



## A Separation: Ambiguous Loss and Family Breakdown on Social Work Perspective

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the concept of ambiguous loss through the lens of Asghar Farhadi's film A Separation (2011), highlighting its implications for families and contemporary social work practice. The narrative of Nader and Simin, caught between caregiving responsibilities, marital breakdown, and intergenerational conflict, provides a vivid case study of how dementia, separation, and poverty generate unresolved grief and loyalty conflicts within families. Using close reading informed by Pauline Boss's framework and family systems thinking, the discussion is organized into four themes: (1) Simin and Nader's eroding marital empathy, where migration hopes collide with filial duty; (2) Razieh's family under moral and economic strain, showing how religious conscience and poverty complicate caregiving and truth-telling; (3) Nader's duty, love, and moral compromise, including his role as caregiver and the ethics of lying under pressure; and (4) the children's burden, tracing loyalty conflicts, parentification, and early moral injury (especially for Termeh). The analysis argues that the grandfather's Alzheimer's functions as the film's invisible axis, generating secondary losses trust, role clarity, and childhood across both families. The chapter concludes with implications for family social work practice: naming ambiguous loss, protecting children from parentification, offering narrative repair, stabilizing routines and supports, and pairing emotional care with material aid in contexts of poverty. By bringing cinema and social work into dialogue, this study argues that films like A Separation not only depict human suffering but also provide valuable insights for developing more responsive, family-centered interventions.*

**Keywords:** *Ambiguous Loss, Family Conflict, Grief and Bereavement, Dementia Care, Child and Adolescent Trauma, Parentification, Iranian Cinema.*

### Introduction

Ambiguity is the essence of loss; it freezes the grief process and paralyzes family functioning.” — Pauline Boss

Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation* (2011) is one of the most acclaimed films in contemporary world cinema, winning the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and numerous international awards (Scott, 2012). Farhadi is celebrated for his ability to portray the subtle tensions of everyday Iranian life while also resonating with global audiences (Naficy, 2012). His films, including *About Elly* (2009), *Fireworks Wednesday* (2006), and *Beautiful City* (2004), consistently explore family dynamics, moral ambiguity, and the weight of unspoken emotions (Tapper, 2014). Yet, what sets *A Separation* apart is how an apparently private family struggle unfolds into a complex narrative of truth, duty, and human frailty.

At the heart of the film is Nader's elderly father, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. Though he rarely speaks, his presence silently drives the story. Simin wishes to emigrate to secure a better future for their daughter, Termeh, but Nader refuses to leave his father behind. This conflict, coupled with the hiring of Razieh as a caregiver, triggers a cascade of events marital separation, legal disputes, and emotional upheavals that ultimately fracture the family (Shafik, 2016). On the surface, the film revolves around ethical dilemmas and clashing values. But beneath this lies a deeper psychological truth: the unresolved pain of ambiguous loss.

Ambiguous loss, a concept developed by Pauline Boss, refers to a unique kind of grief in which the person is caught between presence and absence (Boss, 1999, 2006). Boss identifies two types: one where a loved one is physically absent but psychologically present (as in missing persons), and another where the loved one is physically present but psychologically absent (as in dementia or addiction). Nader's father represents the second type. He is there in body but absent in mind, and this "in-between" state destabilizes the family. Each character—Nader, Simin, Razieh, and especially the children carries the burden of this unresolved loss in different ways (Boss, 2010). This chapter will use *A Separation* as a case study to illustrate how ambiguous loss reverberates through family systems, shaping conflict, caregiving, and the hidden grief that accompanies fractured bonds.

This film reflects Farhadi's distinct style, his attention to ordinary details, his refusal to reduce characters to heroes or villains, and his exploration of the gray spaces between duty, desire, and truth (Naficy, 2012). While much of the existing scholarship on *A Separation* has focused on its legal dilemmas, gender roles, and cultural tensions (Hamid, 2013; Motlagh, 2015), this chapter approaches the film through a different lens: the psychology of ambiguous loss. By situating *A Separation* within the framework of ambiguous loss, this chapter argues that the father's illness is not a peripheral subplot but the invisible axis of the story. His condition is the unspoken reason Nader refuses to emigrate, anchoring him in Iran even at the cost of his marriage. For Simin, the father's presence represents a barrier to her vision of a better life abroad, intensifying her sense of entrapment and frustration. For Razieh, hired as a caregiver, the grandfather becomes both a religious dilemma and a reminder of her own unresolved grief. Even when absent from the screen, his condition silently shapes the ethical choices and moral contradictions of those around him (Shafik, 2016). Farhadi's film thus becomes more than a story of marital dissolution it is a study of how unresolved loss reverberates through family systems, producing grief, moral ambiguity, and fractured bonds that extend across generations.

Most profoundly, it is the children who inherit the weight of this unresolved loss. Termeh, caught between parents locked in irreconcilable positions, is forced into premature moral responsibility deciding not only where she will live but also whom she believes (Hamid, 2013). Likewise, Razieh's daughter witnesses' instability and hardship far beyond her years. The ambiguous loss of the grandfather thus ripples outward, creating secondary losses: the erosion of marital intimacy, the collapse of trust, and the burdening of children with adult conflicts (Boss, 2006).

Farhadi's film, then, is not simply about divorce, class, or truth in a courtroom. It is a cinematic study of how ambiguous loss reverberates across an entire family system. His father's Alzheimer's, his simultaneous presence and absence destabilizes each relationship, exposing the fragility of caregiving roles and the unequal distribution of emotional labor (Boss, 2010). By reading *A Separation* through this lens, the film becomes a profound illustration of how unresolved loss produces not only individual grief but also collective fracture, with consequences that extend across generations.

## Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual and interpretive approach, using *A Separation* (2011) as a cultural text to explore themes of ambiguous loss, family conflict, and moral complexity. Rather than conducting empirical research, the analysis applies Pauline Boss's framework of ambiguous loss, alongside psychosocial perspectives from family social work, to examine the film's narrative, dialogues, and character dynamics. The choice of *A Separation* is deliberate: its nuanced portrayal of caregiving, divorce, intergenerational ties, and the moral struggles of ordinary individuals provides a rich ground for understanding how loss is experienced beyond death, through absence, estrangement, and broken bonds. This interpretive analysis situates the film as a case example of how families navigate grief and resilience under conditions of uncertainty.

## Thematic Insights on Ambiguous Loss and Family Struggles in A Separation

The following sections present the core themes that emerged from the analysis. Rather than offering a linear narrative, the themes reflect the layered and often conflicting realities of family life portrayed in *A Separation*. Each theme draws on specific scenes and character experiences, illustrating how issues such as dementia, marital breakdown, gendered expectations, and moral dilemmas intersect with the broader concept of ambiguous loss. By organizing the discussion around these themes, the analysis not only highlights the lived complexities of the characters but also illuminates wider implications for understanding grief, resilience, and family dynamics within social work practice.

### Theme 1: Nader, Simin, and the father – Love, Empathy, and Ambiguous Loss

One of the most striking scenes in *A Separation* occurs when Simin, frustrated by her husband's refusal to leave Iran, tells him that his father no longer remembers him. Nader responds quietly but firmly: "*But he is my father, and I know that.*" This exchange captures the emotional divide at the heart of their marriage. For Simin, the father's advanced Alzheimer's renders his presence almost meaningless; for Nader, his identity as a son and caregiver remains intact regardless of his father's memory loss. The contrast reveals not only a clash of priorities but also a profound empathy gap in their relationship.

From the perspective of Pauline Boss's theory of ambiguous loss, Nader's father represents a classic example of Type 1 ambiguous loss a person who is physically present but psychologically absent. The father's presence anchors Nader in

responsibility and emotional loyalty, but at the same time, it destabilizes the family unit by trapping them in a state of liminality: neither fully connected nor fully free to move on. Simin's inability to empathize with Nader's devotion shows how ambiguous loss affects not just the immediate caregiver but also the wider family system, creating tensions around love, duty, and freedom.

Beyond the father's illness, the film also reveals the deeper emotional distance between Nader and Simin. Their conversations are often transactional, focused on logistics and disagreements rather than tenderness or intimacy. While Nader's interactions with his father are filled with patience, gentleness, and an almost sacred sense of duty, his exchanges with Simin feel cold and restrained. This imbalance makes it appear as though Nader reserves his deepest love and loyalty for his father rather than for his wife. Simin, in turn, interprets this as neglect not only of her needs but also of their daughter's future. The absence of chemistry between the couple illustrates how ambiguous loss can redirect emotional energy away from the marital bond and toward caregiving, leaving spouses feeling alienated and undervalued.

For social work, this scene underscores the challenges of caregiver stress and marital strain in families dealing with chronic illness. Spouses may experience differing levels of emotional attachment, leading to conflict, isolation, or even separation, as in the film. Social workers working with such families need to recognize the multiple realities within caregiving—where one partner prioritizes the ill parent, while the other prioritizes the future of the nuclear family. Interventions in such contexts should not only support the primary caregiver but also address the relational fractures that emerge when empathy fails between partners. By acknowledging ambiguous loss as a shared family experience, practitioners can help families negotiate responsibility, preserve marital bonds, and avoid further fragmentation.

## Theme 2: Faith, Caregiving, and the Fragile Bonds of Family

Razieh's character embodies the everyday struggles of working-class women in Iran, where religious beliefs, caregiving duties, and economic pressures constantly collide. Early on, she hesitates to clean Nader's father after he soils himself, telephoning a cleric to seek religious guidance. This act highlights her moral and spiritual conflict between her sense of duty as a caregiver and her obligation to religious purity codes.

Beyond faith, Razieh's position as both a wife and mother complicate her choices. In one scene, she ties Nader's father to the bed before stepping out, symbolizing how caregiving leaves her stretched thin and guilty, torn between protecting the old man, caring for her daughter, and safeguarding her own fragile household. Her relationship with her husband, Hodjat, although turbulent, is marked by a form of chemistry absent in Nader and Simin's marriage. Hodjat's debts and violent temper often erupt in frustration, yet his devotion to Razieh is evident. He is protective, even self-punishing—seen when he beats himself after realizing Nader may not have caused the miscarriage. In the courtroom, he bitterly asks the judge: *"Do you think we all beat our wives just because we are poor?"* His words reveal not only his anger but also his wounded pride, pushing against the stereotype that poverty equals cruelty.

Razieh's life is deeply anchored in religious belief and moral conscience, which often guides her decisions more than economic necessity. When she is first asked to care for Nader's father, she calls a cleric to ask whether it is religiously permissible for her to change the old man's soiled clothes. This moment captures her struggle to reconcile caregiving duties with religious codes of purity, showing how faith acts both as a support system and as a constraint. Similarly, toward the end of the film, despite her family's crushing poverty, Razieh refuses to accept financial compensation from Nader because she suspects it might be *"haram"* (religiously forbidden) money if tied to her miscarriage. These actions illustrate her inner moral compass, highlighting how, for Razieh, religion is not just ritual but a lived framework that defines right and wrong in situations of ambiguity. Farhadi positions her as a character whose integrity is preserved through faith, even while her material world collapses.

At the same time, Hodjat is depicted as a tender father, playfully interacting with his daughter even amid legal chaos, revealing the contradictory layers of love and strain within his family. The miscarriage itself is central to this ambiguity: although Nader is accused of causing it, the incident occurred when Razieh tried to save Nader's father on the road, linking the tragedy indirectly to her caregiving responsibilities. Farhadi avoids placing blame neatly on any one person, instead portraying a web of interdependence where everyone is both victim and agent of suffering.

For social work, Razieh's story demonstrates how poverty and caregiving responsibilities intersect with faith and gendered expectations. It underscores the importance of viewing families not through a binary of victim–perpetrator, but through the complex realities of love, sacrifice, stigma, and systemic vulnerability that shape their lives.

### Theme 3: Nader – Between Duty, Love, and Moral Dilemmas

Nader is perhaps the most complex character in *A Separation*, embodying the struggles of duty, love, and moral responsibility. His unwavering devotion to his father, who suffers from Alzheimer's, becomes both his strength and his burden. In many scenes, we see how carefully he tends to his father's needs feeding him, cleaning him, and fighting fiercely to keep him at home. There is a sense of helplessness that surrounds him, because his sacrifices raise a haunting question: will his father, lost in memory and recognition, ever know or acknowledge this love? This exposes the painful irony of caregiving love that may never be reciprocated in awareness, yet persists unconditionally.

At the same time, Nader's choices complicate his relationships with Simin and Termeh. His loyalty to his father seems to overshadow his capacity to nurture his marriage, suggesting that his emotional energy may be disproportionately invested in caregiving rather than spousal intimacy. Yet his role as a father to Termeh paints a more nuanced picture. Termeh often sides with him, even choosing to stay with him when Simin leaves, which indicates the warmth and trust she feels toward him. Nader might not be the most expressive father, but his moral orientation and protectiveness create a foundation of love that binds Termeh to him.

Nader's moral compass is central to the film's tension. His denial of knowing Razieh's pregnancy initially comes across as deceitful, but when Termeh confronts him, he reveals it as a survival strategy to protect both his father and daughter, since a guilty verdict would have put him in jail. This moment shows a man caught between honesty and survival, whose lies are motivated by responsibility rather than malice. Furthermore, when Nader suspects that his push might have caused Razieh's miscarriage, he is consumed with guilt, expressing a sincere belief that he deserves punishment if truly responsible. However, his integrity surfaces when he insists that Razieh swear on the Qur'an before he pays compensation a demand that reflects both his respect for truth and his reliance on religion as a moral safeguard. One of the rare moments where Nader's façade of strength crumbles is during the scene in which he bathes his father. Struggling with the weight of responsibility, he breaks down while gently caring for him, an act that strips away all defenses and reveals his profound helplessness. In this moment, the audience sees a man who is not only a dutiful son but also a human being overwhelmed by the enormity of love, duty, and loss. The raw emotion in this scene reflects how caregiving can be both an expression of unconditional love and a silent, crushing burden. It is the only time Nader truly allows himself to be vulnerable, suggesting that beneath his rigid sense of morality lies deep grief and unspoken exhaustion.

Thus, Nader stands as a man torn between multiple roles: a devoted son, a morally conscious individual, a conflicted husband, and a protective father. His character embodies the moral ambiguities of everyday life, where every choice to protect one relationship seems to damage another. Farhadi does not present him as a hero or a villain but as a man trapped in webs of love, duty, and guilt, reflecting the human struggle to balance competing loyalties.

### Theme 4: The Children — Innocence in the Midst of Chaos

In Farhadi's world, childhood isn't lost in one dramatic moment; it is shaved away by a thousand adult choices made under pressure. Seeing that clearly is the first step toward preventing it.

Children in *A Separation* are the clearest seismographs of family rupture. Developmentally, they are still wiring their sense of safety, trust, and right-wrong from the environment around them; traumatic stresses absorbed in childhood often reappear later as anxiety, vigilance, shame, and difficulties with intimacy. Farhadi makes this visible not with speeches but with small, devastating choices that children are forced to make.

At roughly eleven, Termeh stands at the hinge between childhood and adolescence, a period when identity and moral sense are forming. She loves both parents; to keep them both, she withholds truths from each—she doesn't tell Nader that Simin took the money, and she doesn't tell Simin that Nader knew about Razieh's pregnancy. These silences aren't manipulation; they're loyalty strategies. Termeh is doing "invisible child work," trying to hold the family together by carrying secrets that are heavier than she is. When Nader asks her to lie in court, the conflict becomes explicit: family loyalty versus her emerging moral self. The car scene afterward—Termeh crying as they drive away—registers moral injury-like distress: the felt sense that she has crossed her own line to protect the people she loves. Later, when she confronts her father, we glimpse the cost to their bond; Nader doesn't want to become a villain in his daughter's story, yet the request he made has already bent the trust between them. Termeh's world includes religious meaning, which deepens the aftershock of lying. The courtroom oath and the texture of everyday piety in her family mean that deception isn't just "wrong," it's spiritually disorienting. Adolescence is when beliefs are tested and internalized; being asked to lie at this threshold risks splitting her moral identity: the good daughter who protects her father versus the truthful self she wants to be.

In the final sequence, the judge asks Termeh to choose which parent she will live with. It is an ethically impossible question for a child. Being forced to decide assigns adult agency without adult power and can seed long-term patterns of decision paralysis, guilt, and ambivalence in close relationships. The film refuses catharsis; what lingers is the image of an eleven-year-old being drafted into a conflict she did not create. The smaller child in Razieh's family faces a different



but related burden: poverty, stigma, and instability. She watches her father rage and despair in court, shame flooding the room then sees the same man play with her tenderly, reminding us that love and volatility can coexist in the same parent. That oscillation breeds hypervigilance: children learn to scan adults for mood shifts to stay safe. Yet the tenderness matters; it's a protective factor that may buffer some harm even as financial stress and public humiliation leave marks.

The grandfather's ambiguity sets the machine in motion, but its sharpest edges cut the children. They lose not only an intact home, but also clarity, predictability, and the right to remain children. Termeh's "job" becomes managing her parents' truths; Razieh's daughter learns to navigate adult shame. These are secondary losses of trust, safety, and carefree play—that don't show up on a legal docket but shape future mental health and relationship patterns. Simin insists on a better future for Termeh; Nader insists on a son's duty to a father. Both are recognizably loving positions, yet together they mortgage Termeh's present. The bitter irony is that protective intentions create the very conditions (secrecy, divided loyalties, chronic uncertainty) that threaten a child's well-being. Farhadi refuses easy blame: the system of ambiguous loss makes everyone a little right and a little wrong, while the children pay the clearest price.

## Implications for Social Work Practice

### 1. Addressing Ambiguous Loss and grief in Families

Ambiguous loss, as highlighted in *A Separation*, requires practitioners to acknowledge the uncertainty and lack of closure that families experience. Social workers can help families name and validate ambiguous loss, since recognition itself often reduces confusion and guilt (Boss, 2006). For example, Nader's father embodies physical presence but psychological absence, while the family's disintegration around divorce represents psychological absence with physical presence. Both types destabilize family functioning. Interventions such as family therapy sessions that allow members to share their conflicting emotions without judgment can reduce emotional isolation (Paul & Grosch, 2011).

### 2. Supporting Children in Divorce and Illness Contexts

Children like Termeh in the film exemplify how loyalty conflicts, secrecy, and forced decision-making can shape future mental health. Practitioners must actively screen for these challenges and create safe spaces where children are protected from parentification ensuring they are never burdened with carrying secrets or forced to choose sides. Child-inclusive mediation, supported by a neutral advocate, can help balance the needs of parents while safeguarding the child's well-being. Social workers must advocate for child-centered approaches in family disputes, ensuring children are not used as mediators or messengers (Pedro-Carroll, 2005). Age-appropriate grief counseling, narrative therapy, and expressive arts techniques can help children externalize confusion and grief. Adolescents, in particular, may need guidance in reconciling their parents' choices with their own developing identities. At the same time, social workers can provide narrative repair by guiding children to make sense of their experiences in ways that reduce self-blame, reinforcing that "the adults' problems weren't theirs to fix." Stabilizing routines through consistent schooling, peer networks, and supportive mentors in community or faith contexts also helps counteract the chronic uncertainty that ambiguous loss produces.

### 3. Building Resilience in the Face of Intergenerational Trauma

The film demonstrates how illness, poverty, and marital breakdown create a cycle of unresolved grief across generations. Social workers can break this cycle by focusing on protective factors: strengthening extended kinship ties, encouraging spiritual/religious coping where meaningful, and creating safe spaces for children to process emotions. Resilience-building strategies like psychoeducation on grief, peer-support groups, and community-based resources have shown effectiveness in mitigating long-term psychological harm (Walsh, 2016).

### 4. Social Work with Families Experiencing Caregiver Burden

Caregiver stress, as seen in Nader's relentless responsibility for his father, often results in feelings of helplessness and role conflict. Social work practice can incorporate caregiver support groups, respite care advocacy, and stress management programs. Practitioners should normalize guilt and ambivalence among caregivers, while also guiding them toward balanced decision-making that does not sacrifice other family relationships. Recognizing ambiguous loss and loyalty conflicts is crucial in families navigating dementia, separation, or similar disruptions. Finally, for families like Razieh's, practice must extend beyond emotional care to material assistance, since poverty magnifies every stressor and undermines resilience.

### 5. Systemic and Ethical Practice

Finally, the film underscores the importance of structural interventions. Poverty, legal struggles, and limited institutional support magnify personal grief. Social workers must balance micro-level practice (family therapy, grief counseling) with macro advocacy for more accessible elder care, affordable mental health services, and child-sensitive divorce proceedings. Ethical practice also demands cultural humility, recognizing how religion, honor, and family duty shape decision-making in non-Western contexts.

## Conclusion

*A Separation* portrays how families grapple with loss, conflict, and unresolvable dilemmas when illness, separation, and social pressures intersect. The film demonstrates that grief is not always about death; it can emerge in the form of ambiguous loss, where loved ones are present yet inaccessible emotionally, physically, or cognitively. Children, in particular, remain vulnerable to loyalty conflicts, parentification, and identity struggles when drawn into adult disputes. For social work, this story underscores the urgent need for practices that acknowledge ambiguity, protect children from hidden burdens, and provide families with both emotional and material scaffolding. Interventions such as narrative repair, routine stabilization, and inclusive mediation can help reduce the invisible injuries of family conflict. As highlighted in related scholarship, modern forms of grief often manifest not just in death but in the loss of human connection itself (Aswathy & Sathyamurthi, 2025). In both the digital isolation of *Her* and the fractured intimacy of *A Separation*, the central message is clear: when the human touch fades whether through technology, illness, or separation the consequences reverberate through every layer of family and society.

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