



10.12.2018

**Book review: Fariba Vafi's "Der Traum von Tibet"**

## Women suffering in silence

**Fariba Vafi is one of Iran's most popular contemporary novelists. Written in her unmistakably lucid, almost simple style, her latest novel to be translated into German once again looks at the issue of female identity and the role of women in a changing Iranian society. By Volker Kaminski**

Tibet isn't somewhere that enlightened left-wing liberals dream of these days. At least, that's what Djawid thinks - the man of the ideological living-room debates, who over the years has become a prosperous commercial representative for the timber trade. There's no question for him of building Tibet into his "life plan".

Tibet is a country that doesn't feature "on the new world map", he says. Djawid, who used to "talk enthusiastically about the possibility of Cuba, the Soviet Union or China," is quite dogmatic on this point: anyone in Iran today who wants to emigrate to Tibet is clinging to "a flimsy mysticism".

With this claim, we find ourselves in the middle of Scholeh's argumentative family. Its members are always getting into heated discussions on various topics. Scholeh, the narrator, is not only involved in these discussions; she is also a precise observer of each participant's behaviour.

The provocative dream of Tibet was raised by Djawid's brother Sadegh, a man who mostly sits in silence during the family debates, only rarely voicing his thoughts of escape. Since he was released from prison six years ago, he can't bear living in his homeland; unable to summon up any enthusiasm for his former career as an engineer, he dreams of Tibet instead.

### "Schiwa! Get up"

But Scholeh's main interest is her big sister, Schiwa. "Schiwa! Get up", is how several of the novel's chapters begin. Schiwa, so Scholeh believes, is unhappily married to Djawid. The pair might appear to have an exemplary modern marriage, but Scholeh

is convinced that this appearance is deceptive.

She pays obsessive attention to every detail of their conversation, keeping a mental note of how the children are treated and which of them takes care of Djawid's sick stepmother, who lives on the floor above.

There is no doubt that the majority of the household duties have to be borne by Schiwa - but does that really make her unhappy, as Scholeh claims?

There is frequent talk of unhappy marriages in the novel. As young women, both Scholeh's mother and Djawid's stepmother suffered at the hands of severe, sometimes violent husbands, fell in love unhappily with other men, and spent their married lives practically shut in the house.

Things are no longer so rough in Schiwa's family. The middle classes are now more prosperous and the debates between the sexes appear freer and more unencumbered - but unhappiness still seems to hover unbroken over the women.

Scholeh herself is lonely and lovesick. Her great love, a doctor who works in the same hospital as her, has just ended their relationship and married someone else; she tortures herself with thoughts of him.

Her only comfort is a handsome acquaintance whom she calls the "Stoic", who regularly takes her out in his car to go on long walks, though the walks never bring them closer together.

Scholeh only realises late in the day that her Stoic gives her a "long-forgotten feeling of warmth" - but this relationship, too, remains unhappy in the end.

At this year's international literature festival in Berlin, Vafi stressed that the main focus in her novels and stories is to depict female consciousness - and to let the women in her more or less fictional stories find their own roles.

### **A growing generation of female authors in Iran**

What does female identity mean in a "loud man's world"? How do love stories play out in modern Iran? There are many possible answers to these questions and we are lucky that in recent decades more and more female authors have turned their attention to this theme in their books.

The dream of Tibet stands as a metaphor for the fate of the unhappy women - even if it is voiced by a male protagonist in the novel. For it is Schiwa who passionately defends her brother-in-law's dream and expresses her understanding for Sadegh, provoking her short-tempered husband. Admitting the dream of Tibet - a longing for a place that is semi-unreachable - means facing your own unhappiness and not allowing yourself to succumb to social control.

The narrator's view is merciless, with respect both to her own fate and to that of the

novel's other characters. The author masterfully builds scenes behind closed doors and distributes her characters with such dramaturgical skill that the setting comes to life in our mind's eye. The network in which all the family members move sometimes feels like a Chekhov play, in which unhappiness is passed back and forth from one person to another. As if incidentally, the narrator uncovers small weaknesses, observes hidden expressions and catches outwardly optimistic, exaggeratedly cheerful attitudes, beneath which an abyss yawns.

But the question of whether Schiwa is really unhappy remains open. Schiwa seems filled with an unshakeable patience that enables her to take Djawid's tirades and condescension in her stride. There is no doubt that she is waging a silent battle, with Scholeh observing from the wings. In this respect, one might sometimes wish for more open conflict. But the reader's patience is rewarded: events in the couple's house escalate imperceptibly and, towards the end of the book, move towards a tragic climax.

This is a novel whose protagonists are presented in a highly naturalistic, authentic way, without resorting to superficial psychologising methods. A horror vacui at the centre of a well-to-do household!

*Volker Kaminski*

© *Qantara.de* 2018

*Translated from the German by Ruth Martin*

### **More on this topic**

[Interview with the Iranian author Fariba Vafi: "Cliches have no place in writing"](#)

[Fariba Vafi's novel "My Bird": The Iranian dream of emigration](#)

[Book review: "I'm Probably Lost" by Sara Salar: Silent rebellion](#)

**Source URL:** <https://en.qantara.de/content/book-review-fariba-vafis-der-traum-von-tibet-women-suffering-in-silence>