

Behind the Scenes: The Narrative Politics of *A Separation* (2011)

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Despite the censorship and restrictions on freedom of speech, Iranian cinema continues to produce internationally acclaimed movies that deal with the problematic state of the country. A recent example, Asghar Farhadi's latest film, *A Separation* (2011) has become an international phenomenon since it received the Golden Bear in the 61st Berlin International Film Festival. In addition to being widely praised, *A Separation* is particularly significant in the way in which it is received by the media. While the 'Berlinale' describes the movie as a 'family drama', the reception of *A Separation* in the US is equivocally based on the quest of leaving Iran for a better life.¹ The International Movie Database describes *A Separation* simply as a story about the decision of "moving to another country or [staying] in Iran".² Given Iran's image as a potential risk in the eyes of the US government, it is not surprising to determine a focus on the national and local specific to Iran. However, *A Separation* does not exclusively focus on the national or local issues. Quite the reverse, *A Separation* transcends the national and the local, and creates a universally realistic narrative by revealing the underlying social conditions that cause the conflicts depicted in the movie. To this end, Farhadi makes use of a carefully structured plot development and a distinct tone and style through which local, national and ethnic identities are not prioritized. On the contrary, *A Separation* surpasses the local and focuses on class allegiances and explorations of the Iranian society.

Farhadi's stylistic choices create a focus on the social dynamics between different social groups from the very beginning. The initial scenes of *A Separation* are depicted through the eyes of the judge in a courtroom where the viewer is informed of the dissolution of Nader and Simin's marriage. In a packed and dialogue driven scene, we learn that Simin wants to go abroad to provide a better life for their daughter while Nader rejects to do so mainly because of his father who has Alzheimer's disease. The judge does not grant any decision stating that Nader and Simin should agree on all terms including the custody of their daughter. In the following scenes, we look at the lives of Nader and Simin with an omniscient perspective while focusing on one or the other from time to time. The dilemma of Nader and Simin becomes more complicated as Razieh, a pregnant woman, is hired to take care of Nader's father. From that point onwards, the camera becomes selective in the way in which it depicts the plot elements that lead Razieh to lose her unborn child and sue Nader for murdering her child.

Until the very end of the film, the camera continues to have a selective focalization in terms of revealing the plot line while being consistent in the way in which it depicts the social conditions

and everyday situations of each and every protagonist. The scenes in which the camera follows Razieh in and out of the flat and nearly fainting in the bus are cases in point because of depicting the difficult everyday conditions that Razieh has to go through to earn money as a pregnant woman. Similarly, the camera continues to focus on Razieh's working conditions as clearly depicted in the scenes where she has to bathe Nader's father and do the cleaning.

Farhadi's camera emphasizes the different lives that Razieh and her employer lead by continuously looking at them with a distant and non-judgmental all-seeing camera eye. The duality of two different lifestyles is emphasized through the way in which we see everyday situations of the protagonists. Nader and Simin are seen repeatedly in their cars while the camera follows Razieh in a bus. Not surprisingly, the camera is able to look directly at Nader or Simin while it simulates almost a spy camera in the way in which it follows Razieh. The stylistic difference between these two scenes is significant as they underscore the mundane but fundamental differences of the way the protagonists lead their lives.

In addition to its carefully crafted stylistic choices, *A Separation* restricts what the viewer can see through a distinct plot development. Certain elements of the story are not revealed until the end of the movie. The ambiguity about the reason of the death of Razieh's child, for instance, is complicated further by the lack of information provided to the viewers about what Nader really knew at the time of the incident. The puzzle-like structure of the story creates a distancing effect on the viewer because it disables the possibility to fully identify with a character in terms of individual morality. In doing so, the narrative forces one to see the broader picture that leads to the main conflicts of the movie, namely the social dynamics that define a character's stance rather than simply relying on individual morality as the basis of the protagonists' decisions.

Moreover, the duality created through the relationship of two different social groups shifts the focus to social stratification rather than Iran's problematic image as a whole. On one hand there is Nader and Simin, a secular, middle-class Iranian family that has enough resources to consider moving to another country. On the other hand, there is Razieh, and her religious working-class family, whose main concern is to provide for her family. It is not a coincidence that Nader and Simin are able to face the dilemma of leaving Iran or not while the idea does not even cross Razieh's mind. The dilemma of leaving Iran to have a better life is rendered almost only possible through social privilege enjoyed by a middle-class family. It is worth noting that Nader and Simin are leading a radically superior life compared to Razieh and her family. Nader and Simin are affluent enough to provide for their family, a good education for their daughter, a caretaker for the grandfather while Razieh and her family rely on a job that is beyond Razieh's capacity as a pregnant woman. As the plot line makes this distinction more clear, the dilemma of Nader and Simin as to leaving Iran or not becomes less significant. The plot shifts to Nader being charged with murder while annulling the significance of a dissolving marriage only until after Razieh changes her mind and becomes indecisive about the reason of losing her child.

As the story structure and the style shows, *A Separation* consistently draws a clear picture of a severely stratified society. It is fitting to start this narrative through the eyes of the judge as it represents the authority that guarantees the continuity of the current system and how the members of the society are represented in it. In its complex and vivid portrayal of two different families, *A*

Separation reaches a resolution when Nader accepts to pay “the blood money” for Razieh’s child. However, several revelations are made as the story reaches its climax in which Razieh rejects to swear on the Quran. Razieh thinks that Nader might not be the reason why she lost her child. Since Razieh cannot swear on the Quran, the accusation of Nader becomes irrelevant and the plot line shifts back to the originary conflict of Nader and Simin, the divorce and the custody of their daughter.

The very last scene of *A Separation* is a powerful metaphor in the way in which it explores the possibility of leaving Iran or not. However, the very last scene interestingly takes longer than it should be with a steady camera focused on Nader and Simin. Termeh is supposed to declare her decision about whom she chooses as the rightful parent in the courtroom while her parents wait outside. For quite a long time the camera focuses on Nader and Simin. Termeh does not come out of the courtroom and the decision is not declared neither to her parents nor to the audience. This scene is fitting to the end of the narrative as it is obvious from the story that the decision made by Termeh will not necessarily solve any fundamental problems. That’s why the decision is not significant from a broader perspective and is kept as a secret. Again, rejecting finality in the plot line by not revealing Termeh’s decision lead the viewer to judge the story as a whole rather than enjoying a simple narrative fulfillment.

As is obvious, neither social stratification nor individual morality is a culture specific issue. Even though the two issues exist in different levels and produce distinct problems in various countries, they can be described as fundamentally social issues. In the age of pluralism and relativism that deny any possibility of any universal truth, Farhadi’s narrative is fundamental in the way in which it explores the human condition without relying on the differences between individuals but rather on social groups and how they are related. To this end, Farhadi’s movie has several layers of problematized issues. The question of leaving Iran or not is one of those several issues but certainly not the main one as the story structure and formal elements of the movie reveal. In contrast to being centrally about a national and local problem, *A Separation*, thus, explores the human capacity in terms of how individuals deal with issues such as individual morality while showcasing how the social conditions render some decisions inevitable. In other words, Farhadi’s stylistic choices disclose the class issues of Iranian society rather than constructing a story about the quest to leave Iran or not.

Notes

¹ "Berlinale | Archive | Annual Archives | 2011 | Yearbook." *Berlinale*. 10 Feb. 2012. <http://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/2011/01_jahresblatt_2011/01_Jahresblatt_2011.html>

² "A Separation (2011) - IMDb." *The Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*. 10 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1832382/>>