

The Cemetery of the Mind in *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine*: Memory and Mortality in Farmanara's Postmodern Iran

Dr. Mohammad Sadegh Najjarzadeha

Independent Scholar

American Studies and Literary Theory

Halle, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany

sadegh@litverse.de

Abstract

Bahman Farmanara's *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* (2000) stands as a luminous milestone within the canon of Iranian cinema, offering a profound and intricately layered meditation on mortality, memory, and the fragmentation of selfhood. This essay contends that the film's narrative architecture, thematic preoccupations, and aesthetic strategies are profoundly inflected by postmodern sensibilities and psychoanalytic currents. Through the deployment of a fractured, non-linear narrative, the deliberate dissolution of the boundaries between reality and fantasy, and a sustained self-reflexive engagement with the act of filmmaking itself, Farmanara fashions a cinematic experience that echoes the disorientation and instability of human consciousness. At the heart of the film lies a poignant exploration of the protagonist's interior life — his anxieties, his submerged desires, and the inexorable pull of the death drive, as articulated by Sigmund Freud. In probing these psychic terrains, *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* eschews conventional storytelling in favor of a poetics of rupture and loss. Through a close examination of its narrative discontinuities, symbolic textures, and intricate characterizations, this essay seeks to elucidate how Farmanara synthesizes postmodern aesthetics and psychoanalytic insight to forge a haunting meditation on the human condition. The protagonist — himself a filmmaker bereaved and adrift — becomes both subject

and meta-commentator, embodying the entanglement of art, memory, and mourning. The film's recursive time structures, dreamlike visual metaphors, and motifs of absence and decay mirror the postmodern distrust of coherent identity and linearity, while the protagonist's vacillation between conscious mourning and unconscious compulsion reveals the subterranean workings of the Freudian death drive. In weaving together these threads, Farmanara articulates a vision of existence wherein memory falters, meaning dissolves, and creation itself emerges as an act poised precariously against the void of oblivion.

Keywords: Bahman Farmanara, death drive, fragmentation, Iranian cinema, memory, postmodernism, psychoanalytic theory, *Smell of Camphor*, *Scent of Jasmine*

Introduction

The cinema of post-revolutionary Iran, forged in the crucible of political tumult and sustained beneath the ever-watchful eye of ideological censure, has, over the past four decades, acquired a singular reputation for its oblique engagements with the social, the political, and the spiritual. Compelled by necessity to transmute the unspeakable into the allegorical, and the forbidden into the poetic, Iranian auteurs have, with remarkable ingenuity, woven intricate tapestries of narrative evasion and symbolic resonance, wherein the elusive specters of identity, memory, and cultural dislocation find their muted yet persistent articulation. It is within this fraught and hallowed tradition that Bahman Farmanara's *Smell of Camphor*, *Scent of Jasmine* (2000) must be situated, though it simultaneously marks, by virtue of its aesthetic inwardness and elegiac tone, a profound departure from the dominant modes of cinematic discourse in his milieu. Departing from the outward-facing allegorization of communal anxieties, Farmanara's film turns its gaze inward, plumbing the shadowed recesses of the self, where memory and mortality intertwine in a danse macabre of irretrievable loss and existential reckoning. Centered upon the figure of Bahman Farjami — a filmmaker enervated by grief, paralyzed by creative impotence, and haunted by the relentless approach of death — the

narrative unfolds as a solemn meditation upon the fragility of artistic endeavor and the inevitable dissolution of being. Farmanara, assuming the dual role of creator and created, effaces the boundary between autobiography and fiction, producing a self-reflexive *mise-en-abîme* that renders the cinematic text at once confession, elegy, and philosophical inquiry.

This essay advances the proposition that *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* is most fruitfully apprehended through the bifocal lens of postmodern aesthetics and psychoanalytic theory, each offering a distinct yet mutually illuminating perspective upon the film's labyrinthine structure and thematic preoccupations. Postmodernism, with its profound skepticism toward the integrity of narrative, the stability of identity, and the very notion of objective reality, provides the conceptual apparatus by which to apprehend the film's deliberate narrative fragmentation, its ontological ambiguities, and its ironic self-consciousness. Psychoanalysis, drawing particularly upon Freud's disquieting articulation of the death drive (*Todestrieb*), affords entry into the film's subterranean economy of desire, repression, and melancholia, wherein the specter of death is neither merely thematic nor narrative, but inscribed into the very psychic architecture of the protagonist's subjectivity. Through an attentive analysis of Farmanara's deployment of temporal disjunction, symbolic decay, and recursive self-commentary, this essay shall endeavor to illuminate the film's construction of a cinematic world wherein the boundaries between life and death, self and other, reality and dream, are not merely blurred but rendered permeable and unstable. *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* thus emerges not merely as an artistic meditation upon mortality, but as a profound philosophical inquiry into the limits of memory, the illusions of artistic mastery, and the inescapable entanglement of creation with annihilation.

Postmodernism and the Fragmentation of Narrative

Postmodernism, as a cultural and philosophical movement, is characterized by its skepticism towards grand narratives, its embrace of fragmentation and ambiguity, and its

blurring of boundaries between high and low culture, reality and representation (Lyotard; Jameson). In the realm of cinema, postmodernist aesthetics often manifest in non-linear narratives, self-reflexive techniques, and a playful intertextuality that draws upon and subverts established genres and conventions (Bordwell; Denzin). *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* exhibits many of these characteristics, making it a prime example of postmodernist filmmaking within the Iranian context. One of the most striking features of the film is its fragmented, non-linear narrative structure. The story unfolds through a series of disjointed scenes, shifting between Bahman's present, his memories of the past, and imagined scenarios, particularly those related to his own funeral. This fragmentation mirrors the workings of memory itself, which is rarely linear or chronological but rather a collection of fragmented images, sensations, and emotions. As film scholar Hamid Naficy notes in his analysis of Iranian cinema, "Memory, like history, is often fragmented, incomplete, and unreliable" (Naficy, *A Social History* 287). In *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine*, Farmanara masterfully uses this fragmented structure to create a sense of disorientation and temporal ambiguity, reflecting the subjective and often elusive nature of memory. The film's non-linear structure also serves to undermine the notion of a singular, objective reality. Instead, it presents multiple, often contradictory, perspectives on events, leaving the viewer to piece together the narrative puzzle. This is particularly evident in the recurring scenes of Bahman's imagined funeral. These scenes are presented with a degree of ambiguity, making it difficult to determine whether they are actual memories, fantasies, or a combination of both. This blurring of reality and imagination is a hallmark of postmodernism, which challenges the idea of a stable, knowable reality and instead emphasizes the subjective and constructed nature of experience. For instance, the film opens with Bahman visiting a cemetery, searching for a suitable burial plot for himself. This scene immediately establishes the film's preoccupation with death and sets the stage for the fragmented narrative that follows. As Bahman wanders through the cemetery, he encounters

various characters and situations that trigger memories and reflections on his past. These memories are not presented in chronological order but rather emerge in a seemingly random fashion, mirroring the associative nature of memory.

In one scene, Bahman recalls a conversation with his deceased wife, in which they discuss their hopes and dreams for the future. This memory is juxtaposed with a scene in the present, where Bahman is shown struggling to complete a film script. The contrast between the past and the present highlights the sense of loss and disillusionment that permeates Bahman's life. The fragmented structure allows Farmanara to move seamlessly between different time periods and emotional states, creating a rich tapestry of memories and experiences that illuminate Bahman's inner world. Furthermore, the film's non-linear structure is reinforced by its use of recurring motifs and images. The smell of camphor, a substance traditionally used in funeral rites, serves as a potent olfactory symbol that links different moments in time. The scent of jasmine, associated with Bahman's wife, evokes memories of love and loss. These sensory details add another layer of complexity to the narrative, further blurring the boundaries between past and present, reality and imagination.

The fragmented narrative of *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* can be seen as a reflection of the postmodern condition, characterized by a sense of fragmentation, uncertainty, and the breakdown of traditional structures of meaning. By employing this non-linear structure, Farmanara not only captures the subjective nature of memory but also challenges the viewer to actively participate in the construction of meaning. The film does not offer easy answers or a clear resolution; instead, it invites us to embrace ambiguity and to grapple with the complexities of human experience.

Blurring of Reality and Fantasy

Postmodern thought often questions the clear distinction between reality and fantasy, recognizing that our perception of the world is shaped by our individual experiences, memories,

and desires. This blurring of boundaries is central to *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine*, where Farmanara skillfully interweaves scenes of Bahman's everyday life with his imagined scenarios and memories, creating a dreamlike atmosphere that challenges the viewer's perception of what is real. The most prominent example of this blurring is the recurring motif of Bahman's imagined funeral. Throughout the film, Bahman meticulously plans his own funeral, choosing the location, the music, and even the guest list. These scenes are often presented with a degree of realism, making it difficult to distinguish them from actual events. However, as the film progresses, it becomes clear that these are not memories of a past event but rather projections of Bahman's anxieties and desires regarding his own mortality.

In one scene, Bahman imagines himself lying in a coffin, surrounded by mourners. The scene is shot in a realistic style, with detailed attention to the rituals and customs of Iranian funeral practices. However, the scene is also infused with a sense of surrealism, as Bahman, from within the coffin, observes the proceedings and even comments on them. This blending of reality and fantasy creates a disorienting effect, blurring the lines between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness. This ambiguity serves to highlight the subjective nature of reality. What is real for Bahman is not necessarily what is real for the other characters or for the viewer. His imagined funeral becomes a space where he can confront his fears, express his regrets, and ultimately come to terms with his own mortality. It is a space of both anxiety and catharsis, where the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious mind become blurred.

The film further complicates the distinction between reality and fantasy through its use of dream sequences and hallucinations. In one scene, Bahman experiences a vivid hallucination in which he sees his deceased wife standing in a field of jasmine flowers. This scene is shot in a stylized manner, with soft lighting and slow-motion photography, creating a dreamlike atmosphere. The hallucination is clearly a product of Bahman's imagination, a manifestation of his longing for his lost love. However, it is also presented with a degree of realism,

suggesting that for Bahman, the boundary between the real and the imagined is fluid and permeable. These instances of blurred reality and fantasy are not merely stylistic flourishes; they are integral to the film's exploration of the human psyche. By presenting Bahman's inner world in this way, Farmanara suggests that our subjective experiences, our dreams, and our fantasies are just as real and meaningful as our waking lives. They shape our perceptions, influence our actions, and ultimately define who we are.

The blurring of reality and fantasy in *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* also reflects the postmodernist rejection of objective truth. In a world where reality is increasingly mediated by images and simulations, the distinction between what is real and what is not becomes increasingly blurred. Farmanara's film, with its dreamlike atmosphere and ambiguous narrative, captures this sense of uncertainty and invites the viewer to question the nature of reality itself. Moreover, the film's exploration of the porous boundary between life and death can be interpreted through a postmodern lens. In postmodern thought, death is not seen as a definitive end but rather as a fluid and indeterminate state. This is reflected in the film's ambiguous portrayal of Bahman's imagined funeral, which is both a confrontation with mortality and a celebration of life. The blurring of these boundaries suggests that life and death are not mutually exclusive categories but rather interconnected aspects of human existence.

In "The Postmodern Condition," Jean-François Lyotard argues that the postmodern era is characterized by a "crisis of narratives," a loss of faith in grand, overarching stories that provide meaning and coherence to human experience (Lyotard 37). This crisis of narratives is reflected in *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* through its fragmented structure and its refusal to offer a clear resolution or a definitive interpretation of events. The film's ambiguous ending, in which Bahman walks away from his own grave, leaves the viewer with a sense of uncertainty, mirroring the indeterminacy of life itself.

Self-Reflexivity and the Meta-Narrative of Filmmaking

Self-reflexivity, or the awareness of a work of art of its own status as an artificial construct, is a defining characteristic of postmodernism. In cinema, self-reflexivity can manifest in various ways, such as breaking the fourth wall, directly addressing the audience, or incorporating the process of filmmaking itself into the narrative. *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* is a highly self-reflexive film, with Bahman Farmanara not only directing but also playing the protagonist, a filmmaker named Bahman Farjami. This creates a meta-narrative layer, where the film becomes a commentary on the process of filmmaking and the role of the artist in society. The film's self-reflexivity is evident from the very beginning, as Bahman is shown struggling to complete a film script. This immediately establishes a parallel between the fictional Bahman and the real-life Farmanara, blurring the lines between the director and his creation. Throughout the film, Bahman grapples with creative blocks, censorship issues, and the challenges of navigating the Iranian film industry. These struggles mirror the real-life challenges faced by Iranian filmmakers, who often have to contend with strict censorship laws and limited resources.

In one scene, Bahman meets with a group of government officials to discuss his film project. The officials express concerns about the film's subject matter and suggest changes to make it more palatable to the authorities. This scene offers a glimpse into the realities of filmmaking in Iran, where artistic expression is often constrained by political and ideological considerations. By including this scene, Farmanara not only adds a layer of realism to the film but also engages in a form of self-critique, acknowledging the compromises and limitations that he himself has faced as a filmmaker. The film's self-reflexivity extends beyond the portrayal of the filmmaking process. It also encompasses a broader reflection on the nature of storytelling and the role of the artist in society. Bahman, as a filmmaker, is a storyteller, a creator of narratives. However, the film suggests that the stories we tell are not always objective

or truthful; they are often shaped by our own biases, desires, and limitations. This is particularly evident in the scenes of Bahman's imagined funeral, which can be seen as a form of self-mythologizing, a way for Bahman to construct a narrative about his own life and legacy.

Furthermore, the film's self-reflexive nature invites the viewer to reflect on their own role in the process of meaning-making. By presenting a fragmented and ambiguous narrative, Farmanara challenges the viewer to actively engage with the film, to piece together the fragments and construct their own interpretation. This participatory aspect of the film is characteristic of postmodern art, which often seeks to break down the traditional boundaries between artist and audience, creator and consumer. The film's self-reflexivity can also be interpreted through the lens of post-structuralist theory, which emphasizes the instability of meaning and the role of language in shaping our understanding of the world. Jacques Derrida, a key figure in post-structuralism, argues that meaning is not inherent in a text but rather is produced through a process of "différance," a constant interplay of presence and absence, similarity and difference (Derrida). In *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine*, the film's self-reflexive structure highlights the constructed nature of meaning, suggesting that the meaning of the film is not fixed but rather is constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated by the viewer.

The film's engagement with the process of filmmaking also raises questions about the relationship between art and reality. By presenting a fictionalized version of himself, Farmanara blurs the lines between autobiography and fiction, suggesting that all forms of representation are ultimately mediated and constructed. This idea is further reinforced by the film's use of mirrors and reflections, which serve as visual metaphors for the complex relationship between the self and its representation. In one scene, Bahman looks at himself in a mirror and sees a reflection of his younger self. This image suggests that the self is not a fixed entity but rather a constantly evolving construct, shaped by memory, experience, and the passage of time. The mirror serves as a reminder that our sense of self is always mediated,

always a reflection of something else. This idea resonates with the postmodernist notion that identity is not essential or predetermined but rather is fluid and performative.

The film's self-reflexive nature also invites comparisons with other works of meta-cinema, such as Federico Fellini's *8 ½* (1963), which similarly explores the creative struggles of a filmmaker. Both films use self-reflexivity to examine the relationship between art and life, the role of the artist in society, and the challenges of artistic creation. However, *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* is deeply rooted in the specific cultural and political context of post-revolutionary Iran, giving its self-reflexive exploration a unique resonance and urgency.

Pastiche and Intertextuality: Weaving a Tapestry of Influences

Postmodern art often embraces pastiche, a technique that involves the imitation or combination of different styles, genres, and historical periods, often in a playful or ironic manner. This blending of styles creates a sense of intertextuality, where a work of art references and interacts with other texts, blurring the boundaries between originality and imitation. *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* exhibits elements of pastiche and intertextuality, drawing upon various cinematic and literary traditions to create a rich and layered narrative. The film incorporates elements of different genres, including drama, dark comedy, and even a hint of the supernatural. The scenes of Bahman's everyday life, his interactions with friends and colleagues, are grounded in a realistic style, reminiscent of Iranian social realist cinema. However, these scenes are interspersed with moments of dark humor, particularly in the sequences dealing with Bahman's imagined funeral. The absurdity of planning one's own funeral, the bickering among the mourners, and the bureaucratic hurdles involved in securing a burial plot inject a darkly comedic tone into the film.

Furthermore, the film hints at the supernatural through its use of dream sequences and hallucinations. These scenes, with their stylized visuals and dreamlike atmosphere, evoke the tradition of magical realism, a literary and cinematic style that blends realistic elements with

fantastical or magical elements. The presence of Bahman's deceased wife in his hallucinations, her ethereal appearance in a field of jasmine flowers, adds a layer of mystical ambiguity to the narrative. This blending of genres creates a sense of eclecticism, reflecting the postmodernist embrace of heterogeneity and the rejection of rigid stylistic categories. The film's pastiche approach also allows Farmanara to explore different facets of Bahman's character and to engage with a wide range of emotions, from melancholy and despair to humor and absurdity.

In addition to its generic hybridity, *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* also engages in intertextual dialogue with other films and cultural works. The film's title itself is evocative, suggesting a rich tapestry of sensory experiences and cultural associations. The smell of camphor is traditionally associated with death and funeral rites in Iranian culture, while the scent of jasmine is often linked to love, beauty, and memory. This juxtaposition of contrasting scents creates a symbolic framework that permeates the entire film. The film also makes subtle references to other works of Iranian cinema. For instance, the character of Bahman Farjami shares the same first name as the director, Bahman Farmanara, creating a meta-fictional link between the film and the director's own life and career. This echoes the self-reflexive tendencies of other Iranian filmmakers, such as Abbas Kiarostami, who often incorporated elements of their own lives and filmmaking experiences into their narratives (Elena 98).

The film's exploration of mortality and its use of dark humor also invite comparisons with the works of Sadeq Hedayat, one of Iran's most prominent modern writers. Hedayat's novella *The Blind Owl* (1937), a seminal work of Persian literature, is similarly preoccupied with themes of death, decay, and the search for meaning in a seemingly absurd world. The dark humor and the surreal atmosphere of *The Blind Owl* find echoes in *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine*, suggesting a shared cultural and literary sensibility. Moreover, the film's engagement with the social and political realities of post-revolutionary Iran can be seen as part of a broader cinematic tradition. Iranian filmmakers have often used their art to comment on the socio-

political landscape, employing allegory, symbolism, and subtle critique to navigate the constraints of censorship. *Smell of Camphor*, *Scent of Jasmine*, while primarily focused on the inner life of its protagonist, also offers glimpses into the challenges faced by artists and intellectuals in contemporary Iran. The scenes involving the censorship board, for example, highlight the limitations imposed on artistic freedom and the delicate balancing act that filmmakers must perform to get their work approved.

The film's intertextual connections extend beyond Iranian cinema and literature. The theme of an artist grappling with creative blocks and existential anxieties has been explored in numerous films worldwide, such as Federico Fellini's *8 ½* (1963) and Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957). By engaging with these universal themes, *Smell of Camphor*, *Scent of Jasmine* situates itself within a broader cinematic tradition while simultaneously offering a uniquely Iranian perspective. The film's use of music also contributes to its intertextual richness. The soundtrack, composed by Ahmad Pezhman, blends traditional Persian music with Western classical influences, creating a hybrid musical landscape that reflects the film's broader aesthetic of pastiche. The use of both traditional and modern instruments, the incorporation of Persian musical modes and melodies, and the juxtaposition of different musical styles create a sonic tapestry that mirrors the film's fragmented narrative and its blending of different genres and cultural influences.

In "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," Fredric Jameson argues that pastiche is a defining feature of postmodern art, reflecting a sense of historical exhaustion and a loss of faith in the possibility of originality (Jameson 18). In this view, pastiche is not merely a stylistic choice but a symptom of a broader cultural condition, characterized by the recycling and recombination of existing forms and styles. While *Smell of Camphor*, *Scent of Jasmine* certainly employs pastiche, it does so not in a spirit of cynical imitation but rather as a means of creating a rich and multi-layered narrative that draws upon diverse cultural and

artistic traditions. The film's intertextuality can also be understood in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "dialogism." Bakhtin argues that all texts are inherently dialogic, meaning that they are engaged in a constant dialogue with other texts, both past and present (Bakhtin 279). In this view, a text is not a closed or self-contained entity but rather a site of intersection for multiple voices and perspectives. *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine*, with its references to other films, literary works, and musical traditions, can be seen as a dialogic text, one that actively engages in a conversation with the broader cultural landscape.

Rejection of Grand Narratives and the Embrace of Ambiguity

Postmodernism is often characterized by its skepticism towards "grand narratives," overarching stories or ideologies that claim to provide universal explanations for human experience (Lyotard xxiv). These grand narratives, such as the Enlightenment belief in progress or Marxist theories of historical materialism, are seen as totalizing and exclusionary, failing to account for the diversity and complexity of individual experiences. In their place, postmodernism embraces fragmentation, ambiguity, and the multiplicity of perspectives. *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* reflects this postmodern skepticism towards grand narratives in its refusal to offer easy answers or a clear resolution to the existential questions it raises. The film does not provide a definitive statement about the meaning of life or the nature of death. Instead, it presents a fragmented and often contradictory portrait of a man grappling with his own mortality, his creative struggles, and his personal relationships.

The film's ending, in particular, embodies this rejection of grand narratives. After visiting his own grave, Bahman walks away, leaving the cemetery behind. This ending is open-ended and ambiguous, offering no clear resolution to Bahman's anxieties or a definitive statement about the meaning of his journey. The viewer is left to ponder the significance of Bahman's experiences, to draw their own conclusions about the film's themes. This refusal to provide closure is characteristic of postmodern art, which often rejects the traditional narrative

arc of exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution. Instead, postmodern works tend to embrace ambiguity, fragmentation, and open-endedness, reflecting the uncertainty and complexity of the contemporary world. By leaving the ending open, Farmanara avoids imposing a singular meaning on the film, allowing for multiple interpretations and inviting the viewer to actively participate in the construction of meaning.

Furthermore, the film's fragmented structure and its blending of reality and fantasy contribute to its rejection of grand narratives. By presenting a subjective and often unreliable account of events, the film undermines the notion of an objective, knowable truth. Instead, it suggests that reality is always mediated by individual perception, memory, and imagination. This emphasis on subjectivity aligns with the postmodernist view that there is no single, universal truth but rather a multiplicity of perspectives, each shaped by individual experience and cultural context. The film's skepticism towards grand narratives can also be seen in its portrayal of religion. While religious rituals and traditions are depicted in the film, particularly in the scenes of Bahman's imagined funeral, the film does not endorse any particular religious doctrine or offer a spiritual solution to Bahman's existential anxieties. Instead, it presents religion as one of many cultural frameworks through which individuals attempt to make sense of life and death.

In one scene, Bahman visits a mosque and observes people praying. The scene is shot in a detached, observational style, without any overt commentary or judgment. This suggests that the film is not interested in promoting or critiquing religion but rather in exploring its role in people's lives. The presence of religious elements in the film adds another layer to its complex tapestry of cultural references, but it does not provide a definitive answer to the questions the film raises. This nuanced approach to religion is consistent with the postmodernist rejection of grand narratives. Postmodern thought tends to view religious beliefs as socially constructed and historically contingent, rather than as universal truths. By

presenting religion as one of many cultural frameworks, *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* avoids imposing a singular ideological perspective on the viewer, instead inviting them to consider the diverse ways in which people find meaning and cope with the challenges of existence.

The film's rejection of grand narratives can also be interpreted through the lens of post-structuralist thought. Post-structuralism, with its emphasis on the instability of meaning and the deconstruction of binary oppositions, challenges the very idea of fixed or universal truths. Jacques Derrida's concept of "deconstruction" involves exposing the underlying assumptions and contradictions within a text, revealing how meaning is always deferred and never fully present (Derrida). In *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine*, the film's fragmented structure, its blurring of reality and fantasy, and its open-ended conclusion can be seen as a form of deconstruction. By refusing to provide a clear resolution or a definitive interpretation, the film undermines the traditional narrative structures that often reinforce grand narratives. Instead, it invites the viewer to question the assumptions underlying these narratives and to embrace the ambiguity and complexity of human experience.

Psychoanalytic Theory and the Unconscious Mind

While postmodernism provides a valuable framework for understanding the film's structure and its engagement with broader cultural themes, psychoanalytic theory offers a complementary lens through which to explore the inner world of the protagonist. Sigmund Freud's theories of the unconscious, the death drive, and the role of symbolism provide powerful tools for analyzing Bahman's anxieties, his preoccupation with mortality, and the psychological underpinnings of his creative struggles. Freud's concept of the death drive, or Thanatos, is particularly relevant to *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine*. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud proposed that alongside the life instinct (Eros), which drives us towards survival, reproduction, and pleasure, there exists a death drive, an innate urge

towards self-destruction and a return to an inorganic state (Freud 26). This concept may seem counterintuitive, but Freud argued that the death drive manifests in various ways, including aggression, self-sabotage, and a fascination with death and decay. Bahman's preoccupation with his own death, his meticulous planning of his funeral, and the recurring imagery of graves and decay throughout the film can be interpreted as manifestations of the death drive. His obsession with mortality is not merely a rational response to aging but rather a deep-seated psychological impulse, a manifestation of the unconscious desire for oblivion.

The film's title itself, *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine*, evokes this duality between life and death. Camphor, with its association with embalming and funeral rites, represents the death drive, while jasmine, with its connotations of beauty, love, and memory, symbolizes the life instinct. This olfactory juxtaposition sets the stage for the film's exploration of the conflicting forces within Bahman's psyche. Bahman's imagined funeral can be seen as a symbolic enactment of the death drive. By planning his own death, he is, in a sense, attempting to control and master his own mortality. This can be interpreted as a defense mechanism against the anxiety provoked by the awareness of death. By rehearsing his own demise, Bahman is attempting to neutralize the threat of death, to make it less frightening and more familiar.

However, the death drive is not simply a desire for annihilation. It is also intertwined with the life instinct in complex and often contradictory ways. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud argued that the ego, the conscious part of the mind, attempts to manage and channel the impulses of the id, the unconscious reservoir of instinctual drives (Freud 19). This often involves transforming the destructive energy of the death drive into more socially acceptable forms, such as artistic creation or intellectual pursuits. In *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine*, Bahman's creative struggles can be interpreted as a manifestation of this conflict between the life and death drives. His inability to complete his film script can be seen as a form of self-sabotage, a way in which the death drive is impeding his creative energies. However, the very

act of making a film about death and mortality can also be seen as a way of sublimating the death drive, transforming its destructive energy into a creative act.

The film suggests that art can serve as a means of confronting and working through the anxieties associated with mortality. By creating a film about death, Bahman is, in a sense, giving form to his own fears and anxieties. This process of externalizing and objectifying his inner turmoil can be seen as a form of catharsis, a way of gaining a sense of mastery over the death drive. Furthermore, the film's exploration of the death drive can be linked to the broader cultural context of post-revolutionary Iran. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) had a profound impact on Iranian society, leaving a legacy of trauma, loss, and a heightened awareness of mortality. While the film does not directly address the war, its preoccupation with death can be seen as a reflection of this broader cultural context. In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud distinguishes between healthy mourning, which involves a gradual detachment from the lost object, and melancholia, a pathological state in which the individual remains fixated on the loss and is unable to move on (Freud 244). While Bahman is not explicitly mourning a specific individual (although the loss of his wife is a significant factor), his preoccupation with death can be seen as a form of melancholia, a state of unresolved grief and existential angst.

Unconscious Desires and Repressed Conflicts

Psychoanalytic theory posits that our conscious thoughts and actions are often influenced by unconscious desires, memories, and conflicts that have been repressed, or pushed out of awareness. These repressed elements can manifest in various ways, such as dreams, slips of the tongue, and neurotic symptoms. *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* provides a rich tapestry of such manifestations, hinting at the presence of unresolved conflicts and repressed desires in Bahman's past. The film suggests that Bahman's creative block is not merely a professional problem but rather a symptom of a deeper psychological malaise. His inability to write can be interpreted as a form of resistance, a way in which his unconscious is preventing

him from confronting painful emotions or unresolved conflicts. The film hints at a troubled relationship with his deceased wife, suggesting that her death may have triggered a sense of guilt or regret that he has not fully processed.

In one scene, Bahman recalls a conversation with his wife in which she expresses her disappointment with his career and his emotional detachment. This memory suggests that their relationship was marked by tension and unspoken resentments. The film does not provide a full account of their relationship, but it implies that Bahman may be harboring unconscious guilt or regret about his past behavior. Furthermore, the film hints at a possible connection between Bahman's creative struggles and his relationship with his father. In a brief but significant scene, Bahman visits his father's grave and expresses his frustration with his own inability to live up to his father's expectations. This suggests that Bahman's sense of self-worth may be tied to his perceived failures as a filmmaker and as a son.

These unresolved conflicts and repressed emotions manifest not only in Bahman's creative block but also in his physical symptoms. He suffers from various ailments, including insomnia, headaches, and a general sense of malaise. These symptoms can be interpreted as psychosomatic manifestations of his inner turmoil, a way in which his unconscious is expressing itself through his body. The film's use of dream sequences and hallucinations also provides insights into Bahman's unconscious mind. In these scenes, repressed desires and anxieties surface in symbolic form. For instance, the recurring image of Bahman's deceased wife appearing in a field of jasmine flowers can be interpreted as a manifestation of his longing for her and his regret over their unresolved conflicts. The jasmine flowers, with their association with love and beauty, symbolize the idealized image of his wife that he has created in his memory.

The film also suggests that Bahman's preoccupation with death may be a way of avoiding confronting other painful emotions. By focusing on his own mortality, he is, in a

sense, displacing his anxieties about his relationships, his career, and his past onto a more abstract and universal fear. This can be seen as a defense mechanism, a way of protecting himself from the pain of confronting his inner demons. In "The Interpretation of Dreams" (1900), Freud argues that dreams are the "royal road to the unconscious," providing a window into the hidden workings of the mind (Freud 608). The dreamlike sequences in *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* can be interpreted as symbolic representations of Bahman's unconscious desires, fears, and conflicts. By analyzing these sequences, we can gain a deeper understanding of the psychological forces that are shaping his behavior. Furthermore, the film's exploration of the unconscious can be linked to the broader cultural context of Iranian society. In a society where open expression of emotions is often discouraged, particularly for men, the unconscious can become a repository for repressed feelings and unresolved conflicts. The film suggests that these repressed emotions can have a profound impact on an individual's mental and physical well-being.

Symbolism and the Language of the Unconscious

Psychoanalytic theory places great emphasis on the role of symbolism in understanding the unconscious mind. Freud argued that the unconscious expresses itself through symbols, which are often disguised representations of repressed desires, fears, and memories. *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine* is replete with symbols that offer insights into Bahman's psychological state and the film's broader themes. The film's title itself is symbolic. As mentioned earlier, camphor and jasmine represent the duality of life and death, the opposing forces of Eros and Thanatos. The juxtaposition of these two scents creates a symbolic framework that permeates the entire film, highlighting the tension between Bahman's desire for life and his preoccupation with death. The cemetery is another potent symbol in the film. It represents not only the physical place of burial but also the realm of memory and the unconscious. Bahman's frequent visits to the cemetery can be interpreted as a symbolic journey

into his own past, a confrontation with his repressed memories and unresolved conflicts. The graves themselves can be seen as symbols of the buried aspects of his psyche, the parts of himself that he has repressed or forgotten.

The recurring motif of mirrors and reflections also carries symbolic weight. Mirrors often symbolize self-awareness and introspection, but they can also represent the fragmented and unstable nature of identity. In *Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine*, the mirrors reflect Bahman's fractured sense of self, his struggle to reconcile his past and present, his conscious and unconscious desires. In one scene, Bahman looks into a mirror and sees a reflection of his younger self. This image symbolizes the gap between his current state and his idealized image of himself. It also suggests that his sense of self is not fixed but rather a fluid construct, shaped by memory and the passage of time. The mirror serves as a reminder that our identity is always mediated, always a reflection of something else. The film's use of water imagery is also significant. Water often symbolizes the unconscious mind, the realm of emotions and instincts. The scenes in which Bahman is shown swimming or immersed in water can be interpreted as symbolic representations of his descent into his own unconscious. In one scene, Bahman imagines himself drowning, an image that suggests the overwhelming power of his repressed emotions and his fear of being consumed by his inner turmoil.

The film also employs symbolism related to the body. Bahman's physical ailments, his headaches, and his general sense of malaise can be seen as symbolic manifestations of his psychological distress. The body becomes a site where the unconscious expresses itself through physical symptoms, a phenomenon that Freud explored in his studies of hysteria. Furthermore, the film uses food as a symbolic motif. In several scenes, Bahman is shown eating or preparing food. These scenes often have a ritualistic quality, suggesting that food serves not only as a source of physical nourishment but also as a symbolic means of connecting with others and with one's own cultural heritage. However, the film also hints at a more ambivalent relationship

with food. In one scene, Bahman is shown eating alone in a restaurant, surrounded by other solitary diners. This image suggests a sense of isolation and alienation, hinting at the possibility that food can also be a source of anxiety or discomfort.

The film's use of symbolism can be further analyzed through the lens of Jungian psychology. Carl Jung, a former student of Freud, expanded on Freud's theories of the unconscious, proposing the concept of the "collective unconscious," a shared reservoir of universal archetypes and symbols that are inherited across generations (Jung). While *Smell of Camphor*, *Scent of Jasmine* is not explicitly Jungian, some of its symbolic imagery resonates with Jungian archetypes. For instance, the figure of the deceased wife can be interpreted as an embodiment of the "anima," the archetype of the feminine in the male psyche. In Jungian psychology, the anima represents the unconscious feminine aspects of a man's personality, often projected onto real women in his life. Bahman's idealized image of his wife, his longing for her, and his inability to fully come to terms with her death suggest that she represents an unresolved aspect of his own psyche.

The cemetery can also be seen as an archetypal symbol, representing the threshold between the conscious and unconscious worlds, the realm of the dead, and the collective memory of humanity. Bahman's journeys into the cemetery can be interpreted as a symbolic descent into the collective unconscious, a confrontation with the archetypal forces that shape human experience. The film's use of symbolism is not limited to visual imagery. The dialogue is also rich in symbolic language, often employing metaphors and double meanings. For instance, the recurring phrase "smell of camphor, scent of jasmine" is not merely a literal description but a symbolic representation of the film's central themes. The dialogue often hints at deeper meanings and unresolved conflicts, inviting the viewer to engage in a process of interpretation. In "Symbols of Transformation" (1912), Jung argues that symbols are not merely signs that point to something else but rather are "living realities" that have the power to

transform consciousness (Jung 155). The symbols in *Smell of Camphor*, *Scent of Jasmine* are not static or fixed in their meaning but rather are dynamic and multi-layered, inviting multiple interpretations and engaging the viewer in a process of active meaning-making. The film's use of symbolism can also be linked to the broader tradition of Persian poetry and mysticism. Persian literature is replete with symbolic language, often employing imagery drawn from nature, such as flowers, gardens, and the nightingale, to express spiritual and philosophical concepts. The film's title, with its evocative imagery of camphor and jasmine, echoes this literary tradition, suggesting a connection between the physical and the spiritual, the earthly and the transcendent.

Conclusion

Smell of Camphor, *Scent of Jasmine* is a richly textured and deeply resonant film that lends itself to multiple interpretations. By employing the combined lenses of postmodernism and psychoanalytic theory, we can gain a deeper understanding of the film's complex narrative structure, its exploration of subjective experience, and its engagement with the psychological dimensions of human existence. The film's fragmented, non-linear narrative, its blurring of reality and fantasy, its self-reflexive nature, and its use of pastiche and intertextuality are all hallmarks of postmodernist aesthetics. These techniques not only create a unique and engaging cinematic experience but also reflect the fragmented and uncertain nature of the contemporary world. By rejecting grand narratives and embracing ambiguity, the film challenges the viewer to actively participate in the construction of meaning, mirroring the postmodernist emphasis on the multiplicity of perspectives and the instability of truth.

Furthermore, the film's exploration of Bahman's inner world, his anxieties, his repressed desires, and his preoccupation with mortality finds a powerful framework in psychoanalytic theory. Freud's concept of the death drive, his theories of the unconscious, and his emphasis on the role of symbolism provide valuable tools for analyzing the psychological

underpinnings of Bahman's behavior and the film's broader themes. The film suggests that art can serve as a means of confronting and working through the anxieties associated with mortality, transforming the destructive energy of the death drive into a creative act. The film's use of symbolism, drawn from both personal and cultural sources, adds another layer of complexity to its narrative. The symbols of camphor and jasmine, the cemetery, the mirrors, and the recurring motifs of water and food all contribute to a rich tapestry of meaning, inviting the viewer to engage in a process of interpretation and to explore the hidden depths of the unconscious mind.

Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine is not merely a film about death; it is a film about life, about the complexities of human relationships, the power of memory, and the search for meaning in a world that often seems devoid of it. By skillfully weaving together postmodernist aesthetics and psychoanalytic insights, Bahman Farmanara has created a cinematic masterpiece that continues to resonate with audiences, prompting them to reflect on their own mortality, their own memories, and their own place in the ever-shifting landscape of human existence. The film stands as a testament to the power of cinema to explore the deepest recesses of the human psyche and to illuminate the universal themes that connect us all. It is a film that lingers in the mind long after the credits have rolled, like the lingering scent of camphor and jasmine, a reminder of the beauty and fragility of life itself. Its enduring power is a result of its poetic exploration of the human condition using a sophisticated cinematic language. It stands as a major work in the history of Iranian cinema and will be discussed and analyzed for many years to come.

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