

A conversation with Firouzeh Khosrovani, Iranian director of *Radiograph of a Family*

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As part of our coverage of this year's San Francisco film festival, we commented on *Radiograph of a Family*, a film by Iranian director Firouzeh Khosrovani. We suggested the film was "a sensitive, semi-autobiographical and semi-fictionalized portrait, albeit with significant questions left unanswered, of one family's experience of Iranian life over the course of a half century or more."

The film documents the relationship between Khosrovani's parents, Tayi, her traditional, devout Muslim mother, and Hossein, her Western-leaning radiologist father, who met and married in the 1960s. They first lived in Geneva where Hossein was studying, until his wife's unhappiness in Switzerland obliged the couple to return to Iran.

Khosrovani adopts an intriguing format—an invented dialogue between the parents (based on her memories and performed by actors) that plays out over a series of still photographs, home movies and news footage.

The critical events in the family's life are the Iranian revolution of 1979 and, secondarily, the bloody, eight-year 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. Khosrovani's mother became swept up by Islamic fundamentalism at the time of the revolution. She was influenced in particular by Ali Shariati, "the Paris-educated sociologist," as the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in 2018, who "sought to recast traditional Shia theology by incorporating pseudo-socialist phrases and iconography."

The establishment of the Islamic Republic and the accompanying events divided Khosrovani's parents. While her father retreated to his study and listened to classical music, her devout mother, bolstered by her connection to the regime, increasingly took over. Paintings and art objects disappeared. As the director explains in a note, "Religion began to creep in through the cracks. Wine, music and dance ... were forbidden. ... The revolution gave my mother the role of an Islamic combatant."

Born in Tehran, Firouzeh Khosrovani attended the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, a fine arts academy in Milan, Italy. After graduation, she returned to Iran and acquired a Master's degree in journalism. Since 2004 she has directed numerous documentary and short films. She splits her time between Tehran and Rome.

We recently conducted a video interview.

David Walsh: Why did you choose to make this autobiographical work, *Radiograph of a Family*, at this moment? Was it a personal choice, or did it have something to do with the political situation in Europe, for example?

Firouzeh Khosrovani: It was more a personal question than a political or global one. It's a personal essay. I wanted to transform my family's life materials into cinematographic language.

I needed to have enough distance from my past so I could be more balanced, and I wouldn't be so judgmental. The choice to have myself as narrator as a child was again to give the work equilibrium. A child makes no judgment between parents.

I explain in the film that I'm between two poles. I wanted to use my mother as a representative of a way of life, my father, too. My mother

became very religious and revolutionary, and I wanted to explain why. I wanted to give her a voice too.

DW: You say you wanted to reach a balance. Was it more difficult to be objective, balanced in relation to your mother's positions?

FK: Yes. My mother represents a system, the values and ideals of a revolution. It's obvious I'm closer to my father's values and lifestyle. I do, however, respect my mother's choices. If I had done this film 20 years ago, it would have been totally different.

DW: It's your personal story, but obviously it has a broader significance.

FK: Yes, otherwise there would be no point. I knew that when a story is so intimate it could also narrate a collective story, I think. I was aware of which materials and patterns to use so that it would connect to other people's lives, so that my individual experience would reach the collective experience, of a country, of a time, of a society, of a history.

Also, I chose the metaphor of radiology so I could "scan" the family past, "scan" history, "scan" my home.

DW: Do you see, in a sense, the entire population in your position, torn between these poles?

FK: I simplify it to create this metaphor. It's not just these two choices, there's a range of tendencies, ideologies. But I had to minimize things in the framework of an 80-minute film. My family's life might represent concretely what has been happening in Iranian society for a century, not just in recent years. Traditionalism and religion, on the one hand, and secularism, Western-leaning people, on the other.

DW: How did your parents meet?

FK: They met at a family gathering in Iran, during the summer when my father had come back for vacation from studying in Europe. At that time, in the 1960s, traveling was not so easy for a student taking his final exams. So he had to wait until the next summer to marry my mother. In fact, they had to arrange a wedding without my father. This is a central metaphor of the film: my mother literally married my father's photograph. He was not there.

DW: Could you tell me something about their different families?

FK: My mother's family was a traditionalist, religious and middle class family. My father's family was very cultured, very Westernized, very modern family. My paternal grandfather traveled a lot, he spoke various languages and he was involved in commerce between Iran and Europe. So he sent his son, my father, very early on to the US, to Springfield, Massachusetts to study medicine. After two years, my father went to study in Switzerland.

DW: Do you know what the attitude or attitudes of the families or your parents were toward the 1953 coup or the Shah's regime?

FK: My father was pro-Mossadegh and very nationalist, he gave no support to either the Shah or the Ayatollah Khomeini. He was very patriotic.

DW: Why do you think your mother was so unhappy in Geneva? Was it just religion and tradition, or was she also homesick and lonely in a

strange, cold city?

FK: All of that, I think. But she noticed signs of sin everywhere. She was not at her ease. She felt really out of place. I describe her uneasiness in the streets when she saw women with revealing dresses. She hadn't experienced this before.

Also, at the time, there were not many Muslim women in Switzerland, and certainly not wearing a headscarf. So my father used this as a means of convincing her to take off the hijab. He argued that she was more at the center of attention with the hijab, men's attention, and it could create more problems for her.

DW: Do you think that insistence was a mistake?

FK: I know that my father was not someone who imposed himself on other people. But I think he really wished my mother would take off her hijab, he didn't like it at all. He was a little bit hard on this aspect of religiosity.

DW: It tends to have the opposite effect from what you want, it strengthens the religious feelings, which are under attack.

FK: When people put pressure like this, as we see today, there is a reaction. It doesn't help.

DW: I agree. These are reactionary laws in Europe now.

FK: They produce resentment, bitterness.

DW: Do you remember the events of the 1979 revolution?

FK: Very vaguely, because I was only six years old at the time. I remember going with my mother to demonstrations. It was terrifying, because there were large numbers of people and I was afraid of getting lost in the ocean of black chadors, everyone was dressed like my mother.

DW: You mentioned in *Radiograph* that there were religious, nationalist and leftist elements in the revolution. It's a big question, I know, but why, in your opinion, did the clerical-religious element triumph?

FK: This is a complicated issue. At that time it was the reaction of a society that was in the majority traditionalist and religious. It was their turn in the history of Iran, so to speak. For centuries they felt out of power. At least for 50 years or more, during the time of the Shah and his father, the majority of the people felt they had no place in the "modernization" of Iran that was taking place. The revolution was their revenge, against all the forces associated with the West and so forth. Now they are in full power.

DW: I think there was a tremendous political vacuum, or a vacuum on the left, created by the rotten policies of the Tudeh Party and various forces. The religious element took advantage of that vacuum.

In the film, you mention Ali Shariati, the figure who claimed to be reconciling Islam and socialism or populism, and that your mother was a follower of his.

FK: He was a pioneer of the revolution. He was a very important figure in Iran. He was very charismatic for a certain generation, because he represented both sides, being religious but having a modernistic appearance, wearing a suit and tie, and so forth. He lived in France, influencing the intellectuals of his time. He introduced a modern interpretation of Islam. He tried to create a new ideology. He died one year before the revolution.

Like many other young Iranians, my mother was attracted to Shariati's ideas. The revolution could not have happened without this preparation. Khomeini did not come out of the blue. If Shariati had lived, I don't know what his position would have been in relation to the establishment of the Islamic Republic. He put forward a mixture of Marxism and Islam, socialism and Islam. That was very important for Iranian young people, especially the educated ones.

DW: I would say, also very deceptive and damaging. What is your view of the present situation in Iran?

FK: I'm not a very political person. On the other hand, the personal is always political. I'm doing what I can do like many other people involved

in cultural and artistic work. Our task is do what we can do for the culture, for solidarity among the Iranian people. There are many good things happening within this sphere, unofficially, unrecognized. There are many important developments, relations between artists, between visual arts and filmmaking and theater and music. I'm happy to take part in this effort, this ferment, this dynamic culture.

DW: Inside the country, outside, or both?

FK: Both, but mostly inside. I make all my films inside Iran.

DW: Has *Radiograph* been shown in Iran?

FK: Not yet, because of the pandemic. The film is respectful toward the various layers of society. I think it's very fair. I make no judgments. Others, of course, are free to judge.

DW: And we do! But it is an objective film.

Were you influenced by, or did you follow Iranian cinema in the 1980s and 1990s in particular?

FK: The work in those decades was amazing. I'm very happy that we had masters like Abbas Kiarostami, Bahram Beyzai, Darius Mehrjui, Sohrab Shahid-Saless and many others.

DW: What is the state of Iranian cinema today?

FK: It is growing and getting more varied. We have different genres in Iranian cinema today. The sort of films that give an image of nothing but pressure and tension are not my favorites. I feel it's time to go beyond that. Outside Iran for many years they wanted to see a black reality, to present a one-sided picture, a picture of only censorship, despotism and a hard situation.

I think perhaps European and American audiences are a little bit irritated by the repetition of subject matter in Iranian cinema, which was very successful at many film festivals for many years. It's time to return to the poetry of Iranian cinema, a more varied and independent cinema.

DW: Living here, in the US, we experience the continual provocations and aggression of the American government and media against Iran. The propaganda against Iran, Russia and China never stops for a second. It's horrible. They want a war. It's very dangerous. Not just Trump, but Biden also.

FK: I'm sorry to hear that. I was very optimistic because of Biden's victory.

DW: The difference is very small, there are tactical differences, cosmetic differences, but the policy is essentially the same. The Democrats may be more warlike. The American people don't want war, but the American establishment is doing everything it can to provoke a war. That's the reality. They're always looking for excuses, pretexts.

What are your film plans?

FK: It's early, but I'm thinking of a new project, which is a continuation of the *Radiograph of a Family*.

DW: Bringing that up to date? A documentary or fiction film?

FK: Somewhere between fact and fiction, like *Radiograph*. I want to maintain this style, this combination, of a personal essay and more.

DW: In developing your aesthetic approach, what were your influences or inspirations?

FK: There are many inspirations, like the works of Chris Marker, and in terms of the dialogue, I was reading and watching the films of Marguerite Duras, especially *Hiroshima Mon Amour* [1959, directed by Alain Resnais, written by Duras], and Agnès Varda. So my influences came more from the French tradition of experimental cinema but also from directors like Patricio Guzman from Chile. I wanted to write the narration in the first-person, then I added the dialogue, the staged dialogue.

DW: The dialogue is very convincing, it feels like life. I congratulate you.

FK: I'm happy to hear that. Thank you!





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