

## **Writer's Statement – Yera Kheiri**

I was born in Iran and moved to New Zealand with my family when I was eleven. Growing up in Christchurch as part of the Iranian diaspora, I became closely connected with Afghan families through language, culture, and community. While I am not Afghan myself, I feel deeply tied to Afghan stories because of these bonds. At the same time, I am aware of the discrimination Afghans have faced in Iran, despite our shared heritage. Being close but not identical to this community has shaped how I approach *Sahar*, with empathy, respect, and a commitment to listening.

As an Iranian woman raised in Tehran, I know I have had more personal freedom than many Afghan women and even Iranian women. My family allowed me to move cities, pursue education, and follow my passion for film; opportunities that are not always available to women in either culture. I felt a responsibility to use the voice and access I have to tell a story that amplifies others who may not be heard. For me, Afghans are like sisters and cousins. We share language, culture, and history. Seeing so many Afghan women arrive in New Zealand through arranged marriage, often into difficult circumstances, was both upsetting and inspiring in a creative way.

My own experience with arranged marriage and visas also influenced the story. When my cousin could not get a student visa to New Zealand, my aunt suggested I marry him legally to help him migrate. Although this did not happen, it revealed how marriage is often used as a pathway to residency when other options are limited. These situations are complicated, combining family duty, migration struggles, guilt, and personal desire, and they stayed with me as I wrote *Sahar*.

The story was inspired by an Afghan woman I knew whose life in New Zealand became tightly controlled by her husband and in-laws. She had no bank account, no SIM card, and very little freedom to make her own choices. Her sole purpose was to bring children into this world. Her experience was heartbreaking, but I did not want to tell it as a simple tragedy. I have also seen men and women pushed into marriages they did not want because of cultural pressures, immigration barriers, and family expectations. These are complex situations, not just villains and victims.

It was important to me that *Sahar* avoids stereotypes, especially of Muslim men as violent or cruel. While abuse exists in every culture, I did not want the story to single out Muslim men or present them as inherently oppressive. I wanted the characters to feel real, with their own contradictions and struggles. The story provides a perspective that does not necessarily antagonise arranged marriages, allowing audiences to understand the many reasons these marriages happen, from cultural expectation to family loyalty, and even political or logistical factors. Sahar suffers the most because the story is told from her perspective, but if it were told from Amina or Kamran's point of view, we would empathise with them too. By the end, the characters choose to stay together, reflecting the complex ways families navigate these pressures and the factors that influence their decisions.

At its heart, *Sahar* is about isolation, cultural expectation, and the search for freedom. It is a story rooted in realities I have seen in my community and told with compassion for all the characters. Through *Sahar*, I hope to give audiences a perspective rarely seen on screen in New Zealand, one that honours the resilience of Afghan women and invites reflection on the universal experience of negotiating between tradition and self-determination. While I understand that this story may attract some backlash, it remains an important truth; many people have lived these experiences or know someone who has.

### **Director's Statement - Yera Kheiri**

Sahar is a story that matters deeply to me because of my experience as an Iranian Muslim woman and my close connection to Afghan communities in New Zealand. I want to explore the

quiet struggles of individuals negotiating between cultural expectation and personal freedom, portraying these experiences with empathy, honesty, and nuance.

Visually, the film is rooted in realism. In New Zealand, I use naturalistic lighting and framing that emphasises Sahar's isolation. Wide shots show her small and alone, particularly in public spaces like the airport and the streets she walks to the dairy. People pass by without acknowledging her, highlighting her separation from this world and the differences between her life and those around her.

At the beginning, the pacing is deliberately slow, moving between days and locations to reflect Sahar's disorientation after arriving in New Zealand. Early reveals, such as her discovering the photo of Amina and Kamran as a child, gradually build her understanding of her new life. For cinematic effect, we use repeated compositions where Sahar remains framed in a similar way while the locations around her change. This creates a visual rhythm that is both engaging and reflective of her journey.

The bond between Sahar and Amina is central to the story. In many Afghan and Islamic cultures, a daughter-in-law becomes closely involved with her mother-in-law, yet these relationships can be fragile. In the film, we show glimpses of this connection, such as the moment when Sahar hits her eye and Amina responds with care. These small, shared moments illustrate that, despite the tension and distance, the two women will be living together and navigating their lives in the same household. By the end, the three of them—Sahar, Amina, and Kamran—remain together, not out of love, but because marriage is both an obligation and a duty. As much as it would be appealing to give Sahar complete freedom, the story stays realistic, showing how cultural, social, and practical pressures shape their lives and influence the choices they make.

Sahar's journey is also shaped by the people she meets along the way, from the dairy cashier to Talia and others. Each encounter represents a step along her path, gradually moving her toward her climax.

In contrast, the brief Afghanistan scenes are cinematic and lush, almost exotic, reflecting Sahar's roots and what she has left behind. This visual contrast helps the audience feel the shift from home to an unfamiliar and isolating environment, and what is now her reality.

The story's structure and pacing reflect Sahar's emotional journey. Early sections move calmly, showing her dislocation. When Sahar leaves the house, the narrative becomes fully linear, marking the climax. During this sequence, fast-paced editing, overlapping conversations, and interactions between multiple characters create moments of dark comedy. The humour arises naturally from the chaos and absurdity of these situations, such as language barriers, conflicting actions, and multiple storylines colliding. This choice adds energy and engagement while respecting the story's serious themes, allowing audiences to reflect on the characters' experiences beyond just sympathy.

We also glimpse Amina and Kamran's lives outside Sahar's perspective, such as Kamran's parenting struggles, showing that every character faces their own pressures. Sahar herself does not meet Kamran until the ending, keeping the audience aligned with her perspective.

Collaboration and authenticity are central to the production. The script is translated to Dari with the help of an Iranian translator and two Afghan collaborators, including the actor playing Amina, to ensure dialogue feels truthful and culturally grounded. We are working with Afghan women in the lead roles, and with an Afghan woman who has no acting experience for the role of Amina's mother. She brings lived experience and authenticity to the performance, complementing our professional actors and enriching the world of the story. We are also collaborating with Afghan women on wardrobe, production design, and other creative aspects, ensuring that every detail is culturally grounded and true to life.

Ultimately, my goal as a director is to create a cinematic experience that allows audiences to empathise with Sahar and the people around her, while reflecting on the pressures, contradictions, and compromises that shape family and cultural life. Through *Sahar*, I hope to present a story that is emotionally compelling, socially resonant, and authentic to experiences rarely represented on screen in Aotearoa.

## **Producer's Statement - Lee Li**

As an asylum seeker from China, I spend most of my adulthood sorting out my visas to just have a safe place to stay. For many of us, dealing with visas becomes a harsh institutional hurdle, not just in the migration process, but between death and survival.

At the age of 16, I was fortunate to obtain a student visa, which allowed me to cross the border and arrive in Aotearoa, where my asylum-seeking journey began. In a way, obtaining a visa becomes a privilege, which often projects your social status, or whether you are socially desirable or not.

Yet, this so-called “privilege” can be easily exploited when other options are closed off by the immigration system. For Sahar, it was through an ‘arranged marriage’ so she could have the promised safety and “freedom” and stay away from the Taliban in a foreign country.

Unfortunately, In a system shaped by racial bias and rising anti-immigration sentiment, Chinese, Indian, Iranian, and Afghan applicants are often deemed “undesirable.” So marriage became an easy way out—but too often, it becomes another cage.

But the question is not why the system is exploited, the real question is why the current immigration system failed the humanitarian needs. So when Yera told me the story of Sahar and the ‘arranged marriage visa’ following the 15th March attack, I was immediately drawn to her kaupapa and its humanitarian value of the project. Because I believe every human being deserves freedom and safety and is treated with dignity and decency, not on a social leverage of marriage.

So I want to support Yera’s vision, bring this project to life, and open an honest conversation with audiences. Through *Sahar*, I hope we can offer a new perspective on the many diaspora stories—to amplify their voices and highlight their struggles and sacrifices for freedom and basic human rights.