



Interview by Jonas Moody

## Unveiling Iran

Iranian filmmaker Afsar Sonia Shafie brings viewers into the innermost sanctum of her family's life in her newest film *City Walls: My Own Private Tehran*. With all the magnetism of a seasoned storyteller, the 39-year-old Iranian weaves together the lives of three generations of women in her family with the realities of life in Iran, including divorce, the Islamic state, and living under the threat of war.

**Jonas Moody:** Your film seems not to preach any one message on Iran, but rather simply to tell stories. How did you come to make this kind of film?

**Afsar Sonia Shafie:** I'm a storyteller. I didn't want to project a message, just tell the story of my life and my mother's and grandmother's lives. That way people identify with someone in the film. I'm tired of prejudices about Iranian society and people, so I provide a look inside the life of an Iranian family. Then you find out what kind of people we are.

**JM:** Is your family typical of Iranian families? Is someone watching this film getting a real glimpse of Iranian society?

**ASS:** Yes and no. Even though they are average economically, they are not very traditional. Especially my mother. Women in my family are strong. That is something exceptional about my family. In fact, a common thread you can find between my family's stories and others in Iran is this trend of the emancipation of women.

**JM:** How has this emancipation occurred over the generations in your family?

**ASS:** Before WWII divorce was not possible, so my grandmother was stuck in a pre-arranged marriage from the age of 14. She didn't love her husband, but she had no choice. All she thought about was supporting the family and earning money to feed her kids. My mother is more educated and didn't get married until 17. She fell in love with my father, but when she didn't bleed enough for him on their wedding night he became cruel. Still, she was able to think about her own desires as a woman, not just

her kids, and got a divorce. But she wasn't accepted. A divorced woman in the family is seen as having a terrible disease; she is something to hide.

**JM:** You also went through a divorce in Iran. What was it like for you?

**ASS:** The difference is that I had the support of my mother whereas she didn't have any. She was against the marriage, but I loved him. I got married anyway when I was 25 but had been to university and was more aware of my rights than my mother and grandmother. I could think about when to have a child and knew that by doing so I would put myself in a cage. I ended up getting divorced, but my university degree helped me live independently.

**JM:** In the film, living as a divorcée in Iran seems like a difficult time in your life.

**ASS:** If a woman lives alone in a house, her neighbors get suspicious. You can't have a man as a friend, otherwise you're a prostitute. But it's getting better. People are becoming more open-minded because of education.

**JM:** And yet the West generally sees matters as worsening in Iran. There is a strong association between Iran and President Ahmadinejad, especially his claims that the Holocaust did not occur, that homosexuality does not exist in Iran, and reports that the government routinely tortures dissidents.

**ASS:** One distinction that must be made is that my film discusses the lives of the people, not the state and the government. One minute we have a president like Khatami, who is more moderate and open, and all Iranians are seen as open-minded and good. The next minute we have a conservative

president and all of a sudden Iranians are viewed as closed-minded. It's not like that. People are different from the state.

**JM:** Then where are the Iranian people going?

**ASS:** People always progress. They improve their lives by becoming more aware of their rights. Now there are more educated women, which allows us to be aware of our lives. I studied philosophy and began to question why I was made to do the things I do. Why must I obey my husband? The people's mentality is developing.

**JM:** How did you maintain distance from your subject when filming your own family?

**ASS:** Making this film was like psychotherapy: I never cried so much in my life. But to keep that distance I took a long time to envision the film



before I started capturing footage. I listened to the stories and cried, then edited and cried some more. I just tried to be honest.

**JM:** You tell such revealing stories about your family. Do you ever feel you went too far?

**ASS:** Just last night while at the screening I asked myself, "What have I done? Why would I tell such personal stories?" But when I receive feedback, I think it was the right thing. People need to see it. I was at the hotel last night and a woman asked me where I was from, and I told her, "Far away." But she persisted, and I finally told her, "Iran." She answered [in an exasperated voice], "Oh yes! Of course!" She wouldn't have answered like that if I had said Switzerland.

**JM:** Are you embarrassed to tell people you're Iranian?

**ASS:** I am embarrassed for them, not me. I am proud to be Iranian. But sometimes I think we people from the East know more about the West than the West knows about us. When Westerners learn more about Easterners then these misunderstandings disappear. This could prevent war.

**JM:** Last year it seemed that Iran and the US were on the brink of war over uranium enrichment and UN sanctions. As a voice for the people of Iran, what is it you want Western ears to hear?

**ASS:** I want them to know that Iranians are tired of war. They want peace. All these sanctions only make the normal Iranians suffer. The people with the power and money are not touched by them. It has been said that enriching uranium is a right of the Iranian people, but peace is also a right of the Iranian people. We don't need someone coming



into the country bringing democracy as some kind of present. A country has to be ready to accept the democratic system. If the people aren't ready, they can't accept it. However, when a society is ready for democracy, then it comes. It comes from within the society. [a](#)

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