Abstract

*Nader and Simin—A Separation* is the first Iranian movie which won many international awards as well as admiration from critics and the public. Many reviews by critics, however, have revolved around problems in spousal relationships of couples in different social classes of Iran. Through highlighting the self-evident dismantling elements and unreliable readings in the acting, directing, and even the scenario of *Nader and Simin—A Separation*, this article argues that besides the couples’ disagreement, the central concern of the story is the multi-interpretations of dialogues by the characters throughout the story. These multi-interpretations have their roots in the reversal of social codes which itself can be the result of the transition of a traditional Iranian society to a modern one. Applying a deconstructive approach for the analysis of *Nader and Simin—A Separation* is not an imposed critical practice; indeed, it is suggested by the movie itself, owing to the presence of a host of binary oppositions, misspoken, and slipperiness of meaning. By drawing on these elements, various components of the movie are examined through a deconstructive approach including the title, class privileges, audience response, suspending techniques, and unreliable language to reveal the disguised values in a transitory period.

*Keywords:* Separation; Deconstruction; Reversal of social codes; Transition

1. Introduction

The story of *Nader and Simin—A Separation* begins at the court where Simin’s attempts to get a divorce go in vain; thus, she abandons her family—her husband (Nader), her daughter (Termeh), and her father-in-law. Due to Simin’s absence, Nader is compelled to hire a caretaker, a pregnant woman called Razieh, who is accompanied by her little daughter, Somieh. Once in the movie, while Razieh is out, Nader and Termeh return home finding Nader’s father, firmly tied to the bed, unconscious. Consequently, when Razieh returns, she confronts the wrathful Nader who simultaneously accuses her of stealing some money from the drawer. Amidst
their quarrel, Nader shoves Razieh; she has a miscarriage as a result. Then, Razieh’s husband, Houjat—a hotheaded unemployed shoemaker—enters the story in the hospital fighting Nader. A complaint is lodged against Nader in a court investigating the accusation of miscarriage. There comes the possibility of 1 to 3 years of confinement. Meanwhile, Nader alleges Razieh of neglecting his father. When informed that Razieh had visited a doctor on the day she fastened his father to the bed, Nader becomes deeply suspicious of the truthfulness of Razieh’s claims.

To compensate for Razieh’s loss, Simin suggests that Nader should pay the blood money. Nader is enraged because this, he thinks, indicates that he is guilty. However, later we discover that Nader had already known about Razieh’s pregnancy and her accident preceding the quarrel. Finally, there is a meeting in Houjat’s house for Nader to pay the blood money, but Nader asks Razieh to swear on the Qur’an before he writes the check. Razieh refuses, for she thinks it is a great sin and her children might pay for it. At the final scene, in the court, the separation was settled, while the judge asks Termeh to choose between living with her father or her mother. Termeh replies that she has already made her decision, but she requests the judge that her parents should wait out of the courtroom. In the meantime that Termeh is inside the court, we see Nader and Simin outside without getting informed about the final decision.

A deconstructive reading demonstrates that the truths of a film subvert themselves because they are and always have been metaphors of ideal presence that cannot be attained through language, philosophy or art (Hamelman, 2000). To perform a deconstructive study here, we first challenge some presumptively accepted concepts, and then reverse “the sanctity of oppositions that have gone unchallenged” (Carpenter, 2000, p. 64) to show how peripheral is what we believe unquestionably. Finally, the language used in the movie dialogues is studied closely to reflect its uncertainty in narrating Nader and Simin—A Separation story, whereas misspokens are significant parts of this endemically unreliable language.

2. Argument

Ellis (1988) explains that:

As a mode of textual theory and analysis, contemporary deconstruction subverts almost everything in the tradition, putting in question received ideas of the sign and language, the text, the context, the author, the reader, the role of history, the work of interpretation, and the forms of critical writing. (p. 261)

In other words, previously held attitudes, which are taken for granted, are challenged and are read against the grain. Farhadi’s movie is generally known by its original title—The Separation of Nader From Simin—which is a divorce story
between Nader and Simin, but what if the separation is not literally or restrictedly between Nader and Simin as the title of the movie proposes? In other words, what if this separation is considered between Termeh and her parents or between Houjat and his wife or even this couple and their daughter? If such is the case then the title starts to get dismantled as the movie goes on. Thus, if the separation, for instance, is taken between Termeh and her parents then despite the apparent focus of the beginning scenes on court episodes, which attract public attention to the divorce case, the main focus will shift to Termeh’s attempts to fix her parents’ turbulent relationship and keep them together. Thus, in the hope of bringing Simin back home, she decides to stay with her father. Moreover, here the girl can be considered as a symbol of the Iranian teenager of a generation entangled between tradition and modernity (Hassani Nasab, 2011). Indeed, the audience are not aware of the fact that the deadly dilemma of Termeh is not only an emotional choice between her father and mother but also a life style choice between two ways of life: the uncompromising lifestyle of Simin and the conservative one of Nader who says, “a wrong thing is wrong.” (Pooriya, 2011) and in a word between dogmatic world of Nader and modern world of Simin. Accordingly, Termeh’s final decision at the divorce court is to choose between ways of living. Thus, she turns into a transitional figure being forced to join one of these worlds. In other words, the devastating ending where Termeh is left in a critical situation completes the state of uncertainty that Nader and Simin—A Separation’s narrative provides for the last debacle of its characters (Hassani Nasab, 2011).

On the other hand, the sequence of starting scenes of the movie shows that this has not meant to be a mere separation between Nader and Simin as when Termeh asks Simin, why she is taking her books and she replies: “I want them, Termeh: All this for only two weeks?” Or, later between Nader and Termeh in the kitchen, when she warns her father that Simin is really going but her father replies that she will come back, Or another clear cut argument between Termeh and Simin might support the abovementioned view:

- Simin: And how worried was your dad that I was leaving . . .
- Termeh: He knew that you wouldn’t really go.
- Simin: Did you tell him?
- Termeh: No, he figured out himself.

Indeed, it seems that the couple was not serious in proceeding to a separation; rather, it is the social circumstances surrounding the characters which cause the separations. So, the word separations is more appropriate than its singular form because there is a pun on the word separation which extends its meaning and application beyond the title. Farhadi astutely reveals this through the crowded court halls which are painfully replete with potential divorce cases aiming not to restrict the
harsh fact merely to the people of the movie but to generalize this fact to the today’s society of Iran.

There are always opposite concepts in every context whose hierarchical order is seemingly consistent, but reversing them makes it easier to break their sanctity. A crucial binary opposition is between being and not being, presence and absence, and it is widely acknowledged that presence is the supreme or privileged one. Derrida suggests that we temporarily should reverse presence/absence to absence/presence to deconstruct this hierarchy (Bressler, 2007). Farhadi’s movie reverses this order, and thus *Nader and Simin—A Separation* is mostly constructed upon absences. A clear manifestation of this is the fact that muteness of the grandfather occurs when he finds out about Simin’s departure; in other words, it is the result of her absence. Later on, it is logical to see a substitution for Simin that is a washing machine—a symbol of modernity—which mirrors a kind of tendency to fill out the traditional role of a housewife in a transitory society. Even though Nader, willing to keep connected with his past conspicuously his father, is not able to use the washing machine very well (Nooraee, 2011). Another noteworthy absence is once the money was not in the drawer of Nader’s bedroom; he accused Razieh of stealing it. This absence triggers a set of tragic incidents which culminates in the chief conflict of the movie. Furthermore, the most significant scenes are constituted on the random basis of reversal of hierarchies. Notably, whilst Razieh carries out the domestic chores, Nader’s father wanders the street. Razieh makes a dash to seek him out across a busy road, trying to cross the street. This scene is not filmed; it is later in the film that we realize that Razieh had a slight accident in an attempt to protect Nader’s father from being hurt (Pooriya, 2011). In another scene the audience learns from Somieh about her mother visiting a doctor due to her stomachache whereas Farhadi decided not to show it. All these instances, thus, show that the priority of absence is accentuated as a particular component of *Nader and Simin—A Separation*’s narrative.

The next binary opposition in the movie lies in the quality and the ordering of the scenes. The viewer of *Nader and Simin—A Separation* can distinguish the tranquility (i.e., relaxing scenes) through tension and disquiet (i.e., stressful scenes). It is generally acknowledged that civic people usually concede that relaxation is privileged over anxiety. But what if stress is privileged over tranquility? Some notable examples of stressful, privileged scenes in *Nader and Simin—A Separation* are the court scenes followed by the scenes of routine life (especially the starting scene happens stressfully in a courtroom), the grandfather getting lost followed by the scene of playing table football hilariously; the scene of quarrel followed by driving the scene and again the stressful scenes related to miscarriage which happen later; the court scenes-related to the quarrel followed by some scenes which get viewers away from
anxiety. This demonstrates how the life of characters is stressfully defined and anxiety is an inescapable part of this life.

Another binary opposition is in the representation of some characters as symbols of social classes. Nader and Simin are from upper class bourgeoisie, and Houjat and his wife are representatives of lower class; as it is mentioned in an Iranian article entitled “Ta Sobhe Farda,” the notion of social class is more conveyed through Houjat’s character. For the first time, we see him in the bank, Nader’s workplace, and Houjat’s presence in this site of exchanging money and investment makes his social status more remarkable; this especially links his living perspective to his reactions against the social class of Nader, Simin, and Termeh’s teacher. Thus Houjat says, “What do you think about us? . . . I am not as well-spoken as they are, you killed my kid. Now, it’s bad for your kid? Your kid is just important? Our kids are animals? … Sir, if they don’t care about honor, I care, these people are backing one another . . . I have nothing to lose (Danesh, 2011). A further class-reference occurs implicitly when Termeh recited a piece from her history book to her grandmother, “in the Sassanid’s time, people were divided into two classes . . . Privileged upper class and the normal class.” Grandma says, “the normal folks.” In this opposition, conventionally upper class is privileged as Kazemi (2011)—an Iranian movie critic—writes, Farhadi initiates his story in a bad situation of a troubled family from the middle class society, and he aggravates the situation by getting lower-class people into. There is no doubt that entering a stranger (Razieh) into the life of people with a different lifestyle and challenges between them are Farhadi’s favorite plots. However, the story has been going on in a way that makes characters to act against or dismantle their firm beliefs. However, at the end of the movie when it is expected that upper class characters’ privileged deeds and attitudes win, it is Razieh who holds to her belief firmly. She stands against the temptation of telling a lie [taking an oath] . . . She is the sole character who shoulders the burden of faith and belief in order to be a glimmer of hope and a crack of light in the dark world of the movie (Hassani Nasab, 2011). In sum, Razieh’s final decision implies that Nader and Simin—A Separation tries to favor the lower class people as the privileged one. Middle class failure in the story of Nader and Simin—A Separation might be a significant factor to know the reason of societal untrusted viewpoints in the world of the movie since, nowadays, the bourgeoisie is considered as the equilibrium point of its society, and its weakness has been regarded as the sign of instability, imbalance and lack of trust between different levels of society (Mohassesi, 2011).

Reversing the common sense emotional reactions of the Iranian audiences to some scenes is a considerable innovation as Toosi (2011) states, “I watched Nader and Simin—A Separation two times; the audience is clapping and cheering when Houjat hit himself over the head disparately in the kitchen. It is interesting and
This reflects the ambivalent feelings in transitional social status when sadness is privileged in a tragic scene; happiness can be a dismantling feeling in the audience and this need to be traced to the psychological pressures over people’s mind. Farhadi’s films are psychological works of art, which in fact are not concerned with an individual’s psychoanalysis but with a collective and a social one. A Separation casts light on the harms resulting from the societal interaction of its people (Shakibi, 2011).

The preceding discussion has showed possibilities of examining Nader and Simin—A Separation against some interpretations and beliefs held in common among critics or audiences whereas what follows revolves around close reading of dialogues and film’s language in order to trace misspoken, postponing, and slippery utterances in this movie. In the first instance, I may begin with the first scene in which the judge’s picture is not shown and we only hear his voice; simultaneously, the judge’s comments are so important when he says:

- Judge: All these other children living in this country, do none of them have a future, Ma’am?
- Simin: I prefer my child not to grow up under these circumstances. As a mother, I have this right.
- Judge: Under what conditions? Which conditions, Ma’am? Is it better growing up here with both parents, or growing up over there with no father?
- Judge: Nothing. Return to your life.
- Judge: Ma’am, you can just come here every time you have a small issue and want to get divorce.
- Simin: Small issue? My problem is not small. My problem is not small. The problem is my daughter.
- Judge: Ma’am, it’s his daughter too. He has rights too. I’m the judge and I’m saying that your issue is small.

In fact, when the judge uses words like this country, circumstances, conditions, and small issue, this can be another dismantling case which assists to expand a courtroom judge’s role to an emblematic social judge who implicitly states that the divorce case going on between the couples is a social issue rather than the personal one (Nooraei, 2011). Another deconstructing term that needs to be defined is misspoken. Misspoken is when a scenarist (i.e., author) loses the control of the language and says what was supposedly not meant to be said; therefore, deconstructors should look for places in the text to find misspoken (Bressler, 2007). Thus, firstly, the judge insists on the triviality of the issue, whereas his...
misspoken is obvious through using general social-related vocabularies. Secondly, as Simin says, “I’d prefer that my child didn’t grow up under these conditions, and the judge replies, what conditions? Which conditions, Ma’am?,” it shows that there are conditions, but what are these conditions?

Careful examination of the dialogues helps us to find an answer for the last question. Courtroom dialogues vary so constantly which makes it difficult for the characters to get a similar perception or interpretations of even the simplest words or phrases. The resulting multi-interpretations of the dialogues yield a vital clue to consider these conditions the result of unstable social codes on which people evaluate what can be called absence of a constant touchstone. Absence of a constant touchstone arises from either lack of a common paradigm for interpretations or ironically from multiplicity and abundance of paradigms; in the case of Iran, however, the latter is seems to be highly applicable. This abundance of touchstones of interpretation has its roots in the synthesis of traditional and modern values due to pressures of transitory phase of Iran. A scene in the movie which can be representation of this conflict is in the gas station when Termeh who is gassing up the car says, “Everybody is looking.” “That’s ok, let them look,” replied Nader. Here, a cultural social code is represented in Termeh’s speech that it is strange in Iran for a young lady to gas up the car while accompanied by a man. Moreover, Nader mainly does not care about these codes of tradition in order to settle his own codes (Toosi, 2011).

The second misspoken of the scenario is again from the judge in the beginning of the movie when in response to Simin’s claims he declares, “the things you’re saying are not enough reasons to get a divorce. If you have other reasons, let’s hear them.” The word if indicates that there might be other reasons besides disease of Nader’ father for once his father dies, she is still determined to get a divorce. Other main misspokens of the movie could be the ones related to moral codes of Iran both in personal and social perspectives. For example, whereas Nader always tries to teach his daughter not to give in to social compulsions, he himself fails to do so and even lies under these compulsions; thus, he deconstructs his moral instructions as the movie goes on, for example, Pooriya (2011) writes in Film Magazine that the insistence of Nader on using the Persian word poshtvane (meaning, guarantee) for the more common Arabic zemanat (tazmin, zamin), with the same meaning but more common in Persian is futile in the courtroom when he was threatened with detainment; thus, he stops objecting to the usage of zemanat, used by the judge and later by Nader himself.

Later in the movie, audiences observe series of deconstructing events and dialogues within some sequential scenes. The specific instances are when Nader tells a lie on the charge of knowing about Razieh’s pregnancy despite his firm social codes. In Termeh’s school, to test the truth of her teacher’s words, Houjat asks the teacher to swear by the Koran whereas later he ignores his nominal belief once he insists on his
wife to take a false oath on the Koran. Another misspoken is when Nader goes to his neighbors to tell them about the investigation:

- Nader: Yeah, I went to Mrs. Kalani’s.
- Termeh: For what?
- Nader: I told her that they’ll be coming in for investigation tomorrow. So she should be careful.
- Termeh: Careful for what?
- Nader: Just be careful that they’re coming in for investigation. That’s it. Is that a problem?
- Termeh: If she’s supposed to tell the truth, why should she be careful?

Here, Termeh acts as a curious critic who finds out that there is an unknown fact related to Nader’s knowledge of Razieh’s pregnancy.

The deconstruction’s point of departure is that language is by definition uncontrollable. No matter whether a text is literary or nonliterary, it can always be deconstructed and can be shown for its internal stability on rhetorical operations. Deconstruction tries to demonstrate that difference assists the critic to reveal those texts’ fundamental undecidability. Difference means “postpone” and “differ” in the meaning of entities to shatter their predetermined stability (Bertens, 2001). Postponing is a method that Farhadi uses in sequences of the scenario, and all the critical actions are delayed until they are finally done or expected to be performed (Hassani Nasab, 2011). For example, the film starts with a divorce case; the divorce courtroom is again pictured in the last scene. To achieve postponing in *Nader and Simin—A Separation*, Farhadi purposefully utilizes some cinematic techniques such as close ups and medium shots or absence of music until the last scene to put the viewer under the stress of the movie’s tensions, leaving not enough time for the viewer to contemplate and set his side. Most of scenes are medium shots which help to make more tense and limited space in each scene. In fact, these shots reflect the unbiased mind of the moviemaker (Nooraei, 2011). Absence of sound track originates from dexterity of shots and meticulous natural sounds whereby the audience follows the plot eagerly that leaves no need to use an extra sound track. However, the last court scene of the divorce with its fatal sense of waiting has a simple melody which, for the first time in *Nader and Simin—A Separation*, gives the audience time to think about and review the story (Ghazizadeh, 2011). In other words, the ending melody provides an opportunity for a mind-recess and concentration over the film’s concepts (Shajary-Kohan, 2011). Therefore, the viewer is psychologically involved up to the end by these techniques. In the picture, practical postponed judgments are seen in numerous courtroom scenes which are futile and in limbo. People always get involved in
judgment: movie characters judging one another, the judge judging defendants, viewers judging characters or about the honesty and dishonesty in movie style and form. *Nader and Simin—A Separation* has no final conclusion and evaluation. Its ending keeps the viewers in state of indecision hardly able to judge. This is the postmodern “deep breath” in which nobody can be convicted (Nooraee, 2011). Generally, whenever the audience think that they put their trust in certain characters, values, actions or even circumstances, the narrative of the film breaks their confidence; as an instance from several ones, Mrs. Ghahraei—Termeh’s teacher—testifies in the courtroom on behalf of Nader, and she wins the audiences’ confidence due to her social position, but the narrative betrays this trust once Mrs. Ghahraei withdraws her statement.

One remarkable factor in *Nader and Simin—A Separation* is its language endemic unreliability and slipperiness. “Poststructuralists question the ability of language to designate the center, to remain structured around a center, if there is no center, if there is only irresolvable contradiction. If there is no guarantee of stable and stabilizing authority” (Castle, 2007, p. 174), there is no constant truth. This unreliability again refers back to the absence of a constant interpretive touchstone. The characters do not reach a common ground even not only in their dialogues but also in numerous circumstances in which they have different interpretations of simple words, for example, again at the court the couple accuses one another self-interpreting the word *understand*. There are some instances in dialogues of the court episode when Simin asks Nader, “Does he [Nader’s father] understand that you are his son? But I understand he is my father.” Or, later when Nader says that Termeh does not want to go with her mother:

- Nader: Your daughter is emotionally attached to me. She doesn’t even want to come with you.
- Simin: She doesn’t *understand*.
- Nader: Why do you say she doesn’t *understand*? She does! Why doesn't she *understand*?
- Judge: Please sign here, and don’t take up the time of the court.
- Nader: No one *understands* but you!
- Simin: No, it’s just you that *understands* everything!
- Judge: Please don’t take up the court’s time.

Another misunderstanding of the meaning of *understand* is when Simin argues with the porter about the number of floors while leaving home:
Porter: Ma’am, you said second floor.

Simin: This is the second floor, Sir.

Porter: Then, what’s the lower floor?

Simin: This is ground, this is first, and that would be the second floor.

Porter: Our price was for two floors.

Simin: You’re getting paid by the buyer, anyway.

Porter: But only for two floors though.

Simin: I don’t understand what you’re saying, Sir.

A close examination of the actions, events, and dialogues shows the confusing and slippery conceptions that have been problematic both conceptually and practically. As Kazemi (2011) states, what irritates Houjat is the way he has been treated as if he has intended to take some benefits from the miscarriage while he was mourning the death of his dead son. However, the tense atmosphere and complicated situations of the story made him finally abandon his faith on sanctity of oath and he is in a dilemma between necessity and faith. As Houjat, himself, states in the shoemaking workshop, “Why do you think it’s about the money that I’m going to court? When did I say such a thing? You think I’m a bum, I have nothing to do . . . And we don’t understand anything?” So, what are the tense atmosphere and complicated situations which force not only Houjat but other characters to abandon their firm beliefs?

Another fact is the unprecedented number of the movie scenes in comparison to other Iranian films. Whereas the average number of scenes in Iranian movies is seven to eight hundred ones, *Nader and Simin—A Separation* has double number of scenes (about 1457). If you want to have a cinematic justification for this characteristic, it can be said that this is a movie, full of trivial but significant scenes, which obscures its fast rhythm. These numerous scenes cause internal tensions and strains within the movie (Golmakani, 2011). However, it can be argued that it is the tensions Farhadi’s contemporary society which influenced the director’s movie-making style. Indeed, these tensions and complicated situations might be the pressures of transition from a traditional society to a modern one, which is implied in Lee Martial’s (2011) words in *Daily Screen* that the unsettled position of these people in Iran society makes the gap between prosperous, modern family of Nader and poor, religious family of Razieh even deeper. The events within the story caused this hidden challenge to turn to a direct confrontation in a judiciary form. Overall, these lead to undergone reversal of social codes and pressures of a transitory social status of Iran that constitutes the dismantling narrative of the story.
3. Conclusion

_Nader and Simin—A Separation_ is a controversial movie that shows different aspects of Iran’s social problems. Also, the deconstructive analysis of _Nader and Simin—A Separation_’s scenario, characters, and reviews reveals that transition from a traditional society to a modern society in Iran, significantly, affects the interpretation of dialogues, disguises the previously held values, and dismantles the constituent elements of the movie. This study has pursued signs of this transitory period by reverse the binaries between class privileges, moral codes, and audience’s emotional response in order to explain the uncompromising conflict of misunderstanding among _Nader and Simin—A Separation_’s characters. Finally, every close reading of the movie, based on this study, cannot be trusted or approved because abundance of evaluation paradigms beats the path to multiple interpretations.

References


