

A PLACE CALLED HOME

A film by Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri
1998, 30 minutes, Color, Video

Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri grew up an American Community schoolgirl in pre-Revolution Tehran, and daydreaming about an ideal life in the West. Nineteen years later, after living and working in the U.S., Persheng explores her controversial decision to move back to Iran, to return to the place she never stopped calling home. In this fascinating and very personal documentary, Persheng's interviews with her family—with her mother and sister in the U.S. and with her father, who chose to remain in Iran—reveal some of the complex layers of expatriate, national and cultural identities. The film features a rare glimpse at women's lives in contemporary Tehran.

- **San Francisco Asian American Film Festival**
- **Chicago Asian American Film Festival**
- **Women in the Director's Chair Film and Video Festival**

"Beautifully executed and filled with insight about her family of origin and in particular, the culture within which Iranian women live and forge their identities."
Beverly Singer, Filmmaker, National Museum of the American Indian

"Can you go home again? Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri documents here the searing angst of exile and the equally devastating experience of return to Iran."
Ellen Fairbanks Bodman, University of North Carolina

"A touching, sensitive homecoming film, which like all homecomings kicks up more dust than it settles."
Hamid Naficy, author, *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and Politics of Place*

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The first 10 minutes of this 30-minute personal film narrates my history in the first person, with archival footage, photographs, Super-8 home movies of Iran before the Revolution and interviews with my mother and sister in the U.S., to provide the imagery. In a diary-like fashion we follow a month-long trip to Iran, where events recorded on Hi-8 video tell my story; a westernized Iranian woman who returns to her homeland after 19 years to make the decision to live in Iran. This video is my personal exploration of how the West and the East have shaped my life, and created a conflict in my life that is unresolved.

Introduction

Super-8 images of my home in Iran before the Revolution of 1979. It was a modern house, where my sister and I spent most of our summer days swimming in our small pool. My westernized mother made sure we attended the best English and American style schools in Tehran. I graduated from the American Community School in Tehran and like most of my westernized teenage compatriots, imitated western styles, wore jeans and short skirts and dreamt of America. This period is illustrated with photographs and archival footage. I left Iran in 1977 to go to college in the U.S.

Nineteen years later in New York, I am trying to decide whether to return to live in my country of origin, and give up western-style freedom and independence in favor of roots and tradition. I talk to my mother who now lives in Boston. Her choice has been to live separately from my father who is in Iran, because she cherishes her American-style freedom. I am unhappy in the U.S. I am at a dead end after the dissolution of my marriage to my American husband, and the obstacles I have been experiencing as an Iranian in the U.S. When I first arrived in the U.S. at the age of 18, the Revolution of 1979 in Iran and the Hostage Crisis happened. After that my personal decisions were continually affected by political turmoil. With the Iran-Iraq war, the doors to Iran closed almost completely. I needed to find a new home in America, so I married my college boyfriend. My mother and younger sister also moved to the U.S. Super-8 film from college years, and Hi-8 footage of life in New York today provide the visual elements.

I talk to my sister about my predicament. We first meet in a NY café, and later in her Manhattan apartment. She has adjusted to her American life and now she has a successful career in business and lives a comfortable life in New York City. She tells me that she had to use an American first name on her resume to land a competitive job on Wall Street. She did what was expected of her, but when she talks about Iran and our childhood, she is filled with emotions and starts crying.

IRAN

I feel that the answer to my predicament lies in Iran. With this intention I leave New York and arrive in Tehran. I take my camera everywhere with me and record my encounters with family, strangers, and life in Tehran. Upon my arrival I feel nervous about my position as a woman, but I am immediately surrounded and protected by my family. Invitations to lunches, dinners and New Year visits fill up most of my time. They treat me as if I never left.

I make a point of understanding the place of a woman in the patriarchal Moslem culture of contemporary Iran. Signs in the streets, in every store and public place visually demonstrate the restrictions placed on women: "*O My Sister, Your Veil is Your Integrity, or The Veil is like a Beautiful Ornament on a Woman.*" But when I observe the women in my family, I see that they are not demure and limited individuals. They have jobs and have a key role in the social structure of the family -- an important aspect of life in Iran.

I ask various female relatives whether I should stay and live in Iran. Upholding tradition, invariably, they want me to stay and marry an Iranian. Not quite what I had in mind! My grandmother goes on to tell me how all of us who left Iran made a mistake. She tells me that when she first heard about my marriage to an American man she cried. She thinks Americans should be with their own, and Iranians with theirs. I also talk to my dad who has stayed in Iran because he feels more connected to the society here. He thinks I can easily live in Iran.

The traditional and the western have always been opposing forces in Iran and in my family. My mother is also visiting Iran with me, but not enjoying it as much. She prefers her lonely life in Boston, to submitting to Islamic government rules about women. She lived in westernized Shah's Iran as an educated, working woman and left Iran after the Revolution in protest of the changing conditions.

To find out more about the roots of my family, I travel to Kurdistan, in western Iran. My father's family has lived in this area for the last 300 years, where they were landowners in a feudal society. Modernization and the Revolution have virtually destroyed the old order. Our large ancestral home built around a shallow pool and a garden are the only remains of their past glory. Most of the younger generations have left for Tehran, Europe or America. Having been away so long, I find their pace of life soothing, and peaceful. But I remember that as a young girl, it was intolerably slow and boring for me.

One day, my oldest aunt tells me the story of my great grandmother who lived in the old family home 120 years ago. The old, worn out but still grand architecture of our ancestral home provides the background for this story. My great grandmother had an independent spirit; she traded in fabrics and rode horses alone in the mountains. She and my great grandfather had six children. But his mother wanted him to marry the daughter of another powerful family. When my great grandmother heard this news she could not bear it. She decided to commit suicide and made a ritual of the act, by preparing herself like a sacrificial lamb, and then shot herself.

Is her fate the kind of story that motivated my mother to lead her daughters towards the West? But in this story I find resonance of my own life and other Eastern women's lives. When I think about the women in my immediate family, I am struck by their strong sense of independence and ambition, which has cost them their social status, mental well being, or even their lives.

I continue to live in Iran and everyday I learn something new about the religion and the people here which makes me understand myself better. In Iran, a woman has to be forever watchful of what she wears, how she behaves, and what people might think of her. In the U.S., I was encouraged to hide my name and nationality for a job. I realize I cannot behave the way an American woman is expected to by her dominant culture, nor can I be a "decent" and devout Iranian woman. My American sense of independence and freedom is in a tug of war with my sense of roots and tradition. I cannot give up either Iran or the U.S. I have to somehow bridge

these two homes that are 6,000 miles apart, and which are opposites in ideology and culture.

MAKER'S BIOGRAPHY

Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri is an Iranian filmmaker with a Masters in Cinema Studies from New York University. (She has created award-winning documentaries about Iran and Iranians in America: *Journal from Tehran*, 1986, funded by Boston Film and Video Foundation, screened on PBS's Independent Focus series, honorable mention at the Black Maria Film Festival; *Far From Iran*, 1990, funded by New England Foundation for the Art's cable series *Mixed Signals*. She works as a producer and associate producer on documentaries that have been broadcast on PBS, such as "Vis a Vis: Iran Beyond the veil", *Vote for Me: Politics in America*, *Response Program to Leona's Sister Gerry*, and *Talking Back* for the series P.O.V. Now, based in Iran, she works on American and Iranian documentaries that deal with Iranian culture.

CREW'S BIOGRAPHIES

Sahba Vazir (Co-Producer) is a financial analyst with an MBA from MIT's Sloan School of Business. She has worked for ten years with companies like Bechtel, Bank of Boston and most recently as Vice President at Lehman Brothers in New York.

Larilyn Sanchez (Editor) is a second-generation Nilipino woman who graduated from the New School for Social Research. She has produced an independent documentary about Asian American artists in New York City. Her credits as an editor and assistant editor include commercial and corporate videos for MTV, Nike and Mercedes Benz, and on various PBS documentaries, including *Vote For Me — Politics in America*, *Signal to Noise*, *Media Matters* and *Mixed Signals*.

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Rajul Mehta (Camera) is an Indian graphic designer, photographer and camerawoman. Her recently completed documentary on a potter's colony in Calcutta, has been widely shown in festivals around the world.

Dr. Rashmi Jaipal (Advisor) is Assistant Professor of Cultural Psychology at Rutgers University and New York University. A native of India, she has researched and published on intercultural communication and the psychological impact of individualism and collectivism.