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## Colour Narratives in Tamil Cinema: A Chromatic Analysis of the Movie Petta

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**Abstract:** Color in Tamil cinema goes beyond being an element of visual spectacle; it is also a powerful medium of symbolic communication shaping narrative and audience perspective. This research paper analyses the usage of color in Karthik Subbaraj's movie Petta (2019) through Richard Misek's framework on chromatic cinema, which emphasizes the evolution of color grading in the cinema history and the conscious decisions filmmakers make regarding its deliberate usage in the film making (Misek, 2010). This study analyzes how colors are used in the movie Petta to distinguish temporalities—contrasting flashbacks with the present—to construct various visual atmospheres, external environments, and emotions such as anger, nostalgia, and mystery. By analyzing these visual strategies, the paper argues that color serves as a tool for narrative enhancement and depth of theme, character development while enriching viewer experience. Furthermore, situating movie Petta within the larger context of Tamil cinema's innovations, this research demonstrates how commercial films integrate nuanced visual theory into mainstream storytelling.

**Keywords:** Color theory, Visual aesthetics, Narrative, Tamil cinema, Petta

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### 1. Introduction

Cinema, which not only relies on dialogues and music but also on hidden symbolic meanings, plays a major role in conveying the narrative to the audience. Colour is one of the important symbolic tools used by the filmmakers to shape the visual aesthetics, which improves the experience of watching the movie. Colours are used not only for aesthetic purposes but also to convey meanings and emotions. Filmmakers often use various colour palettes to communicate narrative context, deeper symbolic meanings and also to differentiate character shifts and narratives. Therefore, colour becomes an important component of visual storytelling, which enhances the overall cinematic experience. Colour in cinema also helps to convey a story and helps to distinguish between the two different worlds.

The use of colour in Indian cinema evolved gradually with technological developments. One of the earliest Indian cinema 'Kisan Kanya' directed by Moti Gidwani is recognised as the first Indian film to use color. This was because the Technicolor process was expensive and complex. After the mid-1950s, color was extensively used in films. The release of films like AAN, Jhansi Ki Rani, and Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje in the mid-1950s, and the introduction of the more accessible Eastman color film process around 1952, marked the beginning of the "color era" in Indian films. In Tamil cinema Alibabavum 40 thirudargalum directed by T.R.Sundaram was the first film to use color, shot in gevacolor marking it as a significant milestone in Tamil film industry.

Nevertheless, the narrative function of colours in Tamil commercial cinema remains a relatively understudied phenomenon in the current film studies literature, despite the recent surge in interest in the visual aesthetics of



films. While there are several studies on the use of colours in the visual style of films, there are very few studies on the narrative function of colours in the commercial Tamil movie.

This paper attempts to discuss narrative colour usage in the Tamil movie *Petta*. This movie is written and directed by Karthik Subbaraj and released in the year 2019. This movie provides an interesting case for analysing the narrative use of colour in Tamil cinema. The film features the lead actors like Rajinikanth, Vijay Sethupathi, Nawazuddin Siddiqui and Sananth. The box office collection of the movie is about 250 crores which indicates the commercial hit. The movie is known for its unique color palettes and visual style, which highlight different emotional tones and story transitions. Subbaraj's filmmaking style is mostly structured with the colour schemes to support storytelling and character representation. This paper aims to identify the color symbolism and its impacts in the narrative, particularly how it reflects the themes such as nostalgia and revenge in the film.

## 2. Objectives

1. To explore the role of colour as a narrative tool in the movie *Petta*.
2. To analyse how colour palettes are constructed through cinematography, lighting, and production design in the film.
3. To interpret the symbolic and narrative meanings of colour using chromatic cinema theory and semiotic analysis.
4. To examine how colour enhances character representation and thematic expression enriching the film's emotional and visual impact.

## 3. Review of literature

### 3.1. Color as Narrative Language in Cinema

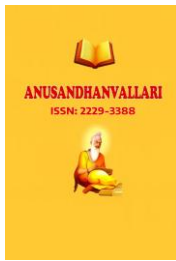
Multiple scholars have established color as a crucial narrative device that functions alongside the plot, character, and dialogue. Tharun Mani V. (2020), in his comparative study of *Thalapathi* and *O Kadhal Kanmani*, demonstrates how Mani Ratnam employs a consistent color palette—red, pink, orange, yellow, and blue. And he adapts its usage according to the narrative demands of each film. Rather than serving as mere visual aesthetics, color operates as a storytelling language that intensifies emotional response and supports character development. Through content analysis and descriptive methods, Tharun Mani V. (2020) highlights how color and lighting choices guide the narrative flow and deepen emotional response.

Chandra Mouly, Nandhini (2018) explains that dominant color acts as a non verbal narrative medium in their case study about the film *Pudhupettai*. By examining four scenes, it reveals how red and green are visually communicating the Protagonist's psychological transformation. The deliberate repetition of these colors across the narrative builds meaning without reliance on dialogue, reinforcing the idea that color on its own carries narrative purpose.

Together, these studies state that color in cinema functions as a narrative language. It is capable of expressing inner conflicts, thematic progression and character psychology.

### 3.2. Color, Emotion, and Audience Perception

The emotional resonance of color in audience is a repeating theme across films. Tharun Mani V. (2020) establishes that Mani Ratnam's color palettes amplifies emotional intensity and directly influences how audiences perceive character emotions. The careful arrangement of lighting and hue amplifies moods such as romance, conflict, and melancholy, allowing viewers to emotionally indulge with the narrative.



Amaljith N. K., Shemin K., and Ameer Salman O. M. (2024) further explore this relationship in their study on the semiotics of color in Tamil cinematic narratives. Analyzing films such as *Alaipayudhey*, *Paruthiveeran*, *Super Deluxe*, *Kaka Muttai*, *Vada Chennai*, and *Asuran*, Amaljith N. K., Shemin K., and Ameer Salman O. M. (2024) shows how colors evoke anticipated emotional responses. Like red symbolizing danger or intensity, yellow representing innocence, and darker tones creating tension or curiosity. Their mixed-method approach demonstrates how color significantly shapes audience engagement by guiding emotional interpretation.

Zhang, Yanxiang. (2025) article on color language in film and television animation, supports this statement, denoting that colors often communicate emotions beyond images and dialogue. According to Zhang, Yanxiang. (2025) bright tones tend to evoke innocence and joy, while darker palettes generate fear or suspense, therefore influencing audience perception at a subconscious level.

### 3.3. Color Grading, Technology, and Constructed Realism

Advancements in technology have expanded the expressive possibilities of color in cinema. It enables filmmakers to construct stylized yet believable realities. Zhang Yanxiang's study introduces a semantic segmentation technique using RGB-D image integration and a dual-stream weighted Gabor convolutional network to analyze color usage in animation. This technological approach demonstrates how color grading and digital processing enhance narrative flow and emotional depth in visual storytelling.

In Tamil cinema, realism constructed through color and lighting is evident in films like *Thevar Magan*. The study on P. C. Sreeram's cinematography highlights how earthy color palettes and textured visuals contribute a sense of realism while still serving narrative and emotional motives. The strategic use of lighting—soft, harsh, or high-contrast—creates a believable world that reflects the character's conflicts.

Similarly, Percy Fernandez's analysis of *Kaala* identifies the film's visual style as a form of socially rooted realism. Though the paper primarily focuses on political themes, the film's visual language—including color tones associated with land, resistance, and identity—helps construct a realistic yet symbolically charged cinematic space.

### 3.4. Semiotics, Symbolism, and Cultural Meaning of Color

Color as a semiotic and symbolic system has been widely explored in Tamil cinema studies. Amaljith N. K. et al. (2024) decode color usage scene by scene to uncover cultural and emotional symbolism rooted in Tamil traditions. Their study explains how filmmakers like Mani Ratnam, Vetrimaaran, and Thiagarajan Kumararaja use color to represent cultural identity, social realities, and moral tensions.

Dr. R. Pugalendhi's (2025) research further deepens this perspective by applying Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, Eisenstein's montage theory, and Auteur theory to films such as *Vikram Vedha*, *Sadhranga Vettai*, and *Thalapathi*. The study illustrates how binary color oppositions—white symbolizing virtue and black representing moral ambiguity—communicate complex ideas of good, evil, fate, and transformation. Visual metaphors like the rising sun and the eagle reinforce symbolic meanings associated with renewal, power, and destiny.

Chandra Mouly and Nandhini (2018) also contribute to this discourse by interpreting red and green in *Pudhupettai* as symbols of emotional states and moral conflict, reinforcing color's role as a culturally loaded signifier.

### 3.5. Color Studies in Indian and Tamil Cinema

Color studies within Indian and Tamil cinema reveal how visual aesthetics intersect with culture, politics, and social identity. Tharun Mani V.'s (2020) comparative analysis situates Mani Ratnam as a filmmaker with a distinctive color signature that evolves across time and genre. Amaljith N. K. et al. (2024) broadened this scope by examining multiple contemporary Tamil films, showing how color palettes reflect regional culture, social class, and emotional landscapes.



Percy Fernandez's critique of Kaala positions color and visual style within a larger political framework, where cinematic aesthetics support narratives of Dalit identity, resistance, and public anger. Although the study emphasizes socio-political themes, the film's visual language plays a key role in articulating oppression and empowerment.

The study on Thevar Magan further underscores how cinematography including color and texture reinforces cultural realism and narrative depth, solidifying the film's place in Indian cinema history. Collectively, these works demonstrate that color in Tamil cinema is not merely aesthetic but deeply tied to cultural meaning, ideology, and audience interpretation.

#### ***4. Research methodology and Theoretical framework***

This research paper follows a qualitative analysis to explore how color contributes to narrative meaning in the movie Petta. The primary source of data for this study is the film itself. Using purposive sampling technique, six major scenes were selected for detailed examination. These scenes were chosen as they represent important narrative moments. It also demonstrates different colour palettes which contribute to the development of characters and thematic expression. The selected scenes are the major scenes of the movie's narrative which includes the protagonist's introduction, protagonist's past revealing Scene, the identity-revealing fight sequence, the antagonist establishment, flashback scenes, and the climax.

This paper utilizes Richard Misek's theory of Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Color and Color Theory to understand the color palette, its meaning, and significance. This study examines the ideology of Richard Misek by linking emotion and storytelling to color. It is deeply tied to meanings and audience perception. Misek states that colors applied in cinema may seem natural but are artificially constructed by the creator in order to help the narrative.

Misek argues that the films made exist on a spectrum between Chromatic and Achromatic styles. In Chromatic style, the film uses expressive and vibrant color palettes. It helps to convey emotions deeply and also makes the audience feel the mood of the scene and characters state. The use of color is determined by many forces like available technology and director's choice. (Misek,2010).

In addition to Misek's chromatic cinema theory, this study follows the Roland Barthes semiotic approaches to visual analysis. Barthes (1977) explains that visual elements function as signs which produce different meanings through cultural interpretation. From this colour can be studied as a signifier that conveys symbolic meaning in the context of Cinema. The Colour interpretation therefore depends on narrative context, cultural background, and the visual structure of the film.

Each scene is analysed through a systematic visual examination. First, the dominant color palette and lighting design were identified. And the visual composition of the scene was interpreted based on the narrative context, cultural background and character state.

Through this approach, the study seeks to understand how colour in the movie Petta operates not only as a visual experience but also as a narrative and symbolic device that enhances storytelling, strengthens character development, and creates impact in evoking emotional response for the film.

#### **5. Analysis and Interpretation**

### 5.1. Protagonist Introduction



Frame 5.1.1



Frame 5.1.2

The first scene is the introduction of the character Kaali (protagonist) of the film. It is set during the night (figure 5.1.1). So the wide shot of the locations are shown and it is a fight sequence happening in the hostel's church. The room has artificial lighting of yellow and red (figure 5.1.2). According to semiotic analysis Barthes, R. (1977) the signifier is red and yellow colors, it signifies anger and caution. The wide shots had cool blue color to depict the scene setup at night.

Red here is deliberately placed to represent the protagonist's rage, anger and danger. The color yellow symbolises caution. Throughout the film this color is associated with the protagonist. According to chromatic cinema theory Misek, R. (2010), the colors that were placed in this frame (figure 5.1.1, 5.1.2) are hyper-realistic and beyond realism to create a surreal world by using high-intensity lighting.

### 5.2.

#### Plot

#### disclosure



Figure 5.2.1



Figure 5.2.2

This scene occurs immediately after the song sequence (Ullala) where Kaali goes into his room, and the background score transfers to a more serious tone. The moment he retrieves a photograph from his bag functions as a visual cue that connects the present narrative to an unresolved past. The color used in the scene is in a warm and dark tone (figure 5.2.1, 5.3.2).

According to the chromatic cinema theory Misek, R. (2010) explained about visible darkness. It is said that few films use this kind of lighting to create certain meanings that are significant to the story or the narrative itself. In this scene, lighting style highlights the visibility and also the deliberate choice of darkness for aesthetic meaning making. In this frame, the half face of the protagonist was in light and the other half in darkness as shown in figure 5.2.1 and figure 5.2.2. According to the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes (1977), this kind of visual contrast signifies meaning. In this scene, it signifies that Kaali's identity is divided between his present identity and his undisclosed past, which may be revealed in the future as shown in the scene itself. It signifies that only half of his

story is revealed as said by Barthes, R. (1977), which indicates that he has a flashback or a backstory in his past that has not been disclosed to the audience.

### 5.3. Identity-revealing fight



Figure 5.3.1



Figure 5.3.2

This scene is set in a hostel at night, and Kaali gets into a fight with a student gang. There is a parallel scene in which the antagonist's men try to attack Anwar(second lead), and this prompts Kaali to come and save him. Though this scene looks like a routine action scene, it also serves a significant role in gradually revealing the real identity of the protagonist. The entire scene is dominated in a blue color environment with low lighting.(figure 5.3.1,5.3.2).From a semiotic perspective, as explained by Roland Barthes (1977), colours can act as signs that carry meaning. The use of color blue immediately establishes the night-time setting, but it also creates a sense of tension and seriousness within the scene. According to Richard Misek (2010), colour in cinema is not simply natural but is carefully constructed through techniques like lighting and colour grading. This scene works as a turning point where the protagonist's identity begins to unfold visually rather than through dialogue.In this case, the blue tone is deliberately intensified to shape the mood and guide how the audience experiences the scene.

### 5.4. Antagonist establishment scene



Figure 5.4.1



Figure 5.4.2

This is the scene where Singar Singh (antagonist) and his son Jithu finds out that Petta (protagonist) is the one who fought with their gang. The antagonist also reveals the identity and the past life of Petta. The color used in this scene is mostly red and a slight tint of yellow. The color red and yellow signifies danger and illness respectively (figure 5.4.1,5.4.2).

The room was dominated by red hues, symbolizing the villain's territory, while shades of yellow suggest illness Barthes, R. (1977). This lighting design aims to create a hyper-realistic experience for the audience. These colors are used to highlight the evil characteristics of the antagonist. Yellow is highlighted slightly to convey the sickness of the antagonist. According to Chromatic cinema theory Misek, R. (2010) such color schemes are intentionally

created to evoke evilness, danger, illness and create a depth in the antagonist's characteristics and also used to convey intense emotions and deep meanings.

### 5.5. Flashback scenes



Figure 5.5.1



Figure 5.5.2

These are a compilation of scenes from the flashback of the movie Petta (figure 5.5.1,5.5.2). These scenes are graded with a mild sepia tone to signify and establish their past life as said by Barthes, R. (1977). Sepia conveys a sense of nostalgia, loss and warmth mixed with distance. All these emotions are disclosed in the proceeding scenes. In this scene color grading is used to differentiate present and past timelines evidently as mentioned in Chromatic cinema theory Misek, R. (2010). Also, the color green is used in Malik's (Sasikumar) house (figure 5.10) to symbolize his religion (muslim), as the flashback is associated with a clash between two families based on religion of Malik (Sasikumar) and Poonkuzhali (Malavika Mohan). According to Barthes, R. (1977) these color differences function as a sign that produce cultural and emotional meaning. Misek, R. (2010) Chromatic differentiation aids in establishing the difference in these scenes.



Figure 5.5.3

The color used in this particular frame (figure 5.5.3) is a mix of blue and teal, which visually distinguishes it from the flashback scenes. These colors are deliberately placed to evoke chromatic differentiation as stated by Misek, R. (2010). This scene is graded in a teal color to convey revitalization and a new beginning as they have moved on to the next phase of life after a tragic incident in which they lost Malk (Sasikumar) and Saro (Trisha) which broke their heart. Earlier in the film the color blue was used to establish night setting, sense of tension and seriousness whereas in this scene it signifies a new beginning and a fresh start.

According to the Roland Barthes (1977) semiotic perspective, the color teal can be interpreted as a symbol of renewal, emotional healing, and gradual movement towards stability. It does not negate the feeling of loss entirely, but there is a process of adjustment and continuation.

## 5.6. Climax



Figure 5.6.1



Figure 5.6.2

These are the scenes from pre-climax (figure 5.6.1) and climax (figure 5.6.2). In this scene Petta (protagonist) and his team come into Singar Singh's (antagonist) home to fight against him. The villain was in his room and the climax (figure 5.6.2) also took place in the same room. The colors used here are red and yellow. In this scene the color distinguishes villain and hero by signifying each color to one person. Red is associated with villain which represents danger, power and yellow is associated with hero which represents caution and morality as stated by Barthes, R. (1977).

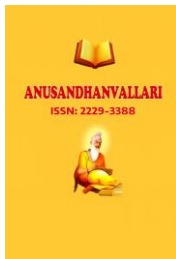
In the climax scene initially, the antagonist was shown in full red color lighting (figure 5.6.2) to symbolise evilness, anger and danger. Once he is killed by Petta the red light behind him turns into yellow showcasing evilness is destroyed and righteousness takes over. This change is not just aesthetics, it reflects the narrative resolution, where the dominance of violence is replaced by a sense of closure and justice. According to Chromatic cinema theory Misek, R. (2010), the color theory supports the flow of narrative and conveys emotion. It also establishes the difference between the protagonist and the antagonist. The change from red to yellow shows the shift in power and emotion within the scene, reinforcing the idea that colour plays an active role in shaping narrative meaning. As per Barthes, R. (1977) here the color acts as signifier and it signifies two intended meanings. It is used to establish the difference between evilness and goodness. It is also used to aid the narrative, in conveying the protagonist's winning over the antagonist.

## 6. Findings

The analysis of Petta (2019) through chromatic cinema theory Misek, R. (2010) reveals that the colour in the film functions as the deliberate narrative tool rather than using it as an aesthetic tool. This paper found that color functions beyond aesthetic tools which serve as a significant narrative tool. This movie uses various color palettes to distinguish temporal dimensions such as sepia tones for flashback sequences to create a 1990s atmosphere, while present scenes use vibrant and hyper-saturated colors. This temporal differentiation through color grading shows how commercial Tamil movies integrate sophisticated visual grading techniques to enhance narrative flow in the movie through the colour.

This study reveals systematic color associations with character narratives supported by Barthes, R. (1977). The protagonist Kaali is consistently associated with yellow lighting, symbolizing caution and morality, at the same time the antagonist Singar Singh is largely framed in red environments, representing danger and territorial dominance. This chromatic characterization reinforces narrative themes without relying on dialogue or action. This paper also identified cultural specific color usage, particularly the deployment of green in flashback scenes to represent Islamic identity, demonstrating how color serves as a cultural signifier within the Tamil cinematic context.

The analysis of key scenes further shows how colour enhances the major themes such as revenge, power, and duality in the narrative. In the climax scene, where the antagonist's red lighting changes to yellow upon his defeat,



which symbolises the victory of good over evil, symbolising the defeat of evil and restoration of order. This highlights how colour transformation can function as a visual metaphor within the narrative.

This study confirms that movie Petta used digital color grading technology to create hyper-realistic, surreal environments that transcend natural lighting conditions. This aligns with Misek's argument that cinematic colour is artificially constructed to produce specific meanings and emotional responses.

### 7. Conclusion

The analysis of this research proves that Tamil Movie Petta successfully incorporates color as the narrative tool in Tamil commercial cinema. The film does not simply incorporate colour for aesthetic appeal, instead, it is used as a means of storytelling that aids in the development of the character and the audience's engagement with the film.

The findings reveal that colour functioned at multiple levels as a narrative guide, a symbolic system, and a cultural signifier. And also colour contributes significantly to character development and thematic depth. The film is able to create a distinction between the timelines and the character identities through the different colours. This proves that visual elements, including colour, play an important role in the construction of the story.

It is also suggested that contemporary directors like Karthik Subbaraj are becoming increasingly aware of the potential of colours and are making deliberate use of colours to elevate the story. This is a new trend in Tamil cinema, and the films that are made in this genre are not only visually spectacular but also have a degree of sophistication in their visual and narrative content.

In conclusion, Petta is a movie that exemplifies the potential of how a mainstream movie can be visually and narratively rich. This research has used the chromatic theory of cinema to prove that colours play an active part in the construction of the narrative and the cinematic experience.

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