



Fig. 1: Performance by Ashmina Ranjit

Picture Courtesy: *Silence No Longer: Artivism of Ashmina*, 2018. Published by Vajra Books, Kathmandu

A Study of Colour Semiotics in the Performances of Ashmina Ranjit

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to explore the colour semiotics in notable performances of Ashmina Ranjit. In her performances, Ranjit mostly employs the colours red, black, and white to communicate powerful and multilayered meanings. Her use of colour reflects a simplified Postmodernist approach in which each performance embodies a distinct semiotic significance and often conveys dual interpretations. The representation and application of colour in her works are highly innovative and experimental, enabling subtle yet effective communication with the audience. Ranjit's performances challenge the norms and traditions of mainstream Nepali art, particularly in relation to the conventional use of colour symbolism. Consequently, the colour semiotics in her performances appear more expressive, unconventional, and conceptually significant. By using minimal yet vibrant colours, she seeks to communicate the essence of the artwork in a direct and evocative manner, drawing inspiration from Postmodern aesthetics in Western art. Her major performances, including 'Nature in Flux', 'Tika', 'Tamas: Darkness', 'Feminine Force', and 'Celebrating Womanhood', demonstrate the significant role of colour in generating semiotic meaning. This research is an analytical study conducted through a qualitative method.

Keywords: Art, avant-garde, colours, symbols, socio-political

Introduction

Ashmina Ranjit has been selected for this study because of her diversity and dedication to contemporary performance art. She has inspired a younger generation of Nepali artists to engage with interdisciplinary art practices within contemporary Nepali art. The study also seeks to address a significant research gap in the field of colour semiotics, as very few studies have examined this aspect

of contemporary Nepali art. Existing research has focused primarily on formal elements such as form, rhythm, tone, line, and space rather than on colour semiotics.

Colour semiotics in performance art refers to the meanings and messages communicated through colour as a visual sign. Different colours carry distinct symbolic meanings in the performances of Ashmina Ranjit (Fig. 2). Performance art is widely recognized

as an alternative form of avant-garde art that became prominent in Europe and the United States during the 1960s (Thapa 2018: 48). Artists such as Yoko Ono, Barbara Kruger, Joseph Beuys, and Marina Abramović were major figures in the field and employed strong colour symbolism to communicate ideas in expressive and meaningful ways.

This artistic tradition originated in Western modernism and later developed into a postmodernist tendency in Nepal, particularly in the works of AshminaRanjit. The study anticipates an opposition with Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgment, in which he argues that beauty resides primarily in form and design rather than in colour. In contrast, Ashmina Ranjit’s performances demonstrate that colour can play a significant role in communicating contemporary social issues (Veereshwar and Sharma: 2016:74).

Ashmina predominantly uses red, black, and white in her performances. Red symbolizes danger, forbidden symbol of women’s sexuality, desire, and procreative power. In contrast, black represents freedom, female empowerment, voice, choice, identity, and pluralism in her performances (Bangdel 2018: 80–83). She often presents her own body dressed in white attire to signify purity; however, this purity is overlaid with metaphors of negative forces such as the armed conflict during the Nepalese Civil War, the impact of climate change in Nepal, and patriarchal oppression within society. Her performance *Tika* is also significant in terms

RED	WHITE	BLACK
Dangerous, forbidden symbol of women’s sexuality, desire and procreative powers	Purity, Light, Serenity, Unhappiness	Pain, freedom, empowerment, Women’s voice, choices, identity

Fig. 2: This table shows the colour symbolism in Ashmina Ranjit's performances.

of colour semiotics, as it carries a distinct symbolic form and cultural context.

Ashmina does not follow traditional artistic norms and conventions; instead, Postmodernism serves as a major inspiration for creating her works in a more conceptual and intangible manner. Her use of colour reveals multiple layers of meaning and has had a significant impact on contemporary Nepali art. Through colour semiotics, her performances symbolize women’s voices, rights, empowerment, suffering, and purity within the social context of Nepal.

Methodology

This is an analytical study based on a qualitative research method. The primary and secondary sources include articles, online journals, reports on Ashmina Ranjit’s works, and studies related to avant-garde art practices. Clement Greenberg’s theory of the avant-garde serves as the principal theoretical framework for interpretation. The reviewed literature on Ashmina Ranjit provides valuable academic insights into the understanding of colour semiotics.

Inspiration Behind the Colour Semiotics in Her Works

One of the major inspirations behind Ashmina Ranjit’s use of colour is the postmodern aesthetic of Western art. The search for new rules of colour, decentralization, multiple meanings, fluid interpretations, intertextuality, and the



Fig. 3: This picture shows the shades of red during the performance of ‘Celebrating Womanhood’ (2013) by Ashmina Ranjit.

blending of genres and disciplines are central characteristics of postmodernism (Sharma2021). These aesthetic values are clearly reflected in her works. For example, the meaning of *Tika* changes according to time, place, and cultural context. The black snake-shaped *Tika* may convey one meaning when presented in the United States and another when presented in Nepal. Likewise, the perception of colour in a live performance is not fixed and may be influenced by external conditions. Although the artist primarily uses red, black, white, and yellow, audiences may perceive multiple shades and meanings according to their own interpretations (Fig. 3). This openness of interpretation can be understood as a significant characteristic of the postmodern attitude in Ashmina Ranjit's work.



Fig. 4: Jackson Pollock's No. 5, 1948

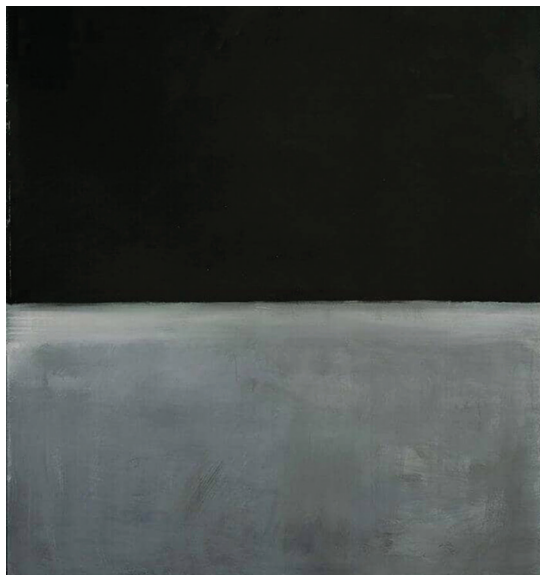


Fig. 5: Mark Rothko's Black and Grey, 1970

The expressive yellow, black, red, and white lines are visible in Jackson Pollock's *Painting No. 5*. The colours convey the artist's emotions and inner feelings. A similar emphasis on colour semiotics can be observed in the works of Mark Rothko, although the forms and modes of expression differ significantly. In Rothko's paintings, the combination of black and gray can evoke the image of nightfall over a desolate landscape, functioning as a metaphor for death.

One of the core elements of both Modernism and Postmodernism is the avant-garde approach to art. In avant-garde practice, the use of colour is often non-academic and unconventional, as seen in the works of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). According to Clement Greenberg, "All kitsch is academic, and conversely, all that is academic is kitsch." This statement refers not only to conventional artistic practice but also to academic art rooted in Plato's Theory of Imitation. Plato argued that art is an imitation of appearances and that artists should imitate nature in a refined and perceptive manner. For him, nature, created by God, represents the highest and truest form of art (Greenberg 1965: 3-15).



Fig. 6: Yayoi Kusama's *Ascension of Polka Dots on the Trees*

The avant-garde approach does not seek to follow conventional rules and artistic norms; rather, it emphasizes experimentation with contemporary subject matter, ideas, and concepts, as seen in the works of Ashmina Ranjit. Colour experimentation in avant-garde art is often characterized by minimal yet vibrant visual expression, a tendency that has become influential across the globe. For example, Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama employs simplified forms with one or two dominant colours to create multiple layers of meaning (Fig. 6). Similarly, Indo-British artist Anish Kapoor uses a comparable approach to colour in his works (Fig. 7). Similar methods of colour application and visual simplification can also be observed in the performances of Ashmina Ranjit.

Another influence on Ashmina's performance art can be traced to her own earlier drawings (Fig. 8). These drawings are composed primarily of red, black, and white lines.

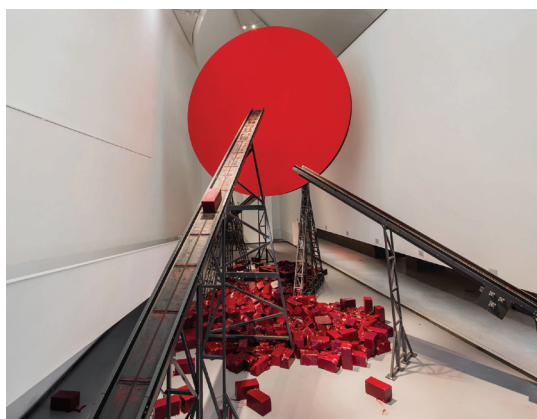


Fig. 7: Installation view of Anish Kapoor's *Symphony for a Beloved Sun*, 2013 at CAFA Art Museum, Beijing

They closely resemble her performance *Tika* (Fig. 9) in their curvilinear forms, use of black colour, and flat visual treatment. The work also reflects an avant-garde approach, emphasizing experimentation and conceptual expression rather than adherence to the strict conventions of traditional artistic practice.

Colour Semiotics in Her Works

The signifier of Ashmina Ranjit's two-inch-long, snake-shaped *Tika* on her forehead is presented in an unconventional manner (Fig. 10). The *Tika* is created in black using a simplified flat colour without visible textures, depth, or shading. Nevertheless, its curved, serpentine form creates a sense of illusion and movement for the viewer. Wherever she travels, the *Tika* functions as a powerful performative symbol on her forehead, attracting the attention of spectators. As one observer, Michael Gill writes:

Ashmina can sometimes seem outrageous, in your face. Instead of the traditional red plastic dot, or Bindi, that many women wear on their foreheads, Ashmina sports a black, snake-shaped tattoo that flits from her forehead down to the bridge of her nose. It is disconcerting, almost as if it might leap off her nose and bite you on your own (Bangdel 2018: 86)



Fig. 8: Ashmina Ranjit, *Drawing on Lokta Paper*

The inward quality of the black *Tika* on Ashmina Ranjit's forehead signifies boldness, power, mystery, elegance, and sophistication, reflecting the artist's inner expression. In this context, Ashmina seeks to portray the deeper meaning of female freedom and liberty in Nepal rather than the outward appearance of Nepali society. As Aristotle argued, "The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance" (Martinique 2016).

Beyond Recognition reveals the significance of colour in Ashmina Ranjit's performance presented during the exhibition *Nature in Flux*, held with senior artist KG Ranjit at the



Fig. 9: *Detail of Tika*

City Museum, Kathmandu. The performance features a bell-shaped plain white gown accompanied by a stacoat. The stacoat, made of traditional Nepali handmade *Lokta* paper, appears in a light yellowish tone. Thousands of mild steel pins were inserted into the costume over the course of the 24-hour performance. Approximately 45,000 pins were pierced through the garment while the performance was taking place (Fig. 10). Annie Ivanova explains the performance as follows:

Performance started at 6 pm. sitting with a serene expression in front of the guests. Ms. Ranjit did not address her audience.



Fig. 10: The above picture represents the power and significance of Ashmina Ranjit's Tika across different spatial and temporal contexts.

Photos: Photo Kathmandu & Kailash K. Shrestha

She took a silver pin with her right hand and pierced the front of her white gown. Then, drawing another breath, she took another pin and repeated the action. Her left hand had a (counting) clicker. Next to her, a laptop on a wooden stand kept time the light on the screen showed 23.58."

With each breath, Ashmina would pin her crisp white dress with a metal pin. All throughout the night, she would inhale the dusty Kathmandu air and then release it with an involuntary, gentle sigh. Her attention solely focused on the simple truth that, as Eckhart Tolle puts it, is the present moment that is all we ever have (Ivanova 2018: 25-66).

This was the first performance in Nepal to continue uninterrupted for 24 hours without sleep or rest. Although time, breath, and the number of pins inserted into the costume changed throughout the performance, these transformations gradually altered the visual character of the attire. As the duration progressed and more pins were attached to



Fig. 11: Ashmina Ranjit, *Beyond Recognition*, 2014

Photo: Koshal Hamal

the white gown and light yellow stacoat, the performance conveyed increasing pain and physical challenge. In this work, colour functions as a narrative of contemporary urbanized human civilization. It reflects the ongoing destruction of nature through deforestation and the gradual disappearance of the green environment. The number of concrete buildings is increasing in the name of development in modern human civilization. In this context, the white attire and the light yellow colour symbolize the purity, spirituality, and originality of the natural world. The colour of the artist's body serves as a metaphor for the connection between the sun and the earth. The juxtaposition of white and yellow suggests radiance, evoking the appearance of sunlight from a distance (Fig. 11). These natural colours are gradually disrupted by the man-made intervention represented by the pins. Thus, the intangible meaning of the



Fig. 12: Installation of Ashmina Ranjit's performance attire and related objects exhibited at the City, Museum, Durbar Marg, Kathmandu, 2014

Photo: Koshal Hamal

performance is primarily governed by the white and yellow palette, while the metallic texture and colour of the pins alter and challenge that symbolic purity throughout the performance.

Tamas: Darkness is one of Ashmina Ranjit's major performances from 2008. In this work, she wears a black kurta while performing (Fig. 13), and a video is projected in the background. The contrast between darkness (black) and light (white) is employed to communicate the central meaning of the performance. Colour functions not only through visible forms but also through verbal expression during the performance. Ashmina states, "A cow comes in many different colours such as black, brown, and white." This statement serves as a metaphor for the heterogeneous culture of Nepal. The performance questions how the cultural diversity of Nepal is treated instrumentally, like a cow, by those in power, which becomes one of the core semiotic dimensions of the work. The performance was created during a period of political unrest associated with the rule of former king Gyanendra Shah of Nepal and the struggle against absolute monarchy. Ashmina explains, "This work examines the present national scenario suspended between



Fig. 13: Ashmina Ranjit, *Tamas: Darkness*, 2008

hope and despair, light and darkness." Through both tangible and intangible uses of colour, she articulates a call for democracy. In this context, the black attire becomes a sign of protest, symbolizing resistance to absolute power and the struggle for freedom. As in political demonstrations, the display of black cloth before a king or prime minister is widely understood as a symbol of protest.

Most of Ashmina Ranjit's works are dominated by vibrant shades of red, which evoke the colour sensibilities of modern and postmodern artists such as Mark Rothko, S. H. Raza, and Anish Kapoor. Kurchi Das Gupta quotes that "Ashmina Ranjit's works question the definitions of postmodernity in contemporary Nepali art."



Fig. 14: Ashmina Ranjit, *Celebrating Womanhood*, 2013

In the performance *Celebrating Womanhood* (Fig. 14), Ashmina Ranjit is wrapped in vibrant red attire. Red and yellow pigments are used to create a symbolic form on the floor during the performance. This form represents the vagina. Through her bodily gestures and the use of red, Ashmina establishes a visual relationship with the red-and-yellow vaginal form, creating a mode of intrapersonal communication. The imagery symbolizes feminine sexuality, fertility, childbirth, and menstrual blood (Gupta 2018:19). In the context of Nepal, women have often been excluded from family life and compelled to remain isolated during menstruation, childbirth, and other reproductive periods. By foregrounding these experiences, the performance challenges such social practices and reinterprets them as sacred and life-affirming processes. The colours in the performance therefore symbolize purity and the generative power of life. Rashmi Sheila states:

She (Ashmina) uses it (red) as a symbol of suffering. '... red in most of her works related to women. All these are related to women. All these are related to women's sexuality and their experiences as women. These works suggest that women are good only if they can control their sexuality. Otherwise it will become something unwanted by the society

-characterless and impure. Elements like ...red colour, therefore, signify the loose of women's status, both as a social being and as a married women (Sheila 2018: 39).

Her work *Feminine Force* (Fig. 15) conveys a different meaning. The entire gown is constructed from white sanitary pads, while red thread is used sparingly as a subtle visual element. The combination of the sanitary pads and the red thread evokes themes of female suffering and social stigma associated with menstruation. In this context, the red thread against the white sanitary material symbolizes the treatment of menstruation as a form of impurity within society. The



Fig. 15: Ashmina Ranjit, *Feminine Force*, 2010
Photo: Cor Dietvorst

performance serves as a reflection of Nepali social attitudes toward women and menstruation. Through this satirical visual language, the artist effectively captures the invisible or intangible social meanings attached to the female body.

Conclusion

The artist's works strongly reflect the socio-political realities of Nepal. Her use of colour is closely associated with the experimental tendencies of Modernism and Postmodernism within the broader framework of avant-garde art practice discussed by Clement Greenberg. Ashmina's work does not conform to Plato's philosophy of imitation; rather, she regards art as a means of critically engaging with the negative aspects of society. The selection of colours in her performances is highly intentional and conceptually driven. She rarely uses blue and green, while red, black, and white remain the dominant and most iconic colours in her work.

Ashmina employs a range of colour semiotic devices, including symbols, signs, metaphors, and icons. Through these visual strategies, she addresses contemporary socio-political concerns and issues related to climate change, such as pain, female suffering, women's voices, empowerment, hope, liberty, human rights, and the relationship between human beings and nature. Her performances make these otherwise invisible social realities visible through embodied visual expression. Consequently, the colour semiotics in her five major performances functions in diverse, expressive, and unconventional ways.

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