

The East meets the West in Cinema: The Immigrant's Challenges in *House of Sand and Fog* (2003)

تلاقي الشرق والغرب في السينما: تحديات المهاجر في منزل الرّمل والضّباب (2003)

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Abstract:

Immigration is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has been the subject of much academic and public debate. It involves the movement of people from one country or region to another, often in search for better economic opportunities, political stability, or personal freedom. The experiences of immigrants are shaped by a variety of factors, including their cultural background, socioeconomic status, and the context in which they settle. One important way in which immigration is portrayed in popular culture is through cinema, which has the power to evoke emotions, challenge assumptions, and offer insights into the human life experiences. One film that offers a powerful portrayal of the experiences of Middle-Eastern immigrants in the United States is *House of Sand and Fog* (2003). Directed by Vadim Perelman and based on the novel by Andre Dubus III, the film tells the story of Behrani, an Iranian immigrant, and Kathy, an American recovering drug addict, whose lives intersect when a bureaucratic error results in the sale of Kathy's house. This article analyses the film as a case study of Middle Eastern immigration in the United States, using a thematic and aesthetic analysis. The focal point is how the film portrays the experiences of immigrants, and how it addresses issues such as displacement, cultural exchange, and the search for identity. The study argues for the importance of locating immigration between opportunity and challenge, namely for the Middle Eastern immigrants in the United States.

Keywords: Immigration, displacement, cultural exchange, search for identity, American Dream.

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ملخص:

تثير الهجرة كظاهرة إنسانية معقدة ومُتعددة الأوجه اهتمام الرأى العام وكذا الباحثين بشكل خاص. ينطوي تحت مفهوما حركة تنقل الناس من بلد إلى آخر ومن منطقة إلى أخرى بحثا عن فرص تحسين وضعهم الإقتصادي وسعيا إلى أمان سياسي ومجال حُرّيات فردية أوسع. وفي خضم ذلك تُولد تجارب المهاجرين من رحم خلفياتهم الثقافية ووضعياتهم الاجتماعية والاقتصادية ونظيراتها في الوسط الذي توجّهوا للإستقرار فيه. تبرز السينما كإحدى أهم الوسائط التي عبّرت عن ظاهرة الهجرة وأدخلتها إلى الثقافة الجماهيرية، من خلال قدرتها الفنية في توليد العاطفة وتحدي المُسلّمات وتمثيل التجارب الإنسانية. اهتم فيلم **منزل الرمل والضباب** لمُخرجه **بيرلمن فاديم (2003)** بتصوير قصة تلاقي بهراني مهاجر إيراني مع كاتي مُواطنة أمريكية شُفيت لتوها من الإدمان على المشروبات الكحولية. يجتمع الطرفان في المكان والزمان بسبب خطأ بيروقراطي أدى إلى انتقال ملكية المنزل من كاتي إلى بهراني. يسلط هذا البحث بمعالجة الفيلم كدراسة حالة للهجرة من الشرق الأوسط إلى الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. من خلال الإعتماد على منهج موضوعاتي وجمالي تُركز هذه الدراسة على اضاءة كيفية معالجة الفيلم لتجارب المهاجر وماتمخض عنها من قضايا الانزياح، التبادل الثقافي، والبحث عن الهوية. وبناءا عليه تُشير النتائج إلى ضرورة فهم الهجرة كظاهرة مُتموضعة بين الفرص والتحديات الناشئة عن تجربة المهاجر، لاسيما بالنسبة للقادم من الشرق الأوسط إلى الولايات المتحدة.

كلمات مفتاحية: الهجرة، الانزياح، التبادل الثقافي، البحث عن الهوية، الحلم الأمريكي.

Introduction:

As part of human activity, people have moved from one country to another for many reasons throughout the development of human civilisation. In *The Age of Migration*, Castles, Haas, and Miller (2014) contrive that immigration is when people move across borders to live in a new location either temporarily or permanently. It is a complicated process that has various social, economic, cultural, and political factors that affect both the destination country and the migrants themselves. Thus, immigration is a complex and multifaceted issue that has shaped the United States among other immigrant-based countries in many ways. In cinema, through the lens of the film *House of Sand and Fog (HSF)*, directed by Vadim Perelman (2003), we can get insights into the complex experiences of immigrants in the United States and the challenges they face. Based on Dubus (1999) novel of the same title, the movie tells the story of the Behrani family, who have escaped political strife in their native country in the Middle East and migrated to the US to seek a better life. However, they face a number of challenges upon arriving in the US, including cultural differences, language barriers, and stereotypes about Middle Easterners.

Through our analysis, we focus on the East-West cultural encounter and its impact on the Behrani family, as well as the role of language and communication in their struggle for the American Dream. We also use an aesthetic approach, specifically analysing the cinematography, sound, and *mise-en-scene*, to understand the visual and aural design of the film and how it contributes to the themes of immigration and cultural encounter. Thus, we seek to demonstrate how the main idea and value find grounds through the interplay of the narrative, characters, and visual design (Bordwell & Thompson, 2016, p. 39).

By examining the intersection of cultural differences and the immigrant experience, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the movie's message and its relevance to the ongoing debate on immigration in the United States. Thus, we can gain a deeper understanding of the impact of immigration policies and the importance of creating a more inclusive society. Through *HSF*, we can see the struggles and sacrifices of immigrants and the complexities of their lives in the United States, a country in which immigration has been defining to the nation since its early days. This ranged between inviting and excluding attitudes, under legal and illegal umbrellas. Providing hope and aspirations, but also violence and discrimination, American official and social attitudes have not settled to this day (Daniels, 2005). By bringing attention to these issues, we endeavour to contribute to a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of immigration from the East to the West.

1. Displacement and the search for identity:

The film opens with a scene at the home on which all the narrative is based. Then a flashback scene takes us to the Behrani family's former home in Iran, where the bird chirps are intertwined with the sound of sea waves. Aesthetically, such cut accounts for displacement at both levels, time and space. In *HSF* displacement manifests in different ways for Behrani (Ben Kingsley) and Kathy Niccolo (Jennifer Connelly), the new and the old owners of the house respectively. On one hand, Behrani experiences displacement in terms of leaving his home country and culture, and then struggles to adapt and integrate into a new society that often treats him and his family with suspicion and hostility. On the other hand, Kathy has her own share of displacement within her own country, as she loses her home and all her possessions. Thus, she is forced to live in a motel, then in the streets, and even in her car, as we will discuss hereafter. Her displacement is not only physical, but also social and psychological, as she struggles with addiction and depression.

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Another theme that is closely related to displacement is identity. Behrani and Kathy both struggle with questions of identity as they go through their new circumstances. Behrani struggles to reconcile his past identity as a colonel in the Iranian military with his current identity as an immigrant trying to provide for his family in a new country. Kathy, meanwhile, fights to come to terms with her new identity, as a homeless person, and the shame and pain that comes with it. The Behranis give much importance to their original identity and keep reminding themselves of it. As Kathy pays them a visit, the scene in Figure 1 launches the film's narrative on the debate on identity. Through a full shot and no soundtrack, with bleak colours raising curiosity and tension, we see how Kathy is surrounded by many objects. At a dark corner, a portrait captures her interest. Then, she is driven to turn her attention to it. To her surprise, Behrani is portrayed in his uniform, only to make her reaches out to take an attentive close look at it. As the viewer is already aware of Behrani's exposition in his former country, the camera keeps holding a distant view for a while.

Figure 1. Kathy reaching the portrait of Behrani with his uniform



Source: (Perelman, 2003, 00:35:00)

Displacement is a concept that has been explored in various fields, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, and cultural studies. It refers to the experience of being uprooted or removed from one's original location, either physically or emotionally. Thus, the second scene in *HSF* explicitly shows how the trees are cut at Behrani's former home in Iran. *The Location of Culture* by Bhabha (2004) explores the complexities of cultural identity in the context of displacement and migration. Bhabha argues that displacement is not just a physical movement, but also a psychological experience that involves a sense of dislocation and disorientation. He discusses the ways in which cultural identity is formed through a negotiation of the self and the other, and how displacement can complicate this process. Another important work is *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity* edited by Lavie and Swedenburg (2013). This collection of essays explores the multiple ways in which displacement and diaspora affect cultural identity, politics, and social relationships. In this view culture is not necessarily bound with geography. The contributors discuss topics such as the Palestinian diaspora, African American identity in the United States, and the experiences of Iraqi refugees. In *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in*

the Modern World, Castles et al. (2014) argue that immigration is intertwined with globalisation. That is, the movement of people is closely related to the movement of capital and commodities. Communication technology promotes cultural exchange and helps the mentioned movement to spread out faster. Yet, the authors acknowledge the challenges that migrants face in adapting to new environments. In the light of these arguments, in *HSF*, the Behrani family's main drive for movement from Iran to the United States is political. The revolution that took power in the country made it impossible for colonel Behrani to remain in the country, fearing prosecution and violent measures as he represented the overthrown regime. Naturally, such political dimension behind the family's move was intertwined with social aspects. Behrani held a prominent social position and seemingly he had no predisposition to fall in social rank, a thing that we notice through his vertical vision to society even in the U.S. In one scene, with a high-pitched voice, he addresses Kathy, telling her: "You are nothing!!" because for him she is just an ordinary citizen (Perelman, 2003, 01:17:11). The scene goes beyond Behrani's criticism of Kathy to show that displacement is not just about the physical and psychological movements, but it is one that demonstrates signs of empowerment. As Saha (2015) advocates, displacement has the faculty of bypassing the psychological struggles in the "alien land," leading to a sense of self-elevation. Thus, in a good number of scenes, we can see how Behrani moves beyond the stereotyped immigrant, merely seeking survival.

2. Immigration: Greed or Necessity?

HSF, as a film, accounts for Behrani's journey as an immigrant but also for human nature and aspiration. Immigration in the film manifests layers of complexity *vis-à-vis* the rationales of human action. Between the ends of a spectrum ranging from greed to necessity, the story of Behrani unfolds. In his study of migration in America, Handlin (1951) purported that "no man could escape choices that involved, day after day, an evaluation of his goals, of the meaning of his existence, and of the purpose of the social forms and institutions that surrounded him"(p.7). Thus, the journey of the immigrant has never been about adventure, pleasure, or greed, but it was an act of desperation. The same inclination was proposed by Higham (2002), who stressed that the immigrants were no adventurers or greed-driven, but they left their countries for human reasons, escaping oppression, persecution and seeking safe life for their families and children. Likewise, in *HSF*, the character of Behrani illustrates the challenges faced by immigrants who experience a significant loss of social status and professional identity upon arriving in a new country. As an officer in his home country, Behrani likely held a position of authority and respect, which may have played a significant role in his sense of self-worth and identity. However, upon arriving in the United States, he is forced to take on low-paying jobs to support himself and his family. This loss of social status and professional identity can be a deeply challenging and humbling experience for many immigrants. Behrani's struggle to find work that is adequate with his skills and experience is also reflective of broader societal challenges faced by immigrants in the job market. Immigrants often face systemic barriers that prevent them from accessing meaningful employment opportunities, even when they have valuable skills and experience.

In Behrani's case, his experience also underscores the impact of economic and political factors on migration patterns. Many immigrants are forced to leave their home countries due to economic hardship, political instability, or conflict. Upon arriving in a new country, they often face a difficult transition as they adapt to a new culture and try to establish a sense of belonging and economic stability. Behrani's way to find such stability goes through his endeavour to assure an adequate financial situation. For this, he resorted to buying Kathy's house in the first place. While a superficial reading of the film might entail a certain level of greed in Behrani's choice, underneath

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such seemingly ugly reality lies an immigrant's rejection of the stereotype on middle-easterners. While there is some truth regarding the inefficiency of some types of works, there is much mis-use of the judgement. Journalist Walter Lippmann was the first to come up with the concept of "stereotype" as he noticed the way national types were used as propaganda in the First World War, only to promote atrocities (Makari, 2021). For the immigrants, the stereotype in question meant they are the emblem for poverty and never-ending inefficient work. Through an orange tone, accented with medium lighting, the scene in Figure 2 displays Nadi with a high camera angle. A feeling of otherness arises as she externalises her inner concerns and awareness on the potential fate of immigrants like her. She tells her husband: "I did not come to America to live like an Arab." The scene reflects on how society looks down to the immigrant, namely middle-easterners. Nadereh, or Nadi (Shohreh Aghdashloo), is located at the bottom of the frame, looking upward, engendering a feeling of lowness and despair. The shot is purposefully taken from a high angle to foster such emotion. The scene is defining for the film as it demonstrates Behrani's intentions and rationales. With nostalgic piano music in the background, entering the house holding white flowers, he reveals the high aspirations and hope he holds in his heart, yet the bleak browns and reds foreshadow the risks and dangers lurking ahead. A few moments after he brings what he considered as good news, buying a new house, a quarrel between the couple over the nature of the house, a bungalow, ignites a debate over the social position they are about to experience. In contrast to the rest of the film, this scene shows the house as less than the family's expectations. Here, it is taken for what it is, just a bungalow, while in most of the scenes involving native characters, the small house is magnified into the sum of thirty years of work by Kathy's father. Beside the symbolism the house entails, such discrepancy in terms of viewing the value of a given entity shows that not necessarily culture attributes objective evaluation to different matters of life. Thus, we are called to rethink the judgement many native characters show *vis-à-vis* the Behrani family. Kathy's lawyer, for instance, accuses Behrani of greed, as she tells him that he is trying to make profit out of her client's house, prior to any objective study of the case. Ultimately, the film does not refer to any juridical procedures or settings in relation to the case, only to foster the stereotype-based postures taken by certain natives against the immigrants.

Figure 2. Nadine looking at Behrani, about to reveal her unhappiness with society.



Source: (Perelman, 2003, 00:17:13)

3. Behrani's aspirations: An American Dream?

Cinema has chronicled many experiences of protagonists' rise from the shades of society to success and fame. Yet, such success is often associated with early European comers to America. In many cases, such journeys of success raise to the level of epic. Widely considered as a land of opportunity, America has been associated with the American Dream. This is a term is used to describe the ideal of success and upward mobility in American society. In the *The Epic of America*, Adams (1931) turned the term into a lasting concept and associated such dream with "a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (404). At its core, the American Dream represents the idea that with hard work, determination, and a little bit of luck, anyone can achieve success, prosperity, and happiness in the United States.

Today, the American Dream has come to be interpreted in a variety of ways, depending on every individual. For some people, it might mean owning a home, having a good job, and providing a comfortable life for their family. For others, it might mean achieving fame, fortune, or success in a particular field. At a more philosophical level, the American Dream can be seen as a broader ideal of freedom and opportunity. The United States has long been seen as a land of opportunity, where people from all over the world can come and make something of themselves. The American Dream embodies the idea of limitless possibility, where anyone can achieve their goals and aspirations if they work hard enough. However, the American Dream has also been criticised for innately excluding some seekers and being overly idealistic. Some argue that the dream is not attainable for everyone, an idea we find in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), in which Willey Loman believes in social connection rather than hard work as means to achieve success. Such privilege is often not available to certain groups, such as immigrants, minorities, and the working poor, who face systemic barriers that prevent them from achieving success and prosperity. Others argue that the American Dream places too much emphasis on material success and individual achievement, and that it fails to account for the importance of community, social responsibility, and other non-material values.

In *HSF*, Behrani's association of his new experience in America with dream is pronounced in early scenes as he informs the guests of his daughter's wedding: "A father can dream" (Perelman, 2003, 00:04:02). As early immigrants who landed in America, he is autonomous and hardworker, and had the courage to begin his life anew. As his savings were spent on his daughter's wedding, he enrolls to a highway company to exert himself in one of the hardest jobs, as the scene demonstrates (Figure 3). An eye level shot puts Behrani at the same level with other workers to emphasise his new status as equal with the working class. Then, in the next scene, he reminds not just his guests but the viewers that it was a wonderful idea to cut-off the trees at his home on the Caspian Sea, Iran. The scene is double-layered in meaning as it opened the horizon for the family to find new opportunities through the sea. In other words, the house's view on the sea has become wide-open to the horizon, finding no obstacles to experience new possibilities. However, as Behrani himself tells us, their lives went the way the trees did, as to foreshadow the other side of what might be associated with the Behranis' version of the American Dream. For this, the film sought to highlight not only the successful achievements in the image of his daughter's well elaborated wedding, but also the challenges lying ahead.

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Figure 3. Behrani at the high-way company



Source: (Perelman, 2003, 00:05:29)

The Behrani family as middle-easterners are basically conceived as spiritually defined people, only to raise concerns of the stereotypes and prejudice facing such type of immigrants. In a dark tone scene, as Kathy complains about the way Behrani pushes her outside what has become his house, the policeman, Lester (Ron Eldard), finds no justification but to tell her that “May be they don’t know their way around” (Perelman, 2003, 00:56:22). That comment could be interpreted as prejudiced since it implies that the Behrani family is unfamiliar with American society and culture, suggesting that they are outsiders who do not belong. It could also be seen as patronising, as if the policeman is suggesting that he knows better than they do. This type of thinking is an example of stereotyping and prejudice, which can lead to discrimination and exclusion of marginalised groups. Just after, Kathy and Lester are driving by the Behranis’ house and notice that they are having a party with music and guests on their rooftop. Lester remarks that they are “having a party on the roof like they’re back in Tehran,” alluding that the Behrani family is not integrated into American society and is still clinging to their Iranian roots. Kathy agrees and says that it’s “so un-American” (Perelman, 2003, 00:57:45). This scene shows their prejudices and biases towards the Behrani family, and reinforces the idea that they are seen as outsiders in their own community. It also highlights the characters’ narrow-mindedness and ignorance towards other cultures.

Probably, the American dream reflected the philosophy of the founding fathers of the nation, but the status quo in the social and political ladder after two centuries is not necessarily bound with such maxim. In the film, Lester overtly demonstrates a derive from the very basics of freedom and equality. In a way, he is a symbol of corruption and ethical decadence. In one scene, he arrives at Behrani’s house under the pretence of discussing the selling notice that Kathy has received. However, his true motive is to intimidate Behrani and his family into complying with his demands. The scene starts with a medium shot of the police officer standing outside Behrani’s house. As he enters the house, a high-angle shot, frames him from behind as he walks through the living room. The shot creates a sense of unease and tension, as the audience is placed in the position of an observer who is following the police officer’s movements. Lighting is predominantly warm with yellow tones, which convey a sense of homeliness and comfort. However, as Lester’s true intentions become clear, the lighting becomes dim, with blue tones dominating the frame. This shift in colour palette reinforces the threatening nature of the officer’s presence, and the sense of intrusion and violation that his actions represent. No use of music adds to the sense of realism and

immediacy. The absence of music means also that the audience is left to focus solely on the dialogue raising a sense of intimacy and intensity. Behrani moves from being a difficult colonel to a victim citizen. Reddish colours generate further a tense and uneasy atmosphere, underscoring the abusive and unethical behaviour of the police officer towards Behrani and his family.

4. Behrani: Between longing and belonging

Behrani's character in the film faces a conflict between his Persian heritage and his desire to assimilate into American society. He aspires to provide a better life for his family and for him owning a home in the US is a symbol of success and acceptance. For this, he works hard to improve his economic and social status and raise them to the American standards. Early in the film, the wedding scene demonstrates how American social style is apparent through the guests' costumes and the ceremony arrangement. In the very next scene, Behrani is introduced as a worker in a highway company, with much focus on the effort he is making. Through strong natural lighting, a scene on the road establishes such meaning merged with his eyes focused on the horizon, as a sign for his vision and determination. Our perception of him as just an ordinary worker is dashed when a more interesting scene portrays him dressed up, holding his bags, and crossing the door in a very determined way (Figure 4). The melancholic music, the bright lighting, and white rosy colouring foreshadow a dreamlike world and hope. The camera in a front position fosters the impression that he is crossing to a new world, visioned in the earlier scene, and being watched by the host Americans.

Figure 4. Behrani dressed up and crossing to his new world.



Source: (Perelman, 2003, 00:12:46)

Meanwhile, his actions to achieve this goal, such as buying the house at an auction and evicting Kathy, conflict with his moral and cultural values. On one hand, Behrani sees himself as a proud Iranian who values his heritage and culture. He speaks Farsi, prays to Allah, and holds his family traditions close. On the other hand, he wants to integrate into American society and achieve the American Dream, as we mentioned earlier. He changes his name from Nadi Behrani to Behrani, and encourages his son to adopt a more American-sounding name, Esmail. He also works hard at

his job to provide for his family and maintain a middle-class lifestyle. Throughout the film, Behrani's pursuit to maintain a new lifestyle makes him struggle with his sense of identity, a fact that becomes more pronounced as his actions conflict with his values. He becomes increasingly desperate to keep the house and maintain his status, leading him to make questionable decisions that ultimately lead to tragedy. In this way, the theme of identity in *HSF* is intricately tied to issues of immigration and the struggle to assimilate into a new culture.

Behrani's longing for his former home with a view of the sea can be seen as a symbol of his displacement and sense of loss as an immigrant in the United States. The house represents his former life and identity, and the sea serves as a reminder of the country and culture he left behind. In many ways, Behrani's attachment to his former home is a reflection of the challenges and struggles that immigrants face as they try to integrate into a new society. While they may find new opportunities and possibilities in their new country, they also experience a sense of dislocation and displacement as they try to adapt to a new culture and way of life. As a former Iranian citizen, Behrani belongs by birth to what Daniels (1991, para. 22.3) calls the new Asian immigrants. They are the category of immigrants who benefited from the socio-political atmosphere of the Cold War, lending them the right to join the American soil and society. In the film, we can see how Behrani is more or less confident that the US is willing to provide shelter for the politically prosecuted officials in what they call rogue countries. Besides, as an immigrant, Behrani may feel that his Middle Eastern identity is a barrier to acceptance and success in American society. He may believe that distancing himself from his cultural background and adopting American values and customs will increase his chances of integration and success. Moreover, through his explicit statement "I did not come to America to live like an Arab," (Perelman, 2003, 00:19:06) we find allusion to his internalised prejudice and self-hatred. He may have experienced discrimination or prejudice in the past and internalised negative attitudes towards his own culture and identity. This can be a common experience among immigrants who feel pressure to conform to dominant cultural norms and values in order to succeed.

Overall, Behrani's discourse underscores the complex challenges faced by immigrants as they navigate a new cultural landscape and try to establish a sense of belonging while facing discrimination and prejudice. It highlights the importance of understanding and respecting cultural differences, as well as the need for a more inclusive and accepting society that values diversity and cultural exchange.

5. Kathy: A homeless or a free woman?

Kathy's character in *HSF* brings a more nuanced vision on the dilemma of the immigrant, providing a daring perspective from the American viewpoint. While standing for the native American, the way she goes into similar in-nature experiences of those new comers works as an alert and call for Americans to feel what others go through. Perelman's way to do this in the film is symbolism. Thus, home at the centre of the film serves this very end only to be reinforced by the car as a symbol. Kathy's loss of the former and resort to the second emphasises the complexity of Kathy's character. One of the turning points in the film is defined by her decision to take things on her own and show some strong character, as illustrated in the scene (Figure 5). A full shot, with natural lighting and vivid colours, puts her against a landscape in nature, penetrated by the road. The choice of the road is no accident as it turns around a mountain, only to show the high pressures and difficulties she is undergoing, with drumming in music raising a sense of danger and challenge. Moreover, her determination to go through is of paramount importance and could be confirmed through her will to find her way through.

Figure 5. Kathy driving her car through a turning road



Source: (Perelman, 2003, 00:41:27)

She is a multi-dimensional character, whose experiences shed light on the challenges faced by immigrants and their struggle for stability and sense of belonging. As an American citizen who lost her home due to bureaucratic mistakes, Kathy becomes a symbol of displacement and homelessness. Her car, or what she calls “the bonneville,” in which she sleeps at one point, becomes her sweet home and the symbol of her freedom, highlighting her resilience in the face of hardships. Her divorce from an uncaring husband is also significant, symbolising her desire for autonomy and self-determination. Thus, in her image, the car can be seen as symbolizing both her homelessness and her freedom. On one hand, the car is a reminder of Kathy’s desperate financial situation and lack of stability. She is forced to mostly live in it, with reference to her poverty and inability to afford a home. On the other hand, the car also represents Kathy’s independence and freedom. As a divorced woman who has lost her job and home, she is ironically free of the responsibilities of a family or a stable job, only to recapture a spontaneous and free-spirited life. Her car enables her to move around freely and explore different parts of the city, which is something she might not have been able to do if she had a more stable and traditional lifestyle.

Therefore, Kathy’s car serves as a powerful symbol of both her homelessness and her independence, highlighting the complex and nuanced realities of life for people who are struggling to make ends and opposites meet, or be bridged, as the scene in Figure 1 portrays. The shot takes on a foggy atmosphere with bleak lighting, only to reflect on Kathy’s emotions and sense of ambiguity and uncertainty. The way the future is much precipitated and thought of appears at the sound level when the next scene’s bus sound is brought forth before even the respective shot is displayed. Through Kathy’s character, the movie takes a universal stance as it explores the impact of displacement, particularly on those who are not immigrants themselves but who experience displacement for other reasons. Her story serves as a reminder of the fragility of the American Dream, as well as the importance of empathy and compassion in addressing issues of displacement and homelessness. Overall, Kathy’s character highlights the complex intersections between displacement, freedom, and identity, providing a rich and nuanced portrayal of the challenges faced by immigrants and others who experience displacement in their lives.

Figure 6. Kathy on her car pondering near the bridge, with a foggy weather.

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Source: (Perelman, 2003, 00:19:55)

6. Immigrants' Language: When one letter makes the difference

Like cinema itself, language plays a central role in conveying meanings. For the Behrani family, language evokes itself whenever they are to interact or intersect with the new surrounding and culture. Behrani spends a huge part of his fortune only to foster the importance of language and education for him as an immigrant. He, thus, allocates what it takes to send his son to university. The latter demonstrates his will to cultural assimilation through his adoption of the American culture. In many scenes in the film, he distances himself from the Iranian culture through his portrayal as an observer of the dialogues unfolding in front of him. This is enforced by his emotionless reaction to the content he is exposed to. Despite his effort to distance himself from his cultural heritage, some hidden tensions resurface only to witness his uneasiness, with regard to detach himself from a huge part of his identity. The means by which such tensions manifest themselves is language. The scene in which the police officer refers to him as “Ishmael” and his prompt act of correcting him by saying “my name is Esmail, not Ishmael” is significant in several ways (Perelman, 2003, 01:38:44). Firstly, it illustrates the stress and misunderstandings that can arise between different cultures and languages. Lester, the police officer, who is likely not familiar with Middle Eastern names and pronunciation, mispronounces Esmail’s name. This can be seen as a form of aggression, which can contribute to feelings of exclusion and marginalisation among immigrants. Secondly, Esmail’s correction of Lester highlights the importance of cultural identity and respect for individual differences. By asserting his correct name and pronunciation, Esmail is asserting his own cultural identity and sense of self. This can be seen as a form of resistance against assimilation and disregard of cultural differences. Finally, this scene also highlights the challenges faced by immigrant families in maintaining their cultural identity and traditions in a new country. Esmail’s retaliating action reflects the Behrani family’s efforts to preserve their cultural identity and pass it on to their children. However, the challenges of navigating a new culture and society can make it difficult for immigrant families to maintain their cultural practices and traditions. All in all, this scene highlights the complex cultural dynamics and challenges faced by immigrant families in

navigating a new society, and the importance of respect for cultural identity and individual differences in promoting social inclusion and cohesion.

Figure 7. Behrani reading the county's letter with startling difficulty



Source: (Perelman, 2003, 00:38:52)

Language, as deep reference system, works in the back of the narrative and resurfaces at different scenes only to foster its importance and allusion to the immigrants' need for communication with the two cultures they are torn between. Above, in Figure 7, the scene demonstrates Behrani's difficulties of reading a letter he received from the county. A medium closeup shot creates intimacy with the character and exaggerates the way he reads a word for word through the movement of his head and the extensive focus on each word. Muting the soundtrack and amplifying the paper rustling calls further to our attention to Behrani's tension. The next scene goes further in accenting the power of language and its role of negotiating meanings and solutions. Kathy gets bewildered as the Behranis are discussing the content of a letter issued by the county. Kathy's confusion raises the tension and adds to her concerns over finding conciliation with what she considers as perpetrators who stole her house. Misunderstanding occurs again when Behrani was trying to make a deal with potential buyers. Despite their initial willingness to acquire the house, they come to get frustrated and fearful. He could not sell them the house as a hostile atmosphere was set through his utterance of Iranian words that called promptly for the buyers perplexed emotion. To add insult to injury, another scene goes beyond confusion to mockery, as his co-workers deride his imperfect English.

7. Cross-Cultural Family Experiences

The social relationships in *HSF* are central and defining of the workings of two different cultures. If, as proposed by Nafisi (2008), an Iranian professor who lived under the confines of both culture, one culture is centred on individual freedom, the other reveres adherence to community. On one hand Kathy and Lester stand for the extreme Western nucleus family, which not necessarily involves official or religious bonds. The decline and troublesome nature of such family is portrayed in the film through the troublesome nature of both Kathy and Lester marital statuses. Kathy's very depressed nature is the outcome of her breakup with her husband who never appears in the narrative,

accounting for the disappearance of a former style of family. Lester's wife is only talked about and when she appears with her sons, she is shown as a nervous woman, unsatisfied with her husband's attitudes, resembling an uncaring man who is escaping his familial duties. Through his extra-marital relationship with Kathy, we can see how his family is at the verge of destruction. When asked by Kathy about his feelings for his wife, he answered that it was complicated. In many ways, this refers to his uncertainty *vis-à-vis* the communal sense of the family. On the other hand, the Behrani family reflects different attitudes towards social relationships. Spiritual and traditional dimensions serve as the basis of such type of connectedness, while Kathy's relationship with the married police officer can be seen as a reflection of her sense of disconnection and loneliness. Basically, her attraction to him finds grounds in her need for support and power. When they meet, all that he offers is some alcoholic drinks, with reference to their poisonous effect. Despite some references to her family, Kathy is portrayed as a lonely woman. Throughout the film all that evokes her family is just a few phone calls. Remarkably, they never appear physically or come by to pay her a visit. Such portrayal of Kathy's situation left her perceived as a vulnerable woman in a harsh world, accented by the authorities seizing her home. As Nader (2013) put it, "the family's demise has left children exposed to a heartless world without a haven" (para. 6.12). In addition to such vulnerability, Kathy loses any ties with family belonging for she is also a divorced woman. Her social agony is sealed as the film's twist is marked with the loss of her house. All this builds a sense of identity loss that is clearly evoked through the film's narrative. Thus, Kathy is definitely perceived as a vulnerable woman and, by consequence, we understand that she is to seek comfort and companionship in Lester, the police officer.

Figure 8. Kathy meets Lester



Source: (Perelman, 2003, 00:47:52)

However, while their relationship begins with some hope signs, it progressively appears to be superficial and based on secrecy and deception. Through a dark tone and dim lighting, a long shot that is accompanied with an abrupt cut in the soundtrack, puts the couple against a dark background in (Figure 8). The swimming pool imbeds the sexual tensions as they are portrayed as meeting in the shadows of society. They go further to discuss Lester's relationship with his wife. Kathy's awareness on the familial status of her counterpart demonstrates that they are fully conscious of

their action. Ultimately, this bond ends with betrayal and conflict. As his superiors at work discover his irresponsible and unethical behaviours regarding the Behrani's case, his professional life is put into question, only to be sealed by imprisonment. The fall of Lester is not just a critique to the current status of the American family, but is an eye-opener on the outcomes of unrestricted personal freedoms. In contrast to Lester's case, the Behrani family's relationships are characterised by unity, loyalty, and mutual support. Despite the challenges they face as immigrants in a new country, they maintain a strong family bond and prioritise their family relationships over material possessions or financial gain. Stylistically, the film shows Behrani having discussions with his wife and son in a repetitive manner, while for the former, just few storytelling instances evoke the members of his family. No real concerns or implication are stressed within such talks. Overall, the contrasting relationships in the film reflect different attitudes towards family and relationships, and highlight the importance of trust, loyalty, and mutual support in building strong relationships and communities. The portrayal of family in *HSF* takes another dimension, other than a contrasting device between Eastern and Western cultures. It actually serves as a space for cultural exchange. Often the Behranis receive guests and they pay much attention to exhibit their hosting excellency. In the following scene (Figure 9), Nadi expects her newly-wed daughter Soraya (Navi Rawat). So, we understand the extent to which the familial bonds are strong between the Middle-Eastern family's members through the welcoming gesture.

Figure 9. Nadi's garnished guest table



Source: (Perelman, 2003, 00:56:42)

Using a closeup shot, the scene brings forth fruits, with their colours exuding with an inviting atmosphere of emotional prosperity. As she hears her daughter's car honk, Nadi displays her happiness through a broad smile and high-pitched call for her husband. Beside the natural and expected hospitality with regard to her daughter, Nadi welcomes Kathy in no less cheerful face or atmosphere. Kathy who often comes with the predisposition to fight for her right as the true owner of the house, finds herself received as a guest and offered warm reception by Nadi. In the previously examined scene of Behrani portrait, Kathy gets a warm reception and she is served tea by Behrani's wife, Nadi. Tea is a strong symbol of hospitality and its delivery is a gesture of kindness towards a stranger. It may also serve to show the Behrani family's attempts at integrating

into American culture and adapting to their new surroundings. In Middle Eastern cultures, tea is often served to guests as a sign of hospitality and, more importantly, respect. By serving tea to Kathy, Nadi is not only welcoming her into their home, but also trying to make her feel comfortable and at ease. In addition, such act could also be seen as a way to bridge the cultural gap between the Behrani family and Kathy, who comes from a different cultural background. It is worth noting that tea is a common drink across many cultures, and sharing it alludes to connection and familiarity. In a broader sense, the moment Nadi establishes such connectedness is one of cultural exchange, evoking the senses of understanding and compassion. The evoked power through the moment is to erode cultural differences and pave the way for promising possibilities of openness on the other.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, *House of Sand and Fog* by Vadim Perelman (2003) is a filmic masterpiece that provides a nuanced exploration of the immigrant experience of the Middle Easterners in America. Through thematic and aesthetic analysis, we have seen that the film sheds light on various issues, closely related to the phenomenon of immigration. This includes multi-layered portrayals of displacement, identity, freedom, language, family, and the American Dream. Moreover, it succeeds to a large extent in seamlessly employing cinematic elements such as camera angles, lighting, and sound to enhance the portrayal of these themes.

The film also invites its audience to participate in the process of raising awareness and promoting cultural exchange. Resorting to an objective perspective on both Eastern and Western cultures, the film presents itself as one that is an exemplar for openness and sensitivity in art. Through such inclination, *HSF* highlights the need for understanding and tolerance in a world that is becoming increasingly globalised. Additionally, the film serves as a reminder that cinema is an art form that has the power to inform, educate, and inspire its audience. With much respect to world cultures, the film provides criticism to both ends involved in the immigration phenomenon, East and West. Out of the dilemma and difficulties surrounding such delicate issue, the film pinpoints the real reasons and rationales behind the anomalies in human thinking and behaviour, leading to tension and confusion. In many ways the film calls humans to avoid biased irrational judgements and naïve aspirations for unrealistic success through immigration.

In conclusion, *HSF* is a significant contribution to the representation of the immigrant experience in cinema, and it continues to resonate with audiences today, as more and more waves of immigrants find themselves compelled to move away from their motherlands, namely because of the ongoing political and military conflicts in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Its powerful message encourages us to embrace cultural diversity and to recognise the value of every individual regardless of their ethnicity or background.

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Appendix:

Figure 10. *House of Sand and Fog* (2003) film poster



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