



# A Semiotic Approach to Costume Colours: Luca Guadagnino's Adaptation of André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*

Bidisha Maji

**Abstract** This paper deals with a semiotic approach to costume colours in Luca Guadagnino's adaptation of André Aciman's novel *Call Me by Your Name*. Movies, too, like the written text, have a language of their own. Both the mediums are full of hidden codes. Where literature uses textual codes and depends on conventional linguistic rules to create meaning, the adapted film borrows some codes from the written work and recreates them through visual codes to animate its narration. In modern cinema, colour plays a huge part in the storytelling. The director uses his multiple colour palettes in the background and costumes to create his rainbow on the screen and asks the audience to search for the eighth colour out of it. Colour is one of the most important elements in a good film by which a filmmaker communicates with the audience. During the film adaptation, by playing with costume colours, the director Luca Guadagnino has shown how colour can be used in a semiotic way to peep into the characters' psyche that even André Aciman's novel can't. The costume designer, Giulia Piersanti, has taken some ideas for playing with colour from the book and then used her creativity by using colour as a signifier for the audience to decipher meanings differently.

**Keywords:** Colour, Semiotics, Film, Costume.

## Introduction

A film can be considered to be the youngest art form as it borrows several elements from different sources like literature, theatre, painting, human life etc. A film adaptation can be thought of as the way a director adopts or modifies a written work into a film. The film, like written work, has a language of its own. A film speaks through camera shots, colouring, costumes, editing, mise-en-scène, etc. Both the mediums are full of hidden codes. Where literature uses textual codes and depends on conventional linguistic rules to create meaning, the adapted film borrows some codes from the written work and recreates them through visual codes to animate its narration. Both the mediums, film and written text want their viewers to see or observe. This can be understood more clearly by a quotation from one famous writer and one film director: Joseph Conrad, in the Preface to his book *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) says, "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see. That – and it is everything" (Conrad 14). Famous American film director D. Griffith has said, "The task I'm trying to achieve, above all, is to make you see" (Mottram 67).

When adopting from any written work, the director reads the primary text and then uses his or her own secondary or poetic imagination to knock the audience's psyche for creating their version of reality themselves. Any movie is not just about the story, but it always has a language. In every scene, everything is deliberately placed by the director or cinematographer in a semiotic way. From 1970, the third phase of Cinema, the directors got inspiration from linguistics, drawing upon the works of Chomsky and Saussure, to question the system of end meaning. In modern cinema, colour plays a huge part in storytelling where the director uses his multiple colour palettes in the background and costumes to create his rainbow on the screen and asks the audience to search for the eighth colour out of it.

Such a movie is *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), directed by Luca Guadagnino, adapted from the novel having the same name by Andre Aciman, which is a story during a restless summer in Italy, where a powerful romance blooms between seventeen-year-old Elio and his father's student, Oliver, their house guest for six months. With multiple colours in costumes, the film, itself becomes an LGBTQ flag to celebrate the homosexual love between Elio and Oliver. There are many minor and major differences between the movie from the novel; the novel is set in 1987, whereas the film is set in 1983; the novel is presented as Elio's memory but the movie is set in the present and so on. The movie with its each *mise-en-scène* element raises the audience's curiosity to get an answer: be it a fly, some specific books, a locket of David, costumes and of course costumes' colours. The director Luca Guadagnino and costume designer Giulia Piersanti by choosing some particular colours for costumes which are not even mentioned in the book provide ceaseless echolalia in audiences' minds to anatomize the plurality of meaning, that is embedded in the colours and force the audiences to believe that even costume colours' need a semiotic approach in the post-modern era.

It is entirely up to the filmmaker and costume designer to choose any particular colour for the set and dresses. As colour does not have any fixed meaning, it opens the door to multiple interpretations for the audience. According to Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author*, the death of the author is the birth of the reader means the author has written something from his/her point of view, but after finishing the text, the readers can interpret meanings in their way out of the given text. As there are many interpreters, so, interpretations can also be many and it is impossible to have one final meaning to anything. After providing multiple signs, the director, too, gives the audience the authority to decipher meanings from their point of view. My paper attempts to analyse a semiotic approach to costume colours that I have found as an audience in Luca Guadagnino's adaptation of André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*. To prove my points, I have divided my discussion into four parts –

- I. Window view of costume colours through the Director and Costume Designer's lens.
- II. Anatomy of costume colours by Barthes' five codes.
- III. Peep into the characters' psyches by costume colours.
- IV. The role of Colour theory.

## **I. Window view of costume colours through the director and costume designer's lens.**

An excellent Italian film director, screenwriter, and producer, Luca Guadagnino has received several awards, including nominations for the Academy Award for Best Picture, BAFTA Award for Best Direction and Best Film, Nastro d'Argento for Best Director, Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture – Drama, etc. for the Oscar-nominated movie *Call Me by Your Name*. The movie excels in costume design and its colours. Nastro d'Argento award winner for Best Costume Designer of the movie Giulia Piersanti plays with the bright coloured swimming suits and blue billowy button-down shirts throughout the movie, which have become the perfect uniform for the dreamy trance-like Italian summer of that time in which the film is set. According to Giulia, she and the director had discussed in great detail, the characters' backgrounds, surroundings, and other details they wanted to portray about them through costumes, and then she went on to make a wide visual research about the colour palette. She wanted to communicate the sense of summer and sensuality through the costumes. In an interview with Rodey Uhler, Giulia Piersanti was asked by Rodey that a few pieces of clothing are very significant to the story and film like Oliver's colourful swimsuit that Elio discovers, and the shirt that Oliver gifts to Elio. How did she approach these pieces? She says, "A hint from André Aciman's book [*Call Me by Your Name*] was that Elio thinks to read into Oliver's emotions by his ever-changing swimsuits all in different colours, so we simply played around that. Another piece taken from the book is Oliver's "billowy" shirt, which he gives to Elio. Here I wanted to play with proportions so to make Oliver's shirt be much bigger and looser on Elio since Oliver has such an American statuesque look compared to everyone else in the town". In the same interview she herself agrees "...through repetition of some key costumes we managed to be very clear about what we wanted to tell about them." "I love collaborating with Luca and actors to create characters and telling a story through clothing".

## **II. Anatomy of costume colours by Barthes' five codes.**

In an article for *The New York Times*, Anatole Broyard in 1983 writes, "Nobody had better eye for fashions – in language, in behaviour, in anything – than Roland Barthes" (Broyard 13). Roland Barthes (1915-1980), a famous French theorist, was one of the first writers to give language to fashion. In his book, *The Language of*

*Fashion*, he shows the study of fashion as a language. Colour, being an integral part of fashion, has become a sign of the language. Barthes, in his book *S/Z*, talks about five semiotic codes that are common in every language: Hermeneutic, Proairetic, Semantic, Symbolic, and Cultural.

**Hermeneutic Codes:** Hermeneutic codes are also known as Enigma codes. These codes are imageries to show mystery and therefore entice a viewer.

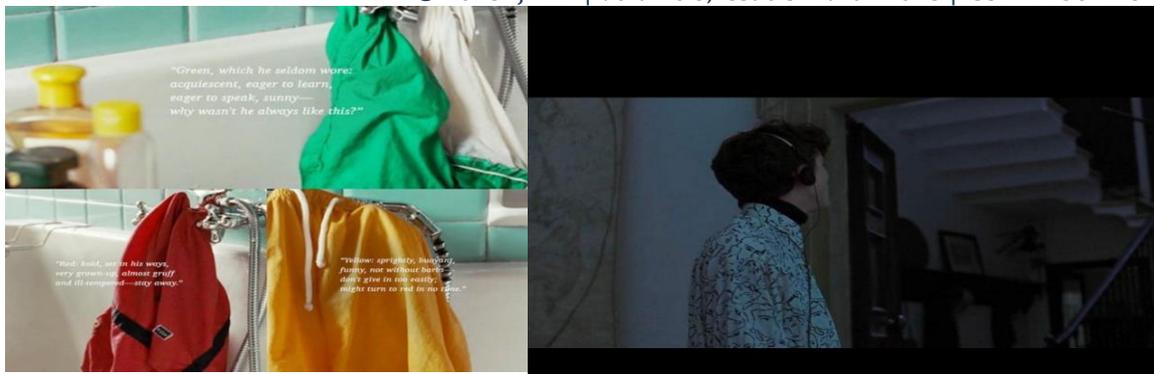
**Proairetic Codes:** These codes are used to show that some action is going to happen.

**Semantic Codes:** Here audience identifies that specific elements should have an extra layer of meaning.

**Symbolic Codes:** It uses symbols or images to represent meaning.

**Cultural Codes:** It means that the codes have cultural references and therefore appeal to people of a certain culture, age, race, etc.

In the movie *Call Me by Your Name*, in the first scene, Elio is shown in a red t-shirt and Oliver in a blue “billowy” shirt, which is even mentioned in André Aciman’s book. The book is written from Elio’s point of view, so his costume colours are not mentioned that much in the book. The director, by putting red in Elio’s t-shirt in the first scene, has provided one of his many hermeneutic codes for audiences to identify this as a semantic code and find meaning in it. The colour red probably shows the love and passion of Elio for Oliver and his hope for a new beginning in life. It is not new in the world of cinema to show passion with the colour red. In the movie *Barfi!* (2012), directed by Anurag Basu, when Shruti Ghosh, after her marriage with Ranjit Sengupta, not with her lover Barfi, changes her clothes to colourless or to a light-coloured dress to show the lack of love in her life, but after re-meeting Barfi in a shop, love comes again in her life and she changes her sari’s colour from white to red in the next scene to welcome Barfi’s love into her life. It can’t be merely for aesthetic purposes that the director and the costume designers have played with the colour and it is obvious that all of these colours are put hermeneutically in their way. The association of red for love can be seen in many other movies like *Amélie*, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, which is about a young woman who in her everyday’s life takes love and pleasure in an unusual way, and almost the whole movie she wears red to show red’s association with love and passion. According to Pastoureau (2010), in the past, red was associated with masculinity for its association with blood or war but in that era, however, Pastoureau (2010) explains that red has become a feminine colour for its association with love and pleasure. So, the red t-shirt of Elio also can be used to show his feminine side. But colour symbolism can change in the same movie with different contexts, like red works as a proairetic code when Marzia comes to ask Elio what he feels about her and gets rejected by him. Here, with its association of love and passion, red brings its masculine association of killing, blood, and here is the murder of love or getting rejected. From colourful costumes in summer to a different dull white costume in winter at the very end of the movie, raises mystery and forces the audience to believe that the director has put this together hermeneutically to make it a proairetic code for Elio’s heartbreak. There are many abstract faces on the last white shirt of Elio, which have become symbolic code to show his real and multiple emotions at the same time. Their background, culture, age, and even the season can also be traced by the dress colours of the characters. The bright blue, yellow, red and green swimsuits which are even mentioned in the book are the colours generally associated with the season of summer. The colour “blue-green” is associated with, summer, faithfulness, and “yellow-green” with friendship, youth, and newness of that colourful atmosphere. From that scintillating summer to Elio’s white pale shirt at the end, suggests winter, snow, and so the changing of seasons (Cunningham 93). Vibrant, intense colours on the main characters and dull black and white on the servants show how colour can even determine the social rank of the characters (Cunningham 121). So, it is somehow clear that in *Call Me by Your Name*, colours have been used to show more semiotic purposes than merely enhancing beauty or fulfilling other technical purposes.



*Call Me By Your Name (2017)*

**Figure 1:** From yellow, green etc. to show summer to pale white to symbolize winter.



*Call Me By Your Name (2017)*



*Call Me By Your Name (2017)*

**Figure 2:** Red as a hermeneutic code to show love, show warning

**Figure 3:** Red as a proairetic to code.



*Amélie (2001).*



*Barfi! (2012).*

**Figure 4:** Examples from other movies to show red's association with love and passion as a hermeneutic code.



**Figure 5:** Abstract faces have been used as symbolic code to show Elio's inability to feel.



**Figure 6:** From contrasting dress colour at the beginning to matching dress colour to show the progress of their relationship.



**Figure 8:** Association of Oliver with the colour of apricot.



**Figure 9:** *The Queen's Gambit* (2020) Beth adopts the colour of chess board, after feeling connection.

### III. Peep into the characters' psyche by costume colours.

In the world of Cinema, costume colours can tell a lot about the inner world of the characters, intensifying the flux of the changes without uttering a single word. It is already mentioned in the first section of the paper that the director and costume designers of the film, Luca Guadagnino and Giulia Piersanti, have used costumes and their colours to help the audiences to peep into the inner psyche of the characters. In the book, Elio tries to understand the mood of Oliver by his different swimming costumes. As Elio says in the book "...it took me a while to realize, four personalities depending on which bathing suit he was wearing. Knowing which to expect gave me the illusion of a slight advantage. Red: bold, set in his ways, very grown-up, almost gruff and ill-tempered—stay away. Yellow: sprightly, buoyant, funny, not without barbs—don't give in too easily; might turn to red in no time. Green, which he seldom wore : acquiescent, eager to learn, eager to speak, sunny—why wasn't he always like this? Blue: the afternoon he stepped into my room from the balcony, the day he massaged my shoulder, or when he picked up my glass and placed it right next to me"(Aciman 32). Clothing's colour is the most common way to show an association. Taking the intimacy of the colour blue from the book, in which Elio can associate his love for Oliver, the movie shows how blue has affected Elio's psyche. From the first shots, the contrast in their dress colours, suggests their gap in maturity, age, and culture with the progress

of Elio and Oliver’s relationship, they have adopted each other’s love even by matching their outfits’ colour. This can also be seen in Elio’s association with the colour of the apricot, which reminds him of Oliver. Apricot has its origin in a Latin word meaning “Pre-Ripe”, which can also be associated with Elio’s pre-ripeness at such a young age in the field of love. Having been rejected by Oliver, Elio’s sexual encounter ends up being with Marzia, who once again dresses in symbolic apricot yellow. The last time the apricot-yellow colour appears directly in the film is in a glimpse of the white and yellow pillow cover of Elio’s bed. After that, winter comes and there has not remained any sign of the apricot yellow with Elio, suggesting the absence of Oliver. As the movie concludes, only yellow flame reflects on Elio’s face, which mirrors the lack of love-heat in Elio’s life, which is reminiscent of the apricot yellow of the last summer. Adopting the colour unconsciously after feeling connected is also shown in the web series *The Queen's Gambit*, directed by Scott Frank, where Beth Harmon, the protagonist, at school feels that she can’t belong to any group or person. In the absence of a real person, she feels connected to the black and white dress on the mannequin. The colours black and white shades are also associated with the board of chess, her matter of interest. So, later, she chooses to wear that black and white dress to show her connection with chess.



*Call Me by Your Name (2017)*

*A Suitable Boy (2022)*

**Figure 10:** Suggesting innocence to maturity by dress colour.

In the final scene of the film, Elio wears something completely different, unlike stripes, colourful patterns of summer, he wears a pale white shirt with abstract faces, which indicates the change in his maturity and, of course, the transition of his relationship with Oliver. In the web series *A Suitable Boy*, directed by Mira Nair, Shimit Amin by showing Lata’s cotton saris, mostly of pastel colours in episode I and silk, satin organza saris in dark shades in the later episodes suggesting the process of innocence to maturity in her character.



*Call Me by Your Name (2017).*



*La La Land* (2016).

**Figure 11:** Characters' dilemmas are depicted through costume colour.

As mentioned before in the paper, the colour red can be associated with love or passion. The dilemma in Elio's character is also shown by his red shirt at the time when he is writing in his diary that he thinks Oliver hates him, and at that time, the red shirt is hanging on his bed, though he is not wearing it to show his uncertainty. In the Oscar-winning movie *La La Land*, directed by Damien Chazelle, after getting to know Sebastian, Mia adopts the red colour associated with him in her wardrobe and accessories. When she goes into an audition the day after her first meeting with Sebastian, she dresses in a distinctive red jacket, longing immediately to be the person that she hopes she will be because of their first interaction. But when the audition does not go well, she symbolically removes the red jacket and gets back to her blue shirt, which shows the dilemma in her mind, like Elio, about a better future.

#### IV. The Role of Colour Theory.

Using colour to create emotion or mood in a cinema is called colour theory. The use of costume colour is just one of the many ways of storytelling by the use of colour. The background colour palettes are equally important for a good movie maker for conversing with the audience through chrome. The same colour with different hue, saturation, brightness or value can evoke different emotions among the audience. *Call Me by Your Name* movie's cinematographer, Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, has beautifully done this. For example, from the dreamy colour palette of green, yellow backgrounds in the first half of the movie to the gloomy background palette at the end is used to show the linear movement of time and emotion. By analysing some similar scenes, it is clear that *Call Me by Your Name* has taken some influence from the film *Maurice*, directed by James Ivory. *Maurice* takes place in England and has some additional layers of social class, which is perfectly shown by the light colour palette of the movie.

#### Conclusion

In the film adaptation, there is more of the director than of the author. An author assimilates as a "scriptor", the director portrays, and the readers or the audience responds to the picture. While researching this topic, I have discovered many other mise-en-scenes elements that the director has used in the film *Call Me by Your Name* that requires further investigation.

So, in the world of cinema, all good filmmakers use colour to silently converse. In an adapted film, the filmmaker, by choosing some particular colours in the costumes, which are not even mentioned in the book, does not confine the scope of imagination for the readers but opens the door for multiple interpretations. The changes from the book were needed because by using colour in a semiotic way, the director has excelled the writer's vision. Though colours' meanings get influenced partly by context, individual human nature, culture, etc., it can't be denied that colours affect, in their way, the viewers' mood. It's on the director to use the colours in a hermeneutic way differently from the book to raise the audience's curiosity, but it's on the

audience to find and interpret the semiotic approach in the colours, which I have tried to discuss in my paper. One may conclude the importance of colour in the world of cinema, with a quote by the famous cinematographer Roger Deakins from one of his interviews: “It is easier to make colour look good, but harder to make it service the story” (Marine 1).

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