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Iranian Cinema in Transition: Relative Truth and Morality in Asghar Farhadi's Films

A Thesis by

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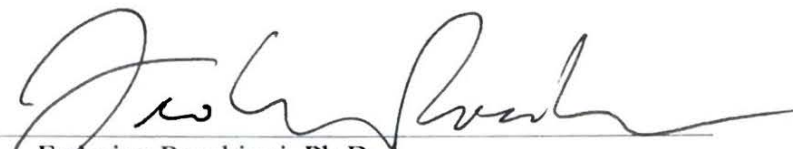
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April 2019

Iranian Cinema in Transition: Relative Truth and Morality in Asghar Farhadi's Films

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ABSTRACT

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by Mazyar Mahdavifar

In addition to box office success, Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi's films have achieved national and international critical acclaims. However, it is not only this rare achievement of critical and commercial success that sets Farhadi apart from other Iranian filmmakers, but also, his new approach to the issues of truth and morality which have been age-long themes in the history of Iranian art, literature, and cinema. Compared to his predecessors such as Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Jafar Panahi, Farhadi's viewpoint on these themes is distinctly secular. This thesis focuses on the significance of the change Farhadi's approach has brought on Iranian cinema by analyzing three of his critically acclaimed films, *About Elly* (2009), *A Separation* (2011), and *The Salesman* (2016). By creative use of narrative techniques such as narrative gaps and open endings and filmic techniques such as indirect-subjective point of view and handheld camera, Farhadi's films highlight the relativity of the concepts of truth and morality through a secular and modernist lens. Such an approach marks a shift in Iranian cinema which, in turn, indicates an ideological shift within the contemporary Iranian society as well.

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"You have your way, I have my way.

As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist."

- *Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Introduction

On September 1, 2016, for the first time in Iran's history, film theaters had to add special screenings at 6:00 a.m. because all the tickets for the film releasing that day had been sold out. The film to be shown was not a blockbuster film or an escapist comedy. It was Asghar Farhadi's latest film *The Salesman* (2016), a family drama about moral dilemmas in the life of a middle-class couple in the city of Tehran. Eventually, *The Salesman* became Iran's biggest box office hit up to that time.¹ The film also brought Farhadi, already a well-established and respected international filmmaker, many awards including his second Best Foreign Language Film Oscar. At the time, critics had different views about what had caused such a considerable audience turnout;² however, whatever people's motives were to wake up that early to watch the film, there was no doubt that Farhadi had become the representative of a cinema with which Iranian filmgoers could identify.

Asghar Farhadi is the most significant among the new generation of Iranian filmmakers, which gradually emerged in the 21st century. He has received international and national awards, more than any other filmmaker of his generation, among them two Oscars for the best foreign language film for *A Separation* (2011) and *The Salesman* (2016). Also, all of his films are among the most popular with both the Iranian film critics and the public audience.³

However, it is not only this rare achievement of critical and commercial success that sets Farhadi apart from other Iranian filmmakers, but also, and more importantly, his new approach to the issues of truth and morality which have been age-long themes in the history of Iranian art, literature, and cinema. Compared to his predecessors such as Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Jafar Panahi, his approach to these themes is distinctly secular. His films effectively brought an end to the reign of religious approach to such issues. Since Iranian society is governed by religious rules after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, this constitutes a radical break from previous practices and even a subversive act.

This thesis focuses on the significance of the change Farhadi's approach has brought on Iranian cinema by analyzing three of his critically acclaimed films, *About Elly* (2009), *A Separation* (2011), and *The Salesman* (2016). In these films, Farhadi explores concepts of truth and morality through a secular, modernist, and relativist lens that is starkly different from that of his predecessors which was based on either a religious or mystic belief. Such an approach marks a shift in Iranian cinema which, in turn, suggests an ideological shift within the contemporary Iranian society as well.

In order to highlight the significance of this shift, this thesis first contextualizes Farhadi's films within the history of Iranian cinema in terms of their approach to the issues of truth and morality; then, close readings of Farhadi's three aforementioned films demonstrate the ways in which Farhadi's use of narrative and filmic techniques are effective in drawing audience attention to the relativity of truth and morality. Specifically, textual analysis of these films focuses on the function of narrative gaps, character development, open endings, the depiction of religion, hand-held camera,

indirect-subjective point of view and editing techniques. The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that the distinctly secular approach in Farhadi's films indicates social, ideological changes within the contemporary Iranian society.

Asghar Farhadi and the Emergence of a New Generation

Farhadi belongs to a new generation of Iranian filmmakers that emerged in the 2000s under the reformist government of Mohammad Khatami. One of the reasons why this generation is critical toward religious absolutism is their childhood experience under the early years of the Islamic Republic in the 1980s during which religious guidelines were advocated in every aspect of human life, including cinema.⁴ Mostly born in the 1970s, they also experienced the catastrophic results of the war between Iran and Iraq (1980-88) as children or teens.⁵ The state presented this war as a religious, sacred war between right and wrong. It also had a significant effect on this generation's early exposure to cinema because Iranian cinema of the 1980s was mostly influenced by the war and the official national identity developed by the "culture of martyrdom" and Islamic values.⁶ Farhadi and his generation's social experiences made them become acutely aware of the futility and dangers of a religious administration which controls all the relations in the country.

During the 1990s a reformist movement formed among the younger generation of politicians, clergies, as well as artists and thinkers in the protest against the failure of absolutist revolutionary values in satisfying people's social, political and economic demands. Despite belonging to different schools of thought, all reformists believed in the inefficiency of strict religious rules and, thus, called for a freer society.

This reformist movement reached its culmination with the election of Mohammad Khatami as the President of Iran in 1997. Khatami's presidency continued for the next eight years from 1997 to 2005. Khatami was under severe pressures imposed by the Shiite hardliners who ruled the country and were in charge of its non-democratic branches. Nevertheless, his reformist government had relative success at creating a freer environment for artists including filmmakers. In fact, we could say that the new generation of Iranian filmmakers, among them Asghar Farhadi, Negar Azarbayjani, Mani Haghighi, Reza Dormishian and Hamid Nematollah, was a direct product of the reformist government's cultural policies.

Given the relative freedom, these filmmakers focused on telling the stories of people in urban areas especially the capital city of Tehran. They shifted their lenses to the major cities to show the everyday life of the urban middle-class, which had been absent from the cinema for a long time. While Iranian art cinema of the 1980s and 1990s used rural settings and esoteric, enigmatic but simple narratives, Farhadi and other young filmmakers were interested in more commercially oriented narratives based on the complex relationships between people within modern urban Iran. Also, they neither advocated Islamic revolutionary values and morals nor used the rural settings to avoid the complex realities of life under the Islamic Republic in the cities.

One of the crucial differences between the films of the previous generations of directors and those of the new generation, well represented by Farhadi's films, is their approach to the notions of truth and morality, which, as I argue, is entirely non-religious. In all Farhadi's films, religion and religious beliefs stay on a personal level and never play a positive social function. This marginalization of religious beliefs is in stark

contrast to the Islamic Republic's policy of introducing Islam as an ideal governing force. As such, Asghar Farhadi is the leading figure in the new generation of Iranian filmmakers. Farhadi's films are the firsts (regarding the new philosophical approach), the most critically acclaimed (inside and outside Iran) and the representative of the new moral philosophy or viewpoint in Iranian cinema.

Farhadi's first cinematic work was his screenplay for Ibrahim Hatami Kia's *Low Heights* (2001), a film which brought him critical acclaim and became a starting point for him to make his debut film *Dancing in the Dust* in 2003. The film was a promising start. However, as Farhadi explained later, "what sets *Dancing in the Dust* apart from my other films is that it's rooted in cinema itself,"⁷ and not in his own experience as a young filmmaker growing up in a major city. The film was an experience for Farhadi to start working on themes and subjects with which he had a connection: the complexity of the relationships within a society entrapped between the traditional religious ideology of the state and the modern, secular perspective represented by younger educated urban civilians like Farhadi himself.

Since then, he has made seven more films, *Beautiful City* (2004), *Firework Wednesday* (2006), *About Elly* (2009), *A Separation* (2011), *The Past* (2013), *The Salesman* (2016), and *Everybody Knows* (2018). And all these films have common themes: the difficulty of moral judgment, the relativity of truth and morality, and inefficiency of absolute values in solving the problems of contemporary life. The three analyzed in this thesis are his most critical and commercial successes inside and outside Iran. Also, they are his last three films which are entirely set in Iran (*The Past* and

Everybody Knows are set in France and Spain respectively) and, therefore, can be studied for their reflection on the social realities of contemporary Iran.

A few scholarly works in the English language have been published on Farhadi's cinema, and the existing scholarship finds his body of work exceptional in many ways. For instance, Roxanne Varzi distinguishes Farhadi's cinema from the poetic cinema of the 1990s with its doing away with "the desire to please a western audience"⁸ and "moving toward a universal narrative,"⁹ while addressing the everyday life in Tehran. Tina Hasannia argues that Iranian cinema after the Revolution has always been divided into two categories: art-house cinema and mainstream films. The former has been the international film festivals' favorite and the latter, despite its success within the domestic market, has not appealed to western cinephiles. In fact, the importance of Farhadi's cinema, as Hasannia argues, is that he has successfully bridged this gap between the local and the global reception.¹⁰ Daniele Rugo sees Farhadi's cinema as a "clear break" from the tradition of New Iranian Cinema¹¹ for its intricate narrative structures, which focus on "urban middle-class, its values, and lifestyle," and for the characters "marked by emotional complexity rather than immediacy."¹²

According to Mohammad Rezaei et al., Farhadi's cinema showcases a new portrayal of class relationships in Iran, which very closely reflect the reality.¹³ During recent decades, the class structure within Iranian society has experienced significant changes, which is partly a result of a dramatic shift in the distribution of the rural and urban populations. Within the first decade of the 21st century, the urban population has grown to 70 percent of the population, compared to 47% thirty years ago.¹⁴ It means, for

a more accurate picture of contemporary Iran, we need to seek it in the life of the urban middle class and their relationship to the working class living in the cities.

A few critics have pointed to Farhadi's interest in morally complex narratives. For instance, Joseph Burke maintains that, in *A Separation*, Farhadi proposes different layers of moral complexity to emphasize the difficulty of making a judgment while refuting absolutism in moral values.¹⁵ However, Burke and others do not acknowledge Farhadi's engagement with the notions of truth and morality as a new approach in Iranian cinema or a new way of representing the urban middle class that has long been absent from Iranian cinema. Despite the international success of Farhadi's films, no scholarly work has yet focused on the relativist approach of his oeuvre as a significant shift from all previous Iranian filmmakers' philosophical reflection on the notions of truth and morality. What has been missing is the discussion on Farhadi's thematic approach which makes his cinema a complete shift from his predecessors: his non-religious relativist approach to the notions of truth and morality. This thesis focuses on this overlooked aspect of his films.

The relativity of truth has been a long-existing theme in Iranian art and literature. More than seven hundred years ago, Persian poet Jalal-Al-Din Rumi reflected on the subjectivity of truth in a prose poem by saying, "the truth is a mirror that shattered as it fell from the hand of God. Everyone picked up a piece of it, and each decided that the truth was what he saw reflected in his fragment rather than realizing that the truth had become fragmented among them all."¹⁶ Rumi's approach to the notion of truth was based on Sufism,¹⁷ a form of spiritual Islamic mysticism which, according to Islamic scholar Lloyd Ridgeon, "tended to embrace all manifestations of truth, and rejected

absolutism.”¹⁸ While Shi’i Islam propagated by the Islamic government is based on the strict rules derived from the Quran and Shariah emphasizing the absolutism of truth and moral codes, Sufism asserts, “[t]he world appears to us as multiplicity, and the goal of the spiritual life is to ascend from this multiplicity to unity, to see the One in the many and the many integrated into the One.”¹⁹ This form of interpretation, which is more pluralistic and relativistic than the absolutist perspective of most religions, has been projected in the works of many Iranian artists throughout history.

During the first decades after the establishment of the Islamic Republic led by Shiite revolutionaries in 1979, filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf reflected on the multiplicity of truth to question absolutism. By blurring the boundaries between documentary and fiction and “the fusion of factual reality and the manufactured one”²⁰ their films pose the question of what is real and what is not, thus, challenging the concept of absolute truth. However, these films’ search for truth stops at the point of presenting the difficulty of recognizing facts and the ambiguity of the concept of truth. It does not reflect on the truth of belief and moral judgment. It does not go further to engage with the idea that the relativity of truth leads us to the subjectivity of judgment and morality. In their films, the ambiguity of truth and the blurring the line between reality and fiction only happens in the mind of the viewer, not within the narrative itself. The films directed by Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami rarely challenge the morality of the decisions made by the characters because there is no moral conflict or dilemma in their narratives based on the nature of truth.

In contrast, in Farhadi’s films, the questioning of truth happens on two levels: firstly, in the diegetic world of the narrative, and secondly, in the mind of the viewer.

Thus, the quest for truth in Farhadi's films serves as a leading point to guide the viewer toward the more subjective issue of morality; it makes the viewers question and ponder the actions and decisions made by the characters. The three films under discussion, *About Elly*, *A Separation*, and *The Salesman* are the exemplary films that showcase this dual structure of questioning the concept of truth and using it as a leading point to draw the viewer's attention to the more complicated question of morality.

The need to simultaneously explore the notions of truth and morality lies in the idea that morality is a result of our perception of truth. As American philosopher Gilbert Harman points out, "[m]oral judgments depend on what we take the facts to be."²¹ In other words, the way we look at reality and how we define the truth/facts directly affects the way we set our moral values. If we describe the truth as an absolute concept, then, morality will find a solid, concrete meaning, and right and wrong are clearly defined. But, what if the truth is unknowable? What if the definitions of truth, reality and morality are not concrete and depend on social and individual circumstances? Then, to reach a reasonable conclusion, first, we need to define our terms.

The term truth has different implications. It can be used to refer to the physical events happening in our surroundings. This state of "being in accordance with fact"²² can be called factual truth. In Farhadi's films, the factual truth is missing at critical moments in the narrative. This is significant because it leads the characters to a situation in which the deeper implications of the term truth, the truth of beliefs and judgments, are at stake. Close analysis of the three films show that they are in accordance with the subjective relativist viewpoint that relates "the truth and falsity of judgments ... to the beliefs, opinions, and the points of view of individuals."²³ In such a context, the yardstick to

measure the truth or falsity, the rightness and wrongness of moral judgments is the way individuals “think or feel” rather than “how things are in the world.”²⁴ This point of view is in complete contrast to any form of absolutism.

According to moral absolutism, “there is a single moral law that applies to everyone; in other words, there are moral demands that everyone has sufficient reasons to follow and these reasons are the source of all moral reasons.”²⁵ In his study of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Wells, 1941), Daniel Shaw defines moral absolutism as having a belief in the existence of “one universal standard for moral judgment” whether it is “God’s Will, civil law, the Categorical Imperative, or the principle of utility.”²⁶ Religion is one of the most critical sources for absolutist perspectives on truth and morality. According to Christian-Judeo-Islamic philosophy, God is the main and only source of absolute truth. He knows what is good, and that is why humans should obey him unconditionally.

Regarding moral philosophies based on Divine Authority, “God issues commands for the universe as a whole and human beings in particular. Being good is a matter of obeying those commands, submitting to them, bringing your will into line with God’s.”²⁷ Another absolutist moral philosophy is Emanuel Kant’s theory which, despite being based on “rational justification” suggests the Golden Rule²⁸ as an effective method to find out the morality of an act.²⁹ In other words, Kant’s notion of Categorical Imperative as “universal commands” points to the fact that “to ascertain whether the action you are contemplating is moral, you must simply ask yourself whether you would be willing to have everyone act the same way in the same situation.”³⁰ Thus, in a society ruled by moral absolutism, like Iran, the multiplicity of truth is unthinkable.

On the other hand, as Harman suggests “moral relativism denies that there are universal basic moral demands and different people are subject to different basic moral demands depending on the social customs, practices, conventions, values, and principles that they accept.”³¹ Moral relativism does not believe in “standards” and attributes moral judgments to “the context in which they are made,” whether historical, social, or individual.³² Thus, there cannot be a universal yardstick to distinguish right from wrong.

Farhadi’s characters fit into the characteristics of relativism. They have their own standards and values, which might differ from those of others. Their commitment to the moral values may even change during the course of the films and based on the individual circumstances. Truth and morality in Farhadi’s films are relative concepts, and his use of narrative techniques such as deliberate gaps and dual structure, open ending as well as filmic techniques of hand-held camera and indirect-subjective point of view among others work effectively to engage the audience with these issues in a cinematic way.

Narrative Techniques: Truth of Relativism

In traditional narrative structures, gaps or hidden pieces of information have two functions: eliminating the unnecessary details and keeping critical information from the viewer to create suspense. The latter is usually used in mystery, crime and detective dramas. In such films, a piece of the narrative is missing to render the story mysterious and to create a puzzle to be solved. Eventually, at the end or during the course of the story, the film provides the viewer with the missing information, and the puzzle becomes complete. Enjoyment comes with the resolution, with gaining the knowledge about the factual truth.

However, in Farhadi's films, that crucial narrative gap is never filled in clearly. It is because he does not use narrative gaps to keep pieces of information from the audience, but uses them to draw their attention to a more crucial point: the morality of actions. The characters' desire to find out the truth of an incident only works as a leading point to put them in a circumstance in which they have to measure the morality of their own actions—what is the right thing to do— before making a decision. Thus, in Farhadi's films, there is no intention to reassure the viewers by giving them a definite ending or a moment of revelation.

The narrative gap, which creates a surface question of what happened, is only a window to project a deeper question: what would be the moral act the character should perform? And it is precisely this dual structure which leads us to the subjectivity of truth and its relation to morality. This structure allows the viewer to engage with the characters' moral dilemmas and their choice of actions as if they are one of the characters involved. And, in the end, the viewer realizes there is no absolute moral good or bad. Morality is a subjective and circumstantial concept. This is the effect Farhadi's films have on the audience.

All three films—*About Elly*, *A Separation* and *The Salesman*—utilize this dual structure and narrative gaps. Elly's disappearance in *About Elly*, Razieh's miscarriage in *A Separation*, and finally the assault in the bathroom in *The Salesman* all constitute the narrative gaps containing the critical information which are absent from the storyline. And it is this adoption of mystery genre—the 'who dunnit' structure—in the beginning, particularly in *A Separation* and *The Salesman*, that makes Farahdi's films more accessible and commercially viable.

About Elly recounts the story of a group of young middle-class law graduates who travel to the north of Iran, a typical vacation destination for Iranians, to spend a three-day national holiday in a beach house by the Caspian Sea.³³ The group consists of three couples and their children. Sepideh, a female member of the group who has arranged the trip, has invited her son's kindergarten teacher Elly to set her up with their recently divorced friend Ahmad who has just returned from Germany. The group is having fun on the beach until Elly disappears. The truth about this incident and Elly are revealed gradually as the narrative unfolds, and things become more complicated when the members of the group realize Elly had a fiancé.

When Elly suddenly disappears without a trace, the immediate question asked is “what happened to Elly?” The characters, including the children, are asked about the incident. Each person has her or his subjective point of view about the question. Some speculate that she might have drowned in the sea. However, since no one has seen Elly actually stepping into the water, Nazi and Ahmad pose the possibility that Elly has left the group to join her ailing mother in Tehran. Sepideh disagrees with the speculation that Elly is drowned because her body is not found. However, Amir is certain that Elly has died. Like that of the characters, the viewers' view is also incomplete. The last time they see Elly is when she gives a kite to Morvarid, one of the children playing on the beach, and says she is going to leave. We never learn whether Elly drowned accidentally, committed suicide, simply disappeared, or if she is dead at all. By eliminating the critical scene of her disappearance, the viewer is placed in the same position as the characters in the film, left with only partial knowledge about the truth.

When they learn Elly had a fiancé, the characters' desire to find the answer to the factual question of "what happened to Elly?" shifts to a more complicated, subjective one which is related to their position toward Elly's decision to begin a new relationship while still in an engagement. In traditional Iran (and many other countries), those who are engaged are not allowed to have another relationship. Such an act is interpreted as betrayal and damages the honor and reputation of both parties. In a patriarchal society like Iran, this is true especially for women. As a result, when the group realizes Elly had hidden her engagement with Alireza from them, the issue shifts from the surface question to the morality of Elly's behavior and their position vis-à-vis her action.

The central moral question becomes that of "should they let Alireza know that they were aware of Elly's relationship with him when they decided to introduce her to Ahmad?" For them, it might seem a simple moral choice to tell Alireza about their ignorance. However, among the members of the group, Sepideh knew about Alireza, yet she had invited Elly. However, she also knew Elly was not happy with her engagement and was about to break it. Since Sepideh was the only person aware of Elly's engagement, she asks the group to stick with their decision in telling the truth while letting her tell her version of truth as well. For Sepideh, the right action is to conserve Elly's reputation by telling Alireza that she wanted to break their engagement. This makes their decision more complicated because Alireza might not be a logical person. So, if they exclude Sepideh from their story, he might not believe them. They also argue his situation might provoke him to behave impulsively and hurt someone, particularly Sepideh, who had played the matchmaker. Eventually, they choose to act to their own benefit, and, as a group, deny any previous knowledge about Alireza and the engagement.

Thus, they ask Sepideh to be quiet while they encounter Alireza. For them, telling the truth is moral only when it benefits them.

The dual behavior—telling the truth only when it benefits us—goes further when Alireza is not convinced with the group's explanations and insists on talking to Sepideh. Amir, Sepideh's husband, the same person who had earlier advocated telling the truth, now asks her to lie to Alireza because he thinks it is for the benefit of everyone. Alireza's question for Sepideh is simple: did Elly tell you about her engagement to me or not? Another moral dilemma forms. Going back to Harman's idea, the first question for Sepideh would be to find the truth of the fact. The fact is that Elly had informed Sepideh of her engagement. But she had also discussed with her that she was not happy and wanted to end the relationship. Thus, if the truth is the knowledge Sepideh had about Elly's engagement, informing Alireza about this fact would be moral. But, what if we take the truth as Sepideh's knowledge about Elly's decision to end the engagement, as is symbolically evident in the opening scene in which she drops her engagement ring into a charity box? In this case, Sepideh's statement regarding her not knowing about the relationship can be interpreted as projecting the real desire of Elly. Therefore, it can be also a moral decision. Consequently, by ignoring her knowledge of one thing, Sepideh is telling the truth inadvertently. She can argue that the truth is that for Elly, the engagement had ended. How could Sepideh be aware of a commitment which did not exist anymore? Here, the relativity of truth makes the ethical evaluation of Sepideh and other characters' behaviors very difficult. From different perspectives, what Sepideh tells Alireza can simultaneously be truth and lie, morally wrong and right.

A Separation also revolves around a gap in the narrative that hides crucial information from the viewer to draw his/her attention to deeper questions. The film recounts the story of Nader and Simin, a middle-class Iranian couple. Simin wants to leave the country, hoping to provide a better life for her 11-year-old daughter Termeh, but Nader wants to stay to take care of his aging father who has Alzheimer's disease. Simin requests a divorce and leaves the house to stay with her parents. Nader hires Razieh, a young working-class religious woman, to look after his father. A series of events cause a physical argument between Nader and Razieh, and Nader shoves her out the door. The next day Razieh has a miscarriage. Her husband, Hojjat, sues Nader for manslaughter, and Nader opens a case against Razieh who has abandoned his father and locked him to the bed. The heated dispute between the two families puts the characters in difficult situations in which they have to make decisions that contradict their beliefs.

The actual reason for the miscarriage is unknowable. What the film shows is that Nader shoves Razieh out the door, and the next day she has a miscarriage. However, as the audience learns, that is not the entire story. When she left Nader's apartment to find Nader's father, Razieh had a mild car accident. Further, from the conversation between the tutor and Razieh's daughter, we realize she and her husband, Hojjat, happened to have arguments at home that occasionally became violent. So, the surface question is: who is responsible for the death of the unborn child? There are three possible causes for the death: the husband, Nader, and the car accident. However, here again, the lack of critical information and the surface question about the facts is only a device to lead the characters, as well as the viewer, to a quest in which they must redefine their moral values based on the circumstances. Later we learn that Nader had overheard the

conversation between Razieh and the tutor about her pregnancy, yet he told the judge he was not aware of it to avoid a possible jail sentence. Is Nader partially or entirely responsible for the miscarriage or is he completely innocent? In each case, is it moral to lie about a fact and potentially hurt someone in order to protect others?

As such, the definition of truth becomes complicated in critical moments because it is not only about the general knowledge of an individual, but about his/her interpretation and the circumstance in which he/she is referring to a fact. The scene in which Termeh and the viewer realize Nader knew about the pregnancy when he shoved Razieh out the door, in some ways, is similar to the final scene of *About Elly* in which Alireza asks Sepideh if Elly had told her about their relationship or not. As with Sepideh in *About Elly*, Nader's lie is justifiable and even could be accepted as the truth. "I knew she was pregnant," Nader confesses to Termeh that he knew about the pregnancy, and he had lied to the judge. However, he adds, "but at that moment, I did not know. I had forgotten it." In fact, as in the case of Sepideh, the meaning of the term "truth" becomes complicated. Nader accepts his knowledge of the pregnancy, but adds that, at that very moment, he did not know it. Did he know Razieh was pregnant when he pushed her away? At that crucial moment, does forgetting equal not knowing? There are no right or wrong answer here.

In *The Salesman*, also, there is a narrative gap that creates the factual question of the film in order to lead the characters and the viewer toward the deeper issue of the morality of the action. The film tells the story of Emad and Rana, a middle-class, educated couple, in Tehran. Emad, a high school teacher, and his wife Rana perform in theater in their spare time. A construction project in the next building causes damage to

the couple's apartment complex and forces them to evacuate and move to a new place owned by Babak, one of their fellow theater artists. It looks like their problem of finding a new place has been solved until one night, when Emad is away, Rana is attacked by an intruder while taking a shower. This leaves her with a physical and psychological trauma. The traumatic incident provokes Emad to pursue the intruder. However, finding the man responsible for the attack is only the surface of the story.

The surface question in *The Salesman* is finding the person who attacked Rana. However, the attack itself is given as a narrative gap. The viewers do not see how the intruder enters and leaves the apartment. They also do not know what happens inside the bathroom and between the intruder and Rana. This narrative gap never fills in clearly. Rana does not tell what had happened to her, and different characters create different stories. A neighbor argues it was a robbery. Another neighbor rejects him and relates the incident to the clients of the prostitute who was the previous tenant of the apartment. But, there is no absolute truth about it. Again, the camera, the filmmaker, and the viewer all have partial views to the truth. Also, the truth comes out of the interpretation of the events, not the actual events. Interpretations are subjective and relative. Something has happened, and everyone has his or her own interpretation and moral judgment.

Like in the other Farhadi's films, in *The Salesman*, the narrative gap and the surface question lead the main characters to a deeper one which challenges their moral values and judgments. Emad finally finds out the truth for which he was looking. His goal was to find the person who attacked Rana, and he found him. During all this period of tracing the intruder, he has been so consumed by the feeling of revenge and rage that he has not been able to think about the next step; what would happen if he finds the

assailant? And now, he is facing the intruder, though the truth differs from what he had imagined. The attacker is an old man with heart issues. He has a family who cares about him and a wife who loves him and trusts him with her life.

The situation leaves Emad, along with the viewer, with a complicated question: what is a moral decision vis-a-vis the attacker? Should Emad punish him by physically hurting this fragile old man? Should he inform the old man's family of his willful act? Or should he file a report with the police against the man? The reputations of two families are at stake. In such a situation, is revenge a moral act or not? Here we realize the notion of truth cannot be restricted by physical facts or factual truth. If it was, when Emad had found it, the problem should have been solved. But, finding the old man who attacked his wife is only the beginning of the problem. The nature of truth, as Farhadi mentions it in an interview, is like Russian dolls. You open it, and, right when you think you have all, you realize there is another one.³⁴

The temporal and inconsistent nature of the characters' reactions and their transitions throughout the film also notes to the relativity and subjectivity of the notion of morality. It points to the fact that, rather than a concrete or absolutist ideology, it is the characters' circumstances that define and redefine their moral values and judgments. People who seem to be well defined and persistent in terms of their moral values encounter events that force them to act against those values. For instance, Nader has shown himself to be a person with strict moral values. He tries to teach his daughter to ask for her rights and to stick with solid moral values no matter what the circumstances are. He reminds Termeh, "what's wrong is wrong, no matter who says what." Nevertheless, he lies to protect his family, even if this lie puts another family in a difficult

situation. When the judge asks him if he knew about the pregnancy, he denies any knowledge of such a thing. Later, he justifies his lie before Termeh by saying that he was concerned about Termeh and her grandfather's fate. His justification seems to be valid. However, we do not know if he really did it to protect his family or he was thinking of protecting himself from prison or losing money when he decided to avoid the truth. The importance of posing these questions is to realize there is no true answer to them.

Nader's wife, Simin, is an advocate of telling the truth in any circumstance. She believes in a set of values, and no matter what the outcomes are, she tries or at least pretends to insist on them. For instance, when the teacher asks her what she should say if the judge asks a question whose answer would put Nader at a disadvantage, Simin asks her to "just tell the truth." Does this mean Simin has absolute moral values? It is true that she invites the teacher to tell the truth, but what if she does this because telling the truth will put Nader in jail, and if it happens, she will be able to take the custody of her child and leave the country? In fact, she also gathers pieces of information, combines them with her own imagination, and makes a conclusion which in her view is the truth—that Nader is responsible for the miscarriage. She is advocating a subjective version of the truth which benefits her. In fact, subjective goals or interests affect individuals' perceptions of truth; therefore, the characters manufacture their own truth, which, in turn, lead to actions that raise the issue of morality.

Throughout *About Elly* also, each "character's reactions to events are constructed as highly temporal."³⁵ Changes in the circumstance cause shifts in their reactions and evaluations. It is also true about their moral values. For instance, Amir advocates telling the truth. However, when he realizes telling the truth might be to his disadvantage, he

prefers to hide it. On the other hand, in the first part of the film and before Elly's disappearance, Sepideh is characterized as a person who has no problem with telling lies. She lies about everything only to make everyone happy. Nevertheless, when it comes to the decisive moment of encountering Alireza, she is the only member of the group that hesitates to hide the truth. At that moment, a small lie can make everyone happy, but Elly's reputation becomes Sepideh's priority. Again, the situation leads a character to act differently from what he/she is known for.

In his search for truth, Emad also experiences a metamorphosis. At first, he is the one who respects people's privacy. He leaves the taxi to avoid intruding on the woman's privacy, he does not open the previous tenant's room, and even his character in the play asks the neighbor to respect his privacy and leave the apartment. But, in the course of the film, his character gradually changes, and in search for the truth, he, himself, becomes an intruder. He goes through personal photos of his student, opens the previous tenant's room and searches through her things. He even asks a student to obtain the credentials of the intruder's car illegally. All these acts, once immoral, become justifiable to Emad because he wants to find the attacker. All the values Emad advocated before the tragedy lose their credibility and are replaced with the new values of protecting the family's honor, finding the intruder and giving him the punishment he deserves. In fact, the characters' effort to find the answers to the surface questions are only a way to put them through a journey in which they confront more complicated dilemmas, only to find out the fact that the nature of truth and moral judgment is relative.

The open ending is another narrative technique employed by Farhadi which highlights the relativity and subjectivity of moral judgment. For instance, in *The*

Salesman, the ending does not show if the old man lives or dies. The final scene only shows the unconscious man lying down on a stretcher. What would be the truth if the old man dies because of the heart attack? One can claim that the attack happened because he was humiliated by his own action. In this case, he is responsible for his death. However, another assumption is that Emad's behavior, especially keeping him locked in a small room for a long time, pressing him to confess his shameful act in front of his family, and slapping him in the face may have triggered a fatal heart attack. In that case, is Emad a murderer? We also can interpret it as a moral punishment for an unforgiving sin. Such an assumption justifies Emad's act. Again, the truth becomes a multi-faceted concept and morality becomes relative based on the circumstances.

By keeping the ending open, the film leaves the question of the relativity of our moral judgments to the audience. Whether we affirm Emad's action or not depends on what happens next and according to each viewer's take on the issue. For most of the viewers, slapping a man who has attacked one's privacy seems to be a proper punishment, but killing him is probably not acceptable. If revenge in such a circumstance is the appropriate action based on absolute moral values, why should we care about the consequences? As is evident, the film is again rejecting the possible absolutist religious or other traditional solutions. It is pointing to the relativity of moral values and actions.

A Separation also has an open ending. The film ends where it began, in the family court. Nader, Simin and Termeh are in the court, wearing black clothes, a possible sign of the grandfather's death. They have decided to divorce, and now it is up to Termeh to choose with whom she wants to stay. She asks the judge to give her a moment to think through, and the film ends here. This open ending, as with Farhadi's other films, is a

narrative technique to add to the uncertainty of the facts and to include the viewer in creating the narrative according to his/her personal subjective interpretations.

What is significant about the use of these narrative techniques is the fact that it is linked to Farhadi's secular position toward religion and the impact of religious beliefs on the individual and society at large. In his films, religion has lost its social function—claimed by the religious leaders—as the problem solver and plays mostly a superstitious role. For instance, take the opening scene of *About Elly*. There is a prevailing religious belief in Iran that donating money to charity boxes, which are everywhere in the country, keeps you away from incidents and misfortunes. Since a car accident is very common and lethal in Iran, donations become especially important to people when they begin a road trip. The film begins with a scene in which people drop their donations into the Alm box. However, the religious belief in the protective effect of the charity box ends up with the tragedy of Elly's death, which refers to the futility of such a superstitious belief. In the same scene, instead of donating money, Elly, the central character whose presence and later absence create the entire drama and its moral dilemma, drops her engagement ring in the box. Dropping the engagement ring into the box, which is linked to religious practices, symbolically notes to the fact that Elly frees herself from the traditional religious bonds that could keep her in a relationship with which she is not happy, a relationship that has likely been imposed to her by the rules of the religious patriarchal society.

Another example is the character of Razieh in *A Separation*. She is a religious woman. As a result, we expect her to believe in absolute values. Her belief in religious orders is to such an extent that even for simple everyday affairs she consults a religious

advisor. For instance, when the old man spoils his pants, she cannot convince herself to clean him up without calling a consultant to ask if changing the cloth of a seventy-something-year-old man with dementia is a sin or not. Nevertheless, when it comes to more important affairs, Razieh acts differently. If Nader is found responsible for her unborn child's death, Razieh can claim the blood money and use it to pay her husband's debt. That is why in the court, she only talks about Nader's act as the cause of miscarriage and ignores the other two possible causes. But, what if it is not the truth? What if the car accident or her husband's violence were the reason for her miscarriage? In fact, for Razieh, moral absolutism or implementing religious orders would be telling all the possible scenarios, all that happened that might have caused the miscarriage. However, she chooses to be subjective and only offers her own perspective. As Donovan Schaefer observes, for Razieh, religion "is technological: it is used to create meaning in certain contexts and abandoned in others."³⁶ In the end, what keeps Razieh from lying is not religion as a belief, but it is a superstitious belief in the idea that if someone brings dirty money to her home, that money will make her child sick.

A similar interpretation is present in *The Salesman* in a scene in which Emad suddenly avoids eating the food prepared by the money the old man (the intruder) left mistakenly on the table. Throughout the film, Emad or other characters never act based on religious beliefs in the critical moments of their lives. But, when it comes to such mundane reactionary behaviors, religion shows itself, again, not as a problem solver, but more as a tradition with no real function. This secular attitude toward religion and religious beliefs is in itself a subversive act in the context of contemporary Iranian society.

Filmic Techniques: A Window to Subjectivity

Farhadi's use of filmic techniques such as handheld camera, indirect-subjective point of view, close-up shots, the juxtaposition of reaction shots, fragmentation of the bodies, and fast editing are other devices employed to suggest the relativity of the concepts of truth and morality. Through these devices, Farhadi's films subtly subvert the notions of absolute truth and morality.

In Farhadi's films, the camera perspective plays an important role. For instance, in *About Elly*, the entrance of the viewer into the world of the film is from the inside of an ATM depository. A ray of light appears in the middle of the darkness, and we realize people are dropping notes and coins into a charity box. This opening scene that takes the entire opening credit and is about 1:30 minutes, apart from its general meaning, has a specific implication. By showing the truth from the inside of the box, instead of showing it from a usual point of view, the film is pointing to the fact that some pieces of truth are not observable at all. Therefore, even when we, as viewers or characters, assume we have the whole truth, there are still some hidden, unseen pieces of truth that can affect or blind our moral judgments. This unusual use of point of view also points to the relativity of truth and shows the limitations of our individual perspective and accessibility to truth. Viewing the events through the limited perspective of a money slot also points to the very narrow vision of individuals in seeing the truth in their surroundings, a fact that makes the nature of truth subjective.

Another effective technique employed by Farhadi is the use of indirect-subjective point of view. In their study of cinematic points of view, Dennis W. Petrie and Joseph M. Boggs define the indirect-subjective point of view as one that "does not provide a

participant's point of view, but it does bring us close to the action so that we feel intimately involved and our visual experience is intense. ... We recognize that we are not the character, yet we are drawn into the feeling that is being conveyed in a subjective way."³⁷ As a result, such a point of view "gives us the feeling of participating in the action without showing the action through a participant's eyes."³⁸ Here, the "closeness to the action"³⁹ is what makes the viewer feel intimacy.

For instance, in *About Elly*, such a point of view creates a sense of subjectivity and intimacy. The lengthy drowning sequence is mostly shot by the handheld camera, whose imbalanced movements "heightens the sense of reality provided by the subjective viewpoint."⁴⁰ The indirect-subjective point of view mixing with the handheld camera shots put the viewer inside the world of the film. The viewer becomes one of the characters. In such a situation, the power of the camera in seeing things is restricted, like the eyes of human beings. We, the viewers, accompany with it, walk from a place to another, sometimes slow and another time fast, to explore and to find the truth about everything. However, in the end, we are alone with our takes of the story and our own judgments.

Another form of indirect-subjective point of view is the close-up shot.⁴¹ Such a close shot of the face of a character again creates a sense of intimacy to the feeling of the character. Farhadi masterfully uses this technique in *The Salesman*. For instance, the lengthy final sequence of *The Salesman* is full of such close-up shots of the three main characters, Emad, Rana, and the old man, in which the viewer witnesses the pain, shame, pity, and the desire for revenge in their faces. These close-ups, juxtaposed with reaction shots, create an atmosphere which, again, makes the viewer a close witness. He or she

becomes so close to the scene that can evaluate the situation and judge the characters. In the end, the viewer is reminded of the fact that there is no concrete, absolute moral value to follow, and everything is relative to the situation within which a character acts.

In *A Separation*, Farhadi utilizes three main film techniques to enhance the relativity of truth and morality: fast editing, the juxtaposition of reaction shots, and fragmentation of the bodies. One of the court scenes provides an excellent example of these strategies. In the scene, the judge is trying to find out if Nader knew about Razieh's pregnancy when he pushed her away or not. The importance of the scene is that, first, the court, per se, is an apparent allusion to the concepts such as right or wrong, truth or lie, subjectivity or objectivity. Also, this scene, in many ways, is the climax of the narrative because it puts the characters in a dilemma, where they have to define the notion of truth and then choose between telling it, entirely, partially, or subjectively, or keeping themselves out of trouble. Finally, the narrative and the camera techniques applied to the scene imply the notions of the subjectivity of truth and morality.

Nader, tired from the intense exchange, says, "the issue isn't if I knew or not." Immediately, the camera gives a close-up of the judge asserting a critical point. "This is so important because if it is proven that you knew she was pregnant, the court can request a prison term of one to three years," the judge says. The camera freezes on Nader's face. It seems everything stops for a few seconds. You notice the tension on Nader's pensive face. It is obvious he is thinking about the negative outcomes of such a sentence—one to three years in jail—for him and his family. After a few seconds of silence and suspense in which the camera is fixed on Nader's face, the judge continues by asking him the question again: "Did you know?" This time, the question is more serious to Nader. He

evades the answer just to buy some time, and you can read from his face that he is thinking. “No, I didn't know,” Nader says. The viewer still does not know the right answer. But the way Nader handles the question could be a hint to make us suspicious. Later we learn that he was lying.

The fast editing creates a sense of tension and uncertainty. The viewer sees a shot of one character and immediately that of another. In fact, by using this technique, the film provides the spectator with an equal amount of each specific character's point of view. The film is objective in giving us the pieces of facts from each standpoint. Finally, it is up to the viewers whose perspective they want to take as the fact. The use of reaction shots and gestures also highlights objectivity of the film, and, in turn, puts the viewer in the position of the judge, which in its essence should be objective. Observing a character's action for a second and switching to other character's reaction while the first one is still talking or shifting the camera to the third character happens very fast, and the viewer is forced to digest all these little pieces of reality instantaneously while missing many others. This is the way, in the real world, we observe the surrounding facts, analyze people's opinions, judge them, and finally make decisions.

Fragmentation of the bodies also adds to the instability of the moment and points to the relativity and subjectivity of the truth and the idea that the whole truth is not knowable. The viewer sees the talking character not in a simple, clean frame but in a documentary style setting that prevents the audience from observing the character's whole face. When a character talks, an object such as someone else's face, shoulder or dress covers a part of his or her face, and it makes the viewer think she or he is missing a

piece of valuable information. This feeling causes the audience to fill in the gaps by themselves and adds to the subjectivity of the scene.

The change of the camera's point of view also plays a crucial role in this scene as well as the entire film. The camera continually alternates between the judge, Nader, Razieh, and Hojjat. Farhadi's camera does not privilege one character's position over others. For a moment, you identify with Razieh and immediately change your mind and sympathize with Nader, and this change goes on and on. All these changes create a sense of uncertainty and doubt about everything. Each character looks to be right and at the same time wrong. There is no absolute right, and there is no general set of moral codes. Nader, Razieh, Hojjat, and the judge all seem logical, and yet, it is not possible to accept their claims altogether.

Conclusion: from Religious to Secular

By raising issues of moral judgment, Farhadi's films are an attempt to demonstrate that even though judgment is inevitable, it is not definite and absolute in today's modern Iran.⁴² Each human being has her/his values that are related to her/his geographical, social and cultural background. Farhadi makes his audience to think actively about their society and their position within it.

In evaluating a film's faithfulness to reality, one should consider the fact that any form of representation includes some levels of subjectivity. A film can never be "a completely pure imitation of the original."⁴³ As Varzi suggests, the filmmakers' "choices of what to show create a reality," and Iranian art-house filmmakers of the 1980s and 1990s decided to show rural areas to "create a reality that did not exist in order to take the

gaze off of one that was undesirable.”⁴⁴ In fact, rural areas, poetic stories, and abstract concepts helped them to avoid revolutionary themes and Islamic codes and markers mostly observable in Tehran and other major cities.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Tehran and other major cities with all symbols such as billboards and murals were mostly representatives of the state-funded cinema. The art-house films tried to bypass such an image by either completely turning away from urban settings (Kiarostami) or showing a partial image of the city by excluding the official symbols (Panahi and Majidi).⁴⁵ What Farhadi offers differs from both approaches. He has brought the films back to Tehran and engages with the institutions such as the justice system, education system, and the police or subjects such as censorship which are directly related to the state to offer an accurate image of contemporary Iranian society. In terms of the visual aspects, compared to previous films which depicted major-city lives, in Farhadi’s cinema, city is not dominated by the Islamic and propaganda images such as murals of martyrs or clergies or quotes by the Prophet and Imams. The overall image of civilians is also not the bleak picture of bearded men and women homogeneously covered with black chadors.

Although criteria such as the name of the filmmaker and the stars have been decisive, the films’ interpretations of the ideological concepts and their closeness to the general worldview of the people in any given time have played the most critical role in capturing the Iranian audiences’ attention to the films.⁴⁶ According to Shalchi and Mobin, the popular films in a country, in some ways, show the interest of the audience to the subjects and themes that are being shown in the films.⁴⁷ In fact, studying popular films shows the connections between the subjects and themes of the films to the social

circumstances and cultural dynamics in society. Considering the fact that Farhadi's films are among the popular films of their time, it is safe to conclude that the ideas and themes presented in his films appeal to their audience because Farhadi's version of the social realities and ideological concepts is in accord with the needs and perceptions of the audience.

Based on the findings of Shalchi and Mobin, traditionalism and modernism have played crucial roles in what attracted the audience in Iran. For instance, in the 1960s, traditionalism was the dominant discourse. In the 1980s, there was a challenge between tradition and modernity.⁴⁸ Regarding "plot, theme, characterization, the portrayal of women and mise-en-scene,"⁴⁹ the populist or mainstream cinema after the Revolution followed the Islamic values advertised by the Shi'i state. Islamic values, which still prevails in the national television controlled by the state, define truth and morality as concrete and absolute concepts.

However, in recent years, and specifically through Farhadi's films, the depiction of modern urban life and secular values have become the dominant discourse in Iranian cinema. The main characters of Farhadi's films, such as Sepideh, Nader, Simin, Emad, and Rana are not traditional, religious civilians. They are from the middle-class urban population, which is familiar with modernity and is ideologically secular. Even religious characters such as Alireza, Hojjat, and Razieh show levels of subjectivity and individualism and are not blind followers of strict religious rules.

We should bear in mind that none of the stories happening in these three films portray the traditional religious resolution to issues such as betrayal, child custody, blood money, and sexual assault. In a traditional patriarchal religious culture, Elly's fiancé

would likely hurt or kill Ahmad for damaging his honor. Nader would not allow Simin to leave the country and would not give his teenage girl permission to decide her future. Also, Emad would have a more intense reaction when he encountered the man who attacked his wife. All these resolutions show that Farhadi's characters, which are the representatives of contemporary Iranian urban society, despite their struggles with the conventions of the traditional religious culture, are moving toward a more modern, subjective, universal life.

The analysis of these characters and their interactions with the characteristics of modernity such as individualism, rationalism, subjectivism, and secularism show the changes and transitions in the society. For instance, take the notion of subjectivity which, according to Farzin Vahdat, is an essential pillar of modernity.⁵⁰ Analyzing Farhadi's characters show their submission to this "pillar of modernity, against which the traditional society stands with all its written and unwritten standards."⁵¹ Such a distinction not only applies to the adult characters but also to child characters in Farhadi's films. In contrast to his predecessors who used children as symbols of innocence and witnesses to the behaviors of the adult world, in Farhadi's films, children are not passive agents trapped in the decisions made by adults. They are a part of it, they transform it, and they have the agency to change or subjectivity to represent it. They are themselves "free social agents"⁵² who see, listen, argue, logicize, decide and act. In cases such as *About Elly* and *A Separation*, their decisions and interpretations even affect adults' lives dramatically.

By creating intricate narratives with narrative gaps and subjective points of view offered by dynamic, developing characters, Farhadi's films give an active role to the

viewer in shaping the story and filling in the gaps. Farhadi's own perspective on the world within his films is partial, precisely like in the real world. For him, the truth is our interpretation and understanding of the circumstance based on the incomplete knowledge we have on a particular event. Such a truth leads us to have subjective perspectives on everything and everyone. It shows the relativity and fluidity of truth, thus, rejecting it as an absolute concept.

Farhadi goes a step further to allude to the relativity of truth and morality by putting the characters and the viewer in the position of judges. He forces them to judge, choose and make decisions continuously where the truth-value of the different statements and claims are not clear at all, and every moral judgment can end up hurting someone and helping someone else. In Farhadi's films, truth finds different faces, but not similar to Rumi's pieces of the mirror which altogether make a whole truth. His truth(s) in no ways can be unified to create a whole because in Farhadi's world, there is no place for absolute truth and morality. That is the uniqueness of his cinema. Is it the intention of Farhadi's films to champion moral absolutism, moral relativism or any other philosophical concept? The answer is no. Rather, his films are reflections on and portrayals of the reality of the contemporary urban life in Iranian society, a society in transition from strict religious rules and absolutism toward pluralism, individualism, and relativism.

Endnotes

1. "What happened at 6 a.m. in the first show of 'The Salesman'?" *Azad News Agency*, September 1, 2016, www.ana.ir/news/137134, Accessed 20 Sep. 2018.
2. Many saw the appeal of *The Salesman* as a sign of cultural and political protest by fans. It is because Farhadi is an independent filmmaker who does not advocate the Shi'i state's official ideologies. Others saw the film's success a result of Farhadi's skillful effort to depict the reality of life of contemporary Iranian as it was.
3. Somayyeh Hosseini, "Dah Filme Bartar Tarikhe Cinemaye Iran (*The Ten Best Iranian Films of All Time*)," *Manzoom*, October 11, 2017, www.manzoom.ir/news/1301335, Accessed 23 Oct 2018. *About Elly, A Separation*, and *The salesman* are respectively the sixth, ninth, and eighth in the list of the most popular Iranian films based on the popular votes.
4. For instance, the filmmaking code issued by the government in 1983 prevented films from the exhibition if they "encourage[ed] foreign cultural, economic and political influence" contrary to ... the policies of the regime. It also prohibited the films which "express[ed] or disclose[ed] anything that is against the interests and policies of the country which might be exploited by foreigners." A new filmmaking code that was issued in the 1990s was stricter and had many details. For instance, it prohibited giving Islamic names to the negative characters of the films, "wearing tight cloth by women," "multiplicity of costumes worn by characters," "body contact within men and women," and "close-up of the women's faces."
Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 40-48.
5. Asghar Farhadi was born in 1972 in the historical city of Isfahan. Growing up in this major city in central Iran, he showed a keen interest in cinema by making 8mm and 16mm films in the Iranian Youth Cinema Society. Later, he perused his academic education at the University of Tehran and received a bachelor's degree in Dramatic Arts followed by a master's degree in Theater Direction.
6. Roxanne Varzi, "Keeping It Reel," *Film International* 12, no. 3 [69] (2014): 78.
7. Tina Hasannia, *Asghar Farhadi: Life and Cinema* (Raleigh, NC: The Critical P., 2014), 48.
8. Varzi, "Keeping It Reel," 81.
9. *Ibid.*, 84.
10. Hassannia, *Asghar Farhadi: Life and Cinema*, 9.

11. According to Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, the term New Iranian Cinema is “widely used in reference to films made in Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution, and specifically to a body of post1990 Iranian films that have attracted attention and garnered high-profile awards on the international film festival circuit and pleased cinephiles and art-cinema audiences around the world. Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf are among the most prominent and well-established directors associated with New Iranian Cinema.” Self-reflexivity, use of children and non-professional actors, on-location shooting, rural settings, minimalist documentary style, and depiction of everyday life of ordinary people are some of the characteristics of these films. Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 299-300.

12. Daniele Rugo, "Asghar Farhadi: Acknowledging Hybrid Traditions: Iran, Hollywood and Transnational Cinema," *Third Text* 30, no. 3-4 (May 2016): 175.

13. Rezaei, Mohammad, Arash Hasanpour, and Shirin Daneshgar, “Representation of Class and Class Relationships in Iranian Cinema: Case Study of A Separation: Nader and Simin,” *Quarterly Journal Of Iranian Cultural Research* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 117-148.

14. Ibid.

15. Joseph Burke, “Rediscovering Morality Through Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation*,” *Senses of Cinema*, December 2, 2013, www.sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/rediscovering-morality-through-ashgar-farhadi's-a-separation. Accessed 23 Oct 2018.

16. Hamid Dabashi, *Close up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (London: Verso, 2001), 212.

17. “Sufism, which has been so great a power in Persian culture, was originally the reaction to the corruption, moral indifference, cruelty, and lax rule of conduct at the court of the caliphs and the church in Baghdad. ... Sufism ... through acknowledging the multiform aspects of the problem of life” rejected “overcertainty” and “dogmatism.” Sufis believe that “no religion has a monopoly to truth, but each religion has much to offer to the rest.” Nasrollah S. Fatemi, Faramarz S. Fatemi, and Fariborz S. Fatemi. *Love, Beauty and Harmony in Sufism*. (South Brunswick: A. S. Barnes, 1978), 131.

18. Lloyd Ridgeon, “Makhmalbaf’s Broken Mirror: the Socio-Political Significance of Modern Iranian Cinema,” *Durham Middle East Papers*, no. 64 (2000): 14.

19. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: the Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islams Mystical Tradition* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 40.

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20. Hamidreza Sadr, "Contemporary Iranian Cinema and Its Major Themes," in *Life and Art: the New Iranian Cinema*, ed. Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 42.
21. Gilbert Harman, "Is There a Single True Morality?" in *Moral Relativism: A Reader* eds. Paul K. Moser and Thomas L. Carson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168.
22. John Pletz, *Finding and Confirming Truth*. (Lanham: University Press of America, 2010), 103.
23. Maria Baghramian, *Relativism: the problems of philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 124.
24. Ibid., 121.
25. Harman, "Is There a Single True Morality?" 171.
26. Daniel Shaw, *Morality and the Films: Reading Ethics through Film* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 52.
27. Christopher Falzon, *Ethics Goes To The Movies: an Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 64.
28. The Golden Rule is the principle of doing unto others the way we would have them do unto us.
29. Shaw, *Morality and the Movies*, 41.
30. Ibid.
31. Harman, "Is There a Single True Morality," 172.
32. Shaw, *Morality and the Movies*, 52.
33. *About Elly* was made in 2009 and won awards at international festivals such as Berlin, Chicago, and Tribeca. However, it was only after the spectacular success of *A Separation* in 2011 that *About Elly* gained the worldwide recognition it deserved.
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