

SON-MOTHER



SON-MOTHER / PESAR-MADAR

DIRECTOR: **MAHNAZ MOHAMMADI**, SCREENPLAY BY: **MOHAMMAD RASOULOF**,

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: **ASHKAN ASHKANI**, EDITED BY: **MOHAMMADREZA MUJINI**,

SET & COSTUME DESIGNER: **SIAMAK KARINEZHAD**, MAKE-UP DESIGNER: **MEHRDAD MIRKIANI**,

SUPERVISING SOUND EDITOR AND MIX: **ENSIEH MALEKI**, SOUND RECORDIST: **HASAN SHABANKAREH**,

MUSIC BY: **AMIR MOLOOKPOUR**, PRODUCED BY: **KAVEH FARNAM MOHAMMAD RASOULOF**

AND **FARZAD PAK** CAST: **RAHA KHODAYARI, MAHAN NASIRI, REZA BEHBOODI,**

SHIVA ORDOOIE AND MARYAM BOUBANI

film
n
iran

MEDIA
NEST

Official Selection

tiff

Toronto International
Film Festival 2019

SON-MOTHER / PESAR-MADAR

Iran | 2019 | 102 min

Directed by **Mahnaz Mohammadi**

Cast

Leila Raha Khodayari
Amir Mahan Nasiri
Kazem Reza Behboodi
School Principal Shiva Ordooe
&
Bibi Maryam Boubani

Crew

Screenplay Mohammad Rasoulof
Director of Photography Askhan Askhani
Editor Mohammadreza Muini
Make-up Designer Mehrdad Mirkiani
Set & Costume Designer Siamak Karinezhad
Supervising Sound Editor & Mix Ensieh Maleki
Music Composer Amir Molookpour
Sound Recordist Hasan Shabankareh
Production Manager Vahid Moshari
Post-production Coordinator Gabriela Daniels
Post-production & VFX Magiclab, Roashana Studios
Sound Technical House Moon Studio, Bystrouška Studio

Produced by Kaveh Farnam (Europe Media Nest)
Mohammad Rasoulof
Farzad Pak (Filminiran)

Technical details

Shooting format **4k ProRes**
Screening format **2k**
Audio **5.1**
Aspect Ratio **Flat**
Framerate **24**
Original version/language **Persian**
Subtitles **English**

SON-MOTHER / PESAR-MADAR

INTRODUCTION



Synopsis

Leila is a single working mom of two. The factory she works at faces a crisis and jobs are at stake. Kazem, the factory bus driver, proposes marriage to Leila, but she hesitates to accept his conditions. Kazem has a daughter the same age as her 12-year-old son, Amir, and since tradition frowns upon a young girl sharing a household with her step-brother, Kazem tells Leila not to bring her son until he marries his daughter off.

After Leila is fired from her job, she makes the decision to stay with Kazem and leave Amir at a boarding school for deaf children for a while she tries to manage his return. There, Amir is forced to pretend he's deaf-and-dumb, and after a few months tries to run away to search for his mother. On the run, he faces Kazem who asks him to think about his family's future. Amir has to decide.



SON-MOTHER / PESAR-MADAR

Director's Statement

"It is hard for me to imagine Iranian life without tragedy. The moral obligation to tradition in very unsafe situations can be extremely cruel and very effective. Leila does not have any choice. Her life does not completely belong to her. She is supposed to live in a way that society wants for her. It is tradition

that decides her fate. Amir has to pretend to be deaf to survive. In this 'Son - Mother' relationship, I try to show a critical view of our traditions and values imposed on us by the powers that be. We have become tools of our own oppression."



INTRODUCTION

About the film

Mahnaz Mohammadi's feature debut is gentle and harsh at the same time, just like its protagonists. A candid image of the heartbreaking reality, it centers around the struggles women still face in society to this day, and how families can be broken due to dated social norms which stem from patriarchy and orthodox religiousness.

Mohammadi has a history of being "too honest", so much so that authorities have followed and interrogated her, she has been banned from travelling abroad and repeatedly imprisoned. Based on a screenplay by renowned filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof, Son – Mother is no less provocative or socially critical than Mohammadi's previous documentary work.

The film is divided into halves. The first, titled Son, actually focuses on the mother, Leila, who strives to take control over her and her family's lives, ultimately being forced to give up to the strict tradition and abandon her son, Amir, for an unspecified amount of time. The second half, titled Mother, revolves around Amir, who is forced to face a tremendous responsibility to be put on a 12-year-old.

“Tragedy is what defines a lot of people's lives in the Middle East, each of us has experienced or keeps experiencing tragic events. In Son – Mother, I deal with the question of what each of us is able to do in order to stay away from tragedy.”

– Mahnaz Mohammadi

After a long search, Mahan Nasiri was cast as the stubborn Amir, while Raha Khodayari was the ideal choice for the role of his mother, Leila. Captured by the universal story of survival and search for a better life, experienced producer Farzad Pak decided to help turn the screenplay into film. Rasoulof, who took on the role of an advisor and producer as well, brought in DoP Ashkan Ashkani, who had also worked on his 2017 feature A Man of Integrity.

Kaveh Farnam, CEO of Europe Media Nest, completed the trio of producers. The Czech-based company has been trying to “build a bridge between Czech and Iranian cinema in the long term,” says Farnam who also helped connect the film crew with Magiclub, a leading Prague-based post-production studio which took care of the colour grading and VFX. The sound was mastered in the Bystrouška studio in Prague as well.

About the director

Well-known for her provocative documentaries on social issues as well as her tireless activism, Iranian director Mahnaz Mohammadi has made headlines in the likes of *The Guardian*, the *Hollywood Reporter* or *Variety*, and has been supported by Amnesty International and French Directors Guild (*Société des réalisateurs de films*) among others.

Mohammadi wrote and directed her first short documentary, *Women without Shadows*, in 2003. She instantly received praise at international film festivals for her depiction of homeless and abandoned women in a state-run shelter, and continued documenting everyday lives and struggles of people on her next couple of films.

The award-winning feature documentary *Travlogue* was shot on a train going from Tehran to Ankara, where Mohammadi questioned passengers about the reasons why they decided to flee the country. The film premiered in 2010 at the "A Day in Tehran" event in Paris, with the director in attendance, which became one of the reasons for Iranian authorities to ban Mohammadi from leaving the country and from producing any more films.



The avid women's rights activist also contributed to Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's documentary *We Are Half the Iran's Population*, which portrayed the demands of Iranian women in the 2009 presidential election.

At the time, Mohammadi was already considered a public enemy, her passport was withheld by the court, and her home was searched. The authorities also confiscated her work and filming equipment along with other personal belongings, while banning her from working as a filmmaker. Several of her films have been banned in Iran.

In 2011, she starred in Reza Serkanian's drama *The Momentary Marriage* and was invited to the 64th Cannes Film Festival, but was not allowed to attend. Greek filmmaker Costa-Gavras read a letter she sent, including the famous words, "I am a woman, I am a filmmaker, two sufficient grounds to be guilty in this country." In June, she was arrested and jailed in Tehran's infamous Evin Prison. A month later, she was released on bail.

SON-MOTHER / PESAR-MADAR



On June 7, 2014, Mohammadi was arrested again, and faced a five-year-long prison sentence for “endangering national security” and distributing “anti-regime propaganda”. State authorities accused her of working with BBC Persia, al-Jazeera English, and other international networks and media: a charge that more or less equals espionage in Iran’s legal system. Mohammadi denies ever having worked with any of said media.

The French Directors Guild launched a petition demanding Mohammadi’s release, the first signatories including Costa Gavras, Gilles Jacob, Reza Serkanian, and Bertrand Blier. She was released after two years thanks to her friend, a famous Iranian actor’s intervention and went on to work on her first feature film together with Mohammad Rasoulof.

“What I try to do is present people with some kind of mirror using my films, telling them: Look at how you live your lives. Is this the right way? Is this how you want to live?”

— Mahnaz Mohammadi

“WE ARE HUMAN FIRST, THEN MEN OR WOMEN”

**Interview with director Mahnaz Mohammadi,
producer Farzad Pak, and director of photography Ashkan Ashkani**

What initiated the whole project?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: Thematically, the film is based around tradition and everyday life. My friend Mohammad Rasoulof wrote the story, and it took us five years to turn it into a film. Mohammad was a big help after I came back from prison, we often debated how to face various issues. Tragedy is what defines a lot of people's lives in the Middle East, each of us has experienced or keeps experiencing tragic events. Religion and tradition play a big role in that, with people being very orthodox about them. In Son – Mother, I deal with the question of what each of us is able to do in order to stay away from tragedy.

A single mother of two, Leila, is forced to leave her son temporarily at a boarding school for deaf children, so that she can live with her new partner and his family, and her family can be saved. Are such situations common in Iran?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: For Leila to be able to get married again, she is forced to abandon her son simply because her husband-to-be has a daughter of the same age. The girl must be married off first, only then can she share a household with a teenage boy. The reasoning for this is that if the two actually wanted to get married in the future, it wouldn't be possible since they are half-siblings. Given the circumstances, Leila's decision actually doesn't depend on her, it is a social issue. That's also why she's being so harsh with her son, sort of driving him away. If she weren't like this, she would make everything even more complicated.



You criticize excessive adherence to Iranian traditions. How much do they define people's daily life?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: Tradition is an invisible but ever-present force controlling the everyday lives of us all. No one stops to think about it, it is simply “how it has always been”, and we are not offered many options to deal with it other than accepting it.

This is not something that can be changed overnight. Is there a way out?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: What I try to do is present people with some kind of mirror in my films, telling them: “Is this the right way? Is this how you want to live?” I think that, at least in part, better access to education would help Iran as a whole. The lack of education for children, and women in general, leads to the fact that we keep living those same unhappy lives over and over.

SON-MOTHER / PESAR-MADAR

The film opens the question of female empowerment in the traditional patriarchal world. How is the current situation in Iran?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: It is still men who have most of the power. Naturally, there are a lot of strong, empowered women, but they are still in minority. For some time, I wasn't allowed to travel abroad at all, so I travelled across Iran instead, getting a chance to meet many interesting people. I also found out that there is really just a small number of those who think critically, the way that me and my co-workers are used to think.

Generally, you contradict stereotypes about what women should do or behave like.

What or who inspires you in this sense?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: My dear father, who has passed recently, taught me how to be who I am. He always said: "We are human first, then men or women." I owe so much to my father who always tried to empower and encourage me with his words, whose words were always void of gender-based stereotypes. Most importantly, he taught me how to follow my dreams without any prejudice, and how not to succumb to adversity. This last one has been hard but also sweet.

The film industry is a quite masculine environment, even in the west. How does it feel to be a female director?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: As a female filmmaker, I am the perfect example of what you are pointing out. Chances for men in the society are still higher than women. It is common for male directors to have made a number of films at my age. I wasn't able to put my first feature together until this year.

How did the whole crew come together for Son – Mother?

Farzad Pak: For the most part, the credit goes to Mahnaz. She is a very genuine, sincere person, and managed to attract an amazing group of people quite naturally. Everything fell into place at just the right time. Mohammad Rasoulof played a very important role as Mahnaz's advisor, and Media Nest completed the circle. Son – Mother was not just a usual film for us. All the cast and crew related to the story, they put their mind and soul in it. We had the opportunity to have some of the best Iranian crewmembers on this film.

Did you rehearse with the children before the actual shoot?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: No, we didn't. I wanted them to be as authentic as possible, to keep their spontaneity as well as those moments of surprise.

Have you encountered any difficulty while shooting?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: We had to adapt the shooting schedule to the needs of the child actors above all. I never dealt with them as regular actors who arrived to set to work. At least one of their parents was always present, and I observed how they communicated with each other and what their daily regimes looked like. The 2-year-old Mounes enjoyed the shooting. She never discovered the camera on set, which was why she mostly just played as she wanted and acted absolutely natural.

Farzad Pak: Sometimes we lost a whole day of shooting because the children refused to cooperate. But you need to count with that.



SON-MOTHER / PESAR-MADAR

Are all the actors in the movie professional actors?

Farzad Pak: All of the actors on Son – Mother had some kind of professional experience, even the 2-year-old girl had been acting in TV commercials, but we did not intend to hire any superstars for this movie. The casting took quite a while, and the search for the actor who would play the 12-year-old Amir took the longest. Mahnaz always had some sort of doubt about everyone, and I have to admit I was becoming a little bit nervous.

Mahnaz Mohammadi: Finally, we met Mahan Nasiri, a stubborn and charismatic kid with an extraordinary brand of sincerity. There is a scene in the film where he was supposed to ride a carousel. At first, he refused to do that because he had never been on one before, and he was scared. He was scared of a lot of things, and each morning, we had to talk him into the shooting. We discussed this a lot, even cried about it together a few times, until one day he came to me and said: “I won’t be stubborn anymore.”

Farzad Pak: I wasn’t sure about Mahnaz’s choice at first, Mahan has these almost Asian features which I thought didn’t correspond with those of his fictional mother. Mahnaz stood by her decision, though, and it is true that people who have seen the film usually admit they didn’t notice this at all. That they focused on other things.



Mahnaz Mohammadi: You just need to believe me! (laughs)

Did you have to customize the way you narrate the story in order to get closer to the audience abroad?

Farzad Pak: I stumble across a lot of different screenplays as a producer, and what caught our attention about Son – Mother was the universal subject of the story. Thanks to that, we didn’t have to make any changes or adjustments.

Did you actually manage to screen Son – Mother in Iran?

Farzad Pak: We are working on it, and I sincerely hope that we can screen the movie in Iran.

Why do you feel it is so important for the Iranian audience to see?

Ashkan Ashkani: When I was reading the screenplay, the film actually reminded me of a lot of situations from my own childhood. The reality hasn’t changed much since then, unfortunately.

Is this why you chose to work on the film in the first place?

Ashkan Ashkani: I think one of my biggest professional achievements is the fact that I stand by each film I have worked on. I like to think things through before I say “yes” to an offer. I need the story to be close to my heart. Working on Son – Mother captured me so much that I couldn’t tell when it started and when it ended. I think each of us left a piece of their heart in it, and even though it is quite a sad story, I am really glad we made it.





What does the future of Iranian cinema look like from your point of view?

Ashkan Ashkani: That's a rather broad question. There are a lot of promising filmmakers who focus on Iran's social issues, Mahnaz being one of them. Cinema proves to be a universal medium to uncover these issues and help everyone understand them. Hopefully, more such filmmakers will emerge, that would make me very optimistic about the future.

Mahnaz, you were imprisoned after shooting the documentary *Women in Shadow*.

Mahnaz Mohammadi: But my problems weren't related specifically to this film. They began when I started to speak out about, or work on, the topic of inequality and gender-based discrimination. My films were judged unjustly because under totalitarian rule, different viewpoints are not celebrated. From the moment women are born, rules and regulations are dictated to them by a patriarchal world. We all become variations of "being a woman" due to our varied life experiences, yet we are expected to obey one single rule imposed on us by the society.

Has your imprisonment taught you to obey these rules? Has it changed you?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: I was imprisoned three times. And even though I did suffer very much in prison, I suffered much more after my release, because there were people who rejected me altogether. Suddenly, the state and the regime weren't my enemies, the people around me were.

If you could turn back time, would you change anything in your life?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: No. I believe that all the bad things that happened to me made me a better person in the end. They broadened my view and made me more focused.

Have you ever considered moving outside Iran, to live and work in an environment which would offer you more freedom?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: A lot of people make this decision, and I did consider it for some time, but then I began working on *Travelogue*, a documentary on people who flee Iran. I spent many hours on a train to Ankara, inquiring about their reasons to leave, and after all, I decided to stay in Iran myself. To try and change what didn't suit me. This way, my life in Iran might get better one day.

The film ends with the son and mother being apart. Do they get to see each other again?

Mahnaz Mohammadi: What do you think?

I wish they would.

Mahnaz Mohammadi: If it were a Hollywood movie, there would probably be a happy ending. But this is an Iranian film. And if they were bound to see each other again, Leila wouldn't leave Amir in the institution for a week, much less a couple of months.

That is terribly sad.

That is our life.

*The interview was conducted
by Viola Cernodrinska in April 2019.*

CAST & CREW PROFILES



Mohammad Rasoulof

Independent director, writer and producer. Mohammad Rasoulof started making documentaries and short films. His first feature film, **The Twilight** (Gagooman), premiered in 2002 and was awarded the best film at the Fajr Film Festival in Iran. After releasing his second film, **Iron Island** (Jazireh Ahani), in 2005, he faced Iranian censorship and his further work was restricted by the authorities. Since then, he has produced five feature films which have been banned in the country. Later he has been prohibited from travelling abroad.

In 2010, he was arrested on set, trialed and sentenced to six years in prison. This was later reduced to one year and Rasoulof was released on bail. He is still waiting for his sentence to be carried out. He has since won many international awards, including the directing prize for **Goodbye** (Bé Omid é Didar, 2011), the FIPRESCI prize for **Manuscripts Don't Burn** (Dast-Neveshteha Nemisoozand, 2013), and the best film award for **A Man of Integrity** (Lerd, 2017) in the Un Certain Regard category at the Cannes Film Festival



Farzad Pak

Producer, long-time member of the Association of Independent Iranian Producers, and head of the Filminiran production company. During his 20-year career in documentary and film, he has worked in both Iranian and international productions spanning from

Joanna Lumley's silk road documentary to Costanza Quatriglio's war drama **Just Like My Son** (Sembra mio figlio), which was released in 2018 as an Italian, Croatian, and Belgian co-production.

SON-MOTHER / PESAR-MADAR

Kaveh Farnam

Producer Kaveh Farnam, CEO of Dubai based Advanced Media and film enthusiast. His passion for cinema took him to Czech Republic where he founded Europe Media Nest s.r.o. with the mission to produce films, support young talented and independent film makers, and sponsor film festivals and the events that would shed a light on the real and true image of current Iran. Co-produced "**A MAN OF INTEGRITY**" "Directed by Rasoulof- winner of uncertain

regards, Cannes film festival 2017. "**A VERY ORDINARY CITIZEN**" (2015) - awarded the Sepanta award at the IFF San Francisco. "**LIKE MY NAME PEGAH**" (2018) – directed by Soudabeh Beizaei – awarded as the best documentary of the year by Iran Cinema House. "**LEAKAGE**" (2018) directed by Suzan Iravani – introduced at Karlovy Vary International Film Festival 2018 in a Works in Progress section and premiered in Berlinale 2019 Forum section.

Askhan Askhani

Considered one of Iran's top cinematographers, he has worked on more than 30 short and feature films. He has collected awards for best cinematography at the Tehran Short Film Festival and the Évora International Short Film Festival. One of his most successful collaborations was on Mohammad Rasoulof's **A Man**

of Integrity which has been developed in cooperation with Europe Media Nest and the Magiclub and Bystrouška studios. The production and post-production of **Son – Mother** partly brought the same crew together again in 2018 to create a captivating film that Askhani says is "close to his heart".



SON-MOTHER / PESAR-MADAR

© 2014 Creative Dock

CONTACT INFO

Sales

Gabriela Daniels

gabriela.daniels@medianest.net

Tel: +420 732 830 411

Europe Media Nest s.r.o.

Štítného 591/7, 130 00, Prague, CZ

www.medianest.net

Press

Marie Barvínková, Viola Černodrinská

media@creativedock.cz

Tel: +420 774 835 661, +420 774 090 731

Creative Dock

Zubatého 295/5, 150 00, Prague, CZ

www.creativedock.com



medianest.net/son-mother

