

# The Impact of Religion on Realistic Choices: *A Separation*

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## ABSTRACT

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran adopted the tradition again. However, with the development of the modernity, there were lots of problems in Iran, such as the status of women and inequality and poverty of the underclass. *A Separation* is a great film that reflects these problems. In this article, the reasons behind these problems, especially, the influence of religion on practical choices through analyzing the plots and the dialogue between the characters, are explored. The analysis is divided into three parts. First, the choices made by women from different social classes are discussed, such as whether to against the bondage of religious precepts or compliance. Second, the relationship between law and religious ethics is investigated, so as to explain the reasons behind the characters' choices. Last, the inequality faced by the pious underclass and their oppression by the middle-class is analyzed. In this paper, the author thinks that some intellectual women choose against the bondage of religion, while the under-class women choose to be religious. In Iran, laws are based on religious precepts, both of them supplement each other, they established the standards of right and wrong of Iran. The author also argues that religion makes some pious people unable to carry out new changes and have to live a hard life.

**Keywords:** religion, Iran, film, ethic, modernity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*A Separation* is an Iranian film, depicting a real life that highlights lots of problems in religion, culture, values and law. It was awarded the Oscar in 2012 for Best Foreign Language Film. According to the film, Iranians are subject to the ethics and rules of Islam. Islam, with the history over 1400 years, has had a great deal of conflicts between tradition and modernity due to the development of modern civilization. This paper mainly focuses on the influence of religion on law and individual behaviors.

In this paper, how the precepts of Islam affected the behaviors of different classes, the status of working women and intellectual women in Iran, the conflicts between religious ethics and secular morality, and the dilemmas faced by Iranians will be investigated. Besides, the reasons behind will be analyzed through the plot of and dialogue of the film.

Under the influence of religion, people need to make a choice between ethics and law, their consciousness hovers between religion and the individual. For their religion, should they resist or choose to submit? Each character has different behaviors, different choices in the film. This article aims to give people a better understanding of the current situation of contemporary Muslim society.

## 2. ANALYSIS

### 2.1. *The Conflict Between the Individual and the Religion*

At the beginning of the film, the main character of the movie, Simin, wants to emigrate. With the development of the plot, Simin as a middle-class and educated woman, lives in an affluent environment. Since she wants to give her daughter more opportunities, she thinks of moving abroad. In the film, she says she does not want her daughter to continue living in Iran. Her husband, Nader, does not agree with moving abroad, because he needs to take care of his father, who diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. However, Simin's desire for freedom has overcome the pressure of circumstances, so she chooses to divorce. Thus, a separation refers not only to the separation between Simin and Nader, but also the separation of Simin from her country and all the things that she is familiar with.

In the film, Simin wants to compensate Razieh who has a miscarriage by selling her car, but Nader asks Simin to stay out of his business, and says Simin has no right to deal with these things. This is a manifestation of the men's self-esteem. There is a verse in the Qur'an that express the reason, "As for those from whom fear disloyalty, admonish them, and abandon them in their beds, then strike

them”[1]. In Muslim society, men have the right to punish women and they have more authority than women. That can explain why Nader does not care about his wife's feelings. His personality is influenced by Islamic culture. He does not consider Simin's needs and is not unwilling to talk with her. When Simin takes Nader's father home, she complains why Nader never begs her not to leave. In the scene, Simin's existence seems meaningless in marriage for fourteen years, her individual consciousness are ignored by her husband.

In the movie, Simin puts the fashion scarf, revealing her hair dyed red, while Razieh, a woman from lower class is always in black and her headscarf covers all her hair. It indicates that the two women have different choices between individuals and religion. Simin prefers to show female beauty, while Razieh chooses to envelope it. Mehra Shirazi's essay refers to the Iranian revolution history. In the late 1930s, Iran abolished the woman's veil or chador. But in late 1970s, a strong resistance against the gender reforms. In 1983, wearing a headscarf is once again compulsory for women[2]. According to Qur'an, "There is no blame on them concerning their fathers, or their sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or their female servants. But they should remain conscious of Allah. Allah is Witness over all things.”[3] In today's Iranian society, women are forbidden to display their bodies, because they are believed to influence the minds of men negatively.

In the film, Razieh's husband owes a debt and she wants to help him pay off the debts. If Razieh wants to look after Nader's father, she must ask her husband's permission. Also, she is afraid her husband will oppose her choice, so she has to hide it from her husband. She is not much educated, and prefers to follow the precepts of religion and finds her identity in it. In the whole, she is a traditional woman who takes good care of her husband.

Nevertheless, whether Simin and Razieh choose individual freedom or religious discipline, they have to pay for the price. If they choose to obey their consciousness, they will have to face objections from society or family. If they choose to submit religious discipline, they will lose more possibilities.

## **2.2. Law and Ethics**

With the development of plots, there is new conflict. After Simin leaves, Nader hires Razieh to assist with his father. But the Razieh is misunderstood by Nader, Nader thinks she stole his money. Razieh, insists not stealing his money and defends for herself. During the quarrel, Razieh falls down the stairs. After suffering a miscarriage, Razieh accuses Nader of murder. A conflict of law, ethics and morality begins.

Hashi mentions Abdullah Hassan's point of view. He suggests that Islamic ethics are those universal standards of right and wrong, which dictate what human beings should do, as taught by the Qur'an. In addition, Hashi notes in Islam both morality and law originate from the religious origins and religious beliefs[4].

Obviously, compared with warnings of the religious precepts, Nader lacks of faith and is more afraid of punishment in reality. If convicted of murder, he will be one to three years in prison. Going to prison will give him a real life shock: He will lose his job and cannot take care of his daughter. As a result, although he knows the maid is pregnant, he still lies before the judge that he does not know. Meanwhile, he also denies having pushed Razieh. Temeh's teacher also lies before the judge. As a middle-class woman, perhaps to maintain the relationship between her and Nader, she tells the judge that Nader is a good person. Later, Razieh's husband questions her testimony and asks her to swear on the Quran at school. After she swears, she changes her words. She tells the judge that Nader knew Razieh was pregnant. Because there is no pressure for realistic punishment, Temeh's teacher seems to be more afraid of religious punishment and still has faith in her heart.

In chapter 4 verse no. 135, there are ideas about honesty in the Qur'an. "O you who believe! Stand firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even if against yourselves, or your parents, or your relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, Allah takes care of both. So do not follow your desires, lest you swerve. If you deviate, or turn away—then Allah is Aware of what you do.”[5] At the end of the movie, Razieh's husband asks her to lie before the Qur'an but is refused by Razieh. This scene suggests the religious precepts is the inner law of Razieh. She has faith, thus, religious ethics can restrain her. Despite the incomprehension of others and the anger of her husband, she is more afraid of the misfortune of lying. She thinks that Nader's money is unclean for she is suspicious. At last, faith overcame selfishness.

In Islam, neither law nor religion can solve all problems, but both of them supplement each other. If someone does not respect religious ethics or does some immoral things, then he will be punished by law. As Reinhart has argued, Islamic is basic to Islamic ethics, and it is not merely law, but also an ethical[6]. Nader chooses to lie because he was afraid of being punished by Islamic law. For Razieh and Temeh's teacher, it is the religious ethics that makes them realize their sins, so they chose to be honest.

## **2.3. Survivals Between Tradition to Modernity**

In the film, Nader has a good job and lives in a nice house. However, he is unwilling to pay Razieh higher and asks his daughter get back the tip that is not worth paying. These plots indicate that he is a rational man in money. He works in bank also means he receives modern education. When he argues with the judge, indicating that he is uncompromising and eloquent. However, the traditional culture has also deeply influenced him. He insists correcting the Arabic taught by Temeh's teacher to Farsi. In Iran, there are so many people like Nader: The mixture of tradition and modernity is reflected from their thoughts and behaviour. But Simin's choice means she does not want this kind of compromise. Rebecca Mangan has mentioned journalist Bongiorno's viewpoint, although Iranian women

are highly educated, their career options are limited[7]. In the film, lots of intellectual women are engaged in the teaching position. During the quarrel between Nader and Simin, Nader believes that Simin is timid and avoids problems instead of solving them. He says she wants to leave Iran, because she is afraid to stay in Iran, where there is a limit to what individual women can do. Nader's words appear to lack empathy. Because Nader does not agree with leaving Iran, he has to face his wife departure and deal with the difficulties in life. His dilemma epitomizes Iran, the choice that sticks between tradition and modernity is really hard.

Except the dilemma of middle-class, the pious underclass has to face poverty and inequality. In the film, Razieh lives in a shabby house. She is pregnant but has to work. What is more, it spends her a few hours in the way to work by bus. In the court, Nader accuses Razieh of failing to take care of his father, while Razieh's husband blames Nader and he says the only thing worse than Nader is his eloquence. His words indicate that the law does not protect his rights after he is fired. He is angry and helpless. At the end of the film, Nader asks Razieh to swear on the Qur'an to prove he has not caused her miscarriage. Despite the great pressure, Razieh does not swear. In contrary, she chooses to give up the money, It represents she cannot pay off her debts and has to live in poverty in the future. In the film, Razieh is hit by a car in search of Nader's father and injured at work. In good conscience, Nader should undertake some responsibility. But in the film, Nader's mistake is disintegrated, the camera focuses on Simin's confession. Pious people fall into poverty, while the educated middle-class oppresses those at the bottom. Their piety just make them poorer and poorer. From this aspect, there is a conflict between a completely rigid mind and modernization. The conservative underclass has to struggle between traditional commandments and current rapid changes.

Above all, in the film, Nader or Simin or Razieh needs to respond to the changes at the crossroads between tradition and modernity.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Linking the literature with what is shown in the film, different dilemmas are clearly presented, in which two different social classes show their different attitude and behaviors. And the religion has a great effect on law and individuals. This film is representative of three trends in Iran, some of intellectual women choose divorce and to pursue their freedom and rights, and the dominant male choose to stick to in Iran, looking for their new possibilities, Iran's poor are struggling with piety and survival. They are at the bottom, facing inequality and poverty. In the film, piety makes them miss the opportunities of developing the modernity, after reaching spiritual harmony. As a result, the contradiction of their real life cannot be solved. The purpose of this article is not to judge whether their choices are right or wrong. Instead, the author attempts to investigate the current situation in

Iran and hopes that the Iran can find a balance between religion and reality.

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