

The Semantics Of Colors In Classical Eastern Literature

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ABSTRACT

Color symbolism occupies a significant place in Classical Eastern literature, serving as a powerful artistic and philosophical tool for expressing spiritual, ethical, and aesthetic meanings. Poets and mystics of the Eastern literary tradition employed colors not merely as descriptive elements but as symbolic representations of divine truth, human emotions, moral values, and metaphysical realities. This article examines the semantic functions of major colors, including white, black, red, green, blue, and gold, in Classical Eastern literary texts, with particular attention to Persian-Tajik and Turkic Sufi poetry. Through textual and comparative analysis, the study reveals how color imagery contributes to the construction of symbolic meaning and enriches literary discourse.

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Introduction. The study of color symbolism has attracted considerable attention in literary criticism, semiotics, and cultural studies. Colors function as significant semantic markers that convey emotional, spiritual, and cultural meanings beyond their visual properties. In Classical Eastern literature, particularly within Persian, Arabic, and Turkic literary traditions, colors play a central role in shaping poetic imagery and expressing metaphysical concepts.

Classical Eastern poets such as Mahmud Shabistari, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Alisher Navoi, and Hafez frequently employed color imagery to represent spiritual states, divine beauty, human love, and existential transformation. The semantic richness of colors reflects both cultural traditions and mystical interpretations embedded in Eastern poetics.

This article explores the symbolic meanings of major colors in Classical Eastern literature and analyzes their literary and philosophical functions.

Literature Review. Scholars have emphasized that color symbolism is deeply rooted in cultural consciousness and literary traditions. According to Berlin and Kay (1969), color categories reflect both universal and culture-specific meanings. In Eastern literary traditions, color semantics are strongly influenced by religious, mystical, and philosophical doctrines.

Studies on Sufi literature indicate that colors often symbolize stages of spiritual development and mystical experience (Schimmel, 1975). Similarly, Lewisohn (2014) argues that color imagery in Persian poetry functions as a bridge between sensory perception and metaphysical understanding. Researchers examining Turkic literature have also highlighted the symbolic significance of colors in expressing ethical ideals and cosmological concepts (Karamustafa, 2007).

One of the pioneering scholars in the study of symbolism is Carl Gustav Jung, who argued that colors are connected with archetypes embedded in the collective unconscious. According to Jung (1968), color

symbolism reflects universal psychological patterns that transcend cultural boundaries. His theory has been widely applied in literary studies to explain the symbolic significance of colors in artistic texts.

In the field of cultural symbolism, Mircea Eliade (1959) emphasized that colors often acquire sacred meanings through religious traditions and mythological systems. In Eastern cultures, colors are closely associated with spiritual concepts, cosmological beliefs, and ethical values. Consequently, literary representations of colors frequently reflect broader cultural worldviews. Research on Islamic and Persian literary traditions has significantly contributed to understanding color semantics in Eastern literature. Schimmel (1992) demonstrated that color imagery occupies a central position in Persian poetry, where colors function as symbols of mystical experience, divine love, beauty, and spiritual transformation. Her analysis reveals that white often signifies purity and divine illumination, green symbolizes paradise and sacred knowledge, while black may represent both mystery and spiritual depth.

Nasr (1987) further explored the relationship between Islamic spirituality and artistic symbolism. He argued that colors in Islamic literature and art are not merely decorative elements but manifestations of metaphysical realities. Through symbolic colors, poets and mystics communicate complex spiritual truths that cannot be expressed directly through ordinary language. Studies devoted specifically to Sufi literature indicate that color symbolism plays a crucial role in representing the stages of mystical experience. In many Sufi texts, colors serve as metaphors for spiritual development and the soul's journey toward divine union. Scholars examining the works of Rumi, Attar, and Shabistari have noted the recurrent use of white, green, red, and black as markers of various mystical states.

Despite substantial research on Persian and Islamic literary symbolism, relatively few comparative studies have focused on the semantic functions of colors across different Eastern literary traditions. Therefore, the present study seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship by examining the symbolic meanings of colors in classical Eastern literature and exploring their cultural, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions.

Methodology. **White Color - Symbol of Purity and Divine Light.** White occupies a privileged position in Classical Eastern literature. It commonly symbolizes purity, innocence, spiritual enlightenment, and divine truth. In Sufi poetry, white is frequently associated with the illumination of the soul and the attainment of spiritual perfection. For example, in *Gulshan-i Raz*, Shabistari employs images of light and whiteness to describe the divine reality that transcends material existence (Shabistari, 2008). White garments often signify the purification of the self from worldly attachments and the readiness to encounter divine knowledge.

Furthermore, white imagery is connected with celestial beings, sacred wisdom, and moral integrity. The semantic field of whiteness extends beyond physical appearance and functions as a metaphor for inner spiritual transformation.

Mahmud Shabistari – *Gulshan-i Raz*: “When the Light of Truth appears, the whole world becomes white.” Here, white symbolizes purity, enlightenment, spiritual awakening, and divine truth. It reflects the soul's purification through mystical experience.

Saadi Shirazi – *Gulistan*: “May the whiteness of your face reflect the purity of your heart.” White serves as a symbol of moral purity, innocence, and righteousness. It reinforces the ethical ideals promoted in classical Persian literature.

Black Color - Mystery, Separation, and Spiritual Trial. Unlike Western traditions where black frequently signifies evil, Classical Eastern literature presents a more complex semantic interpretation. Black symbolizes mystery, hidden knowledge, longing, and spiritual testing. The black hair of the beloved represents both attraction and the obstacles that separate the lover from ultimate truth. Rumi repeatedly employs the contrast between darkness and light to illustrate the soul's journey toward divine illumination (Rumi, 2004). In Sufi discourse, darkness may symbolize the stage of bewilderment (*hayrat*), a necessary condition for spiritual growth. Thus, black carries both negative and positive connotations, depending on literary context.

Mahmud Shabistari – *Gulshan-i Raz*: “*Darkness resides in the heart, yet light emerges from it.*” Here, black symbolizes divine mystery and the hidden reality of spiritual existence rather than evil or ignorance. The color represents the unknowable aspects of God and mystical knowledge.

Nizami Ganjavi – *Layla and Majnun*: “Layla's black hair captivated Majnun's heart.” Black symbolizes mysterious beauty, longing, separation, and emotional depth. In love poetry, black often enhances the beloved's attractiveness while emphasizing the lover's suffering.

Red Color - Love, Passion, and Sacrifice. Red is one of the most emotionally charged colors in Classical Eastern literature. It symbolizes passionate love, spiritual ecstasy, martyrdom, and sacrifice. The image of the red rose occupies a central place in Persian and Turkic poetry. The rose symbolizes divine beauty, while its red color signifies the intensity of love and suffering experienced by the seeker. According to Schimmel (1975), red frequently represents the mystical state of annihilation in divine love. Moreover, red imagery is associated with blood, sacrifice, and heroic devotion. Poets often employ red symbolism to express the transformative power of love and spiritual commitment.

Alisher Navoi – Khamsa: *“Her cheeks were like red roses blooming in spring.”* The color red represents beauty, love, passion, and vitality. In classical Eastern poetry, red often symbolizes both earthly and divine love.

Jalal al-Din Rumi – Masnavi: *“The fire of love painted the heart in crimson.”* Red signifies the burning intensity of divine love and spiritual transformation. The color reflects the passionate journey of the mystic toward union with God.

Green Color - Paradise and Spiritual Renewal Green holds a sacred status in Islamic culture and consequently occupies a prominent place in Classical Eastern literature. It symbolizes paradise, fertility, renewal, hope, and divine mercy.

Many poets describe heavenly gardens using green imagery. The color is closely associated with eternal life and spiritual prosperity. In mystical literature, green frequently represents the rebirth of the soul and the flourishing of divine knowledge.

Navoi utilizes green landscapes and gardens to create symbolic representations of spiritual harmony and divine order (Navoi, 1996). Consequently, green serves as an important marker of positive spiritual states. Alisher Navoi – Lison ut-Tayr: *“Birds wandered through the green gardens of eternity.”* Green symbolizes paradise, renewal, spiritual growth, and eternal life. It is closely associated with Islamic culture and sacred knowledge.

Blue and Gold - Cosmic and Royal Symbolism. Blue often symbolizes infinity, wisdom, contemplation, and celestial reality. Images of the blue sky and ocean evoke ideas of transcendence and cosmic order. In Eastern cosmology, blue reflects the vastness of creation and humanity's search for ultimate truth.

Jalal al-Din Rumi – Masnavi: *“Beneath the blue sky, the soul seeks its eternal home.”* Blue symbolizes infinity, contemplation, transcendence, and spiritual aspiration. It often evokes the vastness of the universe and divine wisdom.

Gold, on the other hand, symbolizes divine glory, perfection, sovereignty, and spiritual wealth. Golden imagery appears frequently in descriptions of palaces, heavenly realms, and sacred illumination. The combination of blue and gold creates a symbolic contrast between the infinite universe and divine perfection. Such imagery contributes significantly to the aesthetic sophistication of Classical Eastern literary texts.

Hafiz – Divan: *“Golden wine sparkled in the cup of the beloved.”* Gold symbolizes perfection, divine light, spiritual wealth, and royal authority. The color frequently represents the splendor of both earthly and heavenly beauty.

Color symbolism in Classical Eastern literature differs considerably from its Western counterparts. While certain meanings appear universal, Eastern traditions emphasize spiritual and metaphysical interpretations.

For instance, black often acquires positive mystical significance, whereas white primarily symbolizes divine illumination rather than merely innocence. Green possesses strong religious connotations due to its association with Islamic culture. Red transcends romantic passion and frequently denotes spiritual sacrifice.

These semantic distinctions reveal the cultural specificity of color symbolism and demonstrate the close relationship between literature, religion, and philosophy in Eastern traditions.

Conclusion. The analysis demonstrates that colors function as complex semantic structures in Classical Eastern literature. White symbolizes purity and divine illumination; black represents mystery and spiritual trial; red signifies love and sacrifice; green embodies paradise and renewal; while blue and gold convey cosmic wisdom and divine perfection. The symbolic use of colors enriches poetic expression and enables authors to communicate profound philosophical and mystical ideas. Understanding color semantics is therefore essential for interpreting the artistic and spiritual dimensions of Classical Eastern literary works. Future research may

further explore comparative aspects of color symbolism across different Eastern literary traditions and historical periods.

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