

A Separation



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DIRECTED BY: Asghar Farhadi

CERTIFICATE: PG

RUNNING TIME: 117 mins

COUNTRY: Iran

LANGUAGE: Persian

YEAR: 2011

KEYWORDS: domestic drama, class conflict, secular v religious, justice, truth, contemporary Iranian cinema

SUITABLE FOR: 14–19 media/film studies, RS and citizenship

SYNOPSIS

This rich and compelling film captures the reality of city life in modern-day Iran, where a middle-class woman's decision to leave home sets in motion events that culminate in the death of an unborn child. Was Nadir, the woman's husband responsible? Certainly, he did shove the carer Razieh violently from the flat on the day he returned home to find his Alzheimer's-affected father tied to the bed, but all is certainly not as it seems. As the adults involved turn to legal remedies and the accusations and counter-accusations mount up, the tale's moral centre becomes Termeh, the ten-year-old daughter of Nadir and Simin – old before her time and increasingly burdened by her parents' unhappiness and the broader flaws she witnesses in the world around her. This wonderfully subtle film is a masterclass in understated storytelling.

BEFORE VIEWING

In an interview available as a 'DVD extra' the director Asghar Farhadi (b.1972) explains the origins of his fascination for film. He describes his first cinema trip that left him frustrated because he arrived late and missed the first half of the movie. He explains coming away with an intense desire to know 'what happened' and that thanks to this curiosity he was bitten by the 'cinema bug'. He started making short 8mm films aged only twelve. Despite this grounding, his early career was divided between writing plays and theatre directing. His first feature film was called *Dancing In The Dust* (2002). International attention and prizes came with his third film *Fireworks Wednesday* (2006). *A Separation* is Farhadi's fifth feature film and he has won significant plaudits for it including a Golden Bear at the 2011 Berlin Film Festival, a Golden Globe in the same year and an Oscar for best foreign language film in 2012.

- When you come to see *A Separation*, keep in mind the origins of Farhadi's interest in cinema. It is intriguing to see how many of his films, this one included, are concerned with the unravelling of 'the truth' from a complex mix of actions and emotional entanglements.
- Farhadi's theatre background and his experience as a writer of plays and scripts for TV shows, definitely has an impact on the sorts of stories he chooses to make into films and the kinds of performances he tries to coax from actors. Consider what you think the priorities of a film director might be given with such a literary and theatrical background. What kind of setting and environments do you think he might prefer to place his characters in?
- The title of the film: *A Separation*, seemingly arises from the breakdown of the marriage of the central characters Nader and Simin; but before you see the film consider all the other kinds of separations that can keep people apart or alienate them from one another. Farhadi is fascinated by the many divisions he observes within Iranian society, many of them common in our own.
- How might a film director 'suggest' the idea of 'a separation' between characters in terms of the environments we see them in and the positions from which they are photographed? Consider this question throughout your viewing of the whole film.

Because of the domestic nature of so many of the scenes in *A Separation*, it is possible to forget that the Iran in which the events of the film occur is a very particular kind of state. It is defined as a ‘theocratic republic’ – one in which government and the law is highly influenced by religious principles and customs derived from Islam. Before you see *A Separation*, do some background research into contemporary life in the Iranian capital Tehran – in so many ways a modern city but also with institutions overshadowed by religious orthodoxy and fundamentalism, and suffering – along with the rest of Iran – from severe economic troubles and international isolation – at least in terms of the West and Western allies. A great source with which to start your research is a recent article in The Independent by Patrick Cockburn: ‘Inside Iran – What Life Is Really Like In Tehran’: www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/inside-iran-what-life-is-really-like-in-tehran-2275531.html

THE TRAILER

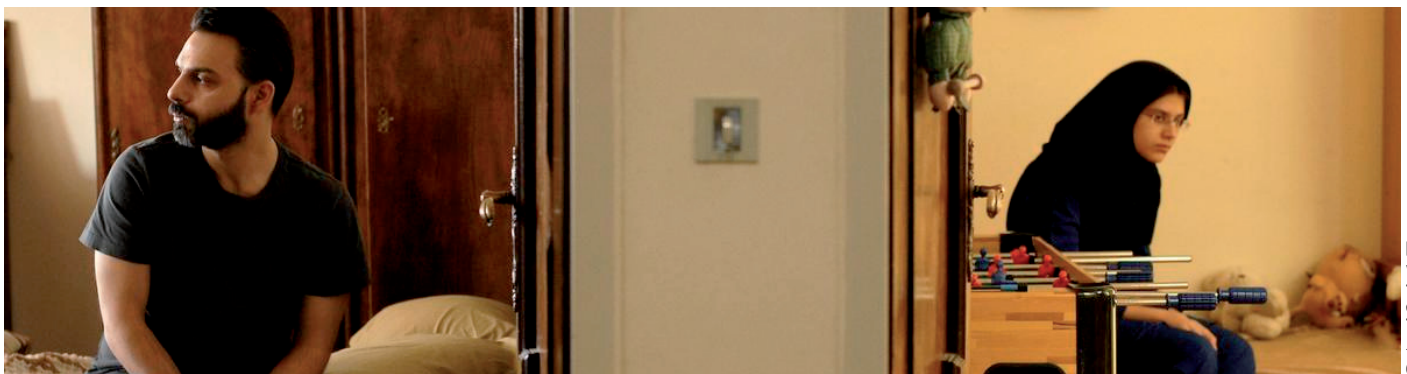
“Tell me exactly what happened...” is the last line spoken on the trailer for *A Separation* which appears among the DVD extras and can also be found online. Before you see the film, look at the trailer and see if you can work out the story in advance. It is utterly in keeping with the film that there is a lot of misdirection in the trailer. It will be rewarding to review it once you have seen the whole film and see if you can spot how certain small incidents are given significance in the trailer they do not ‘enjoy’ in the film itself.

What other expectations does the film trailer raise? Does it do an effective job of providing a clear sense of the principal characters and the kinds of battle-lines that are going to emerge? Consider at the end of one or two viewings what you know about the characters of:

- the bearded man with full hair: Nader
- the bearded man with receding hair: Hojjat
- the red-haired woman in a grey head-scarf: Simin
- the dark-haired woman in a black head-scarf and wearing a chador over her clothes: Rajieh
- the young girl – also dressed in grey, similar to her mother’s outfit: Termeh

Like all trailers, it comprises a series of mini-scenes in quick succession, but compare this trailer to many others – particularly for American popular films and you may notice that it is much more steadily-paced, with many of the moments being of roughly the same length.

- What kinds of message does this kind of cutting provide about the kind of film you are about to see?
- Consider the music on the trailer – what kinds of message does the piano tune provide about the mood of the film?



AFTER VIEWING

THE OPENING

It is very important in any piece of drama that an audience is quickly tuned in to the world of the characters and the kinds of people they are. This is true of *A Separation*, but the director Asghar Farhadi makes some interesting decisions about what to let us know and what to withhold. Though not exhaustive, here is a list of some of the elements of the first scene. In each case consider what the significance of these might be. Remember, that a good director will try to ensure that every shot, every line and every incident has a part to play in the overall pattern of his film. This is what distinguishes film as an art form from the kinds of casual video footage we can all capture these days on mobile devices.

1. Along with the credits we see a succession of documents and certificates being photocopied. Although on a first viewing it is not apparent, many of these documents and faces do not belong to characters we will meet in this film. Why do you feel Farhadi includes this hint of other lives at this important opening point in his film?
2. It is unusual to film an entire opening sequence from the point-of-view of an unseen character. What is the impact of this decision? What position does it place the audience in?
3. During the course of this first scene we learn that Simin has decided to divorce her husband Nader because of his refusal to leave Iran for a life abroad. Clearly, they had begun the process of emigration together but Nader's father has fallen ill and has advanced Alzheimer's and this is the cause of Nader's reluctance to leave Iran. Simin's motivation appears to be concern for her daughter who, she says, will have greater opportunities abroad. Those are the key elements of their disagreement. With whom, at this stage of the film, do you feel the greatest sympathy, if anyone?
4. Do you feel that the judge's opinions are valid or fair – especially when he sums up their dispute: "My finding is that this is a small problem..."?
5. What is your reaction to his demand that Simin should "...go back to her life"?
6. A big silence follows the judge's demand that Simin explain what she means by the 'circumstances' in Iran that make it desirable for her daughter Termeh should be educated abroad. Why do you feel she is reticent at this point and does not provide a more explicit answer?



GAPS IN THE NARRATIVE

A Separation's director Asghar Farhadi is on record explaining that the film is in many ways a suspenseful detective film. What is your reaction to this suggestion having seen it in full? It is much more than a simple crime movie in which a final solution is arrived at and all is explained of course, and it is interesting to consider the ways in which Farhadi keeps us, the audience, on our toes.

Think back to any moments when we are expected to 'fill in blank spaces' in the narrative. There is an early warning of this when Razieh is left by Simin at the bus station at the start of her long journey home from the smart part of Tehran to the poorer district where she lives. This occurs about 13.22 minutes into the film. In a single cut we see her still travelling but now it is the following day and she is on her way to begin her first day of 'housekeeping'. What do you feel the effect of splicing these two sequences together? What does it suggest about the burden on Razieh and her daughter?

The central drama surrounding Razieh's fall is similarly left unclear. It is another 'blank space'. It may be hard to do at a first viewing of the film, but make a note of everything that happens in and around the stairs of Nader and Simin's flat. Notice how the film is seeded with hints and clues that may or may not be significant.

The event that leads to Razieh's losing the baby is never shown, but it is implied. Do you think that the way Farhadi keeps back information at this point is clumsy or clever? Think about how the 'gap' that he leaves is an effective way of showing the predicament Razieh is in doing a job of which her husband would disapprove.

What do you make of the ending? We end with a huge unanswered question. What is your view on this – would it have damaged the overall effect of the film if Farhadi had depicted Termeh's final decision?

MISE EN SCÈNE AND SEPARATION

Thinking back to your ideas from before seeing the film about possible 'separations' that divide people, now consider how Farhadi manages to build this idea of people being split from one another into the very fabric and layout of the environments within which he films his scenes.

- Consider how the relative prosperity and sophistication of Nader and Simin is represented through the set dressing and the objects in their house. There is a very telling scene when Somayeh (Razieh's daughter) tours their flat on her first time there alone with her mother and stares at all the strange things decorating its walls. Then contrast this to the home in which Razieh lives.
- Notice the ways in which windows, protective glass, screens and other surfaces frequently intrude between people – keep a note of the kind of division these surfaces might suggest exist between characters each time this 'motif' occurs. What does the smashing of the car window suggest in this context at the end of the film. And thinking about narrative again – why do you feel Farhadi does not actually show Hojjat smashing it?

THE SCRIPT: LANGUAGE AND TRUTH

At a very early point in the film Simin has a dispute with some furniture removers about the floor they are meant to be carrying a piano from. It is an utterly insignificant moment, but think how it is a harbinger of future confusions and troubles springing from people's failure to use language clearly, precisely or truthfully. There are so many examples of this in the film. Imprecision and exaggeration have terrible consequences. Make a note of as many moments when people say things that make situations more complicated or, what is perhaps worse, fail to say the things that may have the effect of building bridges. This is a problem not only for those involved in the main legal disputes but also for Nader and Simin who fail to say crucial things to each other and so precipitate the collapse in their relationship.

EXPLORING ANOTHER CULTURE THROUGH FILM

In *A Separation* events are depicted that affect people of many different nationalities. Old people here become sick. Couples split up and children are left feeling confused and upset by the experience. In the UK there are big differences in people's wealth, education and outlook in life. Such similarities enable the world of Farhadi's film to be comprehensible to audiences across the world, but then again there are subtly different pressures affecting the characters that are very different from anything affecting people in our country. As you watch and then recollect the film, try to identify as many ways in which life in Tehran is familiar to you, but also the ways in which it differs.

- In particular, consider how Razieh feels she must seek religious guidance before helping Nader's father. And similarly how her failure to explain to Nader why she left the flat springs from her reticence to discuss something intimate with a man who is not her husband.
- Consider the problems that the poor face from creditors and what the repercussions of their debts might be.
- Consider the way in which justice is administered in Iran (as depicted in the film) and how both the judicial system and the hospitals appear to be under lots of strain.
- Would you agree that women face particular pressures that do not affect the men in Iran?

WHERE DO YOUR SYMPATHIES LIE?

Make a list of the adult characters and try to work out what 'mistakes' they make contributing to the miseries in the film. Is there anyone in the end who deserves the lion's share of blame? Or is every character both a victim and at fault in equal measure?

What do you think of the depiction of the children? Would you say that it is true that Farhadi's sympathies lie with them?

INTERESTING LINKS

A Separation would make an ideal subject for an entry to the Young Film Critics Awards:
www.filmeducation.org/youngfilmcritic/

There is a wealth of professional reviews of the film online. One of the most informative and thorough is by Peter Green in the New Yorker:
www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2012/01/09/120109crci_cinema_lane

To find out more about Asghar Farhadi and his other films a good starting point is:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asghar_Farhadi

To find out more about life in modern Iran, put the country's name into the search engine of the Guardian's website and explore some of the recent articles from this country. Among these one article tells the horrific tale of public executions in Iran, many of which proceed from the kinds of disputes and crudely administered justice we see in *A Separation*:
www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/16/iran-public-executions-hangings-human-rights?newsfeed=true

Written by Jerome Monahan



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