

## Women's Power in Iran

**In a time when the so-called “axes of evil” continuously makes the headlines, the Iranian filmmaker Afsar Sonia Shafie tells us a different story.**

**During her trip to her hometown Tehran, the filmmaker, who currently lives in Switzerland, confronts us with the history of her own family. She visits her grandparents and lets them talk about their lives. In conversations with her grandmother, her mother, her sisters and aunts the director documents their emancipation as well as her own.**

Five years ago, being offered the chance, Afsar Sonia Shafie left Iran, to continue her film studies in Switzerland. Now, together with her Swiss husband and cameraman Martin Frei, she returns home to visit her family. In the first scene at Tehran airport we get an idea of how much she missed those she had left behind. To an infatuating song of the famous Iranian singer Dariush, the family welcomes Sonia with hugs and tears. “My home“ sings Dariush in the 70s” is a flower that only flourishes in blood“. Tears become one of the recurring motives, carried along by the poetic sound of the Persian language.

The journey to the exile Iranian's country and family, offers an intimate insight into a society of which our view is often blurred by clichés. The journey takes us over no less than half a century of an Iranian family history. At the centre of the story are three women of three different generations: grandmother, mother, the filmmaker herself, and her older sister Sona.

Tears are shed more than once, for instance, when the grandmother gives the heartbreaking account of how she came to Tehran as a fifteen-year-old mother to look for her husband, only to find him jobless and addicted to opium. “Opening my eyes for the first time, I saw the world through tears.“ she sums up her hard life full of privation.

However, men are rare in the family tree, which Shafie draws up. And there is a good reason for this, since it was mainly the women, mothers and daughters who looked after the family's welfare. Grandmother recounts freely the difficult time she had to face living side by side with her opium-addicted husband who repeatedly insulted her and occasionally beat her up. At the end of her bewailing she turns to him and says: “You needn't be embarrassed; the foreigners don't understand Persian.” A little revenge and also humiliation for the man who has, in the meantime, realised whom to thank for “his“ house and ”his children“.

It's the women who wear the trousers in Shafie's family. Surprising insights for the Western eyes: Didn't we have a different perception of Muslim women, veiled and speechless? Shafie's family history rebuts the prejudice against them and shows an Iranian society that is far more rich and diverse than expected. The closer Shafie comes to her own private story, the more the viewer becomes involved in the emotional life of the filmmaker: her ambition to go to university, her first love and marriage, divorce and her subsequent life as a divorcee, an outcast in Iran, and her move to Switzerland.

In 1918 Goethe wrote in his book of poems *West-Eastern Divan*: “Who knows himself and others / will too here understand / Orient and Occident / can be separated no more.“ Such a thought might seem rather odd considering today's geopolitical situation – however, in Shafie's personal account of *City Walls – My own private Tehran*“ the western viewer gets strikingly close to Iranian society, and to its people.

In a very private, sensitive and exemplary way *City walls - My own private Tehran* portrays remarkable mothers and women who, from one generation to another, gradually managed to free themselves from the chains of the oppressive patriarchal order and it shows how women continue their fight for the right to progress.