

THE WEFT OF TRUTH AND LIES AND ITS MISDEMEANOURS. ANALYSING THE ROLE AND SCOPE OF LIES IN *ABOUT ELLY* AND OTHER MOVIES OF ASGHAR FARHADI

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ABSTRACT. The male and female, upper-class and lower-class, adult and child characters in Asghar Farhadi's films remodel variants of the subject's relationship to the Other. The intertwining of lies and truths into the subject's fantasy or into the characters' fictions sometimes (mis)leads the characters into violence, or brings them to face their subjective suffering, or, alternately, makes it possible for them to pass through their experience of mourning and to possible advance. The continuous shifting of the positions, value, perspectives and emotions has an unsettling effect upon the spectator's subjective relation to the characters' responsibility and actions.

Keywords: *lies and truth, unconscious desire, culpability, responsibility, other, fiction.*

After watching the movies of Asghar Farhadi, the spectator is left with the impression that there is a repetition of patterns and themes, with slight modulations from one movie to another: the conflicting ways in which women and men deal with reality, social class differences, the warring couple, the inherence of lies, violence and guilt; still, the meaning of this repetition and slight modulation remains more difficult to grasp. We will try to discern the value which these themes acquire along their enactment by the various characters, as well as what we feel insists across these various enactments.

The dialectics of lies (primarily feminine) and violence (mainly on the part of the male characters) is used by the characters to complicate, and consequently to find solutions to the augmenting conflict – which, itself, involves a real and unacknowledged (*The Past*) or a partially imaginary and more subtle (*About Elly*) fault. In the process, the boundary between good and bad, rightful and wrongful

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characters is continually shifting, as everybody partakes in the constitution of guilt. Guilt, like lies, is fabricated in common, although it builds on the conflicts and difference of perspective between the various characters. Older movies, such as *Fireworks Wednesday*, *About Elly*, (*Nader and Simin*) *A Separation*, deal more with this relation between lies, partial truths and a real which is impossible to face. This articulation becomes somewhat underlying in more recent movies (*The Past*, *The Salesman*), where violence and guilt are more pregnant.

All movies juxtapose the different forms of the couple: wife versus husband, and mistress; fiancée *versus* unwanted fiancé and their respective disgraces; woman and man to be introduced to one another with a view to marriage; divorcing or already separated couple. Children are always present as victims, witnesses and censors of this impossible relation¹.

Lies, sharing the same fabric of fiction with the story itself – are usually told by the women and, as such, support or make up for an evasive desire: the wife in *Fireworks Wednesday* makes up a scenario in order to find out information about her husband's suspected infidelity, all the while hiding her concrete fears though she lets her anguish and frustration transpire in the constantly degrading relationship with her husband; Rouhi, the young maid and enamoured bride-to-be, lies while trying to re-establish coherence and some kind of justice to the sides in the conflicting couple, with a view to her own upcoming wedding. In *About Elly*, Sepideh's lies serve her goal of helping her new friend Elly out of an oppressive engagement, while herself seems to be in a constant evasion from her own conflicts with her short-tempered husband. In *A Separation*, lies do not only pertain to (usually female) characters as their manner of dealing with reality, but they are produced directly as a reaction to the violence – of men or of the real itself – that is, the production of lies comes as an answer to an arresting silence imposed upon the protagonists by the Other: Razieh, the lower class, religious woman who comes to take care of Nader's old father, hides the fact from her husband, caught as she is between her husband's volatile temper, his frail mental health and his severe financial problems. In *The Past*, daughter Lucie's lies (and strong, though partial, truths) mask her unbearable guilt of having been the indirect killer of Céline, the depressive wife of her mother's lover; as with the rest of Farhadi's movies, by the end we find out that her conviction is false, which nevertheless leaves her intactly culpable; because, just as her fantasized fault is invalidated, she will have to choose between evading into a new fantasy of innocence or, rather, delving into the nature of her culpability. Just as in the case

¹ In his Seminar of 1969-1970, *L'envers de la psychanalyse*, lesson of March 11, 1970, Jacques Lacan forges his well-known statement: "there is no sexual relationship" (Fr. "il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel").

of Sepideh, Lucie's fault exists, but not as she perceives it: she is not guilty of having been instrumental in Céline's suicide attempt, but rather of having herself used Céline as a mean of pursuing her own desire – that of hindering her mother's new relationship and of preventing her from divorcing her estranged husband, Ahmad; that is, of setting the scene for her own love for Ahmad.

Perhaps the most extraordinary "liar" is Sepideh, the female lead from the movie *About Elly*. The movie revolves around a plot fabricated by Sepideh to extract her new friend Elly from an unwanted and troubling engagement to fiancé Alireza and to make her find a new love interest (and a new fiancé) with Ahmad, a friend among her group, who has recently returned from Germany and who is divorced. As she keeps reinterpreting reality for the other characters, her rather immature friends go along with her plan, not knowing either that Elly is still engaged (which would make the process of match-making and wooing completely inappropriate in the conservatory context of the Iranian society) or that she strongly opposed the plan and came to the trip reluctantly and only for one day. As their short holiday proceeds, the projected romance between Elly and Ahmad takes on various forms: while the others joke about it with hushed voices when Elly is around and while Elly herself is rather reserved, it is presented by Sepideh as a fact to the lower class family in charge of the villa they rent. The devised idyll develops timidly, but Elly suddenly disappears (we last see her raising a kite for the group's children); nevertheless the relationship between Elly and Ahmad goes on to gain even more substance for the remaining characters. It is this entirely fabricated relationship that will become the basis for each of the characters' culpability: the members of the group will deal with their being guilty of arranging a meeting between an engaged woman and their friend Ahmed, Elly will be blamed to have lied to them about her engaged status, the fiancé's sense of guilt will finally arise from his confrontation to dead Elly's refusal.

About Elly revolves around lies. Although it seems that Elly dies accidentally, the gravity of lies impacts fundamentally the story and its burden upon the characters.

Sepideh lies: to Elly the least of all – by not telling her that Ahmad had previously been married; also, she is untruthful by forcing her scenario onto Elly – Elly has half-heartedly accepted to come with them, as she wants it, but at the same time is hesitant. Moreover, Elly by no means intends to remain with them for three days – the whole duration of the trip. She is forced to remain as Sepideh hides her telephone and bag. To the group, Sepideh lies on several subjects: first and foremost, she hides from them the fact that Elly is engaged, because telling them this would mean meeting with the group's disapproval and, even worse, with the violent rejection of her husband against such far-fetched scenarios his wife seems

to have specialized in. Although rightful, Sepideh's cause is far too complex in order to be accepted by the others. But she also lies unnecessarily, almost continuously – concerning their accommodation, the “newly-weds” etc. Correspondingly, Sepideh is also the one that will utter the most unbearable truths: the “truth about Elly” – she finally tells the group that Elly was in fact engaged and unwilling to betray her fiancé, and therefore that the whole responsibility lies on her shoulders, not on Elly's; also, she is the one to break the news of Elly's death to the fiancé Alireza, a scene which the viewers are left to deduce as it is not shown in the movie. Eventually, by lying or admitting, by opposing the others or by complying to their demands, Sepideh makes way for an unutterable truth.

In a discreet and more innocent manner, Elly herself lies: to the group (but not to Sepideh) she lies by saying that she comes on the trip solely as the children's teacher, while in fact she comes in order to make the acquaintance of Ahmad, a possible love interest after she will have managed to put an end to her no longer wanted and burdensome engagement. She lies (by omission) that she is alone, while in fact she has a fiancé. Elly also lies to Alireza, by involving her mother to hide to him her whereabouts. She lies, but on a more profound level she is indeed truthful: she wants separation from her fiancé, which she most probably has already requested, but has been refused; also, she is reluctant to meet the bachelor (in fact - divorced) Ahmad before properly breaking her engagement, as she feels it would not be fair to her (abusive) fiancé. To her mother, Elly lies by only telling her that she has left with some colleagues and also by asking her to pass the lie over to the undesired fiancé. Towards the end of the movie, after her disappearance has let loose all the questions raised by this complex system of lies, her behaviour in itself becomes, to the group, deceiving – being interpreted as untruthful and dishonourable towards both her fiancé and the group. Her disappearing and leaving behind her unanswered questions is in itself regarded as a lie; since the violence of her disappearance and death is disturbing and unsettling for the group and for her fiancé, it is therefore interpreted as untruthful, dishonourable and deceiving – and is in turn answered with violence towards the disappeared: accusations, defamations, doubts cast over the facticity of her death ('if she lied to us about her engagement', say the others, 'then maybe she didn't even drown'). The fact that she may have died saving little Arash is conveniently forgotten. Perhaps, in fact, that she is too truthful – a trait that we also discern in the behaviour of the other, majestic, liar: Sepideh.

Elly and Sepideh share a common knowledge about the fiancé and about Ahmad, but they are on opposing positions: while the former is reluctant – in relationship with the others, but as well as to her desire, Sepideh impetuously takes the lead; however, we might still wonder as to Sepideh's relation to her own

desire², which drives her to meddle into her friends' love lives and leaves her somewhat blind to her own relationship with her husband Amir.

There are also the group's lies: the group of friends is made up of three couples with their three kids, as well as Ahmad, who is also friend with the rest and has recently divorced and returned from Germany. The adults in the group belong to the Iranian middle class (as opposed to the lower class family who lends them the villa), and while being, ironically, law graduates, they behave rather childishly, (as opposed to the children's lucid and often critical glances upon them) and are particularly noisy. Except for Ahmad, whose behaviour is more nuanced and who does not really partake in the others' power games, they act as a group: they play along the "romance" planned by Sepideh, they lie whenever it seems necessary, they hide the real motive of their jokes to Elly, while at the same time letting her feel slightly embarrassed. Their lies also play a theatre-like function, as, in order to work, the idyll between Elly and Ahmad cannot be spoken of. After the events take a dramatic turn, they choose to hide together the whole truth from the angry fiancé, they accuse Elly, irrespective of Sepideh's admittance of responsibility, and they proclaim their partial truth (that of having been ignorant of Elly's engagement) as if it were whole: when deciding upon what they should say to Alireza, following Sepideh's singular disclosure of truth, they answer – 'we will tell the truth'; but obviously it is neither Sepideh's, nor Elly's truth.

The fiancé Alireza's lies are not so much spoken as they are heavy – both upon him and upon the two women towards whom he addresses his questions

² See Alireza Taheri, *About Elly... and Polyneices or The Misfortunes of Postmodernity*, <https://psychoanalyticdiscourse.com/index.php/psyd/article/view/36>

"Sepideh lies to Alireza claiming that Elly never mentioned him or their engagement. This last scene, however, testifies to a great confusion concerning the thin boundary separating truth from lies. When asked what to say to Alireza regarding their knowledge concerning his existence, they all proudly claim that it would best to "tell the truth". However, this statement, for all its simplicity, is highly equivocal: what is truth according to Sepideh is not truth according to the rest of the group as she knew about Alireza while they were ignorant of him. The confusion here between truth and lies touches more essentially on a deep psychoanalytic insight, namely that truth can only be expressed in lies. Is Sepideh's last word to Alireza a lie or does it better deliver the truth of Elly's desire? Does Sepideh betray Elly or does she allow her to find some freedom from her fiancé, some space for her oppressed desires to finally manifest posthumously? The alms box, with which the film begins, may represent the idea of making a wish and thereby evoke the theme of desire. At the end of the film, Amir hints that Elly may have used the box thus raising the question as to the possible content of her wish. What does Elly want, one may ask echoing Freud's famous quip. Is it possible that Sepideh's last lie to Alireza is closer to the wish Elly cast in the alms box? (...) In other words, one can approach a subject's desire only through the modality of lies, something Lacan stated unequivocally when he proposed that "there is no truth that, in passing through awareness, does not lie" (Lacan, 1977, p. vii)."

and aggressive demands for a convenient truth (Elly and Sepideh). In addition, he lies to the group that he is Elly's brother – and this lie is an admission that he is forcing the relation and does not feel very comfortable or 'honourable' in the position of fiancé. We may assume that he was also insincere in his relationship with Elly, and that he is deceiving himself as to his own guilt and responsibility in Elly's unhappiness and demise.

Elly's mother lies about her daughter's whereabouts, having chosen her daughter's side against Alireza.

At the other end of this lie-based type of relation there are sometimes those who are only lied to, without reciprocating: the family in charge of the house are lied as to the nature of Elly's and Ahmad's relationship; it is a rather unnecessary lie, thrown into play under the pretext of the family's lower class, traditional view of such things. The children are being lied to because they are supposedly ignorant. As witnesses, they are being given the truth, but not its coherence, instead they can only grasp incoherent rests from it. Both the lower-class family and the children are addressed by the other (elder or wealthier) characters as being incapable of apprehending "the whole truth"; however, they are also the first to question the validity of the others' words, thereby being instrumental in the uncovering of the awkward aspects of "truth". Thus, these peripheral characters stand as a symbol of the nature of truth as incomplete, unutterable and non-transferable.

Finally, the director's „lie" is what originates and develops the fabricated story, recalling to us the image of what Freud called the "dream's navel"³; it is also what he repeats or reformulates in his other movies.

While lies permeate the events and the actions of most of the characters, what they revolve around – the goals, pretexts and wishes – is of a different nature: the characters preoccupy themselves, perhaps excessively, with the good (what would be good for Elly, or, disjunctively, for her fiancé), the honour (first Elly's, then the group's honour) and the justice (with the disappeared, drowned Elly as the only one to be judged and accused). While Sepideh thinks she is pursuing the good of Elly, she ends by causing her suffering, all along dragging the compliant Elly into the pursuit of her own plans. Therefore, it is not at this level of the story that we can find its truth. Referencing Freud's concept of the *other scene*, Lacan says that what remains unconscious, unacknowledged by the subject, "speaks in the Other"⁴; this relation to an unsettling Other (such as is the disappeared Elly,

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Basic Books, 2010, p. 528.

⁴ "Ça parle dans l'Autre, disons-nous, en désignant par l'Autre le lieu même qu'évoque le recours à la parole dans toute relation où il intervient. Si ça parle dans l'Autre, que le sujet l'entende ou non de son oreille, c'est que c'est là que le sujet, par une antériorité logique à tout éveil du signifié, trouve sa place signifiante.", in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (conference "La signification du phallus"), Ed. du Seuil, 1966, p. 689.

unanswering, pointing by her death to the others' responsibility) is the key to the subject's potential repositioning in relation to his / her own desire and truth. The characters cannot decipher the truth in their own fictions of good, justice and honour, truth "is written down elsewhere"⁵, and the lie is what covers it, also what signals its censoring and calls for its uncovering.

The leading-liar characters of *About Elly* support this ambivalent nature of the lie: first, Sepideh knows that Elly is engaged, she keeps it a secret and she wishes her friend well, that is, she wishes for her to separate from her abusive fiancé and to be free, to fall in love with Ahmad and find a new, good fiancé; this, in itself, gives the character of Sepideh a very strong stance in the reality of the story. Secondly, Sepideh (almost) never tells the truth and she also leaves unanswered the question about her motives: why does she involve herself so disastrously in Elly's life? How could she correlate her match-making efforts to solve her own problematic marriage?

Elly's ambiguity is also double-layered: she is engaged, she comes there secretly and she needs a new fiancé; she speaks of none of these, but her silence is what is unsettling for the others. Moreover, she disappears, dies and leaves no explanation behind. The finding of her drowned body at the end of the film is not the solution the other characters were searching for. They are now confronted with the arresting lack of meaning of her death.

Lacan defines metaphor as "the substitution of a signifier for a signifier"⁶. We can see that both Elly and Sepideh operate metaphorically: what makes them enigmatic in the first place – their lies (Sepideh) or discreetness (Elly) – is then doubled by the particular and radical relation they establish with truth: Sepideh's truthful nature and intentions (despite her lies) and the secret of her own desire;

⁵ "L'inconscient est ce chapitre de mon histoire qui est marqué par un blanc ou occupé par un mensonge : c'est le chapitre censuré. Mais la vérité peut être retrouvée, le plus souvent déjà elle est écrite ailleurs. À savoir :

– dans les monuments: et ceci est mon corps, c'est-à-dire le noyau hystérique de la névrose où le symptôme hystérique montre la structure d'un langage et se déchiffre comme une inscription qui, une fois recueillie, peut sans perte grave être détruite;

– dans les documents d'archives aussi: et ce sont les souvenirs de mon enfance, impénétrables aussi bien qu'eux, quand je n'en connais pas la provenance;

– dans l'évolution sémantique: et ceci répond au stock et aux acceptions du vocabulaire qui m'est particulier, comme au style de ma vie et à mon caractère;

– dans les traditions aussi, voire dans les légendes qui sous une forme héroïsée véhiculent mon histoire;

– dans les traces, enfin, qu'en conservent inévitablement les distorsions, nécessitées par le raccord du chapitre adultéré dans les chapitres qui l'encadrent, et dont mon exégèse rétablira le sens", in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (text "*Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage*"), Ed. du Seuil, 1966, p. 259.

⁶ "L'effet métaphorique - la substitution d'un signifiant à un signifiant", in Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire: Livre VI, Le Désir et son interprétation*, lesson from November 12, 1958.

respectively the disconcerting lack of answer in the case of Elly, whose dramatic disappearance comes in stark contrast to her discreetness as a positive trait and to her delicate nature, as well as it reveals her disinvestment in her own survival – contrarily to the voluntary Sepideh, Elly is a character who gradually renounces everything.

Farhadi's female leads enact a multifaceted and multilayered lie as metaphor, in order to tackle the truth. There are many shreds of truth: the truth of each character, of the monolithic group and of the various parties that form along the story, there is the truth as a story told by the director by means of the characters' conflicting perspectives, and there is also the truth that is only understood by means of lies (such as Sepideh's lie to Alireza, in the end of the movie).

Contrarily, violence goes for the truth, demands it, forces it from the other, and it obviously fails: Sepideh forces Elly to stay, but is afterwards left with the culpability over Elly's disappearance, death and dishonor. The fiancé Alireza is forcing Elly by not letting her break from the engagement, and is subsequently violent to Ahmad and the rest of the group in trying to get "the truth about Elly" from them – in fact, he will have to uncover the truth in himself, and is guided towards his own acknowledgment of guilt and responsibility by Sepideh's final, unwilling lie. Sepideh's husband, Amir, beats Sepideh in frustrated response to her perpetual lying, but he too fails to obtain her truth; also, he avoids to acknowledge the truth of his own abusive behaviour towards his wife and the possible correlation between this and her constant evasion that drives her to desire on behalf of the others. Finally, there is the violence of the group's self-evident hypocrisy: their debate as to how to deal with the angered and aggressive fiancé is solved with an equivocal decision to "tell him the truth", but they keep silent on the fact that there was never a common truth. The group in itself is a fiction. Therefore, they force Sepideh, the only member of the group for whom this "truth" is fundamentally untrue and an injustice to Elly's honour, to utter it.

What might be said as to the director's choice of sides in this dialectics of lies and violence? On the one hand, he seems to force all of his characters into tortuous and grim turns of the script-destiny. Along the course of events, his main characters lose ground and end up being faced with an overwhelming, perhaps oversized guilt. Sepideh's culpability over Elly's drowning is not lesser than that of Alireza's unacknowledged, but equally oppressing one. Both of them seem to stand awkwardly on the two sides of a process of mourning that is yet to unravel. Similarly, in Farhadi's movie *The Past*, Lucie's accusations against her mother hide her own guilt over Céline's death, which in turn serves as a screen to divert everybody's attention from Samir's responsibility. At the end of his films, Farhadi leaves his

characters on the brink of a possible process of mourning, with guilt and non-understanding as their only weapons in tackling truth that is neither comfortable, nor comprehensible.

On the other hand, this somewhat peculiar open ending, in which not the course of events but the development of the characters' inner life remains in question, allows Farhadi to leave the enigma intact. The director's "lie" is of the kind that underlies truth, in order for the latter to acquire an improbable and fulgurating existence. Just as its characters are left in the moment when they might choose to face their subjective responsibility, the story's completeness does not consist in a grip on truth, but in a gift of freedom. The director's "lie" is not illustrative of a master position in the discourse, but rather it represents an option of the director for the feminine modality in relation to the real.

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