

***A Separation* (2011)**

“Your problem is a small problem.”

Major Credits:

Producer, Writer, and Director: Ashgar Farhadi

Cinematography: Mahmoud Kalari

Cast: Peyman Moaadi (Neder), Leila Hatami (Simrin), Sarina Fahradi (Termeh), Sareh Bayat (Razieh), Shahab Hosseini (Hojjat), Kimia Hosseini (Somayeh), Barbak Karimi (Interrogator)

Production Background:

With the political imprisonment of Jafar Panahi (*The White Balloon*, *Offside*) and the recent absence of Abbas Kiarostami (*Certified Copy*, *Like Someone in Love*), Farhadi has become the contemporary face of Iranian cinema, which has a long and distinguished history. He began his professional career in the theater, which accounts for both his intricate screenplays and attention to details. Farhadi has said that this film originated in an image that had long haunted him: a son washing his aged father in the bathroom. He also acknowledges two autobiographical elements: his experience dealing with his father's Alzheimer's disease and his relationship with his daughter, who plays Termeh in the film. Almost certainly, *A Separation* became the most awarded film of 2011, winning 83 international prizes along with the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. That last fact might seem surprising, but Iranian government officials apparently appreciated the film's even-handedness in its treatment of a modern theocracy.

Cinematic Elements:

1. Screenplay: The script is a marvel of craftsmanship in which one crucial decision leads to a new set of complications and, to quote Jean Renoir (*The Rules of the Game*), “Everyone has his reasons.” Despite such a dense text that keeps one reading the subtitles, Farhadi makes an important point when he says, “The blanks between the lines are as important as the lines themselves.” Note, for example, the exchange of looks between the two young girls or the troubled expressions of the characters as they offer testimony.
2. Editing and Mise-en-scène: Filmed in tight spaces (cars, traffic, crowded hallways and apartments) with a hand-held camera and rapidly edited to reflect the multiple points of view, the film nevertheless takes pains not to privilege any particular character or provide a consistent moral authority. In a film entitled *A Separation*, notice how often the editing separates characters from one another despite the confined spaces.
3. Long takes: The film is brilliantly bookmarked by two long takes of more than four minutes of husband and wife contained within the frame but occupying separate spaces. Notice how the opening shot directly involves us, while the final image keeps us at a distance.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Despite being so thoroughly rooted in the specific culture of Iran, *A Separation* appealed to a widespread international audience because the story involves universal issues of gender, religion, class, and age. How does each of these factors figure in the moral complexity the film unfolds?
2. Is there a single character who represents the film's moral center?
3. How does Farhadi depict the Iranian justice system and the judges, in particular?
4. Children often play crucial roles in Iranian cinema (e.g., Panahi's *The White Balloon*), as they certainly do in *A Separation*. In the climactic confrontation, Termeh and Somayeh momentarily share a glance that seems to bond them as "sisters." How does their presence influence—one might almost say determine—the adults' behavior?