

Original Research Article

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The symbolism of green color in Iranian-Islamic culture and art

Abstract

Problem definition: Colored symbols are one of the most prominent signs affecting the human beings psyche. Colors have special meanings in relation to the nature, culture, religious beliefs and life experiences. However, they are affected by the temporal and geographical locations, thought, culture, politics, religion and traditions of the people. Artists and poets have also used colored symbols to make their poetic and mental images tangible and to explain inexpressible concepts. The audience can achieve the thoughts and emotions of the artist as well as the subject and theme of the work through analyzing the colors in an artwork. The present study seeks to answer the question that what is the symbolic expression of green color in Iranian culture and art?

Objective: The purpose of this study is to investigate the symbols of green color and analyze the concepts behind it in Iranian-Islamic culture and art and finally acquire better knowledge of Iranian symbolic concepts.

Research Method: The current research has been conducted on a descriptive-analytical manner and comparative methods have been employed for the data analysis. The required information has been collected through searching in the library and internet sources

Results: The green color in Mithraic thought and ritual is sometimes considered as a symbol of sky, moon and water and sometimes that of justice and angel. It was also a symbol of the peasantry in the class system of pre-Islamic society. This color in Islamic thought is also considered as a symbol of heaven and heavenly beings, prophets and imams while being as a stage of mystical behavior in mysticism and Sufism. Nature, faith, wisdom, youth and vitality, etc. are other symbols of the green color.

Keywords: Green color, symbol, Iranian-Islamic culture and art

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Introduction

One of the important issues in understanding the culture of human societies is to investigate the meanings and role of the colors in their artworks and literature. Sometimes, active social or political groups may tend to a color influenced by the natural environment, spirit, thought, ideology and other factors and select it as the color of their tunics, flags or hats. Artists and poets also use color symbols to make their mental and poetic images tangible, objectify them and to explain inexpressible concepts. The audience can also realize the thoughts and emotions of the poet or artist, as well as the subject and theme of the work by analyzing the colors in a literary text or an artwork and image. In some cases, the ancients were considering some similar colors to be the same and giving them a single name. For example, colors such as indigo, purple and azure were in the sense of black, pink and red were supposed to be red and sky and sea were considered to be green. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the symbolism of green color and analyze the concepts behind it in Iranian-Islamic culture and art and finally acquire better knowledge of Iranian symbolic concepts. It is also attempted to answer the question that what is the symbolic expression of green color in Iranian culture and art?

Research method

The current study has been carried out on a descriptive-analytical manner and comparative methods have been employed for the present data analysis. The required information has been collected through searching in the library and internet sources. In order to match the pictorial samples, it has been attempted to use the works of first-rate artists of Iranian painting schools.

Research background

Numerous researches have been conducted on the symbolic meanings of colors in Iranian-Islamic culture. "Mahmoudi and Bakhshizadeh" (2013) have investigated this topic in the article entitled "Green fields of heaven, critical look at Hafez's poetry". Several other researches have dealt with this subject such as the article entitled "Color in the tales of Haft-Peykar of Nezami" by "Taj Varedi and Mokhtarnameh" (2007), "Costume type and color symbolism in Islamic mysticism" by "Mounesi Sorkheh et al." (2015), "Light and color symbolism in Iranian and Islamic mysticism" by "Nikobakht and Qasemzadeh" (2008) and "The Positions of colors in Haft Peykar" by "ghazizadeh and Khazaie" (2005). The above researches have paid more attention to the literary reflections and views of the poet or a specific group in using the green symbol. In the present research, it has been attempted to deal with some of the symbolic aspects of the green color, which are indirectly present or hidden within these texts and have not been mentioned before, by matching the literary, mythological and mystical sources with paintings.

Green color symbols

The green color has long had a special place in the culture of the Iranian people so that elites and commoners have used its symbolic features to express their ideas in different ways. Some of these symbolic meanings are rooted in mythology and history, which have preserved their concepts over the historical periods and passed on to us. Among them, green is the symbol of sky, farmer and agriculture, justice, angel, heaven and heavenly beings, prophet and imams, moon and water, wisdom and knowledge, faith and firm belief, vitality and youth and also that of reliance in mysticism and Sufism which are discussed in the following.

1. Sky

In Zoroastrian mythology, the sky looks like a grove and is green, and the sperm of people and cattle are created from the sky light (Esmailpour, 1998, 93-94; Farnbagh Dadegi, 1999, 41). The greenness assumption for the sky has also found a way in the poems of poets, part of which is rooted in myth and the other goes back to the oneness idea of green and blue (Esmailpour, 1998, 105).

2. Farmer and agriculture

In pre-Islamic Iran, people from the traditional classes of society were wearing clothes of different colors to introduce their class personality. In Avestan texts there were three classes and then four ones were mentioned including king and clerics, soldiers, farmers and craftsmen. Also, the class of secretaries was added to Pahlavi texts. The robes of the priests, armies, secretaries and farmers were considered to be white, red, yellow and blue (green), respectively (Bahar, 2005, 74). "Namvar Motlagh" says in this regard "It is interesting that the color of craftsmen is green being related to plants, that of warriors is red and the color of princes is white". Perhaps the one who chose these colors [for the color of the Iranian flag], has unconsciously paid attention to the slogan of Cyrus, who said "I am afraid of three things for my nation: lie, enemies and drought, lying is the greatest fear for the princes while the enemy and drought are the biggest dangers for the warriors and craftsmen, respectively as the main task of the latter group is agriculture and animal husbandry".

3. Justice

One of the ancient religious rituals in Iran is the Mithraism, in which green is a symbol of the struggle against tyranny. This manifestation can be found in Persian mythology. "Fereydoun", a mythical character and pioneering king, overcame the



Figure 1.
Zahhak imprisonment on Damavand Mountain.
Source: www.pinterest.co.uk

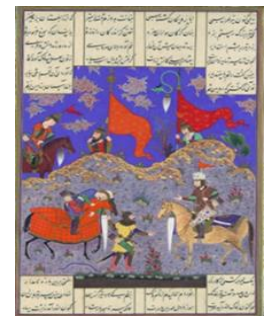


Figure 2.
The battle between Rostam and Esfandiyar. Source:
www.metmuseum.org

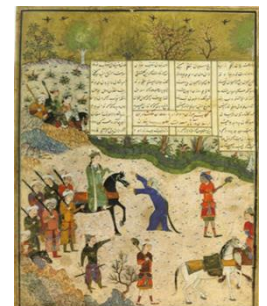


Figure 3.
An old woman complaining to Sultan Sanjar. Source:
www.britishmuseum.org

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tyrant "Zahhak" with the help of "Kaveh" and imprisons him on Damavand Mountain. According to [Figure1](#), Fereydoun is shown as a judge in the face of Zahak's tyranny, wearing a green robe. Also, the curtain house of Rostam was green in "Ferdowsi's Shahnameh". In the story, when "Sohrab" asks Hojir for the addresses of the Iranian heroes, his eyes fall on the green curtains. In the belief of Iranians, "Rostam" is a symbol of heroism and justice who always stands against oppression and prevents injustice. He is drawn in a green robe in many paintings ([Figure2](#)). "Nezami" tells the story of an old woman in "Makhzan al-Asrar" who comes across "the Seljuk Sanjar" one day and blames the sultan for the crimes of his guard against the people. In the old woman's oppression paintings, the painters have appointed Sultan Sanjar as a judge while the old woman is suing him. In these paintings, the sultan is also shown in a green clothing ([Figure3](#)). The Qur'an states about the judgment authority of Solomon (AS) "We gave each of David and Solomon the authority of judgment and knowledge" ([Al-Anbiya, 79](#)). In a story from the Bible, two women come to Solomon and claim to be the mother of a child and ask him to judge between them. In another story, an old woman who fell from the roof due to the wind and broke her arm comes to Solomon and complains about the wind. Both stories about the judgment of the Prophet Solomon are presented in an image in "Jami's Haft Awrang". In this painting, Solomon (AS) is wearing green as a judge ([Figure4](#)).

4. Soroush and angel

Soroush is an angel who wears green clothes to highlight its heavenly and sacred color. One of the characteristics of Soroush is helping the brave and warriors. Soroush, one of the Minavi judges, along with Izad Mehr and Rashan, has the duty of judging the souls of the dead and guiding the pious people to cross the Chinvat Bridge([Figure5](#)). "Ali ibn Mowaffaq", one of the grandees, said "I carried out Hajj in a year and on the night of Arafa I saw two angels in a dream coming down from the sky in green clothes ..." ([Ghazali, 1995, 218-219](#)).

5. Heaven and heavenly beings

In the Qur'an, the color of the heavenly beings clothing has been introduced as green. "They lean on pillows adorned with green cloths and rare carpets" ([Al-Rahman, 76](#)). "They will be adorned with bracelets of gold and dressed in delicate green silk brocade dresses" ([Al-Kahf, 31](#)). When the Prophet (PBUH) is asked about the gates of Paradise, he answers that Bab al-Rahma is made of ruby, Bab al-Sabr has a jewelry badge of ruby, Bab al-Bala is made of topaz, Bab al-Shukr is colored in green ruby and at the beginning of Bab al-Azam there are angels of light with green clothing.



Figure4.
Solomon judgment.
Source: www.asia.si.edu.



Figure5.
Soroush descent to assist
Khosrow Parviz. Source:
www.metmuseum.org.



Figure6.
Hadrat Khidr and Elias
Source: www.pinterest.co.uk

6. Prophet and Imams

Green in Islam is a sacred color and is associated with the Prophet of Islam and Khidr. It is stated in Orad al-Ahbab that "Anas ibn Malik says that the Messenger of God preferred green among the colors and the clothes of the heavenly people are green" (Bakhzari, 1966, 37). According to the narrations, when the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) was born, Gabriel came to earth and raised a green flag over the Kaaba. (Al-Diar Bakri, Bi Ta, vol. 1, p. 185). At the time of his marriage to Hadrat Khadijah (SA), the Holy Prophet was dressed in green (Bakri, 1994, 341). According to some historians, the Prophet (PBUH) was wearing green clothes during Tawaf (Ibn Sa'd, 1989, vol. 1, 350). Gabriel (AS) descended on the night of Qadr while being accompanied by a green flag (Sheikh Mofid, 1992, 273). The color of "Rafarf", the Holy Prophet's (PBUH) horse is green while ascending the Al-Aqsa Mosque for the heavenly journey (Tabarsi, 1985, vol. 1, 121).

"Hadrat Khizr" is also known as a green dressed man. One of his miracles was that when he sat on any dry land, the land turned into green and became fertile. Due to this reason, he was called the name Khidr (green). Moreover, the water of life plays an important role in Khidr's story, indicating his connection with the color green (Figure 6).

According to the sources, two clothes were sent from heaven to the Prophet (PBUH), he gave the green dress to "Imam Hassan" (AS) and the red one to "Imam Hussein" (AS) (Majlesi, 1985, vol. 44, 246). In Shiite culture, green is a sign of innocence and the slogan of Bani Hashem. In Iranian paintings, "Imam Ali" (as) is painted with a green handkerchief (Figure 7). Sayyids also used a green shawl or turban to distinguish themselves from others (Shahri Baf, 2004, vol. 2, 332). According to "Mostofi's description" in the Nasserite period, similar to Imam Hussein used to wear white robes, green shawl and turban and a green- or red-gold silk cloak (Mostofi, 2009, 289). Also, similar to "Hadrat Abbas" (AS) is seen in a green robe having a sign in his hand, putting green feather on his helmet and wearing a green belt on his waist (Anasori, 1987, 237) (Figure 8).



Figure8.
 Muslim acceptance by Imam Hussein (AS).
 Source: www.pinterest.co.uk.

"Behafarid" from Zuzan, Khorasan, claims to be a prophet in the age of Abu Muslim. He was wearing a green robe during the prophetic claim.

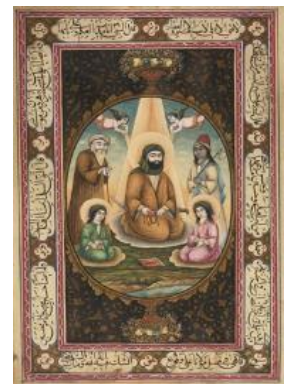


Figure7.
 Imam Ali (AS) and Hasnain (AS).
 Source: www.pinterest.co.uk.



Figure9.
 Behafarid's departure. Source:
www.pinterest.co.uk.

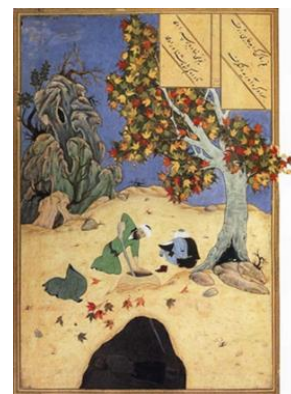


Figure10.
 The story of good and evil
 Source:www.britishmuseum.org.

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Behafarid traveled to China before revealing his prophetic claim. He brought a thin green silk shirt when returning from the trip, went to the top of the dome at night and hid there. Then he came down in the morning, put on his clothes and claimed that he had been in heaven for seven years and had seen heaven and hell. He also claimed that God has revealed to him and gave him this shirt (Seddiqi, 1993, 155). "Majd Khafi" also says that Behafarid "brought many Chinese delicacies, among which was a green robe that could disappear in the handle upon being wrapped (Iqbal, 1930, 97) (Figure 9).

7. Moon and water

"Abu Rayhan Biruni" has described the days of the week in "Al-Tafhim" and considered Monday to be related to the moon and its color to be green. It also refers to the eight levels of the sky, the sky is constituted of eight spheres, twisting one on top of the other, like the layers of onion. The smallest levels are the ones that are closest to us in which the moon comes and rises... (Biruni, 1988, 56). However, "Siwati" and "Meybodi" considered the sky to be of seven levels, the seventh of which belonging to the moon and green sky (Siwati, 1404, 42-41 and Meybodi, 1992, 382). It has been mentioned in "Haft-Peykar of Nizami" that "Bahram Gur" visits the Princess of the Green Dome on Monday. The story is about a man called abstemious Beshr. According to the story text, he accidentally sees a woman in the market and falls in love with. Since Beshr is an abstemious man, he seeks refuge in the house of God to avoid sin. On the way back, he travels with Melikha and finally reaches his mistress with her sudden death. Beshr wears a green robe as soon as he marries his mistress. In this story, water plays an important role that shows his relationship with the moon and the green color (Figure 10).

8. Knowledge and wisdom

In the story of the Green Dome, Nizami wisely describes the Princess of the Third Climate (Figure 11). As can be seen, green is a sign of wisdom and a symbol of the wise person here. In this verse, Saadi is also a symbol of awareness and knowledge. Nezami also introduces Alexander as a ruling philosopher, wise sage and religious prophet (Figure 12).

9. Faith and firm belief

Given that the believers are patient in the hardships of life, the attribute of patience is also shown in green in psychology. Hence, the believers, their attributes and words are depicted in green (Ghasemi, 2017, 419). As would be observed from Figure 13, "Kamal al-Din Behzad" has chosen the clothes of Josef (AS) as green, which indicates the innate belief and faith of the Prophet of God, and in contrast, the red color has been chosen for the clothes of Zuleikha, which shows her lust and

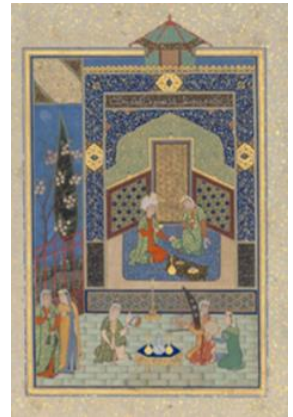


Figure11.
Bahram Gor in the Green Dome.
Source: www.metmuseum.org.



Figure12.
Alexander and the sages. Source:
www.pinterest.co.uk.

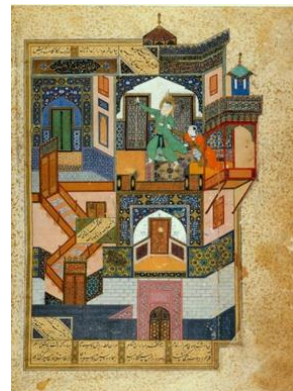


Figure13.
Prophet Joseph escapes
Zuleikha's temptation.
Source: www.pinterest.co.uk.

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earthly love. Here, green has also been used as a symbol of the clothes of the prophets.

10. Cheerfulness and youth

In the opinion of poets, freshness and vitality are the spirits of the youth. Just as the field goes this way and that with the breeze when it is green and breaks down when it turns yellow, human being is also full of dynamism and mobility in his/her youth and walks with tenderness, but he becomes loose, bent and withered upon aging. For this reason, Behzad has painted a young man in a green robe as in [Figure 14](#).

11. The step-wise color in mysticism and Sufism as a symbol of trust, knowledge, peace of mind, contentment and acceptance of repentance

The Haft-Peykar poem by Nizami contains the behavioral stages of Bahram Gur, the third one of which is the Green Dome. In the story of this dome, Beshr reaches the final destination by trusting in God. Here, the green color is a sign of trust in God, recourse and avoidance of arrogance ([Figure 11](#)). In the world of Sufism and mysticism, green is the color of the highest symbolic position. Green is the third stage of the Seven Cities of Love as well as the knowledge and certainty stage. "Hatam Assam" says "A Sufi must accept four types of death, one of which is the green death (Al-mautu 'l-akhzar) which means wearing rough clothes" ([Haghighat, 1988, 29; Gilani, 2014, 19](#)). In another artwork from Kamal al-Din Behzad ([Figure 15](#)), the artist depicts the dervishes in Sama. He himself, who was from Naqshbandiyya, has represented them through being familiar with the seven ranks and degrees of Sufism as well as the symbolic aspect of colors in these sects. The states and colors of the cloaks in this group of dervishes indicate that each of them is in a level of mystical behavior.

Conclusion

Colors have been considered to have symbolic concepts in different human societies, which in many cases have survived to the present day. In Iranian and Iranian-Islamic history, various groups such as Qizilbashs, Khurramites, green-dressed Parthians, Siahjamegans, Harufians, etc. have used symbolic aspects of color to express their specific political and social goals. By examining and matching the data in the literary, mythological and mystical sources with the drawings, one can realize their unexpressed points within the hidden layers and symbolic aspects of colors in these texts. Investigation of the data illustrates that the green color in Mithraic and Mazdaic thoughts is sometimes a symbol of sky, moon and water, and sometimes that of justice, angel and Soroush. It was also a symbol of the peasantry in the class system of pre-Islamic society. This color in Islamic thought is also considered as a symbol of heaven and heavenly beings, prophets and imams while



Figure14.

Saadi and Javan-e-Kashghari
Source: www.pinterest.co.uk.



Figure15.

The dervishes Sama.
Source: www.pinterest.co.uk.

being as a stage of mystical behavior in mysticism and Sufism. The firm faith and belief, wisdom, youth, vitality, etc. are other symbols of the green color.

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