

READING OLFATORY METAPHORS- A MODE OF ENGAGING WITH LITERARY TEXTS

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Abstract

Smell is a potent wizard that transports us across a thousand miles and all the years we have lived.

-Helen Keller

*Invisible yet powerful, the sense of smell has a significant role in cognition, emotion and even on other senses. But in the academic perspective this sense is often unappreciated and is considered the most animalistic sense that have no intrinsic and universal standards. It was with Nietzsche's declaration that "all my genius lies in my nostrils", smell gained the status of a knowledge marker among researchers. Literature represents this sense in different aspects. The structuralist approach marks a clear distinction in the dichotomy of pleasant and unpleasant smells, the semiotic approach focuses on the nature of smells as a signal in communication and the aesthetic approach deals largely with the effect of odors and their aesthetic judgements towards self and society. This study aims to understand how memory related to smell are represented in literature, which is used as a means of reconstruction with past experience. This study helps to ascribe the literary significance to smell and to the metaphors of odors. Through the analysis of the novel *Gazelle* by Rikki Ducornet this article, focuses on how smell metaphors are used as new ways of writing a literary text and how far perfumes signified the social aspects of people.*

Keywords: Odor, Olfaction, Smell metaphors, Memory and Emotion

Introduction

The belief that sight is dominant over other senses has its roots from Aristotle's declaration in *Metaphysics* that "of all the senses sight best helps us to know things, and reveals many distinctions" (Aristotle, 1933). Later, this disparaged sense was praised by Proust and Baudelaire for the richness of emotions it inspired. With the increased attention given to smell of madeleine in Marcel Proust's, *The Remembrance of Things Past*, literature gradually focuses on the emotional and recollective reaction to specific scents and also on the scent's pervasive hold on our memory.

This exploratory research will approach literature with an olfactory lens through which it helps to understand that smell is also a reliable source of wisdom. To know the effect of olfaction in human it becomes necessary to first understand the physiology of olfaction. Olfaction has a close relationship with the limbic system, a collection of brain structures situated beneath the cerebral cortex, which is strongly involved in a person's emotional life. This becomes the reason why scent has the power to affect the emotions in a way much stronger than the visual and auditory stimuli. Taking this into account and the emotive power of literature, this study engages with the literary texts and their olfactory metaphors.

Sensory perception and their descriptions

Sensory perceptions are often times difficult to describe and are "ineffable" according to Levinson and Majid where the term is defined as "the difficulty or impossibility of putting certain experiences into words". This ineffability is certainly due to the absence of linguistic materials for a perceptual quality and varies from one language to the other. For example, the basic color terms such as red, white and green that are most prevalent in English language is less used in the Amazonian language Pirahã (Everett, 2005). Similarly, English lacks in smell terms that are used widely in the Maniq language that is spoken by the hunter-gatherers in Thailand where they use discrete words like *caŋes* for the smell of monkey hair and burnt animal hair. (Wnuk & Majid, 2014). This implies that sensation is expressible but it corresponds with the language one uses. In general linguists suggests that sight is the most codable sensory modality since there are more lexical differentiation for visual concepts when compared to other senses (Buck, 1949, Viberg, 1983). This codability is also related to the processing speed and a study by (Connell & Lynott, 2014) shows that vision is processed more quickly.

Smell thus is evidently the most ineffable and the research on this smell suggests that though speakers easily recognize particular smells, labeling them becomes a difficult task. (Cain, 1979; de Wijk & Cain, 1994; Engen & Ross, 1973; Huisman & Majid, 2018; Yeshurun & Sobel, 2010). The lack of smell words is also due to the lack of awareness and attention given to odors which can be substantiated with a research that suggests that participants frequently do not notice changes in odors (Mahmut & Stevenson, 2015) Because of this difficult challenge of mapping odors smell is called as a "muted sense" (Olofsson & Gottfried, 2015, p. 319). It is further well stated by Lorig (1999, p. 392) that, "odor and language do not seem to work well together" and this is why there pervades a massive gap between what is perceived and what is linguistically encoded which is expressed by Cacciari (2008, p. 425), who says that "the informational richness of perceptual experiences is hardly rendered by linguistic expressions."

Authors and researchers have pointed out the immense importance of smell which is said to have an affect on mate choice (Havlicek & Roberts, 2009) and also in helping us to avoid rotten and poisonous food, both of which are necessary for the evolutionary success. They also affect our daily behaviors in numerous ways as it constantly surrounds us. The growth of multi-billion fragrance industries and the high value of products such as scented soaps, air fresheners, perfumes and colognes imply the significance of smell and this resulted in the deodorization of self and

environment. Agapakis and Tolaas (2012, p. 569) mockingly points out that “humans have a remarkably low opinion of the nose, neglecting to cultivate and educate the sense of smell while zealously deodorizing the world.”

The cultural preoccupations such as the disregard for smell is also a reason for the improper representation and communication. Plümacher and Holz (2007, p. 2), for instance, talk about the “less developed cultural need to reflect odors” in language. In line with this idea it is easily concludable that cultures that emphasize smell tend to verbalize smell and have many vocabularies related to smell than the English-speaking cultures which is vision-centric. For the Ongee culture of the Andaman Islands smell plays a vital role in cosmology and the spiritual belief system. They consider aromas as vital energies and conceptualize death as loss of a person’s smell. (Classen et al., 1994, pp. 95–96). The relative importance of smell in their culture, Ongee speakers use many smell words as a means of their expressions. Also, Floyd, San Roque, and Majid (2018) describe the fact that the Barbacoan language Cha’palaa (spoken in Ecuador) is the only language so far that have a grammaticized smell classifier.

The nexus between Language and Smell

It is an evident fact that our languages tend to have only a limited palette of words to describe what we smell. As the ability to communicate the smells are limited by English language the ability to understand and recognise scents also is limited. Thus, a literary study on smells, fragrances and spices entails with it several problems that are left unacknowledged and unsolved. From the outset, one must understand initially that scent images are categorically different from that of auditory and visual images. The descriptions of scents most often take the form of simile, metaphor and metonym. Even when visual and auditory images are also represented through these means, further descriptions and explanations are possible for those images. For example, the visual simile, “her teeth were as white as pearls” can be further described by focusing on the details of “her teeth,” or on “pearls” which can provide descriptions that include the aspects of size or the particular colour. Such additional descriptions are difficult to provide for scents since it lacks the aesthetic lexicons and becomes difficult to grasp if the scent that is mentioned is previously unexperienced. Additionally, the visual images can be recreated in the mind but the smells and fragrances portrayed cannot be precisely recreated and one cannot smell the fragrance of lavender by focusing at the idea of lavender.

Smell as a Literary symbol

The symbolic use of scents and perfumes in literary text is described by Mary Fleischer where she states that

Smell might well have been the Symbolist sense par excellence. While the Naturalists and Realists used detailed descriptions of smell as literary device to imbue the environment with a moral atmosphere or to enrich the verisimilitude of their works, the Symbolists used smell in suggestive, mysterious, and expansive ways to dissolve barriers between subject and object, individual and environment. (Fleischer, 2007)

Authors use the symbol of smell as a clue to an individual’s personality or in recreating the environment in which the story takes place and thus providing scents to speak to

the emotions of the readers. Roland Barthes considers such sensory memory described in a text as a “perfumed idea” (Barthes, 1977) that pervades in it.

Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is one fine example. Here the author uses scent images in setting up a scene

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden, there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn. (Wilde, 2015)

Shakespeare uses smell symbols to portray the Elizabethan Age, the low set hygiene and the terrible living of the people which was abounded with unpleasant smells. He hits the foul-smelling breath of the common people in *Julius Caesar* by stating “a deal of stinking breath that it had almost choked Caesar”. (Shakespeare, 2012, 1.2.) The perfume is given a negative connotation when used to refer the dandies and coquettish ladies, cheap and paid women and the courtiers and they are considered to be disguises of ugliness and betrayals. He also makes a clear contrast about the mention of the aristocrats and their pleasant smells in *Hamlet* where Ophelia observes the sweet, perfumed breath of Prince Hamlet in the scene of their Confrontation in which she remarks,

And with them, words of so sweet breath compos’d
As made the things more rich; Their perfume lost,
Take these again, for to the noble mind (Shakespeare, 2015, 3.1.)

Similarly, in *Othello*, Desdemona is believed to have the sweet smell which makes Othello to pause and inhale her, before he strangulates her. Othello knows the consequences of the murder that Desdemona cannot be brought back to life and so places a last kiss on her and enjoys a moment of her balsamic breath.

Such examples are abundant in literary texts that we as readers often fail to notice and interpret meaning from them. Thus, the next part is about the in-depth analysis of an American fiction where smell is significantly used to denote various aspects.

Engaging Rikki Ducornet’s *Gazelle* through their Olfactory metaphors

Rikki Ducornet, the American writer, poet and artist is well known for her writing style characterized by a number of motifs on nature, Eros, abusive authority, subversion, and creative imagination. *Gazelle* traces the story of a thirteen-year old American girl named Elizabeth, who grows up to become an anatomist dissecting mummified bodies in the museum. The book is a beautiful narration of her growing up in Cairo, a city in Egypt, with her tragically mismatched parents. Her Icelandic mother is a wayward woman who leaves her husband and picks up strange men becoming a centre of male attraction through her vivacious beauty. Her father is a professor of History and seems completely lost in the game of chess and the history of war. The abandonment of her mother strikes both Elizabeth and her father quite hard because of which he falls into depression and weakness. He wanted his wife back at any cost as he felt like nobody without her and called in for magicians to serve the purpose. Elizabeth is fascinated by Ramses Ragab, the friend of her father and the war game companion, a perfumer by profession who takes her into the world of exotic

perfumes. The novel clearly pictures the troubled relationship that Elizabeth has with her mother.

Throughout the book the words of Rikki evoke the senses and one could smell the aromas and delicate fragrances of orange blossoms, perfumes, mint, almonds, limes, roses, jasmines and other delicacies to the smell of animal dung, the pungent smell of vinegar, of urine and long-buried mummies that pervades through the pages.

Smell as a socio-cultural symbol

Anthony Synnott, a social anthropologist argues about the many socio-cultural qualities of smell. He regards smell as 'a boundary-marker, a status symbol, an impression management technique, a school-boy joke or protest, and a danger signal—but it is above all a statement of who one is.' (Synnott, 1991)

The Egyptian setting of the book is clearly mentioned through the aromatic streets, Ramses Ragab's *Kosmètèrion* and the ivory shop from which Elizabeth's father orders for chess pieces. In Ducornet's words "the shop was very old and smelled unlike any place I had ever been; I suppose it was the ivory dust on the air—all that old bone—the henna, the coffee, and the tea. It was a wonderful smell and soothing" (Ducornet, 2004) it is evident how smell metaphors can encode spaces.

Identity and Body Odors

Smell has a long historical association with disease and death. For centuries, the disease was thought to be spread by foul odours in the air and the deadly plague in particular that was prevailing in Europe from the fourteenth to seventeenth century spread an anxiety about the odour of others. Thus, odour was considered as a primary force in distinguishing good and ill, and is believed to hold the power of life and death since bad odour is continued to be inextricably linked to bad health and the smell of rotting body.

Rikki marks this clear association of body odour with wellness when the magician who is brought by Beybars, the cook, to help father bring back his wife identifies that he is unwell and remarks "He smells of chalk. Of old stone walls succumbing to humidity. He is not well" (Ducornet, 2004)

The sense of smell also offers an olfactory marker which is used to express and regulate personal and social identity and to establish a boundary between self and other. The dominant social class is often portrayed as inodorous or pleasant smelling while the subordinate class is represented by an offensive stench and they are considered malodorous. George Orwell's declaration goes well with this phenomenon where he puts forth that, 'the real secret of class distinctions in the West can be summed up in four frightful words ... *the lower classes smell*'. (Orwell, 1937)

With this distinction marked by the smell of body odour people started to mask themselves with perfumes, which became the reason for the rapid growth of fragrance industries in the twentieth century. Also, the place that fragrances had among the people was much significant. When Elizabeth's father asks Ramses Ragab about the customers who shows interest in buying his perfume, he proudly declares "The stylish, the frivolous, sirens and sluts, voluptuaries and brides . . . dandies, of course; I see lots of dandies. Anybody game for amorous adventure, coquettes . . . courtesans"

(Ducornet, 2004). He remarks on how Egyptians loved perfumes and how even their sweetmeats and other meals were perfumed with blossoms. He then narrated a story of a slanderer who, dying of cancer was cured by pastry that was perfumed with mastic. Ramses Ragab can be compared with Patrick Süskind's hero Grenouille from the novel *Perfume*, who places high emphasis on olfaction and capable of cataloguing and differentiating aromas. Ragab gives scent imagery to each and every thing he faces with including people and situations. The beauty of such imagery is seen when he addresses "transgression" with the smell of metal, brass and bruised green cardamom. He also identifies Elizabeth with the smell of Grapefruit, green sandalwood, and with new box of lead pencils. This brings into focus on how smell can create meaning of identity as Antony Synnott puts forth the claim that "It is said that 'we are what we eat'—but it is also true that we are what we smell like: fragrant or foul, good or bad." (Frank & Synnott, 1995).

Smell in memory and emotion

Many authors have tried to explain the emotional connect of scent with memory and experiences. One good example is Marcel Proust's (1983) declaration in *A Remembrance of Things Past* on the effect of madeleine that brought with it, his childhood memories and his aunts place where he had them.

But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

This strong association of smell and memory is clearly portrayed in *Gazelle* through different situations. Elizabeth now in her early forties narrates an incident that happened during her teen, where she and her father were returning from the ivory shop and her father vomits suddenly and a man offers him a handkerchief moistened with orange blossom water, which he keeps plunged on his face throughout their way back home. This experience with the smell of orange blossom makes her to declare "To this day I cannot smell orange-blossom water without thinking of a cobbled street, a spoiled fez, my father's stained knees." (Ducornet, 2004)

As a perfumer Ramses Ragab is also more emotionally attached to perfumes and the fragrance, which through their slightest traces brought in memories and situations attached with them. He propounds that these fragrances either evoked the deepest reveries or the greatest pleasures.

"Cassia, myrrh, lavender, orris, santal, rose, bergamot, anise, almond . . . even as a child I loved these things," Ramses Ragab once told me, "for their fragrances which caused me no end of delight, and for the mysteries of their medicinal properties which evoked the deepest reveries I had ever known and the greatest bliss." (Ducornet, 2004)

To conclude *Gazelle* is an adventure through the realms of sensuality and the fragrance of the story wafts in the mind of the readers.

Conclusion

The relationship between the sense of smell and human behaviour and emotion is complex that is often left unrepresented in literature or paid lesser attention by the readers. This study thus argues for the importance of olfaction and a more post-modern understanding of unrepresentable forms of knowledge that modern epistemologies inevitably depend on yet conveniently overlook or gloss over in the process of knowledge creation' (Chia, 2003). Along with declaring the authority of smell as Hellen Keller calls it the "fallen angel" (Keller, 2009), this study also helps to understand that scents are not just the pleasing objects. Each one tells a unique story. They have something to share and contribute to the process of meaning making.

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