

‘Prescriptive’ Masculinity?: Deception and Restraint in the Films of Asghar Farhadi

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In the wake of Farhadi’s most recent international success with *The Salesman*, an angry article on the conservative site *Mashregh News* asked, “[f]or which society does Asghar Farhadi write up his prescriptions of masculinity?” According to the author, Hossein Soleimani, this prescription calls on men, specifically men from the middle to upper middle classes, to ignore any transgressions against their *namus* (i.e. their honor/women), for to take action is to become an unhappy and unlikeable man, and in any case, taking even the smallest action will only result in support for the transgressor.¹ In his appearances on *Haft*, a film review program on Channel 3 of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) and in his writings, the film critic Massoud Farrassati echoes this critique, accusing the film of adopting a moral relativism that elides the distinction between transgressor and victim, such that by the end of the film, the audience has more

¹“Sokhani ba Moshtari-ye Forushandeh: Asghar Farhadi Baraye Mardanegi Kodam Jame’eh Noskheh Mipichad?” (A Word with the Customer of *Salesman*: For Which Society Does Asghar Farhadi Write Up His Prescriptions of Masculinity?), August 2016, *Mashregh News*, www.mashreghnews.ir.

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sympathy for the former than for the man whose “honor” has been stained.² *Sureh Cinema*, which is the official site associated with the arts division of the State organization *Sazman-e Tablighat-e Eslami*, similarly critiqued *The Salesman* for negating a man’s duty to fight for his honor/woman and for treating the culprit against honor with empathy.³ *The Salesman* reveals a culprit guilty of honor violations on both a specific and general level: not only does he assault the wife of the lead male character (violating the honor of one man), but he is also a philanderer who frequents prostitutes (violating the honor of patriarchal society more broadly). As such, critics consider it a clear-cut case where the transgressor must be punished without remorse or consideration for the particularities of his situation. Critics have made similar objections to the lack of absolute moral judgment or resolution in Farhadi’s previous films. These reactions also seem to pivot on Farhadi’s construction of, and commentary on, masculinity. Referring to *A Separation*, Ali Akbar Raefipoor, for instance, calls it a film that privileges a feminist viewpoint which depicts and decries “absolute patriarchy.”⁴ Farrassati sees *A Separation* as a film mired in deceptions, where no marital or family relation is sacred and all lie to one another.⁵

Much of the domestic criticism against Farhadi came in the wake of the successes of *A Separation*, and later that of *The Salesman*. Both films garnered international attention, including Oscars, and both emerged at particularly sensitive political moments. Nearly two years after the 2009 demonstrations in Iran when *A Separation* was released, the country was still in the grip of its aftershock, with talk of “sedition” and foreign influence still dominating official discussions. *The Salesman* came to the scene at another volatile moment, albeit a global one, with the surprise candidacy and ultimate success of American President Donald

²Massoud Farrasati, “Excusez Moi,” www.massoudfarassati.com.

³“Resaneh-ye Honari: *Forushandeh Filmi Aleyh-e Gheyraat va Qeysar-Koshi*,” 16 August 2016, *Tabnak News*, www.tabnak.ir.

⁴“Naqd va Barressi-ye Layeh-i-ye Film-e *Jodayi-e Nader az Simin*” (A Critique of the Layers in *A Separation*), www.jc313.ir.

⁵“Enteqad-e Shadid-e Farassati be *Jodayi-e Nader az Simin*,” www.aparat.com.

Trump, culminating in the “Muslim Ban” shortly before the 2017 Oscars. The domestic and international circumstances surrounding the release and celebration of both films prompted many Farhadi critics to decry the attention the films received as political and politicized. These political circumstances and the ideological battles fought around them are part of the bigger picture that explain some of the intensity of discussions around Farhadi’s films. In addition, I suggest a more specific inquiry, which considers the reception of Farhadi’s film in the context of heightened domestic concerns around the breakdown of key institutions such as marriage and the nuclear family, concerns which themselves are tethered to deeper anxieties about gender. I will show that Farhadi’s films explore multiple men and masculinities, but that the assertion of masculinity in its various forms never seems to act as a corrective to the situation at hand. In their most extreme expressions, assertions of masculinity appear as violence or the threat thereof. However, they include a range of relational behaviors, statements, or attitudes which are often about showing dominance or control over a person or a situation. This is as true for the assertions of hegemonic masculinity as it is for those that deviate from it. In other words, it is not simply that only the traditionally privileged forms of masculinity show themselves to be futile in Farhadi’s films. Contrary to the claims of Farhadi’s conservative critics, who see his films as undermining traditional masculinity in favor of a version that eschews long-held values such as fighting for one’s ‘honor’, Farhadi does not present or celebrate alternative forms of masculinity. The inadequacy of traditional masculinity as well as the lack of an alternative are both important to assessing the hostilities directed at Farhadi and to making sense of the bigger argument his films are making about the state of gender relations in contemporary Iran. Namely, Farhadi’s films reveal intersectionally rooted crises that traverse social and economic class. He does not point fingers at villains, but neither does he provide a way out.

Whether conservatives consider the failure of traditional masculinity to be a symptom or cause, the unravelling of gender roles and core institutions such as marriage and family appear at the heart of official

approaches to diagnosing and fixing society's other ills as well. Indeed, over the last decade, "crisis of marriage" and "crisis of the family" have become increasingly noticeable themes in journalistic, official, and even academic accounts coming out of Iran. Many of these accounts identify the harmful role of a range of media in creating and exacerbating these crises, with fingers pointing at both foreign and domestically produced media.⁶

The sense of crisis has been severe enough to necessitate an explicit policy statement by the highest office in Iran. In September 2016, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei issued a sixteen-point decree outlining policies on the family.⁷ The first three points concern the "creation of a family-centered society" and strengthening the family's internal ties as well as its relationship to institutions such as the mosque. Other points outline the goal of encouraging marriages "at a suitable age," rejecting singlehood, creating "healthy" social spaces, and adhering to proper Islamic relationships between men and women. Importantly, the decree notes the role of cultural production in meeting its goals, explicitly indicating the work that media must do and the defenses that must be put up against the "enemy's soft war."⁸ Even a cursory review of Farhadi's work, particularly the films in his marriage trilogy (*Fireworks Wednesday* [2006], *About Elly* [2009], and *A Separation* [2011]) and *The Salesman*, seem to

⁶For journalistic accounts, see for example, "Khanevadeh-ye Irani dar Bohran Ast," 27 October 2015, *Alef*, <http://alef.ir>. "Bohran-e Khanevadeh dar Iran Jedi Ast," 7 February 2015, <http://www.tabnak.ir>. For examples of the scholarship on the perceived crisis, see Sami'i, Mohammad, "Khanevadeh dar Bohran: Keshakesh-e Olguha-ye Sonnat va Nogarayee" (Tehran: Ettela'at Publishers, 2014) and Samira Kalhor, "Afzayesh-e Qatl-ha-ye Khanevadegi: Nemadi az Bohran-e Khanevadeh dar Iran," Winter 2007.

⁷"Eblagh-e Siyast-ha-ye Kolli-e Khanevadeh," 3 September 2016, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir>.

⁸Elsewhere, I have outlined the genesis and features of state discourses on "soft war." In short, the phrase "the enemy's soft war" is usually a reference for foreign or foreign-funded media and cultural programs including cinema, satellite television, social media accounts, etc. For more on official policies and conceptualization of "soft war", please see Niki Akhavan, "Social Media and the Islamic Republic," *Social Media in Iran: Politics and Society after 2009* (2015): 213 and Niki Akhavan, *Electronic Iran-The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

reveal families, marriages, and indeed a bigger society that stand in opposition to what Khamenei's policies aim to establish. Such a review of Farhadi's films also shows that the crisis of marriage and the family is not limited to a particular group.

In response to Oleinik's claim that Farhadi's films romanticize the relationships of the working class, Abedinifard has argued that the breakdown of marriage and the family cuts across economic and social class in Farhadi's films, with the religious working class as vulnerable as their more secular seeming counterparts in the middle and upper middle classes. Oleinik reads Farhadi as a "conservative" who locates the distress of contemporary relationships in modernization; in his view, Farhadi focuses on the decay of middle class marriages since they have been more welcoming to modernity and are more subject to its ills. Abedinifard offers a more nuanced view, arguing that Farhadi presents an intersectional picture of the failures of both "traditional marital relationships" and "modernized gender relations." In the case of the former, Abedinifard shows how Farhadi identifies a combination of factors such as poverty and "detrimental traditional beliefs about gender." In the case of middle-class marriages that may have moved toward some equity in gender relations, enduring structural inequalities contribute to the undermining of these relationships.⁹ In short, Farhadi does not single out one particular class or one particular factor in revealing the tensions of contemporary relationships.

Nor does Farhadi easily assign blame when showing relationships in distress. Echoing a familiar observation, Cheshire cites the "emotional complexity" of the relationships Farhadi sketches; remarking specifically on the titular Nader and Simin from *A Separation*, Cheshire notes how "both characters come across as decent ordinary people with equally compelling reasons for their positions."¹⁰ The refusal to easily cast fault

⁹Mostafa Abedinifard, "Asghar Farhadi's Nuanced Feminism: Gender and Marriage in Farhadi's Films from *Dancing in the Dust* to *A Separation*," forthcoming in *Asian Cinema*. For Oleinik's original article, see Anton Oleinik, "Dostoevsky's Journey to Iran," *Cineaction* (2013): 21-23.

¹⁰Godfrey Cheshire, "Scenes from a Marriage," *Film Comment* 48, no.1 (2012).

is also seen in Farhadi's depiction of the marriage under stress in *The Salesman* as well as the relationships that begin to show strain in *About Elly*. Even in *Fireworks Wednesday*, where the husband beats his wife in the street and is ultimately revealed to be cheating on her, the film manages to show potential and existing fissures in romantic relationships without scapegoating any specific characters. This absence of overt judgment renders Farhadi's reading of relationships more powerful, but it also appears to irk his critics: lacking resolutions and without clear targets to blame, those seeking answers to the crisis of marriage and family in Iran are left without easy solutions. According to Rugo, the emotional complexity and nuance of Farhadi is reflected in both the narrative flow and camera movements as well: "the narrative structures are intricate and, whilst the camera often operates with the agility more typical of documentaries, its constant agitation does not suggest directness, but functions as an invitation to keep up with unruly relationships."¹¹ Given a domestic context where official approaches to fixing the apparent cracks in the social fabric are rooted in re-entrenching a place for marriage and the nuclear family, it is not surprising that Farhadi's depictions of fragile families and marriages touch exposed nerves. Yet this alone does not explain the extent of the pushback he has received from conservative commentators. After all, other contemporary films showing the darker sides of Iranian society, such as *Abad o Yek Ruz (Life and a Day)* [2016]), to take one example, have been praised by the same critics who condemn Farhadi for his grim depictions of Iran.

It is equally possible to read Farhadi's films as providing the evidence for why the state's project for rebuilding society is necessary: in other words, rather than contradicting the calls for a family- and marriage-centered society, his films could be used to justify policies such as those proposed by Khamenei. Yet, by and large, critics have not cited Farhadi in the service of conservative arguments for reinvigorating traditional gender relations. One reason for refusing to appropriate Farhadi's films in making pro-state arguments can be found in the

¹¹Daniele Rugo, "Asghar Farhadi: Acknowledging Hybrid Traditions: Iran, Hollywood and Transnational Cinema," *Third Text* (2017): 1-15.

polarities of the political landscape, where conservatives shun Farhadi on the basis of his perceived sympathies with reformist factions. I want to suggest an additional factor, which pertains to the specific ways in which his films understand and challenge masculinity. It is not merely the case that Farhadi's films are without resolution nor is it that he prescribes a particular kind of masculinity. Rather, almost all multiple assertions of masculinity in Farhadi's films, which are relational in nature, are insufficient to forestall, much less fix, the bigger turmoil of marriage and other social relations that his films sketch. Just as Farhadi does not limit his accounts of marriages in trouble to a particular class, he does not only show the crisis of one particular type of masculinity.

The notion of 'relationality' as presented in theories of masculinity provides a useful background for discussing versions of manhood as they appear in Farhadi's films.¹² Drawing on Connell's ideas of hegemonic masculinity¹³ and multiple masculinities, Schippers has underscored the important role that femininities play as axes in the relationalities that undergird the construction of the masculine. Schippers is also interested in providing a model for hegemonic femininity to complement that of hegemonic masculinity: "masculinity and femininity are hegemonic precisely in the ideological work they do to legitimate and organize what men actually do to dominate women individually or as a group."¹⁴ This

¹²Citing the works of Raewyn Connell and Eve K. Sedgwick, Anneli Häyrén and Helena Wahlström Henriksson have noted that the concept of relationality has been important to theorizations of masculinity as far back as the 1990s, if not earlier. For more, see Anneli Häyrén and Helena Wahlström Henriksson, *Critical Perspectives on Masculinities and Relationalities* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2016).

¹³Since introducing the term, the notion of "hegemonic masculinity" has been challenged and reformulated, including by Connell herself. Scholars have noted that the idea is context-specific and a single monolithic hegemonic masculinity cannot be posited. For examples of literature complicating the notion of a singular hegemonic masculinity, see Chris Haywood, and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill, *Men and Masculinities* (London: McGraw-Hill Education, 2003). M. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Jeff Hearn, *Men of the World: Genders, Globalizations, Transnational Times* (London: Sage, 2015).

¹⁴Mimi Schippers, "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony," *Theory and Society* 36, no. 1 (2007): 85-102. For Connell's original work, see R.

relationality, of course, is not fixed, and the “feminization” of various spaces can undermine femininity’s complementary role in maintaining hegemonic masculinities. Citing McLeod’s work on public policies in Australia, for example, Budgeon has noted that fear of the feminization of public spaces and “anxieties about the limits of masculinity” have reflected themselves in programs aimed at “allowing idealized masculinity to be reworked while managing the ‘contagion’ of femininity.”¹⁵ Popular media have also reflected the worry about feminized and thus emasculating work cultures. Looking at *Fight Club* (1999) and *In the Company of Men* (1997), for example, Ashcraft and Flores see characters who seek to recuperate a hardened, dominant masculinity that is being undermined by the contemporary workplace.¹⁶

These two ideas in masculinity studies, namely the role of relationality and the role of both feminine/feminizing spaces, are useful in tracing the assertion and consequences of various forms of masculinity in Farhadi’s films. My examinations here are limited to Farhadi’s trilogy and his latest work, *The Salesman*, as these are works that have most often been at the center of the earlier noted criticisms of his films¹⁷. Looking at the interrelated themes of deception and the

R. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) and Connell and J. W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society*, no. 19 (2005): 829–859.

¹⁵Shelley Budgeon, “The Dynamics of Gender Hegemony: Femininities, Masculinities, and Social Change,” *Sociology* 48, no. 2, (2013): 317-324, 330. For McLeod’s original study, see J. McLeod, “Working Out Intimacy: Young People and Friendship in an Age of Reflexivity,” *Discourse* 23, no. 2 (2002): 211–26.

¹⁶Karen Lee Ashcraft and Lisa A. Flores, “Slaves with White Collars: Persistent Performances of Masculinity in Crisis,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no.1 (2003): 1-29.

¹⁷Farhadi’s *The Past* (2013) shares many features with the films under consideration: complex characters with complicated lives and relationships and an exploration of conflicted masculinity. Kara Abdolmaleki’s review of *the* for *The Guardian*, “I Was, I am Not: Asghar Farhadi’s *Le Passé*” touches on how these themes reveal themselves in the film. Unlike Farhadi’s marriage trilogy and *The Salesman*, however, *The Past* did not receive the same level of harsh domestic criticism as his other films. Perhaps domestic critics did not read the film as an essentially Iranian story: while the lead is an Iranian man, the film is set abroad and the dialogue is mostly in French. For this reason, I have not included this film in my discussions herein.

family, I consider the constructions and failures of masculinities in Farhadi's films with an eye toward the bigger question of why they resonate so negatively in the current context of the "crisis of marriage and the family."

Deception and Collusion

Inside Iran, the theme of deception is among those that has received the most attention in analyses of Farhadi's films. Critics hostile to the work have either claimed that his films paint a picture of Iranian society where everyone is a liar and no relationship is sacred or—following Farassati's claims of relativism in Farhadi's films—where every deception may have a justification and therefore should not be judged. Supportive assessments of Farhadi reject accusations of relativism and instead read his films as an attempt by the director to complicate the audience's knee-jerk reactions and to call for more nuanced readings of social interactions. Looking at the question of deception and collusion while foregrounding masculinity may illuminate some of the deeper reasons why Farhadi's take on the issue is particularly unsettling for his critics.

Both collusion and deception are prominently seen in Farhadi's trilogy, though they are particularly interesting in the case of *About Elly* and *Fireworks Wednesday*, as collusion in these films is not always carried out intentionally. The former tells the story of a group of friends who have travelled from Tehran to the Caspian coast for a brief getaway. All but Elly (Taraneh Alidoosti) and Ahmad (Shahab Hosseini)—who have just met on the trip—are married couples, some of them with children. The film first revolves around the possibility of romance between Elly and Ahmad, but an unexpected tragedy changes the tenor of both the film and friendships. *About Elly* opens with a seemingly innocuous deception: the female lead, Sepideh (Golshifteh Farahani), knew that the villa her friends and she were going to rent on the weekend away at the Caspian Sea would be occupied by its owners and that they could only spend one night at their usual place. Sepideh admits to having known but protests that if

she had told her friends from the outset, none would have agreed to come along. The second lie she tells soon thereafter is one in which everyone else in the group, with the exception of Elly are in on: she tells Badri Khanoom, the older woman in charge of facilitating guests at the nearby villas, that they are hosting newlyweds Ahmad and Elly from Germany. Sepideh is shown to be at the helm not only in initiating these small deceptions, but also in attempting to push the activities of the group, and more specifically, of Ahmad and Elly, around whom she has engineered the trip, hoping that they might get together. Sepideh as the engine behind the group's activities and the deceptions that surround them is an important part of assessing the construction of masculinity in the film.

The film's most central deception--the one which then casts all previous lies in a dark light--becomes clear to the audience and characters at the same time. After Elly disappears on the beach, everyone eventually learns that Sepideh herself did not know much about Elly except for one significant detail, the fact that Elly was engaged to another man. It is also only after Elly's disappearance, more than half an hour into the film, that the men become actively involved in pushing the narrative forward, initiating action rather than mostly being background props to Sepideh's suggestions and proddings. Yet, there is both impotence and violence in this turn. Not only are the men in the group unable to find Elly in the sea, but they also cannot persuade the search group with the boat to continue looking. In conversation with the police, they have little information to provide, and conferring with one another on what to say to Elly's family and when to inform them, they are uncertain. At this point, Farhadi shows the men in medium longshot, backs to the camera, facing the sea, an image of passivity and forlornness before a trouble that overwhelms.

By the next morning, the attempt to transform the sense of impotence into agency turns to rage and violence, with couples fighting, and Amir (Mani Haghighi), cursing and hitting his wife Sepideh for orchestrating the ruse of the trip without consulting him. It is as though

the disappearance of Elly sets triggers a shift where men become the center of action, but this intervention does not set things right. On the contrary, collusion increases, both within the group and among them, as does the overall level of tension and violence. In the end, all work together to agree on one story that would best safeguard themselves against retaliatory action by Elly's fiancé Alireza (Saber Abar), and this includes Sepideh's being forced to lie that Elly had not told her she was engaged. Sepideh begins and ends as a liar, Elly's reputation is besmirched, Alireza is heartbroken, and rather than being drawn together by the tragedy, all of the couples appear strained. In short, none of the assertions of male authority—between the husbands and wives, the men and the authorities, or the friends and the fiancé—act as correctives or even offer temporary respite.

A similar dynamic is at work in the *Salesman*. This film is about a married couple, Emad (Shahab Hosseini) and Ra'na (Taraneh Alidoosti), who are the leads in a Tehran production of *Death of a Salesman*. Structural problems with their building necessitate a move at the outset of the film, but other than this disruption, the couple appear to be content. This is abruptly changed after an unknown assailant attacks Ra'na in their new apartment. The remainder of the film chronicles the ensuing unravelling of their life and relationship. In the *Salesman*, the transgression against the wife is at the center of the plot, but there are also various levels of deception and/or omitting the truth at play: the friend and landlord who does not disclose that the previous tenant was a prostitute, the victimized wife who never speaks of the exact nature of the transgression against her, the husband who engages in many a ruse to entrap the man who has victimized his wife. The most significant deception for the discussion at hand, however, is that of the old man (Farid Sajadhosseini), who appears unlikely as a villain. From the outset, Ra'na (Taraneh Alidoosti) had been against finding and bringing the perpetrator to justice; while she is somewhat vague about this, the reasons she gives point to wanting to go on and not re-live the experience through any form of investigation. Once she sees that her husband has cornered

the old man, however, she gives a new, explicit reason, threatening her husband that if he humiliates the old man in front of his family, exposing his deception, that she will no longer have anything to do with him. Emad (Shahab Hosseini) chooses a midway solution: while he does not expose the old man's lies, he does slap him, causing the man to suffer two heart attacks, and likely death, though that is not confirmed for the audience.

The film's sharpest critic, Massoud Farassati, is right to note that the climactic scenes of confrontation between Emad and the old man are set up both narratively and cinematically in terms of point of view shots to arouse pity for the old man. And while on some level Emad has acted to restore his honor in keeping with longstanding codes of *gheyrat*,¹⁸ the film not only refuses to condone him, but indeed punishes him. This reading is at the heart of conservative critiques: namely, that fighting for one's honor is discouraged, with all forms of violence becoming relative. Indeed, for such critics, Emad shows too much restraint in failing to bring the full force of the law, or of his own personal wrath, against the old man.

Again, what lies beneath such critiques, I suggest, is the undercurrent that provokes anxieties about the bigger picture of manhood that is not restricted to questions of honor. As in the case of *About Elly*, it is not simply that the film offers no resolution, it is that the assertion of male authority fails to bring one about. Similarly, in both films the leading women fall short of their relational function in bolstering the dominant role of their male counterpart. In *About Elly* Sepideh only begrudgingly accepts her husband's demands on what to say to Elly's fiancé, and then only when she has been pressured by others in the group. Sepideh bends to her husband's will, but the film does not depict this as a compromise that will strengthen the marriage. On the contrary, Sepideh's marriage—along with those of the other

¹⁸*Gheyrat* refers to the concept of male honor, defined most often in relation to a man's women (his wife, sister, daughter, etc.). A man with *gheyrat*, for example, will defend that over which he has a sense of propriety (such as women but also his home or country) against all transgressions, real and perceived.

couples—suffer and appear rather fragile by the film’s end. Even less so than Sepideh, Ra’na in *The Salesman* refuses to participate in her husband’s attempts to restore his honor, and in fact, stands in opposition to him until the very end. Similar breakdowns are apparent when marriage and family is the more explicit center of action, to which I turn below.

Marriage and the Family

The issue of fragility of the marriage institution in Farhadi’s films is linked to deception, and not just in the classic case of the cheating husband of *Fireworks Wednesday*. Even if marriage itself is not the locus of the deceit—as in *A Separation* or *About Elly*—they are vulnerable to its manifestation around them. Thus, while the issue of deception and collusion will again be referenced in this section, marriage as it appears in Farhadi’s films deserves a separate treatment for two interrelated reasons. First, the films under consideration all show major cracks in the central marriages depicted; in some cases the marriages seem to break down all together; the second reason pertains to the earlier noted sensitivities of the Iranian state to the crisis of the marriage and family in society. As in the case of the above discussion of deception, the assertion of masculinity in various forms is not enough to significantly delay or prevent damage to the marriage or the family relationships.

At first glance, the case of *Fireworks Wednesday* may appear to be a counter-example. Exasperated by his wife Mozhdeh’s (Hedieh Tehrani) suspicions of an affair with a divorced beautician in their building, Morteza (Hamid Farokhnejad) beats her in the middle of the street after he spots that she has come to his workplace to spy on him. The young woman he has hired to clean their home, Roohi (Taraneh Alidoosti), inadvertently becomes an accomplice in deceiving his wife, and he is not exposed as a cheater. For a moment, it appears that he may be allowed to have it all, the wife and the mistress: in short, he seems to be a man in control of his household and his women. The film does not allow this to be, with his mistress Simin breaking up

with him at the end, and the impending sense that his marriage too is headed in the same direction. This suspicion is indirectly confirmed in the opening sequence of *A Separation*, where documents being scanned in a family court include those of Mozhdeh and Morteza.

Of all the husbands in troubled marriages in the films under discussion, Morteza most embodies the features of a ‘manly’ man. He has no trouble providing for his family, and hired help and a trip planned to Dubai are seemingly unremarkable parts of his lifestyle. His virility is not at issue with a wife and a mistress, and in the eyes of available legal structures, Morteza would be within his rights to have both (if the latter were procured under the temporary arrangement of a *sigheh*). Nor is he pliant in the face of his wife’s demands and accusations, going so far as to raise his hand to her in public to put her in her place. The contrast between Morteza and the “emasculated” husbands of Farhadi’s films (discussed further below) is instructive and evidence for the bigger argument I am making here. Namely, the problem of manhood that appears in Farhadi’s films is not just the familiar crisis of masculinity where men are battered by the quotidian humiliations of modern life; it cuts across social classes and cannot be corrected with assertions of masculinity. The end results are the same regardless of the masculinity on display: a traditional expression of dominance such as that of Morteza or self-conflicted forms such as displayed in *About Elly* fare similarly.

This is visible in the case of husbands in Farhadi’s oeuvre who may be seen as emasculated on some level: in *A Separation*, Hojjat (Shahab Hosseini) fails to pay his debts and feels humiliated by his wife’s secretly working to care for another man; Nader (Peyman Moaddi) is unable or unwilling to convince his wife Simin (Leila Hatami) to stay with him; and in *The Salesman*, Emad (Shahab Hosseini) experiences a physical assault on his wife. In *A Separation*, Hojjat and Nader appear as diametric opposites, and they see themselves as such. Nader is employed and both he and his wife’s family are property owners, as is confirmed when a deed has to be produced as bail for him. Hojjat is unemployed, in debt and pursued by his debtors, and

his wife is forced to secretly work (in collusion with everyone from Simin and Nader to Hojjat's own sister and daughter). Nader's low-key refinement is juxtaposed against Hojjat's hair-trigger temper, a contrast which is imbricated with their class positions, and which Hojjat bitterly comments upon on several occasions. While very different in personality and personal circumstances, each character is similar in dealing with their respective crisis through reliance on the relational connections that established their masculine roles. In addition, both of their assertions of very different kinds of masculinity provide no relief in addressing the separate crises they face.

In the case of Nader, the assertion of his manhood is not done in relation to his wife or his marriage, something which he appears to have given up acting upon. Even after promising his daughter to do so, for example, Nader does not follow through on asking Simin to leave her parent's house and to return to the marital home. Instead, Nader turns to his identity as father and son to re-establish his foothold, but even in relation to his father and daughter, he is unable to center his life. Indeed, his devotion as a son is presented as one of the main factors in the turmoil of his marriage. Simin is eager to leave the country before the expiration of their visa, but Nader refuses to leave behind his Alzheimer's-stricken father. In fact, in the opening scenes, one of Nader's first and most memorable lines is one in which he asserts who he is in relation to his father. When Simin questions his insistence to stay in the country for his father when his father doesn't even know who Nader is, he responds, "He may not know that I am his son, but I still know that he is my father." It is in this same scene that Nader asserts his authority as a father, denying Simin permission to take their daughter abroad. What the film shows in this first five minutes is largely what we see of Nader's masculinity for the rest of the film: he is restrained, even passive, in relation to his wife's desires about the move abroad he tells her, "If you prefer to, go," but in relation to his child and father, he asserts his rights and privileges.

Displaying a deeper pattern evident in all of the films at hand,

however, Nader's assertion of authority in these well-established male roles does not mitigate his circumstances. On the contrary, they seem to steer him toward further instability. His affection and sense of duty to his father cause him to lose his temper with Razieh (Sareh Bayat) after he discovers that she has tied the elder man and left the house. Pushing her out the door in anger sets off the events that lead to the major crises of the film: the loss of Razieh's pregnancy; Hojjat's learning that Razieh has been working for Nader with everyone's knowledge; Hojjat's legal complaint against Nader accusing him of killing his child; and Nader's counter-complaint that Razieh has stolen cash from their home. While Nader's relationship with his daughter provides more grounding, it too fails to fortify his authority. It is he who is dependent on her to learn the household details Simin had previously dealt with, and he finds himself having to answer her queries both about why he is passive in the face of her mother's threats to leave and about whether he is being completely truthful when it comes to the incident with Raziyeh. Thus, while Nader is shown to be a good and caring father, the power dynamics of the relationship are not ones that unequivocally confirm his masculine authority.

Hojjat also asserts himself as a father, both in relation to his daughter and the lost pregnancy, and he also fully embraces the role of the husband whose honor has been marred. In the former, Hojjat reveals that he is both aware of and sensitive to the dynamics of class as they pertain to his position as father and husband. In the court scene where he has come to register a complaint against Nader for causing his wife to miscarry, Hojjat begins to lose his cool at the defendant's demeanor, asking with anger, "Are our children not children?" Later, Hojjat confronts the school teacher who testified for Nader for interrogating his daughter about whether a drawing she has made depicts domestic violence: "Why do you think that day and night we are beating our wives and daughters?" As a person from the working and religious class, Hojjat understands that the masculinity that has been ascribed to him is imbricated with violence, particularly

in relation to his wife and children. Ironically, Hojjat's objection to these constructions are themselves manifest in violent reactions, as he tends to lose his cool in recounting them. In this too, he is self-aware, as in one scene, where comparing himself to Nader's cool demeanor, he admits that he is unable to get justice because he has trouble staying calm.

As such, Hojjat is in many ways the most self-aware character, even if he is the most volatile. He also is the person whose enactment of masculinity fits with the most traditional conception of it. Confronting Nader about pushing his wife out of the house, he asks him, "How did you allow yourself to touch my *namus*?" Like Emad in *The Salesman*—who as a character could not be more different than Hojjat—he takes the transgression against his wife personally and raises his hand against the person who was responsible for it. Hojjat's manhood has also been wounded by his wife's having to work at Nader's to begin with, not only because she had to work to pay his debts, but also because it was done secretly in collusion with so many others and it was a job that placed her in the presence of two strange men, one of whom she had to care for physically. In the end, Hojjat is unable to recuperate his masculinity, with the final failure acted out in relation to his wife about the matter of the blood money.

Though initially indignant at the suggestion, Nader agrees to pay Hojjat blood money for the lost pregnancy, but demands that Razieh first swear on the Qur'an that it was his actions that caused the miscarriage. The religious Razieh refuses despite Hojjat's badgering her to do so. Failing to impose his will on his wife and with his debtors awaiting payment one room over, Hojjat turns his violent hand against himself. While this in essence exonerates Nader, the film's ending shows that he has been unable to deal with the titular crisis of the film, and their separation is finalized in front of a judge. As in the case of *About Elly* and *The Salesman*, *A Separation* ends with all of the marriages worse off than they appeared at the outset.

As evident from the examples above, Farhadi does not limit either

his depictions of marriage or of men and women to one specific class or type of person. As his audience, we see relationships that traverse different levels of economic class, religiosity, and cultural capital. Farhadi's exploration of these diverse marriages becomes a vehicle for him to explore the relational masculinities that undergird each marriage. Always showing the complexity of his characters and their relationships, Farhadi never points fingers. This absence of blame means that no specific type of masculinity is under attack. On the other hand, the fact that none of the forms of masculinity under consideration in the films provide a solution for the quandaries that each character faces reveals a broader crisis of gender relations in Iran.

Conclusion

Farhadi's critics are not wrong to observe that his films are filled with unstable marriages and families as well as widespread deception in relationships and in society at large, and that his stories offer no concrete solutions or resolution. But Farhadi is not the only Iranian filmmaker to show the darker sides of contemporary society, and yet he is the subject of the most vehement attacks. Part of this must be understood against the bigger backdrop of volatile political moments domestically and internationally, where global recognition at the level of prestigious film festivals and awards is interpreted politically. More important, however, is the context of domestic concerns about the perceived crisis of marriage and family in Iran, a crisis that is considered to be so severe as to necessitate explicit policy decrees by the Supreme Leader. The conundrum here is why Farhadi's films are not taken as confirmatory evidence of what the state has identified as a problem and are instead seen as a threat. The answer, as I have tried to suggest, is to be found in the underlying current of what the films reveal about the present and futures of gender relations in Iranian society. Specifically, the assertion of masculinities in Farhadi's film—emerging in various forms and in various relationalities—fail to bring about any positive or stabilizing shifts in Farhadi's narratives. As such, and contrary to the accusations of his critics, it is difficult

to see a sense in which Farhadi is prescribing a particular form of masculinity. If anything, he provides nuanced descriptions of the various challenges of manhood (and womanhood) in contemporary Iran, and the difficulty of what it would mean to resolve them. In the end, perhaps what is most revealing—and in the mind of conservative critics, most troubling—about Farhadi’s films are not the marital and familial instabilities that they depict; rather, it is the realization that assertions of masculinity—traditional or otherwise—are ill-equipped to restore the lost balance.