



Color and Artefact Emotion in Alternative Cinema: A Comparative Analysis of *Gabbeh*, *Mirch Masala*, and *Meenaxi: A Tale of 3 Cities*

Lalita Pandit Hogan

Abstract: This article discusses filmic emotion by focusing on how the dominant color (blue in *Gabbeh* and *Meenaxi*; red in *Mirch Masala*) is used to elicit emotion. Through alienation effect, the viewer is distanced from the aims and goals of characters, and is less likely to experience the sorts of emotions that result from identification. The first two films use multiple frames of narration leading to character(s) in the outer frame becoming like spectators, invested in, for instance, *fortune of others* emotions that are central to the enjoyment of movies. In *Mirch Masala*, narration focuses on class struggle; there is minimal engagement with characters' individual aims, goals, and desires. While the red film foregrounds social anger, the blue films foreground consciousness. The three films together ask questions about what makes war and what makes peace, and how human action and human consciousness, represented through colors, figures in all this.

Keywords: alternative Indian cinema, cognitive theory, color, emotions, *Gabbeh*, Iranian film, *Meenaxi*, *Mirch Masala*

At a time when it was technologically possible to use color, but it was not clear yet how it would impact film style, Eisenstein made some cautionary notes about the use of *color*. He thought that while the introduction of *sound* to film technique brought music on board, color had no such metrical and rhythmic advantage ([1947] 1998: 167–86). Eisenstein was concerned that “color cannot meet expressive demands,” as, in his opinion, music undoubtedly did (171). Another difficulty with colors for Eisenstein was, as he put it, “they are perceived very individually”; that is, each person associates some-

thing unique to a color, and to make matters worse “different countries have different notions of color” (172). However, to Eisenstein the “difficulty” presented an aesthetic possibility. He emphasized that “there must be expressive movement of color—it is very difficult, but necessary” (171). “What matters,” he insisted, “is that you have a conception of a colored object, or a number of colored objects, as a sense of the color as a whole; this sense of color can then be interpreted emotionally in its own way” (172).

Clearly, Eisenstein saw color as communicating emotion. In the context of recent research on emotions, cinematic language of color lends itself to further exploration as a cross-culturally accessible emotion language. However, in applying the idea of color language as emotion language to the three films mentioned in the title, there is need for caution because these films are not sentimental and melodramatic. The color aesthetic used in them is different from the more typical Bollywood spectacle and saturation in color for the sake of color. In contrast, the use of color in these films can provide some of the best examples for Eisenstein’s notion—evident in his word choice such as “color key,” “color counterpoint,” “color score”—that color effects are, or should be, like musical effects (1946: 119–20). Consistent with this principle, for the Iranian director, Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*Gabbeh*), and the two Indian directors, M. F. Husain and Ketan Mehta, color functions like a musical score—with its own key color—that keeps track of time and guides cognitive processing of information essential to each film’s cumulative emotional effect. In saying this I do not have in mind only the song-and-dance sequences of the two Indian films, *Meenaxi* and *Mirch Masala*, but refer to the overall quality of color composition used in each of the three films, a formal arrangement that is conducive not so much to the elicitation of emotion in relation to active agents and emotive events in the story world, but to the elicitation of what Ed Tan has called *artefact emotions* as opposed to *fiction emotions* (see Freeland 1999: 76–77).

Briefly, fiction emotions are elicited in relation to the viewer’s appraisal of the goals, aims, and concerns of the characters. In contrast, artefact emotion is not elicited by an investment in what happens to the characters. It arises in relation to the visual or aural qualities of the work, by arrangements that change, repeat, present equivalences and contrasts for the viewer’s physical perception and cognitive processing of information.

In distancing the viewer from the objects, events and agents in the story world, through embedded stories tied to a minimalist frame story or situation, Makhmalbaf’s 1996 Farsi film, *Gabbeh* and Husain’s 2004 Hindi/Urdu film, *Meenaxi* seek a sort of *alienation effect*. The characters in the frame story of *Gabbeh* are situated in a way that makes them authorial; they are also like readers and viewers of the story about the oddly named girl, “Gabbeh,” which means “carpet.” She is, in fact, a figure in the carpet that has been woven and is in the process of being washed and beaten into smooth shape. At the end,

we see this carpet, mostly blue, in contrast to other carpets, hanging out to dry. In that form, it becomes an abstract, formalized emotion object suggesting events: the life story of the elderly couple who figure in the initial establishing shot to which the film returns from varied angles, using different lighting. In Husain's film, the author, the Nawab of Hyderabad has a surrealist encounter with the woman who has not yet become the fleshed out heroine of his novel. In contrast to the object of art and memory (what the younger version of the woman in the frame story in *Gabbeh* has become), Meenaxi in Husain's film is unformed life wanting to become memory, art, a figure, not in a woven carpet, but in an unwritten novel. The story worlds in both films are so tentative, so experimental that the events, agents, and objects depicted in them are not grounded enough in illusion to elicit emotion. Instead, attentional focus is guided by cognitive processing of other colors in relation to the predominant color of both these films, blue.

Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala* uses red as the central color, and he achieves alienation effect differently, by foregrounding class struggle and class conflict in late Colonial India, in which the proletariat—women workers in a spice factory—rise up against the oppressive tax collector. Stylistically, alienation effect is a consequence of dramatic contrasts not only between the red color of chili peppers against other background colors, but also the contrasting arrangement of objects, events, and agents that formalize social anger as an aesthetic emotion object. The advantage of color as part of the formal arrangement of montage, mise-en-scène, graphic match, is that color perception is at once biological and social, individual and collective; color is sensation as well as cognition.

While the main characters are distanced in the “blue” films by being surrealistic, the main character in the “red” film is distanced by being portrayed at once as the village wife and something larger than the landscape she traverses daily. She is the village itself: its honor, shame, pride, and anger. Ketan Mehta's use of red in *Mirch Masala* shares with the use of blue in the other two films (by Makhmalbaf and M. F. Husain) an almost anthropomorphic representation of the dominant color, its movement, shape, and texture that links three elements: context, concept and content. First, there are values that might be culturally, or cross-culturally, associated with a particular color, such as red as the color of communism, or blue, as it is associated with Lord Krishna's skin color in Hinduism. Culture-bound color symbolism, however, remains tentative and not as important as the second element—color patterning (or concept) intrinsic to each film, as it works toward foregrounding of the dominant color. The third element, perhaps the most important, is the way color constitutes subjectivity, which is ultimately that of the viewer.

Among the types of emotions that play a constitutive role in the films are “fortune of others emotions,” defined by Ortony and colleagues as emotions that result from reacting to the “consequences of events” when focusing on

the “consequences” for others (1990: 22–23), as well as prospect-based emotions, defined as emotions that arise when a person reacts “to an event counterfactually, by thinking about and imagining what it would have been like had the contemplated event transpired” (109). In the films we are considering, these are not precisely fiction emotions. That is, the characters may experience the fortune of others and prospect-based emotions, but the viewer engagement is most of the time assured by artefact emotion. For instance, the Nawab’s Muse, Meenaxi, in *Meenaxi*, becomes invested in both fortune of others’ emotions and prospect-based emotions. This happens when the first segment of the embedded story world is linked to the other two counterfactual worlds through a networking of these emotions, for which colors become cognitive process markers as they organize screen space and time.

In addition, the cinematic motion of contrasting colors that have been coded with meanings intrinsic to each film—not narrative development, because the plots are unhurried and frequently interrupted—is guided by the *law of change*. To clarify how this significant law of emotion elicitation works, Frijda maintains that “Emotions are elicited not so much by the presence of favorable and unfavorable conditions but by actual and expected changes in favorable and unfavorable conditions” (2007:10). Classical poetics might have called it *peripeteia*—the law of reversal of fortunes and, in fact, Frijda refers to literary suspense and its reliance on the law of change.

Alienation Effect, Identification, and Artefact Emotion

Although consistent with various classical principles of emotion elicitation, the color aesthetic used in the three films discussed here challenges the perceived opposition between Brechtian emphasis on the *alienation effect* and Aristotle’s notion of *catharsis* of emotion. This is not to say that there is no dif-

Although consistent with various classical principles of emotion elicitation, the color aesthetic used in the three films discussed here challenges the perceived opposition between Brechtian emphasis on the alienation effect and Aristotle’s notion of catharsis of emotion.

ference and no opposition, but only to suggest that it is sometimes more a distinction between two kinds of artefact emotion than between emotion and critical thinking. The *emotion object* in each type of aesthetic is different; thus, *emotion outcome* is different for this reason. That is why Brechtian drama is not devoid of emotion and the tragedies that Aristotle spoke of *do* engage us in critical thinking (through emotion). More important for our approach is to consider what the laws of emotion are and how they guide the movement of colors, their rhythms, and “musical” structures, as they guide events and outcomes of events in films where fic-

tion emotions are more important. The laws of emotion are abstract and universal, such as the law of concern, situational meaning, apparent reality, closure, the law of change, of care for consequence, the law of comparative

feeling, and so forth (Frijda 2007: 4–19; Tan 2000: 118–21). For cinematic emotion, an imagined identification with goals and concerns of the characters is not necessary; a viewer can become invested in tasks such as a character dropping an object, and wait for him to pick it up with as much eagerness as he or she might wait for the unraveling of a murder mystery. To take one example from Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh*, one might refer to the montage sequence where the gabbeh girl is warming her hands with her breath, as she takes out a piece of cloth from her bundle to weigh it down with hardened snow and leave it on the mountain pass, so that her lover will know which path the caravan has taken. The law of change guides attentional focus and continuity between shots, as the viewer waits to see if the snow will hold the cloth down; if the lover will find it, or if the piece of cloth will be, in spite of the weight, blown off. It is important to note that because of suppression of some kinds of information, the viewer does not necessarily identify with the girl's desire to communicate with the lover. He is not real enough to anyone, but to her. Yet, her action, and the red cloth she selects out of other colors, elicits interest.

Similarly, the global variables for emotion intensity, such as "proximity" to an object and agent, and the sense of "apparent reality" of an event as a condition for the elicitation of emotion intensity (Frijda 2007: 8–9; Tan 2000: 118–19; Ortony et al. 1990: 61), does not require identification or projection. Clearly, alienation effect can disrupt the law of apparent reality and the law of concern, as well as the law of caring for consequence, but alienation effect may also subversively sponsor the law of change to redirect the mechanisms of these laws in such a way as to invest in short-term viewer emotion. For instance, in *Gabbeh*, one becomes invested in wondering if the roll of dyed wool will get caught in the reeds or flow smoothly to its destination. Similarly, in *Meenaxi*, one wonders if the blue water pots sliding from the sand dunes will break or land safely. When the viewer is distanced from the desires of the characters, their life goals, even their individual temperaments, the law of proximity can bring closeness to everyday tasks, movements, and gestures. The concern and *care for consequence* will, then, elicit emotion that can be recruited to the realization of a larger, symptomatic meaning of the film. I refer here to David Bordwell's idea of *symptomatic meaning* as "situating the film within a trend of thought" that may be of social and ideological relevance for its time and place (2001: 48), and beyond. I would add that alternative cinema, in this case Indian and Iranian, offers philosophical reflection on these "trends of thought," because the purpose is not merely to entertain, but to educate.

Gabbeh

Educating through Colors

In *Gabbeh*, a carpet that is woven in the dominant color, blue, has panels of different colors for contrast. From time to time, through close ups, two figures,

male and female on horseback, as if in flight from something or someone, are introduced. Even when the carpet is not blue but dark green to commemorate the death of a mother, the human figures in the design are foregrounded through close ups. The design invokes a genre micro-script that one might gather “from real life,” to follow Greg Smith’s notion of “genre micro-scripts”—such as “show downs,” “feuding lovers,” “stalking,” and “reconciliation of lovers”—and their causal link to emotion elicitation (2003: 48–49). In the context of emotion, these can also be seen as emotion scripts, that is, condensed information stored in long-term memory that, when activated, elicits emotion. In *Gabbeh*, however, the love story micro-script is presented as the sob story of a whiny adolescent girl. As the figure emerges from the blue carpet, magnified and bodily, she begins talking of her troubles (Figure 1).¹ The father delays marriage and forbids a premarital union of lovers; after much waiting and suffering, she escapes with the lover on horseback. The viewer never sees the face of the lover who, while the father uses delay tactics and

Figure 1. *Gabbeh*, the figure in the carpet.



the girl is under constant watch to prevent a romantic escape, pursues his beloved through the rugged landscape the nomadic tribes cross over and come back to from time to time. In place of the youthful face of this lover, we are shown the aged face of the husband who still longs for the figure in the carpet—though that girl, the object of his amorous pursuit, has been his wife ever since. The gabbeh girl and the old woman are identically dressed from head to

foot in a radiant sea-blue. The younger woman has a purple headband. Sequins decorate the edges of her headdress and they fall on her face when she tilts her head to look in a certain direction. In addition, the carpet that the gabbeh girl carries over her shoulder when the caravan moves is consistently blue, though a darker blue, and the carpet the old woman attends to is blue. Even the wool and cotton thread that the girl handles most often is blue.

In these ways, the figure, in all her movements and volitions of will and emotion, manifests a monochromatic color design of dark blue, a radiant bright blue, with greenish tinge on the borders in varying light values. This formal arrangement, at one level, supports the idea of “blue as the color of summer and [and idyllic representation]” (Eisenstein 1946: 165); however, the life depicted here is not wholly idyllic. In addition, viewing time as well as narrative time (the journey of the caravan) is measured in montage being motivated by change from summer greens to autumn reds and browns to wintry

whiteness of snow and ice, and blazing camp fires. Yet, the narrative frame, and its link to the embedded story is organized by highlighting of a collage of blues in various textures, because in that frame it is mid-summer. Blue, in this film, for Makhmalbaf, is the emblem of what joins life to art and entertainment, and what separates it from these artifacts. Blue is also the color of what joins the everyday processes of the mind—emblemized in the daily life of the elderly couple—to memory and imagination.

Although the frame characters are not conscious of color as color, Makhmalbaf's film makes coloring and color a self-conscious, self-reflexive process. As if linking the frame story and the embedded story through the color blue was not enough, the first full narrative sequence starts with a kind of preface to a theory of colors given by a teacher to his students in the camp school that travels with the caravan. In this sequence, *color* is explicitly thematized. Erasing the alphabet from the chalkboard, Gabbeh's uncle, who has come from the city and is the teacher for the day, writes the names of colors: red, blue, green, and orange-yellow. He associates red with flowers (tulips), blue with the sky and paradise, another shade of blue with the sea; green is associated with earth and foliage, and orange-yellow with the sun. Not all these objects can be grasped in one's hand, but some can. In one shot, the teacher's hand reaches out to a field, from where, as if through magic to impress the kids, he brings in a bouquet of tulips and some other red flowers. This underscores the instrumentality of the human hand, its labor and the ability to create beauty. Taken out of context, this entire sequence of shots may seem a bit over the top in its pedagogical aim. Yet the global variable of "proximity" for emotion elicitation (in the students, and the viewer) is evident here in bringing close of what is distant—the sun, sky, sea, vegetation, and flora—through alternating shots (distant and close ups) of the hand holding bunches of flowers, and a close up of both hands covered in blue and yellow dye. Clearly, the color lesson teaches a lexicon and syntax of color, bringing the cosmic close to the particular. The raised hands of the teacher will be remembered by the viewer later, in connection with shots of women's hands gathering wild flowers—red, blue and purple—extracting color from them and dyeing rolls of wool and cotton thread. The sense of everyday "reality" of color makes it an object of emotion. In this case the attachment between the elderly couple as they work alone, and the bittersweet memory of the community of workers of the girl's youth—the coloring and weaving of carpets and making of color from plants, herbs, and flowers, as well as a nostalgia for the romantic micro-script of their younger days: its mystery and adventure. The co-worker girls were her extended family, but they were also obstacles to Gabbeh's romantic union with the silhouette on horseback. Age and hard work, the loneliness, have put that part of her life outside of time and space. The film resurrects it as emotion memory.

In discussing global variables for emotion intensity, Ortony and colleagues maintain that the “sense of reality variable plays a major role in vicarious emotions,” particularly when one “reads a novel and watches a movie” (1990: 61). He continues: “our proposal is that such emotions are experienced to the degree to which the stimulating fantasy succeeds in inducing a sense of reality in the reader or viewer” (61). Here, the sense of reality with regard to the characters’ lives is not enhanced. The angles of framing present them, from one perspective, as too real in their banal awkwardness, a sort of shabbiness, their squinting, uncomfortable awareness of the gaze of the camera. They become the estranged stand-ins for the viewer. The micro-script of their romantic youth is not the emotion eliciting schema; the awkwardly felt and inadequately expressed, as well as the bittersweet emotion of its loss due to age and time, is.

Can Blue Be the Color of Grief?

Although the story world is distanced and a viewer is less inclined to identify with the objects, events, and agents depicted in it, there is one sequence that stands out, though the operations of estrangement effect are not suspended. During one of the gabbeh girl’s “sessions” with the old couple, the embedded narrative unfolds the tragic death of a child. The gabbeh girl’s youngest sister, Sholeh, while watching over a goat, wanders toward the higher peaks of the mountain and falls off a cliff. A series of tracking shots follows Sholeh as she shepherds with ease, loses sight of the animal and begins to panic, but bravely persists and picks up the goat, having reached the precipitous edge. The viewer does not see Sholeh fall; no one does. However, Sholeh’s call for help suddenly turns Gabbeh’s figure and gaze in that direction. Within the inner story the gabbeh girl is linked to the characters in the caravan only through work. She never talks to anyone, and rarely has eye contact with them. The caravan is always marching in a file over narrow pathways where eye contact is not possible. When they work, the girls sit side by side, not looking at each other; their gaze is intensely fixed on work. From time to time Gabbeh looks into the distance, toward her lover on horseback. Also, the color of her clothes is as different from everyone else’s in her family (except Sholeh in this segment) as it is nearly identical to the elderly woman in the frame story. The brief sequence where she loses her sister creates a rupture in the distancing behavior of color and conduct, and elicits shock, guilt, and grief. It is clear that for the filmmaker this is a climactic moment, and he uses a long revolving shot of Gabbeh, as she turns away from work and answers Sholeh’s cry for help (Figure 2). The diffusion of color and light, due to revolving motion, mingles the blue hue with strains of mournful, nondiegetic music.

The cut to the frame story is composed in a set of close ups of the old woman’s face and back. She is weeping inconsolably. Even here, what is repre-

sented is not grief with which one can identify. The woman's weeping is too real, almost awkward as such weeping always is because the person who witnesses it does not know how to react. The high moment of *karuna rasa* (the Sanskrit term for the aesthetic emotion of sorrow) is, thus, distanced enough so that we do not, or cannot share this grief. It is too private. While the film defines the color of death in culturally coded terms, as black, the sea-blue is never depicted in conventional terms. In the outside world, it relates only to nature, not to cultural codifications of the symbolic meaning of color. In Makhmalbaf's film, thus, blue is not just a color, but a color that, within the orchestrated color scheme of the film, defines the location of the subject in the moment of remorse, or emotion memory of loss. The viewer is distanced from the tragedy, because he or she watches the watcher watching a tragic moment, or listening to a tragic episode in someone's life, as the past and present come together. The young girl, whose absent-mindedness was brought on by obsessive mindfulness of romantic love, caused her little sister's death. As the old woman breaks down, Gabbeh, tossing a black ball of wool, makes the quiet confession: "it was my fault." The ball falls into the rivulet, becomes blacker, and assumes the texture of organic matter, as it floats away: Sholeh's little life, fallen from the hand that could not hold it.



Figure 2. *Gabbeh* calling out for *Sholeh*.

What is announced later to the viewer across the frames and from inside the magic box in which the story world is held captive—like memories are held captive in the mind—is the loud declaration: "color is life, and color (*rang*) is love (*ishq*)." In so far as these utterances, that lie outside of a realistic context of a dialogue, are relevant to the embedded story, they are declarations of love to the distant paramour on the horseback whose outline can be seen from time to time at corners of mountain ridges, and who communicates his coded message (of love) through a wolf call. Within an immediate, culturally specific context, the super-addressee, to use a Bakhtinian phrase, of this declaration is the religious and political authority (with their headquarters in Tehran); those who have banished color from life by mandating that women must not display their faces, their hair, or their colorful clothing in public, that they must cover themselves in a steel gray or black hijab. One can visualize the utterance in the form of a colorful slogan, even graffiti. The spectacular color-work, color-labor, color-art, and color pedagogy of the caravan, roaming in the Fars region presents a cinematic counterpoint to an unfair law. If color is life and love (*zindagi* and *ishq*), as the *gabbeh* girl announces, then lack of color, or

the predominance of black and white (not of the black and white film, but of the hijab, of unjust legal decrees) is death. In the land of color's splendor, women are condemned to move about in public places wearing the drab, black robe of death.

Meenaxi

Blue Refrain in the Song of Colors

The influence of *Gabbeh* on M. F. Husain's *Meenaxi: A Tale of 3 Cities* is evident, among other things, in his strategic indexing of the color blue throughout the film; explicit use of the color theme in one of the song-and-dance sequences; distancing of objects, agents, and events in the story world by introducing a frame story or situation. Both filmmakers are to some extent alluding to the embedment motif and stylistic device used in *Arabian Night* story sequences, and the main female characters can be seen as cinematic versions of the Scheherazade character. In *Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade's project is to educate the tyrant king through storytelling, through the deferral of story suspense over a thousand and one nights. Night after night, as she builds and maintains suspense through elicitation of curiosity, moral anxiety, and interest, she stalls her own death sentence. Husain's film is not explicitly political, but it has political relevance because it deals with possibilities for a liberating unity amid the religious diversity of India. In brief, *Meenaxi* focuses on a Nawab of Hyderabad who is a novelist and begins with his meeting with the press and a public eager for his new novel. To their dismay, the novelist is experiencing a writer's block; he is stuck in a rut. In a surrealistic fashion, reminiscent of Pirandello (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*), the heroine of his novel, Meenaxi of Hyderabad, shows up at his doorstep and takes charge of his life and his art. This uncanny collaboration between the two brings forth two other protagonists, her doubles: Meenaxi of Jaisalmer and Maria of Prague (all played by Tabu). Toward the end, Nagma discovers her brother's dead body in the un-peopled mansion, amid torn pages of a manuscript. Prior to the entry of bereaved sister and distraught aunt, the dying Nawab is watched over only by this not so "real" Meenaxi, who exits before others enter.

Husain's painterly dramaturgy of color, combined with Santosh Sivan's cinematography uses the following system. The segment dealing with the Nawab and his shadow companion—the strange girl who calls herself Meenaxi and says she sells perfume in one of the Hyderabad bazaars—uses white, black, and blue to guide attentional focus. Meenaxi is invariably dressed in white; the Nawab wears a black sherwani in the opening set of shots, and dark blue for the rest. Before the opening kawali, a familial mise-en-scène brings together the frame characters as if for a portrait. The beloved sister and bride-to-be, Nagma, is in green; the aunt in brocaded maroon; the Nawab in white and black, against a background of white, brown, beige, and pale green. The

kawali sequence uses floor lights of different colors, and a blue haze, to emphasize the black and white costumes of the male dancers, the veils and head to foot black burqas (hijabs) of the female guests, who are repeatedly shown moving in circles that turn into spirals. It is at the heart of one of these circles that the Nawab first spots the resplendent, bejeweled Meenaxi, though the peanut crunching sarcastic Meenaxi is an exact opposite of the kawali-induced vision (Figure 3). For obvious reasons, the congregation of burqa-clad women figures only in Hyderabad because the emphasis is on the city's Muslim community. Wearing of burqas (hijabs) in India does not have the same connotation as the officially mandated public dress code for women in Iran. In India women wear it voluntarily to affirm their cultural identity; there is no law requiring them to do so. Apart from indexing this group of women, the black and white clearly refers to writing (or not writing) the novel, to uncertainty and irresolution, and the atmospheric blue of lighting is associated with other emotions elicited by being stuck—as the Nawab is for a major portion of the film.

The change in emotions occurs with a shift to prospect-based emotions, through the counterfactuality of the tale of Jaisalmer: the second of the three cities. As the novel is being written and as the film unfolds, anticipation, excitement, promise of fulfilling goals figure prominently and are suggested, among other things, through a shift to bright colors, such as yellow, red, blue of costumes and objects, and green, as well as various blends. Even black, through the new Meenaxi's revealing dance costume, changes to something exuberantly sexual. Narratively, the shift is motivated by the Nawab's having accepted the challenge of that phantom of the imagination, Meenaxi of



Figure 3. Meenaxi in the circle.

Hyderabad, who, for better or worse, has practically moved into the Nawab's mansion. From reading parts of the manuscript to serving the bachelor Nawab his favorite biryani, she takes walks with him to discuss his male *kir-dars* (characters), offering irrelevant suggestions and cutting remarks on their inadequacies and/or his reluctance to make them more overtly sexual. She is now a partner. Her own emotions, made consistently accessible by well-timed cuts to this frame situation, can be explained as fortune-of-others emotions (where emotion is elicited by appraisals about what the consequences are for others). These are fiction emotions, not artefact emotions. The Hyderabad Meenaxi identifies with the Jaisalmer Meenaxi, and feels frustrated with the boyfriend's reluctance to take the relationship further toward sexual consummation (and possibly marriage). Later, the Nawab, as the author, forms a different kind of fiction-attachment to Maria of Prague. A split screen image of the author and his third imagined protagonist, when the first two draft-heroines do not work out, shows Maria of Prague and the Nawab conversing (with concern) about Maria's lonely, monastic, orphaned life that presents a mirror to his own life.

The fictional character who stays in the story world and does not wander away from it is Meenaxi of Jaisalmer. She has no encounter with the author. Her male lead, Kameshwar, is modeled on Kunal, the mechanic in Hyderabad whose dreams about becoming a musician prevent him from taking care of the Nawab's car, mirroring the Nawab's own irresolution and writing block. Once again, color organizes screen space and time, and the progression to the second city, as Kameshwar is sent to visit his aunt in Jaisalmer, the colorful city in the deserts of Rajputana, where he meets Meenaxi, the Rajput princess. Blue plays a significant role here. In contrast to the white robed meta-fictional Meenaxi of Hyderabad, the Jaisalmer Meenaxi wears an array of colors: black, yellow-orange, blue, and green. She wears blue repeatedly, but it is not her permanent garb, or her element, as it is of the old woman and the young girl in *Gabbeh*. The grounded subject in Husain's film, though an imaginary creature, is the white-robed Meenaxi, who wears black just at the end, when the Nawab is dying. Kameshwar and the colorful Meenaxi come into existence only to gratify the Hyderabad Meenaxi's fortune of others, and prospect-based emotions, her hopes and desires, and her demand that the novelist should invent for her a microscript of romantic-sexual consummation, which he does not. Her appetite for fiction emotion is left unsatisfied.

Kameshwar's journey is synchronized with a very fluid song-and-dance sequence, strewn with allusions to Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* at many places. The words of the song refer directly to statements made about color in *Gabbeh*: "color is life, color is desire," and so forth. The Hindi song is not a great poem (the better poem in this film is the opening and ending kawali); the color song relies mostly on end rhyme and inner rhyme, such as between *rang* (color) and

umang (desire). The real poetry is in the way blue is used as a color refrain; the visual display of objects and persons in red, purple, yellow, green returns repeatedly to blue. The organization is like that of a stanza of five or so lines, with the resolving refrain in blue. The cut to blue is often, not always, synchronized with the refrain of the song, “color is, color is, color is / color is life, color is desire.”

Another song sequence, later, when Meenaxi and Kameshwar’s romance heats up, once again alludes to Gabbeh through repeated shots of pots and pottery, dyeing, recently dyed red, blue, green, purple sheets of fabric drying in the sun, captured in long shots that enable one to see the entire length, followed by cuts to piles of blue, yellow, and red powder dye, faces painted in blue, and pots painted blue sliding down the dunes. It is like what Aristotle calls “spectacle” in Greek Tragedy. Here it is visual splendor of blue to elicit artefact emotion through ornamentation.

If blue, as a receding color, is the opposite of red, and other warm colors, and if the color blue in monkeys and babies triggers feelings of calm as opposed to those of excitement and arousal that red does (Humphrey 2006: 20–21), then Meenaxi’s plain blue saree at her first meeting with Kameshwar foreshadows non-fulfillment of their romance. During one of their meetings, Kameshwar comments on Meenaxi’s “midnight blue” saree, and later, when she comes to him at midnight, surrounded by a blue haze, dressed in orange-yellow, she is unable to confess her feelings. Explicit comparisons are made between Meenaxi of Jaisalmer and Meerabai, the Rajput princess who became a poet. She rejected her royal husband (and thus, all material joys) because she fell in love with the blue-black god, Krishna. Orange-yellow is, traditionally, the color of devotion to deity: the color of spirituality. Husain’s use of this color, briefly, for Meenaxi’s saree is only a tentative reference to Hindu spirituality, because Meenaxi is not very spiritual and does not identify with Meerabai. However, the introduction of orange-yellow, with its culturally defined meaning, does provide an anticipatory counterpoint to the blue that finally defines spirituality as devotion to a deity without attributes, without a body and a life history. In the middle of what happens and does not happen in these distanced, embedded story sequences, Meenaxi’s blue clothes are associated with her work as an activist for the water conservation movement in Rajasthan, suggesting a possible conflict with her sexual-romantic escapades and marital commitment.

A return to the whites and blacks, the filtered blues of Hyderabad brings us back to the voyeuristic Meenaxi, with her strong disgust and disappointment at the turn the Jaisalmer story has taken. As she throws away the pages of the manuscript, and leaves the Nawab’s house in anger, she is enveloped in a blue haze. A montage of the street, with rickshaw wallas waiting for early risers is handled in such a way that we do not know if her reality is confirmed by any-

one other than the Nawab. When people in the street look, we are not sure they are looking at her. At this odd hour, it seems she is spotted by a group of bicyclists in white, but we cannot be sure they have seen her, as they drive circles around her. A cut to the burning of the manuscript, with the Nawab looking on, not in anger, but a sort of resigned annoyance, concludes this section.

Because Meenaxi is a story within a story, within a film (thus a story), moving in and out of story worlds requires strategic linking and cognitive recall. Blue functions prominently in this role. In this linking role, blue is not like a refrain, but like the repetition of words in a Sestina, following a tightly linked intricate pattern. In one aspect of the emotionally charged *mise-en-scène*, blue of the Jaisalmeer Meenaxi's saree is recalled through the blue water glass that the Nawab hands to the *paan*-chewing Meenaxi, dressed in her usual white. A blue vase, the blue flute (reinforcing associations with iconography of the flute playing god, Krishna) which Kunal brings to the house and the surreal Meenaxi places on the dying Nawab's bed from where the pen drops to the ground at that exact moment, blue of the stained glass windows and paneling, blue of the sheet on the dais where the musician are seated in the opening and ending *kawali*, the dark blue pillow on the Nawab's death bed, the light blue sheet, Nagma's blue clothes as she approaches the bed, canopied by green, red, and yellow drapes, made of thin cotton, worn out due to long neglect, blue floor lights leading to the center of the *kawali* set up, all these images are part of the Sestina format of repeated words in different combinations. But what is the thematic purpose?

If blue is the color of tranquility and if it maps outlines of subjectivity in *Gabbeh*, in *Meenaxi*, blue is a unifying and purifying color. It clarifies, and defines the relational tone of feeling—love, attachment, desire—between men and women. In this film, white and black define the location of subjectivity, commemorated in the final return at the end of the funeral *kawali*, to the

Figure 4. *Meenaxi and the Nawab*.



white-robed Meenaxi, now again bejeweled, beneficent, not menacing, but serene, the waiting bride, a step away from the groom: the novelist-Nawab, in his black sherwani and white trousers (Figure 4). The irresolution of the Jaisalmer and Prague stories, especially the Jaisalmer story—where the end came with Meenaxi's goal to marry Kameshwar having been stalled, and suspension of her consciousness in a tender, romantic feeling—is also clarified and purified when

all story threads and traces of feeling come together in the final scene. Though erotic love may be more enduring in this unfinished format, it does not lead to romantic or marital union. The Urdu word for this feeling is *ahsaas*, one of the novelist Nawab's favorite words; it can be translated as "awareness of emotion." The color aesthetic of the film communicates and clarifies this emotion-cognition mode: the romantic-erotic *ahsaas*. Perhaps this meta-emotion is something conceptualized within a specific cultural context, perhaps not. In either way, the elicitation of this meta-emotion is contingent on non-fulfillment of direct achievement goals, and goals associated with the trajectories of other emotions. The function of blue is thus, to show, in relief, all colors as traces of attachment to worldly objects, and to indicate that spiritual enlightenment lies in transcending color, or attachment, through an aesthetic meditation on color.

Husain's film is a meditative film. He imagines the human subject, the Nawab, finding light, as exemplary lines of the Sufi kawali suggest: "We asked the shadows; they were silent/Daylight felt ashamed/Then, we asked flowers, leaves, *colors*;/From there came the [echoing] answer: 'all is light, and radiance [coming from you]'" (emphasis added; my translations). It is impossible not to be reminded of the color lesson in Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh*, and the association of blue first with the sea, the sky, and finally heaven. Ancient Persia is one of the original homes of Sufism; from there it traveled to India. Husain's own identity as an Indian Muslim and that of his Nawab merge with the consciousness of Meerabai. Turning away from royal favors, Meerabai famously sang songs about becoming colored in the color blue, of her beloved Krishna. In Husain's film, two strains of mysticism are brought together under one rhapsody of color. In the funeral kawali, the word for light is *noor*, which means a bedazzling radiance of white that is almost blue: color of spiritual truth. All blues, through the Nawab's trials and tribulations surrounding writing of the novel—the manuscript was created and destroyed twice—have culminated in this special blue of the sublime. As the publisher waits, name, fame and money, all trappings of the material world wait, as the body lies dead in the lonely mansion without friend and family around to touch it with love—the spirit is this unvanquished Nawab, situated both at the center and periphery of the song about bedazzling light: the *noor* that is everywhere and in everything, even in despair.

Mirch Masala

The Color of Class Conflict

In Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala*, blue does not play a significant role, nor does god, or meditation, or detachment from worldly objects, or transcendence. The leitmotif of this film is red. Red is the color of anger, a reaction to an offense; it is the color of rebellion and resistance. Yet, through alienation effect,

the chosen figure for this universal symbol in the film is a natural object: the chili pepper, an object of no great consequence used as a metonym for something of great ideological consequence. As a material object, red pepper has use value and exchange value; the women work in the spice factory, make a living by it. But when circumstances bring them face to face with the class enemy, the *subedar*, his guns and his soldiers, the women subvert the use and exchange value of chili pepper. From being a source of capital as well as of underpaid labor, it metamorphoses into ammunition for the fight against the colonialist-capitalist economic system. In this process, the women workers shed their individual concerns, goals, family duties, and their comfortable identities as village women (Figure 5) to become an army of the proletariat and turn the spice factory into a garrison from where a battle between classes can be launched, and a clearly identifiable class enemy destroyed. As chili is

not just chili, but a weapon in Mehta's film, so anger is not just anger, but valor.

The first shot of the film is of three red peppers ripening, followed by someone plucking one of them as if it is a stone and aiming it at a huge, ugly scarecrow that comes apart to show crawling worms. This is quickly followed by the menacing sound of soldiers on horseback arriving to exploit and terrorize the village. The narrative focus is on the ar-



Figure 5. *Son Bai and the other women.*

arrival of the *subedar*, the tax collector, who, though not without charm and a sense of humor, considers the village women part of the tax he is legally entitled to collect. Clearly, he represents the British Raj and its exploitative land revenue policies. His insistence on pursuing one of the women, Son Bai, leads to a situation that neither he, nor anyone else could have expected. The woman seeks shelter in the spice factory, where many of the village women work. The watchman of the spice factory closes the gates, and does not allow the soldiers to take her by force. As things get out of hand, the villagers decide to hand over Son Bai to the tax collector, but the *chowkidar* (watchman) refuses to deny further sanctuary to her.

In a complementary and a clashing display of red, green, yellow, and purple of the women's clothing, white and khaki of the men's clothing, the red and black of their turbans and vests, with an occasional blue thrown in, social emotions of pride and honor come into play. This is shown particularly in the watchman's honor and pride, his dharma or duty to protect, his sacrifice.

There is Son Bai's honor on the one side and the *subedar's* on the other; the choice for the *chowkidar* is not personal, but ideological. Also the conflict is ultimately between a *subedar*, the man in charge of a district, and a *chowkidar*, the man in charge of a *chowki*, the home base. The *subedar* forces open the door, and the *chowkidar* is killed. As the *subedar* approaches the now unprotected Son Bai, the women attack him with large amounts of ground chili pepper, and Son Bai, standing still with a sickle in her hand, walks toward the fallen enemy and stands above him (Figure 6).

Outside of the final iconography of Son Bai, with the sickle in her hand, the universally acknowledged red of class resistance is particularized in terms of the film's own color syntax based on the visual configuration of Son Bai's heavy red and purple saree, its ornamentation and embroidery amid flecks of other colors, whites of her conch shell bangles (to signify good fortune), and the red bindi on her forehead. These costume-based and cosmetic reds present a graphic match to the bright, brilliant abundance of red chili: whole and powder. In the uneven, meandering typography of the village, the rugged path for her flight from the soldiers is likewise landscaped by a rich display of mountainous piles of red chili drying in the sun. The piles are so huge that she is able to hide behind them; the soldiers do not see her. As has been pointed out, alienation effect in this film is achieved by a Brechtian emphasis on ideological issues, on individuals as social beings caught in an agonistic conflict—of which most of the time they are unaware—between those who labor for the profit of others, and those who profit by the labor of others. The agent of change is not cool, critical *reason*, but volatile *emotion*, the moral-political efficacy of anger. In this case it is female, proletarian anger emblemized in the chili pepper. The meagerness of the object that assumes unexpected magnitude satisfies the law of change. The laws of concern and care for consequence are directed at things larger than the destinies of individual people and their particular circumstances.

In short, Makhmalbaf's blue is a location of the subject in various transactions of art, life, society, and state. Husain's blue is the resolving note in the complicated, often jarring song of the soul that fights against claims of body, not out of righteousness of organized religion, but on wings of a passion to reach the light that is in each leaf and flower. Mehta's red is violence. It is vengeance of the oppressed, the one who, as a human subject is negated,



Figure 6. Son Bai, after subduing the *subedar*.

In each of the films, the salient color slips out of culturally or trans-culturally coded meanings; it becomes an instrument for the cognitive processing of information, for the accumulation of detail that emerges temporally from the film form, and elicits artefact emotion.

shamed, and thought of as nothing; the woman who cooks and feeds, decorates herself in reds for her man; yet, her anger can be the anger of a goddess standing without remorse over corpses of beheaded men. Son Bai is not blue-black like the demon killing Kali. She kills in bright light of the sun minutes after having helped a woman (a fellow worker) give birth in captivity, surrounded by the radiant splendor of spice. In each of the films, the salient color slips out of culturally or trans-culturally coded meanings; it

becomes an instrument for the cognitive processing of information, for the accumulation of detail that emerges temporally from the film form, and elicits artefact emotion.

Lalita Pandit Hogan is Professor of English and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, where she recently won the College of Liberal Studies' Excellence in Research and Creative Endeavors Award. She has co-edited three books, two special issues of journals, and has numerous published articles and book chapters on Shakespeare, Rabindranath Tagore, Goethe, Indian cinema, comparative literature, Indian theory of Rasa and Dhvani. Pandit has also published, in print and on the Internet, poems and stories about Kashmir in English, and a few poems in Hindi.

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Society for the Cognitive Study of the Moving Image Conference, Madison, WI, June 2008.

Note

¹ Color photos are available for this essay in the electronic version at <http://berghahn.publisher.ingentaconnect.com/content/berghahn/proj>.

References

- Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. 2001. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. 1946. *Notes of a Film Director*. Eds. R. Yurenev and Ivanov-Mumjiev. Trans. X. Danko. Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. [1947] 1998. "Some Lectures on Music and Colour in *Ivan the Terrible*." Pp. 167–86. In *The Eisenstein Reader*, eds. Richard Taylor and William Powel. London: British Film Institute.
- Freeland, Cynthia. 1999. "The Sublime in Cinema." Pp. 65–83 in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg Smith. London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Frijda, Nico H. 2007. *The Laws of Emotions*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Humphrey, Nicholas. 2006. *Seeing Red: A Study of Consciousness*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Ortony, Andrew, Gerald Clore, and Allan Collins. 1990. *The Cognitive Structure of Emotions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, Greg M. 2003. *Film Structure and Emotion System*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tan, Ed S. 2000. "Emotion, Art, and the Humanities." Pp. 116–34. In *Handbook of Emotions*, eds. Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones. New York: Guilford Press.

Filmology

- Husain, M. F. 2004. *Meenaxi: A Tale of 3 Cities*. India.
- Makhmalbaf, Mohassein. 1996. *Gabbeh*. Iran.
- Mehta, Ketan. 1986. *Mirch Masala*. India.
-