

# Construction of Reality and Naturalization of Ideology through the Discourse of Cinema: A Critical Discourse Analysis of a Separation

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## Abstract

Researchers have analyzed movies and books, some have tried to have a discourse analysis and some a critical discourse analysis. The aim of this paper is twofold: first it aims to study the discourse of *A Separation*, the critically acclaimed 2011 Iranian film drama, showing how realities are produced and social norms are renormalized through the discourse of this film. Another objective of this study is to investigate the comments and reactions that this film received based on Van Dijk's theoretical framework. Therefore, an attempt was made to reveal the hidden ideology and ulterior motives of commenters and show how one can make use of discursive strategies and linguistic elements as well as derogation and euphemization to make the audience believe what he/she thinks. After studying the discourse of some selected dialogues and comments of *A Separation*, Nader from Simin, the researchers showed that how a film can produce realities and instill ideologies in the audience. In addition, they endeavored to indicate that how one can practice the mentioned strategies to misrepresent "the other" and overestimate the positive qualities of the "self".

**Keywords:** CDA; Cinema; *A Separation*; Discursive strategy; Linguistic elements derogation; Euphemization

## Introduction

This paper tries to explore how ideologies are naturalized and realities are manufactured through the discourse of cinema. To this end, the researchers decided to critically analyze the produced discourse of an Iranian internationally successful film. "*A Separation*" - a critically acclaimed 2011 Iranian drama film - explores the social problems that supposedly lie in the Iranian society namely lying, accusing, cursing and violence as well as family problems (like divorce), women's social status in Iran, unemployment and inequality. *A Separation* was scripted and directed by Asghar Farhadi and performed by Leila Hatami, Peyman Moaadi, Shahab Hosseini, Sareh Bayat and Sarina Farhadi. This film was critically acclaimed and internationally acknowledged. The film won the Fajr Festival's Crystal Simorghs for best director, best screenplay, best cinematographer and Best Sound Recorder. *A Separation* then managed to win the 84th Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2012 and it was the first time an Iranian movie claimed the title. It also won the Golden Bear for Best Film as well as the Silver Bears for Best Actress and Best Actor at the 61st Berlin International Film Festival and it should be noted that the Golden Bear was never given to an Iranian movie before. Also, the 69th Golden Globe Awards for the Best Foreign Language Film was granted to *A Separation*. The film was also nominated for the Best Original Screenplay Academy Award, considering that a non-English language film is not commonly nominated for this award.

*A Separation* is the story of a middleclass couple who are separating because the woman (Simin) has decided to leave Iran so that she can raise her 13-year-old daughter (Termeh) in better conditions while the man (Nader) insists that he has to stay in Iran to take care of his old ill father. Although Nader seems to consent to the divorce, he does not let Simin take Termeh abroad. The family court, therefore, does not agree to grant Simin a divorce. However, Simin leaves home and in her absence, a young pregnant woman (Razieh) is hired to take care of the old man who is not only an Alzheimer's patient but also suffers from incontinent. One day, Razieh ties the old man to the bed and leaves the home to visit a doctor about her pregnancy. When Nader finds his old

father in a very bad condition, he gets so mad that he pushes Razieh out of his house in a way that she suffers a miscarriage. Hojat (Razieh's husband) files a lawsuit against Nader for having killed his child. Simin, worried about Termeh's life, offers Hojat \$15000 as blood money so that he can pay his debts provided that he withdraws his lawsuit. Nader reluctantly consents to give the money for the sake of Termeh. However, Razieh comes to Simin confessing that she is not sure whether her miscarriage was due to the hit or the accident that she had in the street. Razieh wants Simin not to tell anyone. Therefore, a meeting is arranged to deal with this issue. However, Nader demands Razieh to swear on the Quran that the miscarriage is because of his push. But Razieh refuses to swear on the Quran and consequently the meeting gets disrupted with no results. This matter is over and while it seems as if Nader's father has passed away, Nader and Simin come to court once again for divorce. Nader leaves Termeh to decide whether to stay with her father or her mother. But Termeh is too shy to announce her decision in the presence of her parents. Simin and Nader wait for Termeh's decision out in the court corridor and the film ends.

The story of the film seems to be simple. However, some parts of the film lead the audience to accept some realities and to see the social reality as it is portrayed. This paper is an attempt to study the discourse of some parts of *A Separation* to show how a film can lead the viewers to accept some realities (which are produced by the discourse of film) and how the process of naturalization of norms can take place through the discourse of cinema.

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A Separation, one of the most successful films in the Iranian Cinema Industry and a film which literally made quite a splash, can be an appropriate choice for analyzing its discourse critically. The present contribution is aimed at studying the discourse of A Separation to show how the Iranian society is typically portrayed to the viewers through the discourse that this film produces. The other objective of this paper is to study critically and analytically the selected comments that the film received in Iran. This paper, therefore, is also aimed at uncovering the hidden ideologies and real motives of the commenters.

Within the scope of this paper, the following questions are addressed:

I. How are realities produced through the discourse of cinema?

II. How are social realities portrayed through the discourse of cinema?

III. How can discursive strategies and linguistic techniques be used to manipulate reality and naturalize ideology?

## Methodology

The method used in this paper is “critical discourse analysis” i.e. the researchers study analytically and critically the discourse of the selected excerpts of “A Separation” and also the selected comments as texts. Critical discourse analysis aims at studying and analyzing a piece of language from critical point of view. Systemic-functional linguistics provided the ground for analysis of text through interpretation. SFL, as proposed by Halliday [1], is the grammar in which texts are analyzed not only by grammatical analysis but also by interpretative observation and commentary [1]. Halliday’s Systemic-Functional Grammar chiefly considers the function of language in the social structure [2,3]. The systemic-Functional Linguistics dialectically considers language as a semiotic form of social action. CDA aims to study how discourse leads to production and reproduction as well as normalization and legitimization of domination and power [4]. Van Dijk [5] maintained that CDA is about studying and analyzing written and spoken texts to reveal the discursive strategies of dominance, inequality, power and bias. It fundamentally aims at revealing the language in discourse which contributes to the exercise, maintenance, or reproduction of unequal relations of power [6]. Simply put, CDA studies how texts are constructed establishing social relations, social identities and power relations [4,7,8].

This critical contribution intends to investigate the discourse of A Separation to show how a film can influence its viewers. The current paper also tries to analyze critically the selected comments on the film to detect manipulation of reality and naturalization of ideology. An attempt is, therefore, made to uncover discursive strategies and linguistic techniques found in language. In order to analyze critically A Separation, the researchers selected the controversial and disputed parts of the film and subsequently transcribed and translated them into English so that they can be analyzed as texts. Therefore, the material for this study is comprised of the chosen parts of the film which include four excerpts (more than 8 excerpts were analyzed but due to space limit, the researchers had to remove them from publication). At the end of each analysis, a section is dedicated to summarize how the discourse of the scene leads to the productions of a number of realities. Considering the fact that A Separation has received many reactions from different sides nationally and internationally, it was not an easy decision to choose a few comments for analysis. Nevertheless, two comments were found appropriate for the objective of this paper. The first comment is by Salahshoor, a controversial director in Iran while the second comment is by Shamghadari, the only official position in Iran who

has congratulated Asghar Farhadi on his success. After translating the comments, they are analyzed based on van Dijk’s framework of CDA.

## Analysis of excerpts

The first excerpt is taken from the middle of the film where Razieh had to clean the old man who was incontinent while she was not sure whether it can be a sin according to the Islamic law. She was the only one who could clean him and the old ill man was in a bad situation. So she called a religious center whose number was already written down in her telephone directory.

**Excerpt 1:** Razieh: hello. Pardon me. I have a question. I’m somewhere for work. There’s an old man that I’m here to take care of him. I’m wondering that...you know... he took a leak in his pants, I was just wondering that if I changed his pants, ah...sin... is it a sin? No there’s nobody here.... He is an old man... He is in his 70s, 80s. I mean, he doesn’t understand well too... you mean about whether it is essential to do so, you know, this old man is half an hour standing in this situation. Can I?

This excerpt is taken from that part of film in which the old man has urinated in his pants and Razieh finds herself having to wash and rinse the old man. It should be noted that not only is he very old but also he suffers from Alzheimer’s disease. Having said that Razieh (as a religious woman in Iran) is still trying to get the permission of the religious authorities in order to wash the old man. It is taken for granted that religious people in Iran have to get permission even when an action is reasonably needed. This excerpt shows that religious people in Iran are so brainwashed and indoctrinated that they cannot decide for themselves and based on their own reason and they need to have the phone number of these religious centers to constantly ask their questions. So even in this urgent situation that the old man really needs to have a wash she first tries to get the permission from the religious centers to make sure it is not a sin. It should also be noted that the religious authorities are portrayed insular and unsympathetic who are only concerned with trivialities.

In this part of the movie, the viewers are led to accept the following “manufactured” realities:

- The religious in Iran are some narrow-minded, insular, bigoted people who are easily manipulated by the religious authorities.
- The religious authorities are merely concerned with trivial issues such as giving permission to a woman to wash an old Alzheimer’s patient.
- The religious authorities are indifferent and uncivil that even when they are told about the situation, they still ask whether it is “necessary” to wash him.

After Razieh managed to get permission from religious centers then she looks pleadingly at her daughter (even though her face is not shown) so that she makes sure that her daughter won’t report it to her husband that she cleans an old man. The second excerpt shows the girl’s response to her mother’s worried look.

**Excerpt 2:** A 4-year-old girl: I won’t tell dad.

This short excerpt is taken from that part of movie that Razieh has already obtained the permission of the religious authorities for washing the old sick man and is now looking at her daughter beseechingly and awkwardly to make sure that her daughter does not talk about this matter to her father. Her 4-year-old daughter understands why her mother is looking at her like that and she looks down (probably she feels

shy) and then she says "I won't tell dad". This portrays how women are restricted socially in Iran and are under the control and manipulation of men in Iran. Patriarchal domination is implicitly emphasized in this excerpt. When a 4-year-old kid says "I won't tell dad" about washing an old man, it means that it is a very typical family issue that very young girls are even aware of it. It shows how forcibly women are imposed by limitations and restrictions in Iran. Not only should they get the permission from the "religious authorities" but also they have to get permission from their husband or father (a male family member). The kid says "I won't tell dad" because she knows that if she tells her father, some unpleasant things will happen to her mother (audience can predict that her father will beat her mother). It is suggested that girls in Iran are made to know about these matters from the very early age in their life.

In this excerpt the viewers are led to accept the following "manufactured" realities:

- Women are so restricted and controlled by men in Iran.
- The Iranian society is extremely patriarchal.
- The restriction is so evident and common that even a very young girl knows about it.

This excerpt is taken from that part of the film in which Hojat gets angry when he sees that the judge is partially and unfairly concluding against him and his wife. The excerpt shows the conversation between the judge and Hojat where the judge threatens to sentence Hojat for contempt of court.

**Excerpt 3:** Judge: I explained to you that if you disrupted the order of here, I would sentence you to jail for 3 days.

Hojat: I have lost my life, Hajji. Are you trying to scare me of prison? Be scared of God!

Judge: Mr. Izadi? Call a soldier to take him out.

Hojat gets very angry when he sees that after losing his child and filing a lawsuit against Nader, this is his wife who is going to be in detention for having left her workplace. Hojat feels that the court is being unfair so he starts cursing Nader (while his eyes are filling with tears). This part of the film mightily arouses the viewers' sympathy and feelings for Hojat and his wife. When the viewers find this family in this sad situation and feel the abject misery that they live in, they will come to sympathize with this poor family. The viewers can soundly conclude that these poor people not only are denied to their rights. But the viewers can also see that while Hojat and his wife have filed a lawsuit against Nader for making Razieh have a miscarriage, now the court is going to sentence Razieh to detention. One can obviously see the cruelty and indifference of the judge. When Hojat says, "Are you trying to scare me of prison? Be scared of God!" The judge gets very angry and demands a soldier to keep him in detention. While the judge looks very heartless, callous and godless, he also tries to show that he is with God. The audience can feel sheer hypocrisy of the judge.

By watching this emotion-provoking part of the film, the viewers are led to accept the following manufactured realities:

- The poor low class people are born to be oppressed in the Iranian society.
- Inequality exists in all parts of the Iranian society including in the judicial system.
- Judges are hypocrites. The judge portrayed here seems ruthlessly indifferent while he tries to show he is with God.

While Hojat is being sent to detention, he starts angrily, irately and tearfully talking about the miseries he has had in his sad life. This scene can greatly arouse emotion and sympathy from the side of the viewers.

**Excerpt 4:** Hojat: Sir, I had been slaving away as a shoemaker for ten years. Finally, they threw me out of my workplace like a dog. They told me "go and get your rights from law." I filed a lawsuit, they dragged me here and there for a year, and finally I got no results. They told me, "get the hell out of here and stay at home." But this time I don't let them do this to me. No, this time, this time, it won't happen again. I have nothing to lose. My problem is that I can't speak as this man does; I reach my boiling point soon and I can't speak.

This excerpt shows how Razieh is trying to make her husband calm by pushing him out and asking him to be quiet. However, Hojat is importunate and does not want to leave there; he tells the story of his sad life. He has been working to the bone for ten years with no salary. The viewers can see that the law does not protect the rights of the poor in society. In the past he has let his boss and the law to trample on his rights. The viewers are also led to see that only because he cannot speak so prestigiously and rhetorically like Nader (who is from upper class), many rights are taken from him. Social inequality is implicitly suggested in the produced discourse of this part of the film.

The viewers are provoked to accept the following manufactured realities:

- The judicial system in Iran is unjust.
- The poor are denied from their rights and they are recurrently oppressed.

## Critical Discourse Analysis of comments on "A Separation"

### Text 1

A Separation is a film in conflict with nation's beliefs and an insult to culture and family in Iran and for this reason we cannot say this film has given us and Iran honor. For example, if somebody is a good thief and robs bank and is consequently granted the title of the "best thief" or if a doctor is an expert in producing Ecstasy tablets and obtains an award in this regard; must we really be proud of them? A Separation plays such a role in Golden Globe too and for us, followers of the leader, obtaining such an award is no honor. A Separation and "its supporters for sending it to Oscar" betrayed the country and Islam and in my opinion and all the followers of leader, A Separation's Golden Globe Award is not only no honor for country and our nation but also a big betrayal of nation - Farajollah Salahshoor, director of the TV series Youssef (Joseph) the Prophet

Salahshoor is a director who is politically strongly oriented towards Iranian current government. He maintains a strongly aggressive and hostile attitude towards the film and considers it against Iranians' beliefs. Turning a blind eye to all the artistic features of the film, he simplistically tries to reduce the value of the whole film to "an insult to culture and family in Iran". National self-glorification strategy is employed to arouse national sentiment of people and remind them of their great culture and family. It should be also noted that at the very outset, he makes use of polarization strategy by making a distinction between in-groups and out groups (Us-Them). "We cannot say" shows the polarization strategy clearly. Also, he is just an Iranian but he expresses his views as if this view is held by all or at least most Iranians. Consensus strategy is clearly employed. The Polarization strategy is more noticeably used

when he puts “us” beside “Iran” to suggest that the film is no honor for us (Iranians). To support his claim (which was made as though it is a fact or a view held by all Iranians), he provides the addressees with an example (Examples/Illustrations strategy is employed). In this example, he compares the film (and its contributors) as well as the award winner and the award granter to thief and illegal drugs producer. Therefore, comparison strategy is evidently employed to portray their activities as illegal, immoral, wicked, evil activities such as stealing and producing illegal drugs. Therefore, an attempt is made to accuse the “other” and consequently to negatively represent them as well as attribute “them” to the evil category (negative other-presentation and categorization strategy are both employed). After presenting his argument, he asks a rhetoric question to which supposedly a “no” answer is expected. It can be also argued that he employs norm expression strategy to say that “we should not be proud of them”. It is worth noting that he uses the term “them” in line with his polarization strategy. So he further assigns the film to the evil category. On the other hand, he assigns the “us” to the followers of Iranian (supreme) leader (consensus strategy, presupposition strategy). Again through consensus strategy (“in my opinion and all the followers of leader”), he claims that A Separation is against Islam and Iran so that all religious and nationalist people are incited to regard film as an anti-religious and anti-Iran film. Time and again, he states that “this is no honor for us” so that he instills this idea in the audience (Repetition Strategy). Populism strategy is also evidently employed (“country, our nation, nation’s rights”) to say that the film and its awards are not only honor but also are against people’s rights.

## Text 2

The Islamic Revolution of Iran marked the beginning of the growth of a great civilization. A civilization which, in the light of morality, spirituality, and justice, can bring prosperity, welfare, peace, and real joy to man who is bewildered and cut off from his/her reality and origin. Every flash of this cultural treasure will undoubtedly make eyes glitter and if curtains, obstacles, and bigotry are removed, every day we will witness the reception and attention of others (other countries) to the cultural works and cinematic productions of Iran. Mr. Asghar Farhadi was able to pull these curtains and obstacles and a wise judgment could place his film on the platform of the selected ones. I will congratulate him and the Iranian Cinematic Society and the nice people of our country on this success- Javad Shamghadari, Deputy of Cinematic Affairs, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Given the fact that the Iranian government did not warmly welcome the international success of A Separation and many propaganda efforts were made within Iran to count this film an anti-Iran film and even many have been trying to diminish Asghar Farhadi’s awards by accusing the whole international success a political game, Javad Shamghadari, Deputy of Cinematic Affairs, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance had the courage to congratulate him. Shamghadari, therefore, is now considered the only official position who congratulated Asghar Farhadi on the Golden Globe awards. He has a relatively positive (or almost neutral) attitude towards the film and its director. At the beginning of his comment, he tries to glorify Islamic Revolution of Iran, instead of talking about A Separation or its director. He employs lexicalization strategy and national self-glorification to prepare the context so that his comment can be politically accepted in the Iranian official system. Another reason behind his praise of “Islamic Revolution” is that he tries to attribute A Separation’s international success to “the Islamic Revolution of Iran”. He makes an attempt to overestimate the so-called fabulous characteristics and advantages of the Revolution and count Asghar Farhadi’s success within the framework of Islamic Revolution of Iran. He presupposes the fact that this revolution will assuredly

bring happiness and prosperity for its people (Presupposition Strategy, hyperbole strategy). But the point is that why he tried to attribute implicitly this success to the Revolution. There are at least two main reasons why he attributed A Separation’s success to the Revolution (his ulterior motives). First, considering the fact that the success of this film was not welcomed officially in Iran, he tried to avert the future attacks by exaggerating the good qualities of the Revolution (Hyperbole/Exaggeration strategy). The second reason is that he tried to consider this international success within the framework of the Revolution. He also employs the counterfactual Strategy when he says that if limitations are removed and bias and prejudices are eliminated (“ he also makes use of Lexicalization Strategy “curtains, obstacles, and the bigotry”), “others” (probably he means other countries and award granters like the Golden Globe, Golden Bear and Oscar) will pay attention to the cinematic works of Iran and will realize the real value of Iran’s cultural heritage. Despite these limitations, he says that Farhadi managed to surmount these obstacles. He congratulates Asghar Farhadi (implied in “him”), “Iranian cinematic society, and Iranians (as in “the nice people of our country”) and applying the pronoun “our” (Populism Strategy).

## Conclusion

The present contribution was aimed at investigating the discourse of A Separation, the critically-acclaimed film of 2011, to show how a film can produce realities and instill ideologies in the audience. As stated in the concluding section of each analysis, a number of realities were constructed to sharpen the social problems within the Iranian society. All in all, therefore, the film exaggerates the negative aspect of the Iranian society. This paper was an attempt to indicate that the viewers can be provoked to accept some realities that the discourse of a film helps them to be manufactured. In this case, the viewers were led to come to the understanding that “lying, accusing, aggression, arrogance and dissembling” are commonly found in the Iranian society. The researchers also tried to show how one can manipulate realities and legitimize his/her ideologies through discursive strategies and linguistic techniques as well as derogation and euphemization.

According to the first research question of this paper, it was demonstrated that realities can be produced through the discourse of cinema. For example, it was suggested in the analysis that the viewers can be made to feel empathy with women and find them severely socially restricted in Iran.

Based on the second research question, the researchers tried to show how a film can re-norm our understanding of the society. As indicated in the analysis section, unfavorable circumstances are normalized for the audience. In other words, the negative image of the Iranian society is sharpened.

The third research question of this study was concerned with investigating and revealing the hidden ideologies and ulterior motives of commenters. An attempt was made to analyze critically the selected comments that this film received in Iran to see how one can make use of discursive strategies and linguistic techniques as well as euphemization and derogation to naturalize/ legitimize their own ideology. As can be seen in CDA of the comments, the researchers tried to show how one can practice them to misrepresent “the other” and overestimate the positive qualities of the “self”. In text 1, at the very outset the commenter made an attempt to make use of polarization strategy, discriminating “us” from “them”. In order to support his antagonism, he tried to degrade the success of the film to the illegal activities of the criminals through comparison strategy. In text 2, even though he had a positive attitude towards the film and expressed his congratulations to Iranians, he mainly tried to attribute the success of A Separation to

the Islamic Revolution of Iran. He could have some ulterior motives for doing so. The possible reasons were suggested in the analysis section.

This paper showed that a film can lead its viewers to perceive realities as produced in its discourse. This study merely studied the discourse from linguistic perspective. Also, given the fact that in this day and age we are constantly bombarded with information and ideas from different sides, this paper suggested that if we do not look at these information through critical lens, we will be either manipulated by those who want to maintain the status quo (mass manipulation) or incited by those who want to upset the status quo (mass hysteria). Either way, we will be exploited.

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