

What is depicted is effectively a clash between two worldviews: one prioritising the individual and individual desires, the other the community and its systems. Gül, boss of the firm where Umay works, reflects something of this when she warns: 'If they have to decide, if they have to choose between you and the community, they'll never choose you.'

Another memorable sequence depicts the male members of the family meeting together in silence. Acar is given the task of killing Umay, and two wordless scenes follow: in the first, Acar pounds his fist into a cupboard in his bedroom; in the second, Mehmet weeps.

The hospital scene where Umay's father asks her forgiveness is another sequence open to dual interpretation: Umay thinks her father is apologising for the suffering he has caused her, particularly by banishing her from the family (and some of us watching the film will probably share that interpretation), but in fact the forgiveness he wants is for the attack that has yet to take place. By leaving ideas unspoken in this way and fragmenting the action, the element of surprise is sustained throughout the narrative – the actors' expressive looks and gestures and the conviction they bring to their roles more than offsetting the economic use of dialogue.

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*In the 'Ecran large sur tableau noir' [Big screen on the blackboard] collection, Les Grignoux publishes teaching materials (more than 300 titles to date) about films most of which are made in Europe. The texts are written for both teachers and cinema-goers generally and each one offers a wealth of original ideas about, and insight into, a particular film.*