

**The colours of Shiva in ‘Solo’:  
Analysing the role of colour scheme in cinematic - visual storytelling**

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**Abstract**

Solo is a Malayalam language anthology film consisting of 4 segments - each telling its own story. Each of the segments is named after an epithet of Lord Shiva and is assigned a color palette associated with a ‘*pancha bhoota*’ or ‘constituent elements of the universe’ according to traditional Hindu philosophy. This research paper analyzes the use of 4 distinct color schemes in the film and its intended role in the film’s storytelling.

**Keywords: Colour, colour palette, colour scheme, cinematic - visual storytelling, symbolism**

**Introduction**

The use of colour in cinema is a crucial part of the visual storytelling process.

Cinema is primarily a sensory experience. In other words, the audience ‘experiences’ the narrative/story of the story primarily through their senses of vision (visuals), and hearing (sound). Thus, the use of colours is a significant part of the audience’s experience of the cinema’s narrative.

Colours have a significant impact on the audience’s understanding of the story/narrative since it carries both denotative and connotative meanings. For example, warm colours such as Red, Orange, Yellow are often associated with danger, warmth, or playfulness, cool colours such as blue, green etc are often associated with cold, damp, envy, fertility etc. Bright, saturated displays of colours are often associated with splendour and might while desaturated colours symbolise austerity.

According to Rabbaa et al. (2024), ‘*The fusion of diverse colors serves as a powerful tool in highlighting the creator’s artistic intent and evoking emotional resonance among the audience. It enriches the emotional depth of characters in film narratives, ensuring that the creator’s intended emotions are vividly and distinctly perceived by the viewers*’.

The perception of colour is also different across the globe. According to Alnasuan (2016), ‘*..the meanings and uses of color have never been consistent across geographical and cultural boundaries. Similar colors can carry vastly different meanings across cultures*’.

Thus, usage of colour is also dependent on the cultural context. The audience of a film would be able to derive the connotative and denotative meanings associated with colours according to their respective cultural contexts. For example, the colour black is associated with mourning in western cultures, while in India, white is often associated with austerity and mourning.

This study focuses on analysing the use of colours in Malayalam film ‘Solo’. The film is an anthology, meaning, it consists of 4 individual segments each telling its own story.

The segments use 4 different colour palettes each distinct from each other. The use of colour palette is designed to complement the symbolism associated with the Hindu God Shiva. This study would explore how the filmmakers have creatively used colours for complimenting the storytelling process.

### **Research Objective**

The use of colour is an integral part of cinematic storytelling. The selection of colours in the frames is a deliberate creative choice made by the filmmakers to create a certain psychological impact and emotional response from the audience. According to Rabbaa et al. (2024) *'fusion of diverse colors serves as a powerful tool in highlighting the creator's artistic intent and evoking emotional resonance among the audience'*. This study focuses on understanding the role of colour in the cinematic storytelling process by analysing the use of colours in the Malayalam film 'Solo'.

### **Research Question**

- How does the selection of colour scheme influence or compliment the visual storytelling process of the film?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Colour Theory**

The use of colour in a film plays a significant role in influencing the audience's experience of the narrative. Filmmakers can use colour as a storytelling tool if they are able to understand the psychological impact of colours on their audience. According to Rabbaa et al. (2024) *'the presence of colour in cinema art represents a significant contributor to the emotional and narrative impact of the medium. It transcends its visual characteristics to elicit profound emotional responses and to convey the artistic intentions of the creator, ultimately enhancing the cinematic experience and leaving an indelible mark on the audience'*.

According to Maria et.al (2011), *'Colour can be used to give visual pleasure, an element that can be deliberately manipulated. It can be used expressively, according to which colours are chosen, how they are arranged and mixed to emphasize dramatic effects. Colour can also constitute a significant element of the narrative. Gradual modifications in the colour of a scene as well as changes in costume and setting can assume different significance'*.

In other words, the use of colour adds depth, subtext and nuance to the frames of a film and enhances the visual storytelling process. This would not only impact the visual reception of the audience but their cognitive perception as well.

#### **Samkhya school of thought**

'Samkhya' or 'Sankhya' philosophy is one of the 6 major 'Astika' or orthodox schools of Ancient Indian philosophy. According to Sharma (2020), *'Samkhya philosophy posits that the ultimate reality is composed of two fundamental entities: Purusha and Prakriti. Purusha represents the transcendental consciousness, the eternal essence that remains unchanging and unaffected by the material world'*.

According to Indian mythology, the union of Shiva and Shakti is necessary for ensuring the balance of the universe. Shiva represents the uncorrupted, eternal truth & consciousness or

'*Purusha*', while Shakti represents the dynamic energy which brings change, and ultimately the evolution of the universe or '*Prakriti*'. Shiva is an immortal witness to the changes across the cosmos however, he is characterized by his detachment (*vairagya bhava*). Detachment from the 'worldly matters' - allows Shiva to be unclouded by 'maya' or 'illusion'.

In the mythology, Shiva is portrayed to be 'introspective' (*antharmukha*), 'detached from desires', conqueror of his ego (*nirahankara*) and leading a simple 'austere existence' in the pursuit of the ultimate knowledge. While his role amongst the Trimurti is - 'samhara' - which in layman terms could be translated to 'destruction', Shiva is not merely a bringer of destruction - his role is to ensure the dissolution of the decadent universe and birth of a new cycle of life.

According to Sharma (2020), the union of Shiva and Shakti represents the relation between the eternal (Shiva) and the dynamic change (Shakti) which are complementary and symbiotic. All the stories in Solo feature the separation of the male & female protagonists/central characters - and how it impacts the worlds they reside in.

## Methodology

This is a qualitative study which analyses the use of colour scheme in the cinematic storytelling process. Since this study uses purposive sampling, content analysis was chosen as the preferred method. According to Zhang et al. (2009), samples for qualitative content analysis usually consist of purposely selected texts which can inform the research questions being investigated. Patton (2002), opines that content analysis refers to "*any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings*" (Patton, 2002, p.453). In addition, Downe – Wamboldt (1992), using content analysis aids "*to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study*" (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314).

## Analysis

In the context of this study, the term 'text' is used in association with the frames of the film 'Solo'. According to semioticians, every text would have denotative and connotative meanings. Denotative meanings refer to the direct or explicit meanings while Connotative means the indirect or implicit meanings associated with that text According to Fauziyah and Ilmi (2019), 'denotative refers to the dictionary meaning, while connotative refers to a value that emerges in communication and it depends on the context of the word'. This study attempts to understand how the selection of the colour schemes by the filmmakers influenced the visual storytelling process of the Malayalam film 'Solo'.

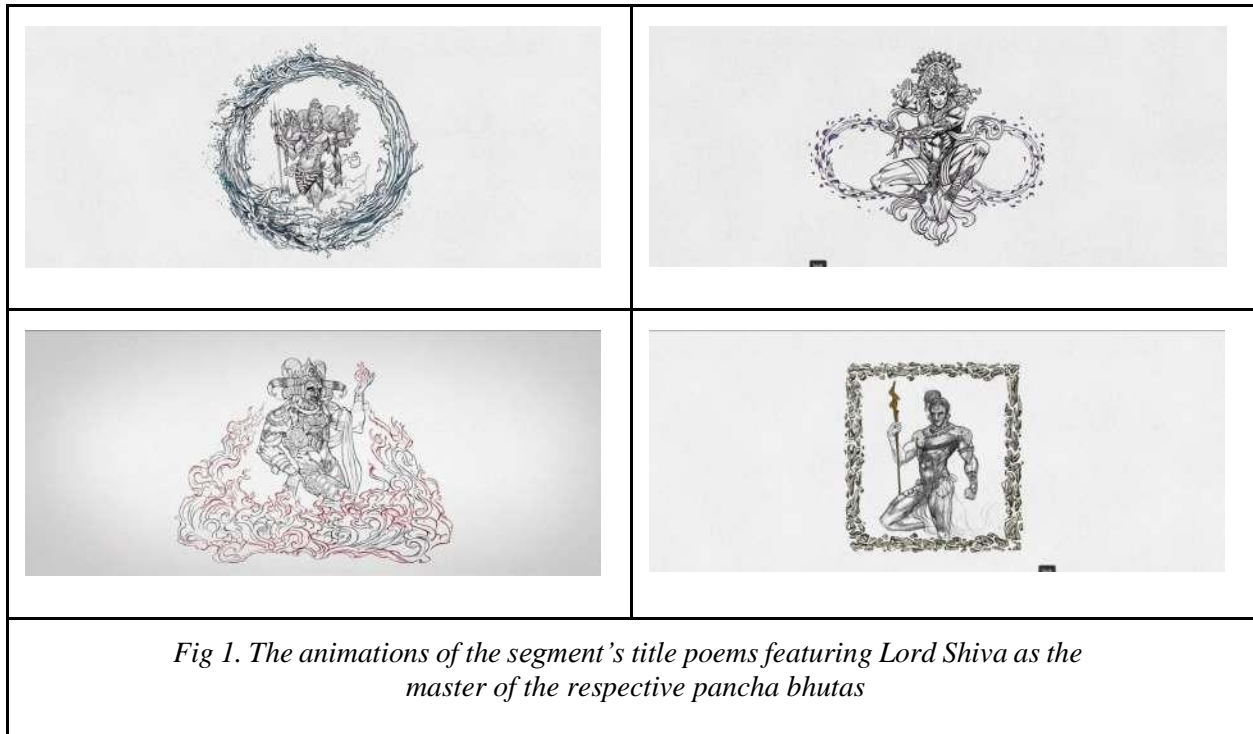
## The film's anthology

Solo is an anthology film consisting of 4 segments - each telling its own story. The filmmakers have attempted to adapt two themes from the Hindu mythology – first one being the union between 'Shiva & Shakti', and the second one being the concept of '*Pancha Bhutas*' or the 'Constituent elements of the universe'. The segments feature stories of separation between Shiva and Shakti - and how it impacts the lives of the people around them.

- a) World of Shekhar – features the bereavement of a husband mourning his wife
- b) The world of Trilok - rage of a husband following the death of his partner
- c) The world of Shiva - estrangement of a son from his mother

## d) The world of Rudra – separation of a couple

Each segment is named after an epithet of Lord Shiva. They are assigned a colour palette directly associated with a ‘Pancha Bhuta’ and given a title poem which describes the ‘Pancha Bhuta’ with which that segment is associated. Each segment begins with the rendering of a poem dedicated to the respective pancha bhuta and features an animation featuring Lord Shiva as the master of that element.



### Themes from the Hindu mythology adapted in the movie

As stated earlier, the movie adapts two concepts from the traditional Hindu mythology –

- a) The theme of union & separation between Shiva and Shakti. According to Samkhya school of philosophy, the symbiotic relation between Shiva who represents ‘Purusha’ or the uncorrupted, eternal truth & consciousness and Shakti who represents the dynamic energy which brings change, and ultimately the evolution of the universe is vital for the harmonious existence of the world, and the separation between Shiva and Shakti would throw the entire universe off its balance. The filmmakers have adapted the concepts of symbiotic relation between Shiva & Shakti, their dual nature, as well as how their separation impacts the lives of the people around them.
- b) The ‘Pancha Bhuta’ or ‘Pancha Maha Bhuta’ concept discusses the 5 elements which constitute the building blocks of the universe. The Sanskrit term ‘Pancha Maha Bhuta’ could be divided into 3 parts - ‘Pancha’ meaning five, ‘Maha’ meaning revered ‘Bhuta’ meaning ‘consisting of’ or ‘constituent of’. According to the Samkhya school of philosophy the ‘Pancha Maha Bhutas’ were born out of the union between Shiva or the ‘Purusha’ and Shakti or the ‘Prakriti’. According to the Samkhya school of thought,

the relation between Shiva – Shakti or Purusha – Prakriti represents the duality of everything in the universe

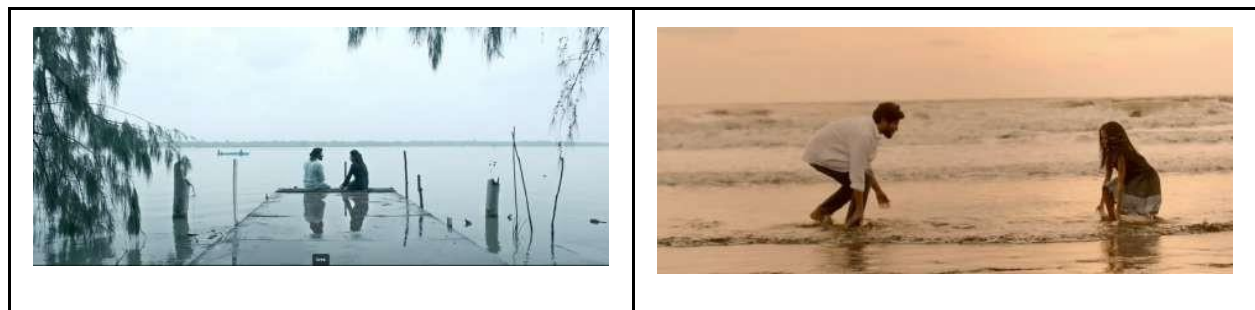
- c) The film incorporates the dual nature of 4 pancha bhutas (except ‘akasha which is not incorporated into the narrative). For example, the same ‘agni’ or fire which could light up a path and remove darkness, could also turn into a raging fire which could wreak destruction in its path. The same ‘jala’ or water, which calmly flows through a small stream could become part of a heavy sea wave. The same ‘vayu’ or air which breathes life into all mortals could turn into raging storms. The same hard earth or ‘bhumi’ below our feet which could carry the weight of mountains, also births and cradles all living beings.

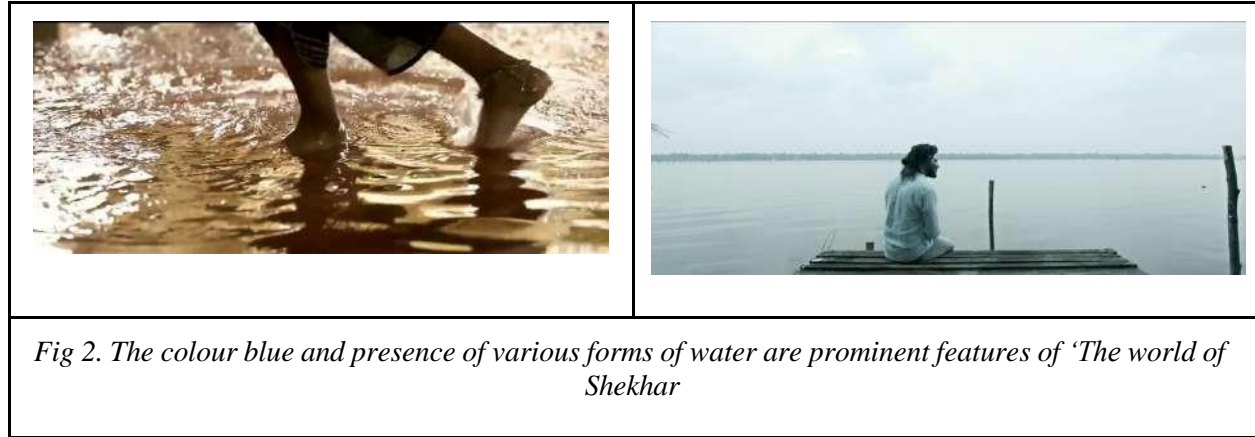
d) **Colour schemes used for the individual segments in the film**

The film is divided into 4 segments, each telling its own separate story. The segments are named after the male protagonist who is named after an epithet of Lord Shiva from Hindu mythology. The characterisation of the male and female protagonists, as well as the selection of the colour palette is influenced by which ‘pancha bhuta’ is associated with that particular segment. This selection of colour palette complimenting the theme of the segment’s narrative as well as the assigned ‘pancha bhuta’ was a creative decision made by the filmmaker to not just create an aesthetic style but also create a certain psychological impact on the audience.

According to Branigan (1984), *‘The color itself, of course, may be produced in many ways: through the use of special film stock, camera filters, mise-en-scene, lighting, laboratory processing, etc. It is not the technological origin which is decisive, but rather the employment of color in a system of character narration’*. For example, the first segment of the anthology is titled ‘The world of Shekhar’. It tells the story of the relationship between Shekhar, a man with speech impediment and Radhika, a blind woman. The ‘pancha bhuta’ associated with this segment is ‘Jala’ or water. Both Shekhar and Radhika represent the dual nature of water. Shekhar, is an impulsive and raucous young man, like the waves of an ocean while Radhika possesses a calm demeanour similar to a gentle stream.

The frames of this segment are dominated by cool colours – mainly blues, and greens – colours which are associated with water, as well as the greenery of nature. The colours shift in appearance as the story progresses, changing from brightly lit frames featuring vibrant shades of blues and greens to dimly lit & desaturated frames to signify the change in ambience and mood of the story.





### The correlation between colour and symbolism in the movie

The film is rich in terms of symbolism related to Indian Shaivism, especially in terms of the characterisation of the male and female protagonists. Duality of nature as a whole is an important aspect of the film's narrative.



It is reflected in the

- a. characterisation of the male & female protagonists,
- b. the theme of the individual segment's narratives and,
- c. assigning a colour palette which compliment both of them

This study would focus upon the use of colour to reflect upon the theme of duality of nature. According to Rabbaa, Zainab (2024), '*... the presence of colour in cinema art represents a significant contributor to the emotional and narrative impact of the medium*'.

*'It transcends its visual characteristics to elicit profound emotional responses and to convey the artistic intentions of the creator, ultimately enhancing the cinematic experience and leaving an indelible mark on the audience.'*

The film effectively uses the duality of meanings assigned to colours to compliment the narrative. For example, the third segment titled, *'The world of shiva'*, predominantly features warm colours such as red, orange, and yellow along with dark shades of black, and brown. On one hand, the colour red is associated with positive values such as passion, love, while it is also considered as a sign of danger, anger, and destruction.

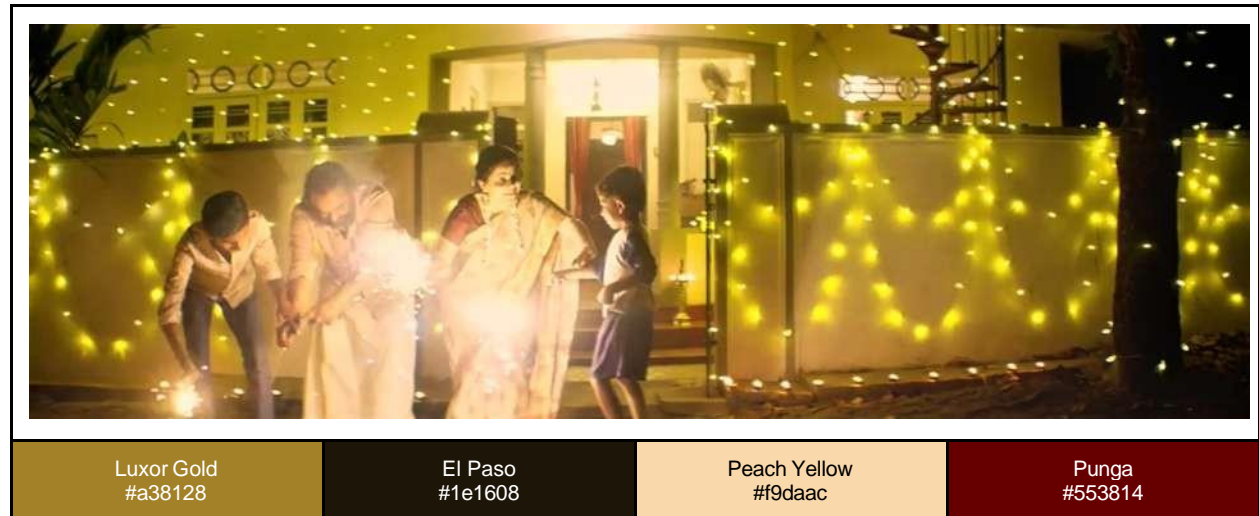
On one hand, the male protagonist of this segment, Shiva is on one hand devoted to his family, but at the same time a feared gangster. He is shown to be capable of being compassionate as well as brutal at the same time.

This characterisation, complimented by a saturated colour palette of warm and dark hues allows the filmmakers to effectively capture the dangerous life led by the characters.

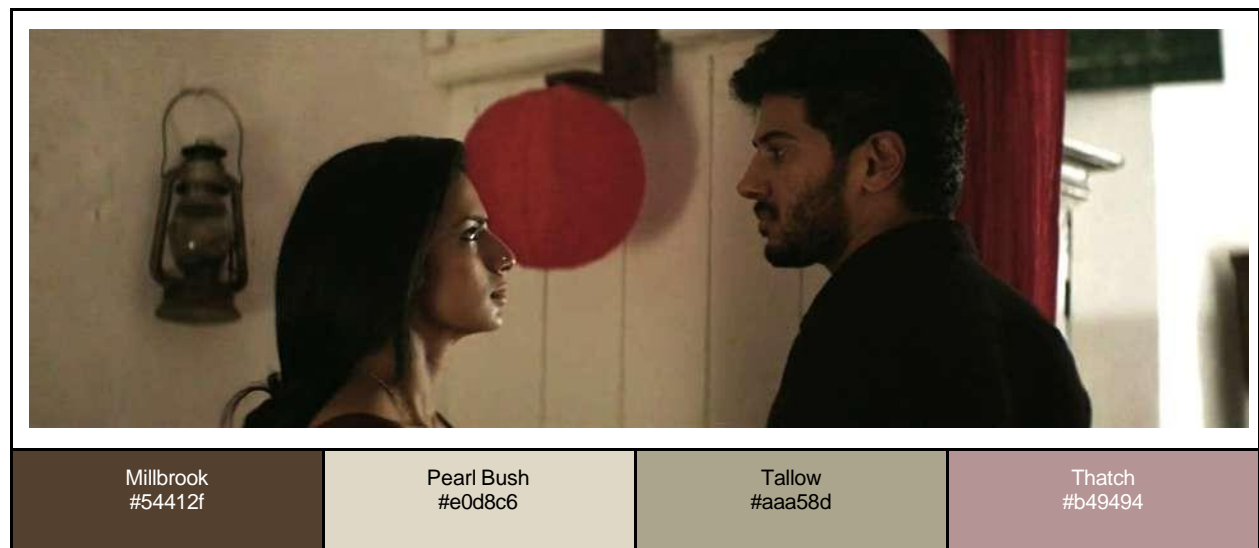


The segment also tells the story of Shiva's relation with his mother and partner. The segment tells the story of his separation from his mother, which led him to a dark path in life, as well as his passionate, yet tumultuous relation with his partner Rukku.

Overall, the segment tells the tale of how fire which could provide warmth, or illuminate a dark path, could also be destructive.



*Fig 5. This still of Shiva’s family before their breakup, features Shiva in a white shirt surrounded by mild hues of yellow and orange representing the happy phase of his life*



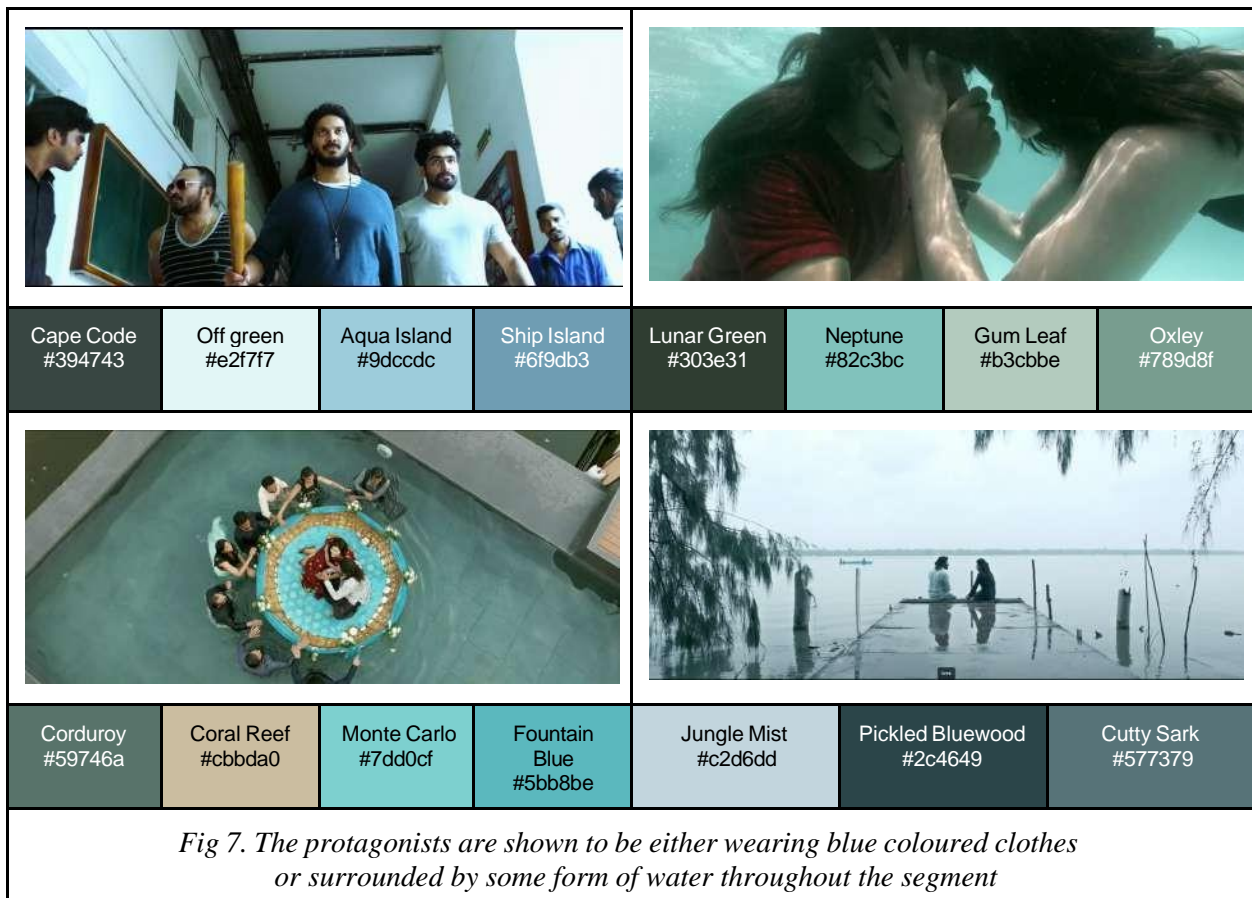
*Fig 6. This still features Shiva & Rukku in a dimly lit room with red details and shadows in the background. He is also wearing black, symbolising his journey to the dark side of life.*



**The relation between the colour palette assigned to the segments of the film, the duality of the featured pancha bhuta and the characterisation of the protagonists**

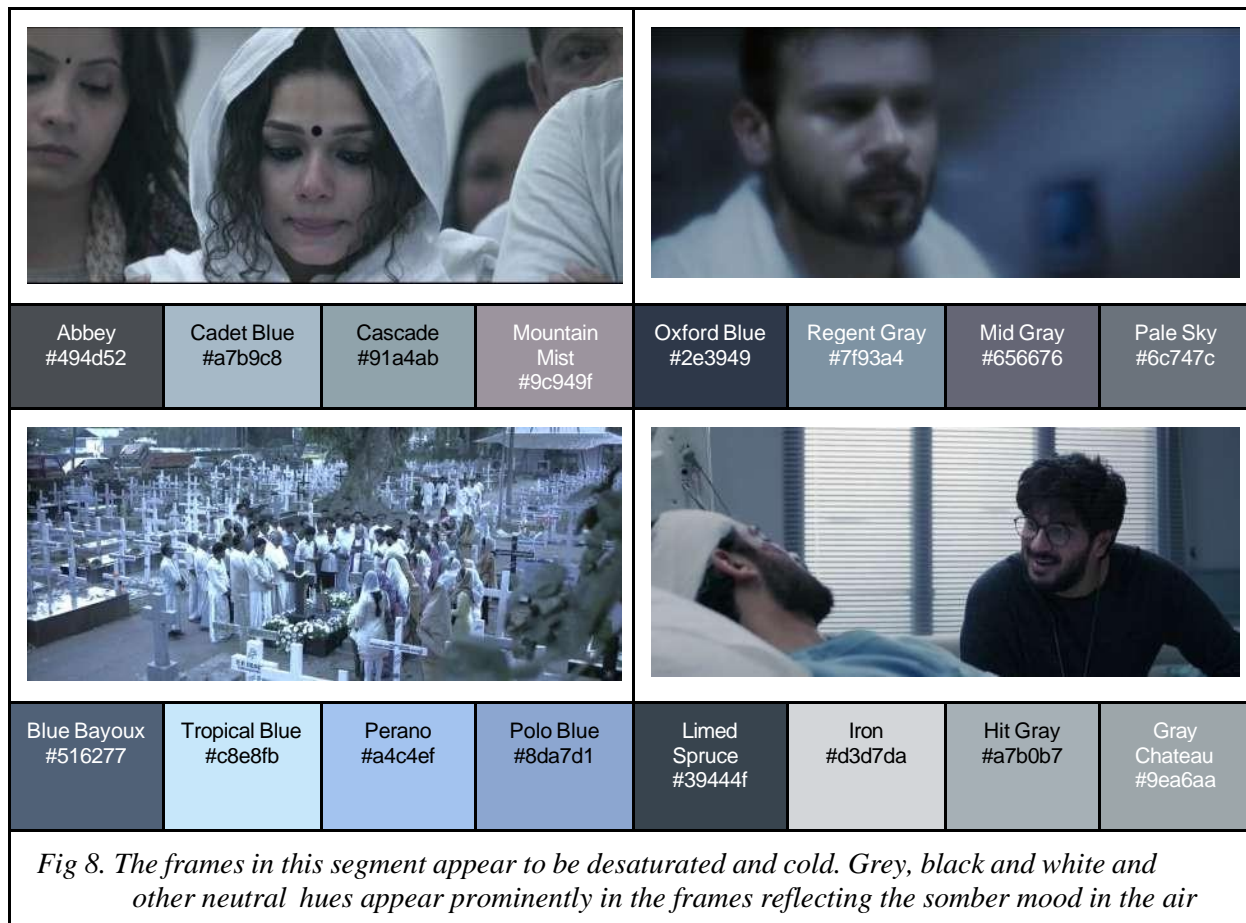
<b>The world of Shekhar</b>		Running time – 40 minutes	
Associated Pancha bhuta – Jalam (water)		Prominent colours – Cold colours	
<b>Female Protagonist</b>	<b>Representation</b>	<b>Male Protagonist</b>	<b>Representation</b>
Radhika	Calm stream	Shekhar	Turbulent waves

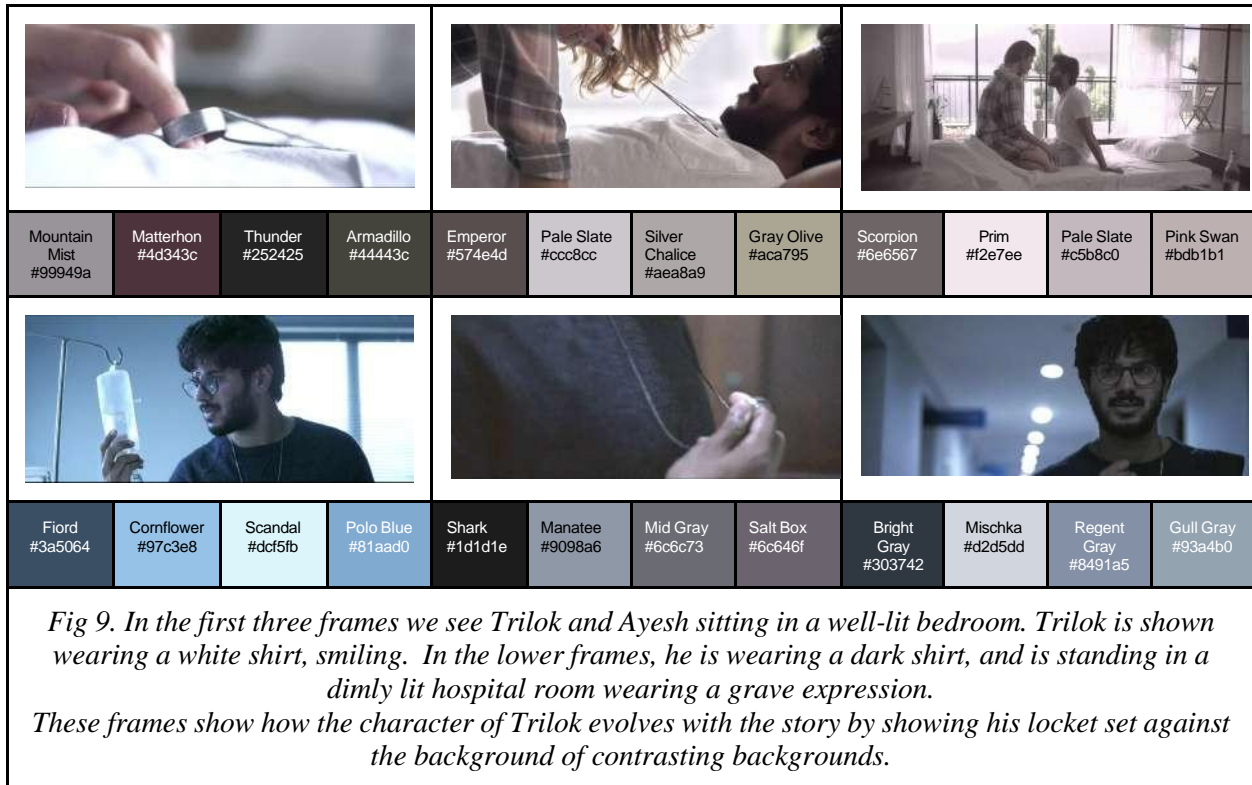
- The first part of the anthology series, ‘*The world of Shekhar*’ features the story of Shekhar, a college student with a speech disorder and his relationship with Radhika, a blind dance student.
- The most prominent color in this segment of the film is blue and other cold color hues.
- The ‘*pancha bhoota*’ associated with this segment is ‘*jalam*’ or water. Shekhar is shown to be slightly raucous and impulsive like the waves of a sea while Radhika is shown to be calm like a stream.



<b>The world of Trilok</b>		Running time – 29 minutes	
Associated Pancha bhuta – Vayu (water)		Prominent colours – Neutral colours & desaturated tones	
<b>Female Protagonist</b>	<b>Representation</b>	<b>Male Protagonist</b>	<b>Representation</b>
Ayesha	A gentle breeze	Trilok	A raging storm

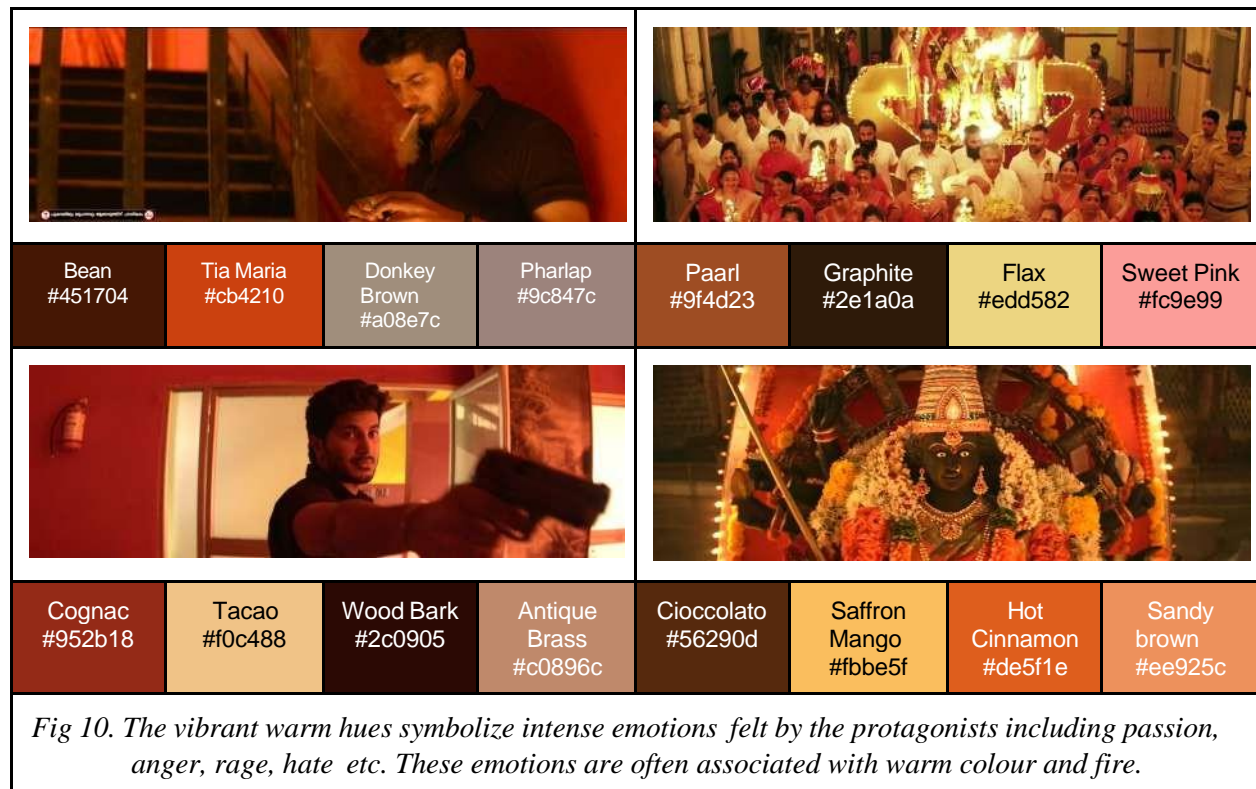
- The second part of the film, ‘*The world of Trilok*’ sees a marked shift in tone - both in terms of the narrative as well as the mise - en - scene. The segment tells the story of Dr Trilok’s revenge on the people responsible for his wife Ayesha's death.
- The ‘pancha bhoota’ associated with this segment is ‘*vayu*’ or air. The theme of the story depicts how valuable the presence of ‘*vayu*’, while being invisible, is. Ayesha is shown to be gentle like a breeze while Trilok is a raging storm on a destructive mission.









<b>The world of Shiva</b>		Running time – 38 minutes	
Associated Pancha bhuta – Agni (fire)		Prominent colours – Warm colours	
<b>Female Protagonist(s)</b>	<b>Representation</b>	<b>Male Protagonist</b>	<b>Representation</b>
Amma	A guiding light	Shiva	A destructive wildfire
Rukku	A fiery flame		

- The third part of the film, ‘The world of Shiva’, features the turbulent life story of Shiva and his family.
- Warm, dark and saturated hues dominate the frames of this segment. These hues compliment the harsh lives of the main characters. The ‘pancha bhoota’ associated with this segment is ‘agni’ or fire.



<b>The world of Rudra</b>		Running time – 40 minutes	
Associated Pancha bhuta – Bhumi (earth)		Prominent colours – Earth colours	
<b>Female Protagonist</b>	<b>Representation</b>	<b>Male Protagonist</b>	<b>Representation</b>
Akshara	Gentle clay	Rudra	Hard earth

- The final part of the film, *'The world of Rudra'*, features the story of Rudra Ramachandra, a young cadet in the Indian Army, and his relationship with Akshara, who is daughter to one of his father's colleagues.
- The frames in this segment are dominated by various earth colors (such as various hues of green and brown). The 'pancha bhoota' associated with this segment is *'bhumi'* or the earth. The hues of green, and brown represent the various forms of life which are birthed by the earth.

							
Dallas #695228	Teak #b2945f	Donkey Brown #a49c74	Lisbon Brown #4b4127	Bizarre #eaded2	Gurkha #a3a475	Dawn #9f9b95	
							
Birch #433b28	Mongoose #bfa581	Sage #97a582	Star Dust #989795	Beaver #8e6956	Gordons Green #141c0d	Pickled Bean #623d1d	Ciocolato #4b280d



**Conclusion**

The use of colour in a film helps the filmmakers to convey denotative and connotative meanings and create an intended effect on the audience. It could also help the storytelling process by adding visual subtext and nuance to the cinematic narrative.

The film primarily deals with the development of the male protagonist’s character arc, after he is separated from the female protagonist.

By using different hues, saturation of the same and brightness of the prominent colours in the mise - en - scene, complimented by the lighting arrangement, the filmmakers attempt to inform the audience about the journey of the protagonists through the journey.

In addition to this, the story combines the many connotative meanings associated with the colours with the ‘dual nature’ of the ‘pancha bhutas’ as well as the ‘shiva – shakti’ concept. This creative use of colour palette, symbolism, and visual metaphors results in not just visually rich and aesthetically pleasing frames, but also signifies the role of colour palettes in cinematic storytelling.

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