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Published in the USA
Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)
Issued since 2005.
ISSN 1994-4160
E-ISSN 1994-4195
2026. 22(1): 174-185

DOI: 10.13187/me.2026.1.174
https://me.cherkasgu.press

Costume, Culture, and Contrast: Significance of Black & White in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Color Films

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Abstract

This paper explores the symbolic significance of black and white in the films of Sanjay Leela Bhansali, with a specific focus on *Devdas*, *Black*, and *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. The study aims to examine how black and white operate as symbolic codes, shape character identity, and communicate psychological and emotional meanings through cinematic aesthetics. The study applies a qualitative analytical method, combining visual content analysis and cinematic semiotics, to investigate how these two colors function as cultural texts and narrative devices. Drawing on theories of color symbolism and semiotics, the research treats black and white as signs that carry shifting meanings, depending on the context, costume, and character. The findings reveal that Bhansali consistently uses black and white to shape character identity, cultural representation, and emotional resonance. White, a color traditionally tied to purity, widowhood, and restraint in Indian culture, is redefined as a marker of resilience, authority, and empowerment, especially in *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. Black, frequently associated with stigma and despair, is used in *Black* to express inner struggle, silence, and the contrast between ignorance and enlightenment. In *Devdas*, the interplay of black and white reflects class conflict, sacrifice, and tragic decline. This challenging of traditional codes compels the audience to engage in critical media literacy, deconstructing visual signs to understand shifting cultural and emotional narratives.

Keywords: color symbolism, film color, cinematic semiotics, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, visual narrative.

1. Introduction

Color has traditionally been a significant storytelling tool in films, affecting both the way they look and the way they convey. Color in film not only sets the ambiance but also conveys cultural codes, psychological moods, and character identity (Bellantoni, 2005). Color symbolism is an important part of storytelling in Indian movies, where clothing and set design are very important. In a film, the careful choice of colors by the director, director of photography, and production designer plays a crucial role in shaping the audience's experience, even before shooting begins. The shift to color cinematography marked a significant change from the earlier black and white era. The advent of color cinematography compelled filmmakers to conceptualize and implement tailored color palettes for their movies (Matkar, Ghodake, 2024). While colors carry specific meanings in films and in everyday life, the intentional use of black and white within other hues in a film is particularly meaningful. These two colors often have many connotations. For example, they might indicate purity and sacrifice on one hand and grief or being on the outside on the other (Dwyer, Patel, 2002). This study examines the significance of black and white in Sanjay Leela

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Bhansali's films through costume, culture, and contrast. Focusing on Gangubai Kathiawadi (Gangubai Kathiawadi, 2022), Black (Black, 2005), and Devdas (Devdas, 2002), it investigates how these two colors function as cultural texts and narrative structures. Sanjay Leela Bhansali is broadly acknowledged as one of the most visually ambitious auteurs in Hindi cinema, with films that incorporate intricate sets, meticulously designed costumes, and meticulously managed color palettes. He often uses color as a type of cinematic language, combining spectacle with emotional impact (Sharma, Goswami, 2021). In Bhansali's films, every shade is intentional, contributing to narrative depth and cultural symbolism (Kulkarni, 2021).

Building on this understanding of Bhansali's visual language, it is essential to consider the psychology of color in films. According to Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961), colors are the subconscious' native language. Color and culture are closely linked; in fact, color is often used to show faith and values (Panjwani, 2014). In films, color is a semiotic tool that helps filmmakers encode story, emotion, and character attributes (Elliot, 2015). Filmmakers utilize color selections to enhance narrative, cultivate characters, and establish immersive environments. Every hue has its own meanings and associations that affect how the spectator sees and feels about it (Fusco, Hellerman, 2023). Colours have the psychological ability to influence our perceptions and evoke strong feelings. There is a common perception that warm colors (red, orange, etc.) represent energy, intensity, and vitality, whereas cool colors (blue, green, etc.) represent equilibrium, serenity, and tranquility. White often signifies purity, honesty, or regeneration, yet in other situations it can also mean emptiness or death. *Black*, on the other hand, is often associated with mystery, power, or authority, but it can also mean fright, oppression, or despair (Wexner, 1954). It is crucial to analyze these visual codes in order to develop media literacy, particularly within higher education film classrooms that aim to cultivate informed and ethical media practitioners (Romero-Walker, 2022). By deliberately engaging with and often subverting traditional color schemes, this work encourages audiences to critically examine cinematic narratives and challenge entrenched cultural assumptions, an essential aspect of critical literacy (Marsh, 2022).

2. Materials and methods

This study examines three of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films where black and white emerge as central symbolic motifs. *Devdas* stands as the third Hindi film adaptation of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's 1917 novella, but it is the first to be created in full color (Gokulsing, Dissanayake, 2004). Bhansali's adaptation is different from prior ones because it puts the story in a rich setting where the costumes, music, and colors make the story even more emotive (Dwyer, 2014). *Black* draws inspiration from the life and writings of Helen Keller, particularly her autobiography *The Story of My Life*, and reimagines it in an Indian context (Kumari, 2017). What makes the film unique is its restricted color scheme: Bhansali largely avoids bright hues, using blacks, whites, and muted blues to intensify the drama (Puthur, 2013). *Black* earned major Filmfare awards, screened at Cannes, and featured in TIME's best films of 2005 (Mathur, 2017a). *Gangubai Kathiawadi* is adapted from a chapter in Hussain Zaidi's book *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*, published in 2011. The film fictionalizes the life of *Gangubai Kothewali*, a brothel madam who became an influential activist in Kamathipura (Fanani et al., 2025). In this film, the costumes not only visualize cultural codes but also construct Gangubai's identity as a gendered subaltern resisting oppression (Sarkar, Rai, 2022).

This research is based on theories of color symbolism and cinematic semiotics. Color symbolism refers to the subjective significance that individuals ascribe to different hues (IxDF, 2021). If a hue has influenced your emotions or thoughts in any way, it becomes a form of color symbolism (Katatikarn, 2024). As noted by Goethe, colors are associated with emotional states and moral values (Goethe, 1840). Later developments by Kandinsky highlighted the psychological resonance of colors (Kandinsky, 1911). In film studies, Monaco emphasizes that color operates as a signifier, while Bellantoni demonstrates how color design in cinema translates emotions into visual form (Monaco, 2009; Bellantoni, 2005). Similarly, Kim, Jun, and Kim demonstrate how costume color serves as a symbolic expression in film (Kim et al., 2014). On the other hand, the semiotic approach draws on Barthes, who argued that cultural texts carry multiple layers of meaning (Barthes, 1967). In cinema, costumes act as cultural texts (Barnwell, 2019), revealing identity, power, and ideology. Semiotics views cinema as a system of signs, where images, sounds, and colors work like a language. Metz describes film as a "*language without a code*," where Buckland further explains how contrasts and framing create signifiers that guide narrative and

emotion (Metz, 1991; Buckland, 1999). Within this framework, black and white are studied as recurring cinematic signs.

The objectives of this research are: (1) to examine the symbolic significance of black and white in Bhansali's selected films, (2) to analyze how these contrasts shape character identity and emotional journeys, and (3) to explore their psychological and cultural meanings as expressed through cinematic aesthetics. This study follows a qualitative analytical approach, drawing on visual and textual analysis of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films. The research integrates visual content analysis with cinematic semiotics to understand how Bhansali uses black and white. The analysis is structured into five thematic headings: costume and cultural identity, contrast and context, cinematic symbolism of black and white, aesthetic and narrative implications, and psychology of color and emotion. Dialogues, costume details, and key scenes are examined to trace how black and white function in different contexts.

3. Discussion

The analysis can begin with a striking dialogue from *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. When Afsaan comes to her house with white sarees, Gangubai playfully asks: "*Kaunsa wala safed? Chand wala? Baadal wala? Safed kaagaz wala? Sabse zyada gulab bana sakta hai? Safed namak wala? Doodh wala? Shankh wala? Jharne wala? Barish wala*?" ("*Which white? The white of the moon, or the white of clouds? White of paper, or the one that makes roses stand out? White of salt, milk, or a conch shell? The white of a waterfall, or the white of rain?*"). To this, Afsaan replies, "*Hansha wala Safed*" ("*White is like a duck*").

This short exchange captures Bhansali's layered approach to color. White, in this film, is not static. At times, it signifies purity and fairness. In other moments, it becomes the mark of leadership, unification, or even a mode of protest. Through this dialogue, the director clearly sets out his vision: white carries many shades, many meanings. It has a wide spectrum of emotions and possibilities. Costume designer Sheetal Sharma later revealed that Bhansali insisted Gangubai appear mostly in white. He took inspiration from heroines of the 1950s–60s, like Madhubala and Meena Kumari. At first, Sharma worried about monotony. But Bhansali reminded her: white has many shades. Their discussion itself inspired this dialogue (Parasuraman, 2022). Just as white dominates *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, black shapes the core of *Black*. The film's very title turns a color into a theme. Though shot in color, Bhansali restricts himself to blacks, whites, and muted blues. Shadows and light become a language of ignorance and learning. Debraj, the teacher, often insists, "*Come... into... the light*!" This echoes the entire narrative. Darkness is not the end. It can be broken. At one point, he tells Michelle, "*Your world is not black*". Later, he begins her lessons with, "*Your alphabets begin with B, L, A, C, K... Black*". Here, Bhansali uses black both as a limit and as a beginning. This dialogue shows how Bhansali transforms a color into an existential condition, then into a possibility of transcendence (Puthur, 2013). In contrast to the film *Black*, white is a central color in *Devdas*, carrying layered meaning. At first, it may suggest purity, but in the film, it transcends that. We can see how white reflects custom and ritual, marking the traditions that shape the characters' lives. It also signals nobility. The all-white dress of Devdas's family underscores their Zamindar status, wealth, and pride. Devdas' Haveli is dominated by white, a shade that reflects the family's aristocratic status as zamindars. The white interiors underscore their adherence to tradition and social prestige, turning the household into a visual metaphor for heritage, restraint, and the weight of honor in the narrative.

The discussion starts by looking at how costumes and colors shape identity and show cultural semiotics. The color of a character's attire enhances their personality on screen. To achieve a significant effect, it is essential to comprehend color value. Costume selections (silks, intricate embroidery, and layered blacks) signify gender and class, rendering identification perceptible on screen (Bell, 2023). Colorization and archival work demonstrate how changing a costume's color can transform its historical significance; this clarifies why Bhansali's intentional palette for period dress redefines cultural identity in films like *Devdas* and *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (Watkins, Williams, 2025). In *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), Bhansali revisits the atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s. Gangubai's costumes follow three main schemes: pure whites, soft floral pastels, and designs influenced by Ajrakh and Kathiawadi traditions. Each of these choices signals something about her transformation and the impression she leaves on those around her. While most women in the brothels appear in subdued, faded shades, Gangubai's presence is marked by glowing white. The brightness of her sarees makes her

stand apart, almost as if her body radiates its own light. This whiteness does not simply decorate her but becomes her aura, a sign of strength, dignity, and leadership.

The thematic essence of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* centers on the color white. Gangubai isn't the only character to wear this hue; it's present in the attire of many others as well, such as the Prime Minister, Rahim Lala, Hamid Fezi, and Afsaan, local leaders, protestors, and many more. Each carries the shade in some form. White is everywhere, but never in the same way. Its meaning shifts with the person and the moment. Sometimes it marks authority. At other times, it stands for honesty, or protest, or quiet resistance. Bhansali, through these subtle variations, reminds the audience that white is never singular but a spectrum of tones and connotations.

In *Black*, Michelle's dress is usually in darker shades. We often see her in black, grey, or deep tones rather than bright colors. This choice is not casual. Her clothes mirror the secluded environment she lives in, where hearing loss, blindness, and quiet are the norm. The absence of color in her attire reflects her isolation and emotional darkness. This principle applies not only to Michelle but also to those around her. The costumes of her sister Sara, her father Paul, her mother Catherine, and her teacher Debraj all fall into shades of white, black, or grey. We can see that Bhansali avoids the usual bright tones of Indian cinema. The few colors that do appear are faint, muted, or drained of energy. This choice is deliberate. It reflects Michelle's life, which stands in contrast to the vivid world outside her home. The subdued palette becomes a symbol of emptiness and silence. Through this careful design, costume becomes more than fabric. It becomes a code. Black, white, and gray represent Michelle's inner existence, encompassing her struggles, loneliness, and her gradual journey from darkness to light.

In *Devdas*, costume becomes a vital medium for expressing cultural identity and social customs. During the funeral of Devdas' father, the frame is saturated in white. Every member of the household wears plain white attire, adhering to Hindu mourning traditions. The absence of ornamentation stresses purity, discipline, and the collective sorrow of the zamindar family. Here, white functions as both a cultural marker and an emotional language.

In contrast, the "*Dola Re Dola*" sequence highlights another layer of identity through costume. Paro and Chandramukhi, though divided by class, wear similar white-and-red Bengali sarees, the traditional attire during Durga Puja. The red border signifies festivity, fertility, and devotion, while the white base symbolizes purity. Their shared costume bridges the cultural gap between a thakurain and a courtesan, showing how devotion to Devdas and the goddess unites them. By staging this in a religious festival, Bhansali blends individual love with collective celebration. Therefore, the use of black and white, or in this case, white with red, transcends aesthetics to embody emotional and cultural symbolism. Recent research shows that higher saturation and certain colour harmonies heighten visual engagement and emotional recall (Lin et al., 2023). In this sequence, the vibrant red backdrop not only amplifies the whiteness of the costumes but also intensifies the audience's emotional response, transforming the scene into a powerful fusion of cultural identity and cinematic emotion.

Now it is important to discuss how Contrast and Context work together to create mood and meaning in a scene. Classic film-psychology experiments show that the same color can produce different emotions depending on context and sequencing (Cao et al., 2024b). Rcent research shows that, Lighting temperature (warm/cool) and contrast strongly affect where viewers look and what they feel about a scene (Shahidi et al., 2021). Research on restoration and digital recoloring indicates that even minor shifts in contrast, such as saturation and tonal changes, can significantly affect perceptions of period and authenticity. This is pertinent to Bhansali's application of high-contrast frames in *Black* (Liu et al., 2022).

The visual design of Gangubai and Afsaan's first outing together rests almost entirely on the interplay of black and white. Gangubai appears in a white saree paired with a black blouse. But Afsaan is dressed in a black kurta. The tanga, or horse carriage, is also black, which deepens the contrast. Against this dark setting, her saree seems brighter, almost luminous. Every element in the frame follows this restrained palette. The carriage driver wears white, and even the horse is white, reinforcing the balance of opposites. Color is stripped away, leaving the scene in a monochrome scheme. Only Gangubai's red bindi and the red rose in her hair break this pattern. These flashes of red suggest intimacy, a subtle expression of emotion, in a world otherwise reduced to black and white. The composition recalls classic cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, where romance was often staged through carefully balanced contrasts. The scene becomes more than a depiction of a date. It turns into an evocation of nostalgia, an echo of timeless love stories.

In *Black*, Bhansali uses color to reflect Debraj and Michelle's struggles. Debraj, facing Alzheimer's, is shown in a white and empty hospital room. His white kurta blends with the sterile space, marking absence, emptiness, and memory slipping away. Michelle appears in black attire with dark glasses, her dress extending the idea of blindness and silence. Michelle's all-black ensemble could be interpreted as a symbol of the intensity and profundity of her feelings. Black signals limitation, while white suggests fragility and loss. Their struggles with communication and understanding are reinforced through this visual contrast. The narrative shifts when Michelle begins to teach Debraj, and the reversal unfolds through the subtle play of black and white.

In *Devdas*, Kaushalya's contrasting colors of costumes reflect both personal change and cultural expectation. Her clothing often contrasts with her surroundings, marking her individuality within the household. But the black and white in her clothes is quite significant. When her husband lies on his deathbed, she wears a black saree. Black here is not fashion but ritual, symbolizing grief, loss, and the shadow of death. After his passing, her dress shifts permanently to white. In Hindu custom, white is the color of widowhood, a constant reminder of renunciation and restraint. By showing Kaushalya in black at one turning point and in white thereafter, Bhansali ties costume to identity. Her attire becomes a visible marker of her social role, her sorrow, and her place within tradition.

Visual storytelling goes beyond just aesthetics when color becomes a symbolic code. According to studies on colorization between film and photography, color selections produce new narrative layers, which lends credence to the interpretation of Bhansali's color schemes as deliberate symbolic devices as opposed to merely ornamental elements (Saxton, 2025). Studies of color plus editing show that color cues combined with montage serve symbolic and emotional functions. Colour has the power to intensify the emotional tone of any given scene, whether happy or sad (Cao et al., 2024a). The closing sequence of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* carries immense that symbolic value. As Gangubai meets the Prime Minister and later returns to Kamathipura in a celebratory procession, the screen is almost entirely taken over by white. The crowd is dressed in white garments; men wear white turbans and caps, women appear in white sarees, and petals fall like snow. The effect is overwhelming, transforming the setting into a space of purity and collective affirmation. The narration underlines this moment: *"On that day, the whole of Kamathipura glowed with light, with happiness, with color. And the shade of that happiness was white, like Gangubai herself."* White, then, does not simply dress the characters. It becomes the very language of the scene, a shared identity that transcends individual difference. Yet Bhansali introduces a subtle disruption. Gangubai's saree, while white, carries a deep red border. This detail is striking. It recalls sacrifice, passion, but also strength. Even Raziya, once her rival, is seen in white at this point, signaling reconciliation and unity. This collective whiteness operates not only as a costume design but as narrative closure. It symbolizes victory, dignity, and the transformation of a marginalized figure into an emblem of empowerment. The scene shows how Bhansali deploys color as cinematic language – where white is not absence but presence, charged with history and emotion. Memory studies show that dynamic, richly coloured scenes become more memorable; this helps explain why Bhansali's lush tableaux remain emotionally and cognitively salient to audiences (Şimşek et al., 2023).

With *Black*, Bhansali achieves a sense of grandeur despite employing a minimalist color scheme of black and white. The film uses the contrast between these two hues to convey profound implications. Debraj, dressed in white and placed in a sterile white room, embodies the emptiness of his fading life with Alzheimer's. The walls, draperies, and pillars all repeat this blankness, creating a visual echo of his decline. Michelle, often dressed in black with dark glasses, reflects blindness, silence, and the isolation of her world. Debraj's black cap disturbs the whiteness, suggesting the sudden lapses of memory and his longing for light. Through such deliberate color placement, Bhansali transforms costume and space into psychological symbols, producing images that resemble painted canvases in their depth and emotion (Sachdeva, 2014a).

In *Devdas*, one of the most powerful uses of color occurs before the final moment of his life. As he leaves Chandramukhi's brothel, Devdas rides in a black horse-drawn carriage, wrapped in a black shawl. Later, the same imagery repeats at Pandua station, when another black carriage takes him on the last journey toward Paro's home in Manikpur. Bhansali avoids bright colors, presenting the sequence in achromatic tones. Black becomes a symbol of inevitability, marking the path toward death. In Hindu mythology, a black chariot is often linked to the soul's departure, a cultural reference echoed here.

The analysis also discusses the intentional use of color design and compositional balance to create aesthetic and narrative coherence. Gangubai's first appearance is staged almost like a vision. She is seen through the sunlight that falls across the white sheer. The effect makes her seem radiant, almost divine. The saree itself is not ordinary widow's clothing. Its fine chikankari embroidery adds delicacy, and at the same time marks her apart. Costume designer Sheetal Sharma noted that this choice gave depth and texture, making the attire both traditional and distinctive. Along with the saree, the accessories play a crucial role. A black umbrella, a black purse, and dark sunglasses build contrast against the white fabric. Her jewelry, too, adds detail, projecting dignity as well as authority. Together, these elements construct the image of a woman who is not bound by the codes of her environment. What Bhansali achieves here is a reframing of the brothel space. Instead of repeating the usual images of darkness and despair, he creates a visual that is striking, layered, and alive. The blending of modern objects with classical textile art shows Gangubai as someone ahead of her time, rooted in tradition yet moving beyond it (Kanaskar, 2023).

The use of color in the *Shikayat* sequence is both deliberate and layered. Huma Qureshi, positioned at the center of the stage, performs in a white saree embroidered with golden motifs. Around her, the chorus of women appears in coordinated lavender sarees, while the backdrop is framed in green. The combination of purple and green, with white serving as a stark contrast, forms a powerful complementary scheme (Kanaskar, 2023). The choice of white for the lead costume is significant. It does not merely set Huma apart from the group but also links her symbolically to Gangubai, who watches from below the stage. In this arrangement, Huma's performance becomes the *alter ego* of Gangubai herself, voicing what the protagonist feels but cannot articulate. The song's theme of endless love problems is like Gangubai's own pain, and the white clothes show this struggle without saying anything. By staging white in this way, Bhansali transforms color into a narrative tool. White is not neutral; it embodies conflict, longing, and separation. Color here becomes psychology, giving form to emotional complexity and deepening the resonance of the story.

In *Black*, the first sequence shows us how Bhansali sets the tone with color and light. The film opens on a dark screen, with Michelle's voice guiding the audience. What we see is not color but absence. The darkness becomes a direct symbol of her condition, a life shaped by blindness and silence. Then the screen shifts. We enter a large room, designed almost entirely in black. Walls, furniture, and shadows create a heavy atmosphere. This blackness is not just décor. It is a visual metaphor for deprivation, for a world cut off from sense and sight.

Yet the silence of black is interrupted by white. From six tall windows, three send streams of light across the floor. These rays fall like lines of hope. They suggest three supports in Michelle's life: her teacher, her mother, and her sister. In visual terms, the black room shows limitation, while the white light points to guidance and care. Michelle, sitting at her typewriter, stands between the two. The contrast speaks louder than words. Darkness surrounds her, but light still enters. Through this arrangement of black and white, Bhansali introduces the entire narrative. The prologue works as a visual essay, explaining Michelle's inner world before the story even begins.

The last scene of *Black* stands as a culmination of Bhansali's visual and emotional design. Michelle returns home after receiving her degree, wearing her black graduation robe. Debraj, now an Alzheimer's patient, touches her robe; his hands tremble. He begins to cry, sensing its meaning. Through this moment, the robe is no longer just cloth; it becomes a memory trigger, a symbol of her journey, and his role in it. Outside, rain falls heavily. Both Michelle and Debraj move toward the window. They extend their hands into the water, letting the rain connect them to the world outside. The frame is entirely white, with white walls, curtains, and window frames. Michelle's black robe creates a striking contrast against the white background, reminding us of how the entire narrative has unfolded between these two shades. And then comes the turning point. Debraj, who has forgotten almost everything, speaks. His first word is "*Water*."

Michelle repeats his words with tears of joy. The narration reminds us, "*Mrs. Nair, you will be happy to know, we have come into the light. My teacher remembered his first word today. His alphabets just like my but not starts with A, B, C, D... but with B-L-A-C-K.*" This sequence is Bhansali's final statement on color and meaning. Black is not simply darkness. It is also a beginning, a place where language, memory, and identity can come to life. The closing sequence of *Devdas* draws its strength from the visual contrast of black and white. As Dev lies beneath the Gulmohar tree, his costume, a white shirt draped with a black shawl, reflects the duality of his life. White here signifies his inner vulnerability, the purity of his love for Paro, and his final longing for acceptance.

Yet the black shawl covering him marks the weight of despair, signaling the inevitability of death. The combination of his body shows both innocence and burden, hope and resignation.

At the same time, Paro runs toward him in a white saree with a red border, echoing her lifelong role as the bearer of devotion, sacrifice, and duty. Her white attire underlines purity and loyalty, while the red border foreshadows the unfulfilled passion that frames their tragic love. Against the backdrop of red petals raining down from the Gulmohar tree, their black-and-white costumes stand out as symbolic anchors. Through this final imagery, Bhansali creates a visual dialogue: Dev wrapped in the shadows of black, Paro framed in the light of white. Their union remains incomplete, yet the narrative resolves in color, black as closure, white as memory.

Finally, the study looks at the psychological aspects of color, focusing on how it can make people feel and how it can change how they see things. Color Perception and psychophysical work shows that fine-grained colour symbols reliably predict emotional labels in film and video. When it comes to color perception features, there is a big variance in how each feature is related to emotion. This implies that each color perceptual feature has a varied effect on each emotion dimension (Wang et al., 2024). Research on vision and attention indicates that chromatic information directs attention and can rapidly alter perceptions; this corroborates interpretations of Bhansali's color choices as tactics to influence audience concentration and emotion (Hiramatsu et al., 2023).

In color psychology, white often carries the meanings of purity and resilience. It can also signal a difference. In *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, this idea becomes central. Gangubai's white sarees stand out sharply against the vivid, noisy setting of Kamathipura. The contrast is not just visual. It also reflects her inner determination. Through this choice, Bhansali shapes a character who does not simply blend into her environment. The brightness of white gives Gangubai a kind of shield. It makes her visible, untouchable, and distinct. Emotionally, the effect is powerful. Audiences see her not only as a woman surviving, but as someone radiating strength. White also becomes transformative. It moves beyond being a costume to serve as a mark of authority. In this sense, Bhansali uses warm and brown color grading to enhance the intensity and establishes the mood of the scene. Archival colourisation research shows that adding color in proper way to historical footage redefines cultural memory and authenticity, echoing how Bhansali reimagines the past through saturated palettes in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (Simor, 2025).

One of the most tragic moments in the film occurs at the death of Kamli, a sex worker from Kamathipura. The women gather around her body, preparing it for cremation. Gangubai instructs them with a sharp remark: "*Tie her legs tight, these men can't even be trusted with dead bodies.*" In this single line, she expresses both anger at male exploitation and recognition of its unending presence (Sathyamoorthy, 2022). The visual arrangement intensifies the emotional weight. The group of women, dressed in faded and darkened tones, reflects the grief of the moment. Their muted colors suggest suffering, exhaustion, and collective despair. Against this background, we can see a remarkable contrast when Gangubai is shown in a black bordered white saree. The chosen color scheme for this situation grabs the audience's attention and gives them a strong emotion with feminine grace. The choice is deliberate. Her attire cuts through the darkness, creating a striking point of contrast. The impact is psychological as well as visual. White here represents dignity, purity of intent, and calm authority, even in the middle of loss. The black border acknowledges reality – death, exploitation, and pain.

In Michelle's childhood, we can see how Bhansali uses color to shape emotion. The bathing scene is dimly lit, almost swallowed by shadows. Catherine, Michelle's mother, wears a white dress. Her clothing suggests purity, innocence, and maternal care. But this whiteness also becomes fragile when set against the blackness of the room. Paul, Michelle's father, enters dressed in black. His costume adds heaviness to the frame, and with him comes the news that Michelle is both blind and deaf. This revelation throws Catherine into shock. We notice how the mood shifts with light: the door opens, brightness enters, and then quickly falls back into darkness. The movement between white and black reflects the emotional turbulence of the moment. On the wall behind them, paintings of the nativity appear in gray tones, creating a symbolic backdrop. The birth of Christ is usually tied to joy and hope, yet here it is overshadowed by gloom. Catherine claps to draw Michelle's attention, but the child gives no response. The lack of reaction intensifies the silence.

On her graduation day, Michelle explains the meaning of black in her own words:

"*Mere liye sab kuch black tha. Par mere teacher ne mere black ka ek naya arth samjhaya. Black ka matlab sirf ghratala aur andhera nahin hota. It is the color of achievement, the color of knowledge, the color of the graduation robe. Wahi rang jo sabne aaj pehna hai.*" ("*For me,*

everything was black. But my teacher gave black a new meaning. Black is not only chaos and darkness. It is the color of achievement, the color of knowledge, the color of the graduation robe. The same color that everyone has worn today.")

The convocation scene in *Black* changes the way we read the color itself. Throughout the film, black has been tied to blindness, silence, and inner struggles. Here, the same shade is transformed into pride and accomplishment. Michelle wears a black graduation robe, a universal symbol of knowledge and learning. Holding her certificate, she embodies years of effort finally recognized. We can see how Bhansali plays with emotional codes. Visually, the contrast is powerful. She stands in a white room, and the robe defines her presence sharply against the light. Darkness is no longer fear but dignity. Bhansali uses costume to remind us that color is never fixed. Black may express despair, but it can also represent growth, knowledge, and triumph, depending on context. In this scene, psychology and color meet directly, showing us how one shade can express both vulnerability and victory depending on the moment.

In *Devdas*, the shifting colors of Dev's costumes mirror his changing emotions and inner state. At first, he appears in Western dress, a white shirt, black blazer, red bow, and gray hat. These choices suggest youth, energy, and the influence of Western culture. White here signals purity of heart, while the hints of gray and red point to confidence and pride. When he leaves his home, the black overcoat marks his entry into uncertainty, carrying the shadow of sorrow that will soon follow. The true turning point comes after his separation from Paro. From this moment, Dev is most often seen in white. His attire, the simple dhuti and panjabi, strips away color, joy, and vitality. In Indian culture, white is the color of mourning for widows, and in Dev's case, it becomes a visual marker of loss. His shift into white clothing reflects not only his broken relationship but also his descent into emptiness. Bhansali's choice of costume here gives shape to grief. Through the contrast of black and white, the film translates Dev's journey from youthful pride to emotional void, making his decline visible before a single word is spoken.

4. Results

From the above discussion, a consolidated table (Table 1) has been prepared to summarize the key findings. It presents how black and white function across four of Bhansali's films under the five thematic sections of this research.

Table 1. Summary of Black and White in Selected Bhansali Films

Section	Gangubai Kathiawadi	Black	Devdas
Costume & Cultural Identity	White sarees signify power and defiance. White also marks leadership for men like Rahim	Black costumes dominate Michelle's world of blindness and isolation.	Devdas's shift to white clothing shows his emotional void and mourning
Contrast & Context	Gangubai in a white saree/black blouse and Afsaan in a black kurta on a black carriage show deliberate contrast but signify love amid monochrome	Hospital scene: Debraj in a white kurta with a black cap; Michelle in full black with dark glasses. Symbolizes role reversal. Black and white are used as existential codes	Contrast between the white attire of early symbolizing grief, loss, and the later white costumes of widowhood. Visual coding marks cultural expectations of women
Cinematic Symbolism	The final procession is a sea of white, symbolizing collective victory and dignity	The film is a visual dialogue between light and darkness, with a sterile white hospital room contrasting with Debraj's fading memory	A black horse-drawn carriage symbolizes Devdas's inevitable path toward death

Section	Gangubai Kathiawadi	Black	Devdas
Aesthetic & Narrative	Gangubai's white saree is a visual reframing of her space, marking her as distinct from her surroundings	The minimalist palette heightens the emotional drama. The absence of color reflects Michelle's world and her journey	Paro's red-bordered white saree echoes her devotion, sacrifice, and duty. For Dev, a white shirt draped with a black shawl, reflects the duality of his life
Psychology of Color	White becomes a psychological shield for Gangubai, radiating strength and dignity	Black signifies not just despair but also dignity and triumph, as seen in Michelle's graduation robe	White is a visual representation of Devdas's emotional void after his separation from Paro

Source: authors' Data Analysis

Table 2 summarizes the two symbolic roles of black and white based on a thorough analysis of each film. It emphasizes that both colors are associated with both positive and negative meanings in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), *Black* (2005), and *Devdas* (2002), providing a comparative analysis of their cultural and narrative importance.

Table 2. Positive and Negative Meanings of Black and White in Selected Bhansali's Films

Film	Black: Positive Meaning(s)	Black: Negative Meaning(s)	White: Positive Meaning(s)	White: Negative Meaning(s)
Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022)	Symbol of resistance, power, and strength; Gangubai's use of black accessories asserts authority	Represents marginality, oppression, and social stigma of courtesans.	Purity, resilience, inner illumination; unity in the final procession (entire Kamathipura in white)	Black border on the funeral sari shows grief, loss, and mourning
Black (2005)	Color of achievement, knowledge, Success, and the color of the graduation robe	Embodies Michelle's inner darkness, silence, and isolation; Associated with suffering, despair, and the void of communication	Linked to Debraj's presence and memory, light is a symbol of knowledge, guidance, and hope	The white hospital room reflects emptiness, fragility, and fading memory
Devdas (2002)	Early outfit of Dev represents youth, energy, and Western influence	Color of death, sorrow, grief, sadness, and darkness symbolize decay, exile, and tragic downfall	Reflects nobility, aristocratic status, and tradition. Symbolizes purity and the innocence of love	Marks a tragic descent into an emotional void. The color of mourning for a widower symbolizes loss. Represents restraint and renunciation in Hindu custom

Source: authors' Data Analysis

The subtle use of color in the analyzed films provides a valuable lesson in media literacy. The strategic subversion of color conventions requires the audience to critically evaluate cinematic aesthetics rather than relying on automatic cultural associations. For instance, recognizing White as a symbol of power in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* challenges traditional interpretations of purity,

fostering critical reading of visual texts. In the same way, the transformation of Black from symbolizing sadness to conveying knowledge in *Black* compels the audience to interpret meaning based on evolving narrative context.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research shows that Sanjay Leela Bhansali's usage of black and white is a purposeful and advanced way to portray a narrative, not just a subject of personal preference. The analysis of *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, *Black*, and *Devdas* demonstrates that these colors operate as a symbolic language that influences character identity, emotional trajectories, and central narrative themes. The study's objectives were effectively achieved by analyzing the symbolic importance of these colors, studying their function in character development, and exploring the psychological impacts.

The theoretical framework, based on cinematic semiotics and color symbolism theory, offers a strong way to understand Bhansali's visual work. The research has demonstrated that black and white operate as signs imbued with complex cultural and narrative significations through the lens of semiotics. In *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, white is not just a symbol of purity, but it also becomes a strong indication of power. In *Devdas*, it is a sign of an emotional blank as well as status, and tradition. In the same way, black changes from a sign of blindness in Black to a sign of victory and knowledge.

The findings also indicate that Bhansali's visual language supports media literacy by encouraging critical viewing practices. Audiences learn to read color as a cultural and emotional code rather than as decoration. By using black and white in a smart way with his distinctive bright colors, he turns his movies from visual spectacles into deep studies of the human condition. The difference between these two hues makes a strong visual conversation that helps the audience understand the emotional depth of his characters and has a lasting effect on their minds.

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