

## A Separation

A middle-class couple in Tehran is pulled in different directions: the wife Simin (Leila Hatami) wants to leave Iran and make a life elsewhere; the husband Nader (Peyman Moadi) wants to stay, raise their only child, eleven-year-old Termeh (Sarina Farhadi), and tend to his father, stricken with Alzheimer's. The split is matter-of-fact, not rancorous, but it causes a concatenation of events that produce a troubling momentum. "A Separation" begins as a basic domestic dispute, but it proves itself to be a most forceful human drama with both convincing universal as well as culture-bound elements.

The initial separation of the couple means Nader must find a care-giver for his father, but the woman he hires, Razieh (Kimia Hosseini), is poor, pregnant, and uncertain of her role as a caregiver. The arrangement does not work out, and her forcible rejection from the apartment results in her miscarriage. Her unemployed husband, Hodjat (Shahab Hosseini), is a short-fused type who berates his wife and who threatens Nader with a murder charge in a dingy family court. Blame proliferates, resentments fester, and several thwarted lives face an uncertain end. The tersely dramatic finale hangs tenuously on which parent will Termeh end up with.

The universal, shown through the compendium of little wounds that can break a family apart, is what makes "A Separation" so relevant as a contemporary story. We are shown an Iran that is not grotesquely alien, but, rather, familiar anywhere. The marital tensions, the trouble with the "help," the encounters with implacable bureaucracies, the pressures on parents...all these and other dimensions are played out here with utter believability. Moreover, one common burden on all societies--what to do with our aged—is here handled with an honesty and truth not shown in Western movies. In our films, you will *never* see a scene like one in this film where Nader must tenderly change and hand wash his crumpled father. It's the kind of sequence that makes you identify with the characters and makes you believe in their genuine human dilemma: how to work through tough choices with no easy answers.

To make the film more intriguing for us in the West, the universal elements are tintured with distinctive Iranian/Muslim ones. The relations between the sexes will be strange for many of us. For example, Razieh, who is supposed to be a caregiver, is alarmed by having to change a grown man's clothes and, later, she is condemned by her husband for working for a "single man." It's something like ground sumac sprinkled on long-grained Persian rice.

Director Asghar Farhadi handles the whole family chronicle with just-right pacing and purposeful editing; the momentum he builds creeps up on you but works superbly. He handles all his actors with great skill, but I want to mention one in particular: the young Ms. Farhadi (the director's daughter) as Termeh. She is a composed presence, the witness (and judge) of all that happens before her. She seems the lone soul who senses how this family break-up has happened, yet also the one who will be best able to survive beyond it.

Nominated this past month for an Oscar as Best Foreign Language Film, "A Separation" fully merits the statuette.

*(Rated PG-13, it runs 123 minutes)*

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