



# ALL MY SISTERS

a film by MASSOUD BAKHSI

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MASSOUD BAKHSI

AUSTRIA, FRANCE, GERMANY, IRAN | 2025 | 78 MIN | DCP | 5.1 | 16/9

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Growing up in Tehran, a capital of the 21<sup>st</sup> century... From 2007 to 2025, within a loving family, eighteen years in the life of three sisters, from their early childhood to their daily lives as young women in search of freedom. Brought up in the traditional way, witnessing the struggles of a youth in perpetual movement, what is their future in today's Iranian society?



# INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR MASSOUD BAHKHSI

**How did the project come about? Did you have the idea of long-term observation of the sisters right from the start? What time period are we looking at?**

The idea of the film was born right after the birth of the two sisters in 2005 and 2006. The main goal was to make a film about the growth and the impact of the family and cultural, educational and traditional principles on them.

At the beginning I planned to film them from very early age till the age of 7 when they start the official public education in the girls primary school.

But as I went through the shooting, I noticed that the growth process does not finish at the age of 7, and what's coming after is even more interesting. That's why I continued the filming, re shaping the ideas of the script according to the ongoing reality. The actual film contains footages of 18 years of shooting (from 2007 till 2025) and follows the growth of the sisters in the main phases of childhood (plays, kindergarten, primary school), adolescence (high school, religious puberty, graduation) and early youth (entering university, getting the driving license, social commitment).

**How did you shape the current structure of the film? Tell us about the process of writing?**

The structure of every film depends on its subject, and I knew from the beginning that the written script for this film, is only a "guiding plan" in order to capture some "key moments of life" like the first day of school, the birthday anniversaries, etc.

I think the most interesting material was recorded during the simple childish plays in ordinary life, when the sisters were discovering the world through their passionate and innocent curiosity. To do this, I spent weeks and months with sisters in their early age before going to school. During these years, they learned how to accept me always with a running camera in hand, they even learned how to play with

camera and sound recorder and how to look and capture, how to record themselves. After this period, I used to film them in different occasions every year, following closely the gradual and slow process of growth. Meanwhile, every now and then, I used to select, regroup and make a rough cut of materials. The editing took place in 3 main phases, with a total time of nine months, which is very short for this kind of film. The most necessary element of this production was patience.

**Do you consider your film "about children", following this known genre of Iranian cinema? Or it is mainly a film about women?**

I think every Iranian film in general is a social film. It's true that during 1970s, 80s and 90s, making films "about" and "with" children turned to be a famous school in Iranian cinema. Iranian cinema was internationally acknowledged and acclaimed for this genre, and talented filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami, Amir Naderi, Bahram Beyzaiee and many others started their careers with "Children films". Meanwhile, the discussion among film critics about whether these are "Films for children" or "Films with children for general public" is old and somehow useless. I don't believe in this kind of categorization, and I think every film about childhood could be suitable for children. To me, this film is above all a "human film" about the growth.

But more importantly, this is a film about women, understandable in every country and culture, as the characters of the film are daughters and mothers from different generations. Men are absent in the film. By the way, for years the project was called: *Daughters and Mothers*, before being titled *SISTERS*, then *Three Sisters* (Iranian title) and *ALL MY SISTERS* (the international title).



**How did you come up with the idea of including the reflection, the so-called “permission” of the young women in the film?**

When I started the shooting, the characters were too small and believed the whole filming process is a childish play. Their parents agreed, but I always wanted to ask the sisters permission and have their accord to finish the film. Later when they were older, we discussed about their consent, and I asked them to give me their permission and comments on the film, once I finished the shooting, and showing them the final cut. It was a moral question for me to have their consent- especially because there are indoor discussions where they express themselves freely in the film. And I wanted this consent to be naturally part of the structure of the film, without being direct, extra or excessive. That's why I invited them to discover- and comment- the last cut while be filmed.

**How do you deal with restrictions and limits in a movie like this? How could you keep your critical point of view despite those problems?**

I think limits and restrictions exist everywhere with different forms and for every creative project. Here in this part of the world, where the culture is very old and rich and the modernity is still very young and in constant struggle and transformation, restrictions seem to be heavier, becoming more complex in key moments of history, sometimes like tidal surges. This provides an extremely challenging but vivid environment for artistic creation in general, in which some critical works happen to be made miraculously despite all the limits. Of course, if the creators have really a vision and something to say, with enough strength to survive. Making only 3 features over the last 30 years, I think I learned a few lessons about survival !

**Has the situation for women changed in recent years?**

In the last decades, generally speaking, I think the younger generation's social cultural situation here made a progressive evolution, even if there are many ups and downs. This concerns mainly women, not only because of their high expectations and demands- expressed with their strength and courage- but also because of

their consciousness and awareness. The important thing is that this consciousness -usually starting from early years of adolescence- has an impact on older, traditional women and men and the way they think, behave and react. This conflictual impact agitates the Iranian society, pushing it to move forward. And this is what makes it one of the most interesting changing societies in the world.

**Your movie also shows very nicely the link between private and public life. In your opinion, is this even more specific to countries like Iran?**

Private and public life could be very different from each other everywhere, but here they could be even opposite. They both have equal importance in the film. Even if my focus is on private and "inside", but the viewer finds out that it's reflecting -or sometimes answering or challenging- "outside" just like a mirror. While the heavy weight of tradition exists in both parts, the way the girls deal with it, is different.

**How are the young women living in this dichotomy between traditional moral concepts, religion and the opportunities that social media and the internet present?**

I think from far past; this kind of duality has become part of our culture and identity. Today with new technologies of communication, it's becoming more evident - and sometimes more odd- but also more interesting. What is fascinating here is the huge curiosity and the thirst for knowing and learning among youngsters, and the strong will to choose and shape a better future, despite all the difficulties and despairs, and not necessarily through immigration and leaving the country. Even if many try that way eventually.

Among the younger generations, those who want to stay in the country and get their rights are more interesting to me. And they are the ones who are better aware of this duality.

**Iranian films are very successful internationally, but filmmakers are often facing different problems doing their films. What is the authorities' attitude towards cinema?**

Iranian authorities like cinema a lot ! At least that's what they say. We are lucky to have sufficient detailed regulations and permissions in our professional film industry. On the other hand, like everywhere in the world, commercial films occupy more space and attract more invests, sometimes too much. In recent years, popular comedies were more successful, so there was very little space and not enough finance and attention towards independent, artistic pictures. This last summer, strangely, while the dark shadow of wars covered the whole region, some social, critical movies with bitter stories and endings attracted a big audience in cinemas.

**How do you see your film after 18 years of making it?**

It's difficult for me to see my film now from a certain distance, as it's very personal and I was involved in making it for such a long time. That's why I'm still seeing it as an unfinished film and want to continue shooting it! As the life of these girls and millions of their generations continues. While I see the indifference, coldness and despair among many people of my generation, the young girls are motivated, courageous and full of life and want to live, to create joy and hope in every possible way. This is what keeps them -and society - still alive.

**Do you consider your work a metaphoric look to Iranian society? or do you see it as a pure realistic documentary?**

I think every form of art is somehow metaphoric. Every artwork that influenced me and remained in my memory has a kind of metaphor in it. I don't know if viewers see metaphors in this film, but I personally see them simply in every scene of it. Without them, it would be more difficult to understand- or to tolerate- the bare reality. Of course, every viewer is free to see and interpret the film personally.

**How is this film related to your previous fiction and documentary works? What's the main difference between fiction and documentary to you?**

I think what I and some of my colleagues in Iranian cinema try to do in our fiction or documentary films, is somehow working with the "real" and looking at the "reality" in order to find the truth. In Iran realities are more interesting than stories.

Using the real characters, non-professional actors and filming in real decors in many fiction films, show the strong impact of documentary filmmaking in today's cinema. Eventually I don't think that there's only one standard definition for fiction or documentary. What counts the most is the cinematic language itself. And having a vision.

**What is the meaning of the text about mirrors in the beginning of the film? What's the relation between the text and the film?**

That's part of the introduction of Shams Tabrizi's book called *Maghâlât*. Shams Tabrizi (1185-1248) was Rumi's friend and master, a mysterious poet and mystic. These lines contain the whole meaning of the film about "*looking at oneself*" in different steps of growing. Centuries before the increasing importance of psychology, Shams Tabrizi talks about "*mirror*" as a tool for "*seeing the flaws in oneself*" and the act of "*reflection*". Through this poetic, philosophic and metaphoric concept, he warns us that this "*looking at self*" could be simultaneously precious and dangerous. He advises us to "*respect*" the mirror and "*not to break it*". To me this film is also a mirror, and a reflection about "*the self*" and about "*the growth*".







## MASSOUD BAKHSHI

Born in Tehran, Massoud Bakhshi worked as a film critic, screenwriter and producer before directing 12 documentaries and short films that won awards around the world. His first feature film, *A Respectable Family*, was presented at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival (Directors' Fortnight) and his second, *Yalda, A Night for Forgiveness*, won the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize at Sundance in 2020.



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