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The Colors in Shahnameh

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Abstract

The color is an element that may indicate the tastes, beliefs, aspirations, and demands of people. Many times, Ferdowsi uses colors to increase the influence of his words. If the symbolic meanings of colors are considered, many colorful mysteries and artistic values of Shahnameh will be revealed and the connection of this great epic work with the myths and beliefs of other nations will become more evident. The careful attention to uses of colors in Shahnameh opens a new window to learn more about this precious work. The black and white colors have no shades. In terms of frequency of using them in Shahnameh, they are in the first and second ranks. This shows that poet has considered more than other colors. However, many psychological and mythical properties of this colors are, consciously or unconsciously reflected in this great work.

Abstract: Color, Shahnameh

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the colors play an important role in human life. Without them, the world would seem spiritless and lifeless. The colors have numerous concepts. Sometimes, they are used as symbol; for example, the black fire means danger and red traffic light means stop. In semiotics, therefore, the colors may have hundreds messages.

The color was important among ancient Iranians. Different colors such as white, green, and etc. can be seen in ancient rituals. In ancient civilizations, the color was the symbol of light and thus, was linked with gods.

The color elements have a special place in myth. There are few myths which do not include colors. The colors in myth are the key to decode many concepts. For example, the color of horse usually fit the

character of its rider. The dark horse of kings in Shahnameh denotes their power. The clothing color of characters reflects their inner states. The black clothes of mourners or the color of flag which is the symbol of God's or evil's manifestations. The white color which is a symbol of divinity and immortality and links with Zal, Kai Khosrow, Baz Sepid, and etc. (Hinelz, 1994: 176).

In Shahnameh, Ferdowsi uses the color to state his intentions. The precise investigation of color elements and their application methods in Shahnameh may help to better understand this precious work.

The colors in the images of Ferdowsi's poetry are not the focus of poems. Many times, they have been used as a fixed part of special objects and do not play a significant role. In fact, the objects do not appear with different colors. Usually, every object has a particular color and each color is associated with a specific object. In other words, a certain color does not reflect different colors. In Shahnameh, for example the blue is associated with dagger; except in four cases including spears, knife, and iron which have been described by this color (vol 1: 33 and 75; Vol. 4: 184; vol. 6: 326). The azure is always indicated as the color of air, except in two cases which is the color of earth (Vol. 4: 236; (vol) 5: 313). Sereshk is always bloody. From 232 mentioned yellow color, 94 of them are attributed to face without a certain image. In 21 cases, yellow water is an allusion to tears. From 90 mentioned purple color, 33 cases are attributed to awl and 18 cases are attributed to blade.

Hakim Abolghasem Ferdowsi in Shahnameh has well used the colors. Many poets have copied his style. However, since the work of other poets was imitation and they used the colors without any imagination, they were not successful. Ferdowsi used colors to convey feelings and express images.

The first use of color in poetry of Ferdowsi does not induce particular color:

دریده درفش و نگون سار کوس رخ نامداران به رنگ آبنوس

Another example:

بدان خنده اندر بیفشارد چنگ ببردش رگ از دست وز روی رنگ

رستم و سهراب ، بیت ۹۲۴

The second use of color manifests cunning and fraud:

بر رستم آمد پر از رنگ و بوی بپرسید و بنشست نزدیک اوی

رستم و سهراب ، بیت ۵۳۹

ز هر گونه رنگ اندر آمیختی دل شاه ترکان برانگیختی

رستم و سهراب ، بیت ۲۱۹۵

The prosperity is the third meaning of color in the poetry of Ferdowsi:

در آن شارستان کرد چندان درنگ که آتشکده گشت با بوی و رنگ

رستم و سهراب ، بیت ۱۵۶۰

The color means glory:

ابا پیل گرد و نکش و رنگ و بوی ز خاور به ایران نهادند روی

پادشاهی فریدون ، بیت ۶۷۱

The color means blooming, prosperity, and growth of plants in spring:

چو آماد برتر مذ درون بآام و کوی به سان بهاران پر از رنگ و بوی

داستان سیاوش ، بیت ۱۲۹۶

Another meaning of color is wealth and property and in some cases, it crown and officer:

زمانی چو آهـرمن آیـد به جنگ زمانی عروسی پر از بوی و رنگ

داستان رستم با خاقان چین ، بیت ۱۵۵۷

هزار اشتر بختی و سرخ موی بنه بـرنـهـادنـد با رنگ و بـوی

داستان سیاوش ، بیت ۱۹۰۰

Using his poetic genius, ferdowsi benefits from color to show the appearance of a letter:

یکی نامـه بنوشت ارتـنگ وار برو کرده صد گونه رنگ و نگار

پادشاهی کیقباد ، بیت ۲۰۹

The color is the most effective and most prominent aspect of sensory images and visual descriptions in Shahnameh. In general, it plays a significant role in creation of imagery and descriptive narratives in Shahnameh. It is most effective especially in poetic, dynamic, and vivid images expressions (Zabeti Jahromi, 223: 1999).

In Shahnameh, the color is used for 4197 times; this figure includes the word (color) itself, too. However, about 3267 cases also conceptually reflect the colors; but, the others mean something different than color. For example, the word (Roshan) sometimes means white and daylight; sometimes in combination such as (Roshan Ravan) means wise and awake. The word (Rang) sometimes means color and colorful; and sometimes, it means trick.

The colors have many substitutes in Shahnameh. Some of them include snow, water, sun, diamond, cucumbers, amethyst, purple, turquoise, bitumen, ruby, Qar, coral, lapis lazuli, Senderos, gold, Diba, Ebony , Parand and vibe, feathers of birds (vultures, peacocks), eye of rooster, yolk, onyx, milk, silver, saffron, rust, gold, night, semen, Samand, fire and Oxnard, yellow, tulips, camphor, amber, red dates, ivory, musk, vermilion, rainbow, amber, straw, and etc.

Using yellow color to express fear and despair:

چو برخاست زان لشکر گشن گرد رخ نامداران ما گشت زرد (۱:۱۹۶)

بزرگان ایران پراز داغ و درد رخان زرد و لبها شده لاژورد (۴:۱۷۱)

Using purple color to show happiness:

شد از شادمانی رخش ارغوان که تن را جوان دید و دولت جوان (۱:۲۵۰)

Also, the purple is used to show health. The saffron is used to express pain and suffering. Before pregnancy, the face of Roudabeh is flushed and happy (purple). During the pregnancy, she feels pain due to largeness of fetus and her face's color gets saffron:

شکم گشته فربه و تن شد گران شد آن ارغوانی رخش زعفران
بدو گفت مادر که ای جان مام چه بودت که گشتی چنین زردفام (۱:۲۳۶)

The purple flag which is Iranian national flag at that time is placed against black flag of Turan in the battles. These two colors are iconic landmarks (flags) of two national Iranian and Turan nations in Shahnameh:

چو افراسیاب آن درفش بنفش نگه کرد بر جایگاه درفش
بدانست کان پیلتن رستمست سرافراز و وز تخمه نیرمست
برآشفت برسان جنگی پلنگ بیفشاردران پیش او شد به جنگ
چو رستم درفش سیه را بدید به کردار شیر ژیان بردمید
به جوش آمد آن نامبردار گرد عنان باره تیز تک را سپرد (۳:۱۸۸)

The purple and green are also used symbolically to introduce Rostam in battle scenes:

The tent of Rostam is green, his flag is purple in the form of a giant dragon, and a lion's golden head is on its stick.

Often, Ferdowsi describes excitedly the martial position of Iranian battalions and commanders in the battle scenes, paying special attention to different colors of Iranian flags:

پس پشت پیلان درفشان درفش به گرد اندرون سرخ و زرد و بنفش (۲:۱۴۳)
همه پشت پیلان به رنگین درفش بیاراسته سرخ و زرد و بنفش (۱:۱۹۸)

The azure indicates grief and mourning:

هر آنکس که با او بجوید نبرد کند جامه مادر برو لاژورد (۱:۲۲۵)

This color is also used to indicate the blue color of water (4: 133), sky (1:75), sun (7: 458), and night (7: 368).

Ferdowsi uses purple to show spring space (1: 104) and especially the group battle field (3: 214):

همه غار و هامون پر از کشته بود ز خون خاک چون ارغوان گشته بود (۳:۲۱۴)

Ferdowsi tries artistically to make balance between of images colors and the specific situations:

طلایه پراکند بر گرد دشت چو زنگی دو رنگ شب اندر گذشت
پدید آمد آن خنجر تابناک به کردار یاقوت شد روی خاک (۴:۲۵۸)

In the following verse, there is an interesting balance among color, movement of light, and movement or action of characters:

پدید آمد آن چادر مشک بوی به عنبر بیالوده خورشید روی
شکیبا نبد گنبد تیز گرد سرخفته از خواب بیدار کرد
درفشی بزد چشمه آفتاب سرشاه گیتی سبک شدزخواب
چو خورشید بر چرخ بنمود دست شهنشاه بر تخت زرین نشست
(۴۰۷-۷:۴۰۶)

Black color in Shahnameh:

The black is the darkest color. In fact, it negates itself. The black represents an absolute boundary beyond which life stops; it expresses the idea of emptiness and destruction. The black means (no); and white is its opposite and means (yes). The white is a blank paper that the story should be written on it; but, the black is an endpoint that there is nothing beyond it (Lucher, 1999: 97).

The black is a sign of complete unconsciousness, mourning and darkness. In Europe, it is considered as a negative color. A person wearing black, ominous house, and black snake are all signs of darkness and hopelessness. In the church, the dead celebrations are held under black flag (Appli, 1992: 284).

In most societies, the black is the color of mourning, repentance, and sorrow. The people who wear black clothes reject society and conflict its norms (Lucher, 1999: 133).

In Japanese religious ceremonies, the dark horse and white horse were sacrificed to demand rain and good weather from God, respectively (Hall, 2001: 26).

According to Hindi beliefs, Yama rides a black bull (ibid., P. 88).

In American mythology, four feathers are introduced. The black feather gives the needed power to a person to do something (Rosenberg, 1994: 969).

Ferdowsi in Shahnameh uses the black for 668 times. In 458 times, the black word is used; the remaining are other words including ebony, bitumen, Qar, musk, raven feathers, dark gray, Shabrang, Shabgoon, and etc. The words including Tire (433 times) and the Tarik (52 times) may also be mentioned.

Ferdowsi uses black word more than 80 times to show massive army and battle field such as: blackness of world due to dust, blackness of daylight, Ebony of world due to dust, black sea in the desert, blackness of sun due to dust, and etc.

وزان جایگه سوی قارن سپاه برفتند برسان گرد سیاه

(ج ۴، ص ۸۳، ب ۱۱۶۱)

که باران او بود شمشیر و تیر جهان شد به کردار دریای قیر

(ج ۴، ص ۲۴۳، ب ۵۱۴)

به دژ چون خبر شد که آمد سپاه جهان نیست پیدا ز گرد سیاه

(ج ۶، ص ۲۰۰، ب ۵۹۷)

سپاهی بیامد ز راه خزر کز ایشان سیه شد همه بوم و بر

(ج ۸، ص ۲۳۱، ب ۲۸۶)

In Shahnameh, the black color is used more than 100 times to indicate the color of animals including mythological creatures like dragons, demons, and common creatures such as crow and horses.

دو مار سیه از دو کتفش برست غمی گشت و از هر سویی چاره جست

(ج ۱، ص ۴۸، ب ۱۵۴)

چـو شـاخ درخت آن دو مـار سـیاه بـرآمـد دگـر بـاره از کتـف شـاه

(ج ۱، ص ۴۸، ب ۱۵۶)

زبـانـش بـه سـان درخـتـی سـیاه زفـر بـاز کـرده فـکنـده بـه راه

(ج ۱، ص ۲۰۳، ب ۱۰۳۰)

پـدیـد آمـد از دور چـیزی دراز سـیـه‌رنـگ و تـیـره‌تـن و تیـزتـاز

(ج ۱، ص ۳۳، ب ۱۰)

چـو مـار سـیه بـر سـر دار شـد سـر کـودک از خـواب بـیـدار شـد

(ج ۸، ص ۱۱۳، ب ۱۰۱۲)

In Shahnameh, all of the demons are black, except Akooan Div (with glamorous gold color) and Div Sepid. The Div Sepid is white only in name; his body is as dark as bitumen. Ferdowsi describes Div Sepid in facing with Rostam in battle as:

سـوی رستم آمد چو کوهی سـیاه از آهـنـش سـاعـد، از آهـن کـلاه

(ج ۲، ص ۱۰۷، ب۵۸۴)

In Shahnameh, the black color is used for 12 times to describe the demons and wizards and make clearer their demonic characteristics:

همـه روی‌هاشـان چو روی هـیون زبـان‌ها سـیه دیـده‌ها پـر ز خـون

(ج ۷، ص ۸۴، ب ۱۴۳)

بـزد چـنگ وارونـه دیـو سـیاه دو تـا انـدر آورد بـالای شـاه

(ج ۱، ص ۳۰، ب ۳۵)

به زنجـیر شـد گنده‌پیـری تباه سر و موی چون برف و رنگی سیاه

(ج ۶، ص ۱۷۹، ب ۲۲۴۱)

Ferdowsi uses black to describe the face of bad characters. In Shahnameh, this color is used for 13 times to describe the faces of people:

از این زاغ‌سـاران بـی‌آب و رنـگ نه هوش و نه دانش نه نام و نه ننگ

(ج ۹، ص ۳۴۱، ب ۳۶۴)

تو با چـهره‌ی دیو و با رنگ خاک مبادی بـه گـیتی جـز انـدر مغاک

(ج ۹، ص ۳۳، ب ۳۸۹)

فـرو هشـته پفـج و بر آورده کفج به کـردار قـیر و شـبه کفـج و پفج

(ج ۷، ص ۷۸، ب ۱۳۱۲)

However, the black is used for nearly 40 times to show the power, strength, and glory of clouds and mountains; it is used more than 50 times to describe the hair and beauty; it is used for more than 80 times to describe the night; also, it is used for 80 times to describe objects such as umbrellas, cup, crown, helmet, flag, musk, and etc.

The black color is also used to describe the objects of Iran's enemies. For example, Shahnameh mentions black flag for 35 times; four of them belong to Iranians and the rest belongs to enemies, particularly Turan.

The black color is used more than 60 times in ironic expressions such as blackness of world, blackness of hearts, blackness of day, blackness of water in the fountain, blackness of face, blackness of prism, and etc. As it can be seen, these words have negative concepts:

جز از من نشاید ورا کینه‌خواه کنم روز روشـن بـدو بـر سـیاه

(ج ۳، ص ۴۰، ب ۵۷۷)

ببـرد ز پسـتان نخجـیر شـیر شـود آب در چشمه‌ی خـویش قیر

(ج ۳، ص ۵۳، ب ۷۸۷)

تـو گردن بپیچی ز فرمان شاه مرا تـابـش روز گـردد سـیـاه

(ج ۶، ص ۲۴۹، ب ۵۲۴)

گناهش به یزدان دارنده‌بخش مکن روز بر دشمن و دوست دخش

(ج ۹، ص ۸۷، ب ۱۳۳۱)

The black paint is also the sign of mourning. The blackening of house and black clothing are the sign of mourning:

همه جامه کرده کبود و سیاه نشسته به اندوه در سوگ شاه

(ج ۱، ص ۱۰۷، ب ۴۷۱)

تبیره سیه کرده و روی پیل پراکنده بر تازی اسبانش نیل

(ج ۱، ص ۱۰۵، ب ۴۳۹)

در خانه‌ها را سیه کرد پاک ز کاخ و ز ایوان برآورد خاک

(ج ۲، ص ۲۶۱، ب ۵۳)

In Shahnameh, the black is sometimes used quite positively. It indicates royal glory and this is particularly striking in the color of kings' horses.

All of the kings in Shahnameh have dark horses. In this case, the black is a symbol of royal power and glory. For instance, during the transition of power from Parthian to Sassanid, Ardeshir, the founder of dynasty takes Ardavans' popular black horse. The ownership of dark horse may be considered a manifestation of power transmission.

Some of black horses of kings in Shahnameh include:

Horse of Keikhosro:

به آب اندر افکند خسرو سیاه چو کشتی همی راند تا باژگاه (ج ۳، ص ۲۲۸، ب ۳۴۸۰)

Horse of Siyavash:

ز تیر و ز ژوبین ببد خسته شاه نگون اندر آمد ز پشت سیاه (ج ۳، ص ۱۴۶، ب ۲۲۳۸)

Horse of Gashtasb:

از آخر گزین کرد اسبی سیاه گرانمایه خفتان و رومی کلاه (ج ۶، ص ۲۹، ب ۳۵۸)

Horse of Khosrow Parviz:

همی داشت تن را ز دشمن نگاه ببرید بر گستوان سیاه (ج ۱، ص ۱۲۰، ب ۱۸۷۵)

Due to same reason, the tents of kings or their affiliates is black including:

Tent of Tous:

سراپرده‌ای برکشیده سیاه رده گردش اندر ز هر سو سپاه (ج ۲، ص ۲۱۲، ب ۵۵۱)

Tent of Yazdgerd Sevom:

گر آیی سر و تاج گاهش تو راست همان گنج و چتر سیاهش تو راست

(ج ۹، ص ۳۴۹، ب ۴۴۹)

Tent of Keikhosrow:

همه بارگاهش سیاه است و بس شب و روز او را ندیده است کس

(ج ۵، ص ۳۸۹، ب ۲۵۹۶)

White color in Shahnameh:

In most myths, including Iranian mythology, the white shows excellence, spirituality, virtue, and holiness; when it is coupled with gold, its sanctity gets more.

In Shahnameh, the white color word is used for 304 times. Of course, this color's concept is sometimes expressed through other words including camphor, day, silver, ivory, month, and so on. Sometimes, it is used in the form of words that mean brilliant including: bright, luminous, liquid, phosphors, radiation, sun, and so on.

The white is used for 28 times to indicate sunrise (25 times) and moon rise (3 times):

چو برزد سر از چــرخ گردنده شید زمین گشت از او چون حریر سپید

(جلد۹: ص ۳۹۵ ، ب۲۰)

چو برزد سر از چشمه ی شیر شید جهان گشت چون روی رومی سپید

(ج۸: ص۳۶۲ ، ب ۷۹۵)

چو پیدا شد آن شوشه ی تاج شید جــهــان شــد بــه ســان بــلــور ســپــید

(ج۷: ص۳۸ ، ب۵۷۲)

سپیده چــو بــر زد ز بالا درفش چو کافور شد روی چرخ بنفش

(ج۷ک ص۶۲ ، ب۱۰۱۱)

Several times, it is swore to white of day and black of night:

به دادار دارنده سوگند خورد به روز سپید و شب لاژورد

(ج۴: ص۱۴ ، ب۹۷)

برآشفت یک روز و سوگند خورد بــه روز سپید و شــب لاژورد

(ج۶: ص۲۳۴ ، ب۲۶۵)

نماینده شب به روز سپید گشاینده ی گــنج پیش امید

(ج۱: ص۱۰۰ ، ب ۳۴۶)

Sometimes, the white is used for ironic interpretation: darkness of white day, day is not white for someone, whiteness of eye, whiteness of teeth, and etc.:

سیه گشت رخشنده روز سپید گسستند پیوند از جمّشید

(ج۱: ص۴۹، ب۱۶۷)

از این زندگانی شدم ناامید سیه شد مرا بخت و روز سپید

(ج۴: ص ۱۶۹، ب ۸۴۴)

سیه شد رخ و دیدگان شد سپید که دیدن دگرگونه بودش امید

(ج۱: ص۱۰۵، ب۴۳۶)

ز امید بیژن شدم ناامید جهانم سیاه و دو دیده سپید

(ج۱، ص۶۸، ب۱۰۲۴)

هر آن گه که در بزم خندان شود گشاده لب و سیم دندان شود

(ج۹: ص۳۲۲، ب۱۴۹)

The white hair of Zal is also mentioned several times:

به چهره چنان بود تابنده شید ولیکن همه موی بودش سپید

(ج۱: ص۱۳۸، ب۵۰)

چو فرزند را دید مویش سپید ببود از جهان سر به سر ناامید

(ج۱: ص۱۳۹، ب۶۰)

The white color concept is used 114 times to describe the beauty of women (94 times), kings (13 times), and heroes and other men (8 times). It is interesting to note that in none of the cases, the white word is not used and instead, other words are used including ivory, day-like, moon-like, a face like moon, silver, and etc.:

بر دختر آمد پر از خنده لب گشاده رخ روز گون زیر شب

(ج۱: ص۱۹۰، ب۸۴۹)

پرستار با افسر و گوشوار همان جعد مویان سیمین عذار

(ج۴: ص۳۰۰، ب۱۴۱۳)

به رخسارگان چون سهیل یمن بنفشه گرفته دو برگ سمن

(ج۵: ص۱۹، ب۱۹۳)

The white concept is used for 33 times to describe the color of animals: one white tree, three white birds, five white elephants, 23 white horses, and etc. also, it is used for 20 times to describe different objects including tents, clothes, curtains, flags, swords, beds, and etc. This color has a positive and good concept. If the white color in Shahnameh is investigated from the perspective of semiotics, the secrets of using this color in this work will be revealed:

Kaikhosrow and joining to immortality in whiteness:

خروشان و جوشان ز کردار شاه کسی را نبود اندر آن رنج راه
چنین گفت کایدر همه نیکویی ست بر این نیکویی ها نباید گریست
ز یزدان شناسید یک سر سپاس مباشید جز پاک یزدان شناس
که گرد آمدن زود باشد به هم مباشید زین رفتن من نژند
مرا روزگار جدایی بود مگر با سروش آشنایی بود
بر آن آب روشن سر و تن بشست همی خواند اندر نهان زند و است
چنین گفت با نامور بخردان که باشید پدرود تا جاودان
کنون چون برآرد سنان آفتاب مبینید دیگر مرا جز به خواب
سر مهتران زان سخن شد گران بخفتند با درد گندآوران
چو از کوه خورشید سر برکشید ز چشم مهان شاه شد ناپدید...
هم آن گه برآمد یکی باد و ابر هوا گشت برسان چشم هژبر
چو برف از زمین بادبان برکشید نبد نیزه ی نامداران پدید
یکایک به برف اندرون ماندند ندانم بدان جای چون ماندند...

(ج۶: ص۴۱۰-۴۱۵)

Keyghobad and dreaming white eagles:

Keyghobad is the fisrdt Kiani's king. He dreams that two white eagles bring brilliant crown from Iran and place it on his head. In this mythical event, the white eagles are symbol of charisma and happiness and whiteness is the secret of excellence:

شهشنه چنین گفت با پهلوان — که خوابی بدیدم به روشن روان
که از سوی ایران دو باز سپید — کی تاج رخشان به کردار شید
خرامان و نازان شدندی برم — نهادندی آن تاج را بر سرم
چو بیدار گشتم، شدم پر امید — از آن تاج رخشان و باز سپید
تهمتن مرا شد چو باز سپید — ز تاج بزرگان رسیدم نوید
تهمتن چو بشنید از خواب شاه — ز باز و ز تاج فروزان چو ماه
چنین گفت با شاه کند آوران — نشان است خوابت ز پیغمبران

(ج ۲، ص ۶۰)

Conclusion:

The color is an element that may indicate the tastes, beliefs, aspirations, and demands of people.

Many times, Ferdowsi uses colors to increase the influence of his words. If the symbolic meanings of colors are considered, many colorful mysteries and artistic values of Shahnameh will be revealed and the connection of this great epic work with the myths and beliefs of other nations will become more evident.

The careful attention to uses of colors in Shahnameh opens a new window to learn more about this precious work.

The black and white colors have no shades. In terms of frequency of using them in Shahnameh, they are in the first and second ranks. This shows that poet has considered more than other colors. However, many psychological and mythical properties of this colors are, consciously or unconsciously reflected in this great work.

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