

## **The Color Functioning in Lo'ai Hamza Abbas's Short Story *Ali the Red***

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### **Abstract:**

Language functions as a vehicle for and a mediator of meanings. For ages, colors have carried multiple symbolic meanings that are often cast in the basic polarities of warm-cold and bright-dark. Colors have long been used to create feelings of coziness and spaciousness. However, how people are affected by different color stimuli varies from person to person. This study focuses on the colors functioning as symbols in the short story of Lo'ai Hamza Abbas, entitled "*Ali the Red*", and demonstrates the rich use of these colors has a great part in the story. It presents the story's main colors and how the author handles them in showing the characters' different life conditions and situations.

## توظيف اللون في القصة القصيرة "علي الأحمر" للكاتب العراقي لؤي حمزة عباس

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### المستخلص:

تعمل كل لغة على أنها وسيلة أو وسيط لنقل المعاني. ولعصور مضت، حملت الألوان المعاني الرمزية المركبة، التي غالباً ما كانت تُطرح في مجال الأقطاب الأساسية الدافئ- البارد أو البراق- المعتم. وقد استخدمت الألوان لخلق الشعور العائلي والمترف. ومع هذا، يختلف مدى تأثر الناس بالألوان المختلفة من شخص إلى آخر. تركز هذه الدراسة على توظيف الألوان كرموز في القصة القصيرة "علي الأحمر" للكاتب العراقي لؤي حمزة عباس، والوقوف على استخدامه الغني لهذه الألوان التي تلعب دوراً مهماً وكبيراً في القصة. وتقدم أيضاً أهم الألوان المستخدمة في القصة وكيف قام الكاتب بتوظيفها في عرض الحالات والظروف الحياتية للشخصيات.

## 1) Introduction

Colour is an important part of human perception. Many everyday objects have been designed to convey a message through colour. The way colours affect psychological processing has not been fully explained, though, the writers use colours effectively in their writings. In all human societies, colour – which is the property possessed by an object of producing sensations on the eye as a result of the way in which the object reflects or emits light – is a cultural construct, in the sense that the colours that are identified and named are the products of language under the influence of culture (Lyons, 1999:73).

Linguists have determined that pre-Islamic language had five basic colour terms: *abyad* (white / light), *aswad* (black / dark), *ahmar* (red / brown), *asfar* (yellow / beige), and *akhdar* (green / blue) (Stewart, 1999: 105-06). Human societies identify colours in different ways. For example, yellow has largely negative connotations in the Quran, and it was inappropriate for men's clothing, although it was not forbidden to women (Stillman, 2000: 23-24). One of the Abbasid caliph ordered the non-Muslims had to wear "honey-colored" (i.e., yellow) scarves and belts, since the colour was undesirable (ibid., 109). Colours' symbolic associations are diverse and varied as their linguistic usages; this diversity and variety also involve seeming contradictions and contrasts. For example, red is the colour of love, desire and marriage, and, by extension, of procreation (Borg, 1999: 141). At the same time and as many idiomatic expressions attest, it is the colour of violence, anger, danger, intensity, war, and by extension bloodshed and death (Stewart, 1999: 119).

In the short story of Lo'ai H. Abbas "*Ali the Red*", there is a kind of arrangement of colour symbolism that illustrates the main character's state and emotion. There are examples that represent these established states and emotions; and the use of colour as an anchor to the character's previous life, presenting many colours, symbolizing the main characters conditions. The author deploys these colours in his story to enrich his characters' states, situations, conditions and emotions but in different ways for different goals.

This study focuses on the employment of these colours in presenting the characters, their states, and predicting their ends; by giving a brief introduction about the nature of symbols, colour symbols across different cultures, and the colour functioning in this story.

## 2) About the Author

Lo'ai Hamza Abbas is an Iraqi storyteller, novelist, critic, and researcher. He was born in Basrah in 1965, holds Ph. D. in Arabic Literature. He has many publications, such as:

### A. Stories:

- On a Bicycle at Night (stories). Azmina House, Amman, 1997.
- The Slaves (fictional book). Azmina House, Amman, 2000.
- Dallying with Horses (anecdotal infancies). The General House of Cultural Affairs. Baghdad. 2003. Sayyab Book, Printing, Publishing & Distribution, London, 2009.
- Closing the Eyes (stories). Azmina House, Amman, 2008.

### B. Novels:

- The Prey (novel). The General House of Cultural Affairs. Baghdad, 2005.
- The Book of Toilet (novel). Azmina House, Amman, 2007.

### C. Studies:

- Narration of Proverbs. The Union of Arab Writers. Damascus, 2003.
- Solace of Narration. The General House of Cultural Affairs. Baghdad, 2008.
- The Iraqi Location: A Controversy of Writing and Experience. The Institute of Strategic Studies, Beirut, 2009.

*Ali the Red* is considered one of the author's interesting stories, which translated into English for its importance in conveying the Iraqi, or in fact, the (Basrian) society in such period of time. The author tries to describe these intimate scenes from a close point of view of the narrator who gives the story an interesting reality and life.

## 3) The Nature of Symbols

A symbol is a sign, whether visual or verbal, standing for a meaning (Wales, 2001: 379). Broadly speaking, all words are symbols

(since they are signs standing for meanings); but in literature we limit the term to those words which reveal in themselves something of the story's essential point or meaning. Such a sign can light up a single character, an event, a scene, a whole story; "Signs have no significance, however, unless users recognize them as such. The meaning of signs has to be learned by the community, and their values can change" (Wales, op.cit.: 357). A symbol is simple, not complex, in content; it has a represent- ational function and stands for something other than itself; and the relation between itself and that which it represents is that of the relation between two general concepts, is non-sensuous in character, and is apprehended by the mind as such.

Not all writers are clearly symbolists, and not all symbols in stories are big flags waving in our eyes; symbols can be quite unpretentious and, often, are no more than simple things or colours around which the meaning of the story clusters. Symbol is one of those words often used in a confusing manner. A symbol is a sign that has further layers of meaning (Geoffrey and Short, 2007: 126). In other words, a symbol means more than it literally says. The more profound the symbol, the greater the complexity of the layers of meaning is (although the symbol itself may be quite simple).

Black (2006: 125) says that "symbolism ...is the result of interaction between text and reader; it is an optional interpretative strategy which the reader may choose to adopt." Symbols are essential in short story writing because they convey so much in very short space. In writing, symbolism is the use of a word, a phrase, or a description, which represents a deeper meaning than the words themselves. This kind of extension of meaning can transform the written word into a very powerful instrument. Symbols require some cultural knowledge to interpret them (Black, 2006: 125). Simple colours can also be symbolic, depending on the context in which they are used. Green has come to represent anything which is environmentally friendly. Colours are culture – specific and can represent different things depending on the geographical site. For example, in Asian countries, red symbolizes happiness, marriage, and prosperity; in some countries the colour of mourning is white. Pastoureau (2008: 24) reports that:

I have never believed in a universal symbolic system of colors independent of time and place and shared by all civilizations. On the contrary, I have always stressed that the problems and stakes related to color are cultural, strictly cultural, and prohibited the historian from disregarding eras and geographical areas. Nevertheless, I am forced to acknowledge that a few chromatic referents are encountered in almost every society. They are not numerous: fire and blood for red; vegetation for green; light for white; night for black – an ambivalent, even ambiguous night, yes, but always, everywhere, more disturbing or destructive than fertile or comforting.

Whereas Black (2006: 135) demonstrates that " symbols are rooted in the pragmatics of situation and use ... We use symbols to arrive at a richer meaning than we could attain without them." In literary texts, where remarks on colour are otherwise rare, the presence of red, white, and black is even more pronounced.

#### **4) Colour Symbol Across Culture**

Colours represent such an important aspect in our daily life. For example, the rainbow is a universal phenomenon, but many cultures see only three colours in it. Others (including our own) have identified as many as seven. Some cultures do not distinguish certain colours; for example, what is called "blue" from what is called "green," or "orange" from "yellow". Most cultures see black and white as colours, but modern science understands black to be the absence of light and white to be its presence (Bloom and Blair, 2011: 6-7). Mehta and Zhu (2009: 1226) suggest that the colour "red is often associated with dangers and mistakes (e.g., errors that are circled with red ink pen, stop signs, and warnings)". While they suggest that "blue is often associated with openness, peace, and tranquility (e.g., ocean and sky)" (ibid.). The meaning and effects of colour are based on context. In different contexts a colour can have different associations. If you are in a social context, red can be associated with romance and then it would have more positive association (Elliot & Niesta, 2008: 1150). Different colours are presumed to have different associations, and viewing a

colour is thought to trigger psychological responses consistent with these associations (Elliot et al, 2007: 154).

A number of researchers propose a close connection between processing colour words and actually perceiving it. They clearly indicate that colour words and colours themselves share a common represent- ational system. They also found that the associations generated by colour words share considerable overlap with those generated by colour samples (De Houwer, 2003: 904 and Schmidt & Cheesman, 2005: 136).

Elliot, et al. (2007) assumed that the perception of red colour signals the danger that based on its associations (e.g., red on alarms). Like the colour red, the word itself often carries the meaning of danger or negative event, both in general (e.g., "code red", "red flag"). This linguistic connotation of red, suggesting a close link between processing colour words and perceiving colour, leads us to expect that the word red alone is sufficient to undermine self-protection and worry. In addition, processing colour words and perceiving colour can influence psycho-logical functioning in the same manner (2007 :165). They also concluded that the colour red does not carry the meaning of danger in all its contexts. In relational contexts, red is commonly linked to love and romance (e.g., red heart on Valentine's Day), attraction and passion (e.g., red lipstick and rouge) and even sexual opportunity (e.g., red – light districts). Thus, red seems to carry different meanings and evoke different responses in different contexts (Elliot, et al, op.cit.: 158). So, "language is the most powerful but not the only symbol system known to us. This observation is pertinent to archaeologists' efforts to recognize symbol- ism" (Hovers et al, 2003: 492). Colour symbolism is one of the symbolic frameworks used extensively by contemporary societies to convey information and abstract messages through material objects (ibid.).

Many languages use names of colours to express different moods and feelings. In all languages there are numerous expressions in which colour plays an important role. It is also important to mention that religion plays an important part in any culture, and in every religion colours have their own associations. An inappropriate use of colour can be perceived as offensive (Bortoli & Maroto, 2001: 11). For

example, green is sacred in Islam, it is the colour of Islam for many, and its use should be undertaken very cautiously (Bloom and Blair, 2011: 38). It conveys a sense of freshness and luxuriousness. It is likely that these explicit connotations lie behind the associative sense of green, as in the green garments of silk worn by the denizens of paradise in the Quran (*Surah al-Kahf*, verse 31 and *Surah al-Insan*, verse 21). In the contrary, black is associated in popular culture with evil, misfortune, and catastrophe (Bloom and Blair, op.cit.: 16). It is also associated with the darkening of the face as a reflection of grief, the sense of darkness, lifelessness, and "conversely lush darkness" (ibid.: 15). Whereas white is the color of mourning in China and India. In the Islamic culture, white is the colour of creation, it is the quality of the water in paradise and can be understood as a symbol of purity. Although it often conveys the sense of purity, it also refers to blindness, when the prophet Jacob's eyes turn "white with sorrow" (*Surah Yousuf*, verse 84). White and black are understood as referring to light and darkness as in the Quran (*Surah al-Baqarah*, verse 187) where the believer determines daybreak and the beginning of fasting by his ability to distinguish a white thread from a dark one (Bloom and Blair, op.cit. : 14).

Red colour is employed only once in Quran, but the word (*dihan*) is used for the crimson skies of the Day of Judgment, and the word (*warda*) (rose coloured) appears once to describe the colour of the sky (*Surah ar-Rahman*, verse 37). The yellow colour (yellow or golden) appears in reference to the yellow wind of sandstorms, the Golden Calf, and sparks of hellfire. While the colour blue appears in reference to the sinful blue-eyed people (*zurqan*) who will be gathered when the trumpet will sound (*Surah Taha*, verse 102). In popular culture, blue eyes are often associated with evil, and, oddly enough, the colour blue has inauspicious connotations in many Islamic societies. Blue is considered magical and disturbing, a sign of misfortune and of failure (Bloom and Blair, 2011: 17).

##### **5) Color Functioning in *Ali the Red***

The first striking reference to colors comes in the very first line of the story; *Ali the Red*. What does it mean to be a colour? Pamuk, in his



novel (My Name Is Red), answers this question in one stunning sentence: "Colour is the touch of the eye, music to the deaf, a word out of darkness" (2001, 186). Red colour, in general, is hot and strong. It conjures up a range of seemingly conflicting emotions from passionate love to violence and warfare. It indicates anger and "it may stem not only from the stimulus of the colour but from the natural flush (redness) of the cheeks, a physical reaction to anger, increased blood pressure, or physical exertion" (Pastoureau, 2008: 32). In Russia the Bolsheviks raised red flags when they overthrew the Tsar, thus it became associated with communism. This last indication of red was rejected by Abbas at the beginning of the story "*It is Ali, Ali the Red, who did not become a communist one day but the nickname "the Red" has stuck to him...*" (p.82).\*

A study of many manifestations of colour in the story, and especially of its manifestation in conjunction with the colours yellow, blue, and white, suggests strongly that red should be interpreted not merely as image but as a symbol. When the narrator describes how the sports teacher used to distinguish the four students by colours, he presents a very short history of their disappearing from the story events.

The first student (Ali Sadeq) is distinguished "*by his dark brownness*" (p.82) (بِسْمَرْتِهِ الدِّكْنَاءِ). He left Basrah with his family up north. Brown is a warm neutral colour. It represents wholesomeness, earthiness, simplicity, friendliness, and health (Vries, 1984: 66). The author deploys brown colour to convey Ali Sadeq situation through its representation of "health, dependability, calmness" (Vries, op.cit. : 67) of his life, which means he lived his life safely. But the colour dark brown always associated with the black colour because of its darkness. According to\* All page numbers come from the 2011, Sayyab Books, Ten Stories From Iraq.what is mentioned before, the use of the dark brownness colour symbolizes the misfortune and catastrophe that this Ali and his family may face in their life after they moved to Beiji.

The second student is (Ali Salem Hulwa). The teacher distinguishes him "*by his sickly yellowness*" (p.82) (بِصَفْرَتِهِ الْمَرْضِيَّةِ) . Ali Salem "*disappeared at the beginning of the eighties with one of the noisy patrols of security men*" (p.82). Yellow is the colour of sun. It is warm, and like red, has conflicting symbolism. On the one hand it denotes

happiness and joy, but on the other hand, yellow is the colour of cowardice and deceit (Vries, 1984: 512). It also indicates sickness, especially jaundice, and it is one of the colours of the Plague (with red and black) (Vries, *ibid.*: 513). In Islam, for example, pale yellow designates betrayal and deception, the colour of envy and disgrace (Mathews, 1986: 220), and it is the colour of hellfire. The narrator employs the yellow to demonstrate the end of Ali Salem's life. It is clear that his life was ended during punishment and excruciation in one of the security arrests, as in "*the second disappeared at the beginning of the eighties with one of the noisy patrols of security men on the houses of the harbor workers*" (p.82).

The third character is Ali Abdul-Rahman. The teacher distinguishes him "*by his blue lips,*" (p.82) (بزقة شفثيه). Blue is the colour of calmness, devotion, hope and faith, and the colour of Eden (eternal youth) (Vries, *op.cit.*: 54). The narrator uses the symbol of this colour to convey the third character's end by explaining the way of his death with his unit withdrawal. That is to say, the narrator considers him as a martyr because he was killed in defending his land and life. Ali Abdul-Rahman "*carried on and enrolled in the Military academy to be killed with the rank of first lieutenant when his unit withdrew from Kuwait*" (p.82). On the other hand the colour blue is also the colour of evil and has inaus-picious connotations in many Islamic societies. Blue is a sign of misfor-tune.

The author continues in his use of colours but in their different Shades. So he uses the shades of the colour red in "*blood-speckled skin*" (p.82), "*blood spurted ... the fruit of a water melon*" (p. 84), and "*dry blood*" (p.86). When the colour is used in literature, it often represents something in addition to its literal meaning. Conventional or traditional literary symbols work in much the same way, and because they have a previously agreed upon meaning, they can be used to suggest ideas more universal than the physical aspect might suggest. One colour may appear in a work of literature in different ways to suggest a number of different things. So, here the words "*blood*" and "*water melon*" are synonymous in colour, representing various shades of the red colour. Redness of blood and water melon symbolizes fertility and joy, but it is also an indication of sacrifice (atonement,

martyrdom, etc.) (Vries, op.cit.: 52). The atonement is done only with one's blood, and a soldier has nothing to offer in war but blood. Then, red symbolizes the violent reality which causes the spilling of blood and death not merely by human hostility, but also by the carelessness of people who caused this death and let other people clean up the mess they had done. Thus Wasfa smashes the bottle over the thief's head and there is "*blood spurted out and left its wetness hitting*" (p.84) her face and neck. On the other hand, the dryness of blood in "*dry blood*" (p. 86) indicates the opposite to the organic life, which is fertility, and it stands for immortality. It opposes the liquidity of blood and water melon previously mentioned, the liquidity of fertility, life and joy. The dry blood colour tends to be brown which represents the colour of earth and autumn, the colour of mourning in the ancient and Middle Ages (Vries, op.cit.: 66). The narrator recognizes Ali, whose forehead and half of his face have blown away by the bullets, and "*dry blood hid his white hair*". The beautiful reds become the colour of killing. On the hypothesis that red symbolizes the violent reality as well as the glittering dream and the joy of life, it is not surprising to find red wedded to white to reveal, simultaneously, both the dreamlike enchantment and the actual brutality as in "*blood spurted out ... as I saw his eyes turning white and his head opening like the fruit of a water melon*" and "*his head split open and whitened eyes*" (p. 84). These examples are similar to what is previously mentioned in Quran.

Again, the author employs the implements of light and darkness as symbols in his story which is also symbolized by (white and black). White indicates purity, the light of the sun, illumination, energy, and 13 peace (Vries, op.cit.: 499) . Light (white and the day) relates to the fundamental struggle for survival and development. Light is a condition for sight, the most essential of man's sensory attachments to the world all around about him. The author uses the colour white in "*his eyes turning white...his head split open and whitened eyes*" (p. 84), "*hid his white hair*" (p. 86), and "*glistening in the light*" (p. 90) to indicate the struggle of his characters to survive their lives. With light and sight one is informed of his environment, can escape its dangers, taking advantage of its rewards, and can even exert some influence over its nature (Morris, 1946: 95). Matthews claims that "Light often occurs in

contrast to darkness" (1986: 119). Human culture has used light to dispel darkness and bring about an increased sense of security and utility to times when natural sunlight is unavailable or is insufficient. Light symbolizes life and happiness (Matthews, *ibid*). In a different vein, darkness (black and the night) brings fear of the unknown, hopeless sight, making one ignorant of his environment. One is reduced to a helpless state, no longer able to control the world about him (*ibid*). Darkness is cold, "suggesting stagnation and thoughts of the grave. Darkness is a symbol of evil or mystery or fear" (Morris, *op.cit*: 96). It indicates something bad is about to happen, and it can have a strong psychological impact.

Darkness in "*the darkness of the house*" (p. 84), became the space in which Wasfa faced her great horrors and determined her own fate. Light – dark combinations still carry another important implication. There are occasions when speakers find it useful to express an attitude of certainty or determinism about the state of present affairs or the shape of the future. The combination of light-dark is ideally suited to symbolize such situation, because light and dark are the most sharply contrasting environmental qualities (Matthews, *op.cit*: 120). They are rooted in a fixed chronological process, the movement of day into night and night into day as in "*Day or night... sunset*" (p. 86).

While light and darkness are presented in a chronological order, there are also subordinate cycles in the various phases of night and day. The dawn-twilight cycle emerges especially as a symbol for human life from birth to death, indicating the birth-death cycle (Arnold et al, 1966: 282). Fire does not only share the central light-dark motivational basis, but also the sun to which it is contiguous. Because fire is the most active, most rapidly changing of nature's elements, it could represent youth and regeneration, and because fire burns and "disintegrates substance", it can be viewed either as "destructive or purifying force": symbolically it is either infernal or purgatorial (Wheelwright, 1968: 118). Again, the author uses the fire and its warmth, its yellow white colour and its light in the story to emphasize the idea of youth and action as in "*fires ignited scattered...a river of flame*" (p. 86), and then he contradicts it with the view of destruction and death, with the darkness and its coldness, its black color as in "*the fires go out... sand*

*cools down*" (p. 88). He demonstrates the end of *Ali the Red's* life by the going out of fire, which also indicates the going out of life, action, energy, and the warmth of *Ali's* body, and also makes him lose the light in his sight (blindness) caused by the gunshot, living in darkness and then causes to his death.

## 6) Conclusion

The structure of *Lo'ai Hamza Abbas's* story is remarkably exhibited in his handling of the colour-symbols in *Ali the Red*. Readers are familiar with the colours (red), (brown), (yellow), (blue), (white), and (black) which symbolize (love, violence), (earthiness, health), (cowardice, deceit), (devotion, faith), (life, sight), and (death, blindness) respectively. The author employs these colours and their symbols in demonstrating the states of the characters in his story. He uses the red colour from the very beginning of the story (the title) by giving the nickname (red) to his main character (*Ali*). The colour red with all its symbols indicates the state of *Ali's* life, the story of his mother (*Wasfa*), and the way of his death. The author succeeds in presenting his characters by using the colours blue, yellow, and brown to sustain their lives and deaths. Each one is presented according to his colour symbols, leaving the reader to interact with the text; and it is an optional interpretative strategy which the reader may choose to adopt. He also employs the (white – black) colours to emphasize the life - death conditions throughout the story. The author uses colour symbols to give an extension meaning to the words and transformed into a very powerful instrument, and to illustrate the main character's state and emotion, and he succeeds in doing this.

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