

Love at its Core: A Review of Maryam Zaree's Born in Evin (2019)

By Katherine Clowater

Maryam Zaree's autobiographical documentary, *Born in Evin* (2019), embarks on uncovering the mystery surrounding her birth in Iran's Evin prison. Zaree's mission is to bring light to the dark shadow shrouding an important part of her own personal history. She wants to learn about her mother Nargess's experience giving birth in prison, her subsequent release from Evin, and her experience of becoming a refugee in Germany.

Fortunately for myself and others with a vague understanding of Iranian history and politics, the film provides enough context for viewers to understand the environment in Iran in which this documentary focuses its attention. At the beginning of *Born in Evin*, I expected a straightforward documentary on Zaree's past and for the resolution to end with her uncovering a clear story about the circumstances surrounding her birth. Like Zaree, I too wanted to know more and have the same questions answered: what happened when she was born? How did she and her mother get out of prison and come to live in Germany? How did Zaree's mother feel throughout this experience?

Although *Born in Evin* initially sets out to tell the story of Zaree's mother and her birth, the subject of the film truly takes form around the concepts of community and love. The narrative quickly morphs from one solely about Zaree into a collection of experiences of the Evin prisoners, their families and friends, and their children. The documentary showcases their love for one another, the bravery to stand up for what they believe in, and the strength as they lived through these brutal situations, as well as their struggles, their trauma, and in turn, the impact all of their experiences had on their lives.

While watching *Born in Evin*, it became clear to me – through these vulnerable moments – what the documentary was about at its core. The first moment I felt that the narrative expanded beyond the birth was the home video footage of Zaree's father standing proudly in front of a heart-shaped wall collage of images of Zaree, with "Maryam" written at the centre. Maryam Zaree is at the centre of this story about the love between parents and their child: wanting the best life for her and wanting to protect her. It is about the love of Nargess's best friend wanting to protect her friend's privacy about a traumatic time in her life, and to ease Maryam's mind by telling her she had "all the love in the world" when she was born. It is also a daughter's understanding of her mother's limits and respecting them, all out of love.

Born in Evin (2019) is not a heavy historical documentary providing extensive detail of Iranian history and politics, but it does inspire greater research to gain further familiarity with the issues and political context once the film is over. Beyond research, Maryam Zaree inspires a search and a desire of a hope