

**Ascenso y caída de un héroe decente: la
recreación del *Edipo Rey* de Sófocles en la
película iraní *Nader y Simín, Una separación*
(2011) de Asghar Farhadi**

**Rise and Fall of a Decent Hero: The Recreation
of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in the Iranian
Film *Jodaeiye Nader az Simin (A Separation)*
(2011) by Asghar Farhadi**

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Resumen: La película iraní *Nader y Simin, una separación* (2011), dirigida por Asghar Farhadi, marcó un hito al obtener en 2012 el Óscar a la Mejor Película Extranjera, además de ser nominada a Mejor Guion Original. Este artículo sostiene que la película evoca elementos estructurales y temáticos de la tragedia griega, en particular del *Edipo Rey* de Sófocles (429 a. C.). Desde esta perspectiva clásica, se muestra cómo la narrativa de Farhadi recrea motivos característicos: la caída del héroe, el error trágico, la ironía dramática, la búsqueda de la verdad y la catarsis final, revelando la vigencia del modelo trágico en el cine contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: Cine iraní, tragedia griega, *Nader y Simin, una separación*, literatura y cine, *Edipo*.

Abstract: The Iranian film *Jodaeiye Nader az Simin (A Separation)*, 2011, directed by Asghar Farhadi, marked a milestone by winning the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2012, in addition to a nomination for Best Original Screenplay. This article argues that the film evokes structural and thematic elements of Greek tragedy, particularly Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (429 BC). From this classical perspective, it explores how Farhadi's narrative strategy recreates essential motifs: the hero's downfall, the tragic flaw, dramatic irony, the quest for truth, and final catharsis, thus revealing the enduring relevance of the tragic model in contemporary cinema.

Keywords: Iranian Cinema, Greek Tragedy, *Jodaeiye Nader az Simin (A Separation)*, Literature and Cinema, Oedipus.

1. INTRODUCTION¹

Born in 1972, Asghar Farhadi has established himself as a prominent figure in contemporary cinema, widely recognized for his in-depth exploration of social issues and moral dilemmas. His work delves into the complexities of human relationships, societal conflicts, and the tension between tradition and modernity. Farhadi's films are acknowledged for their nuanced portrayal of «flawed human relationships», pervasive «class conflicts» and challenging «cultural practices» (Yazdanjoo, 2022). For Farhadi, cinema serves as a means through which he expresses his psychological analyses and perspectives on society (Saeidi *et al.*, 2021: 24).

A «realistic style» has been attributed to Farhadi (Shahba and Alipanahloo, 2018: 74). In fact, his intricate narrative structures often mirror the fluidity of documentary filmmaking (Rugo, 2016: 175). His films, including the Oscar-winning *A Separation* (2011) and *The Salesman* (2016), offer a deep dive into themes of justice, family dynamics, and personal trauma. His success as a director is underscored by numerous accolades, including two Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film (see Bloom and Blair, 2019: 269), and his inclusion in *Time*'s 2012 list of the 100 most influential people in the world.

Jodaeiye Nader az Simin (*A Separation*) (2011) was the first film in the history of Iranian cinema to win an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. The film played a pivotal role in bringing Iranian cinema to a global audience, especially during a critical period when diplomatic tensions between Iran and the West were at their peak (Naficy, 2012: 259). The narrative explores the contrasts between the «urban middle-class» and «working-class» in Iran (Rad, 2022: 164) and, particularly, centers on the conflicts within a married couple, Nader and Simin, in Tehran. The couple's decision to divorce stems from Simin's desire to emigrate abroad, which Nader opposes due to his commitment to caring for his elderly father. Simin's move to her mother's house intensifies the conflict, leading Nader to hire a caretaker for his father. The situation worsens when the caretaker's negligence leads to the father's illness. Nader's response—which results in the caretaker's hospitalization—sparks a legal battle, as he fights to prove his innocence.

The film is widely acknowledged for its innovative plot. However, the present study examines the ways in which it incorporates elements of classical Greek tragedy, reimagined in a modern context. By examining key concepts of Greek tragedy in the Aristotelian sense—such as *hamartia*, fate, catharsis, and *hybris*—this study compares

¹ The author is deeply grateful to the Hardt Foundation (Geneva, Switzerland) for providing access to the necessary bibliography.

Farhadi's film with Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (429 BC), despite their differences of plot and cultural backgrounds.

2. CONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE OF A TRAGIC HERO

A Separation «begins in *medias res*, and yet a critical point» (Abedinifard, 2019: 119), much like *Oedipus the King*, thrusting us directly into the turmoil of Nader and Simin's troubled marriage. Their relationship is fraught with tension, exacerbated by Nader's father's battle with Alzheimer's. Simin has filed for divorce, driven by her desire to move abroad for the sake of their daughter's future. She believes that a better environment outside Iran would benefit her greatly. During a court hearing, when asked about her reasons for wanting to leave, Simin provides only vague references to the situation in Iran, avoiding specifics. This testifies to Moosavi's argument that Farhadi frequently addresses social issues in «subtle» ways (Moosavi, 2017: 82). Nonetheless, Simin insists that her primary motivation is to provide a more favorable upbringing for their 11-year-old daughter.

Nader, despite having previously collaborated with Simin on visa applications, is now resolutely opposed to leaving. He argues that his father's deteriorating condition requires his presence and that he cannot abandon him. Nader acknowledges Simin's right to divorce and is willing to let her choose where to live. Under Islamic law, only men have the right to initiate divorce, and while Nader agrees to grant the divorce to Simin, he refuses to allow their daughter to leave the country. This legal movement adds another layer of complexity to their already strained situation.

From the outset of the film, Nader emerges as a figure of dignity and intellect, deeply rooted in his principles and unwavering in his commitment to family. The director meticulously crafts Nader's character through both verbal and non-verbal cues, allowing the audience to gain a profound understanding of his motivations and fostering a deep sense of trust in him. This ultimately positions him as the hero of the story.

In the film's opening moments, Nader is introduced as a man in his early forties, who exudes politeness and a strong sense of familial devotion. His appearance is understated and formal, often dressed in conventional, subdued colors that reflect his adherence to traditional values. His neatly kept beard and his avoidance of eye contact with women are subtle yet powerful indicators of his respect for cultural norms, emphasizing his deep-seated commitment to moral and ethical standards, even though he is never portrayed as a religious man or shown practicing any religious rituals.

Nader's steadfast refusal to leave the country when presented with the opportunity is a testament to his unwavering dedication to his ailing father. This decision is not born out of convenience, but out of

a sense of duty and loyalty, particularly as his father suffers from Alzheimer's. When Simin argues that the father no longer recognizes him, Nader's response, «I know that he is my father» (00:03:06), poignantly underscores his deep respect for familial obligations and reflects a man who is willing to sacrifice his own desires for the sake of his father.

Nader's decision to grant his wife legal permission to divorce and leave the country reveals a multifaceted dimension of his character. This action reflects a deep respect for Simin's autonomy and her right to pursue what she believes is best for her life. However, his refusal to grant legal permission for their daughter, Termeh, to leave introduces a more complex aspect of his character. Nader justifies his decision by asserting that Termeh is more accustomed to him and that she does not wish to leave the country (00:04:43). This nuanced portrayal is set against the backdrop of Shia Islamic law, where the husband holds the primary right to initiate divorce, *talaq* («طلاق») in Arabic, while women can only seek divorce through judicial means under specific conditions such as abuse, or through a delegated right stipulated in the marriage contract.

In terms of child custody, Shia law typically grants mothers custody of sons until age two and daughters until age seven, after which custody usually transfers to the father, though the father's financial responsibilities persist regardless of custody. At the conclusion of the court session, Nader emerges as a figure of authority, embodying traditional familial values, with the judge's support reinforcing his stance. Simin's desire to leave the country is not considered a sufficient reason to break up the family, which reflects societal values in Iran that prioritize family unity, respect for parents, and fulfilment of familial obligations over individual interests² Through these carefully crafted details, the director portrays Nader as a man of integrity, deeply committed to his values and responsibilities, and willing to endure personal sacrifice for the sake of his father—a portrayal that is likely to resonate positively with an audience that holds these same principles in high regard.

Throughout the film, Nader's character embodies modern heroism through his actions, attitudes, and relationships. His compassionate care for his father, such as gently shaving him and making light-hearted jokes to lift his spirits (00:06:44), implies dedication and family devotion. Despite the strain in his marriage, Nader consistently treats Simin with respect, showing his commitment

² Nasehi argues that the film falls short of exposing Simin's core beliefs and motivations, ultimately portraying her as «a powerless mother and a defeated subject». Her «antagonistic role» remains underdeveloped and only superficially addressed in the narrative (2018: 95).

to preserve a dignified relationship. Simin acknowledges Nader's honorable nature, calling him «چشم پاک» (*chashm-paak*), meaning «pure of eye» or free from ill intentions towards women (00:13:15). Even in court, she describes him as «a good man» (00:01:54), indicating that her desire for divorce is driven by her wish to leave the country, not by any shortcomings in his character.³

Nader's devotion to his daughter is another cornerstone of his character. He is portrayed as a loving and attentive father, deeply involved in her life and education. For instance, at the gas station, he asks her to take on the task of refueling the car, a task often not done by women, and then insists that she collect the remaining change, to enforce the values of strength, confidence, and independence that he aims to instill in her (00:20:48). He is actively engaged in her daily routines —playing games with her after school, helping her study for exams, and accompanying her to school every day. In a particularly memorable scene, he assists her with Persian language lessons for an upcoming exam. When she offers a synonym with Arabic roots, he challenges her to think critically and to question linguistic discrepancies, reflecting his desire for her to develop critical thinking skills, while also honoring Persian cultural heritage: «What's wrong is wrong, no matter who says it or where it's written» (00:28:13). The presence of numerous CDs of Shajarian's music⁴ and books in their home and listening to classical Persian music further attests to his appreciation for Persian traditions and values.

While Nader is not depicted as a practicing religious man, his character embodies the traits of a modern hero: he balances personal honor with familial responsibilities, respects women, fosters independence and critical thinking in his daughter, and lives a life of simplicity and respect. This portrayal enables the audience not only to understand but also to empathize with Nader's actions, ultimately reinforcing his role as the moral core of the film. Interestingly, this representation aligns with Asghar Farhadi's other films, such as *About Elly* (2009), *The Salesman* (2016), and *A Hero* (2021). In these works, a

³ Saeidi, *et al.*, however, argue that Nader uses his father's Alzheimer's as a cover for the emotional distance between him and Simin. They have been emotionally estranged for some time and live separately, with their only bond being their daughter, Termeh. In general, the film thus emphasizes this emotional and psychological detachment more than the legal aspects of their separation (2021: 24).

⁴ Mohammadreza Shajarian (1940-2020) was an Iranian vocalist and master of Persian classical music. He was famous for his extraordinary vocal talent. Shajarian played a crucial role in preserving and revitalizing traditional Persian music, making it accessible to modern audiences. His contributions earned him widespread acclaim, and he is often regarded as one of the greatest figures in Persian music history.

similar narrative style is employed, where a preliminary introduction to the characters is provided before the story reaches its main crisis.⁵ Farhadi devotes the opening segments of his films to introducing the protagonist and revealing different aspects of their character, helping the audience build trust in them. This technique is reminiscent of how Greek tragedians, such as Sophocles, crafted their tragic heroes, presenting them as figures of notable virtue and integrity before delving into their inevitable downfall.

Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* exemplifies this approach through its portrayal of Oedipus as a heroic figure. From the outset, Oedipus is depicted as a celebrated king, whose prior heroic deeds have earned him the admiration of his subjects. This is showcased when the priest of Zeus addresses him with profound respect, stating, «ἀλλ' ὃ κρατύνων Οἰδίπους χώρας ἐμῆς» («Oedipus, my sovereign lord and king» (14)) and mentioning that it was him who saved the city and its people. This praise underscores Oedipus's esteemed status and highlights his crucial role in maintaining the stability and safety of Thebes, thereby positioning him as a paragon of heroism:

ὃς γ' ἐξέλυσας ἄστν Καδμείον μολὼν
σκληρὰς αἰοιδοῦ δασμὸν ὃν παρῆχομεν,
καὶ ταῦθ' ὕφ' ἡμῶν οὐδὲν ἐξειδὼς πλέον
οὐδ' ἐκδιδαχθεῖς, ἀλλὰ προσθήκη θεοῦ
λέγει νομίζει θ' ἡμῖν ὀρθῶσαι βίον:

Art thou not he who coming to the town
Of Cadmus freed us from the tax we paid
To the fell songstress? Nor hadst thou received
Prompting from us or been by others schooled;
No, by a god inspired (so all men deem,
And testify) didst thou renew our life (35-39).

Oedipus's commitment to his people is further highlighted by his empathetic response to the city's crisis. Confronted with a devastating plague, he expresses profound concern for his citizens, specifying not only that he has been worried about them but also that he has taken decisive action to save the city:

ὅστ' οὐχ ὕπνω γ' εὐδοντά μ' ἐξεγείρετε,
ἀλλ' ἵστε πολλὰ μέν με δακρύσαντα δῆ,
πολλὰς δ' ὁδοὺς ἐλθόντα φροντίδος πλάνοις:

⁵ At the beginning of *The Salesman*, Emad is «portrayed as a pillar of integrity», but this portrayal gradually shifts as he grapples with «feelings of indignity and humiliation triggered by pressure from neighbors and friends» (Nazemi, 2024: 1526).

ἦν δ' εὖ σκοπῶν ἡῦρισκον ἴασιν μόνην,
ταύτην ἔπραξα: παῖδα γὰρ Μενουκέως
Κρέοντ', ἐμαυτοῦ γαμβρόν, ἐς τὰ Πυθικὰ
ἔπεμψα Φοίβου δώμαθ', ὥς πύθοιθ' ὅ τι
δρῶν ἢ τί φωνῶν τήνδε ρυσαίμην πόλιν.

Therefore ye rouse no sluggard from day-dreams.
Many, my children, are the tears I've wept.
And threaded many a maze of weary thought.
Thus pondering one clue of hope I caught.
And tracked it up; I have sent Menoeceus' son,
Creon, my consort's brother, to inquire
Of Pythian Phoebus at his Delphic shrine,
How I might save the State by act or word (65-72).

Moreover, Oedipus's relentless pursuit of the truth is a critical trait of his heroic character. His determination to uncover the cause of the plague and seek justice for the murder of Laius is evident in his statement, «ἀλλ' ἐξ ὑπαρχῆς αὐθις αὐτ' ἐγὼ φανῶ: / ἐπαξίως γὰρ Φοῖβος, ἄξιως δὲ σὺ» («I will start afresh and once again / Make dark things clear») (132-133). This reinforces his role as a compassionate and responsible leader (Higgins and Higgins, 2000: 80).

Unlike Oedipus, Farhadi's protagonist is an ordinary individual rather than a king. However, within his sphere of concern, Nader, like Oedipus, embodies dignity and respect. While Farhadi narrowed Sophocles' scope, he also adapted the character to fit this more intimate scale. It is worth noting that Farhadi later adapted Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) in his 2016 film *The Salesman*. Miller was not only a playwright who brought the conventions of tragedy into modern American life but also a critic who, in his seminal work «Tragedy and the Common Man» (1949), redefined the concept of tragedy for the contemporary audience. In that essay, Miller argues that «the essence of tragedy is not confined to the elite but extends to ordinary individuals» —the «common man»— who face intense emotional struggles and moral challenges (Nazemi, 2024: 1523). Miller drew comparisons between classical tragic heroes like Oedipus and the common man of modern times, asserting that both endure profound human emotions and confrontations:

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formulations, such as Oedipus and Orestes complexes, for instances, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations. (Miller, 1949: par 2).

In line with Arthur Miller's theory that a modern tragic hero can be an ordinary individual—a concept that underscores the «significance of the lives of ordinary people» (Abbotson, 2007: 330)—Farhadi portrays a protagonist who, like Oedipus, is respected, courageous, and compassionate. However, unlike the Greek hero, this character lacks noble or royal status.

3. REPRESENTING THE FALL OF THE HERO

Nader's journey in *A Separation* vividly illustrates the fine line between dignity and downfall. However, like Oedipus, his fate is ultimately sealed by a tragic flaw (*hamartia*): excessive anger and rash judgment. This flaw drives both men to irreversible mistakes—the former kills his father, while the latter is accused of causing the caretaker's miscarriage.

After Simin's failure to persuade Nader to take their daughter abroad, she chooses to leave the house and stay with her mother as a gesture of defiance, hoping to force Nader into changing his stance. This decision compels Nader to find a caretaker for his ailing father during his work hours. Razieh, then, appears, a young woman in her twenties, clad in a black veil, «چادر» (*chaador*) in Persian, and eschewing makeup, immediately presenting herself as a devoutly religious person. Accompanied by her young daughter, Razieh begins her duties. Upon arriving, she closes the curtains to avoid being seen by the neighbors. She also shows concern about potential impurities (*Najes*)⁶ on several occasions, making an effort to clean those areas. On her first day, Razieh faces a dilemma when the elderly father soils his clothing. Her religious beliefs forbid her from touching any man outside her immediate family—father, brother, son, or husband. Unsure of how to proceed, she contacts an imam's office for guidance and permission (00:19:20). Razieh then decides to continue working, driven by financial necessity.

Her second day proves equally challenging when, while busy with household chores, the elderly man wanders off. Razieh must search the streets to find him, which contributes to her stress. By the third day, Nader returns home with his daughter after school to a distressing scene: his father lies unconscious on the floor, restrained with cloths around his hands, indicating that Razieh had tied him to bed in order to prevent movement. Nader, frantically attempting to revive his father, becomes enraged when Razieh arrives and reproaches her for leaving him unattended. She offers only a vague explanation about having another task to complete, but her response fails to satisfy him.

⁶ The term *Najes* («نجس») is employed within Islamic jurisprudence to refer to entities regarded as impure or unclean under Islamic law.

Additionally, when Nader finds that an amount of money equivalent to Razieh's salary is missing from the drawer, he accuses her of theft.

As Aristotle believed, the events and plot are the primary focus of a tragedy (1966: 1450a.21-23). In this critical moment, Razieh desperately defends her integrity, but Nader, overwhelmed by his father's condition and blinded by anger, forcefully expels her from the house. His reaction stems from his «suspicion in a state of anger» (Shokrollahpour *et al.*, 2022: 238). This incident marks the peak of the conflict. Much like Oedipus, Nader's fury clouds his judgment, leading him to make severe accusations without proper investigation. After Razieh departs, Nader assists his father in the bathroom. While washing him, he breaks down in tears, exposing his profound remorse and compassion following the outburst of his uncontrolled anger (00:45:29).

In discussing the concept of a tragic hero in *Poetics*, Aristotle notes that, despite his prosperity, this hero is not inherently just. But it is not through badness or misdemeanor on his part, but through a mistake or an error in judgment that misfortune befalls him:

ἔστι δὲ τοιοῦτος ὁ μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνῃ μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλων εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά, τῶν ἐν μεγάλῃ δόξῃ ὄντων καὶ εὐτυχία, οἷον Οἰδίπους καὶ Θυέστης καὶ οἱ ἐκ τῶν τοιοῦτων γενῶν ἐπιφανεῖς ἄνδρες (1966: 1453a.7-10).

This is the sort of man who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his own that he falls into the fortune, but rather through some flaw in him, he being one of those who are in high station and good fortune, like Oedipus and Thyestes and the famous men of such families as those (1932: 1453a.7-10).

Nader's tragic arc parallels the tragic flaws depicted in Greek tragedy, particularly in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Both narratives illustrate how deeply ingrained character flaws and misjudgments can lead to a dramatic downfall, despite their distinct contexts and resolutions. In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus's downfall is propelled by his inability to control his anger and flawed judgement. Similarly, in Farhadi's *A Separation*, Nader's downfall is precipitated by haste, misunderstanding, and lack of communication. The missing money from the drawer had been taken by his wife, Simin, to pay for the workers who moved her piano, but neither she nor their daughter informed him, and Nader himself failed to ask Simin about it before passing judgment (00:09:06).⁷ This oversight leads him to accuse

⁷ In *A Separation*, in general, Termeh's voice remains largely «silent». She is depicted as an obedient and compliant child, one who seeks to please others

Razieh, the housekeeper, of theft. Had Simin communicated this to Nader, or had Nader set aside his pride to ask Simin, Razieh would not have been falsely accused. She would not have felt compelled to return to the house to prove her innocence, nor would she have been forced out by Nader and subsequently fallen down the stairs. Similarly, Oedipus's ignorance of his identity and real origins leads him to unknowingly kill his father, Laius, and marry his mother, Jocasta, thereby fulfilling Apollo's prophecy and turning fate into «his personal destiny» (Dilman, 1999: 24). This illustrates how ignorance propels both characters toward their tragic fates.

Both characters, despite their ignorance and the forces of fate, are driven by anger and impulsivity. In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus is portrayed as «a man of uncontrollable temper» (Harris, 2001: 172), whose anger frequently blinds his judgment and impairs rational thinking (Stauffer, 2005: 117).⁸ Creon highlights this flaw in Oedipus, saying:

στυγνὸς μὲν εἰκὼν δῆλος εἶ, βαρὺς δ', ὅταν
 θυμοῦ περάσης: αἱ δὲ τοιαῦται φύσεις
 αὐταῖς δικαίως εἰσὶν ἄλγισται φέρειν.

Thou art as sullen in thy yielding mood
 As in thine anger thou wast truculent.
 Such tempers justly plague themselves the most (673-675).

In *A Separation*, Nader initially appears as a calm and composed individual, but his anger and distress over the situation lead him to act recklessly. When he confronts Razieh, the dialogue becomes rapid and heated, reminiscent of the intense exchanges between Oedipus and Tiresias, in which the former accuses the latter of treachery (330-331; see also Rabinowitz, 2008: 169). This intensity mirrors the way characters in *Oedipus the King* often interact «in an often abrasive manner» (Hochman, 1984: 256; see also Freidenberg, 1997: 297). This use of fast-paced, terse dialogue is a dramatic technique known as stichomythia. In stichomythia, the pace of the dialogue quickens, and the lines become shorter, heightening the emotional intensity and

and refrains from drawing attention to herself (Yanof, 2020: 174). Notably, Termeh observes her mother taking money from the drawer, yet she does not disclose this information to her father at any point in the narrative, even when he inquires about the money or accuses Razieh of theft.

⁸ Swift argues that Oedipus' downfall is influenced by both his quick temper and his intelligence. While his anger contributes to his killing of his father, it is his intelligence that helps him defeat the Sphinx and marry his mother. Therefore, his tragic mistake can be seen as one of ignorance about his true parentage, rather than purely a character flaw (2016: 41).

emphasizing the characters' conflict and confrontation. As we can see, this technique has been carefully adapted by Farhadi in the context of his film.

According to Aristotle, the most potent means of emotional impact in tragedy are components of the plot, particularly reversals (*peripeteia*) and recognitions (*anagnorisis*) (1966: 1450a, 32-34). Oedipus's transition from ignorance to knowledge, and from prosperity to adversity, exemplifies the dramatic reversals and recognitions that Aristotle considers inherent in tragedy (1451b.39-1452a.2). Recognition is also crucial yet agonizing in Sophocles' tragedy, where Oedipus blinds himself upon discovering his identity (Rabinowitz, 2008: 14). In *A Separation*, these two elements are evident when, after a series of arguments, Nader forcefully pushes Razieh out of the house, seemingly causing her miscarriage. This moment represents the reversal, and his tears afterward testify to his recognition. Both Oedipus and Nader initially refuse to acknowledge their culpability, driven by their pride (*hybris*). Just as Oedipus stubbornly seeks more evidence rather than accepting the truth, Nader also resists facing the consequences of his actions. As Oedipus declares:

ὅποῖα χρήζει ῥηγνύτω: τοῦμόν δ' ἐγώ,
 κεῖ σμικρόν ἐστι, σπέρμ' ἰδεῖν βουλήσομαι.
 αὕτη δ' ἴσως, φρονεῖ γάρ ὥς γυνή μέγα,
 τὴν δυσγένειαν τὴν ἐμὴν αἰσχύνεται.

Let the storm burst, my fixed resolve still holds.
 To learn my lineage, be it ne'er so low.
 It may be she with all a woman's pride
 Thinks scorn of my base parentage (1076-1079).

Oedipus's *hybris* drives his relentless pursuit of truth and justice, blinding him to the evidence of his own guilt. His narrow perspective and «erratic perceptions» (Oates and O'Neill, 1938: 366) cause him to focus on only one thing at a time, often to his own disadvantage. His downfall is marked by a dramatic and public reversal of fortune, culminating in his self-inflicted blindness and exile.

Nader defensively lies in court about his knowledge of Razieh's pregnancy and persists in his pursuit of the truth to prove his innocence. As Hasanpour *et al.* observe, in *A Separation*, lies are deliberate, calculated, closely tied to personal gain, and have the power to deceive even the law itself (2021: 79). However, the director also explores the intricate thoughts and emotions that compel the characters «to lie and deceive» (Rad, 2022: 164). Nader explains that he lied because he was worried about what would happen to his daughter if he were sent to prison (01:33:30). Simin urges Nader to

accept responsibility, pay to Razieh's husband,⁹ and close the case, but Nader refuses. This leads him to a series of arguments with Simin, who tries to protect him, while he, out of «stubbornness», refuses her help or to accept guilt, which «paradoxically comes at a cost» as «the more he persists, the farther he recedes from a solution» (Abedinifard, 2019: 121). This refusal to accept responsibility for their own fault until the end of both works underscores the tragic flaws of the characters and contributes to their ultimate downfall. Nader's story in *A Separation* is a more intimate and domestic tragedy. Unlike Oedipus's grandiose public collapse, Nader's tragedy unfolds within the confines of his family life, revealing the profound effects of personal flaws on domestic harmony.

As the film progresses, we witness a significant downturn in Nader's life. Initially, his actions suggest a compassionate and empathetic individual. Upon learning of Razieh's accident, he rushes to the hospital, genuinely offering his help and support (00:48:57). This initial response showcases his inherent decency and concern for others. However, when confronted with the legal implications of Razieh's situation, Nader's character begins to show signs of internal conflict. In court, he files a complaint alleging that Razieh's negligence led to his father's physical deterioration. Yet, in a surprising turn, he later withdraws the complaint, admitting that he is unsure whether his father's worsening was indeed caused by Razieh's actions (01:23:42). These moments demonstrate Nader's complexity: while he seeks justice, he is also unwilling to accuse another person without certainty. Nader's contradictory behavior becomes even more apparent during the court's deliberation over imprisoning Razieh's husband for his aggressive behavior. Despite his own grievances, Nader intervenes, requesting leniency and forgiveness on behalf of Razieh's husband (01:13:30). This act of mercy contrasts sharply with his growing bitterness and anger as the story unfolds.

As the narrative advances, the once kind, happy, and caring Nader transforms. His interactions with Simin become increasingly hostile, as he blames her for the troubles that have befallen them, arguing that had she not left or introduced Razieh as the caretaker, none of that would have happened (01:28:48). Unlike Oedipus, whose fate was

⁹ Simin privately negotiates a settlement with Hojjat, Razieh's husband, in an effort to resolve the case. Intriguingly, the film thoughtfully mirrors the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy, which seeks to protect both the king and the city. In the film, a group of people close to Hojjat acts as a tragic chorus, persuading him to accept Simin's offer and settle the dispute. Like a chorus in a Greek tragedy, they aim to diffuse the tension and secure forgiveness for the main character (01:39:52).

significantly shaped by destiny,¹⁰ Nader's actions are more driven by external pressures. The change in behavior parallels the increasing pressure and emotional stress he is experiencing, a stress which causes him to lash out at the people closest to him. Nader's moral degradation is further illustrated by his decision to lie to both the court and his daughter about his knowledge of Razieh's pregnancy. This lie is crucial, as admitting that he knew about her condition could lead to him being charged with the murder of the unborn child, potentially resulting in imprisonment and significant financial penalties. The prospect of these consequences propels Nader into a state of desperation, where he prioritizes self-preservation over decency, truth and justice. His transformation throughout the film, from a caring and just man to one who lies and fights to protect himself, illustrates the profound impact of external pressures and personal crises on one's character. As such, we witness the fall of a tragic hero.

4. EXPLORING THE HERO'S QUEST FOR TRUTH

As the narrative unfolds, Nader becomes progressively overwhelmed by the situation, with his patience deteriorating as his aggressiveness intensifies. His insistence on proving his innocence to his daughter reflects a deep-seated fear of losing his dignity, another theme reminiscent of Arthur Miller's tragic heroes, who grapple with the same existential dread. This desire to preserve one's dignity, even in the face of overwhelming odds, mirrors Miller's assertion that the tragic feeling arises when a character is willing to sacrifice everything to secure their personal sense of honor:

As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing –his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his «rightful» position in his society (Miller, 1949: par 4).

In a manner similar to Oedipus, Nader embarks on a quest for truth, determined as he is to uncover the reality behind Razieh's actions. He learns from Razieh's young girl that, on the day of her absence, Razieh had visited a doctor. This consultation raises the possibility that there may have been an underlying issue prior to the incident for which Nader is being blamed. This revelation ignites Nader's suspicion that Razieh and her family might be concealing

¹⁰ *Oedipus the King* is often described as «a tragedy of Fate», where the characters find themselves trapped in an inescapable web of circumstances, struggling in vain to liberate themselves (Oates and O'Neill, 1938: 366).

crucial information to extort money from him. He then embarks on a journey to uncover the truth, such as following Termeh's teacher, who had provided Razieh with the doctor's phone number. Nader's refusal to pay the compensation, rooted in his belief that it has not been conclusively proven that he caused the death of Razieh's baby, reflects his internal struggle and pride to accept guilt.

The parallels between Nader and Oedipus are striking in their exploration of truth. Like Oedipus, who is driven by an unyielding desire to uncover the truth about his own origins, Nader is compelled to investigate the circumstances surrounding Razieh's accident. Both characters are driven by a quest for knowledge that ultimately leads to their downfall. They are eager to uncover the truth, yet they also resist it, finding it maddening and contrary to their understanding of reality.¹¹ Oedipus's tragic flaw lies in his personal *hybris* and determination to defy fate, while Nader's lies and moral compromises are also rooted in a desperate bid to maintain his dignity and protect his family. In both cases, the pursuit of truth reveals uncomfortable realities that shatter the protagonists' lives, forcing them to confront their own culpability. The tragedy of Nader, much like that of Oedipus, does not just lie in the actions he takes, but in the inevitable consequences that follow, which reveals the complex interplay between fate and free will.

5. UTILIZING DRAMATIC IRONY

Dramatic irony is a powerful narrative device that underpins much of the tension and tragedy in both Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation*. In both works, the audience is privy to critical information that the protagonists either overlook or misunderstand, creating a profound sense of inevitability and helplessness as the characters navigate their fates. In *Oedipus the King*, the dramatic irony is foundational to the play's structure. From the outset, the audience is aware of the prophecy that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother. The characters in the play, including Oedipus, are also aware of this prophecy, yet they fail to recognize how it has already come to pass. The irony intensifies as he fervently seeks the truth about the murderer of the former king, unaware that he is the culprit. The audience, fully aware of the truth, watches in suspense as Oedipus gradually uncovers the horrifying reality of his own identity and his unwitting crimes. This dramatic irony heightens the tragic tension in the play (see Oates and O'Neill, 1938: 365).

In *A Separation*, dramatic irony operates in a more subdued yet equally impactful manner. The audience is given pieces of information

¹¹ On Oedipus's pursuit of truth, see Versényi (1962), Yuehua (2006: 46-47), Bloom (2007: 4), Zachrisson (2013) and Ward (2017).

that the characters either do not know or fail to fully comprehend, creating a complex web of misunderstandings and hidden truths. The film's «puzzle-like structure» requires viewers to actively remember previous scenes to understand the narrative and uncover its hidden mysteries, which are not always directly explained (La Caze, 2025). From the beginning, we know that Razieh, the caregiver hired by Nader, has certain constraints —her religious convictions, her pregnancy, and her precarious financial situation. We see her struggle on the second day of her employment when she finds Nader's father wandering the streets and, in her desperation, ties him to bed the next day to prevent him from harming himself. This act sets off a chain of events that leads to her miscarriage, an incident for which Nader is later accused. The audience, unlike the characters, has a broader view of these events. We are informed that Razieh consulted a doctor, indicating that her miscarriage might not have been caused by her altercation with Nader, but rather by the accident she had when she went out to retrieve his father, but we cannot be sure until the end of the story. This knowledge, however, creates a dramatic irony, as we watch Nader grapple with his guilt and responsibility, unaware of the full truth. The tension escalates when he agrees to pay Razieh's family a settlement, but only on the condition that Razieh swears on the Quran that he was the cause of her miscarriage. Razieh's refusal to swear, driven by her moral and religious convictions, unravels the truth, but by this point the audience, aware of the complexities and the ultimate truth, is left to witness the inevitable collapse of these characters' worlds.

The two works highlight striking contrasts: while *Oedipus the King* is deeply intertwined with the inevitability of fate and the will of the gods, *A Separation* is rooted in the moral and ethical complexities of modern life. Farhadi's film does not evoke the grand, cosmic scale of tragedy found in Sophocles' play; instead, it presents a contemporary, personal tragedy where the characters' choices and misunderstandings have profound consequences; their actions are always «compelled by their circumstances» (Rad, 2022: 164). The dramatic irony in *A Separation* centers less on destiny and more on the human struggle to communicate, understand, and empathize with one another amid a web of social, religious, and personal pressures.

6. APPROACHING THE FINAL CATHARSIS

The concept of catharsis is central to Aristotle's definition of tragedy. A «properly structured tragedy» is designed to «provide relief» (Habib, 2011: 19) and evoke feelings of pity and fear in the audience, leading to a catharsis (cleansing) of these emotions:

ἔστιν οὖν τραγῳδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἔχουσης, ἡδυσμένῃ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν (1966: 1449b.VI.24-30).

Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action¹² that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude—by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions (1932: 1449b. VI. 24-30).

In *Oedipus the King*, the audience experiences deep pity for Oedipus as he confronts the devastating truth of his involvement in the crime. At the same time, fear arises from the play's exploration of fate and the inescapable power of the gods' will. The emotional intensity of Oedipus's downfall creates a powerful cathartic effect. Similarly, *A Separation*, as a modern tragedy, evokes a profound sense of catharsis, stirring deep emotions of pity and fear within the audience, much like its Greek counterpart. The Iranian narrative draws a clear parallel to Oedipus, who, despite his best efforts, could not escape his destined downfall. The forces at play were beyond his control, serving as a tragic reminder of the limitations of human agency against the inexorable will of fate.

In *A Separation*, the characters are ensnared by their own flaws and the misunderstandings that stem from a lack of communication. Nader's unchecked fury, fueled by assumptions and prejudgment, propels the conflict forward. Had Simin informed Nader that she had taken the money from the drawer, had Razieh disclosed her accident on the second day, or had Nader managed to restrain his anger, the tragic outcome might have been avoided. Simin withheld the truth about the money because she was upset with Nader and failed to recognize the significance of sharing that detail. Razieh, on the other hand, remained silent about the accident out of fear that she would be fired for neglecting the old man.

In the final scene, Nader and Simin find themselves in court once more, this time accompanied by their daughter, signifying their definitive decision to divorce. The film, therefore, begins at a crucial moment and concludes at another critical point (Dancyger, *et al.*, 2023). It ends with the couple agreeing to part ways, leaving their child in the agonizing position of choosing between her father and her

¹² In discussing the concept of action derived from the Greek term *praxis*, Habib notes that Aristotle refers not just to an individual action, but to a complete sequence of actions and events that encompasses both the deeds of the protagonist and what befalls them (2011: 19).

mother (Moosavi, 2017: 83)¹³, while the audience remains unaware of the girl's final decision. This resolution irrevocably alters their lives, drawing a parallel to the tragic fate of Oedipus, who, upon confronting an unbearable truth, loses his wife and blinds himself. This modern tragedy, much like its Greek counterparts, evokes a powerful catharsis. The audience is left with a profound sense of pity for the characters, coupled with a deep-seated fear that such a devastating fate could befall anyone¹⁴. As Abrams and Harpham observe, the tragedy «moves us to pity» because we know that the protagonist is not a malevolent person, and his suffering seems disproportionate to his actions. At the same time, we are also struck by fear because we see the potential for similar mistakes in our own imperfect and vulnerable selves (2015: 406). *A Separation* clearly elicits catharsis in the audience.

7. CONCLUSION

In the present study, we argue that Nader's character in *A Separation* can be likened to that of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. In both works, the central tragic heroes dominate the narrative. Both characters are portrayed as figures of integrity and dedication, driven by a strong sense of duty. Their downfalls are brought about by their rash anger and flawed judgment. Each hero relentlessly pursues truth and justice, and, when faced with harsh realities, they are reluctant to take responsibility, except when at the last moment they are forced by evidence. Both works illustrate how the quest for personal integrity can lead to tragic consequences when confronted with inescapable circumstances. Dramatic irony and stichomythia are powerful techniques used in both stories. By the end, the audience is left with pity for the hero's fate and a fear that similar circumstances could befall them. Consequently, without re-staging the plot of the Greek tragedy, Farhadi's *A Separation* serves as a modern reinterpretation of *Oedipus the King*, transforming the public downfall of a king into the private collapse of an ordinary man within a more intimate setting.

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¹³ Lykidis argues that the children in *A Separation* find themselves entangled in the consequences of adult misconduct (2020: 157). Termeh's tears in the final scene confirm this.

¹⁴ The audience is concerned not only about Nader's fate, who caused this situation out of anger, but also about Termeh, who had to make a very painful decision by the end of the play. See Rabiger and Hurbis-Cherrier (2012: 130).

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