

The Past from Iran's Asghar Farhadi: Something of a disappointment

David Walsh
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Asghar Farhadi's The Past has opened in North America. It is the follow-up to his award-winning A Separation (2011). The Past was reviewed previously in October 2013 as part of coverage of the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival.

Written and directed by Asghar Farhadi

The new film by Iran's Asghar Farhadi, director of the award-winning *A Separation*, comes as something of a disappointment. *The Past* takes place in Paris. Ahmad (Ali Mosaffa) arrives from Tehran to finalize a divorce from his French wife, Marie (Bérénice Bejo, *The Artist*), after a four-year separation.

The two greet each other in a relatively amiable manner but soon fall to quarreling. Marie, who has two daughters from another relationship, obviously harbors resentment against Ahmad, who left her to return to Iran. "Keep your promise for once," she barks at one point.

Her adolescent daughter Lucie (Pauline Burlet) has been acting particularly sullen recently and seems to have some cloud of unhappiness hovering over her. Marie is involved in a new relationship—one of too many, according to her daughter—with Samir (Tahar Rahim), who owns a dry cleaning establishment and whose wife is in a coma after trying to kill herself. Lucie strongly disapproves of her mother's plans to marry Samir. Although Ahmad attempts to keep his distance and make his visit simply a practical matter of signing some papers, he is inevitably drawn into the various family dramas.

As in *A Separation*, there are elements of deliberate ambiguity in *The Past*. It even becomes something of a detective story, surrounding the facts of the suicide attempt by Samir's mentally unstable wife. She found out about the relationship between her husband and Marie because someone forwarded her emails the

lovers had exchanged. Was it this that drove her to try and end her life? Who was responsible for sending the emails? Who wanted them sent?

In *A Separation*, however, this element of uncertainty, and the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of establishing the *exact* truth about certain events, takes second place to the picturing of Iranian life and class relations.

As we wrote in March 2012: "*A Separation* is a realistic, hardly flattering portrait of Iran, a society beset by intense contradictions. The film is frank about all sections of the population. At the same time, each of the central figures is fairly and sympathetically treated, even the judge who has to rule on the conflicting claims. The individual degrees of guilt or innocence fade into the background, as the ultimate responsibility for the tragedy clearly lies with the profound social and economic tensions. In the end, as elsewhere, the more affluent couple retain the upper hand."

In *The Past*, unfortunately, secondary questions largely come to the fore. The tensions tend to take on a merely personal character. The various personalities have their weaknesses, idiosyncrasies, failings ("Everyone has his reasons" might as well be the film's motto), and those all combine to create an apparently impossible, or at least an emotionally lacerating situation. Neither Iranian nor French society truly falls under the filmmaker's gaze. Even the "past," which figures so prominently, is more or less a private matter here.

As a result, the film is something of a long-winded melodrama, although it has truthful moments and circumstances and all the performers work diligently.

One senses that Farhadi is trying to make a point with his insistence on the relative and tentative character of truth. In the Iranian context, in the face of religious

bigotry and fanaticism, that the director goes out of his way to suggest that there is no single, absolute view of things may have a certain element of social or ideological criticism. The final words of the film belong to a doctor, who, referring to the comatose wife and her prognosis, remarks that there's "room for doubt" and "You can never be sure." Whatever its immediate domestic significance or controversial character, this sort of agnosticism is not the strongest basis for important art.

Iranian filmmakers face very difficult circumstances, and no criticism can leave that factor out of account. There is, first of all, the repression and censorship enforced by the Islamist regime and its cultural thugs. The siren song of the Green movement in Iran, a stalking horse essentially for Western imperialist interests, is not a viable alternative.

Perhaps most importantly, the Iranian artists have been cut off from a left-wing critique of the regime and an orientation to the popular masses. This is largely thanks to the impact of Stalinism and the Tudeh Party, which assiduously worked for decades to subordinate the working class to discredited bourgeois politicians. An enormous political vacuum exists in Iran. The filmmakers appear largely bewildered and overwhelmed by events.



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