



[Vimeo link for this week's film and ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS](#)

[Zoom link for all FALL 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions](#)

The film is available for streaming on Amazon Prime.

**Directed, produced and written by** Asghar Farhadi  
**Original Music by** Sattar Oraki  
**Cinematography by** Mahmoud Kalari  
**Film Editing by** Hayedeh Safiyari

**Academy Award** Best Foreign Language Film of the Year (Iran)

Payman Maadi...Nader  
Leila Hatami...Simin  
Sareh Bayat...Razieh  
Shahab Hosseini...Hojjat  
Sarina Farhadi...Termeh  
Merila Zare'i...Miss Ghahraii  
Ali-Asghar Shahbazi...Nader's Father  
Babak Karimi...Interrogator  
Kimia Hosseini...Somayeh  
Shirin Yazdanbakhsh...Simin's Mother  
Sahabanu Zolghadr...Azam  
Mohammadhasan Asghari...Creditor  
Shirin Azimiyannezhad...Woman in the Bus  
Hamid Dadju...Creditor  
Mohammad Ebrahimian...Judge  
Samad Farhang...Interrogator's Office Manager  
Ali Fattahi...Soldier  
Nafise Ghodrati...School Teacher  
Roya Hosseini...Police Officer  
Seyyed Jamshid Hosseini...Accused Man  
Hamid Janane...Soldier



Sahar Kave...Neighbour Woman  
Seyyd Hamid Mirshams...Soldier  
Manuchehr Mohammadzade...Creditor  
Mazdak Mohaymeni...Police Officer  
Majid Nameni...Accused Man

**Asghar Farhadi** (b. 1972, Isfahan, Iran) has written 19 films and directed nine. Farhadi has received two Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film for his films *A Separation* (2011) and *The Salesman* (2016), making him one of the few directors worldwide who have won the category twice. He also received the Cannes Film Festival Award for Best Screenplay for his film *The Salesman*. In 2021, he received the Cannes Film Festival's Grand Prix for his film *A Hero*. In 2012, he was included on the annual Time 100 list of the most influential people in the world. That same year he also received the Legion of Honour from France. These are the other films he has directed: 2018 *Everybody Knows*, 2013 *The Past*, 2011 *A Separation*, 2009 *About Elly*, 2006 *Fireworks Wednesday*, 2004 *Beautiful City*, and 2003 *Dancing in the Dust*.

**Mahmoud Kalari** (b. April 31, 1951, Tehran, Iran) has 92 cinematographer credits, some of which are 2021 *Major*, 2013 *The Past*, 2012 *I'm his wife*, 2011 *A Separation*, 2010 *40 years old*, 2010 *Adamkosh*, 2009 *7:05*, 2009 *Love at 40*, 2008 *Shirin*, 2008 *Khake ashena*, 2006 *Mainline*, 2006 *The Fish Fall in Love*, 2006 *Havana File*, 2006/*I Offside*, 2006 *Fereshte va farsh*, 2005 *Yek boos-e koochooloo*, 2005 *Bab'Aziz - The Prince That Contemplated His Soul*, 2005 *The Willow Tree*, 2005 "Cinema Iran", 2005 *Tickets*, 2004 *Al-Ghazali: The Alchemist of Happiness*, 2004 *Abadan*, 2004 *Friday's Soldiers*, 2003 *Boutique*, 2003 *A House Built on Water*, 2001 *Ab va Atash*, 2001 *The Hidden Half*, 2000 *Booye kafoor, atre yas*, 2000 *Tales of an Island* (segment "Dear Cousin Is Lost"), 2000 *The Mix*, 1999 *The Wind Will Carry Us*, 1999 *Ahmad Shamlou: Master Poet of Liberty*, 1998 *The Pear Tree*, 1998 *Leila*, 1998 *Madresei keh baad bord* (short), 1998 *Siavash*, 1997 *Betrothal*, 1997 *The Cloud and the Rising Sun*, 1996 *A Moment of Innocence*, 1996 *Gabbeh*, 1996 *The Gazelle*, 1995 *Salaam Cinema*, 1995 *Alchemy*, 1995 *Reyhaneh*, 1995 *Tehran Symphony*, 1995 *Tejarat*, 1994 *The Spouse*, 1994 *The Wolf's Trail*, 1994 *Rooz-e sheytan*, 1993 *Sara*, 1992 *The Sergeant*, 1992 *The love-stricken*, 1991 *Mother*, 1991 *Morghabi-e vahshi*, 1990 *O Iran*, 1990 *A Time for Love*, 1988 *The Lead*, 1987 *Ruzhay Entezar*, 1987 *The Stone Lion*, 1987 *Visa*, and 1985 *Jadehay sard*.

**Sattar Oraki** has 54 film music composer credits, some of which are 2020 *Femininity*, 2012 *Ekbatan*, 2012 *Yek Satr Vagheiat*, 2011 *A Separation*, 2011 *Nadarha*, 2011 *Kooche melli*, 2010 *Whatever God Wants*, 2010 *Empty Paper Bag* (short), 2010 *Nasepas*, 2009 *The Strangers*, 2008 *Loose Rope*, and 2007 *Rock, Paper, Scissors*.

**Payman Maadi** (1970, New York City, New York) has 20 acting credits, some of which are: 2018 *Bomb: A Love Story*, 2013 "Criminal Justice", 2011 *Mourning*, 2011 *A Separation*, and 2009 *About Elly*.

**Leila Hatami** (October 1, 1972, Tehran, Iran) has



appeared in 43 films, some of which are: 2018 *Bomb: A Love Story*, 2012 *Pele Akher*, 2012 *Narenji Poush*, 2011 *Felicity Land*, 2011 *A Separation*, 2011 *Aseman-e mahboob*, 2011 *Ashnaee ba Leila*, 2010 *40 years old*, 2010 *There Are Things You Don't Know*, 2010 *Parse Dar Meh*, 2009 *Bi pooli*, 2009 *Love at 40*, 2008 *Shirin*, 2005 *Poet of the Wastes*, 2005 *Portrait of a Lady Far Away*, 2005 *Verdict*, 2005 *Salad-e fasl*, 2002 *The Deserted Station*, 2002 *Low Heights*, 2001 *Ab va Atash*, 2001 *Morabbaye shirin*, 2000 *The Mix*, 1999 *Sheida*, 1998 *Leila*, 1992 *The love-stricken*, and 1984 *Kamalolmolk*.

**Shahab Hosseini** (February 3, 1974, Tehran, Iran) has 68 acting credits, some of

which are: 2021 *Golden Blood*, 2012 *Sayeh Vahshat* (completed), 2012 *The Paternal House*, 2012 *Hiss Dokhtarha Faryad Nemizanand*, 2011 *Final Whistle*, 2011 *Goodbye*, 2011 *Havalie Otoban*, 2011 *A Separation*, 2011 *Barf Rooye Shirvani Dagh*, 2011 *Just an Hour Ago* (short), 2010 *Anahita*, 2010 *Parse Dar Meh*, 2009 *Flags of Kaveh's Castle*, 2009 *About Elly*, 2009 *Superstar*, 2009 *Heartbroken*, 2008 *Niloofar*, 2007 "Zero Degree Turn", 2005 *Salvation at 8:20*, 2005 *Gerdab*, 2004 *A Candle in the Wind*, 2003 *The Fifth Reaction*, 2003 *Zahr-e asal*, 2002 *Adamakha*, and 2002 *Rokhsareh*.

**Sareh Bayat** (October 6, 1979, Tehran, Iran) has appeared 24 films and television series, such as: 2019 *Rahman 1400*, 2019 *Symphony No. 9*, 2018 *The Dark Room*, 2017 *The Lobby*, 2014 *Resident of the Middle Floor*, 2014 *Dreamy*, 2014 *Lamp 100*, 2014 *Oblivion Season*, and 2011 *A Separation*.

**Sarina Farhadi** is the daughter of Asghar Farhadi and also appears in his latest film 2021 *A Hero*.

### Arjang Assad: Separation

The film opens with the couple Nader and Simin in family court. Simin (Leila Hatami) wants to leave Iran to raise her daughter Termeh in the West. The husband, Nader (Payman Moaadi) wants to stay in

Iran to look after his father, who suffers from advanced Alzheimer's. Since they cannot be together, they seek divorce, but Nader will not give up Termeh. Simin tells the judge that she does not want to raise her daughter in her native country "under these circumstances." "What circumstances?" she is asked. She cautiously chooses not to respond. We never see the judge the couple are addressing, instead they look at us, inviting us to judge. Thus starts Asghar Farhadi's *Separation*: It is an invitation for the viewer to ponder "these circumstances" and assess the relative merits of each parent's arguments.

"These circumstances" take a turn for the worse when a second couple is brought into contact with Farhad's family. When Simin's request for divorce is not granted, she moves out to stay with her parents. Termeh chooses to stay behind with her father and grandfather. Farhad now needs help to take care of his ailing father during the work day. He hires Razieh (Sareh Bayat), a caretaker who also happens to be a devout Muslim. The caretaker and her husband Hojjat (Shahab Hosseini) form the second key couple in the film. Coming from very different economic strata, the two couples are only brought together through an employment relationship. In his earlier film *Fireworks Wednesday*, Farhadi set up a similar structure: a middle class couple whose marriage is falling apart bring in house help in the person of a young girl who is about to be married. While the relation between the two couples in the earlier film was somewhat playful, the two couples in *Separation* are set on a path of tragic confrontation when Hojjat accuses Nader of causing Razieh's miscarriage by pushing her down the stairway.

The original title of the film in Farsi (Persian) is *Separation of Nader from Simin*. The word separation translates "jodaee"—a Farsi word that suggests divorce or parting. Curiously, the abbreviated English title is more indicative of the themes the film portrays. This is not just about a divorce, a matter of irreconcilable differences between two individuals, it is also about separations that keep people apart. Ostensibly, the separation of Nader and Simin stems from several fundamental

disagreements, chiefly how their daughter should be raised. This in turn reflects their different approaches to life, which Nader rather one-sidedly characterizes as fight or flight. These differences between individuals in the same class, quickly spill over to clashes between two very different segments of



society, to which the two couples of the film (and their circles) belong.

Farhadi also highlights the theme of separation visually throughout the film by placing barriers between individuals, doors, screens, shutters, and walls abound. In this way, even the space of the small apartment where most of the action transpires is divided up into smaller cubicles,

enclosing each individual in a more constricted space. Rarely do we see several characters in the same shot together, mostly we get shots of just one individual, often in close up. Moreover, we rarely leave the interiors of apartments, office buildings, or cars. The open city (Tehran) which featured so prominently in such Iranian films as Panahi's *The White Balloon* or *The Circle* is nearly absent in *Separation*. When the camera does capture the city, it is anodyne. This is Tehran represented as if it were any other city of the Middle East: you will not see revolutionary posters or slogans in the streets.

The conflict between the two couples derives from the stark economic and cultural separation between the middle and lower classes, a gap that the Islamic Revolution was supposed to eliminate. In *Separation*, filmed some 33 years after the revolution, the gulf between the classes remains. As a bank employee, Farhad is not rich (the apartment is his father's), but his family does enjoy middle class comforts. His daughter receives private tutoring at home, there is a piano, and he can afford some \$300 a month for home care. In contrast, Hojjat is jobless and on medication for stress and depression. Beset by creditors, he is in an out of jail for his debts. His family is on the brink of collapse, just as his wife is carrying a 4-month plus baby. Despite all this, Farhadi depicts both Razieh and Hojjat very sympathetically. The viewer quickly apprehends that these are basically honest people, would never steal, and carry themselves with an obvious sense of

dignity.

This favorable depiction is essential for the carefully contrived balance of the film; Simin vouches that her husband is a good man at the very start, and we feel the same is true of Razieh (we witness her genuine care for Farhad's father). Creating equal sympathy for both couples is central to Farhadi's stylistic tightrope act, he has called it maintaining equal distance to all of his characters. For exactly this reason, it would be misleading to take this film as a depiction of "life in present-day Iran" whatever such a hopelessly general notion might mean. For instance, one may question if many men in Hojjat's class would exercise his self-control when he is moved to strike his wife or sister! Much of the tension in *Separation* derives from the socioeconomic chasm that separates the two couples. There is the obvious economic contrast: Nader and Simin enjoy a comfortable middle-class lifestyle.

Nader works in a bank, Simin teaches English, they have enough to hire an English teacher for their daughter, each drives a car. Hojjat and Razieh are clearly on the brink of precipice. Hojjat is unemployed, deeply in debt, hounded by his creditors, and on several medications. Razieh is trying her best to help, which is precisely why she accepts the work as caregiver despite the severe hardship this will impose on her. Notwithstanding their severe financial challenges, Razieh and Hojjat continue to project a sense of dignity and rectitude that inspires respect. They are simply good people in a very tight bind.

The basic decency of the two couples does not protect them from falling victim to the deep mistrust that rules the relations between the lower and middle classes. Each couple harbors a multitude of suspicions and preconceptions about the other. Farhad is quick to accuse Razieh of stealing and her husband of extortion. Simin consider Hojjat as capable of vengeful murder. Her mother does not understand why miscarriage is such a misfortune, just have another child next year she tells Razieh with amazing insouciance. Both Farhad and Termeh's tutor suspect Hojjat of spousal abuse. In turn, Hojjat views the upper class as impious and immoral, and accuses the



couple's social circle as weaving a web of lies to exonerate Farhad. Equally important, he is deeply wounded by how Nader's circle seems to treat his kind as subhuman.

The separation between the two couples is also carefully reflected in the dialogue. As a writer and director with deep roots in theatre, Farhadi clearly understands the importance of dialogue. *Separation* has one of the most meticulously constructed dialogues of all Farsi movies, which consistently reflects the sociolinguistic separation of the couples. It should be noted that the Farsi language has several

layers of formality, the usage of which is generally class-based. These differences are much starker in Farsi than in English and regrettably cannot be reflected in the subtitles. As in most society, this facility in language has its consequences. We see how Hojjat is clearly outclassed by the articulate, well-spoken, and wily Nader in the

hearing. Constantly frustrated in presenting his case to the judge, he is cognizant of his huge handicap when he exclaims: My problem is that I can't speak like him [Nader], I come to a boil way too fast.

Significantly, both male characters in *Separation* subscribe to the notion of *haqq*—a word that is used often in the film. In Farsi, this word, which literally means "right," has a wider meaning. One's *haqq* is what is rightfully one's due or what you can lay claim to legitimately, morally, or ethically lay claim to. Nader's view of life in Iran is to fight for his rights and not to yield to pressure. He works hard to instill this in his daughter (witness the scene at the gas station when Termeh goes back to get the change). He often wants to make a decision and move on: his favorite expression is "it's done." Nader hates to be intimidated, which is partially why he will not seek a compromise with Hojjat. When directed towards Simin, this very intransigence costs Nader his family life. Hojjat is the true victim of the film: He did not get his due from the cobbler's shop he used to work at and the legal system did not help him in the least. This time, in his conflict with Nader, he is adamant about getting his *haqq*. In contrast, the women in the film Simin, Simin's mother, Razieh, her

sister-in-law, and even Termeh are all pragmatic and work hard to seek a way out.

Many viewers have focused on truth/integrity as one of the main themes of the film. Nader is keen on instilling rectitude as a value in his daughter, as the scene about Persian synonyms illustrates. When Termeh offers the teacher's choice for the word guarantee, Nader rejects this choice and offers another term. You should always go with the correct choice and not compromise for the sake of a few points in class, the father instructs. Truth over expediency? The developments give this the lie: in the course of the story, almost every character is caught lying. When Termeh herself confronts her father about how he lied to the judge, he defends it based on the large cost that his imprisonment would entail. Ironically, this conversation occurs in the midst of a mathematics homework concerning costs, gains and net benefit!

Farhadi himself has warned us about rushing into judgment with a blanket condemnation of lying. The viewer is asked to ponder if certain lies can be justified. Nevertheless, the broader picture is not reassuring: the system itself drives people to falsehood. It starts with Razieh seeking work without telling her husband, an act of omission in which her daughter Somayeh is complicit. In fact, Hojjat would never agree for his spouse to work in the house of a single (or separated) man, or touch a man. The inflexibility of criminal law forces Nader to lie. Even more telling is how the children, both Termeh and Somayeh, are compelled to lie to protect their parents. One of Farhadi's narrative techniques is to withhold information for slow release. For example, we do not learn about Razieh's accident until the final segments. Other information is available to the viewer but withheld from characters in the film. He has likened his technique to that of a crossword puzzle, as more information obtains on some entries, one gets to fill out other words. He had used this technique to much advantage in his remarkable earlier film, *About Elly*. He continues to use it in *Separation*, but subjects it to a more stylized narrative structure. At times, this



slow-release technique causes the viewer's sympathies to shift from one side to another. Farhadi's broader point seems to be the following: Don't rush to condemn, your information is always incomplete, you may lack the context or the motivation, and there are always shades of grey. This stance is especially important for the Iranian movie audience, an audience used to simple plots and unambiguous resolutions, with clearly delineated heroes and villains. In short, this is a cautionary tale for a society that is much too judgmental for Farhadi's taste.

Both Farhadi and his actors have insisted that *Separation* is not a political film. This is not surprising since any statement to the contrary may have dire consequences for the director and crew in Iran. Despite such denials, the film is not devoid of social commentary. First, there is the matter of Islam. Religion is completely absent from the life of Nader and Simin. For Razieh, however, the sanctions and restrictions of Islam rule supreme. We see this when she calls a central authority to see if she can attend to Nader's father. The Western viewer might be surprised why such a permission should be even sought when the need is so real. But Razieh is not driven by expediency. To her, religious authority is absolute. At great peril to her family, she steadfastly refuses to take an oath when she harbors doubts as to cause of her miscarriage. Some may admire her strict observance and piety, while others may wonder why Islam gets in the way of effecting practical solutions to real problems. In the end, Razieh and Hojjat have lost everything! All hope of resolution is lost and Hojjat's anger against the upper class bursts into violence. Is this indicative of how Islam may be impeding the solution of wider societal problems in present-day Iran, or is this yet another indication of how the Islamic Republic has failed to establish its ideal of justice?

Throughout the two couples' confrontation, their daughters are the observers: Nader's daughter Termeh is 11 while Razieh's girl is about four years old. At the conclusion of the film, it is Termeh who is asked to choose between the separating parents. Her

choice is not revealed to us. Just as at the beginning of the film, we are asked to make up our own mind. “What circumstances?,” the judge had asked in the opening sequence. After over two hours of watching the evidence, one would expect the viewer to know the answer.



**Joseph Burke: “Rediscovering Morality Through Ashgar Farhadi’s *A Separation*,” *Senses of Cinema*, Dec. 19, 2011:**

*There is no shortage of ugliness in the world, If Man closed his eyes to it there would be even more. But Man is a problem solver.*

*The House is Black (Khaneh siah ast, 1963)*

**Introduction**

Today morality is an awkward word associated with genuflections and fairy tales, prejudices and superstitions. Morality is concealed from ourselves, either out of convenience or coercion. The persistent and patient reflection required by true morality is unfashionable in some places, punishable in others.

Yet it is there in all our thoughts and actions. It permeates our expectations and emotions. It is the language of self-identity. The first step to the rediscovery of morality, a terribly difficult one, is to see its reality, to appreciate its weight and to acknowledge its complexity.

With *Jodaeiye Nader az Simin (A Separation, 2011)*, Ashgar Farhadi shows us what cinema can do; it can make us believe again in a moral world. Yet Farhadi is no preacher, no cinematic priest. He hands us the judge’s gavel only to show us the crudeness of its sound. Farhadi disarms the powerful and the cynical through a pluralism of moral perspectives dealing with issues of common concern without attracting the revulsion of authority. In order to engage such matters in an environment controlled

by inconsistent regulation, Farhadi has had to undertake a carefully nuanced approach both on and off screen.

His desire for us to see that life is moral asks each of us not only to assess our judgements but how we make them. He refuses to be called on to deliberate for us. Instead, he weaves and reweaves his story’s threads so that we can appreciate ever more its undeniable pattern, even when we are not precisely sure its picture.

**Ashgar Farhadi – An Overview**

Ashgar Farhadi is the director of five titles: *Raghs dar ghobar (Dancing in the Dust, 2003)*, *Shah-re Ziba (The Beautiful City, 2004)*, *Chaharshanbe-soori (Fireworks Wednesday, 2006)*, *Darbareye Elly (About Elly, 2009)* and now *A Separation*. Including these five, he has also been a full or contributing writer on *Ertefae Past (Low Altitude, 2002)*, *Canaan (2008)*, *Shab (2008)* *Tambourine (2008)* and *Mohakeme dar khiaban (Trial on the Street, 2009)*.

Each of Farhadi’s directed films explicitly concern the pressures of social life and how human interaction develops to pose deeply complex, some say intractable, difficulties. *Dancing in the Dust* follows the struggles of a newly divorced Azerbaijani who has to meet the high demands of his matrimonial dowry. In *The Beautiful City* a youth is imprisoned for murder; as he approaches legal adulthood he becomes eligible for execution. *Fireworks Wednesday* again turns to the trials of marriage: A young woman, soon to be wed, begins to work in a wealthier north Tehran home. Her employers are undergoing their own marital problems and she is soon drawn in. *About Elly* takes a group of seemingly close middle class friends and charts the decline of their relationships when an outsider’s disappearance plunges them into doubt and acrimony.

Farhadi’s career as a filmmaker has seen an intensification of characterisation and plot, reaching a zenith now with *A Separation*. Farhadi’s training is in theatre and he says he feels more a writer than a filmmaker. The influence of the stage on him is openly acknowledged: “We took our time to rehearse [for *A Separation*], working from a very detailed screenplay, which we followed precisely, to enable each actor to understand the different dimensions of their character. This approach may very well come from my experience with the theatre... Once we started shooting, we agreed that variations would be minimal.” This has been to the immense benefit of *A Separation* in which characters engage in sharp

dialogue in tight quarters delivering a remarkable intimacy.

### The Double Success of *A Separation*

In 1986 only two post-revolution Iranian films were shown at foreign festivals. By 1990 two hundred and thirty were screened in some seventy eight international film festivals, winning eleven prizes. When introducing Jafar Panahi's *Badkonake sefid* (*The White Balloon*, 1995) at the 22nd Telluride Film Festival in 1995, Werner Herzog remarked: "What I say tonight will be a banality in the future. The greatest films of the world today are being made in Iran." Yet consensus amongst Iranians and non-Iranians as to which films deserve praise has not always been reached. *A Separation*, however, has managed to do just that.

Irrespective of their quality, there are three broad factors that make Iranian cinema alluring for non-Iranian audiences. First is their exoticism; Chris Marker gives us a sense of the country's hypnotic effect on the outsider: "Tehran with its sky that always looked ten times more vast than the skies of the Occident. The moment of dusk when daylight still hangs, bluish, and when brass lamps are being lit already." Second, geopolitics plays its part. An inside view as to what Iran is 'really like' is always desirable to the politically curious. Third, Iranian cinema is celebrated for giving a sense of purpose to the medium. In its challenges to repressive government both in front of and behind the camera, Iranian cinema gives the impression of transcending mere commercial entertainment. Masoud Golsorkhi writing for *The Guardian* said that "This work's [*A Separation*'s] role in contributing to the wider public dialogue that is determining the future of Iran should not be underestimated."

For reasons related to the above, the Iranian films that are popular on the international circuit can often be derided at home for what are perceived to be unrealistic and heavily allegorical representations of their day-to-day lives. Conversely, films that are well-liked in Iran, take for instance Tahmineh Milani's *Atash bas* (*Cease Fire*, 2006), are frequently deemed too sentimental or politically dubious by non-Iranian audiences. Yet *A Separation* has managed to avoid

both sets of criticisms.

In Iran, Farhadi won the Farj Festival's top prize, the Crystal Simorgh, for best director and best screenplay. Additionally, *A Separation* took the Audience Award at the festival. Currently, it is the Iranian nomination for Best Foreign Film at the Oscars. It also had strong popular appeal with more than ten billion rials, or 1 million US dollars, worth of ticket sales in Tehran within 19 days over the Iranian holiday of Nowruz.



Meanwhile, *A Separation* has won a number of awards beyond Iran's borders. This includes best film and best screenplay at the Durban International Film Festival and, of course, the Berlin Golden Bear for best film and Silver Bears for both the male and female acting ensembles. In France, for instance, the film has had astonishing box-office

success with sales in excess of five million US dollars.

This consensus is as a direct result of Farhadi's masterfully ambiguous, but not impartial, treatment of matters that are of primary concern to Iran's wider population, as well as non-Iranians around the world. In fact, its ability to compromise between audiences is itself a consciously political act. Farhadi has said that "...in all my films, I have tried to multiply the points of view, rather than imposing my own. To enable the viewer to have different angles of the story. It is not difficult to agree that cinema, in essence, is a dictatorial art, where the director dictates what the spectator must see. It is exactly that attitude which I fight against...I hope in all cases that it is a democratic cinema!"

### *A Separation*'s politics

Released alongside the government-sponsored third installment of *Ekhrajiha* (*The Outcasts*), *A Separation* came to be associated with the opposition, known as the 'Green Movement'. The director of *The Outcasts* series, Masoud Dehnamaki, was a journalist for Ansar-e Hezbollah, a paramilitary group accused of beating up student demonstrators in 2009 protests. Others believe he was much more centrally involved than he acknowledges. His latest film satirizes the opposition in Iran, showing them as power-hungry

partiers who are manipulating the nation's youth. Dehnamaki has said that "The film warns against the wrong methods of democracy and election campaigns."

Some in the opposition movement called for a boycott of Dehnamaki's film. To further bolster their protest they sought to actively support another film and so turned to *A Separation*. While somewhat a matter of chance, it also reflected the opposition's appreciation for Farhadi's measured backing of persecuted Iranian artists. As a result, an unspoken contest emerged between the government and the opposition over the two films. *The Outcasts 3* was heavily promoted on state television and shown in thirty two screens in Tehran as opposed to twenty three for *A Separation*.

In addition to this unexpected clash with Dehnamaki's film, *A Separation* picked up on a political issue that young Iranians are most conscious of: economic opportunity. Farhadi has described *A Separation* as a complement to its immediate predecessor: "This [*A Separation*] is a logical development from *About Elly*. I had the feeling that that story wasn't finished. I see this film as a continuation of that film. With Nader the hermeneutical circle and journey was complete." Farhadi is referring to the issue of class.

*About Elly* comprises a group of middle class Iranians and their children who go away for a short break north of Tehran to the Caspian Sea. New to the group and invited by Sepideh (Golshifteh Farahani), Elly (Taraneh Alidoosti) is uneasy about mingling with the others and the group is unsure of her. It becomes apparent that they are trying to match her with their friend, Ahmad (Shahab Hosseini), who has come from Germany. They are unaware at this point that she is, apparently, engaged. When it appears that she has vanished from the camp, guilt, frustration and anger show the group to be less cohesive than originally thought.

Key to the film is Farhadi's use of Iran's social norms and religious regulations, especially around unmarried women. He exploits the prevailing social stigma to curtail his characters' actions and

choices, following Elly's disappearance.

Nevertheless, *About Elly* remains confined to the sphere of the middle classes. Hence, as admirable as it is, it fails to articulate the divide between Iran's middle and lower classes. *A Separation* brings socio-economic divisions to the fore through the frustrated existence of Hodjat (Shahab Hosseini), his wife Razieh (Sareh Bayat) and their daughter Somayeh (Kimia Hosseini) but also through a very quiet class-based prejudice in Nader (Peyman Moaadi).

The family of Razieh and Hodjat are struggling financially. Hodjat has been let go from his job with no redundancy. They embody the economic reality of so many Iranians today. The unemployment rate, not to mention the numbers of underemployed, is given by Iranian officials at 11.5% for 2011 but others say it is closer to 17-20%. A rigid formal labour market in Iran has locked people in long term joblessness. The term 'waithood' has emerged to denote the extended period



of transition between youth and adulthood in the country (and for much of the Middle East and North Africa, more generally). These pressures have put a perceptible strain on marriage and family formation.

Meanwhile, Nader reveals an inability to understand the struggles of the lower classes. He mistreats or distances himself from Razieh, who he has employed as a carer and housekeeper, on a number of occasions. He is aware that she is pregnant but is ambivalent to the long commute and heavy manual work she is undertaking. He is quick to assume that Razieh stole the money from his flat. When Nader plays table football, Termeh (Sarina Farhadi), Somayeh and even Nader's father (Ali-Ashgar Shahbazi), who has Alzheimer's disease, are participating but Razieh is shown tired and worn out in the kitchen.

Other potential indications of Nader's prejudice is that he does not deal with the car fuel attendants and his working life puts a glass wall between him and the general public. Most emphatically, though, towards the end of the film, he makes a belligerent move into the home of Razieh and Hodjat. He embarrasses them in front of Hodjat's creditors, knowing Razieh will be unable to swear on



the Quran. Nader is not extreme or even very consistent in his prejudice but, nevertheless, at key moments his actions are shaped by it.

With these socio-economic tensions infusing the film, a sense of uncertainty for the future of the country reveals itself.

Termeh and Somayeh, the two children of the film, are absorbing the values and observing the actions of their parents. They exhibit optimism for Iran's future when they play together with smiles and cheers, but penetrating gazes, in the courthouse and in Somayeh's home, reveal fear for what may be to come for each other.

In the aftermath of the bitterness that has developed between her parents and Somayeh's, Termeh is left to choose whom she is to live with. Ultimately,

attempts to reconcile her mother and father have broken down; the situation is now recalcitrant. The current reality in Iran reflects a similar stalemate. Opposition figures, such as Mir Hossein Musavi and Mehdi Karroubi, have been unable to gain change in Iran, instead facing arrest and censure for making demands. Factionalism is intensifying between supporters of President Ahmadinejad and those of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Just as we are left waiting in the courtroom corridor for what young Termeh will decide, we speculate as to what Iran's future will be.

Farhadi has said: "It is probably easier for an Iranian audience to establish a complete relationship with the film. Knowing the language, but also the context and social texture in which the story is set will no doubt open up less obvious interpretations." *A Separation*, in contrast to many other Iranian films of recent years, is an urban film, which centres on two adult, middle class subjects. As such, it has managed to reach people by presenting to them a view of their lives in Iran that they can accept as sincere and engaging.

### Overcoming Censorship

Farhadi sees the risks of his films being



prohibited as unpalatable: "What's the point of making a movie if it can't be seen by the 70 million people in my home country?" *A Separation* came under threat when production was temporarily halted after he voiced his desire to see the return of Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Jafar Panahi to filmmaking in Iran. Farhadi reportedly apologised, to the dismay of some, regaining permission to have his film made. Despite its noted themes and Farhadi's controversial comments, *A Separation* has been chosen as the

official Iranian candidate for the Foreign Film Academy Award. Much pessimism was expressed by Iranian cinema enthusiasts in the lead up to the decision. But it was chosen.

The current censorship system dates back to the early days of the Islamic Revolution,

when cinema had come to be associated with the corrupt regime of the Shah. As tensions fermented in the lead up to the revolution, 180 cinemas were burned, most dramatically the Rex Cinema fire of 1978 which resulted in the death of some 400 people trapped inside. That specific attack was in response to the showing of Masud Kimiai's *Gavaznha (The Deer, 1976)* a portrayal of drug addiction amongst miscreants.

The theological basis of this antagonism towards cinema was fourfold: (a) Creative visual representation would overcome one's reason, (b) Sustained reflection on visual representations of real things would prevent examination of reality, (c) The cinema screen invited idolatry, and (d) Cinema's simulation of God's creative act risks blasphemy. As a result of this world-view, within the first four years of the Islamic Republic, 1,956 of 2,208 domestically-produced films were banned.

A shift occurred, however, when the Islamic Regime realised that cinema could be used for its own purposes. Ayatollah Khomeini said that "we are not opposed to cinema, to radio, or to television... The cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people, but as you know, it was used instead to corrupt our youth. It is the

misuse of cinema that we are opposed to.” Moving cinema from haram to halal (‘forbidden’ to ‘lawful’) required the close supervision of the authorities. This would fall upon Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance which continues to supervise film production and distribution in Iran.

The ‘1996 Code of Regulations for an Islamic, Anti-imperialist Cinema’ listed the following as prohibited from film:

Tight feminine clothes.

Showing any part of a woman’s body except the face and hands.

Physical contact and tender words or jokes between men and women.

Jokes on the army, police, or family.

Negative characters with a beard (which could associate them with religious figures)

Foreign or coarse words.

Foreign music or any type of music which brings joy.

Showing a favourable character who prefers solitude to collective life.

Policemen and soldiers badly dressed or having a disagreement.

In 2005, two months after the election of President Ahmadinejad, the Supreme Cultural Revolutionary Council announced the banning of films that promoted: “secularism, feminism, unethical behaviour, drug abuse or violence.” Recently, Mohammad Hosseini, the 8th and current Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, has been coming under severe criticism for what has been daubed the “un-Islamic nature” of the relationships depicted in Iranian films in recent years.

Yet despite the institutional weight behind film censorship in Iran and the specification of codes, it is a mistake to believe that there is either an iron grip on cinema in Iran or that Iranian officials are simply duped when a seemingly critical film emerges. Cinematic censorship does not operate in a uniform way through the application of standardised rules. As Mohsen Makhmalbaf put it: “In cinema, sometimes the person in charge was strict and his deputy was sympathetic, and vice versa. We always found



loopholes which we went through like water through a crack.” Decisions are not even always permanent. Take for instance, Barbod Taheri’s 1979 documentary

on the Islamic Revolution entitled *Soghoot-e 57 (The Fall of 57)*. After many years of popularity, it suddenly found itself on the prohibited list in 1984. The authorities informed Taheri that “there are moments in a nation’s life when people no longer need to know what has actually happened.”

Decisions are always malleable and reversible. This is not to say that punishments are not often severe, but as Dr Zeydabadi-Nejad explains: “Examination of the shifting and complex framework and application of censorship and its relationship with the political atmosphere of the country shows that in the absence of a clearly defined censorship code or a unitary censorship mechanism, the ‘red lines’ are blurred and open to negotiation.” *A Separation* is the archetypal example of a challenging film emerging in such a context.

Farhadi has become a master at eluding positions that might provide traction to censors, by engaging pluralistic moral perspectives to imply that he himself is saying nothing at all: “I don’t think it’s important for the audience to know my intention. I’d rather they left the cinema with questions. I believe that the world today needs more questions than answers. Answers prevent you from questioning, from thinking. From the opening scene, I aimed to set this up.”

Three examples can illustrate Farhadi’s skilful approach in the context of a restrictive environment:

When Simin (Leila Hatami) is moving out of the family home she takes one piece of music with her. It is that of Mohammad-Reza Shajarian, the prized Iranian singer, composer and musician. Shajarian is not only a national treasure in Iran but a vocal supporter of the Green Movement. He, in fact, went so far as to demand that the authorities stop using his music for their propaganda. His status as an icon of Iranian arts makes Simin’s choice simultaneously banal and subversive.

Termeh is learning vocabulary with her father Nader in their home. At one point Nader asks her to

give a synonym for “insurrection”, she offers the answer “rebellion”. The Farsi word she uses is “Jonbesh”. This is noteworthy as “Jonbesh-e Sabz” is the term for the Green Movement. Emphasis is put on the word with the ringing of the doorbell. At this precise moment we are also shown Nader in the kitchen with an intensely green wall in the background. Described in this way may make the scene sound blunt but the flow of interchange between Termeh and Nader is quick and certainly not laboured. For all intents and purposes, the scene depicts nothing more than a typical father-daughter pair working together on homework.

Termeh recites a passage of history schoolwork with her grandmother at the courthouse: “During the Sassanid period, people were divided into two classes, the royalty, the upper class and the normal people.” Her grandmother interjects: “The regular people.” The Sassanid Empire between 224 CE–650 CE marked a period of high civilization, with a culture that was influential far beyond its territorial borders. The Sassanid period preceded the Muslim conquest and the adoption of Islam. It was hierarchical and divided into four groups: the priests, the warriors, the secretaries and the commoners.(32) Its society put a great emphasis on centralised charismatic leadership; the controlling class was the priests. Termeh’s error about the number of classes suggests she is not properly aware of the divisions that exist in her own society. Somayeh, for her part, mimics Termeh in the courthouse; she aspires to be her, to enjoy her opportunities and experiences. Termeh and her grandmother gaze in Somayeh’s direction but fail to see her, they do not understand her circumstances. The Sassanid period offers a variety of prisms through which to interpret this scene.

In using such references Farhadi avails of their numerous interpretative political dimensions to allow him develop deep currents but not endanger his film.

### Separate Moralities

The divorce of Nader and Simin is clearly only one axis across which the schism implied in the

title manifests itself. There is also that between men/women, adults/children, observant /non-observant, middle class/working class, insiders/outside, public/private, kin/non-kin and, indeed, audience/character. Nader and Simin’s home is circular in shape with glass windows and doors that simultaneously allow for visibility and persistent division; Farhadi uses traffic and bus shelters in public spaces to retain a disjunction between us and the object of our attention. The effect of all this is to evoke how we are at once divided and irrevocably together.



In a similar way, Farhadi presents us with characters that are separated from each other by their moral outlooks on life but who cannot avoid dealing with each other. The moral typologies they represent are tested in the real world of choice and action revealing vibrant inner lives, which only

slowly become apparent to us.

Nader is progressive but still motivated by an underlying sense of duty. He wants his daughter to be an independent and strong woman, as illustrated at the car fuel pump when he insists she takes her change and in teaching her vocabulary at home (“What’s wrong is wrong, no matter who says what,” he tells her). Yet Nader also believes in a traditional respect for the older generation that makes certain demands on him. Duty justifies the means towards the end. The nature of his father’s illness requires him to stay in Iran, regardless of his wife and daughter’s wishes. Lying to his daughter and to the judge is permissible to him as a pragmatic consequence of the responsibility he has for his father’s well-being. This subjective morality puts the protection of his father over the welfare of others. He is aware that Razieh is pregnant but he is guided first and foremost by his father’s needs. Duty is linked to respect for Nader, which limits his behaviour. For instance, he is unable to unbutton his father’s shirt at the doctor’s surgery despite his need to clear his own name. A sense of resentment is perceptible in his arguments with Simin who he sees as unaware of these duties or as undervaluing them. For Nader, then, one has an obligation to deal with one’s traditional responsibilities with courage.

Simin too is progressive but for her it is underlined by a sense of optimism and a faith in the ideal of truth. Her longing to leave Iran represents a belief in the abstract, the other place. She believes in the possibility of a better world and in a better future. She thinks that one should move on from traditional duties, which are cyclical and repressive. In the film this manifests itself in the desire to give a better opportunity to her daughter, notably when she refers to the “circumstances” in Iran. Simin desires change and

improvement; while respectful of the past, she is persuaded by the need to reform their lives. She wears the head scarf but has dyed her hair a magnificent, deep red. She believes that truth is a value to be honoured irrespective of

the context. This is illustrated when she is asked by the teacher, Ms Ghahraii (Merila Zare’i), what she should say in the court if asked questions by the judge. Simin’s reply is “Tell the truth.” Simin embodies the need to resolve problems through compromise. Progress is possible with effort and negotiation. Markedly, she tries to mediate between her own family and that of Razieh’s.

Razieh is a woman of faith. She holds a superstitious rather than a critical belief in God. This system of thought guides her actions both in private and in public. One must put oneself in God’s hands; otherwise, one risks harming oneself or one’s family. Respect for God and the Quran are paramount. Humility and obedience are core values. Razieh requests guidance from a religious advisor over the phone when Nader’s father has soiled himself. She refuses to swear on the Quran that Nader has caused her miscarriage because she cannot be certain. She says she is more hurt by being considered a thief than to have lost her baby.

Hodjat is a man who views the world in terms of social justice. He is guided by the fact that an inegalitarian society has prohibited him and his family to progress in life. The Iranian society he is a part of views him as a monster because he is poor; he

is thought to be abusive of his wife and a danger to others. He has lost his job without compensation due to economic forces he has no control over. Debt and imprisonment have caused him psychological illness requiring medication. He considers his inability to defend himself in court a result of inarticulacy. Wealthier Iranian society owes him and his family reparation for the unfair treatment they have experienced. He is particularly outraged when the loss of his unborn baby appears to be taken less seriously

than the mistreatment of Nader’s elderly father. Justice overrides religion and he sees it as acceptable to swear falsely on the Quran in order to receive the money justly due from Nader and Simin.

These typologies are

neither fully consistent nor complete; *A Separation’s* characters are more than these sketches. However, through these characters we see that moral stances can clash and demand evaluation. Duty, truth, faith and justice come into conflict with one another. Our intuitions and judgements go through a process of critical reflection. With the slow release of information Farhadi plays on our own biases, ones we may not even have been aware of prior.

### *A Separation’s* Morality

In 1997 Kim Longinotto and Dr Ziba Mir-Hosseini made a documentary entitled *Divorce Iranian Style*. Set inside Iran’s divorce courts, we encounter a number of women who struggle in a patriarchal system. Through intelligence and charm, however, they manage to carve out acceptable positions from which they can make gains, albeit sometimes small ones.

Though *Divorce Iranian Style* and *A Separation* are ostensibly of different genres, there is something striking that links them. It seems inadequate to say they address the same topic for those who watch both will feel a deeper resonance. On reflection it becomes apparent that in this case it is not a conventional classification of fiction and non-



fiction that is important. Longinotto has said that in creating her documentaries she approaches them as if making a fictional film. What they are both appealing to is a particular way in which audiences are touched by cinema, and that is their moral affectivity.

In her discussion of the relationship between literature and philosophy, Cora Diamond notes that “we cannot see the moral interest of literature unless we recognise gestures, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, styles of face as morally expressive – of an individual or of a people. The intelligent description of such things is part of the intelligent, the sharp-eyed, description of life, of what matters, makes differences, in human lives.” Cinema gives us the opportunity to attend with care to the lives of others. Skilfully prepared, a film of this sort can reveal our own processes of recognition and point out their inadequacies.

A woman, Jamileh, in *Divorce Iranian Style* comes to court with her two children. She recounts her husband’s misdemeanours and demands the court’s intervention. She is insistent, clearly made determined by her hardships. The judge is eventually convinced of her difficulties and makes her husband pledge better behaviour. Then, suddenly, she turns in our direction and smiles with one hand concealing her face from the others in the court. In an instant our beliefs about her are changed. In a very real sense she is no longer the same person we had seen before us hitherto.

The key element common to both *Divorce Iranian Style* and *A Separation* is that they are able, through the camera, to bring to the surface the moral lives of their characters. They both present to us “gestures, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thoughts, styles of face as morally expressive” without ever enforcing their own judgement upon these individuals. In fact, to do so requires that they do not impinge on the viewer their own verdicts.

Is Hodjat beating Razieh and Somayeh? Towards the end of the film when he learns that his wife had a car accident and so cannot in good faith swear on the Quran, Hodjat becomes incandescent with rage. Razieh stands before him in that tiny,



impoverished kitchen. Several blows rain down from his fists. However, they do not hit her but fall upon his own head. In a ferocious scene we now see that he does not beat his family at all, that he is in fact a

deeply troubled man, driven to despair by debt and stress. Earlier at Termeh’s school, Hodjat asks those there: “Why do you think we beat our wives and children like animals? I swear on this Quran, we’re humans just like you.” We, the audience, are the real target of his words and we recall them vividly as he strikes his skull repeatedly and remorselessly.

After Farhadi’s hypnotic opening sequence of identity card photocopying, we find ourselves in the seat of a divorce court judge. The gaze of the spectator is emphatically asserted. The characters are appealing to us to be seen, to be heard and to be understood. We are to pass judgement. For the remainder of the film we essentially retain the seat of judge and spectator simultaneously, receiving evidence and testimony of a very private sort. It is thus unsurprising that Farhadi would say: “In all my films I try to touch upon justice: Justice that people have upon each other, the justice that the justice system has on people and the justice that people have on themselves.” Yet, Farhadi is discouraging self-righteousness, absolutism and moralism. In offering layer upon layer of moral complexity he refutes anyone’s confident, total or self-satisfied judgements.

When Forough Farrokhzad, poet and filmmaker, made her ground-breaking film *Khaneh siah ast (The House is Black)* in 1963, she brought her camera and sensibility to the lepers of Iran. Her unrelenting eye demanded her world to see differently, to reflect on the humanity behind a perplexing and frightening disease. Despite the trials of life she recognised the strength of cinema to bring about a transformation in how we see the world. Farhadi is using his camera and sensibility to show us ourselves. He is inculcating a respect for pluralism and critical thinking. Ultimately, he is making the problems of today’s Iran real, not by simplifying them with easy solutions, but by showing us the unanswered questions that underlie human morality.

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