

A HERO: FILM REVIEW



PC: Amir Jadidi in *Ghahreman* (2021)

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Asghar Farhadi—a two-time academy award winner for Best Foreign Language Film—is arguably the most internationally recognized contemporary Iranian director. His newest film, *A Hero* [Ghahraman], won Grand Prize at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival and adds another potential Oscar to his repertoire. Like Farhadi’s other films, the story revolves around a domestic dispute. The plot follows a man named Rahim who has ended up in debtor’s prison for failing to pay back his creditor. He involves his family and friends in raising the funds necessary to post bail and ultimately reunite with his loved ones. Central themes of the film include the burden of financial debt and the debts of service owed to loved ones—a double-edged sword common in Iranian culture and familial bonds.

While on prison leave for a few days, Rahim seeks a solution to his debt problem. The woman he has secretly been seeing, Farkhondeh, finds a purse on the street with 17 gold coins and aims to use this towards paying off Rahim’s debts. When they are dissatisfied with the pricing, Rahim settles on a different route. He tracks the owner of the purse and returns it to her, broadcasting his selfless act to the prison wardens and his community. Rahim is eventually praised as a “hero” in the press and social media and even wins the sympathy of charity donors to assist him in his debt problem. Some people, including his creditor, don’t buy his story and begin picking holes in the details. Like Farhadi’s other films, there is an element of mystery that causes the situation to spiral—the woman who claimed the purse as hers can no longer be found to verify Rahim’s story. In an effort to save face and convince the Iranian people of his heroic act, Rahim begins lying, and his friends and family lie for him too.

The film is highly suspenseful and puts the viewer in a precarious position as well. As the audience learns more about each character and their personal stories, they begin to ques-

tion whose side they should take. Rahim, who is burdened by debt? Or the creditor, who sold his daughter’s dowry to help Rahim in the first place?

A Hero also touches on several controversial sociopolitical issues in Iran, though the problems of debtor’s prison and Iran’s unreliable credit system are not explored in depth. Iran still sends those who do not fulfill their financial contractual obligations to prison. Someone who goes bankrupt could spend decades in prison until their debt is paid off. Briefly, the film also mentions Iran’s brutal death penalty laws. Those who await the death penalty are dependent on charities to raise funds to post bail and receive a fair trial. The lack of development of these social issues can be interpreted either as an artistic decision by Farhadi or an avoidance of censorship by the Iranian government.

Farhadi uses this film as an opportunity to shift the focus to a lower socioeconomic class. While Farhadi’s *About Elly*, *A Separation*, and *The Salesman* all focused on middle-class families, *A Hero* spotlights Iran’s poorer classes. The role of social media is a new theme that Farhadi explores—while Rahim’s initial “hero” story is recognized and shared through social media, it is also social media that brings him down even lower than he was at the beginning of the film. Like all of Farhadi’s films, the story does not end happily; rather, it leaves the viewer with questions about the characters’ futures and urges us to ponder our own moral stances.

For English-speaking audiences, the translators perform an excellent job of interpreting Iranian figures of speech and creating a natural sounding dialogue. While the plot did feel dragged out at times, the film ultimately succeeds at engaging the audience, especially through Rahim’s story. *A Hero* is a must-watch for any fan of Farhadi and anyone looking to watch a suspenseful film with complex characters.