

Perfume as an Odour-Evoked Trigger of Autobiographical Memory in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

This article examines perfume as an immediate trigger of an individual's autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memories are often activated through the senses of smell and taste. This is associated with the Proust phenomenon. This phenomenon stems from neuroanatomy, as scent evokes nostalgia that benefits human psychology by fostering emotional well-being and a sense of social connectedness. This study explores how scent functions as a sensory device that recalls painful past experiences, including loss, identity, and trauma. The olfactory (piriform) cortex identifies smells, the amygdala generates emotional responses, and the hippocampus forms and retrieves memories. Unlike other sensory signals, olfactory signals bypass the brain's sensory relay station, the thalamus, and travel directly to the olfactory bulb, which is closely connected to the amygdala and hippocampus.

Using the concepts of Odour-Evoked Autobiographical Memory (OEAM) and the Proust phenomenon, this study argues that perfume in the novel is not merely decorative but deeply symbolic, connecting memory and emotion. The paper also examines how scent functions as a narrative bridge between the past and the present, particularly in relation to migration and selfhood. For instance, the vanilla fragrance in Obinze's flat evokes Ifemelu's feelings of comfort and desire. Through the olfactory experiences, Adichie uses smell as a narrative device to connect memory, migration, identity, and trauma. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how different odours evoke nostalgia, past experiences, and psychological trauma, revealing the profound relationship between smell, memory, emotion, and the human psyche.

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Introduction

Among the five human senses, smell is the most powerful sense for evoking memories. Other terms for smell include aroma, odour, scent, and fragrance. When we encounter a sensory stimulus, such as an aroma, it can trigger distinct feelings and emotions. Those emotions are meant to be pure and are not forbidden. This moment is called the Proustian Moment in the fields of psychology and neuroscience. These aromas touch our senses with long-forgotten childhood memories and sometimes internalised trauma. The term is associated with the French author Marcel Proust's famous novel, *In Search of Lost Time*. The protagonist describes dipping a madeleine cake into tea, which triggers his powerful sense of smell. It takes him back to his childhood memories.

In human anatomy, information from other sensory organs passes through the thalamus. The thalamus filters the information before sending it to the cerebral cortex for conscious analysis. However, smell has a direct pathway. In our body, the olfactory bulb connects to the amygdala, an emotion processor, and the hippocampus, a long-term memory storage centre. Because the olfactory pathway bypasses the thalamus, scent triggers emotions and memories that feel more vivid. Scents can also help us store autobiographical memories. Anohana, in his article, says, "When that scent reappears decades later, the brain automatically reopens the entire 'package' of that experience, including the exact feelings you had at that moment" (Anohana).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* explores the memory of a migrant to America. The novel is set during the military regime of Ibrahim Babangida (1985–1993), which brought the country back to democracy. It is a work of fiction set in contemporary Nigeria and America, published in 2013. Although the novel explores identity, it also uses scents to trigger past frustration and happy memories. The novel also develops the idea of how scent brings memories back to life.

"Odour has served as a prominent theme in literature," says Gerald C. Cupchik and Krista Phillips in their article, "The Scent of Literature" (101). Several literary works analyse scent as a factor that triggers memory. Patrick Süskind's *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2001) describes odour-evoked autobiographical memory. The article argues that *Americanah* also functions as a novel of scent that triggers memories. Odour brings back memories that have not faded, including repressed memories that create trauma.

Migration, trauma, and identity form a synthesis of memory. Migration creates a new identity by forcing people to forget their past identities and adapt to new ones. Ifemelu, the central character, embodies the synthesis of migration, identity, and trauma. She migrates from Nigeria and swings between her past and new

identity to redefine herself. The scents she encounters remind her of her experiences in her homeland. Meanwhile, other scents remind her of Obinze, her first love in her homeland, bringing back an unforgettable moment of her life. The novel portrays traumatic memories as suffocating, whereas other memories remain fresh and bring back an irretrievable past.

However, Stevenson and Case (2005) distributed a questionnaire on olfactory interest and found that individuals who reported high olfactory interest identified more odours correctly than a group less attentive to odours in everyday life. Likewise, people who report a high affective impact when perceiving odours also report higher frequencies of odour-evoked memories (Arshamian, Willander, and Larsson 220).

Aim and Objectives:

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach by examining literature through the lens of neuroscience. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* provides instances of odour-evoked autobiographical memory. For instance, in Chapter 5, Ifemelu notices that "The flat smelled of vanilla" (75). The familiar fragrance evokes a sense of home and comfort. The novel further states, "In their American-British jousting, she always sided with his mother" (75). His refers to Obinze, Ifemelu's first love. This suggests that Ifemelu feels emotionally connected to Obinze's mother and experiences a strong sense of belonging in their home. This shows how the fragrance triggers memories of belonging to one's own nation.

Discussion

After moving to America, Ifemelu develops a profound longing for Nigeria. Whenever she visits Obinze's house, the scent of vanilla reminds her of home and reinforces her sense of belonging. She eats her food slowly, thinking about "how much she wanted to remain there with them, in their rapture, forever" (75). Likewise, the smell of vanilla triggers Ifemelu's autobiographical memories, reconnecting her with her past and her emotional attachment to home.

Some flashbacks are cherished and preserved for a lifetime. Ifemelu considers her first love with Obinze pure and wants to preserve every reminder of it. The novel states, "Her nightshirt smelled of his cologne, a muted citrus and wood scent" (435). Ifemelu does not want to wash the nightshirt because she intends "to preserve his essence until the next time" (435). This illustrates her desire to keep Obinze's memory through his fragrance. "A single scent can unlock vivid memories" (Greco-Vuilloud et al. 5). People often preserve memories of love by associating them with specific scents.

Cologne generally refers to a light and refreshing fragrance. According to the article, "Woody vs. Fresh Fragrance for Men: Your Cologne Questions Answered," woody fragrances are "carefully chosen to create that unmistakably masculine appeal that feels both timeless and confident". Similarly, citrus notes evoke freshness and sophistication. These qualities reflect the characteristics that Ifemelu associates with Obinze and wishes to preserve. Although she ultimately cannot hold

on to that relationship, the lingering scent of his cologne becomes a powerful reminder of their love and serves as an odour-evoked autobiographical memory. It is a flashback memory with Obinze.

Correspondingly, in Chapter 36, when Ifemelu is in a relationship with Blaine, she is reminded of her love memories during a birthday celebration. At times, she feels a lack of belonging in her relationship with Blaine. When she encounters Marcia and her boyfriend, she observes that “they wore their love life heavy perfume” (335), which was “exuding a transparent commitment” (335). The heavy perfume symbolically represents their commitment and the intensity of their love.

The passage, “Watching them, Ifemelu imagined this life for her and Blaine, in a small house on a quiet street, batiks hung on the walls, African sculptures, glowing in corners, and both of them existing in a steady hum of happiness” (335), reveals Ifemelu’s desire for a similar sense of emotional connection and stability. After smelling the heavy perfume, Ifemelu compares it with her own autobiographical memories and desires. The scent evokes her memories and creates a moment of emotional reflection, allowing her to imagine a life filled with love, belonging, and happiness. Through the fragrance of certain elements, Ifemelu struggles between her present and past.

Consequently, as Obinze enters a new phase of life with Kosi, his wife, he encounters new experiences tied to perfumes and memories. When Kosi comes to Obinze’s house, she “arranges her perfume bottles on his dresser, citrusy scents that he came to associate with home” and “owned new life” (445). Here, although Obinze carries memories of his past love with Ifemelu, he has to accept his fate of being married to Kosi. Kosi represents a traditional wife, and her presence introduces a new dimension to Obinze’s life. Even though Obinze remains emotionally attached to his past experiences with Ifemelu, he understands that the new citrus scent represents a new beginning and a different phase of his life. According to the *Parcos Luxezine* Editor, citrus fragrances contain notes that provide “an immediate burst of freshness and brightness.” The freshness associated with citrus scents reflects the possibility of renewal and transformation in Obinze’s life.

However, while some perfumes evoke happiness and comfort, others trigger traumatic experiences connected with the past. For instance, Obinze feels suffocated in his marriage with Kosi when he encounters the odour of lavender and potpourri. At the same time, Obinze likes the peppermint odour of his wife, “which he had always liked” (447). Yet, this scent unexpectedly evokes memories of Ifemelu. In this way, *Americanah* effectively represents Obinze’s Odour-Evoked Autobiographical Memory (OEAM). The fragrance triggers his recollection of Ifemelu, which causes him to compare his past relationship with his present life. He experiences emotional distress.

Memory for odors does not inherently diminish with age, but neither is it impervious to the effects of time. Many, if not most, of the declines typically associated with age are the result of insult and injury, neuropathologies,

pharmacological and nutritional imbalance, cognitive slowing, and diminished memorial capacity (Elsner 284).

When Kosi asks, “You are not getting sick?” (445), Obinze is already overwhelmed by his memories of Ifemelu. The scent triggers his prior experiences. It reminds him of a lost love. He rushes to the toilet, where he encounters the strong smell of “new potpourri,” described as “a mix of dried leaves and seeds in a purple bowl,” with a “too strong lavender scent that choked him” (448). He pours the extract into the toilet and feels relieved. The odour evokes autobiographical memories of Ifemelu and intensifies his emotional conflict about his present relationship with Kosi. Although lavender is generally associated with calmness and relaxation, the same scent becomes a source of discomfort and trauma for Obinze because it connects to memories of his past love life with Ifemelu.

Subsequently, some scents become reminders of loss and identity crisis. When Ifemelu uses a relaxer to straighten her hair, she applies chemical products that remind her of “the chemistry lab in secondary school” (204). The product’s smell recalls an unpleasant experience from her past. While relaxing her hair for a job interview, she experiences “the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss” (204). The burning smell symbolises the loss of her natural identity and her struggle with cultural acceptance. This moment demonstrates the function of the Proust Phenomenon, where scents do not merely evoke memories of happiness and comfort; however, they also recall experiences of trauma, disconnection, and loss.

Moreover, some scents remind individuals of specific places and childhood experiences. For instance, in Chapter 15, while Ifemelu is living in America, she is reminded of her mother through “a small jar of Mentholatum” that her mother had given her (153). Ifemelu finds it while rummaging through her suitcase. She “opened and sniffed it, rubbing some under her nose” (153), and “the scent made her want to weep” (153). The fragrance evokes memories of her mother and her homeland. It also explores how individuals develop indifference after migrating from their homeland.

Equally, when Ifemelu is surrounded by nature, “the crisp air, fragrant” reminds her of Nsukka. The experience brings her “a sudden stab of homesickness so sharp.... that it filled her eyes with tears” (147). This shows how deeply memories connect to the fragrances surrounding individuals. Certain scents can revive childhood memories and emotional experiences. For Ifemelu, the scent not only evokes nostalgia but also reflects her traumatic experiences of adapting to a new identity and her longing for home.

Conclusion

Americanah effectively presents Odour-Evoked Autobiographical Memory (OEAM) in relation to migration, identity, and trauma. It also explores perfumes and their characteristics, highlighting how scents influence human emotions and memories. The novel develops ideas related to the olfactory bulb, which receives

smells immediately, and the amygdala, which plays a significant role in generating emotions and storing memories, including memories of belonging, disconnection, and loss.

Ifemelu is constantly surrounded by memories, and each scent reminds her of particular places and experiences. People often associate places with specific odours, smells, or fragrances. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, Ifemelu observes that “Philadelphia had the musty scent of history, New Haven smelled of neglect, Baltimore smelled of brine and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage” (10). These descriptions show how scents become tied to personal experiences and memories of places.

Odors have a unique connection with the human psyche because it can evoke memories more immediately than other sensory experiences. Scents allow individuals to return to past experiences, recalling moments of happiness, nostalgia, displacement, and trauma. However, “Princeton had no smells, she liked taking deep breaths” (10), suggesting a place that does not carry the same emotional associations for Ifemelu. Pathan argues that perfumes can evoke emotions, create lasting memories, and shape personal identity. Therefore, *Americanah* demonstrates how fragrances function as powerful triggers of memory, connecting individuals with their past, identity, and emotional experiences.

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