



Fragrance as a Catalyst for the Emotional Exploration in *The Book of Everlasting Things*

Deepti Prajapati

M.A English Student, Government College for Girls, Sector 14 Gurugram, India

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Abstract— Aanchal Malhotra's *The Book of Everlasting Things* is a deep exploration of the memories and the sense of loss faced by the characters during and after the period of war. This paper is an attempt to dive deep into the minds of the characters and understand how olfactory imagery plays a crucial role in unlocking memories of the past, serving as a bridge that connects generations. The novel offers its reader a delicate understanding of how the scents of the past continue to shape the memories of the present realities, emphasizing the power of memory to both haunt and heal. By analyzing the relationship of the protagonist Samir with scent it can be seen that how, in the hands of Aanchal Malhotra fragrance functions as an invisible yet a gripping voice that echoes the legacy of suffering and survival.



Keywords— Emotion, Fragrance, Memory, Partition, Scent

I. INTRODUCTION

"I'm tired of violence being the only way to look at partition", says Aanchal Malhotra in an interview about her debut novel (Thapar). Literature has long explored memory through words and emotions, but few narratives have captured its essence through scent as powerfully as in Aanchal Malhotra's *The Book of Everlasting Things*.

Set against the backdrop of Lahore before partition and progressing through its consequences in 1947, *The Book of Everlasting Things* tells the story of Samir Vij, a Hindu perfumer and Firdaus, a Muslim calligrapher. Their love story begins with a deep connection formed through art and scent but is tragically disrupted by the political and religious turmoil during those times.

Right from the beginning of the story fragrance is not just Samir's family trade, but instead it is something that shapes his entire life.

"In 1937, after his initiation at the river Ravi, ten-year-old Samir began his apprenticeship at the ittar shop. He was in grade four in boy's school in a large haveli at Wachowali, not far from his maternal grandparents' home." (Malhotra,29).

Marcel Proust in his work *In Search of Lost Time* captures the idea that certain smells and tastes can involuntarily bring back powerful memories. "... I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of a cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shiver ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me." (Proust, Swann's Way). It's a very important and well-known part of literature, so famous that it even has its own name: the Proustian moment. It describes a time when one of your senses — like smell, taste, or sound — suddenly brings back a bunch of old memories, even ones you thought you had forgotten. These impressions rise from his subconscious upon tasting a madeleine cake dipped in tea, filling him with a divine kind of bliss, Aanchal Malhotra uses scent in a very similar way. For her smell is more than just a sense organ, it is instead a powerful trigger for memory.

II. FRAGRANCE AS A MEDIUM OF MEMORY

Fragrance acts as a powerful medium for memory, particularly emotional and nostalgic recall, due to direct link

between the olfactory system and the brain's limbic system, which governs emotions and memory.

In the novel fragrance holds a unique power over memory. Unlike something which we hear or see, memory does not go through multiple layers of processing instead it instantly hits us emotionally to our core.

"Fragrance possessed the power to provide instant, pure pleasure. Quicker than even sight or sound, it penetrated Samir's senses, transporting him simultaneously to multiple places with each whiff." (Malhotra, 33)

In the story, the scent brings back memories without warning. The scents from Samir's childhood, the ittars from their family shop, and even the faintest scent left behind by Firdaus which Samir remembered from the time when she first visited their shop with her family *Ittar Kada, Vij & Sons, Estd 1921, Lahore*, come together to create a blend of intricate fabric of his past. Fragrance is a medium for Samir to re-experience the moments long gone. Perfume becomes a tool for holding his memories.

This connection of Samir with scents becomes clearer when he asks his Taya ji, "Well, is it possible...How can I learn to..." Samir stumbled through his thoughts. "What I mean is, can we recreate something we have smelled before? Or someone, the smell of a person?" (Malhotra, 52). On the surface this may sound like a childish question, but it does carry a deeper meaning, as if the young boy is really asking, can a scent bring a person back even if it is only in memory? The author seems to suggest that only fragrance has the power to help us remember in the most intimate way possible.

III. FRAGRANCE AS AN EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

For Samir fragrance is more than a profession, it becomes a way to express his emotions that are too complex and overpowered to put into words. His perfumes are personal and emotional creations. The novel treats perfume as a form of art just like music or painting, that holds a power to transform everyday life. "This is what art did, what music did, what perfume did, it elevated human life during crisis. We were the transporters; we took people somewhere else." (Malhotra, 313)

Perfumes becomes his way of resisting hopelessness and holding onto the beauty. Even during the Partition, when so much is being lost – home, families, he continues to make fragrance.

After partition when he has lost everything, France is the only place Samir can think of going to when he realizes that he cannot live in a country that does not have Lahore. He goes to France because his beloved uncle, Vivek, had once

fought in France on behalf of the British Empire in World War I, then returned to Lahore with a knowledge of perfumery based on which the Vij family had opened an attar shop. But Samir is too numb, too desensitized to make use of his 'nose' for beautiful, memory-inducing scents. Instead, he works as a hospital orderly, surrounded by the smells of blood, sickness and disease. He marries there and has a child, and Firdaus, left in Lahore, marries and has a family too. But while Firdaus slowly comes to love her husband and moves forward again, Samir, when his 'nose' eventually reawakens, goes back into the past, trying to recreate through scent all that he lost.

The deeper connection to perfume is further revealed through Vivek, Samir's uncle, who says,

"All perfumes are in some way inspired by people. They become homages, dedications, and tributes. In fact, a perfume without memory is a body without soul. One cannot create a perfume for a place where dialogue is unsustainable. The place can be an inspiration, but 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 – we must use them just the same." (Malhotra, 56)

Samir's relationship with fragrance can be understood through the ideas of Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida*. He talks about how certain photographs can touch us very deeply. Barthes termed this as *Punctum*. It is not always easy to tell as to why it moves us, but it does. This idea of punctum can also be applied to Samir's fragrance. Just like a tiny detail in a photograph can stir hidden emotions, a small note in a perfume can unlock a flood of emotions. The scents that Samir create are like emotional photographs made of smell. They remind him of Firdaus, his uncle and of his city Lahore. These fragrances help him express his feelings that he cannot speak out loud. Fragrance becomes his language of memory that words cannot always explain.

IV. FRAGRANCE AND LOVE

Samir and Firdaus's love story unfolds through the quiet yet powerful language of scent. From their very first meeting, fragrance plays a central role – it's what brings them together. "Bottle still in hand, he inhaled deeply with closed eyes as a new smell snaked around him. Everything about it was ordinary, yet something stood out so clearly that he was unable to ignore it. He smelled her before he saw her." (Malhotra, 49)

For Samir, love is not announced – it's breathed in, felt through the air. As he says, "A whiff something intoxicating on someone intoxicating...someone's own scent, their skin

and sweat, can make you fall in love in an instant.” (Malhotra, 393) The focus is less on physical appearance and touch but rather more on the olfactory intensity of their bond, how deeply scent, more than sight or touch shapes Samir’s expression of love.

Even after they are separated, Firdaus’s presence is always felt in the perfumes created by Samir. The perfume “*Khazin-e-Firdaus, the keeper of paradise*” is a sign of how important Firdaus is to Samir. Scent here becomes a powerful tool to remember her, honor her and to preserve her and her love. As T.S. Eliot writes in *Tradition and Individual Talent*, “The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” which resonates with the way how Samir uses fragrance to keep Firdaus alive in his memory and carry her love into the present.

Samir’s uncle, Vivek, also shares a deep, emotional connection with scent and it is through him that Samir inherits the art of perfumery. Vivek’s own love story is captured in a scent named *Ambrette*, which he created in the memory of someone he once loved and lost. For both uncle and nephew, perfume becomes a way to hold onto those things which the heart cannot forget.

V. FRAGRANCE AS RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL

In the aftermath of partition, perfumery becomes a form of resistance for Samir – his way of holding on when everything is lost. Back in France, Samir becomes deeply absorbed in his uncle Vivek’s wartime journals and discovers his uncle’s hidden past—his love story, perfumery training, and life in France. This obsession creates a tension in Samir’s own marriage, leading to its collapse and costing him his job. Eventually, he follows his uncle’s footsteps, trains as a perfumer, and opens a practice in Paris. Despite building a new life, Sameer’s heart remains tied to Firdaus; his most profound creations are inspired not by his wife, but by the memory and scent of his first love. Even with time and distance, Sameer and Firdaus never truly let go of each other. Even when both Samir and Firdaus have grandchildren and experience deaths in the family, the two lovers never forgot about each other. As the French poet, *Charles Baudelaire* writes in *Les Fleurs Du Mal*, “perfumes are as rich as music and love”. For Baudelaire, scents are more than just sensations. For Samir, Fragrance becomes his way to survive amidst the loss and resist forgetting about his past, Firdaus.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the novel *The Book of Everlasting Things*, fragrance is more than just a background theme, it is the very heart and soul of the story. Through Samir’s journey, Aanchal

Malhotra shows how scent can carry memories, express emotions and can work as a tool for survival during the times of the deepest losses. Everything in the novel, whether it is love, grief, or longing, everything flows through the language of perfume. In the end perfume becomes a powerful way of holding on to what matters the most to us.

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