



Film

Brian McClinton

The Persian Wars

A Separation

THE personal is political' – a feminist slogan popularised by Carol Hanisch and others in the 1960s and 1970s – was meant to convey the idea that personal problems are also political issues because the personal sphere of life is not power-free but politically determined. Moreover, the choices we make – to watch certain TV programmes, to wear certain types of clothes, to eat certain kinds of food, and so on – have political and social implications.

The interconnectedness between the private and public spheres pervades *A Separation*, which has won several international prizes, including the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival and BBC4's *World Cinema Award* for 2011. This intense and thrilling movie, written and directed by Asghar Farhadi, was also Iran's official entry for 2012's foreign language Oscar.

At first glance, it seems like a small-scale family drama involving an educated middle class Tehranian couple, Simin (Leila Hatami) and her husband Nader (Peyman Moadi). In the very first scene in a divorce court they are both staring intimately into the camera. Although Simin doesn't seek a divorce, she wants to leave the country and start a new life abroad with their 11-year old daughter Termeh (played by the director's daughter, Sarina Farhadi), but Nader wants to stay and look after his elderly father who lives with them and has Alzheimer's. They agree to a trial separation and Simin moves in with her parents, while Termeh decides to stay with her father, knowing that her mother will not leave the country without her.

The trouble starts when Nader hires Razieh (Sareh Bayat) to do the housework and look after his father while he is working at the bank. She is a devout Muslim from a working class suburb who has to call an imam on an Islamic helpline to see if it would be sinful for her to wash the genitals of the incontinent old man. She is pregnant and has a hot-headed unemployed husband Hodjat (Shahab Hosseini) who doesn't approve of her working. When the old man escapes, she pursues him across a busy street with consequences that impact on everyone. Then Nader comes home early the next day to discover his father tied to the bed. He is furious, accuses Razieh of theft and pushes her out of the apartment. She has a miscarriage which she claims was caused by the fall when he pushed her. Hodjat brings a court case against Nader, whom the judge tells that he faces imprisonment for murder if it is proved that he knew Razieh was pregnant.

So, from banal and minimalist beginnings, *A Separation* expands to embrace a multitudinous layer of conflicts and dilemmas. There is the obvious conflict of secularism versus religious fundamentalism embodied in the two couples, layered on top of the social divisions, in turn placed on top of the feminist politics between the liberated Simin and the still enslaved Razieh. The 'separation' in the film's title is therefore not only that between Simin and Nader but also



**an engrossing
humanist film with
universal themes**

encompasses class, gender and religion. In this sense, it is about the clash between two Irans: the mullah-ridden, patriarchal, poverty-stricken old country and the modern secular, liberated and prosperous new society struggling to establish hegemony.

And yet it would be a lesser work if that was all. For, despite all the divisions that set them apart, these people could be from anywhere in the world. They all share a common flawed and vulnerable humanity. There are no heroes or villains here, none of the characters is spared, and everyone has his or her reasons. Like the rest of us, they seek truth and justice in their dealings with one another while proving that, when we are faced with real moral dilemmas, being honest and fair is not always easy. Truth and justice, as it turns out, are not always black and white but muddled and slippery shades of grey. We may have to lie to save our jobs, to save our relationships, to save our family, to

save our freedom. The web of our life is a mingled yarn.

"Avoid doing what you would blame others for doing", warned Thales, the 'father' of western philosophy. In Farhadi's engrossing and superbly acted humanist film, all the characters are the victims of the white lies and misdemeanours of others, while at the same time being guilty of the same behaviour themselves. It is called hypocrisy and, as the story develops, we should bear in mind that the greatest hypocrites are often the most morally righteous. Perhaps we should also be mindful of the possibility that without some hypocrisy civilisation itself would probably collapse.

A Separation brings to mind two foreign language films of the last ten years. The first is the wonderful Italian humanist film *I'm not Scared*, directed by Gabriele Salvatores and starring Giuseppe Cristiano as Michele, the young boy whose moral journey leads to an act of altruistic heroism. *A Separation* resembles it in that a profound message is encased in a simple story which contains minimal violence and a complete absence of bullets, bombs, car chases, earsplitting soundtracks or lifeless CGI. Both films demonstrate that you don't need to assault the senses to produce powerful and effective results.

The other film is *The Class*, Laurent Cantet's French winner of the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2008. *A Separation* has the same hand-held realism and quickfire dialogue that is as compelling and explosive as any Hollywood action movie. Like *The Class*, it is dominated by talk in a foreign language, yet it draws you into a boiling cauldron that is as tense and gripping as any number of *Bourne Identities*.

How on earth did it get past the Iranian censorship, let alone become the country's official entry at the Oscars? Indeed, at first Farhadi was banned from making it, yet for some reason the ban was lifted. The film was voted second best film of 2011 in the *Sight and Sound* critics' poll. It is, however, infinitely superior to the winner – the tedious and gloomy godfest that is *The Tree of Life*.