

COLOURS AS METAPHOR IN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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Abstract

Metaphor is used extensively in every language to express ideas and emotions. Colour terms as a semiotic entity, capable of producing different meaning in different contexts. The metaphoric uses of colours developed diachronically as well as synchronically in every language culture. The meanings are deeply shrouded with vile of cultural layer. The present paper is an attempt to study basic colour terms and their metaphoric use in Hindi and Russian Language.

Metaphor is used in everyday human language to express ideas and emotions. Metaphor permeates every aspect of our reality such as shaping day to day reality or conceptualizing any notion. The landmark work by George Lakoff on metaphorical concepts underscores the pervasive presence of metaphors. According to George Lakoff, “Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities”(Lakoff George and Johanson Mark,1980). And by suggesting that our conceptual system is basically metaphorical, he proposes that “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff George and Johanson Mark, , 1980)

To define metaphor in limited words or sentences which encompass each and every aspect of the term in question is very difficult. Area of the term, where it exercises its power is so broad that it often mutilates, if mistaken, the boundaries of similar but different concept¹. Most generic and traditional definition of metaphor could be comprised as

“Metaphor” has been variously defined in terms of substituting one word for another word with an apparently different meaning, comparing one idea to another, or creating an implicit analogy or simile” (Ritchie L. David, 2013).

Several linguist and theorist have given various definitions to comprehend the concept of “metaphor”. At first look they all look standardized and interchangeable but by digging deep we see the limitation of these definitions and find that it is not easy to explain the concept fully. David Ritchie in his book “Metaphor” made us acquainted with some of these seminal definitions on the subject in question and elaborates their backdrop as well: “Going beyond the more traditional definitions, Kenneth Burke (1945)

Defined metaphor as “a device for seeing something in terms of something else.” Yanow (2008) defines metaphor as “the juxtaposition of two superficially unlike elements in a single

context, where the separately understood meanings of both interact to create a new perception of each and especially of the focus of the metaphor.” Along slightly different lines, Semino (2008, p. 1) defines metaphor as “the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else.” Applying Semino’s definition, “*incendiary* language” would be considered a metaphor because the vehicle, “*fire*” is used to talk and think about an abstract quality of certain very emotional language” (Ritchie L. David, 2013)

There have been several attempts by different theorists to approach this problem from different perspectives. One of the landmark theories among those approaches is “Conceptual Metaphor theory” by Lakoff and Johnson. Lakoff suggest that our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical one. It signifies that we not only think in terms of metaphors but we perceive and conceptualize our everyday reality in terms of metaphors. They put forward the concept of argument and suggest that we conceptualize the concept of argument in terms of war; for example we execute an activity of argument in following manner:

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked every weak point* in my argument. His criticisms were *right on target*.

I *demolished* his argument.

I've never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

If *you* use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*. He *shot down* all of my arguments.

These statements from our everyday life suggest that we conceive the concept of argument in terms of war.

The metaphoric uses of colours developed diachronically as well as synchronically in every language culture. The meanings are deeply shrouded with vile of cultural layer. There might and might not be some similarities among these metaphoric meanings signified by one and the same colour. These similarities will be totally depended upon the synchronization of their cultural evaluation.

Colour terms as a semiotic entity, capable of producing different meaning in different contexts. These meanings are culturally coded and deviates according to the genesis of these colour terms. colour ‘red’ is associated with a particular set of objects and ideas that exist across different cultures around the world (danger, blood, fire, good luck, joy, fertility and fortune, anger, etc.ⁱⁱ)

Association of a particular colour with a specific meaning is diachronic or synchronic in its nature. It could be a matter of lengthy scholarly debate but one cannot deny the fact that some associated meanings evolved historically while others are recent. Association of meaning or symbol of revolution with colour red can be traced back since not very late but from mid of XIX century whereas association of red with blood is older than revolutionⁱⁱⁱ.

This diachronic symphony of colour with particular meanings provides literature, paintings and visual art with the variant usage of colours to create special visual effects, depicting particular mood and for so many other things. Uses of colours in literature are very important and versatile. It helps author to create particular literary scene with required effect so that the reader can visualize the scene and understand the scenario. Very often an author uses particular colour terms in his/her works. A study of Dostoevsky’s novel “The Doubles” elaborates that it contains only twelve mentions of green (in a briefcase, carpet, armchair, and uniforms), seven of black, three of which are contrasted with white, five of grey, five of red

(excluding references to faces), three of pink, one of crimson, four of sky blue, one of yellow, one of gold^{iv}.

There are two types of meaning that can be produced by words and phrases used for depicting colours. Direct meanings are one which has been used alike by various authors, poets and playwrights. On the other hand there exists a set of meanings that can be categorised as metaphoric. Every language is filled with metaphoric uses of colour terms. Therefore, the expression “metaphoric usage” demands thorough explication.

BASIC COLOUR TERMS IN LANGUAGE

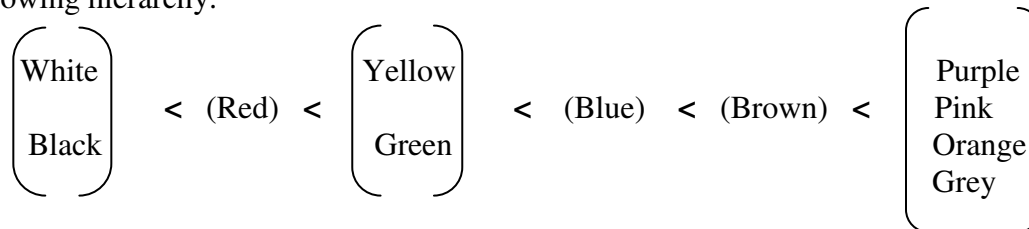
Naming of a colour in any given language as well as meaning that they carry, both direct and symbolic or contextual, deeply rooted in the development of that particular language in the close nexus of its culture. Thus meaning that a certain colour carries is subjected to a wide range of changes across cultures. Talking about basic colours in any language Berlin and Kay’s landmark study that is *Basic Color Terms: Their universality and evolution (1969)* have significant credentials. Berlin and Kay’s study in colour typography points out nature of universalities in colour evolution in any languages. Although subjected to some critical scrutinisation and some defalcations, conclusions of Berlin and Kay by and large fit to the most of language. The conclusions of Berlin and Kay’ were following:

If a language encodes fewer than eleven basic colour categories, then there are strict limitations on which categories may encode. The distributional restriction of colour terms across languages is:

1. All languages contains terms for white and black.
2. If a language contains three terms, then it contains term for red.
3. If a language contains four terms, then it contains terms for either green or yellow (but not both).
4. If a language contains five terms, then it contains terms for both green and yellow.
5. If a language contains six terms then it contains term for blue.
6. If a language contain seven terms, then it contains terms for brown.
7. If a language contains eight or more terms, then it contains a terms for purple, pink, orange, grey, or some combination of these.

(Berlin and Kay, 1969)

These rules for the possible set for colour in any language comply with the diachronic hierarchy, according to their order of existence in any language. Berlin and Kay suggested following hierarchy:



Corbett and Morgan suggested that according to rules provided by Berlin and Kay, the hierarchy also more or less conforms to the lexical structure of language. In their study of basic colour terms in Russian language they demonstrated that “the Berlin and Kay hierarchy, which

made claims about the possible sets of colour terms and therefore about the order in which languages acquire colour terms, is clearly reflected in the lexical structure of a language which acquired a color term for at least ten of Berlin and Kay's eleven categories". (Corbett and Morgan, 1987). The conclusions of the study by Corbett and Morgan were based upon the survey of the frequency of the occurrence of these colours in Russian language: terms higher up the hierarchy occur more frequently than do those lower down, and have greater derivational possibilities. The study by Corbett and Morgan has its limitations as per number of examples it scrutinizes and most importantly it does not cross checks its conclusions with any other languages. However, I have tried to bring in examples from Russian language, because a comparative study expands the horizon of research and thus gives a much clearer view than the study done in a single domain.

Study of basic colour terms in Russian language has been a case of great curiosity for the scholars due to its certain fluctuations from the Berlin and Kay's model and a few bone of contentions in numbering the basic colours in Russian language. Some of the scholars believe that there are eleven basic colours in Russian language which include two term for blue: *goluboj* (light blue) and *sinij* (dark blue) but do not include purple as a basic colour; on the other hand some argues that Russian language has 12 basic colours that includes :

Belyj 'white', *cernyj* 'black', *krasnyj* 'red', *zelenyj* 'green', *zeltyj* 'yellow', *sinij* 'dark blue', *goluboj* 'light blue', *koricnevyj* 'brown', *fiolentovj* 'purple', *rozovyj* 'pink', *oranzevyj* 'orange', *seryj* 'grey'.

Basic colours used in Hindi language are following:

safed 'white', *kala* 'black', *lal* 'red', *hara* 'green', *pila* 'yellow', *nila* 'blue', *bhura* 'brown', *gulabi* 'pink', *naragi* 'orange'.

In Hindi the black colour is used in the following contexts by **Musnhi Premchand** in his novel "**Karmbhumi**":

- वह एक क्षण चुप रही। शायद देखिती कि डॉक्टर साहब क्या जवाब देते हैं। जब डॉक्टर साहब कुछ न बोले तो उसने ऊंचे, कांपते स्वर में लोगों से कहा-बहनो और भाइयो आपने मेरा जो सत्कार किया है, उसके लिए आपकी कहां तक बड़ाई करूं- आपने एक अभागिनी को तार दिया। अब मुझे जाने दीजिए। मेरा जुलूस निकालने के लिए हठ न कीजिए। मैं इसी योग्य हूं कि अपना काला मुंह छिपाए किसी कोने में पड़ी रहूं। इस योग्य नहीं हूं कि मेरी दुर्गयित का माहात्म्य किया जाए।

(*Vah ek kshan chup rahi. Shaayad dekhiti ki daktar saahab kya javaab dete hain. Jab daktar saahab kuchh na bole to usane oonche, kaaanpate swar mean logoan se kaha - bahano aur bhaaiyo aapane mera jo satkaar kiya hai, usake liye aapaki kahaan tak badaai karooan - aapane ek abhaaigani ko taar diya. Ab muzhe jaane dijiye. Mera juloos nikaalane ke liye hath na kijiae. Main isi yogya hooan ki apana kaala muanh chhipaaye kisi kone mean padi rahooan. Is yogya nahin hooan ki meri durgayit ka maahaatmy kiya jaae*).

In Hindi Language **काला मुंह** (kala muh) very often signifies one, who has done something bad and is not able to face the society. One should not confuse this with the similar but all together different idiom **मुह काला कर के आना** (muh kala kar ke aana), which is an abusive expression and means ‘to have an illicit relationship’.

- सहसा लाला धानीराम खड़े होकर भराई हुई आवाज में बोले-सज्जनो, जिस भवन को एक-एक कंकड़ जोड़-जोड़कर पचास साल से बना रहा था, वह आज एक क्षण में ढह गया, ऐसा ढह गया है कि उसकी नींव का पता नहीं। अच्छे-से-अच्छे मसाले दिए, अच्छे-से-अच्छे कारीगर लगाए, अच्छे-से अच्छे नक्शे बनवाए, भवन तैयार हो गया था, केवल कलश बाकी था। उसी वक्त एक तूफान आता है और उस विशाल भवन को इस तरह उड़ा ले जाता है, मानो इस का ढेर हो। मालूम हुआ की वह भवन केवल मेरे जीवन का एक स्वप्न था। **सुनहरा** स्वप्न कहिए, चाहे **काला** स्वप्न कहिये पर था स्वप्न ही। वह स्वप्न भंग हो गया-भंग हो गया।

(Sahsa lala Dhani Ram khade hokar bharayi huyi aawaz main bole-sajjano, jis bhawan ko ek-ek kankad jod-jodkar pachas sal se bana raha tha, wah aaj ek kshan me dah gya.aisa dhah gya hai ki uski niv ka pata nahi.Achhe – ache masale diye, ache- se-achhe karigar lagaaye, ache-se -achhe nakse banwaye, bhawan taiyar ho gya tha, kewal kalash baki tha. Usi wakt ek tufan ata hai aur us vishal bhawan ko is tarah uda le jata hai, mano thas ka der ho. Malumhua ki wah bhawan kewal mere jeewan ka ek swapan tha. Sunhara swapan kahiye, chahe kala kahiye par tha swapan hi. Wah swapan bhang ho gya- bhang ho gya).

In the above sentence **सुनहरा** (sunehra – golden) and **काला** (kala – black) have been used as opposite to each other. Here ‘sunehra swapan’ signifies a good fortune and ‘kala swapan’ signifies a nightmare.

colour ‘black’ is used in different meanings by **Gorky** in his novel “**Mother**”:

- Когда им жилось трудно под властью царей, они науськивали **черный** народ на царскую власть, а когда народ поднимался и вырывал эту власть из рук короля, человечки обманом забирали ее в свои руки и разгоняли народ по конурам, если же он спорил с ними — избивали его сотнями и тысячами.

(Kogda im zhilos' troodno pod vlast'yoo tsaryey, oni naoos'kivali chyerniy narod na tsarskooyoo vlast', a kogda narod podnimalsya i virival etoo vlast' iz rook korolya, chyelovyechki obmanom zabirali yeye v svoi rooki i razgonyali narod po konooram, yesli zhye on sporil s nimi — izbivali yego sotnyami i tisyachami).

*When life was hard for them under the domination of the czars, they would incite the **common people** against the ruler; and when the people arose and wrested the power from him, these little creatures got it into their own hands by deceit, and drove the people off to their holes; and if the people remonstrated, they killed them by the hundreds and thousands(339).^v*

Here ‘черный народ’ (chyerniy narod, black people) signifies common man, peasants and artisan. It’s an outdated phrase. Perhaps during old days черный (black) has been used as a racial comment in reference to the slaves or black peoples. Subsequently it’s traveled its way through to refer common masses as a derogatory term. However, here black is used in its figurative meaning, signifying something bad (as a derogatory term).

- Заревел гудок, поглотив своим **черным** звуком людской говор. Толпа дрогнула, сидевшие встали, на минуту все замерло, насторожилось, и много лиц побледнело. (*Zaryevyel goodok, poglotiv svoim chyernim zvoikom lyoods koy govor. Tolpa drognoola, sidyevshiye vstali, na minootoo vsye zamyerlo, nastorozhilos', i mnogo lits poblyednyelo.* *The whistle blew, drowning the talk of the crowd. The people started. Those sitting rose to their feet. For a moment the silence of death prevailed; all became watchful, and many faces grew pale (442).*^{vi})

Here ‘черный звук’ (black voice) signifies a very loud and harsh voice that absorbs or deafens every other voice around. Black is used here in its figurative meaning of dark, having a bad or evil aura. Present pair [черный (black) + звук (voice)] does not common to Russian language and does not occur very often.

- Он сел писать. Она прибирала на столе, поглядывая на него, видела, как дрожит перо в его руке, покрывая бумагу рядами **черных** слов. Иногда кожа на шее у него вздрагивала, он откидывал голову, закрыв глаза, у него дрожал подбородок. Это волновало ее. (*On syel pisat'. Ona pribirala na stolye, poglyadivaya na nyego, vidyela, kak drozhit pyero v yego rookye, pokrivaya boomagoo ryadami chyernih slov. Inogda kozha na shyeye oo nyego vzdragivala, on otkidival golovoo, zakriv glaza, oo nyego drozhal podborodok. Eto volnovalo yeo.* *Nikolay sat down to write, while the mother put the table in order, from time to time casting <http://booksiread.org> 805 a look at him. She saw how his pen trembled in his hand. It traveled along the paper in straight lines. Sometimes the skin on his neck quivered; he threw back his head and shut his eyes. All this moved her (804-805).*)

However ‘черное слово’ (black word) very often signifies bad language or abusive words but here in these lines this combination does not have any figurative meaning. Black is used here in its direct meaning and signifies simply words written in black ink.

There are a set of colours in any culture but the meanings that they reflect are quite different, for example in India and some parts of Asia white is a colour of mourning but in Europe it is the colour of purity, a bride wears a white wedding dress for her wedding. One can conclude from that these meanings are not inherent with the colours but their roots and explanations lie deep within the socio-cultural or socioeconomic development of a particular society.

Endnote:

ⁱ There are some other form of figurative language such as **Metonym**: Metonym refers generally to the use of a word to reference another closely related concept; **Overstatement and understatement**: Overstatement (hyperbole) is sometimes used for emphasis ('I have a *million* things to do today') and sometimes for ironic effect as, from a conversation among a group of scientists about communicating with non-scientists, "If we were better communicators we'd be *swimming in money*." Understatement is often used ironically, as in 'we have a *little* problem here,' where understatement is combined with the metaphor; **Idiom**: Idioms, expressions that are commonly used within a speech community to express a consistent idea or experience, represent a special case. See Metaphor and other forms of Figurative Language in Metaphor by L. David Ritchie, Cambridge University Press, 2013. p. 14-20.

ⁱⁱ Different cross culture meanings and symbols of colours has been discussed by Denise Turner in his article Cross – culture Color: deep-Rooted Associations Shape Reaction to Color.

ⁱⁱⁱ In his study of "The Tale of Igers' campaign" Dimitrij Cizevskij described following usage of different colours: The colours are very vivid; they are partly real and partly symbolic. The epithets "golden" and "silver" are very frequent; everything referring to princes is connected with gold – their helmets, saddles, stirrups, arrows, thrones, the roof of the castle, and so forth. The epithet "red" is also frequent; the shields of Russian army and the standards are red. The variant – blood red- gives the epithet a horrific shade: a blood-red presages defeat, "blood-red grass" is an indication of a bloody battle, "blood-red wine" is a metaphor for blood; other variants are "purple" and "fiery". The black colour is used in connection with obscure and evil things: crows are black, so are clouds, the soil after battle, loosened by horses' hooves, and the shroud in Svjatoslavs' ominous dream. Blue is of course, employed in connection with the sea, but sometimes it appears as an ominous symbol: "blue wine" and "blue lightning". "Silver" is again a positive symbol: the "silver shore" of the river Donec, which helped Igor in his flight, the venerable silver hair of Prince Svjatoslav.... The grey colour (like its variants *sizyj* and *busyi*) has no special significance; the wolf and the eagle are grey. History of Russian Literature : from the eleventh century to the end of Baroque, p. 120

^{iv} See Jacques Catteau, Dostoyevsky and the process of literary creation, Cambridge University Press, 1989. p. 399

^v English translation of *Mother* Retrieved from <http://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/gorkymother.pdf>

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