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**Moral Dilemmas and Negotiations in a Relationship: A Performance Study*****Aarati Regmi***

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*A Separation, a family drama, reflects the struggle and negotiations within people's life. The film revolves around a middle-class Tehran couple's disagreement over where and how to live and move further leads to the growing conflict. Nader and Simin's partial split becomes only one of the reasons that push the whole family into a problem. The story quietly and cleverly combines elements of family melodrama and legal thriller. With a textual analysis, this paper addresses the performance strategies of characters, besides, the movie captures the frustrations of city life; it reflects not only the modern Iranian life but every everyday life of the globe. So, this paper studies the film from Ervin Goffman's dramaturgical approach as it finely embraces human-restored behavior that includes conflict, relationships, secrets, and other elements in everyday life. It also emphasizes the way people present themselves in front and backstage of their everyday life. However, it displays peoples' performance in their daily relationships and how they react toward it. Furthermore, this paper depicts and reflects that every family adheres to moral dilemmas and relationship negotiations, yet it is complex and multi-faceted.*

Keywords: *Dilemma, restored behavior, modern life, relationship, negotiations*

**Introduction**

*A Separation*, a family drama, directed by Oscar-winner Asghar Farhadi, was released on March 16, 2011, in Iran. This movie has been analyzed from Ervin Goffman's dramaturgical approach. Likewise, this paper explores the problems of family relationships, stresses, and negotiations that are performed in everyday life. Ervin Goffman introduced the Dramaturgical approach in sociology in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* in 1959. Erving Goffman studied the activities and interactions that are performed in society at the practical and micro levels.

Taking this perspective from theatre, Goffman presented theatre as a metaphor to represent the way people behave in any society and distinctly represent themselves. So, people act as actors in this metaphor, and society is a stage; people interact with one another with the usage and exchange of various forms of dialogue. It also represents the fact that people have been directed by specific norms and values they follow as responsible members of society. He uses concepts of a front stage self and a backstage self; the two forms represent ourselves distinctly in the community. The front stage refers to that self of us, in which we are likely to present ourselves in a familiar setting in the world. The backstage self is that aspect of self, which we in reality are; this is the comfortable self and zone of us.

The movie *The Separation* revolves around the complicated relationship between Nader (Payman Maadi) and Simin (Leila Hatami). They are an Iranian married couple and live in Iran with their daughter, Termeh (Sarina Farhadi). Simin represents an educated and career-oriented woman character who wants to move out of the country for a better future. But Nader is unenthusiastic to do so as his father was bedridden and wants to take care of him. *Separation* is a compelling Iranian drama that displays a mature theme. Consequently, the film includes marital troubles, dilemmas, negotiations, and miscarriage. It also reflects lots of everyday fear, worries, anger, arguments, and unsaid truth. With some strong language (in English subtitles) and communication, it demonstrates some adult situations which actually represent the daily performances from the daily lives of ordinary people. It renders life as performance and stage within. Likewise, it shows that every relationship demands freedom and negotiates for it, which leads everyone to perform sequentially in their daily lives. So, *A Separation* is a fascinating family drama that reflects the dissolution and negotiations of marriage. The very first part of the movie resembles Simin and Nader's argument before the judge. The conversation informs us about Simin and Nader's choices and responsibilities. Simin displays the character who wants to leave Iran with her husband Nader and daughter Termeh for a bright and secure future. But as Nader denies doing so, Simin charges him for divorce. Nader does not want to leave his Alzheimer-suffering father. Simin fails to convince her husband, and she returns to her parents' home, but her daughter Termeh decides to stay with her father, Nader. Thus, as Goffman mentions about the metaphor "frontstage" (78) and "backstage" (70); consequently, both Simi and Nader perform their role distinctly in front and backstage of society. Hence, both of them act according to the demand of time and situation.

Obstruction of freedom, lack of mutual understanding and compromise are some of the other issues of the story. My concern is in knowing about the choices, needs and desires that play an important role in moving any marital relationship.

Later, Nader hires a young woman to care for his father in his wife's absence, hoping that his life will return to a normal state. But, the maid accuses Nader of the miscarriage. Nader struggles and suffers a lot to normalize his daily life. Accordingly, their insecure attachment affects their future and relationships too. As a result, Tehmein learns her parents are disorganized, angry, and aggressive. During the conversation in court, Simin's answers reflect her carrier-oriented desire but irresponsible towards her in-laws. When she was asked, "Then why do you want to get a divorce? (00:01:49)" she answers, "Because he doesn't want to come with me" (00:01:52). Here, Simin's answer shows that she wants her husband to leave his sick father and move with her to the next place for a safer and brighter carrier. Both characters negotiate here for their wonderful life, as Goffman says, "their performance cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place" (13). Accordingly, there lie many more internal struggles between them, but they appear in another way in the court. She represents the character who takes an important decision in search of her own better future. So, it shows that in social interaction, like in theatrical performances, Simin and Nader are in court before the "audience" (Goffman 8), and their consciousness is working with audiences in their mind.

### **Obstructions in Freedom**

Although Simin and Nader are husband and wife, they have different choices and desires which they want to grab. Simin prioritizes her preferences first, whereas Nader prioritizes family first and then his career. As Simin asks Nader, "Are you willing to come?" (00:01:57- 59) and he answers, "No I'm not" (00:01:58- 2:00), he also adds, "My dad. I can't leave him. Do I need to give more?" (00:02:11-15). This scene in the film displays that Nader has been entangled between love and responsibility. He loves his wife but cannot leave his father. He prefers to stay in his country with his family and take responsibility. But, Simin wants to move out of the country for a bright future. But, despite having an intimate relationship, they explicitly show that they are struggling with different priorities and negotiations in life. Bringing Goffman's approach, "possible to manipulate the impression the observer uses as a substitute for reality" (162), Simin and Nader each try to present and behave to prevent

embarrassment of themselves or others. So, it ensures that all parties have a kind of the same situation. Everyone understands what is meant to happen during such a situation and what the expectations are from the others involved there; thus, it determines how they should behave. So, all three characters negotiate for their life and follow the values of morality. They appear comfortable and different from their familiar ones but struggle within their selves. To ignore their weekly quota of quarrels and menacing silences, Simin decides to stay with her parents, and Nader hires a maid to look after his sick father. So, every character chooses to remain in their specific comfort zones.

However, Nader again learns that the new maid has been lying to him, and he realizes that he had to negotiate and work accordingly with every single relationship, including his marriage. Regular people's accounts hold common sense, which "contains innumerable pre- and quasi-scientific interpretations about everyday reality" (34) asserts Berger and Luckmann. Everyday life works as an intersubjective world, which is the reality of a world that people share with others. Daily life's inter-subjectivity sharply differentiates from other facts. Everyday life continually carries interaction and communication with each other. Likewise, Goffman claims that everyday life performances deal with the common sense of "ordinary members" (Goffman 91) of society. And family is supposed to be a strong bond between ordinary people. But it also holds specific rules and obstruction. Distinct kinds of choices and desires become the reasons for obstructions to freedom. Every people want to live life with freedom and compatibility. But society holds certain types of rules and values which people are forced to follow. Eventually, people try to intact themselves in front of their community. However, these insecure attachment affects their future and relationships too. As a result, Termen learns her parents are disorganized, angry, and aggressive.

Analyzing the movie from a different perspective, A.O. Scott, in review, interprets, "*A Separation* feels a bit, schematic as, if the characters were pulled from a box of available types rather than painted in the shades of life. But there are also scenes that draw Power from the subtlety of the performances" (Scott). Therefore, this movie represents the character from different boxes of life. Every aspect is a portrayal of real-life people who have been forcefully pulled to experience ups and downs due to their vivid perceptions and choices in their life. So, connecting Ervin Goffman's dramaturgical model, life is also guided by artful and powerful routines and acts. So, the film remarkably and skillfully captures the unnecessary, cumulative frustrations of

modern city life and displays daily life frustrations and negotiations. Scott further adds, "Daily life is a cycle of waiting, nagging, negotiating and looking for a place to park, much of it carried out with frayed and weary decorum" (Scott). So, he persists in revealing about daily life and its cycle; it indulges in every single nagging, negotiation, debate, and mediation. If there is any obstruction in the freedom of those cycles of daily life, it can mend and break the relationships. So, it happens in the relationship between Simin and Nader. They both hold choices and desire but negotiates differently and expect a different kind of freedom. Their story shows that even in practical life, people cannot go and compromise with every negotiation.

Based on relationship power, relationships have a connection with power phenomena. So, the relationship moves with a distinct energy. Such Power influences people and their communications too. Connecting the view of Richard Jenkins, "Power, in this view, is not confined to warfare, politics or economic exploitation. It is, rather, a mundane matter of everyday relationships between ends, on the one hand, and ways and means, on the other" (159). Hence, here he mentions that Power is not only exercised and related to the political, economic, and social subject matter, but it practically matters with the everyday relationship. It is a structural frame that has some sort of greater or lesser degree of efficiency. So, Jenkins again adds that Power always deals with the effectiveness of individuals, such capacity achieves their ends and desire to support or frustrate the purposes of others. However, Power usually depends on the availability of resources and agents. Similarly, Goffman's opinion of "power or status" (104) relates to the political, educational, economic, and social subject matter of Simin and Nader. Likewise, Simin and Nader use their Power from their respective part and try to meet their ends for their betterment. Interestingly, Termeh, too, uses her specific influence to make her parents together but fails lastly. It means no one is neutral; every individual tries hard to bring the situation in their comfort area.

However, their daughter Termen, unfortunately, gets entangled within their ebb and flow. She unknowingly becomes the victim in-between Simin and Nader. Here, we can observe the way Termen tackles her parents. Bois-Reymond., Buchner, and Kruger simply present their perception regarding the child-parent relationship. Furthermore, they add, "the intrafamily relationships (parent-child relationships) the back on the ground of changing family composition, family and intrafamily forms of living together structures and we analyze the process of negotiation between parents and children about the maxims and forms of everyday life inside and outside the family" ( Bois-

Reymond., Buchner, and Kruger). Thus, the Parent-child relationship has made up of a composition of different moral dilemmas and negotiations. Their performance of everyday life carries various forms of processes of talks inside and outside. Every child has guided by specific family rules and moral beliefs. Disputes in the home make children challenging to cope with their parents, and it is often the most challenging kind of negotiation a child may face. Ervin Goffman presents his idea of people having common pre-established scripts to follow new situations. Goffman asserts, "performer may act as if his response in a situation were immediate, unthinking, and spontaneous" (Goffman108). Likewise, Termen is affected by such moral dilemmas and family negotiations. She cannot discover a clear conscience and grooves in frustration. She witnesses every act of her parents, but cannot be able to convince them. Instead, Termen realizes that she too has been in between her parents' problems. Simin screams, "What sort of situation is this that you're creating for her?" (01:29:07- 10). Although Simin desires to maintain the right environment for her daughter Termen, she unconsciously does not realize the core issue of their own relationship. Yet, the final part of the movie displays Termen's character, about to negotiate with whom to stay, her father or mother. Hence this shows Goffman's perspective that every day and every second of time deals with the negotiations to meet the needs.

Accordingly, this film explains that it is not possible to manage or govern others. Compromises always force relationships to be bound by specific rules and people's actions perform, respectively. Mutual understanding may not still work, and every relationship may not influence each other's choices and decisions. Jean Segal, in the subject matter of productive relationship, asserts, "relationship is based on five distinct parts of the communication process that continue to inspire and sustain the desire for intimacy: mutual regulation, nonverbal communication, emotional exchange, interactive play, and willingness to readily resolve differences" (28-29). Consequently, future relationships are shaped by the perfect blend of compassion and understanding. But it includes both success and failure from our day-to-day life: proper communication and emotional exchange play a crucial role in shaping any kind of relationship. Any subject matter of choices and desires can be addressed by appropriate communication and understanding. So, here, in this film, Nader and Simin lack proper and healthy connections to tackle the problem, which results in their separation.

Relationships are the Centre of attachment, emotions, interactions, mutual understanding, and connections, but if these elements are not correctly handled, it may have a devastating consequence. But, this is also a fact that this world is a stage and people are actors here. We perform every time according to the guided social norms and values. Supporting the theory and opinion of Ervin Goffman, he introduced this world as "dramaturgical" (8). Erving Goffman introduced this term in sociology in 1959 in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. This theory presents the micro-level of interactions that take place in society. It has a perspective from the theatre; theatre is used as a metaphor to represent how people behave in society and express themselves. People are the actors, and the community is a stage. Everyone interacts with one another via language and emotional exchange. Moreover, they are directed and guided by the norms and values. People act in two ways: one front stage where we got to know one another and have a social life, and the second is backstage, where we have a completely private experience. Likewise, in the film, *A Separation*, Nader and Simin carry their two sides, and they are guided by their respective cultural and social norms and values. But, at the same time, Simin represents the character of an ambitious woman. She has a social life, and on the other side, she has her private life where all her obstructions remain.

Human relationships revolve around attachment, emotions, interactions, mutual understanding, and connections. So, if these elements do not correctly regulate, a misunderstanding occurs, and many obstructions arise. Consequently, captivating the idea of Ervin Goffman, he claims, " the interaction between two persons becomes so loud, heated, or otherwise attention-getting, that nearby persons engaged in their own conversational interaction are forced to become witnesses or even to take sides " (134). Now, he states that, in everyday life, interactions occur among the relationships, and it progresses accordingly. It takes modifications from their positions and commits a particular problem, including a response negatively or positively. It shows that it is essential to have a clear understanding of capacity and adjustment in a relationship. Relationships always hold challenges and opportunities, and they should rightly point out. Challenges and opportunities lead to tackle with negotiations and complications.

Performances occur in many contexts in everyday life. Our actions ranging from daily operations, sports, communication, dance, music, and popular entertainment, belong to performance. In this regard, our everyday life practices are like theatrical performance acts. Goffman claims, "Performances come to be accepted as reality" (23).

So, performance is a daily routine and act that should be accepted as a reality. We always perform in many ways, and this is the truth of life. In the same manner, Nader, Simin, and Termeh are acting accordingly. In their performance, they happen to negotiate, entangle within the moral dilemmas, and struggle with their individual choices and desire. These performances are part and the routine of everyday life. Every performer engages in interactions and creates an impression on others. So, this means that the world is truth, and reality is being performed here.

As shown in the film, everyday life is performative. None of the minutes would pass without performance. Every character in the movie struggles with their sufferings and performs accordingly. The last part of the film shows the judge making a permanent decision on their separation and enquires Termeh which parent she chooses to live with. Initially, Termeh tries hard to bring back her mother and stays with their father. But, as time pass by out of her control, she realizes that she has lost both of her parents. Termeh does not openly tell her decision and asks the judge to tell her parents to wait outside before she decides. Judge asks Termeh, "Have you made your decision, or not?" (1:58:29-33). Soon, she replies, "Yes" and agrees when the judge asks, "If it's too hard for you, do you want them to go outside?" (1:58:54- 59). However, the decision is left unresolved. This final incident shows that both parents are not compromising this state, and still, they are negotiating with each other for their ego and self-respect. The ego and attitude of both characters do not let them move positively. Thus, the character of Termeh depicts the trap that people always experience in everyday life. She represents people who have a dilemma with the double-edged position.

### **Conclusions**

Acute understanding and co-operation function deeply in the growth of the human relationship. To support this idea, John Gray, in his book *Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus*, presents his opinion about the fact that every couple is different and everyone holds their own kind of perception. "We expect the opposite sex to be more like ourselves. We desire them to "want what we want" and "feel the way we feel. " (8). Thus, it presents that every human character is different. Based on such characteristics, people take actions, and their consequences reflect in their everyday life. I have learned that both characters do not try to compromise and have a mutual understanding to save their relationship. Everyone has a kind of freedom, which has



priority more than any other. But here, the freedom and choices have not been respected. Every relationship needs freedom, and the wings of liberty should not be cut off. John Gray suggests how a couple should work for a healthy relationship. He asserts, "A relationship is healthy when both partners have permission to ask for what they want and need, and they both have permission to say no if they choose" (176). Likewise, the issue between the couple in the film shows that they do not try to find out a compromise rather than a perfect solution. Every choice needs respect, but the different obligations force the couple to separate. So, the couple chose their way and negotiated with their distinct dreams of achieving something and responsibilities.

To give an outline, the film *A Separation* displays everyday life stories and their consequences. The world of reality and natural agents drives us distinctly to perform in our life vividly. Moral dilemmas and negotiations are part of life. This paper has analyzed the film from Ervin Goffman's dramaturgical approach as it finely embraces human-restored behavior that includes conflict, relationships, secrets, and other elements. It displays the way people carry their 'self' in two ways; one front stage self and backstage self. So, people every time present themselves in an area of their compatibility. Performance in front of familiar ones is different from own-self. So, it displays peoples' version of performance in their everyday life relationships. People act at every stage, and they also negotiate based on specific rules and values of society. Accordingly, they react toward every action of others. Simin and Nader distinctly present themselves in front and backstage of the community. Termeh represents the character who intertwines in moral dilemmas and negotiations. Furthermore, this study depicts and discovers that every family adheres to ethical dilemmas and relationship negotiations, complex and multi-faceted. Lastly, this proves that every character's life relies on some kind of 'lies' and 'fabrication.'

To sum up, this paper displays the fact of a realistic world where a distinct kind of performance takes place in a dramaturgical manner. Tears, Fears, and many unsaid truths are the elements of everyday life performances. People have different natures and perceptions of life, and it is presented in distinct manners. So, this paper also incorporates a practical, realistic, and humanistic approach. I have presented this paper intending to reflect upon peoples' performative strategies and their execution to live in everyday life. So, everyone's life is a blend of influential factors of performance, which include work, food, prayer, struggle, conflict, anger, fear, and life. The world is a theatre and people are actors where ethical dilemmas and negotiation go shoulder to

shoulder. Such is my opinion formed after analyzing the movie from the dramaturgical point of view. However, this paper represents the fact that specific norms and values of society have directed people's lives. They follow the basics as responsible members of society.

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