

**‘JONAKI’ - A PHANTASMAGORIA: DEMYSTIFYING CINEMATIC SYMBOLISM OF
FILM JONAKI WITH REFERENCE TO SURREALISTIC FILM THEORY**

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Abstract

Surrealism transformed the art of filmmaking and made it possible for it to explore, reveal, and perhaps even duplicate the inner workings of the subconscious mind. In the film Jonaki repetitive symbols helps to understand metaphorical meanings used by the film maker. There are visual motifs which are surrealistic in its own way.

This study investigates interpretation of symbols and surrealism in the film Jonaki by Aditya Vikram Sengupta.

The whole film is based on dream-like sequences of static frame and long shot taking which helps him to evoke emotions within the characters and helps the audience to be within the frame which helps to connect to the story. The excellent art direction (by Jonaki Bhattacharya) and sound design are the ideal accompaniment to the well-planned images (with plenty of natural ambient sounds). Memories and dreams are presented in a visually spectacular way, pushing the events or plots outside the bounds of conventional storytelling. The use of surrealism in space, time and characters makes its illogical and irrational disruptions to convey the atmosphere and incongruous states of dreams.

Research methodology used to study the film was descriptive qualitative approach with semiotic method and surrealistic film theory.

Symbols used in films like orange, an origami bird, toy soldier, fire, and water depicts characters inner emotions which the character is going through. The indirect way of storytelling makes this film an art film as every scene and frame in itself is like a painting placing the characters in a such way that it gives us understanding the personality of the character making the audience look at the character in different ways. The word phantasmagoria used in the title describes the film as dream-like imaginary sequences used in the film which represses reality from consciousness

Keywords: *surrealism, symbolism, film theory, art film, visual motifs*

Introduction

Aditya Vikram Sengupta, an Indian writer/director, follows up his mesmerizingly poetic debut film, Labour of Love ('Asha JaarMajhe', 2014), with a majestic, dream-like love story told through the deteriorating recollections of an elderly woman who is nearing the end of her life. The filmmaker Mr. Sengupta's *Jonaki* (Firefly 2018) presents surrealistic snippets from the life of his cherished grandmother, who passed away at the age of 81 after being in a coma for four days. Mr. Sengupta's *Jonaki* is an immensely eccentric and individualized movie. After his grandmother passed away, Sengupta began having nightmares, which he blends with what he believes to be the echoes of memories that may have troubled her during the time she was in a coma. However, even if the background is unknown, *Jonaki* may still be appealing due to the way it's confusing, surreal, imagery handles unpleasant memories like the shards of a shattered mirror. Naturally, the "stream-of-consciousness" story (derived from his own reservoir of recollections) in the 1975 movie *Mirror* ('Zerkalo') by Russian auteur filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky comes to mind. Vikram Sengupta's experiments of normative space and time, however, are distinctive in their own way. (KUMAR, *Jonaki*, 2019)

The film has won award in international film festival Rotterdam (2018) & Mumbai film Festival (special mention: Oxfam best film on gender equality).

The film is screened in festivals and OTT platforms like netflix and MUBI. Every frame and scenes are like painting the film. Every composition has a semiotics association which can be studied and research in depth.

Literature Review

Surrealism

Surrealism was the first literary and artistic movement that has largely gone unnoticed by film critics and historians, surrealism was the first literary and aesthetic movement to become genuinely associated with filmmaking. Though its popularity was brief, it was still well-known for its surrealistic aspect, the juxtaposition of everyday people and objects with absurd forms, and the abstraction of real life, places, and things. Surrealism, which was greatly influenced by Freudian psychology, aimed to visualize the unconscious mind. " Surrealist movie made commentary on life, death, modernity, politics, religion, and art itself while juggling symbolism and reality. The movement's roots were laid in France at the same time that motion pictures were invented. France was fortunate enough to have a wealth of interested artists and audiences, easy access to filmmaking resources, film financing, and the origin of surrealism cinema. One of the first generations to have grown up with film as a part of daily life was the Surrealists who were active in the movement. (Wikipedia, 2023)

In a revolution against a society ruled by rational thought, the Surrealists tapped into the "superior reality" of the subconscious. (Oppenheim)

Between 1924 through World War II, André Breton, a poet, led the surrealist movement, which was an intellectual, aesthetic, and literary movement. The Surrealists attacked the foundation of rational thought in order to overthrow the harsh laws of contemporary society. They made an effort to access the "higher reality" of the subconscious mind in order to do this. According to Breton, "in a violent reaction against the impoverishment and sterility of thought processes that resulted from centuries of rationalism, we turned toward the marvelous and advocated it unconditionally. "Within the framework of psychologist Sigmund Freud's beliefs on dreams and the subconscious mind, the Surrealists systematized these tactics. Breton described surrealism as follows in his 1924 Surrealist Manifesto: "Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express...the actual functioning of thought...in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern." (Oppenheim)

The art of giving things or objects a deeper significance beyond their individual components is known as symbolism. Because it portrays the invisible or intangible through obvious or sensory images, symbolism in literature has a long history. There is no definitive meaning to any symbol; symbols and meanings all depend on context. (SEVERSON, 2020)

The meaning of symbols is initially buried and only seldom revealed. A symbol is a concrete illustration and reflection of an intangible reality. While actions can also be interpreted in this way, symbols are not restricted to the relationship between actual objects and symbolic reality. (Fitria, REPRESENTATION OF SYMBOLS IN "PARASITE" MOVIE, 2021)

The movie shows how a series of incidents continue. Symbolism is a suitable approach to use a variety of forms, such as figurative language in which the literal meaning of a thing, person, place, or condition is altered. The meaning is influenced by visuals, lyrics, audio/sound effects, nonverbal cues, and verbal cues. Every good piece of writing appeals to our intrinsic capacity to invent new symbols or recall ones we already know.

In addition to the three components of the symbol, a film is a media that also includes an icon, index, and mark. Through the use of metaphors and symbols, filmmakers can influence audiences and give them new meanings. To convey messages to viewers, writers or filmmakers try to use gestures, symbols, codes, and traditions in a film. (Fitria, 2021)

Phantasmagoria

Phantasmagoria is a Greek word *phantasma* meaning 'image, phantom, apparition,' and *agora* meaning 'assembly': an assembly of phantoms (Mannoni and Crangle 2015). A style of horror theatre that dates back to the 1700s is phantasmagoria. The earliest projection systems for moving images were created using a series of lanterns. This led to an immersive audience experience that was strongly related to horror, true crime stories, and frightening tales. Originally, Phantasmagoria included more than just a moving image in its theatrical presentation to frighten viewers. To push viewers outside of their comfort zones, this production also included extraordinary effects, surround

sound, and even hallucinogens giving them a dramatic experience unlike anything they had ever had. (TEAMBEVERLYBOY, 2021)

Symbolism in films

The Third Meaning, Roland Barthes describes three levels of meaning which exist in film, even though all three might not, and rarely are, present at all times or in every film. Barthes refers to the informative level as the initial level of meaning. At this level, the story's fundamental message is made clear by the people, their relationships, the environment, and the events that are occurring. (Failla). The second level for Barthes is the symbolic level. We know what is happening in the scene from the informational level, but what is the deeper significance behind the objects and actions we see. The depth of one's conscious perception is sometimes indicated by a film's symbolic level, however even this can be heavily debated. Yet Barthes suggests a third, objectively perceivable dimension of meaning in films. This next meaning, however, cannot be coded. Its home is in feeling rather than language. It is not present in nor is it concerned with the diegesis, but it lurks below, it punctures through, it hovers above the signified of the obvious. It is what he calls the *obtuse*. "The obtuse meaning is not in the language system (even that of symbols)." ⁷ Symbols stand for something in reality. If the *obtuse* cannot be named, if it cannot exist in language, that is because there is nothing named that corresponds to it. It is greater than language for it is outside what we know as reality. Symbolism simply uses signs rather than words. The obtuse lay outside the reach of both. "If the obtuse meaning cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the *obvious* meaning, it does not copy anything - how do you describe something that does not represent anything? [...] The *obtuse* meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it." ⁸ Consequently, Barthes calls this level of perception the *Third Meaning* for, like what it signifies, it must go without linguistic title or inadequate description. (Failla).

Dreams and Cinema

The dream state and the unconscious are continually being portrayed in film. The way dreams are shown in films has changed significantly from the early days of cinema to the present; new methods and cutting-edge technology have made it possible for directors to more accurately depict nocturnal visions.

Dream and surrealism

The phrase makes it clear that surrealism is the most prominent artistic movement to use film as a medium to represent a dreamlike state. The surrealists saw film as a continuation of art. Film was the ideal medium for conveying movement through images because they were fascinated with capturing the experience of psychical movement. The surrealist movie was described as abstract, as kinetic art, as a form of art that sought anonymity and independence from reality. Jean Goudal stated in 1925 that he believed surrealism film to be the best medium for capturing the surreal qualities.

"The cinema ... constitutes a conscious hallucination, and utilizes the fusion of dream and consciousness which surrealism would like to realize in the literary domain.... It is times cineastes saw clearly what profits they may gain in opening up their art to the unexplored regions of the dream... They should lose no time in imbuing their productions with the three essential characteristics of the dream: the visual, the illogical, the pervasive" (Goudal 52-54).

Aim & Objectives

Aim : To Analyze symbolism in Aditya Sengupta's film 'Jonaki' with reference to surrealist film theory

Objectives

1. To understand the use of surrealism and Symbolism in the films
2. To explain visual motifs used in the film

3. To understand semiotic approach used in the film

Research Design

Research design used for this research paper is case study approach. A case study is an in-depth examination of a particular subject, such as a person, group, location, occasion, business, or phenomena.

In social, educational, clinical, and business research, case studies are frequently used. Although quantitative methods are occasionally utilized, qualitative methods are typically used in case study research designs. (McCombes, 2020) Case studies are useful for describing, comparing, evaluating and comprehending various facets of a study subject. When you wish to learn more specifically, contextually, in-depth information on a particular real-world topic, a case study is a suitable research design. You can investigate the characteristics, meanings, and implications of the case. (McCombes, 2020)

Case studies frequently concentrate on qualitative data and employ techniques including observations, interviews, and secondary and primary source research. (McCombes, 2020)

Case study approach will help this research to compare and evaluate surrealism film theory and semiotics used in the film Jonaki

Results and Discussion



Figure 1: Master shot of main character Jonaki

Jonaki, 80-year-old lady in her death bed going in her past childhood memories and searching her lost love in her strange world of decaying memories. This is opening scene of the movie. Mostly master shot is always taken in a way where characters and settings are introduced which the foundation for the rest of a production to revolve around. But this opening shot is taken tight close shot on Jonaki who goes back in her past memory. This shows the whole story revolves around the main character Jonaki who is in her old decaying memories and on her death bed.

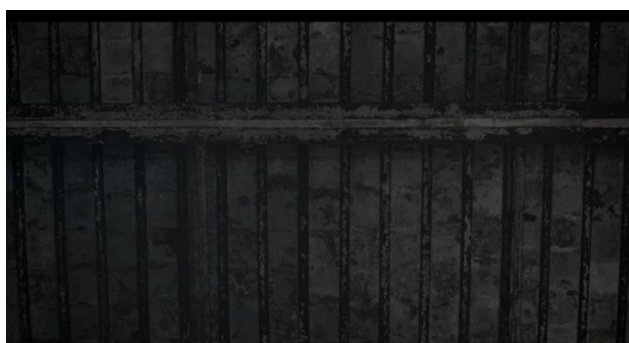


Figure 2 : Visual patterns which depicts emotions

The second scene where Jonaki opens her eyes and sees her old house. This particular scene talks much about her memories many years back which is shown by parallel lines on ceiling which is staring at. The scene also have pigeons flying with sound of wings this symbolizes her memories are

still present in her old decaying house. Pigeons make their presence showing her faithfulness and commitment towards her love. Pigeons are also believed to mate for life they are monogamous in nature. If one of dies the other spend their life agonizing loneliness.



Figure 3 : Use of Surrealism

The surrealism used in this scene shows old lady in a decaying house mentioning on the phone about her father working in the laboratory. This gives information about her father being scientist and the house which is old dusty where human settlement seems impossible showing a old lady staying in the house which makes its believe Jonaki is in her dream or memorizing her old memory.



Figure 4: Mid shot of new character

This scene introduces her father who is performing experiment on plants. But this young age character of her father is very contrast to the character of daughter (old lady) who is mentioning him as her father. This gives us indication the old Jonaki remembers her young father but forgotten her young self and can see herself in the present state in her i.e., old physical state which gives us surreal blurs.



Figure 5 : Shadows created by use of one light

This particular scene gives us understanding the two characters are Jonaki's parents. The dialogue shared between them shows her parents entangled relationship as they both are sitting diagonal to each other showing a plant kept under a light in background. Father completely given his life to research and her mother finding her place in his life. They also mention Jonaki being 19-year-old needs to get married. In this particular scene the information shared by mother tells us that groom owns a business and he will be coming to see Jonaki.

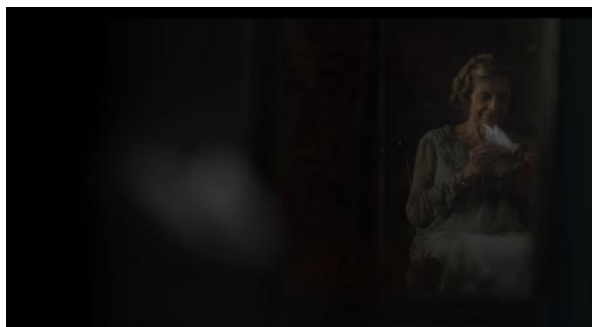


Figure 6: Use of Visual Motif : Origami

Scene 6th now makes us understand Jonaki in her old self but in memory or dream like sequence goes back in her younger life forgetting her young self. Plays with a origami bird. This particularly symbolizes about her being love and her the bird represents loyalty and longevity in her love. The Japanese believed that anyone with patience and commitment to fold 1000 origami would be given good fortune and granted a wish.

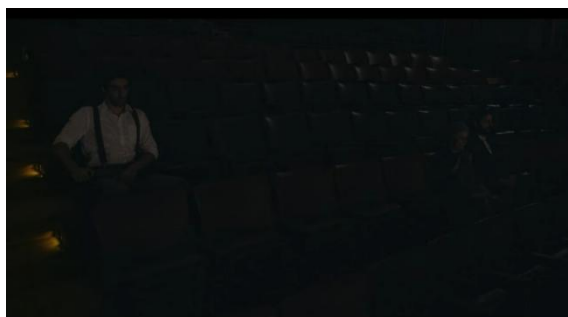


Figure 7 : Introduction of the new character

Jonaki sitting in theatre with her father, here her lover has been introduced changing his seats and coming close to her. The visual patterns used in this scene are square which represents Jonaki protected in four walls and is now breaking it and moving out to explore the world with beginning of new love. Here the use of origami symbolizing starting of love between them.



Figure 8 : Extreme long shot of new character by using visual patterns

The patterns used her are straight lines like staircase, patterns on walls, on the railing. The introduction of new character smoking cigarette standing next to a window which has square glass and a fallen chair exactly opposite to him which represents that he comes has personality has arrogance, proudness and conservative mind set. The chair symbolizes his character as a man in the society wants him to be.

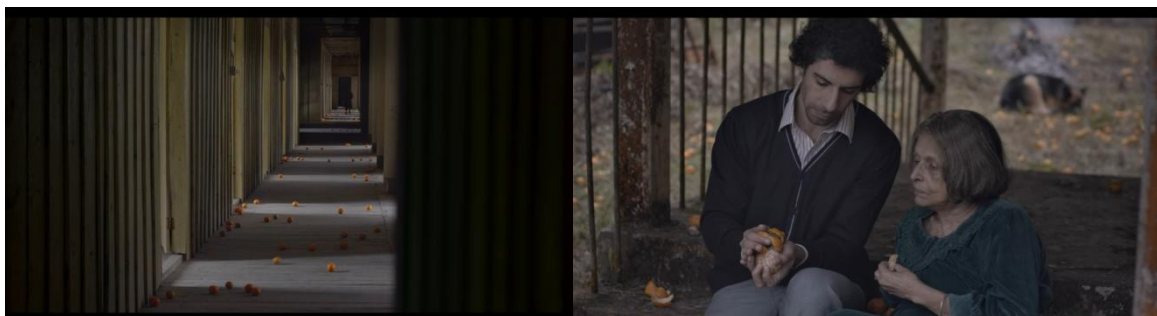


Figure 9 : Visual motif : oranges

Frame 1: Oranges symbolizes love letters exchanged by Jonaki and her lover. The frame in frame composition gives us emotions shared by both of them is deep. This composition also gives depth in the scene. In this particular scene in the beginning one orange is thrown the small girl picks up that orange then many oranges are thrown from left and right side representing letters exchanged among them.

Frame 2: The connected scene where orange is shared by the couple tells us orange being the love as symbolize. The dog in background shows the loyalty in their relationship.



Figure 10 : Use of surrealism

The use of frame in frame is quite common in the film which gives direct focus of viewers to the subject. This particular scene is surreal in itself as the Jonaki shown 80-year-old lady in the dream or her memory but in the past memory Jonaki is 19-year-old girl bathe by her mother who is shown in her actual age.

The surrealism in character age is very contrast.

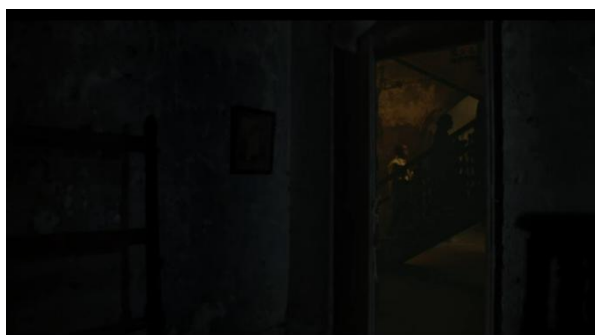


Figure 11 : Frame in Frame

The use of frame in frame helps to connect to the characters, create deeper meaning and helps to establish an observational perspective.



Figure 12 : The depiction of religion which character through visual communication



Figure 13 : Extreme long shot of character in present

The above three frames are the connection of each other.

Frame 1: There is use of light, patterns on window and the lover standing in light represent religious connection or divine light. Character holding the origami in hand. The whole frame shows the purity in his love.

Frame 2: Confirms lover being Christian as Jonaki is seen wearing white gown and use of frame in frame gives us deep connection, she having for him.

Frame 3: Lover in present who is old now back again in same life cycle going back in his past. This scene has doors used and picture of Jesus hanged on wall in background of the character representing the same old lover in past.



Figure 14 : Use of Visual Motif : Fire

All these frames are sequenced one after the other. Fire as a symbol is used in all these 4 frames.

Frame 1& 2: Lover sitting in church front of God and candle lit. Here fire symbolizes the fires of hell, denoting everlasting torment and punishment for one's sins.

Frame 3: Jonaki's Mother burns the veil; here fire represents hatred

Frame 4: Jonaki's grandfather is seen standing front of bonfire representing pain and death.



Figure 15 : The only tracking or moving shot in the film

This is the only scene where the camera is moving (tracking shot) towards Jonaki. Jonaki holding fire stick in her hand which is lit. The space gives us this surrealistic feel and time give us dream like a sequenced used in this particular frame.

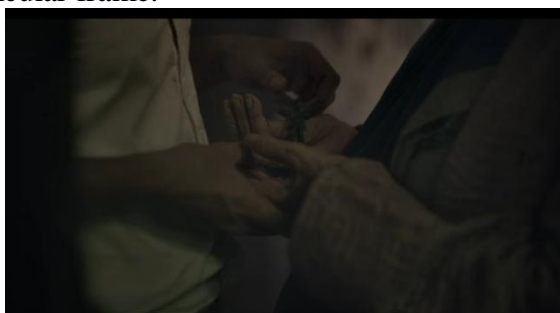


Figure 16 : Visual Motif: Solider toy

The lover handling Jonaki toy solider which symbolizes their love and he will be always there in her memory.



Figure 17 : Extreme long shot

The lover in present state who is old now finding Jonaki. The space here is Jonaki's old house where rotten oranges are fallen all over representing ending of relationship.



Figure 18 : Visual patterns

Frame 1: Jonaki sitting idel and school girls sleeping changing sides this particular scene is where Jonaki feels lonely in spite being surrounded by girls from her school.

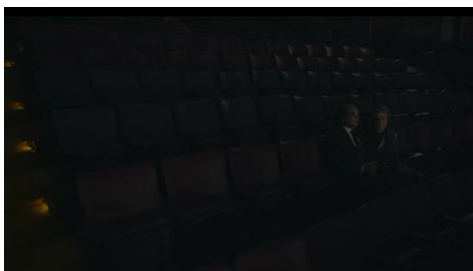


Figure 19: Visual patterns

Frame 2: Jonaki meets her husband in the same place where meets her lover. The square seat patterns used here represents four walls where Jonaki is trapped.

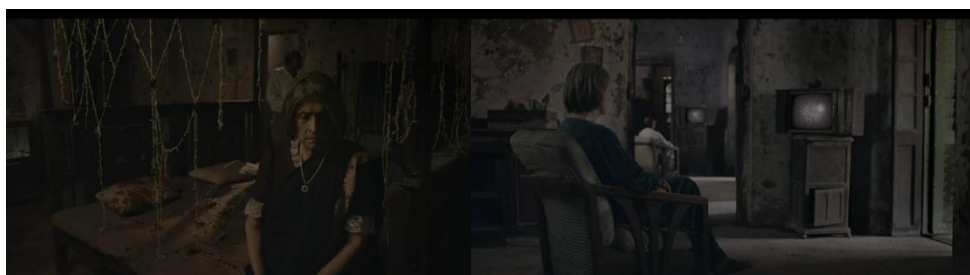


Figure 20 : Use of Surrealism Figure 21 : Frame in frame : depiction of characterrelationship

Frame 1: Use of Surrealism old Jonaki, dried flower decoration of newly wedded couple room. Jonaki going back in her past memory where everything is decayed including her being old forgetting her young version of herself.

Frame 2: Use of frame in frame same activity done by Jonaki and her husband which shows the dead relationship both are having.

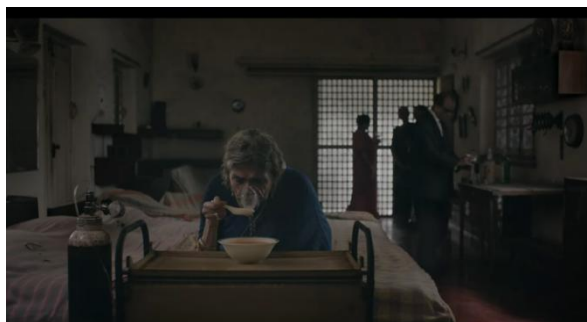


Figure 22: surrealistic way of character suffocating

This particular scene has powerful symbolism and use of visual patterns. This scene shows us there is party which doesn't look like a party but guest standing together having drinks including Jonkai's husband but Jonaki with a oxygen mask shows she is suffocating in the society or people that her husband has given her. The space and the situation are very surrealistic in its way. A good use of visual communication.

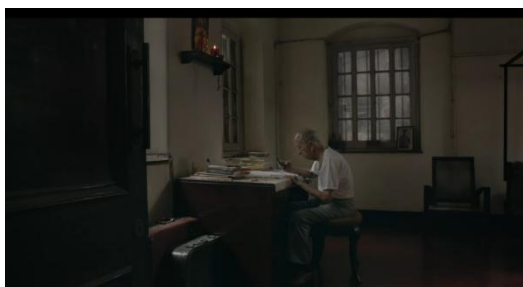


Figure 23 : Long shot

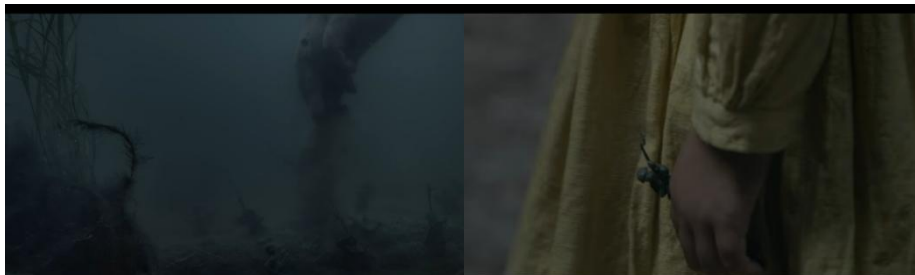


Figure 24 : Visual Motif : Use of toy

Frame 1 : Lover sitting and finding for Jonaki whereabouts desperately to meet her.

Frame 2 :Jonaki removing toy soldier from water

Frame 3: Girl holding toy soldier. The common motif used here is toy soldier which represent the lover who is being missed by Jonaki



Figure 25: Long Shot

Continuation of scene where girl holding toy soldier in her hand which she throws in the bath tub the next frame shows that the lover out of now where turns to be alive from the toy soldier this is thing but use of phantasmagoria and dream which is illogical and cannot connect this to reality.



Figure 26 : Blue of body of character depicting his coldness towards his love.

Jonaki is seen back to her lover. It's seen that lover's body has turns blue which represents that he has become cold towards her. He doesn't have the same old love for her. Somewhere the feeling of hurt and betrayal is seen.



Figure 27 : Visual Motif

Jonaki intimate scene with her husband but toy soldier kept on her stomach showing that she has still not forgotten him.

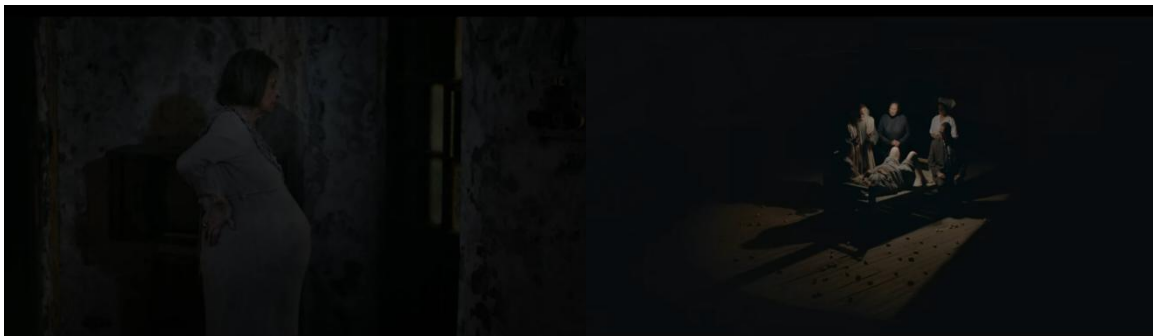


Figure 28 : Character suffering loss

Jonaki pregnancy scene where she has been surrounded by her grandparents, husband and doctors. Representing hopes from her to give birth.

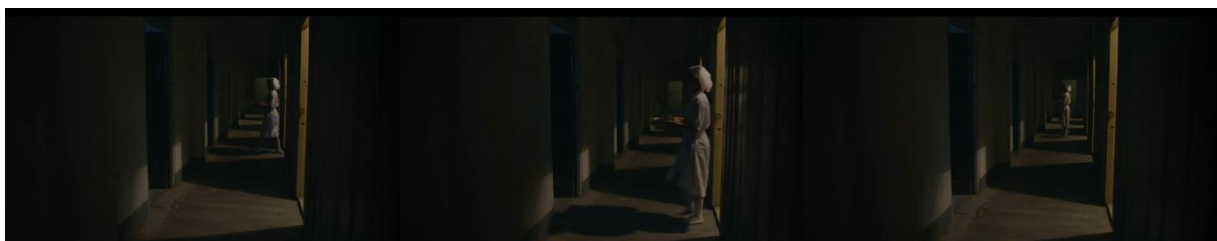


Figure 29: Frame in frame

The use of frame in frame which focuses on the nurse who is coming and going to another door. This particular scene the nurse entering and going to another room. This recurring activity done from different doors by the nurse. This only symbolizes that Jonaki gone through multiple miscarriages.

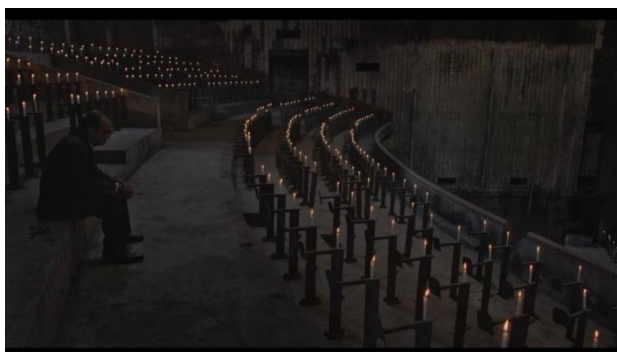


Figure 30 : Use of Circular Visual Pattern with fire as visual motif

Jonaki's husband sitting in his theatre which has caught fire and he lost it. Same time Jonaki's recurring miscarriages has made him furious. The candle here represent the death of their relationship.



Figure 31: Use of Visual Patterns

Present state of the same theatre where the lover is finding Jonaki. This particular scene is the reality and not a memory or dream of Jonaki. The use of patterns of lines and square and old shows that there is still love alive from him toward Jonaki after so many years of separation.

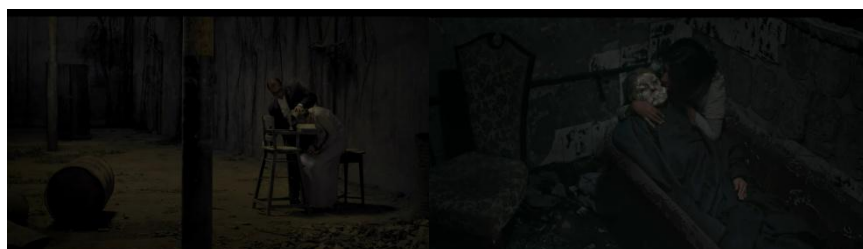


Figure 32 : End of relationship by use of surrealism

Frame 1: Jonaki devastated with her situation. She is seen celebrating her birthday surrounded by her grandparents and her husband dumps her face in the cake showing his arrogance towards her.

Frame 2 :Jonaki lost with the situation fallen in her mother's arms. Mother is trying to console her by licking the cake from her face which shows her mother is guilty of the decision she has taken for Jonaki.

The whole two situation of dumping cake on Joank's face and mother licking same cake from her face shows the surrealism used in the scene symbolizing pain, hurt, guilty and hatred.

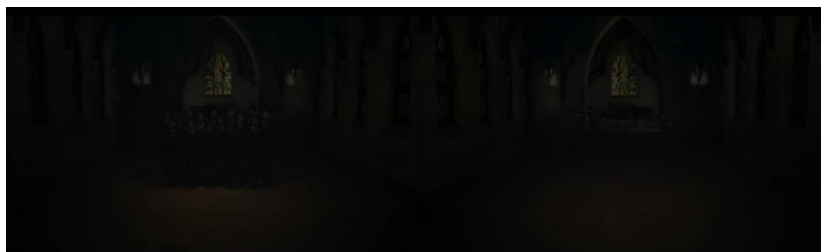
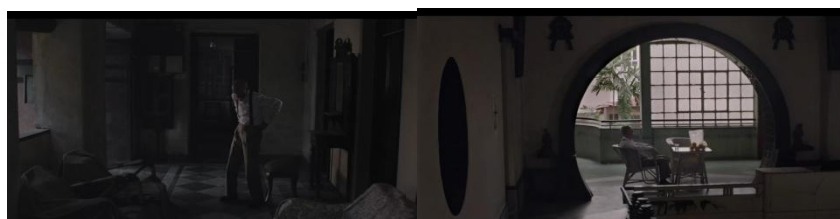


Figure 33 : Use of Firefly

The name Jonaki means firefly. This particular scene is shown of small children standing in chair their eyes lit up with light and suddenly the children vanish in the air leaving the tiny lights disappearing. This shows how Jonaki was trapped in the situation created for her and now she free from and lost.



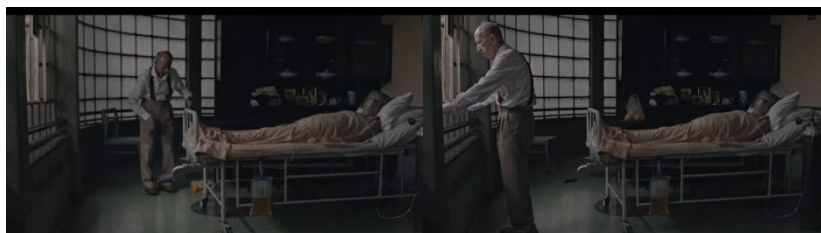


Figure 34 : visual patterns - square, circular interior and lines

These are last few scenes of the film which is present where the lover has finally got to know where Jonaki is. He ready to meet her in spite of not knowing she is in her death bed.

The use of patterns of circle or semi circles in the interiors shows that the lover has come to the same person whom he had left in past. It's like a life cycle.

Use of square patterns shows how Jonaki and her lover could not fit in the societal restriction which brought them to suffer

The chair parallel to him is similar to the fallen chair parallel to her husband as shown in figure 6, This depicts two different personalities and individuals which are handling the situations in their life.

Conclusion

The whole story past memory which 80-year-old woman is having during her last moments. The whole dream like sequences which makes each scene like painting.

The film uses surrealism in a such way that the main character Jonaki who is 80-year-old who has forgotten her young self. Remembering her past and people who changed her life.

This is story is memory of a woman "Jonaki" (Lolita Chatterjee), which begins with her love affair with a Christian boy (Jim Sarbh), is being displayed to the viewers as she lies on her deathbed. Everyone appears to her in their most vivid forms in her memories. When the recollection is from her teenage years, she is in her eighty-year form while everyone else appears to be much younger. Her doomed love and the subsequent planned marriage in which she was unhappy.

There are no shots used in the scene. There is static frame used for every situation shown. This is because dreams cannot be dramatized by using shots and different camera angles and movements. They have long shot taking which shows us through Jonaki's prospective looking at the past memory she is having. The uniqueness used in this film is that there are three character her parents and her lover which are young or can be said at their actual age where Jonaki had left them in her past. Jonakisees herself old as she only remembers herat present age.

There is a proper use of space and time alternation making it contrast against each other for instance use of space Jonaki'shousewhich is old which is decayed which isinpresent state. All characters are younger who lived in that same space which would have been very different than the present state.

The symbols used in the film origami, toy solider, oranges, fire and water which has its own interpretation used in the film showing the emotions of the characters.

Origami = Long lasting Love

Toy solider = symbolizes love and strength

Oranges = Love letters

Fire= End of relationship

Water= Deep emotions

Dream like sequences used in the film is to give those past experiences a way Jonaki remembers them which are not dramatized by using shots, camera angles and camera movements. The word phantasmagoria used in title tells helps to understand a sequence of real or imaginary scenes likely to see in a dream.

To conclude the whole film has these phantasmagorical scenes. Each scene is like a painting. The use of colour mostly use of pale blue, grey, black and yellow which gives the sadness and suffering

Jonaki had gone through. The use of frame in frame in most of scene is to give the audience direct focus on the subject, create deeper meaning and establish observational perspective. It also gives use emotional depth in the scene has.

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