

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE USE OF COLOUR IN SANJAY
LEELA BHANSALI'S *PADMAVAT***

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to study the use and impact of colour in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's latest offering *Padmavat* (2018). The paper investigates and establishes how Bhansali uses colour, with specific reference to the costume design of various characters. It establishes that the choice of costume design and their colours borrows and derives heavily from the dominant symbolism that exists in the Indian society and in Hinduism in particular. The film can be read as a visual display of conflict between two factions in the society on the basis of religion. In the good versus evil battle in the film, both the sides of the narrative can be seen in a very specific imagery - carefully constructed by the director - that derives from the symbolic meaning of colours within Hinduism and thus communicates meaning by reinforcing existing conventions.

Keywords: Colour Analysis, Bhansali, *Padmavat*, Semiotic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a dynamic process which produces the behaviours, the practices, the institutions, and the meanings which constitute our social existence (Turner, 2009). For any given society, these behaviours, practices and institutions are built around the questions of shared social meanings that are generated through visual and linguistic signs. It has been argued by Cultural Studies theorists that language is the major mechanism through which culture produces and reproduces these social meanings. Semiotics, which is a field of study that is concerned with investigating the process of creation and communication of meaning through visual and linguistic signs and symbols, is a handy tool for a researcher when trying to understand how meaning is created and sustained in any given culture. Semiotics theoretically breaks down a sign into two parts: a *signifier* referring to the physical form of a sign: an image, a word, or a photograph, and a *signified* meaning the mental concept the signifier refers to. The signifier and signified together form a sign (Turner, 2009).

In a vast history stretching more than 100 years, cinema has developed and established its own visual language with a defined yet dynamic grammar and syntax. Film narratives have evolved and formulated their own codes and conventions. The cinematic language together with cinematic codes and conventions can be understood as signifying systems that are used to establish social or narrative meanings. The signifier in the cinematic language includes the separate technologies and discourses of the camera, lighting, editing, set design, and sound, which all contribute to the creation of meaning (Turner, 2009). Thus the creation of meaning in a filmic text is through a complex mix of various systems of signification.

Films are an important cultural product that emerges from within a society. And since they are a complex amalgamation of different systems of signification, the method of semiotic analysis makes for an appropriate method when conducting an academic inquiry into meaning creation and communication in films.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to investigate the use of colour in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmavat* and find out how meaning is constructed using a definite colour palette.

COLOUR AS SIGN

Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1875-1961) has been quoted as saying “Colours are the mother tongue of the subconscious”. Amongst the many tools and technical conventions that can be used to create meaning in films, is the use of colour. Films are an audio-visual medium and the use of colour in films plays an important role in the creation of meaning. "Carefully chosen, they (colours) can help get a message across that would otherwise be difficult to express - and perhaps appear less credible in words alone” (Fraser and Banks, 2004). They tend to reinforce and enhance (or negate) the message being delivered. In the Indian context, the symbolism of colour stands out and controls every aspect of life; be it religion, politics, festivals, etc. Colour and culture go hand in hand, in fact colour is synonymous with an expression of faith and beliefs (Verma, 2014). In a film, colour manifests itself in ways more than one. It can include set design, colour palette, colour correction, and costume among many other manifestations. The use of colour in the way characters dress, also plays an important role as a sign in a film and has potential cultural connotations that demand an investigation. The use of specific colours in a film has a larger social and cultural context that it exists in and hence contributes in the creation of meaning.

BHANSALI'S CINEMA

One of the Hindi film directors known for their use of opulence and grandeur, both in terms of narratives as well as set designs and costumes, is Sanjay Leela Bhansali. As noted by Panjwani (2017), "his films are grand and epic in scale". Whether for reasons good or bad, whenever a Bhansali film is around the corner for a release, there is quite loud and distinct chatter and coverage in the media. The prospective audience waits with bated breath for the films to hit the cinema screens and the films' set design and costumes always remain a talking point. Bhansali's latest offering was the 2018 film *Padmavat*. The film came with its share of controversies (Pal, 2018) and was another in the list of Bhansali's carefully crafted, larger than life narratives. The film's release came at a time when communal unrest in the country had been growing steadfastly. (The Telegraph). Thus, the social context of *Padmavat*'s release warrants a reading and analysis.

COLOUR ANALYSIS OF PADMAVAT

According to Saussure, a sign consists of a signifier (the form which the sign takes) and the signified (the concept or values it represents). In the film *Padmavat*, a variety of signs have been employed for the construction of meaning in the narrative. These signs are the camera work which includes shot sizes, camera angles, and camera movements as well as dialogues, set design, costumes, colour and music. For the purpose of brevity, this research paper focuses on the use of colour in the costumes of the characters as they navigate through important plot points of the film's narrative design.

In the film *Padmavat* the opening credits are saffron in colour. *Saffron*, considered the most sacred colour in Hinduism, represents fire and as impurities are burnt by fire, this colour symbolises purity. It also represents religious abstinence, seen largely adorned by ascetics and *yogis*. This colour's connotation has a sacred meaning in Hinduism. It is the colour of holy men who have renounced the world (Verma, 2014). Thus, with the use of saffron in the opening titles, Bhansali is setting the stage for the film as pure and true.

The very next scene in the film opens in a desolate land (Afghanistan) where villainous plots against India are being developed by the 'barbarians' Khilji Clan. The audience is led to believe that the Khilji are an unsophisticated and uncouth people and the choice of colour palette used to paint this part plays an important role in shaping the bias of the audience against the Khiljis. Their introduction scene features a rustic looking courtroom, with the characters dressed in darker hues and shades and lots of fur while donning very little jewelry. Enter the main antagonist of the film, Alauddin Khilji, dressed in all black. Throughout the film except for certain situations, the character of Alauddin is always seen dressed in black. It is important to recall here, that the colour black is considered a colour of ostracisation, of evil. It symbolises the 'other'. With the dominant use of black on Alauddin and later on for his army as well, they are

portrayed as the 'other', the unwanted. Another symbolism associated with the colour black is that of mourning, thus painting and portraying Alauddin Khilji's character as the bringer of pain and death, person that is pure evil. The only break from this dark imagery is in the colours that the character of Mehrunnissa is draped in. Amongst all the darkness, Mehrunnissa's attire and her presence is like a shining beacon, while she is draped in a deep red colour that seems to engulf her, thus leading the audience to conclude that she is unlike the uncouth Khiljis she is surrounded with.

The pervasive use of the colour black in Alauddin's introductory scene cannot be more in contrast with the off-white (almost white) that Padmavati's character wears in her introductory scene. The colour white is a mixture of seven different colours and hence symbolises a little of the quality of each. It represents purity, cleanliness, peace and knowledge (Verma, 2014). Padmavati's off-white finds a reflection in the colours the character of Ratan Singh dons, when Padmavati accidentally shoots him with an arrow (also this character's introduction in the film). This use of stark opposite colours on Alauddin Khilji and the characters of Padmavati and Ratan Singh, symbolically creates and as well as emphasises, for the audience, the two opposing sides, the two poles which will be colliding in the narrative of the film. It also cements the good vs. evil battle that is to form the basic premise of the story. Thus, it can be argued that the use of specific colours in the film's visual universe becomes more than an aesthetic decision and moves into the realm of using colours as signs that signify explicit ideas and concepts that Bhansali strives to construct in the narrative of the film.

The colour symmetry between the characters of Padmavati and Ratan Singh is not accidental and from the get go, lays the foundation, in the minds of the viewer, of the bond that Padmavati and Ratan Singh will share throughout the film; their love for one another and the special relationship that they'll build together. This colour symmetry continues throughout the film. In the scene when after the wedding, Ratan Singh along with Padmavati returns to Chittor (Ratan Singh's kingdom), they meet Raghav Chetan, the king's counsellor and guide (Rajguru). They are both wearing lighter shades with green headgear. In the case of Ratan Singh, it is a green turban while for Padmavati it is a green *odhni* (a separate piece of cloth worn by respectable women to cover their hair). The *ghoomar* dance sequence that follows, sees a momentary break in this tradition with Padmavati dressed in the colour red, a colour that indicates purity (Verma, 2014), thus signifying the purity of the new bride and the new queen of Chittor. The colour red is also the indicator of sensuality (Verma, 2014), and thus alludes to the sexual energy between the two characters (Padmavati and Ratan Singh), foreshadowing the physical intimacy between the royal couple that follows after this sequence. The Khilji royal couple too is shown in a similar coloured costumes (dark red) in the bedroom sequence following Alauddin's ascension to the throne, but this symmetry doesn't stop there, as a third character, that of Malik Gafur, also wears

similar shades as the royal couple. Thus, highlighting his closeness and possible sexual relationship with the Sultan, Alauddin. Here, it is pertinent to mention that in the introductory scene of Malik Gafur, he is seen 'draped' in an all-white piece of cloth, which he later removes to reveal his true self as he uses that same piece of cloth to wipe off the blood of the people he has just killed.

In terms of creating a contrast between the two opposing sides, it is not just the colour of the costumes of the main characters that has been put to use. The contrast finds an echo in the sets of the palaces, forts and also the costumes of the people that inhabit them and continues in the battlefield too. While the Rajput durbar is well lit with use of bright colours and light coloured walls, the Khilji courtroom's ambience is always dark with the use of much subdued colours. Thus, signifying the Khiljis as evil and the Rajputs as good and decent. This contrast is all the more unequivocal as not a single good deed is shown to be performed by Alauddin's character and the Sultanate while on the other hand not a single bad deed is showcased on the Rajput side. This establishes and maintains a reading with the audience that the Rajputs never do any wrong or conversely, that no action by the Rajputs can ever be wrong. Later, this becomes the backbone for the justification of the act of Jauhar.

A film where colour plays such an important role, it is little wonder that a significant plot point of the film happens during Holi, the festival of colours. The shift in narrative is also emphasised by the change in colour donned by Alauddin, which for the first time is all-white. This can be read as a hint to the viewer that something important is about to happen. And it does happen in the form of Alauddin's character smearing his entire face with saffron coloured *gulal* (holi colour). His saffronised face symbolises a peace mask that he is wearing in order to dupe the other side. When Alauddin and Ratan Singh's characters meet for the first time inside the fort of Chittor, their costume colours are fairly straightforward, with Alauddin in his usual dark shades and Ratan Singh in red, thus reinforcing the contrast in the of two characters. It also indicates an end to Alauddin's peace mask and a return to his manipulating and scheming self. There is also a rare contrast in the costume colours of Padmavati and Ratan Singh which signifies the disagreement they have on inviting Alauddin into Chittor and Padmavati pressing on having her face be shown to Alauddin. This contrast in the colours of the royal couple finds a parallel in Mehrunnissa and Alauddin throughout the film's narrative, but one instance stands out in particular which is discussed further in the paper. When Padmavati's reflection is shown to Alauddin, her costume is white, a colour which represents purity, cleanliness, peace and knowledge (Verma, 2014). So through the use of white, this act of being looked at by the 'other man' (Alauddin) is given the noble texture similar to a widow in Hindu society who sacrifices all beauty and colour in respect for a dead husband.

It is important to note here that Bhansali also uses the colour white in instances where there is an act of deception involved. While the character is dressed in white, putting on a facade of being friendly and benign, in reality there are ulterior motives that are being brewed and put to order. Two examples of this are, as earlier discussed, the introductory scene of Malik Gafur and the instance where Alauddin makes the decision of visiting Ratan Singh's courtroom for the first time. A third instance again involves the character of Alauddin Khilji, where Ratan Singh repays the visit to his temporary courtroom. While Alauddin is dressed in white, signifying purity, he has a black *shawl* over his white garments, which can be read as a signifier for his evil intention of kidnapping Ratan Singh.

After the kidnapping of Ratan Singh, Padmavati takes the decision to travel to Delhi (Khilji's Capital) in order to retrieve him. Her unorthodox decision stands out just as she stands out visually, in a saffron *odhni*, symbolising her sacrifice and establishing her moral superiority vis-a-vis other women who are all dressed in red. When the news of Padmavati travelling to Delhi reaches the injured Alauddin, he is seen wearing white while being tended to by his wife Mehrunnissa who is in the colour dark red. This is a throwback to the Padmavati and Ratan Singh disagreements, as the two characters have disagreements of their own over Padmavati. This also forebodes her intention to betray Alauddin. When Padmavati arrives in Delhi she is seen in a black *shawl*, signifying her plotting and scheming to free Ratan Singh. Accompanying her are 800 *daasis*, who in fact are 800 soldiers hiding beneath red *odhnis* which they discard to reveal their saffron coloured robes, symbolising their renunciation of the world and their eventual suicidal mission. When Alauddin returns to Chittor with his army to capture Padmavati and all hope is lost, Padmavati seeks permission from Ratan Singh to do Jauhar (mass suicide by self-immolation). She is dressed in the colour saffron, like the Rajput warriors, symbolising her renunciation of the world and her ascension as a deity.

As the film draws to its end, Ratan Singh and Padmavati are seen together, for the last time, both in the colour red, symbolising their setting aside of differences and their unity in thought and purpose, their own suicide missions - Ratan Singh on the battlefield and Padmavati on the pyre. In the battlefield we see Ratan Singh in his usual red and Alauddin in his usual black, reminiscent of their first meeting in Chittor. This can be read as showcasing, both of their's immovable nature; Ratan Singh always doing what is honourable and just and Alauddin doing anything to get what he wants.

The film's narrative then moves to the great spectacle that Bhansali has been working towards – the jauhar scene. The contrast represented by Bhansali through the use of the colours red and black in the battlefield, continues and intensifies in the scene. On the one hand is the sea of red that the women including Padmavati are dressed in and on the other are Alauddin and his soldiers

in black. The red that the women are draped in, once again signifies their purity and courage, as they decide to enter the pyre and self-immolate themselves rather than outlive their male guardians. Even Padmavati's widow caretaker, who appears in shades of greys and blues throughout the film, is donning the colour red. Once the communal fire has been lit, what follows is a ten-minute choreographed sequence of Padmavati and the other women of the fort, all dressed in red, perhaps their bridal attires, walking with glassy eyes and a steely resolve towards the *jauhar kund*. Their faces are radiant with saffron glow from flames of the pyre. The slow motion shots, the choreographed movement and the use of a specific colour palette all contribute towards making the climax sequence one that the audience cannot help but marvel at. The last shot of the film sees the silhouette of Padmavati engulfed in the saffron colour of the pyre, thus symbolising, as per Padmavati's character 'ultimate victory for Chittor and the biggest defeat for Alauddin'.

CONCLUSION

A thorough reading of Bhansali's Padmavat as a visual text and his use of colour in the film's narrative reveals that Bhansali has used a very specific colour palette. The purpose of the colour palette goes beyond the obvious understanding that it is a decision made to increase the aesthetic appeal of the film. Apart from creating a visually cohesive design, the carefully thought out use of colour contributes to the final audience takeaway. By choosing colours that signify defined ideas and thoughts in the dominant collective psyche, Bhansali is able to construct as well as build upon meanings and associations for the various characters. This use of colour adds another layer of meaning that the audience deciphers subconsciously. The audience comes to abhor the character of Alauddin not solely on the narrative, but also by the subliminal messages being conveyed through the use of colour that paint him as the other; as someone to be detested and frowned upon. Similarly, the characters of Ratan Singh and Padmavati garner praise and appreciation as the colours they are draped in associate them with purity, dignity and sacrifice.

To not see Padmavat in the present context of an aggravated communal disharmony will be akin to studying the film in vacuum. Films are a cultural product and Padmavat is no exception. Therefore, reading the film as an extension or a spillover effect of a dominant right wing ideology is expected, where Alauddin's character can be read as a Hindu hardliner's understanding of a Muslim - barbaric, uncivilised and evil, while Ratan Singh and Padmavati, with their poise, simplicity and adherence to principles, epitomise the cultural ethos of Hindus. Claims have been made by historians and academicians that the film twists Alauddin's portrayal (NDTV) as one that is hate worthy. It is pertinent to note here that the colour scheme utilised in the film heavily borrows its significance from dominant Hindu mythology. Bhansali uses colours that have precise connotations and associations and thus is able to construct identities and

values, an understanding of which, the audience latches on to instantly. However a detailed understanding of the film in this context requires a separate investigation, a fresh research paper altogether.

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