# *The Salesman* (فروشنده, *Forushandeh*, 2016)

*Pedram Partovi*

*dir. Asghar Farhadi; prod. Asghar Farhadi, Alexandre Mallet-Guy, Olivier Père; screenplay Asghar Farhadi; photography Hossein Jafarian; music Sattar Oraki. 35mm, color, 125 mins. ARTE, Farhadi Film Production et al., distrib. Memento Films, Filmiran.*


Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Iranian filmmakers have long engaged with melodramatic modes. However, melodrama's historical imprint on Iranian cinema was, until recently, one that most foreign viewers were unaware of and that many Iranian critics and scholars had ignored or derided. The writer-director Asghar Farhadi's critical and commercial success across the globe over the past decade has forced a scholarly reckoning with an Iranian strain of melodrama, one that can be traced back to the domestic industry's beginnings (Dadar). Although Western reviewers have highlighted Farhadi's links to Euro-American theatrical and cinematic traditions (Bradshaw 2012), Iranian fans may appreciate his narrative and stylistic choices for their creative debt to homegrown melodramas. His 2016 Persian-language feature, *Forushandeh*, which was briefly the all-time domestic box office hit and won Farhadi a second Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film—perhaps best reveals Farhadi's unique and complex entanglements with melodrama that have made him at once an international *auteur* and a local crowd pleaser.

Before Farhadi, cineastes both in Iran and abroad privileged the mainly post-revolutionary, neorealist »New Iranian Cinema« (Tapper) in their definitions of ›national‹ cinema. However, commentators now seeking to explain Farhadi's oeuvre increasingly recognize the neorealist wave as both aesthetically and politically important but as a minor part of Iran's historical output, which had been dominated by different melodramatic genres before and after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (Hassannia). The commercial film industry that emerged after World War II, and which collapsed in the late 1970s, came to specialize in what I have called »contemporary social melodrama« (Partovi 4). Such features depicting family and class conflict in a society undergoing massive change immediately raised the hackles of critics who claimed that they

were nothing more than third-rate copies of other, especially Hollywood, productions, and appealing only to the most culturally ›backward‹ audiences. From the early 1950s, newspaper and magazine reviews referred to the industry's products collectively by the moniker *fīlmfārsī*, or »Persian film,« to ironically highlight their ›foreignness‹ by drawing attention to their one seeming concession to the home culture: the use of Persian dialogue. Yet, press dismissals did not necessarily keep more ›discerning‹ or upwardly mobile audiences from attending *fīlmfārsī* screenings, even if only as a ›guilty pleasure.‹ In fact, pre-1979 melodramas and their stars have continued to resonate with Iranians today via home video, satellite television broadcasts, and a flurry of newer productions paying homage to ›classic‹ titles and narrative themes.

Despite the intellectual elites' critique of *fīlmfārsī* as escapist and reactionary, its lasting significance can be attributed to its overarching concern with ›modern‹ realities, which, according to Miriam Hansen, has characterized the film-attending masses' experience of (Hollywood inspired) melodrama in the non-Western world. Specifically, pre-revolutionary melodramas dealt with the moral and material consequences of ›modernization,‹ a process promoting in much of the ›Third World‹ the universalizing Western social ideal of the rational and acquisitive individual who is engaged in a companionate marriage, one that would serve as the foundation for the nuclear family. While the protagonists who butted up against this ›individualist‹ model of society invariably hailed from the under- or uneducated urban working class, thus supporting claims about *fīlmfārsī*'s ›unsophisticated‹ viewers of similar backgrounds, it was middle class characters (and filmgoers) who most acutely felt the threats to ›traditional‹ social structures identified in these films. In fact, the rise of a modern educated middle class in Iran during the 20th century has seemingly coincided with the democratization of formerly aristocratic conceptions of controlled (female) sexuality (*ʿezzat*) and family honor (*namus*). *Fīlmfārsī* titles often endorsed ›traditionalist‹ bourgeois interests, alongside the more ›desirable‹ aspects of the Shah-era modernist project, by depicting the protagonist's willingness to sacrifice himself or his personal happiness to protect ›honorable‹ women and the ›inviolable‹ bonds of family and friends from morally dissolute and superficially Westernized middle class antagonists.

Interestingly, Western critics have praised Farhadi's catalog for its focus on »the everyday moral and relational problems of the urban middle-class family« (Rugo 15). Eschewing what Nicholas Barber has called the »medieval« subject matter of previous Iranian film exports, Farhadi's familiar ›modern‹ characters and situations have instead invited favorable comparisons to the best traditions of European and American melodrama (Rugo 3). Emad (played by Shahab Hosseini) and Rana (played by Taraneh Alidoosti), the young bohemian Tehrani couple featured in *Forushandeh*, epitomize the filmmaker's ability to create characters that especially Western audiences may claim as kindred spirits, rather than exotic ›others.‹ The opening scenes seem to place special emphasis on their non-conformity with the ›anti-Western‹ Islamic Republic's social and moral order. The *mise-en-scène* immediately paints them as hip, cosmopolitan types, at home in any ›modern‹ city. Emad, in his day job teaching high school literature, also exhibits his free-spirited (even politically dangerous) bent by bringing in banned books and films for his young students to study. In the evenings, he and Rana pad their ›counter-cultural‹ credentials by performing onstage, shown in the film as playing Willy and Linda Loman in a Persian-language production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Miller's exploration in the play of below-the-surface domestic

tensions comes to mirror the couple's own off-stage dramas, whose raw emotions predictably leach into their on-stage performances (Wiegand). Initially, however, viewers only see Emad and Rana's modern bourgeois exterior. Rana's close relationships with male troupe members may lead viewers to assume her liberation from ›antiquated‹ notions of female chastity, while Emad's own non-patriarchal views are seemingly on display in his lack of concern about these friendships. Farhadi calls further attention to their 21st century companionate relationship by focusing almost exclusively on them, with the presence of other family members conspicuously absent. However, just as quickly, the film upends this image of progress towards the ›individualist‹ social model when Rana becomes the victim of a brutal assault, which in turn reveals Emad's darker side.

Late one night, Rana mistakenly buzzes open the apartment building to her attacker, assuming he is Emad returning from the theater. The next time Emad sees his wife, it is in the hospital where she is receiving treatment after neighbors had found her bloodied and unconscious on the shower floor. What exactly happened that night remains a mystery, but Rana's traumatized silence and the speculations of friends and neighbors fuel Emad's rage and set him on a single-minded pursuit of the man whom he believes to have violated his *namus*. The film's climax presents an unhinged Emad detaining his wife's attacker, a pathetic old street peddler very much an Iranian equivalent to the figure of Willy Loman. The salesman admits that he had mistakenly entered their apartment expecting to find the former tenant, a prostitute who received her clients there, and the still-unknown events that followed were the result of blind panic. Emad nevertheless seeks to exact revenge by revealing the salesman's infidelities to his family. When Emad rejects Rana's pleas to release her attacker, she walks out in disgust. Shortly thereafter, the salesman suffers what appears to be a heart attack, with viewers left to wonder if he survives. The final scene depicts the couple, silent and emotionless, preparing once more to take the stage.

Western press reviews prominently noted Farhadi's flair for taut psychological drama, again claiming links to Euro-American ›masters‹ of that genre (Hornaday), but also puzzled over the narrative focus on Emad's »irrational shame at what the neighbours will say« (Bradshaw 2017) rather than on his wife's reaction to the attack. According to Peter Bradshaw, the protagonist's actions reflect the narrative theme of »middle-class hypocrisy in Iranian life« so characteristic of Farhadi's work, with Emad's ›enlightened‹ mask slipping away to instead reveal an aggressive and irrational masculinity. His »morally conceited view of himself« is ultimately punished, with Rana's rejection of Emad validating such critical interpretations of the film. However, if Farhadi's work also engages, even critically, with an indigenous tradition of popular melodrama (Dadar 224), then Iranian audiences familiar with its narrative tropes—specifically the genre's preoccupation with modernization's moral pitfalls—may well expect Emad's central role in the drama, or may even interpret his actions as righteous precisely because of his acute awareness of their potential negative consequences. Farhadi's spin on *fīlmfārsī* would appear to be the de-mystification and de-allegorization of its social and moral dilemmas by doing away with the outward conflict between the self-abnegating lumpen hero and the self-absorbed Westernized villain, instead fusing these two aspects in one character, Emad. As a ›survival‹ of earlier melodramatic motifs, Emad's ›dual‹ role also puts a different spin on Bradshaw's claim that Farhadi is shining light on bourgeois hypocrisy, since it presupposes a necessary concordance between outward

appearances and inner convictions. Bradshaw explains away Emad's moral inconsistencies by viewing his actions for family honor to be rooted in irrational impulses, thus allowing for the individualist values that he and Rana supposedly represent to go largely unquestioned. However, from a middle class Iranian viewpoint, the appurtenances of modern life, cosmopolitan cultural interests, and even violations of societal norms or political taboos under ›close-minded‹ clerical rule, may not by themselves be signs of a character's full embrace of hegemonic Western modes of thought and behavior. Yet, neither are they signs of a wholesale rejection of ›traditionalism.‹ Iranian fans of melodrama then and now would likely make different moral judgments about Emad's actions than would Western critics—emphasizing instead his conscious and situational deployment of ›global‹ Western values and locally hegemonic traditionalist ones, rather than his faithlessness to either. In fact, the character's ability to navigate between these different value systems may itself be a sign of his ›worldliness‹ and class bona fides for many Iranian filmgoers.

Farhadi may well be channeling Western melodramatic traditions in his work, but he is also interrogating issues—especially »the transition to modernity« (Rugo 9)—that have long characterized Iranian melodrama. His ability to operate between and above these related, yet different, genre conventions in a double-voiced melodramatic discourse of his own seemingly explains his rare popularity with both international and domestic audiences.

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