

A Separation

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [April 18, 2012](#) issue

While *A Separation* is the first Iranian movie ever to win the Oscar for best foreign-language film, Iran has been a cinema hotbed for decades, turning out exceptional work despite the strict codes of behavior imposed upon directors. Some have argued that the restrictions themselves have been an artistic plus, forcing filmmakers to become more creative in terms of expressing complex emotions. For instance, since men and women are not allowed to touch in any affectionate manner in Iranian movies, filmmakers employ camera placement, low-key lighting and subtle subtext—instead of copious action—to get the job done.

A Separation, which was written and directed by Asghar Farhadi, is a highly ambitious piece of work. It successfully tackles a range of topics and themes, from class, religion and gender to pride, guilt and justice. It is a tale that appears uniquely Iranian but quickly transcends physical and spiritual borders to portray the difficulty of doing the right thing under difficult, even life-threatening circumstances.

As the film begins, the main story seems to be about an impending divorce between Simin (Leila Hatami) and Nader (Peyman Moadi), an upper-middle-class couple who have reached a crossroads in their marriage. Simin wants them to move abroad to pursue a better life with greater freedoms, not only for themselves but, more important, for their 11-year-old daughter, Termeh (Sarina Farhadi, the director's daughter).

Nader doesn't disagree that this could be a good move for them, but he refuses to abandon his aging father (Ali-Asghar Shahbazi), who has Alzheimer's and needs a lot of care. (Simin argues that the old man doesn't even know that Nader is his son anymore. "But I know he is my father," he snaps back.)

Roadblocks for women crop up throughout the film, driving the conflict forward.

Absent a divorce, Simin is free to leave but cannot take her daughter with her. Later, when Nader is forced to hire a housekeeper to care for his father, we start to realize just how many separations Farhadi is trying to address. The housekeeper, Razieh

(Sareh Bayat), at first doesn't think she can do the job because of the long commute, the low pay and the fact that she will be alone with a man other than her husband, which is against religious law. On top of that, she hasn't told her husband about the job, and she is four months pregnant. But complicated circumstances dictate that she needs to continue working for a while longer, which leads to a series of mishaps, misunderstandings and tragedies. These not only question the moral fiber of all the film's key players but also cast a harsh light on the inflexibility of Iranian law.

Much of the film's second half plays out in a small, shabby courtroom where a firm but patient judge (Babak Karimi) tries to sort out the various issues that have come out of what we've seen so far. Both families are seeking justice, especially the housekeeper's husband, Hodjat (Shahab Hosseini), a hot-headed man who is out of work, in debt and experiencing severe emotional problems.

What is remarkable about the film's third act is how Farhadi is able to graft a sense of suspense and revelation upon this seemingly political tale. It would be enough to see these issues play out in quasi-documentary style, since they are already thick with drama, arcane and archaic at the same time. But thanks to the cinematic tools of tricky camerawork (look for the many forms of separation between men and women throughout) and trickier editing (what you see isn't always what you get), the film turns out also to be a solid piece of old-fashioned entertainment.

It is rare for a film to take on as much as *A Separation* does, and rarer still for it to succeed on so many levels. It is a fine and accomplished piece of work.