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A Separation Builds a Connection

Rebecca Mangan
Cedarville University

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“*A Separation Builds a Connection*” by Rebecca Mangan

Instructor’s Notes

In her research paper, Rebecca explores how cultural differences, although they initially appear to separate us, can actually be the starting points for building bridges. How might an author’s presuppositions unfairly influence his or her conclusions when dealing with a foreign culture? How might one’s own biases be identified, negotiated, and diminished? Why is this important? Is it possible for an outsider to a cultural group to speak about that group with authority? How might a writer/researcher create ethos to help establish authority?

Writer’s Biography

Rebecca Mangan is a junior Nursing major who is passionate about diversity and views writing as a crucial tool in dissolving differences. In 2008, she traveled as a reporter with Y-Press to the Republican National Convention. Last year she won a national essay contest for Abercrombie and Fitch’s diversity and inclusion campaign. During middle school and high school, Mangan published in her state newspaper, the Indianapolis Star, and spoke on NPR wfyi radio in Indianapolis. She searches for opportunities to glorify God with the gifts He has given and to serve others through them.

A Separation Builds a Connection

A Separation, an Iranian courtroom drama, opens with main characters Nader and Simin requesting a divorce before a judge. It appears their marriage has suffered for some time now as they wearily restate their reasons for separation. Simin is determined to leave Iran with Termeh, their 11-year-old daughter while Nader, loyal to his elderly father, refuses to leave. The judge prods—what is wrong with raising their daughter in Iran? Simin’s answer is ambiguous, only replying that she doesn’t want to raise Termeh under “these

circumstances.” The question of why the current state of Iran is bleak for an intelligent young daughter like Termeh is left unanswered. The subtleties in *A Separation* lead the viewer to wonder about the current struggle for gender equality in Iran today, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 reversed efforts of egalitarianism. In order to interpret the subtleties of the film, one must understand the events in Iran that led up to its current turmoil: the White Revolution, the Iranian Revolution, and the current Women’s Rights movement in modern Iran.

The White Revolution of 1963 led by Reza Shah Pahlavi was the culmination of efforts of women that started at the very beginning of the 20th century. In Iran during the 1800s, the majority believed that Iranian women did not need education apart from the knowledge necessary to raise children, manage a home, and honor the family name (Nashiravani). However, at the beginning of the 20th century, Iran could no longer stand at odds with the modernization of the rest of the world. Women were at the forefront leading this change, desiring education and equal opportunities for civic involvement. As a result, in 1906, schools opened by American missionaries and French immigrants allowed young girls to enroll and a year later, a society of both men and women formed to herald cross-gender political debate and discussion, encouraging women to be involved in sociopolitical matters. This society was called The Women’s Freedom Society and later became The National Ladies’ Society (Nashiravani).

When Reza Shah Pahlavi was crowned king in 1925 the progress accelerated. The dawn of the Pahlavi era was the harbinger of economic, social, and political reforms to make Iran a global power. This period of time is known as The White Revolution. The Shah realized that Iran could not join modern society if gender equality was not addressed (Wright). Reza Shah initiated four incredible changes in 1936. In the realm of education, both men and women were admitted to Tehran University. In the realm of politics, women obtained the right to vote and run for parliament. In the realm of family, women gained the right to petition for divorce and gain child custody, when in the past men could both declare divorce and take custody of children by default (Wright). Lastly, during the White Revolution, the Shah removed the mandatory chador for women.

After 1936, when Reza Shah banned the chador, veiling came to be perceived among the minority of elite and secular middle-class women as a symbol of oppression... Iranian society was already polarized between the traditionally minded majority and a minority of involved women who were dedicated to improving the status of women. (Curtis)

Because of The White Revolution, by 1978, “22 women sat in parliament and 333 women served on elected local councils. One-third of university students were female. Two million women were in the work force, more than 146,000 of them in the civil service” (Wright).

As a response, however, another revolution formed. This revolution of 1979 is known as “The Iranian Revolution,” or sometimes, “The Islamic Revolution.” During this time, Reza Shah Pahlavi was overthrown, in an attempt to combat the “liberalism” of previous years and reestablish fundamentals of Islam. The revolution was primarily lead by two theorists, Ayatollah Khomeini and Ali Shari’ati. “Shari’ati drew on a Shi’a model of womanhood to highlight women’s central role as daughters, wives, and mothers” (Sameh). This model was a gentle way of pushing women out of positions of power and back into the kitchen and home. Both leaders were passionate about reversing the secularization that the Pahlavi era had brought and returning to Islamic tradition.

Khomeini gained an immense following and eventually gained enough influence to be the face of the revolution. Surprisingly, many women supported the revolution, being persuaded by Khomeini’s charisma and desire to establish Iran’s identity. He often said that under the Shah’s regime, Iran was a “puppet of the United States” (Wright).

Haideh Moghissi, current Islam and Gender Project Director and founder of the Iranian National Union of Women, wrote in retrospect:

We had failed to listen carefully to Khomeini’s rhetorical pronouncements that the new government would provide women with all rights denied to them, ‘within the confines of the Shari’a [Islamic Law].’ The meaning was crystal clear. However, the dominance of populist, anti-imperialist

tendencies or unrealistic expectations about the revolution within the ranks of the most active, gender-conscious sections of the female population—urban, educated, middle-class women—prevented us from seeing through the revolutionary promises and the Islamists’ medieval agenda... (Moghissi 20)

Despite the Shah’s efforts to silence Khomeini, even banishing him from Iran, Khomeini returned in 1979 and successfully overthrew the Shah. Khomeini was immediately recognized as the new leader of Iran, writing an Islamic constitution and being heralded the first “Supreme Leader.” In his years as leader, he established the Islamic Republic of Iran.

As leader, he reversed almost all progress from the White Revolution. “The new theocracy systematically rolled back five decades of progress in women’s rights. Women were purged from government positions. All females, including girls in first grade, were forced to observe the hijab, or Islamic dress code” (Wright). Furthermore, “After the victory of the revolution, women discovered that the revolution they thought they loved did not love them back, or value the advances women had made. Equality between men and women was not on the agenda of the Islamic Republic” (Esfandiari). Today, in the circumstances movie character Simin alludes to, women still battle the damage that Khomeini’s rule caused, despite many setbacks. “33 years after the revolution, Iranian women still have not regained their pre-revolutionary rights” (Esfandiari). Most the female activists were raised with the freedoms of the Pahlavi era. Francesco Bongioni, a journalist for the *New Yorker* interviewed activist ██████████, a 40-year-old artist in Tehran, and published an article about the circumstances through the eyes of an ██████████.

Today, the Islamic Republic’s gender laws are among the harshest in the world. They penalize women in the areas of marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Polygamy is legal for men, and the legal testimony of one man carries the same weight as that of two women, an imbalance that helps explain why there are so few convicted rapists in Iran. Against this background, women like ██████████—educated, cosmopolitan, and old enough to have come of age before the Islamic Revolution—occupy an

anomalous position. They were formed in a society far more liberal, if not necessarily freer, than the one they now inhabit. And though Iranian women remain very highly educated by the standards of surrounding countries, the social and professional avenues open to them are often disappointingly narrow. (Bongiorni)

Though at first the Iranian Revolution appears to be devastating to all women's rights initiatives, many onlookers like journalist Bongiorni and author Catherine Sameh agree that the revolution made the women even more passionate today. Sameh writes, "It is in this post-revolutionary period, particularly in the last decade and a half, that women have emerged as key agents of many important changes in the social, political and cultural landscape of Iran" (Sameh 9). The attempts of the 1980s to silence women caused even more energy in the women's movement, leaving Iran with one of the most charged and dynamic women's movements in the Islamic world. Many female activists involved have won international recognition (Wright).

Along with the constant actions specific to women's rights, a new school of thought is forming called "Islamic Modernism." This viewpoint tries to reconcile Islamic faith with modern values, incorporating democracy, civil rights, and equality, and creating a new version of the Islamic faith (Moaddel 2). In addition to agreeing with the need for gender equality, the viewpoint removes Islamic supremacist tendencies and seeks to live at peace with other faiths. If Islamic Modernism becomes popular thought, Iran may return to a state of progress similar to its pre-revolution state. Daniel Pipes, president of the Middle East Forum, who is optimistic about the modernization of Iran, summarizes, "This synthesis would choose among Shari precepts and render Islam compatible with modern values. It would accept gender equality, coexist peacefully with unbelievers, and reject the aspiration of a universal caliphate, among other steps" (Pipes).

In conclusion, *A Separation* effectively leads the viewer to wonder about the current circumstances in Iran and the preceding events that led to the turmoil. A thorough understanding of the White Revolution led by Reza Shah, the Iranian Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, and the current state of gender roles in Iran, give context to the subtleties of *A Separation*. Simin's ambiguous answer

in the courtroom left the viewer to question what “circumstances” in Iran fueled her desire to flee the country with her daughter Termeh. When *A Separation* was the first Iranian film to win an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, director Asghar Farhadi had successfully built a connection from American viewers to modern Iran. By creating Simin, Farhadi gave a face and name to an Iranian woman living with the struggle in Tehran yet delivered this message subtly enough to allow the movie to be released. In a review of the film, Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: a Memoir in Books*, says:

The most important aspect of Iran is the people that have always, in fact, resisted their oppression—not just with protests, but also by continuing to live the way they lived before the regime. A movie like *A Separation* brings out that same aspect of Iran, the human aspect. When you see a film like *A Separation*, you realize not how different Americans are from the Iranian regime, but how similar they are to the Iranian people. (Hayoun)

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