

**A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS:  
PROBLEMATIZING THE HUMAN  
TEMPERAMENT IN BEJOY NAMBIAR'S FILM,  
*SOLO***

**Dr. Mary Paul Chakkachamparambil**

Hindu philosophy postulates that *prakriti* or nature is the primary source out of which the universe has evolved. Twenty four *gunas* have been conceived of within *prakriti* by the *Sakhya*, *Yoga* and *Vedanta* schools. They include: the *panchabhutas*, the *panchatantras*, the *jnanendriyas*, the *karmendriyas* and the four internal organs.

The *panchabhutas* or the *panchamahabhutas* are the five elements *Pritvi* (Earth), *Jal/Apas* (Water), *Agni* (Fire), *Vayu* (Air) and *Akasha* (Aether). The quest of the cosmic world begins with uncovering the secrets of the *panchabhutas*. These elements are considered to be the base matter of everything in the world. Plants and animals maintain their poise by the harmonious balance of these elements in the right proportions. *Ayurveda* and *yoga* postulate that disease and disorder in the human body can be ascribed to the imbalance of one or more of these elements. Even our thoughts and emotions are closely related to them. Thus, holistic health can be maintained by the proper balance of these elements. Many branches related to holistic healthcare base their studies in relation to the *panchabhutas*. *Sadhana*, the practice of gaining mastery over oneself in *yoga*, can be effectively done by learning to control the emotions and manipulate the basic elements. *Hasta Mudra*, in the *yoga* tradition also attempts to stimulate the five different fingers in the hand, as they are closely connected with the five elements. The six human tastes are also associated with the *panchabhutas*. The seven

*chakras* in the human body, the three *dosas* in *ayurveda* and the various methods of revival and recuperation used in naturopathy are the other fields of study associated with the *panchabhutas*.

The *panchabhutas* have different characteristics and are associated with different facets of human experience. The first element is earth (*prithvi* or *bhumi*). Associated with the quality of *gandha* (sense of smell) and *sparsha* (Touch), earth represents the solid materials that build up plants and animals. Symbolically, the human body is composed of two kinds of earth: the perishable part which dies and decays after death and the eternal part which is composed of atoms that disintegrate after death, only to go back to its original eternal form, the atom. Earth is used to create all types of buildings and when this element is out of balance, the consequences may lead to explosions or earthquakes.

The complex web of life revolves around the second element, water (*jal* or *apas*) associated with the quality of *rasa* or taste and touch. Water is the lifeline of plant and animal existence. Blood flowing through the human body and water bodies (ponds, lakes, rivers, seas, and ocean) are composed of liquid forms of matter that are crucial for the survival of flora and fauna. Like the earth, water is also composed of the eternal and the perishable form. Water encompasses not only planetary but also human time scales and when this element is out of proportion, drought, floods and tsunamis can occur.

The third element, air (*vayu*), is what we breathe in and breathe out to sustain our life. Associated with the quality of touch (*sparsha*) and recognized by the sense organ *tvak* (touch), *vayu* manifests itself in so many different forms breeze, winds, whirlwinds etc. Thus, both as *pranavayu* (breath for mankind) and in other forms (carbon di oxide, oxygen for plants), *vayu* is an essential link to

life, and also has two levels as earth and water i.e. the eternal atom and the perishable *karya* (work). Imbalance of this element could lead to storms, cyclones and hurricanes. *Yoga* attributes prime importance to the control of *pranavayu*, not only for sustaining a healthy body but also for treatment of various kinds of diseases. On a cosmic level, *vayu* represents electromagnetic energy.

Fire (*agni* or *tejas*) is the fourth element of the *panchabhuta*. The source of heat and light, fire is associated with warmth, enlightenment and knowledge. It also has eternal and perishable elements and Indian mythology posits four kinds of fire—fire of the sky, fire of the earth, fire of the stomach (hunger or digestive power) and ordinary fire. The rays of the sun warm the planet and electricity is indispensable in the modern IT dominated world. Fire, manifested as light energy in the visible spectrum, is perceived by the eye and the absence of this element would lead the world to an impasse.

The last element, aether (*akasha*), the highest and the most subtle, has only one character. It is eternal. Also translated as sound, space or sky, aether connects all other elements together. Associated with the human ear, aether is the medium of sound. Sound or *shabda*, either man made or otherwise, cannot travel through vacuum. Man hears a sound when speech is carried to the ears through air. Sound waves reverberate through a medium, and transfer the energy to the tympanum in the ear. These impulses are then carried through the auditory nerves to the brain and the sound is heard. Thus sound is of prime importance and is also the prime quality of *akasha* or space.

The cosmic world thus resonates in the flux created by the elements. On the microcosmic level, the five elements have always punctuated and dictated the dynamics of human health, temperament, experiences and relationships. Within the planet, on a macrocosmic

level, the harmony or disharmony within the elements is incidental in determining the shifting universal paradigms of chaos and peace.

Western philosophy also presents the concept of the four humours, which are the metabolic agents of the four elements. They include: Blood (air), Phlegm (water), Yellow Bile (fire) and Black Bile (earth). Greek, Medieval and Renaissance thought conceived of various physical, mental and psychological characteristics organised around the predominating vital fluid and the element it was associated with. It was believed that health could only be maintained by the right balance of the fluids and they were responsible for the nutrition, development and metabolism of the organism.

Blood and phlegm, agents of air and water were considered the moist and enriching metabolic agents necessary for growth. Yellow bile and black bile, agents of fire and earth, were the dry elements, and were only needed to serve as powerful catalysts to aid digestion within the human body. The four kinds of temperaments correspondent to the predominant humour in the body included the sanguine temperament (blood), the phlegmatic temperament (phlegm), the choleric temperament (yellow bile) and the melancholic temperament (black bile).

Blood is warm and moist; it carries the nourishment and oxygen needed to all parts of the body. Cells cannot survive without it. It promotes happiness, a sense of well being, love and enthusiasm. The sanguine personality is usually a generous, optimistic type of person. Phlegm is cold and wet; it also includes saliva, plasma and interstitial fluids. These fluids cool, protect, moisten, lubricate and flush out toxins from the body. They also help to transport vital nutrients across the body and to eliminate waste. It induces lethargy, emotionalism and promotes sensitivity. The phlegmatic

personality is usually a sluggish, cowardly and pallid type of person.

Yellow bile is hot and dry. Produced by the liver and stored in the gall bladder it enables the digestion of food, excretion of excess cholesterol, stimulates intestinal peristalsis and aids in the respiratory process. Being caustic by nature, it ignites passion and provokes powerful emotional responses. The choleric personality is usually an explosive ambitious, revengeful and short-tempered person. Black bile is cold and dry. A normal sediment in blood, black bile has condensing, coagulating and astringing properties. It aids in the clotting of blood, digestive processes, structural repairs and bone formation. It encourages prudence, pragmatism and caution. The melancholic personality is usually an introspective, pessimistic and sentimental type of person.

The human condition oscillates between *eucrasia* (when the humours are balanced and in harmony) and *dyscracia* (when any one of the humours dominates and disturbs the optimum level). These humours can also be combined to form more complex personality types for eg: choleric - sanguine, sanguine - phlegmatic, choleric - melancholic and phlegmatic - melancholic.

Having given a detailed analysis of the role of the elements in the Eastern *panchabhuta* system of thought and the ancient Western psychological theory of the four humours, the paper now proceeds to analyze the human temperament as portrayed in the 2017 Malayalam film *Solo*. This reflective paper is based on secondary data including books, articles, discussions and primary data i.e. actual viewing of the film, *Solo*. This paper does not claim to be an authoritative voice in this area. However, it presents my perspective of how the film *Solo* psychologically depicts aspects or 'voices' of the human temperament and how they are aesthetically linked to four elements .

*Solo* is a 2017 bilingual film, directed by Bejoy Nambiar and starring Dulquer Salmaan. Written by Bejoy Nambiar, Dhanya Suresh and Karthik Iyer, the film tells four stories, each based on different elements; earth, fire, wind and water. Starring Dulquer Salmaan in the lead role in all four stories, other actors include Dhaniska (Radhika), Neha Sharma (Akshara), Shruthi Hariharan (Rukku), Arthi Venkatesh (Ayesha), Dino Morea, Manoj K Jayan, Renji Panicker and Suhasini Maniratnam. Cinematography is handled by Girish Gangadharan and the film's soundtrack consists of twenty two songs recorded by an assortment of musicians. The film was released on 5 October 2017, both in Tamil and Malayalam. As mentioned earlier, *Solo* tells the story of four young men Shekhar, Siva, Trilok and Rudra.

### ***World of Shekhar (Water)***

The world of Shekhar dabbles in watery landscapes and fluid movements. It tells the story of a stammerer, Shekhar who falls in love with a blind dancer, Radhika. Four years into their relationship in college, Radhika's brother discovers their affair and hot exchanges ensue between both families. Radhika's revelation that she is pregnant with Shekhar's child leads to a shocked and stunned silence. When it is discovered that the baby will be blind by the age of seven or eight, Shekhar's sister pressurizes him to abandon the child and give a compensatory sum to Radhika. Shekhar is furious, Radhika is aghast and the disharmony between them is only solved, when Shekhar blindfolds himself and asserts his undying love for Radhika and his unborn daughter. The lovers, with the consent of the family, are then united in wedlock amidst the beautiful blue background of the sea. Later Radhika dies after delivering a baby girl and the story ends with Shekhar, playing with his daughter on the beach.

The film celebrates life and is a manifestation of the sanguine

temperament. It is a triumph of the human spirit over challenges (visual and vocal). The love between the blind Radhika and the stammering Shekhar is riddled by physical challenges, familial differences and mental trauma. However, they tune into what they can touch and hear and override all the other obstacles with the purity of their passion and the determination of their will power. The story brings joy and hope to those who are challenged and provides a strong message regarding the superficial relationships that dominate the world today. Tender declarations and reassurances of love between the lovers are interspersed with realistic moments of doubt and uncertainty. The joy of true friendship, interference from family members and genuine love are other themes explored in the film. The film highlights the incorrigible optimism and the power of endurance of the human spirit that often keeps life going. The water theme permeates the whole film - the heroine's entry through graceful, fluid dance movements in water; the hope and angst in the minds of the newly married couple, harmoniously synchronizing with the depiction of the turbulent waves around their basket-boat in the midst of the calm, serene sea and Shekhar's tears mingling in the rain. Lovely shades of blue that appear throughout the film - the blue swimming pool, blue clothes, walls, buckets, baby blanket, the blue curtains of the palanquin - and the sound of water dripping in the background contribute to a sense of serenity. The complex sanguine-phlegmatic temperament that is inherently generous and believes that every sunset is followed by a sunrise is depicted here. It sends signals that life goes on.

### ***World of Siva (Fire)***

Burning with potent, fiery passion and hot, vengeful emotions the world of Siva is a tale of revenge. Siva's mother deserts her family. Siva is left alone with his father and younger brother. Years later, Siva

joins a gangster group led by Bhadran. He protects his brother Siddhu, who is later invited to join the gang. When Siva's father is killed in a bar, CCTV footage reveals that he was shot by Vishnu, a gangster in Mumbai. Though Siva's wife tries to stop him, Siva goes to Mumbai with two other gangsters to take revenge on Vishnu. Siddhu joins them. With the help of a few gangsters in Mumbai, Siva reaches Vishnu. In the shootout that follows, Siva eliminates most of Vishnu's men but is finally killed by Vishnu. A devastated Siddhu, who has witnessed the horrible scene of his brother being shot many times, decides to take revenge on Vishnu. However fate takes a strange twist when Siddhu realises just before killing Vishnu, that his mother is married to Vishnu. His mother begs him to escape and Siddhu runs away.

The caustic, fiery personality of the choleric temperament has been personalized through the character of Siva. The dark, gutsy character of the hitman, encompasses uncharted subtexts that reveal volumes about the complex, often misunderstood and misled minds of gangster, terrorists, and dictators. Domestic issues that lead to separation and their consequences, the delinquency of youth belonging to maladjusted families, the comradeship and code of honour among hitmen, women who survive in gangster groups and sustain their feminine instincts etc are some of the other explosive areas of human relationships explored here. The fascinating scene in which a heartbroken Siddhu seeks comfort from the strange lady, portrays the irony of a world ridden by violence, bloodshed, trauma and yet fraught by a spirit of compassion and brotherhood. Fire can be tamed for domestic purposes. Siva belongs to a broken family and turns to violence as a means of living. Though this roaring passion burns within him, there are moments in the film that give us glimpses of the tenderness hidden within him his love for Rukku's daughter, the



protection he offers Siddhu , his mixed emotions for Rukku and the final confrontation with his mother. Fire can also blaze furiously; devouring everything within its reach till it dies down and is reduced to charred ashes. Siva's rage is ignited at the murder of his father, then blazes into a vengeful blazing firebomb, consuming everything and everyone in his path and finally smoulders to a gradual, fatal finale. Fire appears everywhere in the film a blaze in which the photographs are burned, lighted cigarettes and burning lamps used for devotional purposes. Red, yellow and black hues, associated with fire predominate in visually rich hues that evoke images of revenge, repressed emotions and retribution. Romance also rears up in the background. Through compelling images of the Other the anti hero, the antisocial and the angry young man Dulquer Salmaan showcases a powerful, provoking portrait of the choleric temperament.

### *World of Trilok (Air)*

A thriller that soars on the wings of young romance, the world of Trilok then plummets to the murky depths of human nature selfishness, indifference and a lapse in human judgment that proves to be too costly. Dr Trilok Menon, a young veterinary doctor is out to take revenge on a father and son who were responsible for his wife's (Ayesha) death. Ayesha's cycle collides with a car driven by Thomas Zachariah. Zachariah's son-in-law, Anson wants to save her but Zachariah persuades him to leave the bleeding body of Ayesha on the road. Ayesha gasps for breath and dies in Trilok's arms. Within four years, Trilok hunts down Zachariah, poisons his food and Zachariah suffocates to death. He then pursues Justin, injects a drug into his drip and leaves him to die.

The pick of the lot, the world of Trilok keeps us suspended in

air, on tenterhooks, holding our breath. The slow suspense is steadily maintained till the suffocating end. The innate human instinct to protect oneself at the expense of others is explored in this dark tale. From the breezy world of romance to the tumultuous whirlwind of heartless indifference to a dying accident victim, the film is intricately associated with the element of air, as the three characters who pass away do so due to lack of oxygen. The joy and zest for life of a young couple, deeply in love, has been beautifully captured in the opening cycling scenes. The film gradually ascends to a crescendo from the sanguine young husband, Dr. Trilok Menon, through a choleric phase, as he deliberately and steadily plots revenge to a final melancholic state when the pensive doctor calmly informs the dying man that his wife had been pregnant at the time of her death. Guilt associated with the melancholic temperament is also problematised in the film.

### ***World of Rudra (Earth)***

The eternal and much acclaimed tolerance associated with earth *bhumidevi* - forms the subject matter of this film. Rudhra Ramachandren, an army trainee is in love with Akshara. Their affair is a turbulent one as they have to face severe opposition from both their families. Later, Akshara leaves for Australia to pursue further studies, promising Rudra that she will always be faithful to him. Four years later, Rudra, now an army officer receives Akshara's marriage invitation. Rudra, accompanied by his colleagues, go to meet Akshara, who tells him that his father had requested her to end their relationship. Rudra pursues his quest for clarification and finally realizes the shocking truth that Akshara could be his half-sister.

Rudra represents the phlegmatic and melancholic temperament. Reluctant and sluggish at first to go in search of clarity,

he has to be persuaded by his team mates to find Akshara. Later, when the stunning secret is revealed to him by his mother, he reconciles to the situation and the melancholic penchant for introspection and sentiment is highlighted here. The magnificent capacity of the earth to suffer in silence and to bury secrets forever is symbolically presented through his reconciliation to a painful family secret and the stoicism with which he generously lets his former girlfriend build a new life with another man.

### **Conclusion**

*Solo* deserves credit for the innovative approach in design and the superb roles, pulled off with élan by the hero. The thematic connection to the four elements has also been explained through various premises - explanatory prefaces connecting the elements and striking illustrations introducing each section of the film. Though not without 'grey' areas, the film strikes a chord in the viewer. Subtle nuances of body language, stylized rendering of the four characters and a wide range of varying emotions offer ample scope for the actors to enact the complexities of the human temperament. The love theme that binds all the four stories together is obvious. None of the protagonists seem to achieve a satisfying relationship as Shekhar is left bereaved, Siva's life is cut short, Trilok has to be content with his revenge and Rudra has to accept reality as it is. Each voice seems to be a cry in the wilderness of 'life,' a yearning from the soul for recognition, understanding and dignity. The four differing voices encompass proactive and malignant forces that not only cause turbulence in the world, but also lead to peace and harmony.

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