

# Gender, Nation, and Belonging: Representing Mothers and the Maternal in Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation*

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**Mehra Shirazi** is Assistant Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Oregon State University. Her research interests include inequities in health and access to health care, community based research, racism and Islamophobia, and its effect on Muslim communities.  
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**Patti Duncan** is Associate Professor and coordinator of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Oregon State University, where she specializes in transnational feminisms, women of color feminisms, feminist media studies, and motherhood studies.  
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**Kryn Freehling-Burton** is a Senior Instructor and advisor for the online major for the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program at Oregon State University. She writes about mothering, film, and television and enjoys researching them all with her four children.  
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## Abstract

In this article, we explore an understanding of gender and motherhood in Asghar Farhadi's 2011 Oscar winning film, *Jodāyie Nader az Simin/A Separation*, as a contested site where the discourses of gender and nation are constantly being negotiated. We suggest that the film's unique cinematic language represents a significant contrast to stereotypical portrayals of motherhood in films. Also, by using transnational feminist cinema as a framework, we demonstrate the ways in which Farhadi engages with the relationship between gender and national belonging through a focus on borders, space, and place in contemporary Iran, offering a critique of both fundamentalist nationalist politics and neocolonial Western feminist assumptions.  
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## Résumé

Dans cet article, nous explorons la compréhension du genre et de la maternité dans le film d'Asghar Farhadi, primé aux Oscars de 2011, *Jodāyie Nader az Simin/A Separation*, comme un lieu contesté où les discours

sur le genre et la nation sont en constante négociation. Nous suggérons que le langage cinématographique unique du film est un contraste considérable aux représentations stéréotypées de la maternité dans les films. De plus, dans le cadre du cinéma féministe transnational, nous démontrons les façons dont Farhadi explore la relation entre le genre et l'identité nationale en mettant l'accent sur les frontières, l'espace et le lieu en Iran contemporain, offrant une critique des politiques nationalistes fondamentales et des suppositions féministes occidentales néocoloniales.

...the bodies and their problem in Iranian society are completely interrelated. If the father is sick and frail, then the son is completely involved, as is the daughter. If the general conception in the West is that women in Iran are badly treated, then this also affects men as sons, fathers, and husbands. This situation in Iran puts both women and men under a great deal of pressure. (Asghar Farhadi in an interview with Rahul Hamid)

## Introduction

In this article, we explore questions of gender and motherhood in relation to national belonging in Asghar Farhadi's acclaimed 2011 film, *A Separation*. We situate the film within Asuman Suner's (2007) proposed category of transnational feminist cinema as one potential framework, due to the questions the film raises regarding gender and nation through both its narrative structure and visual form, and because of its preoccupation with themes of space and place. As the above quotation by director Farhadi indicates (from an interview about the film), questions about gender and embodiment, and constructions of masculinity and femininity are central to *A Separation*. Likewise, Farhadi is critical of Western assumptions regarding women's status in Iran, particularly in relation to patriarchy, motherhood, and families. We explore these themes, suggesting that the film's depiction of family relations, especially motherhood/mothering, represents a significant contrast to the proliferation of one-dimensional, stereotypical portrayals of motherhood in many films. Also, by situating the film within a larger body of transnational feminist cinema, we demonstrate the ways in which Farhadi engages with the relationship between gender and national belonging through a focus on borders, space, and place in contemporary Iran, offering a substantive critique of both fundamentalist nationalist politics and neocolonial Western feminist assumptions.

"National cinemas" are worthy of transnational feminist attention as they engage with questions of diaspora, mobility, displacement, and the postcolonial condition. Hamid Naficy (2001) suggests that exilic/diasporic cinema is marked by narratives of transnational migration, borders, and the myriad of losses associated with exile. However, a recent focus on exilic and/or diasporic cinema has detracted from what might be learned from national cinemas. Asuman Suner (2007), in her discussion of transnational women's filmmaking

in Iran and Turkey, suggests that much of contemporary world cinema shares certain characteristics with exilic/diasporic cinema, highlighting the ways national cinemas increasingly address issues of gender, race, citizenship, and national belonging. Her analysis of films by Yesim Ustaoglu and Samira Makhmalbaf reveals that they pose critiques of both the official nationalist ideologies of their home countries and the Eurocentric, neo-colonial (white, Western) conceptualizations of gender and womanhood. For example, she writes, "[T]he gender politics of these films is subversive to the extent that they frustrate the Western desire to reveal the 'truth' of the Middle Eastern woman, lifting her veil and liberating her. Instead of reproducing stereotyped representations of Middle Eastern women, they offer new ways of seeing and thinking about relations of belonging and identity (including gender identity) in specific social and historical contexts as well as in the contemporary globalized world" (68). Thus, Suner proposes a transnational gender politics—and a transnational *feminist* cinema—capable of problematizing the presumptions of hegemonic Western feminism about Middle Eastern women and engaging with questions about gender through both local and global perspectives.

*A Separation*, set in contemporary Tehran, depicts a progressive middle-class heterosexual couple, Simin (Leila Hatami) and Nader (Peyman Moaadi), who seek a divorce because Simin wants to leave Iran with their eleven-year-old daughter, Termeh, but Nader feels compelled to stay to take care of his father who has Alzheimer's disease. When Simin moves out of their home, Nader hires a caregiver, Razieh (Sareh Bayat), a devout working-class woman who is also the mother of a young daughter. When Razieh realizes that the physical labor is heavy and that she will be required to change the old man's clothing after he soils himself, she attempts to have her husband, Hodjat (Shahab Hosseini), replace her. In a complicated twist of events, Hodjat is arrested due to his inability to pay a creditor, so Razieh must return to care for Nader's father. Nader and Razieh then have a conflict based on several misunderstandings, resulting in a series of appearances before a court, which highlights questions surrounding motherhood, religion, and class differences in Iran. This film has been praised by multiple critics and has won numerous awards both in the United States and globally, including the Academy

Award for Best Foreign Language Film—the first Iranian film to ever win this award.

### Contextualizing Women and Gender in Iran

The discourses around modernity, nation, and religion have consistently shaped discussions about gender in Iran. In *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards*, which focuses on gender and sexual anxieties associated with Iranian modernity, Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005) provides insight into structures of hierarchy and power, and the organization of politics and social life using gender as an analytic category. According to Najmabadi, the Iranian encounter with modernity in the nineteenth century was formed in the re-articulation of concepts like nation (*millat*) and homeland (*vatan*). These re-articulations relied strongly on the notion of gender. She writes:

Until the first decade of the twentieth century, when women began to claim their place as sisters-in-the-nation, nation was largely conceived and visualized as a brotherhood, and homeland as female, a beloved, and a mother. Closely linked to the maleness of the nation and the femaleness of the homeland was the concept of *namus* (honor)...Its meaning embrac[ing] the idea of a woman's purity (*'ismat*) and the integrity of the nation, *namus* was constituted as subject to male possession and protection in both domains; gender honor and national honor intimately informed each other. (1-2)

Both Najmabadi (2005) and Fakhredin Azimi (2008) argue that the project of modernity in Iran has never entailed a total negation of tradition, but has tended to always negotiate and contextualize it. However, Eurocentric narratives of modernity, which have informed discourses of nation, gender, and Islam in Iran, have managed to construct tradition and modernity as dichotomous. At the heart of the drive for modernization was gender reform and a focus on the practice of veiling. In Iranian cinema generally, veiling can represent a variety of meanings, depending on the time and location in which a film takes place. In *A Separation* specifically, veiling as costume conveys information about each character's class and her connection to modernization, and therefore the ways she is heard and believed. Because historically, the veil has long been argued to be a marker of (Muslim) identity, we briefly examine how

the history of the veil and its various social meanings are central to Iran's political history and the modernization process and how, through imposed unveiling and re-veiling, regimes have constructed their own image of the ideal "Iranian woman" as well as Iran as a modern or Islamic country (Paidar 1997).

For example, in the late 1930s, Reza Shah Pahlavi abolished the women's veil or *chador*, and his modernization efforts entailed the use of police to impose new disciplinary practices on women's (and men's) bodies.<sup>1</sup> As a result of Reza Pahlavi's action, "women's bodies became sites of political and cultural struggle, complicated further by the subjection of unveiled women to an intense public gaze and sexual harassment" (Afary 2009, 9); this created many tensions particularly at the intersection of gender, Islam, and class. Educational reforms included the establishment of schools that enrolled both girls and boys, and the addition of female teachers contributed to the economic infrastructure and supported the state's Westernization policies in the 1930s and 1940s (Sedghi 2007). At the same time, this period saw a sharp decline in support for polygamy and tolerance for same sex relations, both common practices in the era, and heterosexual monogamy became the new norm.

From 1941 to 1953, after Reza Shah Pahlavi was ousted by the Allies in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the country experienced a period of relative political freedom. The end of the 1940s saw the successful movement for the nationalization of oil, led by Prime Minister Mohammad Mossaddeq and the National Front. The 1953 Anglo-American coup interfered with this democratic movement and brought Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who had earlier fled the country, back to power. After his reinstatement, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi put an end to the political freedom of earlier years. However, he still continued to support gender modernization, as he believed educating women and keeping them in the labor force was economically advantageous and contributed to the modern image of the country.

The imposed unveiling of Iranian women in the 1930s, intended as a means to modernize the nation, resulted in the construction of the hijab as an expression of resistance. During revolutionary marches, women from various ideological backgrounds wore the hijab as a demonstration of their opposition to the regime. Cen-

tral to the discourses of modernity, nation, and religion, the veil functioned as the most obvious visual signifier of change in Iranian women's lives (Azimi 2008; Mirsepassi 2000). As such, discourses are articulated and they compete with the female body as a signifier of the meanings they seek to create. But the veil debate is by no means a post-revolutionary phenomenon.

The late 1970s saw a backlash against the gender reforms of the more modernized sectors of society. The revolution of 1979 also brought about a cultural revolution designed to replace the old value system under the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) with an Islamic form. This reversed most of the pre-revolutionary legal reforms. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic and as the new government began to talk about the imposition of veiling, urban middle-class women once again took to the streets in March 1979 to protest. As veiling became compulsory in 1983, various forms of under-veiling came to signify resistance to the Islamic regime. While a roosari (headscarf) and manto (long coat) came to signify the status of their wearers as secular/moderate, a full chador came to designate its wearer as conservative, traditional, or even a hardliner. In addition to compulsory veiling, the changes in state politics, ideology of the state, party politics, value systems, and asset distribution did not work for women, and by resorting to Islamic shari'ah, the new government successfully implemented a policy of unequal treatment of Iranian women under the law (Azimi 2008).

As noted above, different types of hijab are frequently drawn upon to convey ideas of social class in Iranian cinema. The significance of these divisions, and their cinematic representations, are addressed in *A Separation*. In the film, class differences function as a key point in the narrative. A signifier of this class tension, at least for the domestic viewer, is the female characters' hijab, where it functions as a clear marker of class. While the working-class woman, Razieh, wears a chador and calls religious authorities to ask for advice, the middle-class English teacher, Simin, wears a headscarf and a long coat, wants to leave the country, and seeks divorce. The main conflicts in the film's story surround these two mothers, their relationships with family members, and their engagement with the larger social institutions of school, employment, religion, judicial system, and care work. *A Separation* complicates the narratives around gender, religion, class, and negotiations of modernity

in Iran. The film brings socioeconomic divisions to the forefront and openly engages with local power relations in a society where urban poverty is endemic. Speaking to the audience, Farhadi describes how the two families in the film intentionally represent tensions between classes on either side of a socioeconomic divide. Within the context of the nation, they represent the economic realities of many Iranians today and the sense of uncertainty they feel about the future.

Meanwhile, the popularity of this film both in Iran and internationally has to do with its ability to masterfully depict the pressures of social life and complex human interactions, while delivering an incredible sense of intimacy. It is also a subtle reminder to Western audiences that Iranian women are not all the same; the depiction of three-dimensional women and mothers challenges all viewers to contemplate the specificity of an individual's place in the development of an identity and therefore, the development of a character.

### **Visual Separations: Markers of Space and Place**

The opening scene of *A Separation* depicts documents on a copy machine—travel papers, we learn soon enough, for the central characters, Simin, Nader, and their daughter, Termeh, to leave the country. These documents suggest the crossing of borders both geographic and metaphorical, highlighting both the desire to leave and the privilege, associated with class status, to enjoy such mobility. In the next scene, however, Nader and Simin are positioned in front of the camera and we learn that Simin seeks a divorce because Nader refuses to leave the country, despite the months she has spent preparing for the family to go abroad. Nader's father, who lives with them, has Alzheimer's, and Nader refuses to leave him. Simin says to him, "He doesn't know you are his son," to which Nader responds: "But I know he's my father." They are equally stubborn and neither will budge. So they present themselves to the judge, requesting a divorce. The angle of the camera effectively positions viewers in the role of judge, complicit in the surveillance of this family, while also being "called upon to give our verdict on their motives and actions" (Bell 2011, 38).

When Simin states that she does not want to raise their daughter in Iran, "because of the conditions [here]," the judge asks, "What conditions?" Simin is unable to respond. As Godfrey Cheshire (2012) points out,

the rest of the film represents an attempt to answer this question. However, “Iranian audiences don’t need to be told the manifold reasons an educated, affluent woman would want to move abroad, and indeed would want to so badly that she would split up her family” (79). And Richard Alleva (2012) suggests that, even while Farhadi cannot permit his character to respond, “...he’s counting on us to know what the highly educated Simin’s unspoken yearnings are. All through the legal and domestic wrangling, this quiet political chord continues to reverberate” (20).

The film’s title specifically references the marital separation of Simin and Nader. As we have suggested, however, this is not a film about a singular separation. Viewers also witness the separation of Simin from her daughter, Termeh; between religious practices; between classes and communities; between a man and his father; the separation of a man from his memory; the separation of a woman from her fetus; the separation of individuals from justice; and the separation of truths from experiences. In addition, representations of Iranian femininity and womanhood (and Iranian masculinity and manhood) are made specific—and separated—according to class and religion, as evidenced by the hijab. These multiple, intangible separations are visibly represented on screen in provocative ways. Through the use of camera angles, the filmmaker captures the myriad of separations in the story by framing characters through doorways, windows, and mirrors, often splitting the screen with a wall or window between two characters.

When we witness Simin packing her bag to move out of the family home toward the beginning of the film, the camera operators are in constant motion. This extended scene follows Simin around the apartment, always capturing her in another room, through a pane of glass, and even through a window—across a courtyard—and through another window. Separation as viewed through transparent glass becomes a metaphor for the ways that separation can physically distance someone from another even while they remain connected. As Roshanak Taghavi (2012) suggests, “Iran’s unrelenting social, economic, and religious constrictions are aptly portrayed in *A Separation*, whose characters peer into one another’s lives through see-through partitions, transparent shades, and glass windows” (2). Alternately, this practice illuminates the ways in which two char-

acters in close physical proximity may experience distance from one another.

In the film, middle-class Simin and Nader, progressive, educated, and secular, are juxtaposed against Razieh and Hodjat, portrayed as working class and extremely religious. On the issue of class differences, Cheshire (2012) notes “a common theme in Iranian films, one that often implies a lingering disappointment over the failure of Iran’s revolution to produce a truly egalitarian society” (79). This juxtaposition is highly resonant for local audiences. Yet, in the film, no class or religious position is situated as morally superior or inferior. Rather, each of the main characters, at some point, misleads another character, and each of the misunderstandings—structured around gender, class, and religious values—creates and sustains another separation in the narrative.

### **Representations of Mothering and the Maternal**

Acts of mothering occur in the midst of all the film’s separations. Adrienne Rich (1986) makes the distinction between motherhood as an oppressive institution and the actual engaged practice and relationship of mothering. The separation between the two mothers’ classes, education levels, and religious expressions is heightened by their relationships with their daughters. Razieh’s daughter is exposed to the troubles of her mother’s marriage, the debt of her family, and the mistrust and accusation of Razieh’s employer. In several scenes, we see them walk and wait for the bus, framed from the back by the bus stop windows; they spend many hours traveling to and from this job caring for Simin’s father-in-law. Simin’s daughter is exposed to her mother’s dissatisfaction with opportunities in Iran, the decline of her grandfather and the stress of providing care for him, and the increasingly violent confrontations between her family and Razieh’s family.

The two daughters’ experiences are shaped by their mothers’ particular places in society and the ways that their acts of mothering appear on film differ significantly. Both girls are visible in many scenes, but they rarely speak. Simin and her daughter are framed multiple times by their car windows and schoolrooms with large windows where the daughter attends and her mother teaches. Both the car and the schools represent affluence and mobility for Simin’s family. Simin wants desperately to give her daughter more opportunities by

moving out of Iran. But we see little of Simin and her daughter actually interacting. Termeh is depicted as caught in the middle between her parents and is unwilling/unable to choose between them. We witness Razieh perform many more small acts of mothering with her daughter in the film—getting her water, adjusting her scarf, having her daughter near her as she performs the carework for Simin’s father-in-law. This young daughter spends many hours in the justice halls, crowded with people, while her parents and Simin and Nader debate before the judge. Simin, on the other hand, works to separate her daughter from this judicial process and Simin’s mothering is imagined in the intangible desire for more/better opportunities for her daughter, rather than the day-to-day interactions between mother and daughter.

Sarah Ruddick (1989) suggests using the term maternal rather than mother/ing to capture the possibility and reality that women are not the only ones who practice acts of mothering. Nader, a loving son and father, tenderly cares for his father. Indeed, this father is the reason he will not leave Iran or consent to allow his daughter to leave. The cultural expectation is that a son will provide this care for his father and it is with great nurturing and love that we see him dress, walk with, and bathe his father. We also witness tender moments featuring Simin with her father-in-law and Termeh with her grandfather. Balancing these expected feminine maternal acts with the maternal acts performed by Nader challenges an audience’s idea of who may, can, and should be involved in the care of elders and, by extension, children. In particular, this representation challenges Western assumptions about Middle Eastern masculinities, long associated with violence and hypersexual misogyny (Amar 2011). In opposition to such depictions, Termeh’s reticence about her mother wanting them to leave Iran is wrapped up in her love and tender relationship with her father; Termeh becomes the embodiment of the effects of separation.

Nader “mothers” his daughter as he teaches Termeh to stand up for herself. For example, in an early scene in the film, he observes Termeh through the rear-view window of his car, a fractured representation often suggestive of male voyeurism and indicating what Laura Mulvey (1990) called “the male gaze” (28-40). But rather than an objectifying or sexualizing gaze, the reflected representation captures Termeh pumping gas at a busy

gas station in Tehran—an act normally performed by men. When she returns to the car, she nervously observes, “Everybody’s staring,” suggesting her own awareness of gendered looking relations. But Nader responds, “Let them stare.” He then chastises her for “tipping” the gas station attendant, when she herself pumped the gas, and insists that she return to demand the change she is owed. Termeh is hesitant, but does as she is asked. This scene, notable in its simplicity, highlights the close relationship between father and daughter, and subverts the male gaze in two significant ways - through the camera’s positioning and in Nader’s watchful insistence on Termeh’s ability to stand up for herself.

The film builds depictions of mothers and fathers as complex individuals who have hopes, dreams, and secrets that must be tended. Unlike the “unrepentant mothers” of Kathleen Rowe Karlyn’s (2011) study of mothers and daughters in film, Simin and Razieh are three-dimensional characters, even when nearly silent (Razieh) or absent during parts of the film (Simin during the first half of the film). The maternal is present in the ways both families negotiate purpose and meaning in their lives. Mothers are expected to provide the best lives and options for their children, and Simin believes she cannot do this in Iran and this belief motivates the obvious separation of the film. Razieh seeks work outside the home, even though she must hide it from Hodjat because he would suggest it goes against their religious beliefs. The ways both mothers act to care for their daughters, though they differ significantly, connect the two families in the midst of tragedy, mistruths, and misunderstanding, while emphasizing the separations between their lived experiences. Though the setting is largely in Simin’s part of Tehran, borders—real and figurative—play prominently in the ways that these mothers negotiate caring for their families, especially their daughters, and how they engage in employed work in two families and communities in contemporary Iran.

### **Crossing Borders: Between “Here” and “There”**

Chandra Mohanty’s (2003) work reminds us of the “micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle and the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes” that are present in all women’s/mother’s lives (223). The separations of this film are grounded in characters’ experiences of the historical legacy in Iran and the mothers’ individual social lo-

cations. Like mothers in real life, these characters are always more than we actually see depicted on screen. Both mothers in *A Separation* experience the double space of the oppressive institution of motherhood and the potentially empowering act of mothering apparent in transnational feminist films and in daily lived realities. *A Separation* demonstrates the ways in which transnational motherhood itself is structured by movement across place and time, often involving physical separation and border crossings.

Razieh's relative silence, while caring for an elder in another social class so that his family members can continue their own lives and employment, speaks to this reproduction of social class and religious differences, at the same time that Simin attempts to break this cycle and resist the separations between classes, cultures, and nations. Especially for women, the transnational processes Lindsay Palmer (2011) discusses often entail "precarious journeys between a 'here' that has never belonged to them and a 'there' that has always belonged to someone else" (114). Such "exilic journeying" is suggestive not only of actual physical movement, but also "identity shifts, linguistic traversing, bodily transformations, symbolic reconfigurations of one's 'I'" (114; citing Marciniak 2006, 34). These crossings and transgressions are evident in *A Separation*, suggestive of a changing society, particularly in terms of gender relations, constructions of femininity and masculinity, class, religion, and family structure. As an audience, we "interrogate oppressive representations of mothers while also daring to imagine reproduction as the act of remaking rather than merely copying existing structures of belonging" (Palmer 2011, 115-16). This tension heightens our viewing experience by providing complex views of both mothers, not just the upwardly mobile Simin.

The meanings of windows, mirrors, frames, and glass grow in significance as the film reaches its climax. After leaving a contentious meeting between the families to reach a monetary settlement, Simin and Termeh are framed outside their car windshield that has been shattered, presumably by a rock. This is the first time we see a broken window in the film. As the story spirals toward its conclusion, this broken representation of separation shows the irrevocable loss that each of the characters experience. In the final scene of the film, we see Simin and Nader sitting in the same hallway outside the judge's chambers, but on opposite sides of the hall and

on either side of a window that is cracked. As the credits roll, we watch them sit in their physical and emotional separation, while in another room, their daughter, Termeh, shares with the judge her decision about whom she wants to live with. This ambiguous ending is common to Iranian cinema and serves to leave the audience to draw its own conclusions. Indeed, Cheshire (2012) points out that, "Farhadi scrupulously avoids playing favorites; it's a mark of his humanism that we are finally invited not to judge the characters but to understand them in a way that transfers our concern from the individuals themselves to the entire society" (79). Both the mothers and fathers are flawed, and both exhibit pain and love. It is this balanced perspective that allows the mother characters and the maternal acts of many of the characters to emerge from the shadows they often inhabit in society and in film.

### Complicating Gender and Nation

Our reading of *A Separation* attempts to situate the film within transnational feminist cinema, suggesting its engagement not only with representations of national belonging, mobility, and diaspora, but also gender and motherhood. The film highlights ideas about freedom, citizenship, and collective memory, as well as different conceptualizations of truth and justice. Loss of memory—or a kind of national forgetting—occurs through representations of women's bodies and practices of motherhood. When Razieh abandons Nader's father to see an obstetrician (later we learn of the emergency that prompted this visit), she ties the father to the bed to keep him from leaving the apartment. Nader returns to find his elderly father on the floor, unconscious, and still tied to the bed. Outraged, he also notices that some money is missing from the bedroom. When Razieh returns, he pushes her out of the apartment in front of her young daughter, Somayeh. Later, we find that Razieh suffered a miscarriage. She blames Nader, who is accused of murder under Iranian law. He then accuses her of abusing his father.

The film, in Rahul Hamid's (2011) words, "is a meditation on what it means to be free. In Farhadi's view, freedom is fraught with agonizing choices that pit a person's sentiments and needs against the state, religion, and the needs and feelings of others" (41). Roshanak Taghavi (2012) suggests that the failing marriage at the heart of the film also functions as a meta-

phor for the greater divisions within Iran, “particularly between the lower-income, often more pious citizens and the more wealthy urban classes” (1). Taghavi discusses Iranians’ “yearning for their homeland even as they seek to leave it” (2), a sentiment captured beautifully by Simin. As Taghavi points out, “the symbolism is palpable. Nader, Simin, and Termeh’s US visas require them to leave within 40 days, a period which in Iranian tradition marks the mourning period after a loved one’s death” (2). Indeed, at the film’s conclusion, Simin, Nader, and Termeh appear in court dressed in black, signifying the death of Nader’s father and the further fracturing of their family. Eleven-year-old Termeh is required to make a choice—will she leave with Simin or remain in Iran with Nader? In an interview, Farhadi states, “Termeh represents the future generation of Iran, which will eventually attain freedom. But in Iran, we think democracy means comfort, when in fact freedom means having to bear responsibility, which is difficult. Thus Termeh is experiencing freedom: but it is painful” (Taghavi 2012, 3).

There are multiple losses that structure the narrative, and the two daughters’ lives are shaped by their mothers’ losses, including the loss of the marriage, the loss of jobs and income, loss of home and family, the loss of the grandfather’s memory, signaling the greater collective loss of historical memory and cultural expectations—symbolically a kind of national forgetting. And then of course, at the center, the loss of Razieh’s pregnancy, underscoring the significance of reproductive labor and motherhood within the context of the film.

Recognizing that specific historical, political, and cultural contexts must be taken into account to enable a better understanding of women’s lives worldwide, it is critical that narratives around women and modernity in Iran are not separated from those of men, the family, and the wider society, or that of a larger global and transnational context. *A Separation* challenges this tendency of dividing people into strict gendered categories by contextualizing women’s and mothers’ lives alongside their husbands, families, and the various communities in which they live, work, and love. Without such context, an Orientalist discourse is reinforced, similar to the discourse of the veil as a signifier of Islam’s oppression of women that continues to function as the primary logic through which most Westerners came to understand Iran and Iranians. Within such a discourse,

Islam was transformed into an Orientalist trope and the veil a manifestation of Orientalism, in which “Islam was inherently and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies” (Ahmed 1992, 151). *A Separation* defies this reductive view.

Fatima Mernissi (1991) argues that, discussing Muslim women only in relation to Western women, leads to “senseless comparisons and unfounded conclusions,” which often limit the issue to “who is more civilized than whom” (7). She suggests that the underlying reason for such Orientalist narratives is the “application of the notion of woman as a homogeneous category” (351) without taking specific contexts into account, particularly in relation to global power differences. In this regard, the aesthetics of veiling as a social practice is a dynamic practice in which both men and women are implicated (Naficy 2001). Hamid Naficy (2001) highlights how, by utilizing different veiling practices, women represent themselves differently to the gaze of others, “involving body language, eye contact, types of veil worn, clothing worn underneath the veil, and the manner in which the veil itself is fanned open or closed at strategic moments to lure or to mask, to reveal or to conceal the face, the body, or the clothing underneath” (36). Shahla Haeri (1989) also notes the relationship between the veil and looking relations: “Not only does the veil deny the penetrating male gaze, it enables women to use their own judiciously. Because men and women are forbidden to socialize with each other, or to come into contact, their gazes find new dimensions in Muslim Iran. Not easily controllable, or subject to religious curfew, glances become one of the most intricate and locally meaningful means of communication between the genders” (229). By utilizing the camera lens, Farhadi expands beyond merely situating an individual woman in the context of her veiling and what that might indicate about her class, religious practice, or relationship to family. The literal framing of characters and scenes through windows, mirrors, and doorframes reminds the audience that we, too, are complicit in such looking relations. The audience becomes the judge in the film’s beginning court scene, when the couple makes their case directly into the camera. The end of the film returns to this courtroom with Termeh looking directly into the

camera, returning the gaze to the audience-judge. In these powerful scenes, the glass of objectifying and othering Iranian women (and men) is shattered.

As we have discussed, understandings of gender represent a contested site where discourses of modernity, nation, and Islam have constantly been negotiated within Iranian society and in which the fundamental concept of class cannot be ignored. *A Separation* undermines and subverts any attempt to stereotype Iranian/Muslim women, and/or to frame Muslim women as always already oppressed and in need of liberation. Within its realistic aesthetic, *A Separation* complicates intersections of nation, Islam, gender, and modernity, demonstrating how the different representations of hijab can function as markers of class. The film avoids the popular trope of generating binaries between man/woman, religious/secular, and tradition/modernity and, in its focus on gender and class, allows for the representation of complex differences among both men and women within Iranian society.

It is here where we hope our work intervenes into multiple discourses and representations of mothers and motherhood, and where we suggest the significance of contextual specificity in analyses of mothering processes and in representations of gender and nation. In emphasizing the distinct ways mothers are represented also as citizens of nation-states, whose stories may represent other larger stories, as we have noted, audiences should consider both the local and global implications of gendered looking relations. *A Separation* illustrates the ways in which “national cinemas” engage the transnational, highlighting questions of diaspora and national belonging.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Reza Shah Pahlavi (15 March 1878 – 26 July 1944) was Shah of Iran from December 1925 until September 1941. His son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, took his place as Shah, when the British forced his abdication. Mohammed Reza served as Shah from 1941 to 1979, when he was overthrown in the Islamic Revolution.

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