

Navigating through the Memories of Aroma in *The Book of Everlasting Things*

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Abstract

The Book of Everlasting Things critically deals with a wide variety of characters who are vehemently traumatized by the memories of the historic India-Pakistan Partition. While navigating the transgenerational memories of the characters, the aroma of the partition driven atrocities interweaves the five-sections of the novel with grave concerns. Arguably, both history and memory play, here a dominant role in unearthing the remnants of the protagonist Samir Vij who is the representative of a category of people carrying the scars of their victimised ancestors during and after the Partition. The recurrent reference of 'aroma' in the novel and its association with major characters reinforces the fact that perfume in the dismal memories of partition is ineradicable from the psyche of the subjects trapped in the boards of two divided nations-India and Pakistan. With textual analysis, it is validated how this aroma of reminiscence manipulates the partition survivors.

Keywords

Aroma, History, Memory, Narrative, Partition

Introduction

Memory is a faculty of the human mind that retains information obtained by means of perception or experience which later enables an individual to access such information. A human's ability to memories an event or experience or information of any other kind depends upon whether such information was perceived consciously or not. This means that only information which a person is aware of, adds to the repository of human memory. Human memory operates on three stages- firstly, it encodes information; secondly it stores information and lastly, it aids an information to access such information when required. In terms of function, memory can broadly be divided into three types- episodic memory, explicit memory, and implicit memory. Episodic memory refers to information arising out of events of past experience, for instance this memory may be triggered by aroma, scenery, clothes or of a specific person, similarly which has been expressed in *The Book of Everlasting Things* (2022) by Aanchal Malhotra. Explicit memory on the other hand is that information that is stored as an outcome of conscious decision: for instance, the protagonist Samir Vij deliberately chose to revisit the war experience of his uncle and a few best kept secrets treasured by his uncle through the old journals and perfume vials. Unlike explicit memory, implicit memories are information stored subconsciously by the human brain. There are various stimuli that trigger human memory such as aroma. However, apart from aroma there are several other elements that act as a means of triggering memory which may include music, food, image, colour, structure, ritual, appearance, attire etc.

Aanchal Malhotra, the Co-founder of the Museum of material memory, born in 1990, hails from New Delhi, India and serves as digital depot for family histories and social ethnography. She has extensively explored topics related to the 1947 partition. Her debut book titled

Remnants of Separation 2017 in South Asia and *Remnants of Partition* internationally in 2019 received the council for Museum Anthropology Book Award in 2022. In early 2022, she gained critical acclaim for her second book, *In the Language of Remembering* which delves into long-term, cross-border, generational impact of the partition. Her most recent work is her debut novel *The Book of Everlasting Things*.

What is the most important ingredient in Aanchal Malhotra's work is her historical ethnography of the time of partition. Many scholars have emphasized on the fact that in her novel *The Remnants of Separation* the author, while blending the historical nuggets of that socio-political upheaval of India and Pakistan, plays the role of a historiographer. In another novel titled *In the Language of Remembering*, it is argued that the impact of the brutal and Gore Indo-Pak partition has left the imprints of anxiety, paranoia, and trauma. The metaphor of the division of two nations can be used, according to author, as a gateway to the traumatic experience of the partition survivors. After a thorough literature review, it is presumed that this novel of Aanchal Malhotra may be explored from the lens of memory studies where 'aroma' is being used to trigger the memories of the major characters. For this particular study, textual analysis is used as a research methodology to examine the various passages of the novel *The Book of Everlasting Things* through which the objectives of the research can be validated.

(Prakash, 2012) in *Memory, Nostalgia and Identity in Narratives of India's Partition*, brilliantly explains that the memories of our own past play an important role in constructing ourselves as well as it also plays a crucial role in how we shape our future and also provides a better way to envision our destiny. (Legg, 2004) in *Memory and Nostalgia* stresses that is conceded as destabilizing force against historical 'grand narratives' which can challenge prevalent interpretation of the past. (Yadin Dudai, 2016) in *Personal Memory: Is It Personal, Is It Memory?* considers that one could conceptualize personal memory as a node within a complex, distributed, and multidimensional, memory space. In their framework, an individual's contribution is just one element within an information syncytium that goes beyond the personal realm. (Spence, 2021) *Scent in the Context of Live Performance* avers the different aspects of scent. Firstly, the utilization of scent transitions into a more intentional and, purposeful practice. Initially, it serves as an ambient or atmospheric cue, later evolving into a narrative element. Later, scent has also been employed to convey specific moods. In its early deliberate application, scent often plays a straightforward role, merely matching the setting or scene on stage. (Judith Reinhard, 2004) in *Floral scents induce recall of navigational and visual memories in honeybees* examines through their experiments with bees the scents that bees are familiar with have the potential to evoke both navigational and visual memories in seasoned individuals. Their results indicate that the aroma and flavour of the nectar, which successfully foragers share upon returning to the hive, have the capability to prompt the recollection of navigational memories linked to the specific food source in experienced recruits. This, in turn, aids in facilitating their navigation back to the site. (Mühlbacher, 2022) in *Plotting Memory. What Are We Made to Remember When We Read Narrative Texts?* suggest a concept of emplotted memory, referring to how narrative texts construct a series of events in the reader's memory. Additionally, it asserts that emplotted

remembering is a facet of implied readership and can be examined at the textual level. (Leo'n, 2016) *An architecture of narrative memory* identifies episodic and semantic memories have been identified as primary components associated with narrative characteristics within a broader cognitive system. And further explained that narratives constitute the principal components of both narrative-aware episodic memory and procedural- semantic memory. The paper investigates the application of narrative structures in various memory types. (Miguel A. Teixeira, 2009) *The Perception of Fragrance Mixtures: A Comparison of Odor Intensity Models* reinforces two psychophysical intensity models for explaining the perception of fragrance blends has revealed variations in predicting the odour characteristics during the initial moments following the application of the perfume. The assessment of odour intensity and character in the presence of water molecules indicates that the incorporation of water into perfumes is influenced not solely by economic considerations, but also by the fragrance's olfactory effectiveness and overall impact. (Lentin, 2009) in *Memories for the Future* describes that the recollection of character-defining events has evolved beyond being just a currency within our contemporary fluid society's 'confessional culture.' It is now emerging as a progressively pertinent theme in social science, extending beyond the exclusive domain of historians and psychologists, emphasizing the sociological dimensions and enduring impact of Holocaust memory. (Malhotra, In the Language of Remembering: The Inheritance of Partition, 2022) *In the Language of Remembering* examines Partition's lasting effects and argues that it is still relevant in the day-to-day lives of coming generations. The book explores how memories of the Partition impact family, community, and country via audio interviews with people from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and their diaspora. Interviewees range in age from teenagers to those in their nineties. It discusses the importance of talking about Partition, how it affects relationships, and how it subtly affects phobias and personal traits. The tale acts as a perplexing reminder of the historical ramifications of the Indo-Pak Partition as the subcontinent approaches the 75th anniversary of its inception and promotes inclusivity over divisiveness. (Malhotra, Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory , 2018) preserves the memory of a momentous occasion by revisiting the Partition through artifacts carried by refugees. These possessions, mute witnesses to hardship and selflessness, reveal something about the pasts of their owners and bear witness to a historical event of unmatched significance. Partition becomes tangible through artifacts that tell personal experiences, such as a refugee card and a maharaja's pearl. The book, which bridges the fields of anthropology and history and was the result of years of intense research, provides a different account of the event that is told through material memory, therefore keeping it alive even seven decades later.

Since, she is an oral historian, much of her works are not documented. As per the aforementioned literature survey it is found that the connection between memory and aroma is not established, therefore it can be explored in book of *The Book of Everlasting Things* by Aanchal Malhotra that deals with an excellent interplay of memory and aroma.

(Malhotra, The Book of Everlasting Things, 2022) is a novel, where there is an excellent blending of the two most significant elements—aroma and memory that are artistically embedded in all the five parts of the novel. It is the aroma of memories associated with both the major and the minor characters of the narrative that transcends their generations in a

pathetic and sympathetic manner. The role of aroma acts as an agent of security and safety in the life of the protagonist Samir Vij when as a child he inculcates the smell of tuberose and *rajanigandha* pointed to him by his paternal uncle Vivek Nath Vij in a vial. This is the true nature of *rajanigandha*, or tuberose. It is very valuable, difficult to extract, and blooms at night. Vivek asks Samir how the tuberose smells. Samir responds to this brief question with the note that it smells 'safe'. As if I were resting on a blanket of stars, is arguably strong and dominating that sets the tone of the novel and triggers many such memories buried in the past of the characters' lives. Another argumentative statement that functions in the development of the narrative and later on becomes a pathological issue comes from his uncle in whose opinion smells have the power to produce visceral and physiological changes in human body, be it pleasant or obnoxious.

Apart from this, at multiple stages of the novel, aroma performs the role of an intangible adhesive that connects two hearts, two religions and two countries after the phenomenon of Indo-Pak partition. Malhotra builds a potential relation between aroma and memory by diluting the aroma or perfume into the veins of the minds and memories of the two major characters-Samir and Firdaus, and claims that both aroma and memory are complementary to each other. She has substantiated her views with the words spoken by Vivek in the novel:

All perfumes are in some way inspired by people. They become homages, dedications, tributes. In fact, a perfume without memory is a body without soul. One cannot create a perfume for a place, that dialogue is unsustainable. The place can be inspiration, but a perfume is always created for people in general, or a person in particular. And our memories, our histories, our desires, our fears, and even our interactions are like any other ingredient—a prized flower, a rare spice, a fine herb—and we must use them just the same (Malhotra,56).

Through his extraordinary smelling power, Samir traces the roots of his hometown and his beloved Firdaus by remembering everything revolving around his home and his beloved. For instance, there are many situations where Samir wants to distil every memory into a vial of aroma only to relish whenever he wants. Such memories are related to home, his beloved, borders, many natural elements like air, water, flowers and anything under the sky. What aroma is to human beings can be best interpreted by Rose Sahib who has taught Samir and his paternal achieves its highest status when Rose Sahib explains in the fourth part of the novel that the scent of a beloved's skin, the perspiration, the air, everything that has been absorbed into it, is something we want to preserve. Especially if we have lost something we love, we wish to recreate it and bottle it. However, this creative process requires space, time, and reflection. Experiences, time, weather, light, and the development of our own senses can all affect how we recall the fragrance of someone else. Few have succeeded in capturing this never-ending kind of want, where every try turns into a haven. A powerful bond is made between perfume and memory; whenever memories weaken, they are strengthened by the aroma that trigger those memories. In the fifth part of the novel, it is seen how insanely the female protagonist Firdaus tries to remember the golden memories she had with her lover Samir. Her madness to extract the nectar of comfort is evident in the novel:

Taking deep and deliberate inhales, she now rubbed a small drop of liquid onto her wrist as she had once seen her mother do, gently, tenderly. Still, she discerned no sweetness. She inhaled again, deeper, and a tear appeared. But she persisted, taking an even larger drop and depositing it onto her collarbone, nestling her nose into the skin...Forcefully now, she massaged the liquid liberally into the crook of her elbow, the patch of skin that Samir had once kissed. She inhaled from her gut, drawing her stomach in concavely. She rubbed it onto her ankles, her fingers, the bones of her feet, and the nape of her neck. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. Only tears (Malhotra,383).

Firdaus's madness goes to such an extent that she begins to lose her mind and throws almost the whole bottle at herself, soaking her skin and clothes. However, neither Samir nor his presence on her body can be located within that bottle. With the bottle of *ittar* tightly is grasped in her hands, the box of letters lays open on the bed.

Another instance of how aroma stimulates the rise of memory is invariably noticed in the narrative of Samir's uncle Vivek's mysterious and miserable episodes of life oscillating between India and France. There are many secrets that Vivek couldn't share with anyone staying alive, but those secrets remain hanging in the air of Paris and those places where Vivek settled in the pursuit of love and livelihood. The memories of Vivek, unearthed by Samir, sneak into another flow of memories of Samir: "Vivek had died containing so many secrets, so many burdens. And with his death, with the fire, these had all risen up into the blazing air—soot-like, fumes of memory—and settled onto, into, Samir. Out of the ninety long years of his life, seventy had been spent here, in France, in self-inflicted exile, following the impulses of his nose (Malhotra 439).

At this juncture, a unique blend of aroma and memory is recorded, for Samir in order to bridge the gap between his beloved and him, he creates Khazin-e-Firdaus, in memory of Firdaus, collaboratively with his granddaughter Anouk in Paris. In the viewpoint of Samir, it is the magnum opus in his entire career of perfumery. The imagery of this perfume containing all the cherished memories of Firdaus is distilled in following excerpt of the novel:

The smell was exquisite, more sublime than anything she could have dreamed of, and she raised her arms to touch the invisible curtain of perfume that had dispersed all around. A masterpiece composed as an homage, a tribute, a eulogy, a memory, a desire, a longing, a love. (Malhotra,442)

Above all, there is an enigmatic collection of perfumes or aromas created by the major characters and each perfume carries a plethora of memories. These perfumes not only make the characters connected to each other but also to the places they belong to or happen to be there for some reasons. Some notable aromas are the most important ones which are mentionable—*Amrit, Noor, Arzoo, Firaq, Khazin-e-Firdaus* and many more are that instigate

memories of the character in the course of the novel. Based on the Ambrette Accord, *Amrit*, a fragrance crafted in Lahore by Vivek Nath Vij as a tribute to his late wife, Ambrette, is based on the Ambrette Accord and is updated by Samir Vij in Paris in the 1970s. *Noor* is the first created perfume by Samir Vij in Lahore, and is given to Firdaus at Standard Restaurant in 1946 as a token of love that remains with her as a mirror of Samir till the end of her life. Based on, *Arzoo* is composed by Samir Vij in Grasse as a tribute to Vivek and Ambrette's first encounter among the jasmine fields. His initial jasmine note creation was inspired by Nandan's perfumery school composition. In Grasse, Samir Vij crafts *Firaq*, incorporating the essence of Tulsi, or holy basil.

Conclusion

Thus, scent is shown as a symbol that permeates the lives of the book's protagonists, highlighting the complex relationship between memory and perfume throughout the novel. Beyond just being a sensory experience, aroma has the ability to unite people across generations, religions, and national boundaries—especially in the wake of the Indo-Pak partition. Samir Vij, the main character, highlights the influence of perfume on individual identity by associating the smell of *Rajanigandha* and tuberose with a sense of security. Characters create scents that symbolize relationships, memories, and feelings, and perfumery blossoms as an art form. Characters such as Firdaus try to relive special moments through perfume, illustrating how aroma can be a tool for emotional healing. Examining the pasts of the characters demonstrates how scent is interwoven with their experiences. Besides, scents become odes to and eulogies for loved ones, and the process of creating significant perfumes becomes a thoughtful and creative endeavour. The novel highlights the value of time, meditation, and sensory development by illuminating the complex process of turning memories into smells. In the end, fragrance appears as a force that is subtle but potent in the story, binding people, places, and moments together. Aroma is portrayed in the book not just as a sensory experience but also as a means of comprehending, conserving, and recreating the intricate web of human relationships and emotions.

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