

Movie Review: A Separation

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During the past year, the movie "A Separation" has won awards at film festivals all over the world.

Though set in contemporary Iran, it powerfully depicts human conflicts and emotions common to people in all cultures, including our own.

The movie begins with a married couple speaking earnestly and sometimes angrily to an unseen judge. The wife, Simin, wants to leave Iran with her daughter so as to give the child a better life than she can have under what Simin calls "the circumstances." These are not defined; we can assume she means the conditions under which Iranian women live, since she herself wears jeans and a simple colored headscarf rather than the body-concealing chador that some other women characters wear. Because her husband refuses to emigrate, she is seeking a divorce.

The husband, Nader, has his reasons. He is devoted to his father, who has severe Alzheimer's and needs constant care. When he tells the judge this, his wife impatiently reminds him that his father is so ill that "he doesn't even know you are his son." He retorts, "But I know he is my father."

The judge dismisses the couple's "small problem." Simin, totally frustrated, decides to move in with her parents. As she jams everything she can into a suitcase, her daughter silently watches. Is her mother leaving for good, or temporarily?

Nader now has to find someone to watch his father. He hires Razieh, a young married woman who must bring along her small daughter. On her first workday, the old man wets his trousers, and the pious Razieh calls a religious hotline to ask whether it would be sinful for her to change him. She soon finds that the work and the worry of the job are too much for her.

The next day, Razieh infuriates Nader by leaving his father alone for a time, tying him to the bed so he won't injure himself. Nader fires her and accuses her of stealing money. She insistently defends herself, and he finally pushes her out the door. Razieh's little daughter watches with wide, frightened eyes as Nader becomes more angry and Razieh more agitated.

The movie is filled with questions and mysteries. Did Nader push Razieh hard enough to make her lose her baby as she fell down the stairs? Did Nader know she was pregnant under her chador? Is Razieh's volatile, unemployed husband trying to get money wrongly by charging Nader with murder, having actually hurt his wife himself?

No character in the movie is blameless, except the two daughters. The adults all feel justified in what they do and say, but their certainty creates only sadness and confusion for each other and their children. Resolution seems impossible.

On December 8 we read Galatians 5: 26: "Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another." These are good words for anyone living in the world so artfully presented in "A Separation," and for all of us who know the fallen human behavior it depicts.

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Note: This movie is available at many public libraries and through movie rental sites and businesses. It may no longer be in theaters near you.