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'A Separation' Reflects on Iranian Culture

Zack Mandell · Thursday, August 23rd, 2012

Given the authoritarian politics that govern the country, it would surprise many that the country of Iran has actually been something of a fertile ground for amazing film artists. Iran will never be confused for Italy, which has spawned directors such as Fellini, Antonioni and De Sica, but directors like Abbas Kiarostami and Jafar Panahi have created thrilling works that have entertained art house audiences over the last two decades. This isn't to say that Iranian filmmakers are given complete autonomy in their work however. Panahi is currently sitting in a jail cell, and will be for six years, for making films critical of the Iranian government. After those six years, he will not be allowed to make films or even give interviews for the next twenty. So the content of even the best Iranian films is decidedly compromised. Yet every now and again, extraordinary artists are able to make films that may not make a startling political statement, but offers viewers a glimpse into a society they don't completely understand. In 2011, director Ashgar Farhadi made such a film. It's called *A Separation*, and as far as I'm concerned, it was the best film of last year. It finally came out on DVD/blu-ray this week.

Farhadi's sobering film is an open window to many facets of Iranian culture. The story revolves around an upper middle-class married couple, Nader and Simin, that are on the verge of divorcing. Simin wants to flee the country, but Nader does not want to abandon his Alzheimer's stricken father. The two separate, but are not allowed to divorce. When Simin moves out, Nader hires a woman, Razieh, to take care of his father when he is away at work. Razieh is lower class and more devout in her religion. It turns out that Razieh is simply not up to the demanding task, and asks her husband, Hodjat, to take her place. When Hodjat is jailed by his creditors and can't show up to work one day, complications ensue that lead to a shocking and tragic act of violence between Nader and Razieh. Nader is put on trial for murder, after pushing Razieh down a set of stairs. Razieh is fine, but she suffered a miscarriage from the fall. Or did she? Was it from something else? Did Nader know she was pregnant? Was Nader's shove even the cause of her falling down the staircase? The film becomes a carefully observed legal thriller from here on out.

But it's oh so much more as well. This thematically rich film is filled with extraordinary little moments that educate international audiences about life in Iran. In the first fifteen minutes of the film, Razieh finds Nader's father to be incontinent, and is required to clean him up, which would require undressing him and touching is bare skin. Before she cleans, she phones a religious hotline in order to ensure that her actions will not be an affront to God. Nurses in secular countries don't have to make such phone calls.

On the surface, *A Separation* seems to grab its title due to the fact that the main characters have

separated in their marriage. But Farhadi is too smart and complex a filmmaker for that. *A Separation* refers to his exploration of the dichotomous relationships in Iran between men and women, middle class and lower class, religious and secular. Farhadi makes a point to establish the male dominance in Iranian culture. Simin's petition for divorce from Nader is never taken seriously, and the male inquisitors belittle her in the process. When Razieh tries to get her husband hired on to take care of Nader's father, she does not mention to her husband she had already been performing the job, as working without the husband's permission is illegal. The film does not fail to emphasize the disrespect Nader and Hodjat hold for each other. Even apart from the circumstances that have brought them together, the two men seem to be wary of each other, as each one represents a different class. Nader is wealthier, more modernized, whereas Hodjat is heavily in debt, yet very reliant on religious principles. Nader uses Nader and Razieh's religion against them in the gut-wrenching final moments of the film, when Nader asks Razieh to swear on a Qur'an that he caused her miscarriage.

The film also prevents a fly on the wall perspective on Iran's unique legal system. It is a unique blend of inquisitorial modeling and Sharia law. Nader faces time in prison for Razieh's miscarriage, but only a minimal amount. The real punishment that Hodjat and Razieh seek is in restitution. This is because murder in Iran is viewed as a private crime, one not against God but against people. Financial compensation towards the victim's family can be used in place of prison time. This compensation is known as *diyat.* Of course, this system benefits the more affluent in Iranian culture.

We live in a time when American lawmakers, usually of the conservative brand, are using inflammatory and bombastic rhetoric in order to sell citizens of their country on the idea of yet another invasion of a Middle Eastern country. That country is of course Iran. Yet that rhetoric can, not surprisingly, be misleading. It's fairly clear that many Americans simply do not have a firm understanding of Iranian culture. Farhadi has stated that his film is meant to be apolitical, but these are political times. And when you are humanizing yourself and displaying your depth to those who are looking to destroy you, I frankly can't think of a bolder political statement.

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