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The Semiotics of Colours in Selected Poems by Nizar Qabbani

Hadjira Benhorma, Faculty of Letters and Languages, Department of Arabic Language and Literature,
Amar Telidji University of Laghouat, Algeria, had.benhorma@lagh-univ.dz

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Abstract:

This study explores the semiotics of colours in selected poems by Nizar Qabbani, examining how color imagery functions beyond its literal meaning to construct deeper emotional and socio-political themes. Semiotics emerged as a postmodern discipline reacting against the closed nature of structuralism, opening text analysis to contextual, cultural, and extra-textual dimensions. Tracing its foundational roots from Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model of semiology to Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic framework, the field has evolved into diverse Western traditions—including the semiotics of communication, signification, and culture, as well as the Paris, Russian, and Lyon schools. Drawing upon these theoretical frameworks, this paper analyzes color signs within Qabbani's poetry, demonstrating how color serves as a dynamic system of signification that conveys passion, tragedy, identity, and resistance.

Keywords: Semiotics, Nizar Qabbani, Poetic Imagery, Semiotics of Colour, Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Signification

Introduction:

Human curiosity often leads individuals to analyse, interpret, and seek meaning. Perhaps this is the main reason that prompted many scholars to interrogate signs in their search for meaning, leading to the emergence of an entire field of study known as semiotics. As an independent discipline in the postmodern era, semiotics has often been regarded as a reaction to modernist approaches, particularly structuralism, which adopted the principle of immanence and became known for its closed nature, excluding everything outside the sign. This is precisely what semiotics rejected, as it opens itself to what lies beyond the sign.

In discussing this field a field that neither pens can fully theorise and describe nor pages can contain we have chosen to provide a brief overview of its emergence, its methodology, and some of the figures who contributed to its development. Among them is the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (F. de Saussure), who heralded the birth of a new science, which he called semiology, in his *Course in General Linguistics*, published in [1916]. Many scholars have therefore regarded it as the first and fundamental reference in this field. Another prominent figure is the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who called for the adoption of a new logical perspective and referred to this approach as semiotics.

With the multiplicity of semiological trends and schools in Western intellectual thought, one finds a considerable number of researchers, as well as a diversity of terms and their corresponding translations for the same concept. In the Italian school, for instance, we encounter the semiology of signification, the semiology of communication, and the semiology of culture. Within the Russian school, many names emerge, such as Lotman, Todorov, Tartu, Uspensky, and others.

In the Paris School of semiotics, we find figures such as Joseph Courtés, Greimas, Michel Arrivé, and Jean-Claude Coquet, among others.

There is also the trend of material semiotics, which combines psychological and Marxist analyses, represented by Julia Kristeva and the Lyon School.

Thus, we observe this diversity and multiplicity of approaches and designations, which can be attributed to differences among schools, epistemological foundations, and intellectual orientations. Nevertheless, despite these differences, they may broadly be traced back to two major semiological poles: the semiology of communication and the semiology of signification.

1. Concept and Nature

It may be difficult to establish a comprehensive and clearly defined concept of this discipline, as semiotic studies have branched out and diversified, giving rise to numerous currents that have expanded and differed in their approaches to analysis in various directions. However, we shall attempt to focus on what most scholars agree upon: that the origin of the term going back to de Saussure, who himself stated that it was derived from the Greek root (*semeion*) means an indication or a sign.

ⁱ He defined it as: “the study of the life of signs within social life.”ⁱⁱⁱ As for the other founder previously mentioned, Peirce, he considers semiotics to be “simply another name for logic, in its general sense.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Linguistically, its meaning appears in *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Manzur, under the root (s.w.m), where it is stated: “al-sumah, al-simah, and al-sima’ mean the sign or mark; and to mark a horse is to place a distinguishing sign upon it.”^{iv} From this, we understand that the word *simā’* occurs with the meaning of a sign or mark.

The same meaning is found in several places in the Holy Qur’an, in a number of noble verses. We find, for instance, in the Almighty’s saying: *﴿سِيمَاهُمْ فِي وُجُوهِهِمْ مِنْ أَثَرِ السُّجُودِ﴾*.^v This is associated with certain signs suggesting purity, cleanliness, and serenity resulting from the strength of faith. Likewise, the Almighty says: *﴿تَعْرِفُهُمْ بِسِيمَاهُمْ لَا يَسْأَلُونَ النَّاسَ إِلْحَافًا﴾*.^{vi} He also says: *﴿وَمَا تَنْفَقُوا مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ بِهِ عَلِيمٌ﴾* *﴿وَنَادَى أَصْحَابُ الْأَعْرَافِ رَجُلًا يَغْرِفُونَهُمْ بِسِيمَاهُمْ قَالُوا مَا أَغْنَىٰ عَنْكُمْ جَمْعُكُمْ وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَسْتَكْبِرُونَ﴾*.^{vii}

Based on some books of Qur’anic exegesis, the meanings associated with the use of the word *simah* in these verses correspond to the meanings found in Arabic dictionaries.

In discussing dictionaries, it is necessary to refer to some Western lexicons as well, particularly the well-known Larousse dictionary, which employs semiotics as a term “sometimes to describe a general theory of signs, and at other times as a signifying practice in various fields of communication, such as the semiotics of cinema...”^{viii} The same dictionary also indicates that semiotics and semiology, both derived from the Greek (*semeion*), are synonymous terms, the latter referring to the general science of signs.

As for the semiology of poetry, it analyses the text through structural levels that take into account the literariness of the genre, such as the phonetic level, the morphological level, the semantic level, the syntactic level with its grammatical and rhetorical dimensions and the intertextual level.

What particularly concerns us in this research paper is the close relationship between the poet and his use of colours, a subject that is more closely related to the semantic level. This has led us to focus on the most important aspects revealed by semiotic analysis within the poem through its meanings and deviations. Colour has long been regarded as one of the most significant signs in literary texts, particularly in poetry. It has received considerable attention from both critics and poets, in terms of study and use. Each colour has been assigned a particular significance, and great attention has been paid to the context in which it is employed, resulting in some colours being charged with contradictory meanings. Undoubtedly, every colour has an effect on the reader’s psychological state on the one hand and reflects the poet’s own emotional state on the other.

Given the importance that colour has attained and the extent of its use in poetic texts, we have chosen to study and analyse it from a semiotic perspective, because of the intellectual pleasure it offers and the aesthetic and artistic dimension it encompasses.

The semiotics of colour has undergone considerable development in the modern era across various fields. It has been applied to the visual arts, cinema, theatre, and literature in general, both prose and poetry. Thus, “colour came to possess a symbolic language, moving beyond simple meanings towards a language of chromatic signs.”^{ix}

It is this latter aspect that encouraged us to delve into this field and explore its secrets. Among the most prominent poets who employed colours in many of their poems and endowed them with a distinctive aesthetic dimension, playing with their use in different contexts and investing them with meanings that transformed their familiar connotations and broke away from their conventional patterns, is the renowned Arab poet Nizar Qabbani. We have therefore selected some of his poems in which we will examine the use of colour:

1) The First Poem: “Red, Red, Red”

Never think... the light is red.

Speak to no one... the light is red.

Do not argue about the texts of jurisprudence, or grammar, or morphology,

or poetry, or prose,

For the mind is cursed, detested, and forbidden...

Do not leave your cage sealed with wax,

For the light is red...

Do not love a woman... or a mouse,

For the light of love is red.

Do not make love to a wall, or a stone, or a chair...

For the light of sex is red...

Red has been regarded as one of the most favoured colours, particularly among writers and poets. It is also used in descriptions of feminine beauty, such as the lips and cheeks, and is associated with shyness and modesty, both considered admirable qualities in Arab culture. The poet has entitled this poem with the same colour and repeated it three times. This repetition, as it appears, is not arbitrary; rather, the poet seeks through it to achieve a particular purpose.

“Red” appears in the indefinite form. The reader of the poem does not immediately recognise what is being described, nor does he or she know precisely what the poet intends. The ambiguity increases with every line, as the colour is repeated throughout most of the poem. Nizar Qabbani makes the light red, as well as love, sex, and other aspects of life. This suggests prohibition, functioning as an icon derived from the symbolism of traffic signals.

The poem as a whole presents a sequence of events, almost like the daily life of an Arab poet, who is repeatedly warned that all these everyday practices are forbidden, albeit indirectly, through the constant reminder that the light is red. This is a new style adopted by Nizar Qabbani to express blame and reproach, as well as regret and frustration with the life he portrays through the voice of the protagonist of his poem.

2) “Only in Red”^x

Everywhere in the notebook,
your name is written in red.
Your love is the pupil of a devil,
playing with a red pen...

It draws fish of gold,
and women... made of sugar cane,

and red Indians... and a train,
and moves thousands of soldiers.

It draws a mill and a horse...

What we notice in this passage is the repetition of the colour red, which the poet seems to have employed deliberately, particularly since the poem itself bears a title referring to the same colour. Within its lines, there is also a clear reference to woman and her relationship with nature. Red is considered one of the most significant and oldest colours known to humankind in nature. It is “one of the warm colours, derived from the glow of the sun, the burning of fire, and intense heat, and it possesses one of the longest wavelengths of light.”^{xi}

For this reason, many religions have associated it with the colour of Hell, while in other cultures it has been regarded as a symbol of spells or associated with blood and warfare. Conversely, some consider it a colour of joy and pleasure. However, its use in these lines clearly suggests romance, love, and warmth, as can be inferred from the general meaning of the poem, whose purpose is one of love and flirtation. In the first two lines, it signifies love, longing, and yearning; the use of red ink to write her name serves to reinforce and make her name more prominent. In the following lines, however, its use conveys a tone of reproach, authority, and rebellion through its association with the devil.

He also says in the same poem:

It paints with roses and rubies,
and leaves a wound in the notebook.
Your love is a mad painter,
who paints only... in red.
And it scribbles upon the wall of the sun,
never resting, never growing weary.

Here, there is a clear indication of the use of the colour red as a symbol of love, a meaning that the poet confirms through the restrictive expression “only in red.” As is well known, red is also one of the most appealing colours in foods such as apples, cherries, and strawberries. For this reason, poets have often drawn comparisons between such images and feminine features associated with sensuality, such as the mouth, cheeks, and face.

In another use of the same colour, red, the poet this time associates it with a familiar image whose meaning is commonly understood by everyone, in:

3) The Poem “O Wife of the Caliph”^{xii}

The guards do not understand my case,
O wife of the Caliph...
My letters to you... they refuse them.
My red flowers... they refuse them.
O wife of the Caliph,
my poems, which I wrote with light and velvet...

In these lines, we can perceive a tone of complaint and dissatisfaction. The poet expresses his distress over certain circumstances that have caused him a state of psychological unease, which is reflected in his words. He selects everything poetic and pleasing to the soul, such as poems, flowers, and light, as well as other images that appear throughout the remaining lines. This is something naturally appealing not only to the human soul in general but, in this context, particularly associated with the woman, who is traditionally portrayed as being drawn to such things.

What concerns us here, however, is his description of the flowers as red. Roses come in many colours, yet he chooses red as a symbol of love and as a reflection of emotion. In psychology, red carries contradictory connotations; among the most notable is its association with a violent, stubborn, or angry personality. It may also express an excessive capacity for endurance. Yet, within these lines, its significance is different: it is a colour that attracts attention and stimulates emotion.

It carries qualities of warmth and longing and evokes feelings of freedom, passion, strength, and vitality. This is what led the poet to employ red as the most sincere expression of the psychological state he experiences.

4) The Poem "To a Silent Woman"^{xiii}

Speak of the simplest things,
and the smallest things.
Of your new dress,
of your winter hat,
of the flowers you bought
from Al-Hamra Street.
Speak, my beloved.

What draws attention in the poet's use of the colour red in these lines is its association with streets an expression that may appear illogical at first glance and raises the question: Do streets have colours? And are these colours real?

Naturally, these are red streets only in the poetic world of Nizar Qabbani. It seems that he employs the colour as an indication of an abundance of love. Perhaps these are streets where lovers frequently meet, and for this reason they are described as red; or perhaps they are places where gifts associated with love and celebrations are sold. This possibility is suggested by the preceding lines, in which he asks her to speak about the dress, the hat, and the flowers she has bought, connecting all these objects to the streets, which he describes as red.

He does not stop there, however, but reinforces this entire emotional context with the word "my beloved," thereby further emphasising the atmosphere of love and affection surrounding the image.

5) The Poem "The Most Violent Love I Have Ever Lived"^{xiv}

... Had they told me that he
would set fires ablaze within minutes,
turn things upside down within minutes,
and paint the walls red and blue within minutes,
... I would have driven him away.

A reader of the poem in its entirety will undoubtedly realise that it is a love poem. The poet sometimes sings of his beloved and, at other times, reproaches the love and passion into which he has fallen, until he reaches the duality of the colours red and blue. As for the former, we have already discussed some of its connotations. We are now led to consider the meanings associated with blue, a colour that most poets frequently link to the sea or the sky. Critics and scholars generally associate it with trust, harmony, purity, and serenity.

Like red, blue has several shades, which has resulted in a diversity of meanings. "Light blue reflects trust, innocence, and youth, whereas dark blue is an indication of lethargy, laziness, calmness, and rest."^{xv} Here, we may conclude that Nizar Qabbani successfully combines the two colours: the first suggests love and emotion, while the second evokes comfort and tranquillity. When these two qualities come together within one room, to which the walls refer, they create everything beautiful within the poet's soul.

6) The Poem "Hamlet as a Poet"^{xvi}

All that Nuwar carries of fresh grass
is that you should be... my blue notebook...
my papers... the ink of my mind...

The colour blue in this poem carries a clear significance, embodied in the poet's attention to and emphasis on it through its association with something personal to him, namely the notebook. One of its most significant connotations is his psychological state, suggesting sadness and melancholy. Here, Nizar departs from the familiar meanings usually associated with blue and gives it an aesthetic dimension connected to pessimism, a notion that was traditionally associated among the Arabs with blue eyes.

The poet does not turn to his notebooks except under certain emotional states, whether in moments of sadness or joy.

7) The Poem "Her Room"^{xvii}

In the blue room... I live,
after you, O sister of the finest feathers.
And upon it lies the silk of our bed,
nights in which we scattered our longings.
And your jasmine-like breast... a heap of light,
whose whiteness makes the cloth faint.
Blonde... with a slight lisp,
that leaves your lips struggling in conversation.
And who has ever lived upon colours and shadows?

Among the meanings of blue employed by the poet here is a deeply rooted, almost belief-based significance. He frequently associates the colour blue with a particular place, which in this case he identifies as the room. This may reflect solitude and enclosure. The blueness of the place can be seen as suggesting the stagnation or confinement of blood within the veins, a condition resembling the lover's isolation in his room.

Here, the poet does not specify precisely which shade of blue he intends. If it is light blue, it may signify comfort, as though he were saying that he finds peace and tranquillity only in his room. If it is dark blue, however, it may suggest

pessimism, boredom, and illness. This interpretation is reinforced by the events that later took place between him and his beloved in that room, which are reflected in the tone of sorrow and longing conveyed through the poet's language.

Moving from blue to green, Nizar Qabbani employs the latter colour in his poem:

8) "Olive-Coloured Eyes"^{xviii}

A green lake, upon whose shore
maidens of light have fallen asleep... unafraid.
A frog beneath the lily-white morning,
and a lazy vine upon our slope...

The poet's use of green here is both logical and clear. The shore of a lake is naturally associated with greenery, an image that is familiar and self-evident within the poet's environment, where civilisations were often established along valleys and rivers. This poetic style does not require symbolic interpretation as much as it requires a soul that loves nature and appreciates beauty, allowing the reader to see through the poet's eyes and, consequently, to read the poem in a different way.

However, what calls for closer attention and reflection is what the poet says later in the same poem:

She weeps with a blue voice... blue,
leading into an endless longing.
For a thousand years, I have been sailing,
moving across a warm emerald...

The reader of the first line in this poetic passage is likely to pause for a moment at the expression "with a blue voice", asking: Do sounds have colours? This is a stylistic feature that distinguishes Nizar Qabbani in many of his poems, where he assigns colours to various things, including the voice, encounters, whispers, and touch.

The question that requires a more precise answer, however, is: Why did Nizar choose blue rather than red, green, or any other colour?

Poets have traditionally associated blue with clarity and purity, such as the purity of the sky and the sea. Yet Nizar Qabbani goes beyond this conventional use by associating blueness with the voice, using it to suggest intensity and violence, a connotation known in the Arab cultural heritage. In addition, repetition is employed for emphasis and reinforcement. Here, Nizar repeats the colour within the same expression "blue... blue" which indicates that he adopts blue as a symbolic dimension through which he seeks to achieve his intended poetic effects.

9) The Poem "Frightened by Her Dress"^{xix}

Move gracefully, my key to the observatory, leap,
like a white butterfly in my playground.
Green-footed... do not be afraid.
Does the rose grow angry... so that you may grow angry?

The poet employs the colour white in this verse as a sign of purity and clarity, which corresponds to its original meaning as stated in *Lisan al-Arab*, where it signifies beauty, grace, honour, and purity.^{xx} However, the conventional relationship between the signifier and the signified does not fully apply here, since the butterfly is usually known for its ornamentation, the variety of its colours, and their intermingling. This creates a form of contrast, as the poet compares his beloved in this poem to a butterfly dancing lightly and vividly through his gardens, moving from one place to another.

This is a distinctive descriptive style characteristic of Nizar Qabbani, particularly in his portrayal of things and, above all, of woman the beloved. The butterfly is a symbol of lightness, gentleness, and elegance, which is why the poet establishes a connection between the two in order to create a remarkable artistic image. He succeeds in imagining and conveying it in this manner, drawing part of its beauty from nature.

In conclusion, it can be said that Nizar Qabbani, in his use of colour signifiers throughout the poetic texts selected for this study, relies particularly on the principles of symbolism and deviation. In other words, he moves colour away from its familiar and conventional meanings and invests it with new connotations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be said that the subject of semiotics is broad and complex, one that neither pens can fully encompass nor pages sufficiently contain. However, we have limited ourselves to this small aspect of it because of our interest in poetry, particularly modern poetry. For this purpose, we selected a number of poems by Nizar Qabbani and examined his use of colours and their aesthetic dimensions. This study has led us to a number of conclusions, which may be summarised as follows:

Semiotics is a discipline whose roots extend back to ancient times and which draws upon various fields of knowledge.

Colour symbolism and its connotations constitute an important element in the construction of the poem, owing to the artistic power they possess and the aesthetic dimension they add to poetic meaning.

The semiotic approach is capable of revealing the meanings of words and their connotations within the poem.

Anyone who follows Nizar Qabbani's poetry closely will clearly realise that he is among the poets who make the most extensive use of colours and manipulate their meanings.

Nizar Qabbani may invest the same colour with different and even contradictory connotations within the same poem, as though he were a visual artist blending colours to ultimately create a highly accomplished artistic composition.

Nizar Qabbani's influence by nature is clearly evident in most of his poems, particularly in the way he connects its colours with his life, a relationship reflected even in the simplest details of his world.

The colours employed by Nizar Qabbani in his poems often express his psychological state and changing moods. He does not confine a particular colour to a single meaning; rather, he endows colours with different connotations through which he breaks away from the conventional patterns of poetic discourse.

Nizar Qabbani's frequent use of colours in constructing his poetic imagery ultimately serves to achieve an aesthetic and artistic value.

ⁱ Al-Ahmar, Faisal. Dictionary of Semiotics. Manshurat Al-Ikhtilaf, n.d., p. 11.

ⁱⁱ Benkrad, Saeed. Semiotics: Its Concepts and Applications. Dar Al-Hiwar for Publishing and Distribution, Syria, 3rd ed., 2012, p. 9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Buchler, Justus. C. S. Peirce: Logic as Semiotic The Theory of Signs.

^{iv} Ibn Manzur. Lisan al-Arab, entry "Sawm." Edited by Abdullah Ali Al-Kabir et al. Dar Al-Ma'arif, Cairo, Egypt, n.d., p. 2158.

^v The Holy Qur'an, Surah Al-Fath, Verse 29.

^{vi} The Holy Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah, Verse 273.

^{vii} The Holy Qur'an, Surah Al-A'raf, Verse 48.

^{viii} Le Petit Larousse Illustré, 1998, p. 931.

^{ix} Al-Zyoud, Abd al-Basit Muhammad, and Zaher Muhammad Al-Zawahreh. "The Significance of Colour in the Poetry of Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab: The Rain Song as a Model." Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences, vol. 1, no. 2, 2014, p. 589.

^x Qabbani, Nizar. Diwan: Wild Poems. Nizar Qabbani Publications, n.d. edition, 1970, p. 19.

^{xi} Mukhtar, Ahmad Omar. Language and Colour. Alam Al-Kutub for Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 2nd ed., 1997, p. 111.

^{xii} Qabbani, Nizar. Diwan: Wild Poems, previously cited, p. 29.

^{xiii} Ibid., p. 21.

^{xiv} Qabbani, Nizar. Diwan: Wild Poems, previously cited, p. 40.

^{xv} Al-Saghar, Ibtisam Marhoun. The Aesthetics of Colour Formation in the Holy Qur'an. Alam Al-Kutub Al-Hadith, Irbid, Jordan, 1st ed., 2010, p. 4.

^{xvi} Qabbani, Nizar. Diwan: Wild Poems, previously cited, p. 17.

^{xvii} Qabbani, Nizar. She Told Me, the Brunette. Nizar Qabbani Publications, Beirut, Lebanon, 33rd ed., 1988, p. 25.

^{xviii} Qabbani, Nizar. She Told Me, the Brunette, previously cited, p. 27.

^{xix} Qabbani, Nizar. The Complete Poetical Works, Vol. 1. Nizar Qabbani Publications, Beirut, Lebanon, n.d. edition, 1944, p. 20.

^{xx} Ibn Manzur. Lisan al-Arab, entry "Bayd," p. 398.