

cinema



* Iranian director Asghar Farhadi and actresses Sareh Bayat (left) and Sarina Farhadi hold their Golden Bear for best movie and Silver Bear for best actresses awards after the awarding ceremony at the 61st Berlinale International Film Festival in Berlin, Germany, on February 19, 2011. Farhadi's movie *Jodaeiye Nader az Simin* (*Nader And Simin, A Separation*) has scooped up a string of top prizes on the festival circuit, and is Iran's official foreign language Oscars entry this year.

A Separation — ties that bind dilemmas

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The year that faded away four nights ago threw one big surprise at me. Iranian director Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation*. Last year, it won the Golden Bear, Berlin Film Festival's top trophy. A Golden Globe nominee, the movie is now Iran's official entry for the Foreign Language Oscars. Critics across the board have loved *A Separation*, and declared it to be the best shot after the 1997 Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven* from Iran.

Farhadi is not entirely unknown. His fourth film, *About Elly*, won the Silver Bear also at Berlin, for Best Direction in 2010, and ran for the Academy Awards as his country's official nomination. But *A Separation* is in a class of its own.

However, when one thinks of Iranian cinema the names that arrest you at once are Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Jafar Panahi, the last known mostly for his dissidence. In India, Farhadi

remained a stranger — unlike the others I mentioned above — till his *A Separation* (or *Nader and Simin* as it is also known) began screening in the festival circuit.

I saw this work thrice, and seemed never to get tired of it. For two reasons, I suppose. It is brilliant cinematically — profound performances, an unobtrusive camera and splendid editing that made me just sink into the lives of the characters. Two, Farhadi is critical of Iranian society but in an extremely restrained way. That is what masterful cinema is all about, saying all you want to, but in a controlled, dignified manner.

And Farhadi does this through a neat story whose dramatis personae seem to be tearing apart age-old beliefs and tradition without anybody even realising it. They appear to be writing with invisible ink, the letters waiting to emerge after a hot iron passes over them.

"Every few years a movie comes

along that's very fresh and from a place one doesn't expect and has real crossover potential," Sony Pictures Classics Co-President Michael Barker was quoted in the press. Interestingly, Farhadi has been likened to such classic directors as Almodovar, Fellini and Bergman. That, indeed, is a huge honour.

Farhadi is just 39, and he made *A Separation* in Tehran with a single camera in three months and on a modest budget of \$800,000.

The film probably owes its appeal and success to one hard fact: it tells a story that is peppered with ingredients that are essentially Iranian, but seems palatable even to an outsider. *A Separation* draws you and me because it manages to speak in a universal language, paying attention to your and my likes and dislikes.

Farhadi's tale slips into the private chambers of a married couple, squabbling over their own future and that of their only daughter. In the movie, the wife wants to divorce her husband, because he refuses to immigrate with her and their daughter to America. She

Simin's predicament is no less uncertain: she is terribly afraid that she would find herself alone in the US, because her husband may not let their daughter go. The law would be with him on this.

The daughter is terrified at having to face a broken home, and she desperately seeks to get her father and mother together. In the final frames, when the judge asks her to decide whom she would like to live with, she is in quandary as well.

There are other dilemmas. The maid is torn between helping her husband fight his debtors and telling the truth.

All this is portrayed with haunting sensitivity and extraordinary performance by each member of the cast in a movie that is as dramatic, albeit in a quite sort of way, as it is natural and real.

"For years, I worked in the theatre, and I have a familiarity with plays that use a narrative structure of the Western sort," Farhadi had said. "I don't mean cowboys, I mean the classic narratives of the West — a ghost of that style. It's the combination of naturalism and drama. In our storytelling, we don't have this kind of structure very often."

Some writers have compared Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* to *A Separation*. Lee's work uses Western cinematic idiom to pen a plot that is so Chinese in soul and spirit. This is also what Indian director Anurag Kashyap said recently: make a film that tells Indian stories, but use a language that is understood by all (read West). Much of India's failure to capture the mood, mind and the fancy of the outsider is precisely because Indians refuse to learn a cinematic methodology that is universal in appeal.

Another important reason why *A Separation* shines is that it moves away from Iran's traditional subjects of children, a theme that helmers filmed to avoid the country's strict cinema laws.

And here comes the trump card, the movie is actually political, but never seems so. It is all implied, and Farhadi steers his script and shots deftly away from a road that men like Panahi took with grave consequences. Farhadi attacks the idiocy of bureaucracy (look at the opening shots of photocopying documents and passports). Farhadi lambasts life in Iran; when the wife tells the judge/investigator that she does not want to bring up her daughter in circumstances such as those in Iran, he shoots, "what circumstances?". She does not answer.

That is subtlety in its most magnificence form. Farhadi has learnt that. Mind you, he has been around for a much shorter period than other Iranian giants. Yet, his *A Separation* is a perfectly sculpted work of enormous significance.

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