

A Separation (Jodaeiye Nader az Simin)

Iran 2011

Director: Asghar Farhadi

Written by: Asghar Farhadi

Director of Photography: Mahmoud Kalari

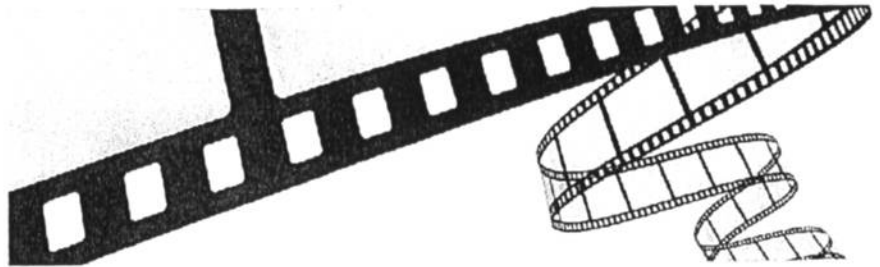
Cast: Payman Maadi... Nader
Leila Hatami... Simin
Sareh Bayat... Razieh
Shahab Hosseini... Hodjat

Running Time: 123 mins

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A Separation—the fifth feature by Iranian writer-director Asghar Farhadi—is an urgently shot courtroom drama designed to put you in the jury box. Dispensing with preliminaries, it opens at a judicial hearing where, facing the camera that stands in for the judge, a quarrelsome husband and wife each make their case.

Both are middle-class members of the Tehran intelligentsia. Simin (Leila Hatami) has finally obtained official permission for her family to move abroad, but husband Nader (Peyman Moaadi) has apparently changed his mind. He feels obligated to care for his aged, Alzheimer's-afflicted father, and, in order to leave the country, Simin is compelled to sue for divorce. Which spouse is being selfish? What's best for their 10-year-old daughter, Termeh?

Simin's petition is denied. ("Your problem is a small problem," the judge concludes.) She moves in with her parents; Nader stays with his father, and Termeh does, too. Everybody is super-stressed. Without Simin, Nader needs a caretaker to look after the old man and hires Razieh (Sareh Bayat), a slightly younger, less educated, equally anxious woman who brings her small daughter to work with her and has taken the job without the knowledge of her devout, unemployed husband, Hodjat (Shahab Hosseini).

A Separation has already established a hectic, bustling visual style—one thing after another, mainly in medium close-up—and, with all players in position, it heads directly into a real crisis. **[Spoiler alert – plot details follow over next two paragraphs]** Nader comes home to find his father's wrists tied to the bed, with Razieh out on an errand. They have words; fired and (perhaps gratuitously) accused of stealing, Razieh demands her wages, is shoved out of the apartment, falls down the stairs, and (Nader later discovers) winds up in the hospital. Turns out she was pregnant and has suffered a miscarriage. Thus the original case is subsumed in a larger one. Hodjat files a complaint, and, according to the law, Nader could be guilty of murder.

Farhadi has called his movie "a detective story without any detectives" and structured events so that the viewer is compelled to mentally review a number of earlier, seemingly inconsequential events. As with the divorce proceedings, the miscarriage case is tried in a small room by a one-man judge-jury-prosecuting attorney. Largely unable to control his rage, Hodjat argues with witnesses, butts in on the questioning, and, at one point, manages to get himself arrested by self-righteously telling the judge to "fear God." Not that this helps Nader, who is deemed guilty even by his wife—she assumes that he knew Razieh was pregnant when he pushed her.

With its two couples warring on two fronts on behalf of their offspring, *A Separation* is an Iranian analogue to Roman Polanski's recent parents-in-conflict drama *Carnage*, but the stakes are higher, the class lines sharper, the pace more gruelling, and the action (though not confined to a single apartment like *Carnage* is), largely played out in stairwells and hallways, more claustrophobic: Each of the four principals is trapped in (or defined by) an individual nexus of social attitudes, family obligations, financial concerns, and moral beliefs that Farhadi seems disinclined to judge.

Given the adult confusion, it's the two young children who have the clearest vision, or at least the most acute sense of the situation. What's fascinating is how the various issues—religious or practical—are played out in these two quite different families, yet always come down to irreconcilable differences between rebellious women and their stiff-necked, controlling men. The meek and pious Razieh becomes as recalcitrant in her way—which is to say, as true to her nature—as the apparently godless Simin.

Everyone has their reasons, but not all reasons are equal. Whether as a good neorealist or, given his own situation as a filmmaker in Iran, just a canny realist, Farhadi resists the notion of narrative closure. As the great Sam Fuller wrapped up *Run of the Arrow*, "The end of this story will be written by you!"

J. Hoberman

Asghar Farhadi interview:

Where did the story of *A Separation* start?

Asghar Farhadi: I cannot pinpoint exactly where it started. It's a combination mostly of some personal experiences and also imagination and making up a story.

What personal elements are involved?

AF: The story of the old man, the father of Nader, that character was greatly inspired by my own grandfather who suffered from Alzheimer's. I was very close to my grandfather throughout my childhood and adolescence. In the screenplay, originally, I used the name of my grandfather. Another storyline that is from a personal history is the relationship of Nader and his daughter. I myself have a daughter, and similar to what happens in the film, oftentimes I'm trying to teach her something, using any opportunity, about life.

Some people have read a layer of social commentary into the film, where the daughter is representative of a new generation, or the relationship between the parents and the family of the woman Nader hires to take care of his father are meant to represent different social classes in Iran.

AF: She's not really a symbol of a society or of something that's happening, but she is representative of a generation of kids that are asking certain questions. It's not particular to Iran. Throughout the world this generation has these questions. One question that they have is: In the future, what style of living is the right one? Which one should they choose? Which one should they opt for? **[Major spoiler in the next sentence.]** That's why that in the final scene in the film, you don't see the decision that Termeh finally reaches. It's not just a decision between mother and father, it is a decision on a more profound level on what kind of life, what system of belief and lifestyle you choose.

Next screening: *Sarah's Key* 7th June 8pm