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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Color Symbolism in Islamic Book Paintings

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

By
Imane M. Sadek Abaza

Under the supervision of Dr. Bernard O’Kane

12/2017

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Introduction

Color symbolism in Islamic art has been one of my main points of interest when I started my masters. The question of why artists employed these specific colors to their works of art has been haunting me since I started noticing the predominant blue in the domes of Persian mosques or the pearl white and sandstone red in Indian architecture. I was waiting for an answer when I embarked on my studies but as I dove deeper into this field I became more puzzled and the magnitude of my curiosity increased. Most of the articles I read and the books I studied discussed colors from a purely aesthetics angle. It was on rare occasions when I read an article that addressed color symbolism in Islam as a subject of interest. It was quite frustrating since everything we studied in Islamic art had a purpose and a meaning for its employment such as forms, shapes, calligraphic bands or iconography. Why not color? If Muslims artists invested that much time in their studies of geometry and math to come up with functional purpose for their artistic creations, how come the employment of colors was haphazard or based solely on aesthetic value? The choice of my topic was at first more optimistic in its magnitude; it was intended to cover color symbolism in architecture, book paintings and portable arts. As I started my research I was advised by my supervisor to narrow it down and focus only on one element. Since this is considered a new area of research, in order to prove my theory, I would need to present a very detailed study of each area which would be impossible to achieve in a master degree considering the time limitation. For time constrains, this thesis would only focus on color symbolism in Islamic book paintings.

The research will be based on theoretical analysis of primary sources such as Quran, *hadith* and Sufi writings, and their practical interpretation in book paintings. The metaphorical use of color in Islamic poetry and Sufi treaties has been long established, hence relying on these literary sources constitutes a logical starting point. The interpretation of the

paintings will be primarily based on the following texts: Nizami's *Hayft Paykar*, different account of the *mi'raj*, *hadiths*, and studies of Muslim Scholars such as al-Ghazali, Ibn Arabi and Ibn Sina among others. Another important source of information for this study is the recent research by scholars such as Soucek, Schimmel, Cross, Blair and Bloom. They have contributed to the study of color symbolism in Islamic Art and their research has brought this field of study into the spotlight. Chapter one focuses on a study of the primary sources discussed earlier in relation to color symbolism. Chapter two examines the meaning of color in the Islamic tradition with reference to the different color theories developed by Muslim and contemporary scholars. Chapters three to five analyze Islamic book paintings in light of the Quran, *hadith* and Sufi writings. The focus will be on some selected paintings revolving around three main themes; the *mi'raj*, *Haft Paykar* and *Majnun* and *Layla*; chapter three discusses the *mi'raj* theme and prophetic depiction in book painting, chapter four explores the color symbolism in the tales of the seven pavilions in Nizami's *Haft Paykar*. Chapter five examines the depiction of Qays or *Majnun* in different manuscripts. Interpreting the religious, poetic and fictional type of narrative in relation to book paintings will shed some light on the importance of color symbolism in Islamic art in general and not only limited to Sufi themed paintings. The manuscripts chosen varies in their area of production from Iran and Central Asia to Turkey and Baghdad. The variation of the geographical location of the paintings are considered strong supporting evidence in the presence of color symbolism in Islamic art. Of course the main focus would be on Persian manuscripts since manuscripts production reached its peak in that geographical location coupled with the time constraints of not being able to display the entire selection of my research.

Chapter 1

Literature Review

Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. The example of his light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star, lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire.

Light upon light. Allah guides to his light whom He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is knowing of all things. (24:35)

But as for the infidels, [they are] like darkness within an unfathomable sea which is covered by waves, upon which are waves, over which are clouds - darkness, some of them upon others. When one puts out his hand [therein], he can hardly see it. And he to whom Allah has not granted light - for him there is no light. (24:40).

Light plays a central role in the Quran. The contrast between light and dark demonstrates a pivotal conception in the Islamic faith. It is the difference between knowledge and ignorance, faith and infidelity, and right and wrong. As depicted by al-Ghazali, God is the source of the ultimate light, and by seeing that light a person reaches a state of revelation since only the faithful see that light.¹ The ignorant or unfaithful live in darkness without the light of God or faith to guide them through life. Considering the importance of this concept in the Islamic faith, colors as the depiction of this light in different historic time periods must be considered as equally important. Muslims across the centuries dedicated a great deal of attention to colors, manifested in their marvelous works of art. Although the use of colors is a topic many scholars paid some attention to, it should be visited from a different angle.²

¹ Mahmoud, "Color and The Mystics," 102-6.

² Scholars such as Ebba Koch, Sheila Canby, Sheila Blair and Jonathon Bloom discussed color in their writings but very few addressed the symbolic meaning of colors.

Usually colors are mentioned in a purely aesthetic or descriptive context to depict the range of artistic or architectural decoration in a work of art. Some scholars talk about colors in terms of availability of resources or from a utilitarian point of view. Articles or books that discuss color symbolism in Islamic art are rare. Perhaps this is because the use of colors was indeed a practical function of beautifying buildings, objects or paintings, or perhaps it was neglected based solely on misconception. Early writings about Islamic art were mostly done by foreigners who did not consider the doctrine of the Islamic faith as a possible source of this aesthetic value of the work of art in question. In recent years, scholars in the field started to pay attention to color symbolism in Islamic art such as Samir Mahmoud in his article “Color and The Mystics: Light, Beauty, and the Spiritual Quest,” in *And Diverse Are Their Hues: Color in Islamic Art and Culture*, and Roland Michaud in his book *Colour and Symbolism in Islamic Architecture: Eight Centuries of the Tile-Maker’s Art*. It is still an obscure area to many and more research is needed to reach a solid conclusion whether patrons, artists and craftsmen deliberately employed these colorful arrays of decoration to deliver a certain message to their audience. In my research I will try to explore the question of whether color symbolism really existed in Islamic art. In order to fully examine this, one must first understand what colors meant to Muslims and how color theory developed in the Islamic world. One should start with Greek scholars and trace how their theories were adopted by Muslim scientists and Sufi writers such as al-Ghazali, al-Kindi and Ibn Arabi. The development, similarities and differences found will explain how some Muslims reached their own understanding of colors and how it affected their art work.

Light and color theory

Light and optical phenomena have been the focus of many studies in the ancient world. Starting with the Greek and until modern times, the study of color, light and optics

have attracted many scholars. To understand the relationship between the object and the observer is a complex issue. How we process light and how we see objects and images is an interesting phenomenon that has puzzled both scientists and artists. David Lindberg refers to the visual theory of the atomists such as Democritus and their quest to understand the connection of the visual object with the observer and how the images are reflected in the cornea: “How the soul of the observer and the visible object make contact.”³

According to Aristotle (d. 322 BCE) color and light are eminently connected. Without light and the transparent nature of the space between an object and the observer, nothing would be visible. Light has a vital role in the transmission of colors and hence the formation of images in the eye of the beholder.⁴ The medium, being transparent due to the effect of light, is what produces color.⁵ “The color of the object, in Ptolemy’s theory of vision performed the same function as it had for Aristotle and soon would for Galen (d. 210 AD). Color, according to Ptolemy (d. 168 CE), is an inherent property of bodies, a quality, which produces a modification (*passio*) in the visual cone. Color is the proper object of vision, and it is through patterns of color and their effect on the visual radiation that other sensible characteristics of bodies (shape, for example) are perceived. However as in the theories of Plato (d. 348/347 BCE), Aristotle, and Galen, color cannot affect the visual cone (or the transparent medium in the case of Aristotle) without the presence and cooperation of external light.⁶ Early philosophers considered light essential to the existence of colors which is a concept that Muslim scholars adopted since it was not contradictory to their faith. Actually it was a cornerstone in their perception of light as the source of all creation, which is linked to

³ Lindberg, *Theories of Visions*, 3.

⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵ Kirchner, “Color Theory,” 6.

⁶ Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*, 16.

their belief of God being the ultimate source of light and hence the source of everything in existence.

Muslim philosophers and scholars were greatly affected by earlier research on optics and light theories. Abu Yusuf Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (d. 873) was one of the earliest Muslim philosophers who were greatly influenced by Greek scholars in his pursuit of optical studies. Al-Kindi was born in the late eighth century CE in al-Kufa.⁷ During the ninth century, the translation, assimilation and study of Greek texts reached its peak under the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad. Al-Kindi was working under the patronage of al-Ma'mun, al-Mu'tasim and al-Wathiq to oversee the translation of many of these texts.⁸ He believed in the importance of studying ancient theories and findings in order to move forward and build on previous experience. He had an open mind and his theories were greatly based on the studies of Aristotle. Al-Kindi believed that color is produced by the object by blocking light, which rejected Aristotle's theory about the medium being the source of color.⁹ Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1039) and Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi (d. 1311) later adopted al-Kindi's views and it was the basis of their further development on the theory. Ibn al-Haytham was the first to consider light as the object of sight instead of just a medium.¹⁰ In his book *Kitab al-manazir*, Ibn al-Haytham discussed how objects of the same color appear differently depending on the intensity of light falling on them. Thus he came up with a different role for light, instead of being the medium of transparency, it actually controlled the intensity of the color of the object. Kamal al-Din al-Farisi (d. 1318) further discussed this theory in his commentary *Kitab tanqih al-manazir* on Ibn al-Haytham's *Kitab al-manazir*. Al-Farisi came up with a more developed theory based

⁷ Ibid, 18.

⁸ Ibid, 18.

⁹ Kirchner, "Color Theory," 5.

¹⁰ Ibid, 6.

on Ibn al-Haytham's notions, which transformed the role of light even further to a more vital role rather than being a catalyst. According to al-Farisi color in sunlight differed from color in moonlight and thus he concluded that color does not reside in the object itself or else it would not differ according to illumination. For him "color is present in reality and is caused by the light falling on an object."¹¹

In discussing color order, Aristotle developed a one dimensional color series in which all colors could be produced by mixing white and black (*De Sensu*).¹² Ptolemy agreed with him, as did Ibn Suwar ibn al-Khammar (d. 1030) and Ibn Rushd (d. 1198).¹³ It was Ibn Sina (d. 1037) who extended Aristotle's theory in his influential book *Kitab al-Shifa* that was translated into Latin as *Liber De Anima*.¹⁴ According to Ibn Sina, instead of Aristotle's one-dimensional color order, he developed a two-dimensional one, in which white has three different paths to transform itself into black; through increasing the darkness of grey, red or blue. For Ibn Sina the three different paths will produce different colors along the way to reach black.¹⁵ Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 1274), who was the director of the Astronomical Observatory in Maragha, was greatly influenced Ibn Sina's theory on color order. He further investigated his notion to come up with five different paths from white to black; yellow, red, green, blue and grey.¹⁶ Al-Tusi discussed the different tints/shades of colors in between white and black while passing through the five different distinguished paths. It was not stated

¹¹ Ibid, 6.

¹² Ibid, 6.

¹³ Ibid, 7.

¹⁴ Ibid, 7.

¹⁵ Ibid, 8.

¹⁶ Ibid, 9.

clearly since the distinction between shades and hues was not fully developed yet.¹⁷ It is worth noting that the same concept was discussed earlier by Nishaburi in 1196 in his writing about minerals. Nishaburi discussed that by mixing blue and yellow, different hues of green are obtained.¹⁸ Before Nishaburi, during the 10th century, Muhammed b. Umayl also wrote about color mixing. He was generally in agreement with Aristotle's color order of mixing black and white to obtain different colors except on rare occasions, such as his discussion of obtaining green by mixing blue and yellow, which challenged Aristotle's theory. It was not until the 16th century that this idea was fully developed by Scaliger, hence Aristotle's theory regarding color order was rejected. A clear distinction between hues and shades was established. Scaliger stated that by mixing white and black only different shades of grey were obtained and not different hues of colors.¹⁹

Islamic artists considered the study of colors and pigments as a vital part of their artistic creation. They published their color recipes such as the Zirid prince Mu'izz b. Badis' *Umdat al-kuttab* or *Staff of Scribes* (c. 1025), Teflisi's *Bayan al-sana'at* (1206), and Muhammad al-Marrakushi's *al-Azhar fi 'amal al-ahbar* (1241). In these writings, detailed recipes of color preparation, mixing and blending were discussed. The recipes were based on practical experience of the artists rather than mere theoretical concepts. They were considered a valuable source of information for artists and craftsmen which proves that ink making, pigment development and color production were as vital as other crafts in the Islamic world. Al-Tusi, Nishaburi and Kashani were ones of the first to describe a limited hue scale.²⁰ It is worth noting that Islamic theories of color mixing and color orders are closer to the modern

¹⁷ Ibid, 9.

¹⁸ Ibid, 9.

¹⁹ Ibid, 10.

²⁰ Ibid, 14.

theories than the ones developed by earlier Greek scholars. Muslims scholars contributed a great deal to the study of color theories and optics.

Aside from the scientific breakthrough of Islamic scholars, the spiritual importance of color and light was of great significance in the Islamic world. Panayotova discussed the minimal attention western illuminated manuscripts before the 1400s received in regard to color theories, optics and painting practices.²¹ Similarly the discussion of color theories and optics in early medieval miniatures was neglected by art historians. According to Panayotova, paintings produced before the 1400s were not given much attention except those that were considered as forerunners to Renaissance paintings; these paintings were only considered in order to analyze the different influences and developments in the study of the works of art produced in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries.²² “Most overviews of the discourse between the visual arts, colour theories and optical science have concentrated on monumental painting since the fifteenth century, briefly glancing back at Antiquity.”²³

She surveyed the Aristotelian theories of color and the emergence of the new discipline, known as *perspectiva*, developed in the 13th century from translating the Greek and Arabic commentaries on Aristotle work.²⁴ *Perspectiva* is the synthesis of earlier studies on color, light and optics developed over the years by Greco-Roman, Christian and Arabic scholars such as Euclid, Aristotle, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd and al-Kindi.²⁵ These earlier studies shaped the works of contemporary scholars such as Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253), Albertus Magnus (d. 1280) and Robert Bacon (d. 1292). Reading their writings one would be reminded of Sufi

²¹ Panayotova, “Colour Theory,” 306.

²² Ibid, 305.

²³ Ibid, 305.

²⁴ Ibid, 307.

²⁵ Ibid, 308.

theories about color and light as they have the same essence. Bacon stated in his book *perspectiva* written in c. 1263: “We take special delight in vision because light and colour have singular beauty, exceeding that of the other things that are conveyed to our senses.”²⁶

Grosseteste’s statement “colour is light embodied in a diaphanous medium” bear a great resemblance in context to al-Ghazali’s theory developed in late 11th/ early 12th centuries.²⁷

Al-Ghazali interpreted God as the absolute source of light and color being a manifestation of that light.²⁸

Following the same school of thought as al-Ghazali was Ibn 'Arabi. His full name was Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Ali Muhyi al-Din al-Hatimi al-Andalusi (1164 – 1240) and he was born in Murcia in South-Eastern Spain during the Islamic rule of the Almohads (1151 – 1212) and died in Damascus. He lived in Seville and travelled to Mecca, Syria, Iraq and Asia, which caused his exposure to a wide array of cultures and different school of thoughts, such as Zoroastrian, Hebrew and Christian theology, Greek philosophy and mathematics. His wide exposure shaped, to a great deal, his un-orthodox doctrine. He was a distinguished scholar during his time and wrote many books; the most famous being *Fusus al-hikam (Gems of Philosophy)* and *al-Futuh al-makkiyya (Meccan Revelations)*.²⁹ According to Ibn 'Arabi, the first step in the acquisition of knowledge is sensory perception. He considered light as the essence of all senses. All our knowledge is perceived through the senses by apprehending light.³⁰ He believed that beauty is the highest level of divine existence. For him love is the ultimate stage of worship and since we can not love God if we did not consider him beautiful,

²⁶ Ibid, 305.

²⁷ Ibid, 308; Gairdner, “*Niche for Lights*,” 3.

²⁸ Mahmoud, “Color and The Mystics,” 102.

²⁹ Landau, *The Philosophy of Ibn 'Arabi*, 15-16.

³⁰ Ibid, 36.

thus the apprehension of beauty is essential in the quest for the divine.³¹ Since God is the ultimate source of beauty as the creator of all being, considering this aesthetic value as important in the spiritual path as knowledge, goodness and love should not come as a surprise. The Islamic faith with all its different schools of thought (i.e. Sufi, Shi'a or Orthodox Sunni) celebrates beauty as a reflection of God in the material world.

Contemporary study of color symbolism in Islamic art

Muslim theories about light and color were used as the foundation for many modern theories but they were rarely discussed as being significant in the creation of art and architecture during their time. Contemporary scholars in the field treated color and light as merely of decorative value supplementing buildings and art objects. It was only recently that art historians and researchers started to pay more attention to the subject as an important field of study. Annemarie Schimmel and Priscilla P. Soucek were among the earliest scholars to discuss this topic in the early 1990s. Schimmel in her research discussed the significance of color in Sufi writings and the meaning of different colors in Muslim culture.³² White, red and black were the main three colors for Sufis. She linked the importance of these three basic colors to verses in the Quran and portrayed the spiritual meaning of each of them; white being the color of purity and goodness while black was the color of evil. According to her, black was sometimes used to describe the light that comes from not seeing as in the case of ecstasy, where a Sufi may experience a state of enlightenment. Blue had a negative connotation expressing mourning and asceticism. Red was always linked to energy, power and blood while green was perceived as the color of life; it is linked in the Quran to paradise

³¹ Ibid, 64-66.

³² Schimmel and Soucek, "Color," 46.

and was the Prophet's favorite color. For Sufis green depicted a high stage on the mystical path. "It is the color that is reached when a Sufi has passed through the "black light" and emerges at the emerald mountain, the symbol of divine proximity and eternal duration, *baqa'*."³³ According to Soucek, the scheme of color symbolism in Islamic art was based on astrological references as she relied in her argument on Biruni's book *Kitab al-tafhim*. Each color was linked to a specific heavenly body which can also be seen in Nizami's poem *Haft Paykar* or the seven portraits.³⁴ In this poem, Barham Gur visits seven different princesses during the seven days of the week, where each one of them was situated in different colored pavilion representing the different stages in human life or on a more spiritual level, the seven different stages of the mystical path.³⁵ While color symbolism was prominent in poetry and Sufi writings, it was less relevant when discussing art and architecture; linking what Muslim scholars believed with the actual works of art produced by Muslim artists is challenging since there are few relevant literary sources on the subject. Most of the analysis must be based on speculation and drawing connections between what is written and what was created during the same time period.

The third biennial Hamad bin Khalifa Symposium on Islamic Art, *And Diverse Are Their Hues: Color in Islamic Art and Culture* was an important initiative to shed light on a rarely tapped topic in the field. It discussed the importance of color in variable contexts. The symposium was sponsored by Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) School of the Arts, VCU Qatar, and the Qatar Foundation. It was organized by Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, two of the most prominent scholars in the field. The fourth symposium, *God is the Light of*

³³ Ibid, 46-50.

³⁴ Ibid, 46-50.

³⁵ Bloom and Blair, "Color in Islamic Art," 23.

the Heaven and Earth, complemented the previous one in the sense that it discussed light in Islamic Art. Together both of these symposia explored an area that has long been neglected by scholars and will be discussed in more details in later chapters. In the introduction of *And Diverse Are Their Hues*, Sheila Blair and Jonathon Bloom discussed the many theories of early Muslim scholars and color symbolism in scientific, philosophical, literary and mystical writings. In their conclusion they highlighted a crucial point which is the discontinuity between theory and practice. They argued that there was a huge gap between the richness of the first in comparison to the lack of any references to the existence of the same level of sophistication in the second. This study aims to fill this gap.

Chapter 2

The Meaning of Colors in Islam

“Color is the touch of the eye, music to the deaf, a word out of darkness.”³⁶

Color terminology

Arabic is an immensely rich language. In studying the meaning of color in Islamic art, a deep understanding of the meaning of the words used to describe certain colors is essential. The attribution of the terms used has cultural and linguistic origins that define their meaning. Comprehending these terms in their original context might shed light on their symbolic meaning for early Muslims. According to Blair and Bloom, there were five basic colors in pre-Islamic Arabic: *abyad* (white/ light), *aswad* (black/ dark), *ahmar* (red/ brown), *asfar* (yellow/ beige), and *akhdar* (green/ blue).³⁷ Early Muslims did not differentiate between color and hue, thus white could have meant light and black could have meant dark.³⁸ Brent Berlin and Paul Kay developed a theory about color terminology in 1969. They came up with five different stages of the development of languages. A stage I language will only have two terms referring to colors; white and black (or light/ dark). A stage II language will have these two basic terms in addition to a third color, which is always red. A stage III language will have a fourth color added; yellow or green. A stage IV language will have five color terms by adding the missing color from the previous stage, whether it was yellow or green. According to these five basic terms attributed to colors, Arabic is considered a stage IV language. A stage V language would have a distinct differentiation between blue and green, which was

³⁶ Simpson, “Why My Name is Red,” 273.

³⁷ Bloom and Blair, *Color in Islamic Art*, 11.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 11.

lacking in pre-Islamic Arabic.³⁹

The use of color terms in the Quran is mostly descriptive. The symbolic meaning associated with colors is derived from the different cultural and mystical connotations in the pre-Islamic world. The Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the early seventh century CE with a certain message. In order to reach the Arabs during that period, it had to speak their own language and to address their beliefs and cultural norms. The use of these particular color terms in the Quran triggered certain thoughts and emotions related to their ideologies. These particular color associations conveyed the needed imagery or meaning in the clearest most comprehensible form. This is a possible explanation for the use of this narrow range of colors – known to the Arabs during the time of the revelation – in the Quran.

According to Richardson, some colors had negative connotations in pre-Islamic Arabia; these negative associations changed over the years. She discussed the origin of the color blue (*azraq*) and according to her findings, the root *z-r-q* in early Arabic was usually associated with bad omens or evil, sometimes meaning blind or dead. She based her analysis on the Quran, hadith and the various commentaries on both. She also explored some literary sources which supported her theory and proved the shift of the meaning of the word over the years. Since the Arabs did not differentiate between color and hue, *azraq* could have meant the color blue, a description of the hue (i.e. shiny), or both. In the Quran, there is one mention of the color blue: “the day the horn will be blown, and we will gather the criminals that day, blue-eyed” (20:102). Richardson believes that blue in this context means shiny-eyed. In her article she referred to Wolfdietrich Fischer’s research in regard to the root *z-r-q*, which meant shine or luster in ancient Arabic.⁴⁰ ‘Abdallah b. ‘Abbas (d. 61/687) explained the term *zurq* in

³⁹ Richardson, “Blue and Green Eyes,” 16.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 16.

the Quran as being blind. Al-Farra' (d. 207/822) had two distinct explanations for the term *azraq*, blind or thirsty.⁴¹ In the Quran there is supporting evidence for these two explanations: “We will gather them on the Day of Resurrection on their faces—blind, dumb and deaf” (17:97) and “And we will drive the guilty to hell in thirst” (19:86). In the commentaries on the Quran, thirst is linked to the change of color of the eye to blue. Al-Zaggag (d. 311/923) was the first to claim that notion and al-Wahidi (d. 468/ 1076) agreed with him.⁴² Also others like al-Tabari (d. 310/923) and al-Samani (d. 211/ 827) commented on the effect of dehydration on the eye.⁴³ Yuḥanna b. Masawayh (d. 243/857) described *al-zurqa* or the glaucoma as a disease resulted from the change of level of the albuminoid.⁴⁴ It is also linked to the difficulty of respiration since the lack of oxygen causes the skin to turn blue. The use of the color *azraq* in this context in the Quran served to show the suffering of the unfaithful. The Day of Judgment is also described as the day where sinners would have black faces from sorrow and guilt while the faithful would have white faces; “when faces will be white or black” (3:106). The association of white with purity and faith was strongly contrasted to the use of black to describe the darkness of the sinful soul. Like black, *azraq* had an evil connotation in the Quran.

It was not until the Umayyad rule that blue in Arabic started to change in meaning. The expansion of Islam outside of the Arabic Peninsula caused inter-racial marriage, which changed the physical characteristics of Muslims. According to Richardson, this alteration caused a shift in how Muslims perceived the color blue. Pro-Umayyad Abbasid writers such

⁴¹ Ibid, 18.

⁴² Ibid, 19.

⁴³ Ibid, 19.

⁴⁴ A simple protein found in the lens of the eye.

as al-Jahiz and Ibn Abi al-Dunya linked blue eyes with more desirable attributes. They tried to move away from the blue-eyed stigma that was prevalent during the pre- and early Islamic periods and “to embrace this feature as authentically Arab.”⁴⁵ Some skepticism might arise to whether this is considered the real reason behind this alteration in the meaning of the color blue since it is based mainly on circumstantial evidence.

Gems and colors

Gems were luxurious decorative elements in pre-Islamic Arabia and later in the Muslim world. Associating colors with gem stones was common as descriptive terms; for instance, the use of the term turquoise or *firuz* to refer to a light blue-green color. Al-Kindi discussed qualities of stones such as their susceptibility to color loss when exposed to oil. Al-Tifashi (d. 651/ 1253) claimed that Persian kings used to wear the turquoise stone to deflect the danger of death (by land or water).⁴⁶ According to Ibn al-Akfani (d. 749/1348) *firuz* is also referred to as the stone of victory or *ḥajar al-ghalaba*. Combining these different explanations and references given to turquoise, it is clear that the same association was prevalent in the Islamic world until the present time; it is still considered as an amulet against the evil eye.

Another gem worth discussing is the cornelian (also spelled carnelian) or *akika*. It is a red semi-precious stone used in ornamental decoration for jewelry and in mosaics. According to superstitious beliefs it had the power to sooth the heart in battle or to give courage.⁴⁷ According to Schimmel red is associated with energy, strength and blood. It was also

⁴⁵ Richardson, “Blue and Green Eyes,” 27.

⁴⁶ Ruska and Plessner, “*Firūzādī*.”

⁴⁷ J. Hell, “*Akīk*.”

ascribed to the state of divine presence in Sufi belief. A red mantled Sufi is one in a divine state.⁴⁸

The emerald or *zumurrud* is a green gemstone known for its talismanic properties in ancient periods. Al-Tifashi and Ibn al-Akfani, among others, cataloged the different applications for emerald during their times; it was used to strengthen eyesight, protect against epilepsy, poison and leprosy, to repel venomous animals, and to strengthen the teeth and the stomach if held in the mouth. Al-Tifashi stated that “it can be hung on the upper arm and neck for talismanic purposes, and on the thigh of a woman in labour for speeding up child delivery.”⁴⁹ In pre-Islamic culture, the emerald was also believed to have healing powers and to be able to blind serpents and dragons.⁵⁰ According to Leaman, pilgrims sometimes used to paint the door of their houses green or wear green hats or scarves to indicate that they had completed their pilgrimage. It was believed to be the Prophet’s favorite color.⁵¹ He also discussed the importance of the color green in Sufism as representing life itself.⁵² In the Sufi tradition green is the color associated with a higher stage on the mystical path. Thus the use of the color green to symbolize peace, life and prosperity fitted within the cultural norms at the time.

The pearl, also known as *durr* or *lu’lu’* is one of the most precious gems and most valuable for Muslims and non-Muslims in ancient times. The color of the pearl varies between white, yellow or ivory and it mostly symbolizes beauty, purity and luxury. Different

⁴⁸ Schimmel and Soucek, “Color,” 46-50.

⁴⁹ al-Qaddumi, “*Zumurrud*.”

⁵⁰ Schimmel and Soucek, “Color,” 46-50.

⁵¹ Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics*, 6.

⁵² *Ibid*, 28.

theories and myths about the extraction of pearls and their origin were discussed by many scholars such as Aristotle in the *Petrology* and later in the *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa'*. Tifashi discussed the qualities of the stone (its perfections and defects). Al-Dimashqi explained the extraction process of the mother-of-pearl from the layers composing the pearl shell. Scholars mentioned its medicinal qualities such as in the case of heart palpitation or in melancholia.⁵³ Muslim rulers such as the Mughal Emperor Akbar valued the pearl for its rarity and considered it as a symbol of purity. The name “pearl mosque” was widely used in Muslim India; it was usually used to refer to mosques made of white marble. Many legends about the formation of pearls are discussed in Indian Muslim works.⁵⁴ The reference to purity and beauty attributed to pearls in poetry, Quranic verses, and mystical writings are similar to those attributed to the color white.

Mystical interpretation

The next passage explains in simple words how Sufis interpret the correlation between colors and the divine:

As central as colors were in life and poetry, still the observers knew that they were veils, or vessels (which color the water according to their own hue), and that to change color meant also to change one's character: Rumi's story of the jackal who jumped into a dyeing vat in order to reach a higher rank is a good example of this view. The final goal is “the vat of unicoloricity,” usually referred to by the Quranic term *ṣabghat Allah* (2:138) “the coloring of God.” God is compared to a dyer who finally dyes everything in his own color, that is, the invisible, radiant light, and, once this state has been reached, color distinctions are bound to disappear.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ruska, “*Al-Durr*.”

⁵⁴ Dietrich, “*Lu'lu'*.”

⁵⁵ Schimmel and Soucek, “Color,” 46-50.

“Our dye (religion) is the dye (Religion) of Allah (Islam) and which dye (religion) can be better than Allah's? And we are his worshippers (2:138).” According to Ibn Kathir, the word dye in this verse refers to the religion of Islam. This previous explanation has the same contextual meaning as the mystical interpretation of Sufis; God being the ultimate source of light and wisdom, bestowing his light (wisdom) on the faithful ones.

The relationship between color and light and the importance of beauty in Islam were the main points of discussion for Mahmoud in his article “Color and the Mystics” published in *And Diverse Are Their Hues*.⁵⁶ In his research he focused on the mystical aspect of Islamic studies relating his findings to Henry Corbin’s theory (1903 - 1978) on color. Mahmoud investigated the works of many Sufi writers such as Kubra, Simnani, Suhrawardi, Ibn Arabi’ and Kirmani, while exploring the intertwining relationship between color mysticism and reality. His citation of the *mi’raj* story gives an interesting view of how colors played an important role in the mystical aspect of Islam and how the same polychromatic palette was used in the narration of the incident.⁵⁷

...the green wings of the archangel Gabriel; the green, yellow, red and white colors of the horse-like creature that carried him during his ascent; the emerald green, gold, and silver of the stairway to heaven upon which he ascended; the seas of yellow and green light in which he was immersed; seventy thousand curtains of white pearls and green emeralds; the colors of the angels, the color of the heavens and all the beauties herein; the green emerald color of the “preserved Tablet”; the lights of the pillars of the Throne; the white dome with a thousand gates of red gold; and Mount Qaf; a mountain made of emerald green that encompasses the terrestrial world from and from which the vault of heaven receives its green color, etc.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Mahmoud, “Color and the Mystics,” 100-119.

⁵⁷ In the description of the colors of the different episodes of the *mi’raj* story, Mahmoud quoted Nadhir al-‘Azma in his book *al-Mi’raj wa-l-ramz al-ṣūfī: Qirā’a thāniya lil-turāth*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 101-102.

He drew parallels between the Prophet's ascension to the divine and the Sufis' mystical quest relating each color to a certain state in his spiritual journey. "In other words, blue is produced when darkness is mediated by light, the darkness of outer space mediated by the light of the sun in the atmosphere. The blue becomes lighter the more the light of the sun dominates over the darkness of the outer space."⁵⁹ The passage discussed the physical and the mystical meaning of the color blue. The absence of the light from the sky referred to the absence of God from the human soul. It is only by the presence of light (God's divine presence) that the darkness is alleviated and the hue of the color blue becomes lighter. The description of the physical darkness of the sky is a metaphorical attribution of the sinful human soul (as being painted blue).⁶⁰ Referring to al-Ghazali's theory, in which God is the ultimate source of light and all his creations are mere extensions of His light, Mahmoud argued that since only the divine can be of pure light, all other beings must be stained by darkness, hence they appear in different shades and hues depending on their level of purity.

Color in the Quran

Have you not seen how God sends down water (rain) from the sky, and therewith we bring forth fruits of diverse colors (hues), and in the mountains are streaks white and red, of diverse colors (hues) and others pitch black; men too, and beasts and cattle diverse are their hues... (35: 27, 28).

In the Quran the diversification of colors is associated with the wonders of God's creation. It is a proof of the magnitude of God and his mighty ability to create from nothing. According to Blair and Bloom, the notion of diverse hues was mentioned nine times in the Quran and the colors mentioned were white, black, red, green and yellow. They are the same colors

⁵⁹ Ibid, 116.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 116.

existing in Arabic vocabulary in the pre-Islamic period.⁶¹ White was always portrayed as the color of purity and faith, while black associated with darkness and evil. Brown did not exist in the Arabic Language, hence yellow was used to denote both. Red was used once in the Quran to describe the crimson skies on Judgment Day symbolizing the power, dominance and supremacy of God: “when the heavens are rent asunder, and turn crimson red and flow like oil” (55:37). Green was used six times in the Quran and it is usually associated with life, freshness (color of the plants) and luxury such as the color of the garments worn in heaven (18:31 and 76:21). According to many of Sufi writers such as al-Ghazali, the existence of colors is a celebration of the beauty around us which can only be attributed to God.⁶²

Visual perception

According to Bloom and Blair, the lack of colored representation of architectural and decorative features in published books on Islamic painting directed the focus of many studies to form and design rather than color. Black and white illustrations were the norm in earlier publications and unless one had the privilege of seeing the art object first hand, the variety and complexity of the colors used could not be grasped.⁶³ In the study of book painting, the lack of colored plates in earlier published articles and books might have led the focus of researchers to the composition of the paintings and the shading rather than the study of color, which diminished the value of the artwork in terms of artistic appreciation. Reading about

⁶¹ Bloom and Blair, “Color in Islamic Art,” 14.

⁶² Mahmoud, “Color and the Mystics,” 106.

⁶³ Bloom and Blair, “Color in Islamic Art,” 4.

color in a description does not have the same effect as seeing it. The trigger of emotional responses is achieved by direct exposure to color.⁶⁴

Persis Berlekamp in her book *Wonder, Image and Cosmos in Medieval Islam* states in reference to the study of Islamic Manuscripts that “Visual Perception of images in these manuscripts is somehow related to the ethical perception of invisible truths. The manuscripts do not challenge what we know, or think we know, about the possible roles of images in Islam. More fundamentally, they challenge the basic assumptions of our own modern education.”⁶⁵ One of the greatest challenges in studying Islamic manuscripts is to understand them within their own context, to grasp their original meaning and what they represented during their time of production. It challenges our own set of assumptions and classifications rooted in our own modern education. We need to study Islamic manuscripts bearing in mind that artists, scientists and poets were bound by a different set of thoughts and beliefs.

According to Berlekamp: “As children of modernity, we tend to conceptualize the intellectual, the ethical or spiritual, and the visual as distinct registers of human engagement with the world, registers that may or may not have much to do with each other in any given circumstances.”⁶⁶ The author suggested that a coherent symbiosis to integrate the multiple approaches that we were originally raised to differentiate is essential if we are ever be able to fully grasp the meaning of Islamic manuscripts and book paintings in their original context.⁶⁷ Earlier Muslim scholars, poets, scientists and artists viewed audience engagement differently. They considered the intellectual, ethical, spiritual and visual engagement of their audience as

⁶⁴ Elliot and Maier, “Color Psychology,” 97.

⁶⁵ Berlekamp, *Wonder, Image and the Cosmos*, 9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 20-21.

an integrated and collective process rather than parallel ways of perception.⁶⁸ According to Ibn Sina the different senses with which we perceive things are categorized into the external and the internal. The five external senses serve the five internal faculties (common sense, representation, estimation, imagination and memory), which in turn serve the human intellect; or one's ability to perceive what is true, good and pure.⁶⁹

Trying to define aesthetics when discussing Islamic art has always been challenging. One of the shortcomings of the contemporary study of Islamic paintings is the lack of understanding of their philosophical aspect.⁷⁰ Forms and functions have always been the focus of scholars, but to fully appreciate the artistic creation, a deeper apprehension of its aesthetic value has to be considered. As Gonzalez discussed aesthetics is defined as the philosophical activity involved in the appreciation of beauty while understanding the theoretical and the practical aspects of the work of art.⁷¹ "Therefore there are two paths towards an understanding of aesthetics: the study of texts through which one defines the concept of beauty and the doctrine of the creation of art; and the direct observation of artistic forms as meaningful things and the experience they induce."⁷² Gonzalez in her research, as did Bloom and Blair before her, considered the lack of any correlation between literary references and artistic creation. The gap created discontinuity between the study of the written texts and illustrations in manuscripts. A language barrier usually prevents scholars from understanding a given work of literature, and hence appreciating its artistic value.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 20-21.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 21.

⁷⁰ Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam*, 2.

⁷¹ Ibid, 2.

⁷² Ibid, 3.

Following the same concept, if we deal with color as a language, the lack of the understanding of this language would lead to a misinterpretation of the intended meaning behind its use. This language barrier kept scholars from truly immersing themselves into Islamic culture and from understanding its artistic creation as intended.

According to Blair and Bloom “colors could mean whatever people wanted them to mean.”⁷³ This seems quite accurate in light of what has been discussed previously with regard to color and light theories. Each culture and civilization viewed color differently and consequently works of art produced in the same geographical location and time period must have reflected these different notions. Linguistics focus on the nature of language and communication. To study the nature of a certain language, the cultural, religious and historical background need to be explored. Following the same concept to study the meaning of colors in the Islamic period, the linguistic, cultural and religious background need to be fully digested. Generalization is impossible when it comes to the study of color since the interpretation differs from one culture to another; it might also differ within the same culture over time and space. Different philosophers and poets in the Islamic world interpreted color according to their own belief and personal views, and for many of them it was more of a spiritual interpretation than a scientific one. The Iranian philosopher Al-Kirmani (d. 1870) stressed that color is the language of the souls.⁷⁴ He differentiated between the manifestation of a color (*zuhur*) and its existence (*wujud*) based on an integral spiritual realism.⁷⁵ He justified his notion by the following Quranic verses:

⁷³ Bloom and Blair, “Color in Islamic Art,” 25.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 25.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 25.

Say, "Who is Lord of the heavens and earth?" Say, " Allah." Say, "Have you then taken besides Him allies not possessing [even] for themselves any benefit or any harm?" Say, "Is the blind equivalent to the seeing? Or is darkness equivalent to light? Or have they attributed to Allah partners who created like His creation so that the creation [of each] seemed similar to them?" Say, " Allah is the Creator of all things, and He is the One, the Prevailing." (13:16)

Not equal are the blind and the seeing, nor are the darkneses and the light. (35: 19, 20)

Al-Kirmanî found support for his theory in the writing of the German poet and novelist Goethe (d. 1832). His book *Zur Farbenlehre* on color theories was published in 1810 as an attempt to refute Newton's theory of optics. He argued that the way we perceive color depends on our perception. "If the eye were not sunny, how could we perceive light? If God's own strength lived not in us, how could we delight in divine things?"⁷⁶ According to Goethe, a dormant light resides in the eye that can be ignited by the slightest change from within or from the outside. So seeing color depends on a psychological trigger that resides within humans themselves; the way we see color depends a great deal on our perception as well as the light emitted from the object. "For to a blind man it would be impossible to speak of colours."⁷⁷ The previous statement by Goethe resembles the Quran verses previously mentioned (35:19-20).

Al-Hujwiri was Persian Sufi scholar. He was born in modern day Afghanistan and died in Lahore, present day Pakistan, in approximately 1077. He discussed some of the mystical characteristics of colors in Sufism. His most famous treaties on the subject of

⁷⁶ Goethe, *Theory of Colors*, xxxix.

⁷⁷ Ibid, xl.

Sufism was published in his book *Kashf al-Mahjub*. According to al-Hujwiri, dervishes wear blue as a sign of mourning for the misfortune of humans.⁷⁸

A dervish was asked why he wore blue. He replied: “The Apostle [Muhammed] left us three things: poverty, knowledge, and the sword. The sword was taken by the potentates, who misused it; knowledge was chosen by savants, who were satisfied by merely teaching it; poverty was chosen by dervishes, who made it a sign of mourning for the calamity of these three classes of men.”⁷⁹

Blue was reckoned to be the color of deliverance by Nizami (d. 1209) who was one of the greatest Persian poets who discussed colors. One of his tales was about a merchant called Mahan who almost lost his beautiful wife in a greedy business venture and ended up wearing blue to “commemorate his deliverance.”⁸⁰ The use of the color blue might be different in context for both scholars, but the main concept is the same. Blue for al-Hujwiri and Nizami is the color of modesty and remorse. According to al-Hujwiri Sufis wear it to demonstrate their freedom from the human desires of sex, money and power among other sins, while Nizami used it to demonstrate repentance of the sin of greed. In the Quran and hadiths, the color white (*abyad*) always had positive connotations. It was used to describe paradise, purity, faithful Muslims and for divine miracles as seen in the story of Moses.⁸¹

[Pharaoh] said, if you have come with a sign, then bring it forth, if you should be of the truthful. So Moses threw his staff, and suddenly it was a serpent, manifest. And he drew out his hand; thereupon it was white [with radiance] for the observers. (7; 106, 107, 108).

The use of the color white in the context of the verse was to denote the divine miracle that

⁷⁸ Blair and Bloom, “Color in Islamic Art,” 25.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 25.

⁸⁰ Cross, “The Many Colors of Love,” 55.

⁸¹ Daneshgar, “Perception of Color,” 213.

God bestowed upon his prophet to overpower the tyrannical ruler.

Color symbolism is present in Islamic literature; the Quran, Hadiths, Sufi and theological writings. The real challenge is to link these various sources to book paintings. The aim of this study is to explore its symbolic value as well. It will focus on the study of Islamic paintings from different manuscripts in an effort to decipher their meaning and different connotations. Three themes will be the focus of the next three chapters; the story of the *mi'raj*, the *Haft Paykar* poem by Nizami and the story of Majnun and Layla. The study of the paintings illustrating scenes from these different stories will help in exploring color symbolism in Islamic paintings.

Chapter 3

Book Paintings: *Mi'rajnama*

Islam is mainly imparted from two sources: (a) the Quran (*al-Qur'an*) and (b) tradition (*al-hadith*), both of which include various passages addressing colors, their features and qualities (*khawass*). It is thought that the application of colors in Islamic dress and customs make reference to these Islamic Texts.⁸²

As previously discussed, in pre-Islamic Arabia, only five colors were commonly used and they were the same colors explicitly mentioned in the Quran; white, black, red, yellow and green. Blue and brown were used as adjectives; the word *azraq* (blue) meant sparkling and the word *asmar* (brown or tan) meant hard.⁸³ As Arabic evolved, these two terms were used to denote the colors blue and brown respectively. The lack of these two terms in earlier times opens the possibility that the other five terms might have been used to describe a wider range of colors. This assumption creates some degree of uncertainty in deciphering the meaning of colors employed in Islamic art. *Akhdar* (green) was used to describe both blue and green, while *aswad* (black) was used to describe brown and black.⁸⁴ This uncertainty can be extended to the application of color itself and not just its interpretation; meaning that blue and green might have been used as exchangeable hues to symbolize the same idea or emotion. This notion will be addressed later in the chapter in discussing green and blue symbolism. Many Islamic scholars believed that color multiplicity in the Quran was primarily used to portray the power of God's creation.⁸⁵ To celebrate such beauty and power, Muslim artists were attentive to the employment of a remarkable and a diverse color palette in their work.

⁸² Daneshgar, "Perception of Color," 211.

⁸³ Ibid, 213.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 212.

⁸⁵ Sebastian, "The Poetics of Islamic Eschatology," 203, 206.

Pointing out the color diversity present in the universe around them was used as evidence of the supreme capabilities of the creator.⁸⁶ This hypothesis addresses the aesthetic value of color as employed in Islamic art. The real challenge is to examine its symbolic value. The paintings discussed in this chapter are from various manuscripts discussing the *mi'raj* theme. The aim of this chapter is to study the colors used in these paintings with reference to their meaning in Islamic tradition and culture.

The mi'raj in Islamic literature

Praise (*subhan*) be to the One Who made His servant (*'abd*) travel (*asra*) by night from the sacred place of worship (*al-masjid al-haram*) to the furthest place of worship (*al-masjid al-aqsa*), whose precincts We have blessed in order that We may show him some of Our signs. Indeed He hears and sees (all things). (Q 17:1)

So he acquired poise and balance, and reached the highest pinnacle. Then he drew near and drew closer until a space of two arcs (*qab qawsayn*) or even less remained, when He revealed to His servant what He revealed. His heart did not falsify what he perceived. Will you dispute with him what he saw? He saw Him indeed another time by the Lote Tree of the Limit beyond which no one can pass, close to which is the Garden of Tranquility. When the Lote Tree of the Limit was covered over with what it was covered over, neither did sight falter nor exceed the bounds. Indeed, he saw some of the greatest signs of His Lord. (Q 53:6–18)

The verses above discuss the “accounts of Muhammad’s famous “journey by night” (*isra*) from the Sacred Mosque (in Mecca) to the Furthest Mosque (in Jerusalem) and his “ascension to heaven” (*mi'raj*) from the Temple Mount.”⁸⁷ The account of his journey includes description of paradise and hell and it complements the already existing belief in the

⁸⁶ Daneshgar, “Perception of Color,” 212.

⁸⁷ Sebastian, “The Poetics of Islamic Eschatology,” 188.

Judgment day and the hereafter. It is one of the most celebrated events in Islam and was discussed, interpreted and illustrated in multiple books and manuscripts. To understand color symbolism in the Islamic period, focusing on the illustrations of the *Mi'rajnama* and analyzing them within the context of the associated literature could be a credible methodology. Ibn Sina's study of the *Mi'rajnama* interprets the allegory in the Prophet's account of the *isra'* and the *mi'raj*.⁸⁸ He based his analysis on the *hadiths* describing the journey and his own philosophical analysis of the event. The ascension experience was a spiritual as well as an intellectual one.⁸⁹

Explanation of the states of made and created things is provided (by him) in a way that literalists would accept within their bounds, while inquiring minds understand these truths. And indeed, people of reason know that the place to which thought goes, the body does not go, and that which insight perceives, the sense of sight does not perceive.⁹⁰

According to Ibn Sina, the journey was intended to be a spiritual and an intellectual one rather than physical and hence the interpretation of the descriptive elements in the story should follow the same concept. The Prophet used the color white to describe the face of Gabriel to denote his virtue and purity; "I saw him whiter than snow, fair of face... with seventy thousand locks of red ruby dangling down, and six hundred thousand feathers of lustrous pearl opened up."⁹¹ Pearls, as mentioned in Chapter 2, were a rare gem that imply rarity and preciousness and their presence in the description of one of the archangels fits within the context of the scene depicted in the text. According to Ibn Sina, this description is an intellectual abstraction of the perceived beauty of Gabriel, meaning that if this beauty were

⁸⁸ Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna*, 123-138.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 124.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 124.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 126.

to appear to the senses in actual physical form, it would appear as described.⁹² The phrase “seventy thousand locks of red ruby,” is a very powerful metaphor. As mentioned in Chapter 2, according to belief the color red had the power to sooth the heart in battle or to give courage.⁹³ It was also associated with energy, strength and blood and attributed to divine presence in Sufi belief.⁹⁴ Considering these attributions while discussing the imagery portrayed in the description of Gabriel, one would notice that the association of these two specific colors, white and red, perfectly suits the depiction of an archangel in the story. Poets such as Nizami, Rumi, Hafiz and Jami used red as a metaphor through their writings. It was usually connected with fire and flames, sunset and sunrise, blood and martyrdom.⁹⁵ In some interpretation of Shi‘a doctrines, red is one of the four pillars of the Throne of Mercy represented by the Archangel Gabriel and the throne of divine love (*walaya*), which is “dyed red with the blood of the martyred Imam Husayn.”⁹⁶ Simpson believes that the color red symbolized the divine presence.⁹⁷ “But just as Muslim poets and philosophers through the ages formulated metaphorical language, often involving the color red, to represent the divine, so too artists employed distinctive imagery for the same purpose.”⁹⁸ The color red in Ibn Sina’s description highlights three main concepts: might, virtue and divinity.

The mi‘raj in Islamic paintings

⁹² Ibid, 126.

⁹³ Hell, “‘ Akīk.”

⁹⁴ Schimmel and Soucek, “Color,” 46-50.

⁹⁵ Simpson, “Why My Name is Red,” 296.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 299.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 299.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 299.

According to the *mi'raj* story when the Prophet Muhammad arrived to Jerusalem before his ascension (*mi'raj*), he encountered the Prophets and was offered three goblets containing wine, water and milk; this episode in the story is referred to as the testing of the cups (fig. 3.1).⁹⁹ The Prophet chose milk (white) which is an allegory for choosing the virtue of the spirit over the pleasure of the flesh.¹⁰⁰ If we were to deduce a conclusion from the previously mentioned account of the *mi'raj* we would certainly draw on the earlier Muslim tendency to use color as metaphorical means to describe certain spiritual states of being. The use of color in the illustrations of the *Mi'rajnama* follows the same concept. In paintings depicting the *mi'raj*, colors were applied to give similar imagery to the one discussed above. Figure 3.2 depicts the Prophet on *Buraq* (the mythical creature, or steed, that the Prophet used in his journey to Jerusalem then to ascend to the seventh heaven; it means lightning in English) leaving Gabriel at his station.¹⁰¹ According to the *mi'raj* account, the Prophet mounted the *Buraq* and he was escorted by Gabriel through his ascension to the seventh heaven. At a certain point in the journey, Gabriel stopped at his station and Muhammad advanced alone to meet God, demonstrating the Prophet's esteemed rank or status.¹⁰² The Prophet is depicted wearing a green robe (fig. 3.2) which was believed to be his favorite color.¹⁰³ There is a *hadith* attributed to Mohammad expressing his love for the color green: "The sight of green is as agreeable to the eyes as the sight of a beautiful woman."¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Gruber, "The Ilkhanid *Mi'rajnama*," 32-33.

¹⁰⁰ Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna*, 128.

¹⁰¹ Akimushkin, *The Arts of the book in central Asia*, 167.

¹⁰² Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*, 64.

¹⁰³ Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ Mahmoud, "Color and the Mystics," 107.

According to al-Ghazali the Prophet enjoyed the contemplation of greenery.¹⁰⁵ According to folk tales, the sight of an emerald can blind a snake, demonstrating the powerful talismanic power of the color green in fighting evil.¹⁰⁶ There is also a significant connection between the spiritual power of Sufis and the color green.¹⁰⁷ In the Sufi tradition it is the color associated with a higher stage on the mystical path and it is sometimes used to represent life itself.¹⁰⁸ Thus the appropriation of the color green with peace, life and prosperity fits within the cultural norms at the time.

I saw Gabriel in the air from the east to the west. The world was filled by one of his wings, on his head were strands of hair of every colour; his forehead was like the sun; and some of his feathers were green. I am not able to describe the beauty with which God created him.¹⁰⁹

The colorful description of Gabriel in this passage – although it is not from the same manuscript as the painting – matches to a great extent the colors used to depict Gabriel in figure 3.2. The similarity between the text and the image does not only appear in the use of colors but also in the proportion of the archangel in comparison to the Prophet; it complies with the statement ‘I saw Gabriel in the air from east to west. The world was filled by one of his wings.’ The description of the *mi'raj* story can be considered as an intellectual and artistic abstraction of the perceived beauty and splendor of its components.¹¹⁰ There are different accounts of story, but the common denominator between them all is the colorful description

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Shimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 113.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 113.

¹⁰⁸ Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics*, 28.

¹⁰⁹ Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*, 38.

¹¹⁰ Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna*, 126.

of every account which is clearly reflected in many of the *mi'raj* paintings.

Figures 3.3 and 3.4 portray similar scenes from the Prophet's *mi'raj* account. The two paintings are from different manuscripts, one from Nizami's *Khamasa* (ca. 1505) and the other from Sa'di's *Bustan* (ca. 1530-35). Nizami's painting depicts the Prophet's ascension over the Ka'ba while Sa'di's depicts the ascension over the Haram al-Sharif in Mecca.¹¹¹ "Sa'di describes the Prophet's luminosity as the source of all light, a concept conveyed by the swirling golden clouds that frame Muhammad and *Buraq*."¹¹² Both paintings demonstrate the same color symbolism; the use of golden clouds to represent the Prophet's divine status, the coral red for *Buraq* and the dark blue background of the sky. The contrast between the golden clouds and the deep blue color of the sky reflects the distinct boundary between the two realms; the celestial and the earthly.¹¹³ Gruber examined the use of the nimbus (gold fiery halo) around the Prophet's head to convey his elevated status in the *mi'raj* paintings; it was employed by artists during Ilkhanid, Timurid, Safavid, Ottoman, Mughal and Qajar periods.¹¹⁴ This notion of the light of Muhammad or '*nur* Muhammad' as being derived from the light of God has been discussed by many Muslim scholars such as Nizami, al-Tustari (d. 896), Farid al-Din Attar (d. 1230), Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) and al-Zarir (fourteenth century).¹¹⁵ Al-Bukhari (d. 870), the famous *hadith* compiler states that: "whenever he went in darkness, [the Prophet] had light shining around him like the moonlight"¹¹⁶ The coral red of *Buraq* is mentioned in the following *mi'raj* text; "Its head was of ruby, its rump of coral and its belly

¹¹¹ Canby, "Art of Iran and Central Asia," 200.

¹¹² Ibid, 200.

¹¹³ Gruber, *The Timurid Book of Ascension*, 308.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 303-304.

¹¹⁵ Gruber, *The Timurid Book of Ascension*, 304.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 304.

of red coral.”¹¹⁷ The same colors for *Buraq* can be also be seen in figures 3.1-5, 3.7-8 and 3.11 depicting different scenes from the *mi'raj* accounts. The Prophet is shown in figure 3.4 wearing turquoise blue, and in figure 3.3 he is wearing green. As discussed earlier, Muslims did not specifically differentiate between the two colors; turquoise blue and green. Probably the symbolic meaning of the two colors is primarily the same in the painting; to denote Muhammad’s pious nature. As discussed in Chapter 2, the term turquoise or *firuz* was used to refer to a light blue-green color. Figure 3.4 shows a different feature that is not portrayed in the other painting; it shows a book placed in a mihrab niche and surmounted by golden flames. According to Canby, this scene celebrates the revelation of the Quran and its divine origin.¹¹⁸

Figure 3.5 depicts the Ascension of Muhammad wearing a green robe surrounded by the seven angels who greet him at the gates of heavens. *Buraq* is depicted having a red body; red has a divine reference as per Simpson’s interpretation.¹¹⁹ Figure 3.6 shows the Prophet and Gabriel both wearing green. *Buraq* is depicted in this painting in blue with an emerald necklace and jeweled crown. The use of the color blue in this painting differ from the usual coral red employed in the depiction of *Buraq*. The golden flames around the Prophet represent the light of Muhammad and his divine status similar to that in figure 3.1-4, 3.6-9. Figure 3.7 has similar composition to figure 3.5 but with Shi‘a references. The Prophet is depicted wearing a green robe and riding *Buraq* who is painted in coral red and emerald green. Muhammad is surrounded by the angels of heaven with a lion in the upper right corner

¹¹⁷ Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*, 39.

¹¹⁸ Canby, “Art of Iran and Central Asia,” 200.

¹¹⁹ Simpson, “Why My Name is Red,” 299.

representing Ali; a symbol of his courage and righteousness.¹²⁰ According to Shi'a belief, Ali was usually portrayed as golden lion.¹²¹ He was also referred to as Haydar (lion) or Asadullah (God's lion) for his courage and prowess in war.¹²² The almost consistent depiction of *Buraq* using the same palette – with few exceptions as in figure 3.6 – matches his divine essence being provided by God to escort the Prophet on his celestial journey.

Figure 3.8 portrays the punishment of those who squander the inheritance of orphans. The contrast between the black background and the prevailing use of yellow and red elicits strong and powerful feelings. The vibrant use of colors and strong contrast reflect the hardship of the scene where Gabriel leading the Prophet to witness the suffering of the unfaithful.¹²³ The color red in this painting is used to depict the struggle of the damned in the afterlife. According to Schimmel red is connected with wrath as well as power, energy and strength.¹²⁴ Red can be perceived as a symbol of divine power as discussed previously, and using red to depict the wrath of God upon the damned fits within the main concept of the painting; the color red is used to depict the punishment of the sinners. The color yellow is also ambivalent as it was used in the Quran for both positive and negative connotations.

They said, "Call upon your Lord to show us what is her color." He said, "He says, 'It is a yellow cow, bright in color - pleasing to the observers.' (2:69)

Indeed, it throws sparks [as huge] as a fortress, as if they were yellowish [black] camels. (77:32, 33)

¹²⁰ Rührdanz, "Visualizing Encounters," 1037-38.

¹²¹ Schimmel. *Make a shield from wisdom*, 58.

¹²² Ibid, 48, 58.

¹²³ Rührdanz, "Visualizing Encounters," 1039.

¹²⁴ Schimmel and Soucek, *Color*, 46-50.

But if We should send a [bad] wind and they saw [their crops] turned yellow, they would remain thereafter disbelievers. (30:51)

In the first verse, the color yellow was used to describe the bright pleasant color of a cow chosen as a sacrifice by God. In the second verse, it was used to describe the wrath of hell fire and the third it was used to describe the color of crops during drought. Al-Ghazali used the color yellow to describe the soul of the unbeliever during death to signify the magnitude of its suffering.¹²⁵ In the context of this painting, the color yellow was used to depict the wrath of hell fire. If we exclude the text associated with the story of *mi'raj*, just looking at the pictures, one would get the same powerful and spiritual message described in the following text; from the *Mi'rajnama*: the yellow of the fire is mirrored in the fiery haloes of the Prophet and Gabriel.

I saw another group of people whom angels were tormenting by pouring poison down their throats. It [the poison] was coming out from their posteriors. I asked: 'What have these people done?' Gabriel answered: 'These are the people who consumed the goods of orphans without fearing this day [of Judgment].'¹²⁶

One of the most significant episode of the *mi'raj* account is its last; when the Prophet finally reaches God's Throne. The buildup of all the events in the story leads to this epic moment where Muhammad stands in the presence of God Himself. In order to depict this magnificent moment in the *mi'raj*, artists had to find an alternative artistic means to trigger the necessary emotional and spiritual response. Writers are less restricted in demonstrating that divine scene than artists; they can use different metaphors and imagery to portray the divinity of that episode. The options for the artists are limited in comparison as the only tools

¹²⁵ Sebastian, "The Poetics of Islamic Eschatology," 198.

¹²⁶ Gruber, "The Timurid Book of Ascension," 366.

they have at their disposal are color and form. Hence the use of the right palette to illustrate the peculiarity of that scene is crucial. The following passages describe that final event:

I went on until I reached the curtains of God's throne (and God's throne has seventy thousand curtains). The vastness of every curtain is seventy thousand years' distance. There were seventy thousand veils of silver, seventy thousand veils of pearl, seventy thousand veils of cornelian, seventy thousand veils of light, seventy thousand veils of wind, seventy thousand veils of darkness, and seventy thousand veils of lightning.¹²⁷

The eyes of my head closed, and the eyes of my heart opened. God strengthened my heart and lifted the veil off my heart. I looked, and I saw God Himself, without visible characteristic or attribute. My heart became astonished.¹²⁸

Figure 3.10 depicts the Prophet praying at God's Throne. The prevailing use of the red hue in the painting coupled with the swirling golden clouds is a symbolic representation of the divine presence.¹²⁹ "God, formless and imperceptible, nevertheless is present in the picture as a sensate and palpable entity, conveyed by the motion and "heat" produced by the gold and red pigments."¹³⁰ The Prophet is depicted wearing a green robe to represent his pious and virtuous nature. The nimbus around the Prophet's head is missing, probably to demonstrate his humble nature in the presence of the divine. Some might argue that the missing nimbus is due to the fact that a golden fiery halo on a golden background might not be an artistically smart idea or might not have been visible if added. The following scene from the *mi'raj* story shown in figure 3.11 is depicting the Prophet during his ascension on *Buraq* surrounded by angels. The background of the painting is golden and yet there is a nimbus around his head to

¹²⁷ Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*, 67.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 68.

¹²⁹ Gruber, "The Timurid Book of Ascension," 301.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 308.

portray his esteemed and divine nature. The golden nimbus is outlined in black to make it visible and thus we can deduce that the missing nimbus in figure 3.10 was done on purpose; the Prophet has a divine status among humans and angels while in the presence of God he is just a humble soul like everyone else.

If the significance of the *mi'raj* story is to warn the faithful against doing evil and promise them the wonders of heaven if they choose to do good, then reading the text would be equivalent to seeing the paintings in eliciting the same spiritual awareness and intellectual experience. In figures 3.2-3 and 3.5-11 the Prophet is wearing a green robe, which as discussed earlier, was a color he admired.¹³¹ Studying the following text describing the *mi'raj*, the use of emerald to describe the wonders of paradise is highly reflective of the perception of the color green within the Muslim tradition. Following the same framework, the color green is used for the robe of the Prophet, attributing the same positive traits to the messenger of God.

Scenes of the *mi'raj* from different texts show the use of a polychromatic description to portray the dream-like quality of the journey with all its splendors. The following description is based on the accounts of Ilkhanid *Mi'rajnama*. The colors of the seven heavens had a wide range of colors such as emerald, turquoise, white silver, red gold and ruby. The wonders that Muhammad saw on his journey were overwhelming and marvelous in their description such as the seas of light, darkness and fire and the mountains of snow. The *Buraq* was consistently associated with coral and emerald colors. In paradise the angels had light crowns and emerald belts. The castles and pavilions were made of ruby, white pearl, emerald, gold, and silver. The gravel in Paradise was made of pearls, its foundations were encrusted with pearls and gems and there were hanging lanterns studded with gems. There were dark-

¹³¹ Al-Qaddumi, "Zumurrud."

eyed *huris* whose hair is adorned with pearls and chrysolite and the souls of the martyrs were flying like green birds.¹³² The Lote Tree of the Limit had branches as luminous as the rays of the sun and its angels had crowns of the color of God's throne and four hundred thousand pearls. Its pavilions were made of gold, silver, chrysolite and pearls. The most majestic description in Ilkhanid *Mi'rajnama* was the Throne of God which was adorned with light and garnet with a radiance shone such that no one could gaze upon it. It had seventy thousand veils of silver, cornelians, emerald and white pearls.¹³³ What is worth noting in the previous passage is that certain hues are constantly recurring in the description of the many elements and components of the story such as emerald green, ruby red, pearl white and gold. These colors constitute an integral part of the artists' palette in book paintings revolving around the *mi'raj* theme as will be further discussed in this chapter.

In the following text Felek quoted a passage from Mieke Bal's *Narratology* displaying the same polychromatic effect discussed in the previous paragraph. Notice the predominant use of the three colors; emerald green, ruby red and pearl white. The author describes the preparation of the Prophet Muhammad for the *mi'raj*:

He was dressed in a cloak of light (*nur*) and a turban of light was put on his blessed head, then Gabriel, peace be upon him, put a cloak on his blessed back and put green emerald clogs on his blessed feet and wrapped a belt of ruby around his blessed waist and gave him an emerald whip that was decorated with four hundred pearls. Each pearl shone like the star Venus.¹³⁴

The author also describes *Buraq* as follows: "Its chest shines like ruby, its back is white like silver, its feet are emerald, its tail is of red coral, and its neck of ruby."¹³⁵ The emerald green

¹³² Chrysolite is a yellowish-green gemstone.

¹³³ Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*, 45-71.

¹³⁴ Felek, "Reading the *Mi'raj* Accounts," 283.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 283.

was also mentioned in the Timurid *Mi'rajnama* to describe Mount Qaf: “The emerald green of Mount Qaf as a peak of cosmic proportions surrounding the entire terrestrial world.”¹³⁶

Ilkhanid *Mi'rajnama*: The correlation between text and paintings

The following paragraph discusses the *mi'raj* story written during the period of Ilkhanid rule (1256-1353) in Iran.¹³⁷ The importance of this text (dated 685/ 1286) is that it is considered the only complete narrative still existing from that period.¹³⁸ It is probably based on the tales of the *Mi'rajnama* written by Ibn Abbas and al-Bakri with obvious Sunni subtexts.¹³⁹ Sunni-Sufi amalgamation is a prominent feature in this Ilkhanid *Mi'rajnama*.¹⁴⁰ According to Gruber, there are some Sufi connotations that are reminiscent of the more mystical approach of the *mi'raj* story as promoted by al-Sulami and al-Qushayri.¹⁴¹ Gruber believed that due to the competition between Islam and Buddhism, as the religion of the Ilkhanid rulers during the last quarter of the thirteenth century, “Sufism provided a common denominator,” due to the many similarities between Muslim mystics and Central Asian shamans.¹⁴² Incorporating mystical features in the *mi'raj* story was an intelligent step in promoting the Islamic faith during that period. The earliest surviving series of paintings depicting the *mi'raj* story (figs. 3.1 and 3.12-16) is believed to have been produced approximately during the same period as the text but they do not now have any associated

¹³⁶ Gruber, “*The Timurid Book of Ascension*,” 289.

¹³⁷ Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*, 3.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 23.

text.¹⁴³ They might have been produced as part of a manuscript commissioned by the last Ilkhanid ruler Abu Said (r. 1317-35).¹⁴⁴ Abu Said was considered a promoter of Sunni Islam after declaring it the official religion of Iran.¹⁴⁵ The paintings show the same Sunni-Sufi inclination as the text.¹⁴⁶ Studying these dispersed paintings in light of Ilkhanid *Mi'rajnama* may help in a better interpretation of their color symbolism.

The paintings show some features that are missing from the Ilkhanid text, as well as other illustrated manuscripts produced later, such as the depiction of the Prophet on Gabriel's shoulders rather than on *Buraq* which is an uncommon feature.¹⁴⁷ Only one painting (fig. 3.1) in the series discussed here depicts *Buraq*: the painting illustrating the testing of the cup in the *mi'raj* story. *Buraq* is featured in the lower left corner of the painting having a red body. According to Gruber, "the *Mi'rajnama* text of 685/1286 provides the closest kind of narrative that would have originally accompanied the paintings, thus helping us to identify the represented scenes, to reconstruct their original sequence, and to determine their possible functions in Ilkhanid cultural and religious practices."¹⁴⁸ The following text is a summary of the colors of the seven heavens as described by the Prophet Muhammad during the *mi'raj*:

I arrived at the first heaven. I saw that the sky of the world was of emerald... Gabriel lifted me up and took me to the second heaven. I saw that the second heaven was of white silver... Gabriel raised me to the third heaven. I saw that the third heaven was of red gold... Gabriel picked me up and took me to the fourth heaven. I saw that the fourth heaven was of ruby... Gabriel picked me up and took me five

¹⁴³ Ibid, 24.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 3.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 30.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 24 and 26.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 24.

hundred years' distance to the fifth heaven. I saw that the fifth heaven was of emerald... 'Gabriel picked me up and carried me five hundred years' distance to the sixth heaven... I saw that the sixth heaven was of white pearl... 'Then Gabriel lifted me up and took me five hundred years' distance to the seventh heaven. I saw that the substance (*sifat*) of the seventh sky was of light.¹⁴⁹

If we studied the colors employed in the paintings in light of the previous text, some similar features are found. In figures 3.12-13 for instance the color of the background is golden and it conveys the same essence of the description of the seventh heaven as discussed in the text being made of light.¹⁵⁰ Figure 3.13 depicts the Prophet arriving at the first heaven made of emerald. According to Gruber the background color in the painting (fig. 3.13) has a green tone depicting the color of the first heaven as mentioned in the text.¹⁵¹ Surveying the six paintings from the dispersed *Mi'rajnama* discussed here in this chapter (figs. 3.1 and 3.12-16), one will notice that the tone of the color green is very pale; it cannot be described as emerald green but nonetheless it has a green hue. Gruber believed that "the artist's particular attention to the hues in the paintings' backgrounds suggests that he was following rather faithfully descriptions provided by the accompanying ascension text."¹⁵²

Figure 3.16 depicts Prophet Muhammad flying over the Swollen Sea over Gabriel's shoulders beyond the seventh heaven: "A sea of fire appeared, and in it was a burning fire and mountains of snow."¹⁵³ The similarity between the text and the painting can be seen in the white snow mountains and the golden color of the background (fig. 3.16). On the one hand the gold could symbolize the light beyond the seventh heaven as previously discussed,

¹⁴⁹ Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*, 45-58.

¹⁵⁰ Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*, 27.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 27.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 27.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 64.

and on the other it could also be used to depict the bright light emitted from the Sea of Fire.

The representation of *Buraq* in figure 3.1 with his coral red body matches the description in the text:

Its head was of ruby, its wings of pearl, its rump of coral, its ears of emerald, and its belly of red coral.

Its eyes were like glittering stars, and its tail of pearl, and its reins of light.¹⁵⁴

According to Gruber, *Buraq* had green ears in the painting (fig. 3.1).¹⁵⁵ However the color green in the reproduction has a rather pale tone, like the color of the sky in figure 3.13 previously discussed. *Buraq* is usually depicted with a red body as mentioned earlier. This type of consistency in the description of each character in the story in different paintings from different manuscripts strongly supports the notion of the existence of color symbolism in Islamic paintings. It is strong evidence of artists' consistency in referring to certain emotions or status using specific colors.

One of the common denominators in all of the six dispersed paintings from the Ilkhanid series is that Muhammad is always depicted wearing blue and Gabriel in red. In the following passage from the Ilkhanid *Mi'rajnama*, there is a clear Sunni Sufi inclination that can be spotted in reference to the 'monasteries of dervishes' mentioned in the below text:

Gabriel says to Muhammad: Look at the sun, which is located in the fourth heaven and whose light pours down. It is like the branch of the Tübā tree. The light of the sun has no diminution and cannot be concealed. Its radiance reaches the vaulted royal halls of kings, the monasteries of dervishes, and everywhere else. Every person benefits from its brightness. If they light one hundred thousand lanterns

¹⁵⁴ Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*, 39.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 26.

from one burning candle, it will not be depleted by one single particle.¹⁵⁶

Such mystical orientation is paralleled in the blue color of Muhammad's clothes in the paintings. According to al-Hujwiri in his treatise *Kashf al-Mahjub*, dervishes wear blue as a sign of mourning for the misfortune of humans as discussed in more detail previously in Chapter 2.¹⁵⁷ "A dervish was asked why he wore blue. He replied: "...poverty was chosen by dervishes, who made it a sign of mourning for the calamity of these three classes of men."¹⁵⁸ Interpreting the paintings (Figs. 3.1 and 3.12-16) according to the same mystical genre of the text, their color symbolism might be translated using Sufi references. In other *Mi'rajnama* paintings, the prophet is usually depicted wearing green – a color that is linked to paradise, prosperity and life. The color blue used in this series to depict the Prophet's robe, has Sufi connotations as discussed by al-Hujwiri among other scholars. It depicts modesty and the freedom from human sins. Nizami used it to "commemorate deliverance."¹⁵⁹ Al-Tifashi also claimed that Persian kings used to wear blue gems (turquoise) to deflect the danger of death.¹⁶⁰ Considering the geographical location and cultural background of Nizami, al-Hujwiri and al-Tifashi – they were all Persian in origin – it is safe to assume that such rooted notions regarding blue have found their way to the series of Ilkhanid Paintings. The color blue here demonstrate repentance, remorse (for the human soul) and liberation from human sins which correspond to the content of the *mi'raj* story and the mystical nature of the Prophet.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 71.

¹⁵⁷ Blair and Bloom, "Color in Islamic Art," 25.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 71.

¹⁵⁹ Cross, "The Many Colors of Love," 55.

¹⁶⁰ J. Ruska and M. Plessner, "*Firuzadj*."

In figures 3.1 and 3.12-16 the face of the Prophet as well as the wings of Gabriel are white, portraying fairness, purity and righteousness. In the text (dated 685/ 1286), the Prophet described Gabriel saying: “I saw his wings as white as pearl.”¹⁶¹ The color white is usually associated with heavenly traits and the light of God. The color used in the paintings matches the description of Gabriel in the text. It denotes the archangel’s pure essence and heavenly traits. The color white used to depict the Prophet’s face represents his pious nature and closeness to God. As discussed earlier, the light of Muhammad is derived from the ultimate and divine source of light (God). The prominent color, beside white, for Gabriel in figures 3.1 and 3.12-16 is red (his robe). The use of warm colors to depict the archangel provides the viewer with the same type of imagery as in the text. “Of all the colors in the spectrum, red has the longest discernible wavelength, which explain why it elicits the strongest optical reaction of all colors.”¹⁶² It also triggers the already familiar association of red with energy and strength.¹⁶³ As mentioned in Chapter 2, according to belief the color red had the power to sooth the heart in battle or to give courage.¹⁶⁴ Gabriel’s role in the *mi’raj* story was to guide the Prophet through his ascension and give him strength and support, which matches with the previous notion regarding the color red. It was also attributed to divine presence in Sufi belief, which corresponds to Gabriel’s divine status as one of the four main archangels and the one chosen by God to communicate with the Prophet and guide him through his celestial journey.¹⁶⁵ Considering these attributes while discussing the imagery portrayed in the

¹⁶¹ Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*, 38.

¹⁶² Simpson, “Why My Name is Red,” 279.

¹⁶³ Schimmel and Soucek, “Color,” 46-50.

¹⁶⁴ Hell, “‘Aķīķ.”

¹⁶⁵ Schimmel and Soucek, “Color,” 46-50.

description of Gabriel, one would notice that the association of these two specific colors, white and red, perfectly suits the depiction of an archangel in the story.

Paintings with color symbolism similar to the *mi'raj*

The belief in Judgment Day and resurrection is rooted in Islamic theology.¹⁶⁶ “Did you think We had created you in vain, and that you would not be brought back to Us? Exalted be God!” (Q: 23, 115-6). Eschatological concepts such as paradise, hell, Day of Judgment and the hereafter constitute the main core of the Islamic faith.¹⁶⁷ The description of that day – as discussed in the Quran – primarily revolves around two main points: the peace granted to the faithful and the regret and remorse of the unbelievers. According to Quranic script, believers will receive their books with their right hands and will have white faces representing their peace and fortune in the hereafter, while unbelievers will receive their books with their left hand and will have black faces representing their doomed fate.

And the Horn will be blown, and whoever is in the heavens and whoever is on the earth will fall dead except whom Allah wills. Then it will be blown again, and at once they will be standing, looking on. (Q. 39: 68)

But when there comes the Deafening Blast; On the Day a man will flee from his brother; And his mother and his father; And his wife and his children; For every man, that Day, will be a matter adequate for him; [Some] faces, that Day, will be bright; And Laughing, rejoicing at good news; [other] faces, that Day, will have upon them dust; Blackness will cover them; Those are the disbelievers, the wicked ones. (Q. 80: 33-42)

¹⁶⁶ Abdel Haleem, “Quranic Paradise,” 49.

¹⁶⁷ Zakzouk, “The Path to Paradise,” 39.

Figure 3.17 depicts a scene from the Judgment Day where believers receive their white scrolls with the right hand and unbelievers receive their black scrolls with their left. The contrast between white and black is straightforward in segregating the two groups: the faithful versus the unbelievers and sinners. Notice that all the people depicted in the painting are dressed the same, representing justice in punishment and reward. Everyone is treated equally according to their own deeds; there is no difference in rank or status although the people have different skin color. This diversity in the skin color perhaps is used to represent people from different ethnicities or backgrounds. Figure 3.18 illustrates the same notion as figure 3.17: the Day of Judgment. The painting is a distinctive example of Shi'a interpretation of that day.¹⁶⁸ It depicts a group of people in the center, some with white faces or veils and others with their faces or veils black, representing the faithful and the sinners. Israfil is depicted in the painting on the left with the horn and another archangel (Gabriel or Mikail) holding the scale to weigh people's deeds.¹⁶⁹ 'Ali is depicted in the painting wearing red and green consulting with the Prophet, who is wearing blue.¹⁷⁰ The color red has a special reference in the Shi'a doctrine as previously discussed. It denotes martyrdom, which matches with the representation of 'Ali.¹⁷¹ The rest of the Prophets are shown in the upper part of the painting sitting in an emerald green garden representing paradise. All the Prophets in the painting, including 'Ali, are portrayed with golden nimbus around their heads representing their elevated status and with their faces white as snow (some of them are wearing white veils) to denote their pious nature.

¹⁶⁸ Rührdanz, "Visualizing Encounters," 1042.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 1042.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 1042.

¹⁷¹ Simpson, "Why My Name is Red," 296.

Figure 3.9 depicts Abu Jahl attempting to hurl a stone at the Prophet Muhammad at the Ka‘ba. Abu Jahl is depicted wearing a yellow robe with his face smeared, while the Prophet is wearing a green robe with golden flames surrounding him to symbolize his elevated and divine status. In the painting the use of color yellow to depict Abu Jahl corresponds with the same negative connotations as in figure 3.8; It connects the Prophet’s uncle Abu Jahl – one of his strong opponents – with the color of hell fire or drought. In its metaphorical meaning, drought can be interpreted as ‘the prolonged absence’ of faith or God’s light in the heart of Abu Jahl. As previously discussed, when color is perceived as a language to express certain ideas, then examining the illustrations in light of those ideas would trigger the same set of emotions.

Paintings depicting other Prophets and pious leaders show similar color symbolism as the *mi‘raj* paintings. Figure 3.19 shows the Prophet Joseph escaping from Zulaykha. He is also depicted wearing a green robe. Aside from the amazing composition of the painting and the exceptional use of the geometrical shapes to portray the emotional anxiety of Joseph at that moment, the color contrast in the painting plays an important role in portraying the struggle of the Prophet Joseph. The contrast of his green robe and Zulaykha’s red garment reflects the conflict Joseph has between his good nature, depicted in the color green and the lust and desire of love he is trying to escape, depicted in the color red. Red has a dual identity in Islamic tradition.¹⁷² It is used to symbolize the life cycle, with love and desire on one end, and war and violence on another.¹⁷³ It is the life force of love and war, that’s why it is often used to represent the divine essence. Muslims associated the planets with certain colors to demonstrate their attributes. The planet Mars was associated with the color red, the symbol of

¹⁷² Simpson, “Why My Name is Red,” 294.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 294.

war (fig. 3.20).¹⁷⁴ This dual nature was cleverly employed by the artists to create prevailing contradictory statements without the use of words. It is a powerful color that has the tendency to draw the viewer's attention inside the painting by being visually striking as well as its ability to trigger strong emotions, depending on its employment within the context of the painting. In figure 3.19 the color was used to symbolize the temptation of love and the powerful emotions that endangered the good nature of the Prophet Joseph.

Figure 3.21 depicts a scene from *Jami' al-tawarikh* for the torturing of Bilal, the first caller to prayer in Islam. Bilal was a black slave owned by Ibn Umayyah, one of the chiefs of the tribe of Quraysh and due to his conversion of Islam, he was severely harassed by his owner. Abu Bakr decided to 'manumit' Bilal to set him free and save him from persecution.¹⁷⁵ Bilal was referred to as the "man of authentic Islam and of pure heart" which is reflected in his white clothes.¹⁷⁶ Abu Bakr is wearing a green robe to portray his pious nature and good heart which matches the Prophet's depiction in the *mi'raj* story. Also, green was considered Muhammad's favorite color.¹⁷⁷ Ibn Umayyah is depicted in red representing the torment and torture he is inflicting on Bilal. As discussed earlier red has a dual nature and in this context it was used to represent violence and blood.¹⁷⁸

Two paintings from Nizami's *Khamsa* depicting Alexander kneeling before a holy man have an interesting usage of the color green (figs. 3.22-23). The green symbolism has been discussed earlier in relation to the Prophets and the *mi'raj* story. It has usually been

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 294.

¹⁷⁵ Gruber, In Defense and Devotion," 98-99.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 98.

¹⁷⁷ Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics*, 6.

¹⁷⁸ Simpson, "Why My Name is Red," 294.

linked to the pure nature and holiness of the Prophets. The two paintings discussed here are from two different manuscripts of Nizami's *Khamasa*, one executed, possibly by Bihzad, in 1494 (Herat) and the second by Mir Musawwir in 1540 (Tabriz). Both paintings depicted Alexander kneeling before a holy man to obtain his blessing in order to capture the castle of Derbent.¹⁷⁹ Alexander is depicted wearing green in both paintings. According to Nizami's text, "It behoves the Sultan, ostentatiously and in the eyes of all, to turn his back upon his own castle, the emblem of earthly vainglory, in order to dwell upon the fate of his soul in earnest conversation with a holy man."¹⁸⁰ Nizami's portrayal of Alexander in the text insinuate his state of renunciation (*zuhd*) which mirrors the Prophets' way of living; the abandonment of earthly pleasures and their focus on the hereafter. "The main concern for Behzad's painting lies in a ritual admonition to royal humility, close here in spirit to Nezami's own text."¹⁸¹ He depicted Alexander wearing green to demonstrate his pious nature and spiritual state (fig. 3.22). Mir Musawwir employed the color green for both Alexander and the holy man to emphasize the same point as Bihzad in reference to Nizami's text (fig. 3.23). The association of green with Muhammad must have played a role in the choice of color. The color green is also considered the color of the martyrs.¹⁸² Depicting the ruler wearing the same color as the Prophet would accentuate his pious nature in the eyes of the viewers. Similar green symbolism was used in the *mi'raj* paintings discussed earlier.

¹⁷⁹ Roland, *Colour and Symbolism*, 19-20.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 19-20.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 20.

¹⁸² Fierro, "Roads to Paradise," 995.

Chapter 4

Book Paintings: *The Haft Paykar*

God's art inspires me. I will make a likeness of the heavenly spheres; He'll dwell protected all his life; on earth he'll govern like the sky. To do this I will build for him, like seven strong forts, seven fair domes, Each of a different hue, and all than hundred fanes more beautiful. The king has seven idols fair; each one a country's banner bears. Each clime is firmly governed by its sister planet. Every day of the week, as all know well, is by one planet clearly ruled. On such auspicious feast-days, let him in a dome his pleasure seeks; Don robes of that dome's hue; drink wine with the fair bride who dwells within.¹⁸³

The *Haft Paykar* (Seven Beauties or Seven Figures) is one of the most famous poems of Nizami in which color symbolism is discussed. It is one of five poems written and collected under the title *Khamasa* or quintet. The *Haft Paykar* was commissioned by the ruler of Maragha, 'Ala' al-Din Korp Arslan in 1197.¹⁸⁴ It is based on the life of the Sasanian ruler Bahram Gur.¹⁸⁵ The poem is divided into three parts: the first part narrates his early life, the last part focuses on his rule as a king ending with his poetic demise (he disappeared into a cave),¹⁸⁶ while the middle part recounts his story with his seven brides, each princess from a different clime (India, Rome, Khwarazm, Siqlab, Maghrib, China and Persia). This middle section of the poem, which recounts seven different tales, each told by one of the princesses, is described by Meisami as an 'interlude.'¹⁸⁷ This break in the story is considered the turning point in the life of Bahram Gur and marks his transformation from a heroic reckless youth

¹⁸³ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 101-102.

¹⁸⁴ Cross, "The many Colors of Love," 58.

¹⁸⁵ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, xv, xxi.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 257.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, xvii.

into a righteous and mature king.¹⁸⁸ According to Cross, “the horizontal-linear movement of the story stalls and shifts into a vertical-transcendental arc.”¹⁸⁹ He considered it as a narrative pause. For the purpose of this chapter, the focus will be on the color symbolism in the seven tales narrated by the seven princesses.

Bahram Gur built seven different colored pavilions for each of the princesses. He visited each of them on a specific day of the week and during his visit the princess would narrate a story. Each princess is represented by a certain color that was linked to her clime and corresponded to a certain celestial body (see fig. 4.1).

Within that fort, the seven domes the seven planets' natures owned. The hue of each of the star-knower weighted, against each planet's cast assayed. The dome of Saturn, as was fit, was veiled in musky black; while that of Jupiter, just as it should, received the hue of sandalwood. The one that Mars encompassed clasped red as its emblem; as for that the Sun informed, bright bands of gold made its hue yellow. That which hoped for Venus-like adornment blazed as bright and white as Venus's face. That one sustained by Mercury was turquoise-hued, like victory. While that towards whose tower the Moon went forth, was clad in verdant green, like Bahram's fortune. Thus were raised those domes whose forms the planet gave. The Seven climes to them were tied, the seven princesses their brides. Each one in color and in mode, had made one dome her own abode, and everything within it made the selfsame hue the dome displayed.¹⁹⁰

The metaphorical interpretation of the seven pavilions mentioned in the *Haft Paykar* can be linked to the seven stages of the Sufi's mystical path. Cross divided the colors of the domes into two main categories; earthly (or physical) colors and spiritual (or neutral) colors.¹⁹¹ Red, green, blue, and yellow represent the physical aspects of the universe, while black, white and

¹⁸⁸ Cross, “The many Colors of Love,” 59.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 58.

¹⁹⁰ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 104-105.

¹⁹¹ Cross, “The Many Colors of Love,” 60.

brown represent the unearthly properties of the spirit.¹⁹² Sufis like Suhrawardi (d. 1191) and Najm al-din Kubra (d. 1220) discussed the concept of the seven-stage mystical path and they connected each stage with a specific color.¹⁹³ Farid al-din ‘Aṭṭar (d. 1221) explored the same concept of the seven valleys in his *Mantiq al-tayr*.¹⁹⁴ In the *Haft Paykar* the same notion is discussed in the progression of Bahram Gur through the seven different colored pavilions. Each dome is linked with a distinct celestial body and a different day of the week. The king goes through a spiritual awakening as a result of his journey grasping “the underlying truths of the world that are embedded within the stories of the seven domes.”¹⁹⁵

The movement of the Sasanian hero, Bahram Gur, from the first black pavilion passing through the different colored ones (yellow, green, red, turquoise and sandalwood) reaching by the end of his journey, the white pavilion (and the Persian princess in the story) symbolizes the passage of his soul through the different stages on the mystical path, from black or darkness until it reaches white – the most purified state of the soul. Cross, in his recent study of color symbolism in the *Haft Paykar*, focused on the dichotomous poles of white and black and their correspondence in Islamic tradition to purity from concupiscence.¹⁹⁶ This concept will be discussed in more detail at the end of the chapter after studying the tale of each pavilion and the progression of Bahram Gur through the seven stories. Analyzing the metaphorical meaning of each color within the context of the seven tales will shed some light on the color symbolism in the paintings accompanying the poem.

¹⁹² Ibid, 60.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 62.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 62.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 62.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 52.

The black pavilion and the tale of the Indian Princess Furak

Furak the Raja's daughter fair; more than the moon's her beauty rare.¹⁹⁷

The first visit of Bahram Gur was to the black pavilion. Figures 4.2-5 depict the king as well as the Indian princess wearing black robes. The prevalent color in the pavilion decoration as depicted in the three paintings is also black. This consistent use of black in the paintings (figures 4.2-5) from different manuscripts show the commitment of the artists to portray that scene from the story exactly as Nizami described. The first tale narrated by the Indian princess revolved around a king who indulged in the desire for knowledge. He found pleasure in the outside world and in hearing the stories of travelers. He built a guest house where he entertained and asked his guests about the wonders they had seen on their travels. There was one traveler in particular that changed the life of the curious king. He wore black from head to toe and when the king asked him about his tale, the traveler refrained from telling his story. The king's curiosity to know the story of the traveler in black led him on his mysterious journey to the Land of Lost Wit-Lack in China. He ended up in a garden so beautiful that it resembled paradise, filled with beautiful maidens. There he met the queen who promised to reveal the secret he was dying to learn if he practiced patience, integrity and chastity.

The whole place is yours, and you have command; but you must sit and rise with me, so that you become aware of my secret, and gain a share of my love.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 51-52.

¹⁹⁸ Cross, "The Many Colors of Love," 78.

If you can stay away from this fancy for a night, you'll obtain light from an everlasting candle. Don't sell a spring for a drop of water, for that will only sting you, while this is entirely wholesome. If your door is closed on one desire, you'll laugh in joy forever.¹⁹⁹

The king was promised the light from an everlasting candle, which metaphorically corresponds to the light verse in the Quran. The king, failing to restrain his desire for the queen, was punished by banishment from the paradise-like garden. His mourning for the loss of his newly found love drove him to wear black. His pursuit to uncover the secret the queen promised (following his untamed desires) led him to darkness. The description of the garden in the poem corresponds to that of paradise in the Quran and *hadith*; it is filled with flowers of different colors, fruits of different flavors and beautiful scents. The correlation between the banishment of the king following his base desires from the garden full of maidens correlates with the story of Adam in the Quran. According to the Quran, Adam was banished from paradise because he did not obey God's one condition, which was not to eat from the forbidden tree, corresponding to the queen fairy in the tale. Following Satan's advice, he tasted the fruits of the forbidden tree and was expelled from paradise as punishment. The similarity of the tale of the man in black to the story of Adam resides in their pursuit of the forbidden fruit. The king in black had the choice of all the beautiful maidens in the garden, but his desire for the queen led him to his demise and Adam's longing for the only forbidden tree in paradise led to his banishment from heaven.

And O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise and eat from wherever you will but do not approach this tree, lest you be among the wrongdoers. (Q 7:19)

So he made them fall, through deception. And when they tasted of the tree, their private parts became apparent to them, and they began to fasten together over themselves from the leaves

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 79.

of Paradise. And their Lord called to them, "Did I not forbid you from that tree and tell you that Satan is to you a clear enemy? They said, Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers. [Allah] said, Descend, being to one another enemies. And for you on the earth is a place of settlement and enjoyment for a time. He said, therein you will live, and therein you will die, and from it you will be brought forth. O children of Adam, We have bestowed upon you clothing to conceal your private parts and as adornment. But the clothing of righteousness - that is best. That is from the signs of Allah that perhaps they will remember. (Q. 7: 22-26)

The main theme of the story of the black pavilion revolves around repentance and punishment. The statement “the clothing of righteousness” corresponds to the metaphorical use of the color black in the tale to symbolize remorse and the return to the righteous path. The choice of black also matches the perception of the color in the Muslim tradition as demonstrated in the following passage.

[other] faces, that Day, will have upon them dust; Blackness will cover them; Those are the disbelievers, the wicked ones. (Q. 80: 42)

The yellow pavilion and the tale of the Byzantine Princess Humay

Wise Qaysar's daughter, fair Humay, noble in name and nature she.²⁰⁰

The tale of the yellow pavilion revolves around a king in Iraq who lived in solitude. His horoscope predicted that he would ‘dwell in conflicts’ if he was ever to be married.²⁰¹ He spent his time moving from one beautiful maiden to the next. He was called the Slave Selling King. Vanity and deceit were his ultimate fear. In his palace lived a hunchbacked woman

²⁰⁰ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 51-52.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 133.

who would fill the hearts of his beautiful maidens with pride so that they would lose the king's trust. The maidens he bought would turn from humble and truthful companions into arrogant and deceitful ones. One day he bought a stunning maiden who served him well. She did not change and the old woman could not turn her against her king as she did with the other maidens. The king fell in love with her for her truthful and humble nature. She told him her secret that the women in her race died in childbirth. She confided in him that she would prefer to live rather than die pursuing her desires. The hunchbacked woman tricked the king into one of her games to get the maiden to fall in love with him by igniting her jealousy. The story ended when the maiden and the king spoke the truth and finally declared their love for each other. The metaphorical use of yellow in Nizami's poem represented primarily truth, honesty, beauty and joy.

Yellow is the source of joy; 'tis that makes saffroned *halva* taste so sweet. Don't look at saffron's yellow; hail the smiles it brings. A yellow veil makes bright the candle's flame; the Calf of Gold from yellow gained its worth. Bright yellow, gold's the source of cheer; for this yellow ochre dear.²⁰²

Saffron is associated to good fortune.²⁰³ The use of the color yellow to Nizami reference to the yellow calf's echoes the color yellow that was used to describe the bright pleasant color of a cow chosen as a sacrifice by God. The metaphorical use of yellow is the same.

They said, "Call upon your Lord to show us what is her color." He said, "He says, 'It is a yellow cow, bright in color - pleasing to the observers.' (2:69)

Bahram Gur and his princess are depicted in bright yellow in figures 4.6-8 portraying the emotions that Nizami was trying to deliver in his poem. The use of warm hues can be

²⁰² Ibid, 144.

²⁰³ Meisami, "Nasir-i Khusraw," 245.

seen in the palette used by the painter to depict the decoration of the pavilion to follow the same metaphorical use of yellow in the tale. Figure 4.9 depicts a scene from the *Haft Paykar* where Fitna, the slave girl, is carrying an ox on her shoulder to impress Bahram Gur. This part of the story lies in the beginning of the poem discussing the early life of Bahram Gur. He was on one of his hunting trips accompanied by Fitna who was his harp playing slave. She was honest, beautiful and talented. Nizami used multiple references to the color yellow in his description of Fitna's beauty in his poem: "Bright faced like spring in paradise; like oil and honey mixed was she, as sweet and smooth as *paluda* (it is a sweet dish made of milk, sugar and flour)." ²⁰⁴ When he asked her about his hunting skills and strength, she replied honestly that his hunting skills were due to practice more than strength. Out of rage from her reply he ordered her death. The officer responsible for the execution felt sorry for Fitna and refused to kill her. Fitna practiced for six years to carry a calf over her shoulders up the stairs until it became a full grown ox to prove to the king that practice indeed is a powerful tool. She then asked the officer to invite Bahram Gur to feast after the hunt and demonstrated her strength. He asked for her forgiveness and married her. The depiction of Fitna in bright yellow in figure 4.9 corresponds with two notions according to Nizami; it represents the joy Bahram Gur felt seeing her once again after regretting his decision to kill her, and it relates with her honesty and beauty. The metaphorical use of yellow in the story of Bahram Gur and Fitna, as well as in the tale of the yellow pavilion, are linked to the same notion. It is reflected in the symbolic use of yellow in the corresponding paintings (figs. 4.6-9).

The green pavilion and the tale of the Tartar Princess Naz-Pari

²⁰⁴ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 76; Schimmel, *Make a shield from wisdom*, 20.

Khawarazmshah's daughter, Naz-Pari: a graceful, strutting partridge she.²⁰⁵

The tale of the green pavilion revolves around Bishr who was mesmerized by the beauty of a woman when her veil was lifted by the wind. He decided to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to repent his temptation. On his route back he met Malikha, a sinful man, who was consumed by his arrogance and know-it all attitude. Malikha drowned in a well when he mistook it for a jar of water buried in the desert. After the demise of Malikha, Bishr wanted to return his belongings to Malikha's wife who happened to be the woman he fell in love with before his pilgrimage. She was fascinated by his honesty and agreed to marry him. The main theme of the story is the importance of modesty, chastity and faithfulness. Figure 4.12 depicts Bishr searching for the body of Malikha after drowning in the Well of Being. Bishr is wearing a black and blue robe symbolizing his grief for Malikha's demise and his grief for straying off his righteous path. The color black symbolized repentance in the black pavilion story and grief over sinful desires. The robe of the wicked Malikha is blue. The use of blue for the mourning of the lost soul of Malikha is mirrored in the story of the blue pavilion as will be discussed later. It can also be linked to a notion discussed in Chapter 2 by al-Hujwiri; dervishes wear blue as a sign of mourning for the misfortune of humans.²⁰⁶

Figures 4.10-11 depict Bahram Gur and his princess wearing green according to Nizami's description: "Don robes of that dome's hue."²⁰⁷ The choice of green for that tale corresponds with its perception in Islamic tradition; it was Prophet Muhammad's favorite color.²⁰⁸ Pilgrims sometimes used to paint the door of their houses green to indicate that they

²⁰⁵ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 51-52.

²⁰⁶ Blair and Bloom, "Color in Islamic Art," 25.

²⁰⁷ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 101.

²⁰⁸ Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics*, 6.

had completed their pilgrimage.²⁰⁹ In the Sufi tradition green is the color associated with a higher stage on the mystical path and linking that specific color to the tale of Bishr with his obvious saintly attributes is mirroring the same notion associated with green in Islamic culture.²¹⁰ According to traditional tales, emerald possesses a powerful talismanic power in fighting evil which corresponds to the struggle that Bishr endured in fighting his untamed desire for the woman he loves.²¹¹

The red pavilion and the tale of the Slavic Princess Nasrin-Nush

The Slav king's daughter, Nasrin-Nush, a Chinese Turk in Grecian dress.²¹²

The tale of the red pavilion revolves around the notion of courage which corresponds with the association of red in Islamic culture (figs. 4.13-14) The planet Mars, governing the red pavilion, was the symbol of war and is depicted as a red warrior as shown in figure 3.20.²¹³

The tale of the red pavilion narrates the story of a Russian princess who was skilled in all the arts of sorcery and magic and could not find a man worthy of her love.²¹⁴ She locked herself in a fortress on a high isolated mountain surrounded by talismans; she was called the Lady of the Fort. The princess declared that she would only be wed to the man who would be able to pass all the talismans and find the secret entrance to the fort. Many brave men had tried and failed until one youth succeeded in deciphering all the talismans and found the secret gate to the fortress, and as a result won the princess's heart. Nizami used the color red for the

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 6.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 28.

²¹¹ Shimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 113.

²¹² Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 51-52.

²¹³ Simpson, "Why My Name is Red," 294.

²¹⁴ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, xviii.

description of the Russian princess: “rosy-faced, seductive with enchanting eyes.” The metaphorical use of red in the poem to depict seduction was discussed earlier in Chapter 3 in figure 3.19 depicting Joseph trying to escape from Zulaykha; she was portrayed wearing a red garment. The choice of red was used to symbolize the temptation of love and the powerful emotions that endangered the good nature of the Prophet Joseph. Red has a dual identity in Islamic tradition.²¹⁵ It is used to symbolize the life cycle, with love and desire on one side, and war and violence on another.²¹⁶ It is considered the life force of love and war which was brilliantly depicted in the tale of the red pavilion. The story juxtaposes the two extremes of red between the seduction of the Russian Princess and her powerful effect on men which led them to their demise on one side, and the courageous nature of the young men who fought bravely and surpassed all the obstacles to prove his worth on the other.

Since this was bloody work (he said), the cruel sphere’s game, he dressed in red, and entered in that sea of blood, with (like his tears) a blood-red robe. He thought not for himself; but men set up a cry, reproaching him. ‘I strive not for myself,’ he said, but to avenge a thousand heads. I’ll lift this deadly yoke from them or lose my head in the attempt.’ When he has dipped his robe in blood, he pitched his tent, and grasped his sword. Whoever heard of his intent – that lion heart on vengeance bent – to that endeavor added his resolve, that he might soon succeed.²¹⁷

In the previous passage the young man is portrayed wearing a red robe dipped in blood to symbolize his bravery and courage. According to belief red had the power to sooth the heart in battle or to give courage.²¹⁸ It was also associated with energy and strength.²¹⁹ Bahram Gur

²¹⁵ Simpson, “Why My Name is Red,” 294.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 294.

²¹⁷ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 166-167.

²¹⁸ Hell, “‘Aķīķ.”

²¹⁹ Schimmel and Soucek, “Color,” 46-50.

was usually dressed in red when depicted in combat, hunting or enthroned.²²⁰ Figure 4.15 depicts a scene of Bahram Gur slaying a dragon dressed in red which matches the same concept discussed in the red pavilion tale.

The blue (or turquoise) pavilion and the tale of the Princess Azargun from the Maghrib

The Maghreb's princess, Azaryun, a sun like day-increasing moon.²²¹

The princess in the blue pavilion narrates the story of the Egyptian youth Mahan. The young man is led into the desert by a demon who disguised himself as a friend. The young man got lost in the desert. He met a couple, then a rider who led him further into a waste land filled with demons (fig. 4.22). He was rescued by an old man who promised him safety and wealth if he managed to wait in a giant sandalwood tree until summoned, without speaking to or interacting with anyone. Mahan could not keep his promise when he met a beautiful maiden who invited him to join her and her attendants in a feast (fig. 4.23). The beautiful lady turned out to be a demon in disguise and Mahan fainted from distress. He woke up to find the maidens gone and the garden transformed into a wasteland. He repented to God who rewarded him by a vision of the Prophet Khidr who guided him back home. "There he finds his friends in mourning for him, and dons blue robes of mourning in renunciation of the world."²²² The association of the color blue with mourning, repentance and grief has been discussed by Nizami in the earlier story discussed in the chapter, about the merchant Mahan. Al-Hujwiri also believed that dervishes wore blue to mourn humans' misfortune.

²²⁰ Simpson, "Why My Name is Red," 294.

²²¹ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 51-2.

²²² Ibid, xix.

Figures 4.16-20 depict Bahram Gur in the turquoise or blue pavilion. There were two different hues of blue used in the paintings discussed in this chapter. Figures 4.16, 4.18 and 4.20 portray the pavilions in a turquoise hue while figures 4.17, 4.19 and 4.21 show a darker shade of blue. The two different hues of blue symbolize two different notions. The first was already discussed earlier, which is renunciation or mourning associated with the dark shade of blue. The same association was demonstrated in Chapter 3 while discussing the Prophet's depiction in Ilkhanid paintings. The second is the use of turquoise or *firuz*, which is according to al-Tifashi's claim is what Persian kings used to wear to deflect the danger of death by land; a notion that was discussed in Chapter 2.²²³ The correlation between this specific color to Mahan story is relevant. He was rescued by the end of the story and was led back home after being lost in a wasteland. The same notion was discussed by Ibn al-Akfani since he referred to *firuz* as being the stone of victory or *hajar al-ghalaba*.²²⁴ These references given to turquoise by other Muslim scholars could also be associated with Nizami's metaphorical use of the color in the poem.

Figure 4.22 depicts Mahan confronting the demons in the desert. The use of dark colors to represent the demons corresponds to the same notion discussed in the black pavilion story; black corresponds to darkness and evil. Mahan is depicted wearing red which was used as a reference to courage and blood in the red pavilion tale. Mahan literally confronted his demons and with God's guidance succeeded in his quest. The same association can also be seen in the red robe of Bahram Gur in his hunting trip (fig. 4.15). Figure 4.23 depicts Mahan in the garden with the fairy queen before transforming into a demon. The fairy queen in this painting is portrayed wearing a red garment which is used in this scene to symbolize

²²³ Ruska and Plessner, "*Firuzadj*."

²²⁴ Ibid.

seduction as seen in figure 3.19 depicting Zulaykha. Mahan is wearing a white robe which can be used to demonstrate his virtuous nature. The contrast between the red garment of the devious queen fairy and the white robe of Mahan mirrors the same notion of Nizami in his poem; the innocent soul being seduced by the evil demon.

The sandalwood pavilion and the tale of the Chinese Princess Yaghma-Naz

Yaghma-Naz, daughter of the Khaqan, charmer of Chin and Turkestan.²²⁵

The tale of the sandalwood pavilion discusses the story of two travelers, Good and Evil. After being lost in the desert, Evil betrayed Good. He stole his precious gems and his water supply, blinded him then left him in the desert to die. Good was saved by a Kurdish chief who managed to cure his eyesight with a remedy he made from sandalwood leaves. Good repaid the Kurdish chief by helping him in his business. He then married the chief's daughter. Time passed and fate brought Good and Evil together once more. They met by coincidence and Good, for his virtuous nature, forgave Evil for his betrayal. Evil was killed at the end by the Kurdish chief for all his ill doing. The story discussed the concept of good and evil in its very basic form. The same notion can be observed in the contrast between the two tales of the white and black pavilions, as will be explored in more details later. The choice of the sandalwood color as seen in figures 4.24-5 mimics the earthly composition of the tree which plays a pivotal role in the turning of events. The tale is divided into two parts; the beginning where Good is literally blinded by Evil and left for dead and the second part when Good is saved by the noble Kurd. The sandalwood tree represented the remedy or the cure of Good's blindness. Cross discussed the significance of black, white and sandalwood as symbols of spiritual colors. The attribution of sandalwood with this fundamental spiritual conflict

²²⁵ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 51-2.

between good and evil residing in every human is worth examining.²²⁶ Considering the black pavilion story which discussed the repercussion of following one's whims and desires in contrast to the white pavilion story which discussed the reward of following the righteous path, the sandalwood pavilion fit right in the middle. It discussed the struggle in each human between Good and Evil. Evil can sometime blind Good from the righteous path, but a true believer would find his way back and restore his sight (or faith). The brown color used to depict Bahram Gur's robe, the princess's garment and the decoration in the pavilion (figs. 4.24-5) gives a humble feel to the paintings which portrays the main spiritual elements as in the poem.

In sandalwood lies the soul's ease; its odour doth the spirit please. Rubbed sandalwood cures headache.
Treats the fevered heart, the liver's heat. That sandal is earth's colour is no wonder, it earth's colour gives.²²⁷

The white pavilion and tale of the Persian Princess Durr-Siti

Kisra's daughter, of Kaykavus' line, fair as peacock, Durr-Siti named.²²⁸

The contrast between the two tales of the white and black pavilions symbolizes the purification and awakening of Bahram Gur's soul. He passed from darkness, through all the different colors representing the different stages on the mystical path to emerge as a purified soul at the end of his journey. The black pavilion story revolves around a king open to the world longing for human desires while the story of the white pavilion begins with a virtuous youth living in a garden and shutting out the world. One day he found some beautiful

²²⁶ Cross, "The Many Colors of Love," 60.

²²⁷ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 216.

²²⁸ Ibid, 51-2.

maidens inside his garden and instantly fell in love with one of them. His desire for the woman he loved almost made him give up on his promise of chastity. After a series of misfortunate events, the story ends when the young man returned to the righteous path and married the beautiful maiden.

The two stories of the black and white pavilion are placed at opposite ends of the poem, revealing the polarity of the two colors and their symbolism of righteousness and sinfulness. In the first story, the king was consumed with the pleasures of the outside world, seeking instant gratification for his curiosity and desire, then ended up in mourning depicted in the black robe. In the second story, the young man locked himself up from the outside world trying to protect his soul from the sins of the desires of the flesh. He was rewarded for his virtue, patience and purity. The color symbolism in the poem is very apparent in the two different endings of the stories. If a person practiced modesty and rose above his human nature, he would be rewarded with his utmost desires, while if he followed his base yearnings, his soul would end up in mourning.²²⁹ The contrast between the beginning of the two stories is interesting as well; one starts with an experienced king, representing the human state after being stained by earthly desires, and the other starts with an unexperienced (or virgin) youth representing the human state before being polluted by worldly pleasures. The darkness in the human soul is contrasted with the white purified path of righteousness.

Figures 4.26-7 depict the scene of Bahram Gur in the white pavilion. The prevalent use of white mirrors Nizami's notion in the tale. Figure 4.28 depicts the scene of the young man observing the bathing maidens in his garden. He is dressed in white which corresponds with purity and innocence. The young man is portrayed in the poem by being a virtuous

²²⁹ Cross, "The Many Colors of Love," 55.

youth who took the oath of chastity. The choice of white to depict the hero in the painting matches Nizami's metaphorical use of the color in his poem. The color white is associated with the pearl which is one of the most precious and valuable gems in ancient times. The color of the pearl symbolizes beauty, purity and luxury. Al-Dimashqi discussed the extraction process of pearls. Due to the hardship involved in the process, its color is usually correlated with rarity and purity.²³⁰ The association of the young man story with the color white in Nizami's poem has the same metaphorical meaning.

The consistency of the symbolic use of color to depict a certain status or emotion proves the importance of this correlation in the Islamic tradition, in literature as well as in book paintings. Considering the seven tales of Nizami previously discussed, black was used consistently to denote repentance, punishment and darkness. Yellow was used to represent joy and beauty. Green was used to refer to modesty and saintly qualities. Red had a dual nature in the Islamic tradition.²³¹ It was used to denote both love and seduction on one side, and blood, courage and strength on the other. Dark blue was used to represent mourning, repentance and grief. Turquoise, being perceived as a good omen, signified the ability to surpass hardship. Both ideas can be noticed in the blue pavilion story. The sandalwood color had spiritual references in the poem; it was used to denote the dual nature of the soul. The struggle between good and evil in humans constitute their humble nature. The consistent use of white to signify virtue and purity is almost constant in Islamic culture. Nizami's metaphorical use of color in his seven tales corresponded to the accompanying paintings. The prevailing color in each painting corresponded to the context of its tale.

²³⁰ Ruska, "*Al-Durr*."

²³¹ Simpson, "Why My Name is Red," 294.

Chapter 5

Book Paintings: Majnun and Layla

The character of Majnun (madman) in the story is based on the accounts of the Arabic poet Qays ibn al-Mulawwah of the tribe of Banu ‘Amir of Arabia and his unfortunate love story with his cousin Layla. The term Majnun Layla is derived from Qays’s madness for his cousin so that he was literally named ‘Mad for Layla.’ He was not allowed to wed her for violating tribal conventions by declaring his love openly by his poetry.²³² The doomed fate of Majnun inspired poets such as Nizami Ganjavi (1188-92), Amir Khusraw Dihlavi (1298-99) and Jami (1484). Ibn Qutaiba’s (d. 889) account of the story in *Kitab al-Shi‘r wa’l-Shu‘ara* was one of the earliest existing versions; it was produced in the ninth century. Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (d. 967) also wrote about Majnun and Layla in his book *Kitab al-Aghani*.²³³ Many conservative Muslim scholars believed that passionate love could be a source of ‘concupiscence’ (*hawa*) if it reached the level of obsession or madness.²³⁴ Majnun’s idealization of Layla increased with their separation causing her to acquire ‘transcendental attributes.’²³⁵ The longer the separation, the more intimate he became with Layla’s idealized image rather than her actual self. Majnun was in love with the idea of Layla which caused him to reject her at the end of the story when she offered herself to him.²³⁶ These ‘transcendental attributes’ were exaggerated in Nizami’s version of the story by adding a complicated plot that transformed it into an epic love story with a hint of some Sufi overtones which was celebrated in the Muslim world. The later versions of this epic love affair by other

²³² Haddad, “Introduction,” 7.

²³³ Ibid, 9.

²³⁴ Seyad-Gohrab, *Laylī and Majnūn*, 9.

²³⁵ Ibid, 19.

²³⁶ Ibid, 20.

poets such as Jami and Khusraw became a symbol of the Sufi's love for the divine, but it was not until Jami's version that a clear Sufi inclination could be detected.²³⁷ Jami, influenced by Nizami, gave Layla the Sufi connotation of divine beauty. Thus Majnun's yearning for Layla is presented as allegory of man's yearning for God.²³⁸ Majnun's association with wild animals in the desert connoted the solitude of a Sufi hermit. Jami also linked Majnun's movements to a dancing dervish.²³⁹ One of the most common means employed by Sufi writers to express their mystical notions was using myths, images and allegories. This had its effect on the way Muslim artists expressed themselves as well. It caused a shift in the imaginative creativity of the Muslim world whose famous literary and poetical accounts with mystical aspect, such as Majnun and Layla, left their mark.²⁴⁰ The story of Majnun became a source of inspiration for many artists in the production of book paintings among different other works of art.²⁴¹ The story was adapted into an opera entitled *Kais, or love in the deserts* by William Reeves in the early nineteenth century. The novel *Le Fou l'Elsa*, published in 1963 by Louis Aargon was also based on Jami's *Layla and Majnun* which in turn was based on Nizami's original version.²⁴²

As mentioned earlier the story of Majnun and Layla was based on the supposed historical accounts of Qays. Some poetic fragments were transmitted by narratives through the *isnad* method; Abu Bakr al-Walibi was believed to be one of these transmitters.²⁴³ He

²³⁷ Khairallah, *Love, madness, and poetry*, 12.

²³⁸ Haddad, "Introduction," 9.

²³⁹ *Ibid*, 9.

²⁴⁰ Khairallah, *Love, madness, and poetry*, 47.

²⁴¹ Seyad-Gohrab, *Laylī and Majnūn*, 27.

²⁴² *Ibid*, 30.

²⁴³ Khairallah, *Love, madness, and poetry*, 59.

probably lived in the ninth century and worked on collecting the anecdotes and poetic fragments attributed to Majnun in a *diwan*.²⁴⁴ Some of these collected verses have some strong metaphorical use of color; “When I touch her, my hand all but becomes dewy and green leaves grow upon its tips.”²⁴⁵ Majnun attributed some divine characteristics to Layla and accordingly he associated being away from her to annihilation; according to Majnun Layla represented life. The metaphorical use of green in the verse had the same connotation. He associated divine attributes to Layla such as the power to resurrect or create. According to Khairallah’s interpretation of the verse, “Layla’s presence has a divine resurrecting power.”²⁴⁶ The different later versions of the story, along with the associated paintings, showed some strong color allegory. This chapter will focus on deciphering the color symbolism in the book paintings depicting scenes from the story of Majnun and Layla in the accounts of Nizami, Khusraw, and Jami.

The depiction of Majnun in Nizami’s *Khamsa*

Nizami wrote Layla and Majnun in 1188 upon the request of Abu’l-Muzaffar Shirwanshah Akhsitan.²⁴⁷ The accounts of Qays have been a selection of anecdotes and poetic fragments until Nizami transformed it into “an organically conceived poetic romance.”²⁴⁸ The tribal setting of the story did not change much in Nizami’s version compared to the prior accounts, but the circumstances of their first encounter did; Majnun and Layla met at school when they were young. Layla’s father became concerned after

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 59.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 74.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 74.

²⁴⁷ Seyad-Gohrab, *Laylī and Majnūn*, 27.

²⁴⁸ Boullata. “Love, Madness, and Poetry,” 157.

hearing of their love affair and immediately removed her from school. He forbade her from seeing Majnun. The separation increased Majnun's longing for his beloved cousin and caused him to roam the desert singing about his love for Layla. He disconnected himself from society and lived in solitude among wild animals. He found peace and comfort in his isolation. Majnun's father in an effort to comfort his son agreed on his marriage to Layla but the girl's father refused. Nawfal, a friend of Majnun's tribe, tried to offer his support by attacking Layla's tribe in a failed effort to influence their decision. Layla's father gave her hand in marriage to Ibn Salam against her will. According to the story, Layla remained faithful to Majnun (she kept her virginity) even after her marriage. The lovers secretly met only to recite poetry to each other and "their love remained unconsummated."²⁴⁹ Years passed and Layla's husband's passed away but Majnun was so in love with the notion of the unattainable Layla that he could not actually be with her in real life. He withdrew into solitude once more and Layla died of a broken heart. Hearing of the death of his beloved Layla, Majnun could not deal with this unfortunate news and died on her grave. The story ended with a dream about Majnun and Layla where they were re-united in paradise celebrating their eternal love.²⁵⁰

Figures 5.1-3 depict the same episode from the story of Majnun where he meets his cousin Layla at the school. Majnun is wearing blue in two of the paintings (figs. 5.2-3) and red in the third (fig. 5.1). Layla is wearing a red robe and a blue cloak in figure 5.1, a red robe in figure 5.2 and a blue robe with a yellow cloak in figure 5.3. The choice of colors to depict the two lovers varied in the three paintings which is a feature that will be discussed in more

²⁴⁹ Koch, "The Mughal Emperor," 278.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 278.

detail. The choice of yellow to represent Layla in figure 5.3 is paralleled by Nizami's metaphorical use of the color in the *Haft Paykar* discussed earlier in Chapter 4. According to the poet it signified beauty, truth, honesty and joy which fit with Layla's description in the story.²⁵¹ In the Quran yellow was associated with both positive and negative connotations. It was used as to describe the color of crops during a drought, to describe the wrath of hell fire and in a different context to describe the bright pleasant color of the cow chosen as a sacrifice by God (30:51, 77:32-33, 2:69). The association of yellow with Layla served the three metaphors; she was the symbol of divine beauty, the source of Majnun's deprivation and his cause of suffering. Layla was depicted twice wearing red (figs. 5.1-2) which signified seduction or love. This color was used in Chapter 3 to depict Zulaykha (fig. 3.19) and in Chapter 4 in the red pavilion story of the *Haft Paykar*. Red as discussed earlier was used to symbolize the life cycle, with love and desire on one hand, and war and violence on the other.²⁵² In this episode the symbolic meaning referred to love and desire. it was often used to represent the divine essence which corresponded to Layla's transcendental attributes.²⁵³ Majnun was depicted only once wearing red (fig. 5.1) which was unusual compared to the rest of the paintings in this chapter. The choice of red in the beginning episode of the story was probably used to depict Majnun as a strong powerful youth prior his doomed love affair with Layla. Similarly red was associated with courage and strength as seen in Nizami's *Haft Paykar* in the depiction of Bahram Gur in his hunting scene (fig. 4.15).²⁵⁴ Blue was employed in the three paintings, either to depict Majnun or Layla which signified their ill-fated affair.²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ Meisami, *The Haft Paykar*, 144.

²⁵² Simpson, "Why My Name is Red," 294.

²⁵³ Ibid, 294.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 294; Schimmel and Soucek, "Color," 46-50

²⁵⁵ Meisami, "I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues," 124.

According to Meisami, the depiction of Majnun in blue has been a consistent trait in the illustrated manuscripts produced in Iran and western Afghanistan during the Timurid, Safavid and Mughal periods, from the early fifteenth century through the late sixteenth.²⁵⁶ As discussed earlier in Chapters 3 and 4, blue has been associated with mourning and grief as seen in the stories of the green and blue pavilions of Nizami's *Haft Paykar* (figs 4.12, 17, 19 and 21). It has also been associated with the Sufi's belief in mourning human sins as depicted in the Ilkhanid *Mi'rajnama*. The Prophet Muhammad was depicted in blue which can be interpreted using Sufi references as denoting modesty and the freedom from human sins (figs. 3.1 and 3.12-16).²⁵⁷ Likewise Majnun's isolation in the desert, his detachment and his search for truth, love and connection embodied in the character of Layla in the story corresponded with the detachment of Sufis, saints and Prophets from worldly pleasures and their orientation toward the divine; Layla was a symbol of the divine presence.

Figures 5.4-6 depicts Majnun among the wild animals in the desert. The physical appearance of Majnun fits within the description of 'love sickness' as it was referred to in early Islamic tradition (showing pale skin and emaciated body).²⁵⁸ Nizami added another dimension to his physical description which is nakedness.²⁵⁹ Majnun is depicted wearing only a plain blue cloth to cover his lower body. The combination of blue with semi-nudity referred to his mystical trance as described by Nizami in his poem. He disconnected himself from worldly affairs and began his journey to the divine portrayed in the character of Layla in the story. Majnun's father in an attempt to help his son, met with Layla's father to try to convince

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 123.

²⁵⁷ Blair and Bloom, "Color in Islamic Art," 25.

²⁵⁸ Seyad-Gohrab, *Laylī and Majnūn*, 79-80.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, 80.

him to approve the couple's marriage. Majnun was rejected by Layla's tribe so his father took him to the Ka'ba to treat his lovesickness and to help him heal his troubled soul (fig. 5.14). Majnun is depicted wearing dark blue or black *ihram* clothes matching the mourning of losing his beloved. Figures 5.7-9 portrays the same episode from the story where Nawfal attacked Layla's tribe in a failed effort to influence their decision. In figures 5.8-9 Majnun is depicted wearing a plain blue cloth while in figure 5.7, from the manuscript made for the Mughal Emperor Akbar, he is wearing white which is the color of mourning in Hindu culture.²⁶⁰

Figure 5.10 depicts a scene of the fainting couple with Zayd in the middle of both lovers trying to revive them. Majnun is depicted wearing blue and Layla yellow. The consistency of using blue to depict Majnun in most of the paintings in this chapter shows a strong sense of commitment on the artists' part to display the same melancholic state of Majnun as expressed by the author. Blue was constantly used to refer to renunciation or mourning as discussed previously in Chapter 3 and 4; the same reference is highlighted in this chapter in the depiction of Majnun. From the choice of yellow for Layla we can infer her heavenly beauty, it being the source of Majnun's annihilation and suffering as discussed earlier in figure 5.3.

During his isolation in the wilderness, Majnun met a woman leading an old man around in chains, who was pretending to be a madman in order to seek charity. Majnun begged her to let him take his place for a chance to see his beloved Layla.²⁶¹ Figure 5.11 shows the episode where Majnun is standing in front of Layla's tent in chains. He is portrayed as a skinny youth wearing a ragged blue cloth demonstrating his miserable state.

²⁶⁰ Meisami, "I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues," 150.

²⁶¹ Ibid, 136.

Layla is also depicted wearing a dark blue robe with a green cloak. The choice of blue for both lovers in this scene refers to their grief and sorrow caused by their separation; it is worth noting that the choice of blue for Layla in the illustrations is generally rare. Green is considered a heavenly color and it fits with Layla's mystical attributes in the story. The longing to see Layla is what forced Majnun out of his isolation. He endured humiliation from her tribe in order to see her one more time; in figure 5.11 children are throwing stones at him. Majnun's longing for Layla could also be interpreted as his longing for the divine and celestial beauty, hence depicting Layla in green gives her celestial characteristics similar to saints and Prophets. There is a significant connection between mysticism and green.²⁶² In the Sufi tradition it is the color associated with a higher stage on the mystical path and it is sometimes used to represent life itself.²⁶³ Thus the appropriation of the color green with Layla fits within the context of the story.

Figure 5.12 shows a scene of Majnun and Layla in the palm grove. Layla, desperate to see Majnun, asked an old man to lead her to him. They met in the palm grove, he recited poetry to her and then she returned back to her tribe. Majnun is depicted wearing his usual blue loincloth and Layla is wearing a red robe and a blue-green cloak. The choice of red for Layla is similar to figures 5.1-2. The setting of the scene in figure 5.12 is a romantic one; the two lovers are alone in a secluded palm grove with Majnun reciting *ghazal* (romantic poetry) to his beloved Layla. The color red was employed in figure 3.12 for Layla's robe as a symbol for love, seduction and longing.

Majnun was visited by his mother shortly prior to her death as depicted in figure 5.13. The scene depicts Majnun in a blue scarf and a yellow ragged cloth. The depiction of Majnun

²⁶² Shimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 113.

²⁶³ Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics*, 28.

in yellow does not match the rest of the paintings discussed in this chapter, but it can be interpreted within the context of the story. According to Nizami Majnun's mother was worried about him from his isolation in the desert without a companion. The depiction of yellow to portray Majnun reflect his mother's concern in regard to his love deprivation and loneliness. Yellow was used in the Quran as metaphor for drought and torture as discussed earlier. In Chapter 3 it was employed to depict the punishment of sinners (fig. 3.8) and the lack of faith in Abu Jahl's heart (fig. 3.9). Al-Ghazali believed that yellow signified suffering.²⁶⁴ As discussed earlier in Chapter 3, drought could be interpreted as 'prolonged absence;' in this instance the prolonged absence of Layla. Figure 5.15 depicts Majnun at his father's grave mourning his death. He is portrayed as an emaciated worn-out figure in a dark blue loincloth. Figures 5.16 depicts Majnun on Layla's grave after her death. He is portrayed in a weathered state representing grief for Layla. The correlation of mourning and blue has been established in the past chapter when the stories of the green and blue pavilions of Nizami's *Haft Paykar* were discussed (figs 4.12, 17, 19 and 21).

Khusraw's and Jami's Accounts

Majnun and Layla was copied by Amir Khusraw Dihlavi (1298-99) and Jami (1484). The two versions are based on Nizami's story as discussed in the introduction of this chapter. There are only minor differences between Nizami's plot and theirs. Figure 5.17 shows the celebration of Qays's birth. Majnun is depicted as an infant in his mother's arms wearing blue (at the upper right part of the painting) to signify his misfortune as predicted by astrologers in Amir Khusraw's version of the story.²⁶⁵ Meisami quotes two passages from the

²⁶⁴ Sebastian, "The Poetics of Islamic Eschatology," 198.

²⁶⁵ Meisami, "I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues," 123.

Khusraw's *Khamsa*:

After the battle between Nawfal and Laila's tribe, Majnun says to Nawfal: "Since the garment of my fortune is blue (*kabud*), what use is there in fighting?"²⁶⁶

Majnun asks a nightingale – which, like himself, suffers from love (of the unattainable rose) – to carry his plaint to Layli. Should she, one day, seek a sign of him in the garden, she will find it in the flowers: the tulip bears a fiery heart like his, the narcissus weeps like him, the jasmine is yellow as is he, and "that blue (*azraq*) which the violet bears on its shoulder: it wears blue (*kabud*) because of my mourning."²⁶⁷

These bridge the gap between the written words and the paintings associated with them.

According to Dihlavi, the intended use of the color blue was to demonstrate the mourning state of Majnun over the loss of his loved ones among other unfortunate events along the story. Al-Hujwiri had the same theory about why dervishes wear blue; as a sign of mourning for the misfortune of humans.²⁶⁸

In Jami's version of the story, the *Falnama (Book of Omens)*, the two lovers met for the first time when Majnun visited Layla's tribe after hearing about her unparalleled beauty (fig. 5.18). He is depicted in the illustration wearing a dark fancy blue robe while Layla is wearing yellow.²⁶⁹ Golden or yellow, green and white are among the most popular colors in the adornments of heavenly people.²⁷⁰ The depiction of Layla, on the first day she met Majnun, wearing a bright yellow robe corresponds with Daneshgar's interpretation of heavenly colors. The same notion was expressed by Nizami in the *Haft Paykar* in the tale of

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 150.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 150.

²⁶⁸ Blair and Bloom, "Color in Islamic Art", 25.

²⁶⁹ Meisami, "I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues," 126.

²⁷⁰ Daneshgar, "Perceptions of Color," 216.

the yellow pavilion discussed in Chapter 4 (figs. 4.6-9). He used yellow as a metaphor for joy combined with the underlying sadness of their ill-fated love affair. Another scene from the same manuscript of Jami depicts the young man wearing blue and standing with his father at the Ka‘ba (fig. 5.20). The news of Majnun’s prayer spread through Arabia. Layla’s father being determined to kill the youth sent troops to his village, which led Majnun to retire to the desert as an outlaw.²⁷¹ According to Jami Layla was described as the “light of the illustrious lamp.”²⁷² He referred to Layla as a bright shiny lamp which is a metaphor for her divine light. The notion of connecting Layla to heavenly light has been discussed by Nizami as well in figures 5.3 and 5.10.

Figure 5.19, from Jami’s *Haft Awrang*, depicts Majnun visiting Layla’s camp. According to Jami’s version of the story, Majnun heard that Layla’s tribe has gone on the pilgrimage so he followed the pilgrims caravans hoping to find Layla.²⁷³ According to Meisami this painting is considered one of the most controversial images of Majnun.²⁷⁴ It has been called ‘enigmatic,’ ‘stylistically decadent,’ and ‘confusing,’ among other terms due to its random and busy nature.²⁷⁵ Majnun is depicted on the lower left of the painting wearing a blue shirt and brown loincloth. His presence in the painting is periphery and insignificant compared to the busy life of the camp depicted in the painting, which was probably the intention of the artist.²⁷⁶

²⁷¹ Meisami, “I Guess That’s Why They Call It the Blues,” 129.

²⁷² Khairallah, *Love, madness, and poetry*, 119.

²⁷³ Meisami, “I Guess That’s Why They Call It the Blues,” 135.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 135.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 136.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 136.

According to Nizami, Majnun's physical description reflects his desolate state of being: "The cauldron of his frame had become cold."²⁷⁷ In another episode when Layla recalls Majnun: "O you who have a warm heart and a cold breath."²⁷⁸ The association of blue in the depiction of Majnun in the paintings are paralleled in Nizami's poem by the use of the term 'cold.' Cold colors such as blue are usually used to depict sadness, death, stillness and gloominess. "Like a night whose light is dead, Majnun had fallen down, a raven had stolen his eyes."²⁷⁹ The raven in Persian tradition is a sign of a bad omen. Nizami used the starless black night to represent Majnun's sorrow.²⁸⁰ The association of Majnun with dark or cold colors are consistently denoting his ill-fated love affair with Layla and his self-annihilation in pursuit of the divine. The symbolic reference to blue as being the color of mourning or repentance from human sins has been widely used in Islamic literature and paintings. Consistency in color symbolism can only mean an intentional use by the artists in their paintings to demonstrate a certain state of being and trigger certain emotions from the viewers, in the same way poets used it as a metaphorical tool to portray certain imagery for their readers.

Meisami discussed multiple paintings with the same color symbolism. The consistency of the artists in using the color blue must have had a significance. She considered it to be an iconographic tradition during that period of time in the region of Iran and western Afghanistan.²⁸¹ Blair and Bloom believed that color symbolism was directly

²⁷⁷ Seyad-Gohrab, *Laylī and Majnūn*, 84.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, 85.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 33.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 33.

²⁸¹ Meisami, "I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues," 148.

dependent on cultural and religious belief.²⁸² This same notion was addressed by Meisami in her discussion of the story of Majnun and Layla. As seen in this chapter, blue was the color employed to symbolize mourning and grief in Persian tradition, while white implied the same connotation in Hindu culture. There is a general consistency in the use of most colors to depict certain emotions in the Islamic tradition but every now and then some discrepancies might arise that can be traced to some rooted beliefs related to the geographical location or cultural backgrounds of the artists before his conversion to Islam (see chapter 1 and 2). Understanding the artists' background helps to decipher these codes when such discrepancies arise.

²⁸² Bloom and Blair, "Color in Islamic Art," 25.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Every work of art rests upon cosmological assumptions, and ... we as critics must discover those assumptions before we presume to interpret the work ... Without specifying a cosmological framework it is fatuous to discuss any theory of symbol or of language or of style or of structure or of anything else that we as critics talk about.²⁸³

If we consider color as a language with its own set of vocabulary, then understanding its meaning is essential in order to fully comprehend the beauty and purpose behind its employment. In reference to the opening passage, the assumptions that color symbolism rests upon are the collection of thoughts, beliefs and perceptions that are rooted deep in Islamic tradition and culture. In the first two chapters we explored the development of different color theories in Islamic art and the meanings of color in the Islamic tradition. This introduction was crucial for the analysis that followed in chapters three to five. We cannot thoroughly evaluate Islamic book paintings without exploring the assumptions and ideas that surrounded the artists and poets at their time of production.

Islamic scholars, artists and poets were surrounded by certain cultural and religious notions that affected their way of thinking and by extension their creativity. If we consider Nizami and Khusraw Dihlavi for example, certain similarities between both could be found in tracing their theories about color order. Comparing their body of work leads to the conclusion that their employment of color was not random. According to Khusraw Dihlavi seven is a sacred number as it symbolizes the cosmos; three was the number of the soul and four the number of the material universe.²⁸⁴ The same notion is mirrored in Nizami's *Haft*

²⁸³ Meisami, "Symbolic Structure," 191.

²⁸⁴ Ibid, 199.

Paykar in his choice of the seven pavilions as a representation of the mystical path of Bahram Gur. Cross's analysis of these seven colors matches Khusraw Dihlavi's notion since he similarly divided the colors of the domes into two categories; physical colors (red, green, blue, and yellow) and spiritual colors (black, white and brown).²⁸⁵ Scholars such as Suhrawardi and Najm al-din Kubra and Farid al-Din 'Aṭṭar referred to the same concept of the seven stages of the Sufis mystical path and they connected each stage with a specific color.²⁸⁶ In the *Haft Paykar* the same notion is discussed in the progression of Bahram Gur through the seven different colored pavilions. The metaphorical use of black to show repentance, then blue to represent mourning, ending in white which represents the purification of the soul with divine light—represented by the color white—displays a systematic progression that corresponds to Sufi tradition. The same notion can be expressed in Khusraw Dihlavi's words: "Sincere repentance becomes ... the light of the divine word in this world. Through the medium of repentance, it consumes his sins and purifies his soul."²⁸⁷ The interconnection between the ideas expressed by Muslim poets, artists and scholars is not arbitrary; there is an undeniable link that they all have in common. There are certain perceptions in regard to the meaning of colors which are clearly influenced by their surroundings such as religious belief, culture and tradition. The book paintings explored in chapters three, four and five point toward the same hypothesis; color symbolism does exist in Islamic art.

Leaman in his book *Islamic Aesthetics* addressed seven misconceptions about Islamic art which are common in this field of study. According to Batchelor the modern Western art

²⁸⁵ Cross, "The Many Colors of Love," 60.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 62.

²⁸⁷ Meisami, "Symbolic Structure," 196.

movement “was based on a distaste for colour” which affected the way Islamic art was viewed since it depended heavily on the use of luster colors.²⁸⁸ This profound correlation between Islamic art and colors was one of the major factors in discarding book paintings produced during the Islamic period as a genuine artistic creation by many scholars.²⁸⁹

Leaman used the term ‘the exotic Orient’ to refer to Islamic art in his book, which in his opinion caused a major drawback by categorizing this art movement based on the patronizing Western attitude towards Middle Eastern, Asian and North African cultures. This view of the East by art historians caused a huge misconception by disregarding Islamic art as an influential artistic movement.²⁹⁰ Trying to break away from this misconception, color should not be considered as a minor factor in art appreciation, on the contrary it is a key component in studying Islamic art.

Another misconception that Leaman discussed is the lack of understanding of Islamic thought which is one of the major drawbacks in appreciating it.²⁹¹ Different schools of thought in Islamic tradition had their effect on the formation of Islamic art such as Sufism. It had a major role in the restructuring of certain notions on artistic creation: “When Sufism became an important part of Islamic culture it changed the approach to literature and also to the visual arts, since Sufism produced a symbolic language of considerable complexity and interest.”²⁹²

The influence of Sufism on Islamic art has been discussed in Chapter 5 as an underlying notion in the story of Majnun and Layla, in Chapter 4 in Nizami’s *Haft Paykar*

²⁸⁸ Leaman, “Eleven Common mistakes,” 27.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, 27.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 27.

²⁹¹ Ibid, 28.

²⁹² Ibid, 28.

and in Chapter 3 in the Ilkhanid *Mi'rajnama*. Sunni-Sufi juxtaposition was a prominent feature in the Ilkhanid *Mi'rajnama* (figs. 3.1 and 3.12-16).²⁹³ According to Gruber, the Sufi connotations were reminiscent of the more mystical approach of the *mi'raj* story as promoted by al-Sulami and al-Qushayri.²⁹⁴ Some notions in Sufism are key to understanding the meaning of some Islamic paintings. Two of these ideas were recurrent in many of the paintings discussed in the previous chapters; the first is that a prophet was considered a representation of the “perfect man”, and second is that green had high mystical attributes and was considered a representation of life itself.²⁹⁵ Thus the correlation of the color green with Prophets and saints as discussed repeatedly in chapters three to five highlights the Sufi influence on book paintings as argued by Leaman. Considering the story of Majnun and Layla, the Prophet Joseph and Zulaykha (fig. 3.19), and Bahram Gur in the Seven pavilions, there is a common feature that can be traced; a mystical journey to attain a higher level of existence. They all revolve around the same concept of self-purification and seeking a connection with the divine. In the story of Joseph and Zulaykha, the prophet Joseph was depicted as the symbol of the perfect man (wearing green) and Zulaykha (wearing a red garment) was a symbol of the mystic in his search for the divine.²⁹⁶ The depiction of Zulaykha in red had some Sufi connotations as it was attributed to the state of divine presence; a red mantled Sufi is one in a divine state.²⁹⁷ Zulaykha’s pursuit of the Prophet Joseph can be mirrored in Majnun’s pursuit of Layla as discussed in Chapter 5. He was in search of the divine light represented in Layla’s transcendental attributes. Similarly, the

²⁹³ Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*, 18.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 17.

²⁹⁵ Leaman, “Eleven Common mistakes,” 28.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 28.

²⁹⁷ Schimmel and Soucek, “Color,” 46-50.

mystical journey to the divine could also be grasped in Bahram Gur's passage through the seven pavilions (symbolizing stages) ending with white, the most purified state of the soul.

Surveying the figures shown in chapters three to five, colors were used to denote consistent impressions. Black was used to denote repentance, punishment and darkness. In Chapter 3, it was used to represent the punishment of the sinful souls (figs. 3.8, 3.17-8). In the story of the black pavilion it was used to represent the punishment of the king in black as he was banished from the paradise-like garden. It was also employed to show his repentance and remorse at the end of the story (figs. 4.2-5). In Chapter 5 black was also used to represent the mourning of Majnun for his beloved (fig. 5.14).

The symbolic meaning associated with colors in the Quran is derived from the different cultural and mystical connotations in the pre-Islamic world. The color blue (*azraq*) had negative connotations in pre-Islamic Arabia which was reflected in its use in the Quran (20:102) and continued later in book paintings. In Chapter 3, it was used to depict the Prophet Muhammad in the Ilkhanid *Mi'rajnama* (Fig. 3.1, 3.12-16). It represented his mourning for human souls and his liberation from human sins according to Sufi belief. Nizami used it to commemorate deliverance in Chapter 4.²⁹⁸ Dark blue was used to represent mourning, repentance and grief (fig. 4.12). The consistent depiction of Majnun in blue in chapter 5 represented his mourning for his beloved and his freedom from human sins.

Akhdar (green) was sometimes used to indicate both blue and green as discussed in Chapter 2.²⁹⁹ This exchangeable use of the term to refer to two different colors has extended to the application and interpretation of the two colors. The common denominator between green and blue is that both were used to depict saints, Sufis and Prophets. While the use of

²⁹⁸ Cross, "The Many Colors of Love," 55.

²⁹⁹ Daneshgar, "Perception of Color," 212.

blue was mainly to depict mourning for human misfortune, green was used to refer to modesty and saintly qualities. Green was the Prophet's favorite color and in Sufi belief it represented life, hence its attribution to the reward of the hereafter (i.e. paradise), modesty and humility (figs 3.2-3, 3.5-7 and 3.10-11). Nizami's green pavilion story discussed Bishr, the modest and righteous youth who was rewarded for his patience and repentance (figs. 4.10-11). The use of green is consistent considering all the figures discussed in the previous chapters.

Yellow was used to represent the juxtaposition of positive and negative emotions; it has multiple meanings depending on the context in which it was used. In Chapter 3 it was used to denote the prolonged absence (i.e. drought) of God's light from Abu Jahl's heart (fig. 3.9) and the wrath of hellfire (fig. 3.8). In the yellow pavilion story, it was used to signify joy and beauty represented in the slave girl who was unattainable to the king. This can also be linked to the notion of the 'prolonged absence' discussed in the story of Majnun and Layla and in the depiction of Abu Jahl (fig. 3.9) as the king longed for the slave girl whom he was not able to attain. Similarly, the yellow in the painting of Fitna (fig. 4.9) was employed to portray the mixed emotions of happiness and regret that Bahram Gur felt when he saw her after ordering her death. In the story of Majnun and Layla, yellow was used to denote the heavenly beauty of Layla that led to the suffering and annihilation of Majnun; it was used to represent joy and beauty but at the same time it had sad underlying emotions linked to the unfortunate circumstances that brought the two lovers together (figs. 5.3,10). It was also employed to juxtapose the happiness of Majnun to see his mother, mixed with her concern about his safety and wellbeing (fig. 5.13).

Red had a dual nature in Islamic tradition.³⁰⁰ It was used to denote both love and seduction on one side, and blood, courage and strength on the other. In Chapter 3, it was used to denote martyrdom in reference to the Shi‘a doctrine (fig. 3.18).³⁰¹ It was also used to depict the wrath of God upon the damned as a symbol of divine power (fig 3.8).³⁰² Schimmel believed that red was connected with wrath as well as power, energy and strength.³⁰³ It was used as a symbolic representation of the divine presence (fig. 3.10).³⁰⁴ The consistent depiction of Buraq with a red body matches the same idea as it was considered a representation of the divine essence as the mystical creature was assigned by God himself to escort the Prophet on his celestial journey. The story of Joseph and Zulaykha denotes some mystical connotations in regard to the color red as discussed earlier in this chapter (fig. 3.19). On the one hand, Zulaykha could be the symbol of the mystic in his search for the divine represented in Joseph (or the perfect man). On the other hand, her red garment could reflect the conflict Joseph had between his good nature depicted in the color green and the lust and desire of love from which he was trying to escape. In the red pavilion story discussed in Chapter 4, red was used to symbolize the temptation of love and the power of seduction represented in the Russian Princess. It was also used to denote the courage and bravery of the young man who was able to surpass all tests and obstacles in order to reach her (figs. 4.13-15).

The consistence use of white to signify virtue and purity is almost constant in Islamic culture. White is usually associated with heavenly traits and the light of God (figs. 3.1 and

³⁰⁰ Simpson, “Why My Name is Red,” 294.

³⁰¹ Ibid, 296.

³⁰² Schimmel and Soucek, *Color*, 46-50.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Gruber, “*The Timurid Book of Ascension*,” 301.

3.12-16). It is linked to righteousness as depicted in figure 3.17. Nizami's metaphorical use of white in the *Haft Paykar* is consistent with the same idea. White was used to represent the final and most purified stage in Bahram Gur's mystical journey and his apprehension of the underlying truth of the world (figs. 4.26-27). It was also used to represent purity and innocence of the youth observing the bathing maidens (fig. 4.28).

Color symbolism in Islamic literature has been celebrated, and analyzed intensively by modern scholars. It is the rarity of the discussion of the same concept in Islamic paintings that caused the discontinuity between the two forms of artistic expressions. A correlation between written words and painted images has been missing from the intellectual platform. Perhaps as Blair and Bloom suggested, the gap between theory and practice is demonstrated by the lack of references to the sophistication of the book paintings produced by Muslim artists. This kind of discontinuity affected the appreciation of manuscripts in the Muslim world. They are not just aesthetically beautiful works of art but also powerful tools in the political, theological and spiritual changes that were happening during their time of production. As discussed in the previous chapters, painters did not solely employ colors based on ascetic value, but also to trigger certain emotional and psychological responses from the viewers. A picture is worth a thousand words. The hidden messages in these book paintings spoke to the viewer on the unconscious level by triggering certain feelings associated with the colors employed that were rooted deep in their cultural and spiritual tradition.

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