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## Perfume Poetics: Olfactory Imagery as a Tool of Memory and Resistance in the Poetry of Arab Women

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### ABSTRACT

In the rich tapestry of Arab literature, olfactory imagery emerges as a potent device, particularly in the works of women poets who navigate themes of exile, trauma, and identity. This paper explores how scents—ranging from jasmine and rosewater to the acrid smells of conflict—serve as mechanisms for evoking memory, asserting resistance, and reclaiming agency in poetry by Nazik al-Mala'ika, Suheir Hammad, and Heba Abu Nada. Drawing on sensory studies and postcolonial theory, it argues that these poets transform intangible aromas into tangible symbols of cultural persistence amid displacement and violence. Through close readings, the analysis reveals five key functions of scent: as memory triggers, erotic symbols, weapons of nostalgia, healing agents, and communal bonds. By interweaving personal and collective histories, these women challenge dominant narratives, using the primal power of smell to bridge past and present. This approach not only highlights the understudied role of olfaction in Arab poetics but also underscores its relevance in contemporary discussions of trauma and feminism. Ultimately, the paper posits that olfactory poetics offers a multisensory pathway to resilience, inviting readers to reconsider how literature engages the body in acts of remembrance and defiance

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## Introduction

Poetry has long been a vessel for the senses, but in Arab literary traditions, the evocation of smell holds a unique place, often overlooked in favor of visual or auditory elements. Unlike sight, which can be distant and observational, scent is intimate, invasive, and deeply tied to emotion and memory. As neuroscientists have shown, olfactory stimuli directly engage the amygdala and hippocampus, bypassing rational filters to summon vivid recollections (Herz & Engen, 1996). In the context of Arab women's poetry, this sensory mode becomes even more charged, serving as a subtle yet powerful tool for navigating patriarchal constraints, colonial legacies, and modern conflicts.

This paper focuses on three prominent Arab women poets: Nazik al-Mala'ika (1923–2007), the Iraqi pioneer of free verse; Suheir Hammad (b. 1973), a Palestinian-American spoken-word artist; and Heba Abu Nada (1991–2023), a Gaza-based novelist and poet killed during the 2023 escalations. Their works, spanning modernist ghazals to contemporary free verse, employ scents not merely as decorative flourishes but as active agents in poetic discourse. What draws these poets together is their use of olfactory imagery to resist erasure—whether from war, diaspora, or cultural silencing.

Historically, Arab poetry, from pre-Islamic qasidas to Umayyad ghazals, has incorporated sensory details to humanize abstract experiences (Holes, 2008). Yet, for women poets, this takes on added layers. In a region where female voices have often been marginalized, smells evoke the domestic, the bodily, and the forbidden, allowing indirect critiques of power structures. As Al-Abbasi (2023) notes, such imagery creates a "holistic" poetic experience, merging the physical with the metaphorical.

The following sections delineate five mechanisms through which scents operate in these poets' works, supported by textual analysis and interdisciplinary insights. By examining these, we uncover how olfactory poetics fosters resilience, turning personal aromas into collective anthems of survival.

### *Historical Context: Scents in Arab Poetic Traditions*

To appreciate the innovation in these women's poetry, one must first trace olfactory motifs in broader Arab literature. Classical texts, such as the Mu'allaqat odes, often invoke smells to depict landscapes or lovers—the musk of a gazelle or the incense of a tent signaling nomadic vitality (Hamdan & Natour, 2012). In ghazal forms, which evolved from Persian influences but took root in Arabic during the Abbasid era, scents symbolized unattainable desire, as seen in Siculo-Arabic poems where synesthetic blends of smell and color evoke the lover's absence (Alonso, 2023).



For women poets, however, this tradition intersects with gender dynamics. Pre-Islamic depictions of women were often sensory but objectifying—fragrant hair or perfumed skin as male fantasies (Natour, 2012). Modern Arab women reclaim this, infusing scents with agency. Al-Mala'ika, breaking from classical meters, uses free verse to personalize olfaction, while Hammad's hip-hop-infused style grounds it in urban exile. Abu Nada, writing amid siege, turns everyday smells into elegies for lost homes.

This shift aligns with sensory history in the Islamic world, where smells like oud or ambergris carried spiritual and social weight (McHugh, 2022). In women's hands, these become subversive, challenging the "memoricide" of occupation by preserving intangible heritage (Sabra, 2025).

### *Mechanism 1: Scents as Memory Triggers*

One of the most visceral roles of olfactory imagery is triggering involuntary memories, a phenomenon Proustian in its intensity but rooted in Arab cultural specificity. In al-Mala'ika's "Love Song for Words," she writes: "Why do we fear words when they have been rose-palmed hands, fragrant, passing gently over our cheeks" (al-Mala'ika, 2003, p. 1). Here, the fragrance of roses isn't ornamental; it conjures tactile warmth, linking language to lost intimacy. Amid Iraq's turbulent mid-20th century, this scent evokes pre-war innocence, much like how Herz (2004) describes odors as "emotional time machines" (p. 217).

Hammad extends this in *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, where diaspora fragments memory. In poems like "Drops," she alludes to water's scent mingling with earth, evoking Ramallah's rains: "the smell of wet soil after exile's drought" (Hammad, 2010, p. 45). This olfactory recall combats alienation, forging solidarity with Black American struggles. As ecofeminist readings suggest, such imagery ties personal trauma to environmental loss, making scent a bridge across borders (Al-Ani, 2016).

Abu Nada, in her poignant "Not Just Passing," uses the acrid smell of rubble to memorialize Gaza: "The scent of charred bread lingers, a ghost in the throat" (Abu Nada, 2023, para. 3). Killed in an airstrike, her work prefigures this, turning destruction's odors into defiant remembrance, echoing Darwish's memory poetics but from a feminine lens.

### *Mechanism 2: Erotic Resistance Through Perfume*

Scents also encode eroticism, allowing veiled expressions in conservative contexts. In ghazals, where love is often unrequited, women poets subvert this by claiming sensory ownership. Al-Mala'ika's "Revolt Against the Sun" features "fragrances and shade" as sanctuaries for desire: "amid fragrances... you



mocked my sadness" (al-Mala'ika, 2018, p. 12). This olfactory intimacy resists patriarchal sun-glare, symbolizing exposure, and aligns with Hijazi ghazals' sensual-spiritual duality (Al-Harbi, 2021).

Hammad's "What I Will" amplifies this resistance, blending erotic scents with political fury: "I will not dance to your war drum... but inhale the jasmine of my mother's hair" (Hammad, 2008, p. 67). Jasmine, a staple in Palestinian perfumery, becomes a sensual weapon against occupation, reclaiming the body from violence.

Abu Nada's fiction-poetry hybrid in "Oxygen is Not for the Dead" evokes perfume as forbidden touch: "Her attar clings, defying the blockade's stench" (Abu Nada, 2023, para. 8). This erotic charge challenges siege-induced desexualization, using smell to affirm life amid death.

### Mechanism 3: Weaponized Nostalgia and Postcolonial Critique

Nostalgia, when scented, turns militant. Poets weaponize familiar aromas against colonial erasure. Al-Mala'ika's nature poems invoke "the scent is beautiful" amid silk and happiness, contrasting Baghdad's chaos (Al-Jumaily, 2024). This nostalgia critiques modernization's sterile odors.

Hammad's *ZaatarDiva* maps "cumin cartography of our hips," using herb scents to redraw erased borders (Hammad, 1996, p. 33). Za'atar's aroma, banned in some occupations, becomes postcolonial resistance, as analyzed in transcultural studies (Metzger, 2019).

Abu Nada's work smells of "cardamom coffee," a Palestinian ritual invoking communal memory against fragmentation (Haddad, 2020).

### *Mechanism 4: Healing Synesthesia and Sensory Rebirth*

Olfactory imagery often synergizes with other senses for healing. In synesthetic ghazals, smells rewrite trauma (Alonso, 2023). Al-Mala'ika's "frankincense hums hymns," blending scent and sound for spiritual balm (al-Mala'ika, 1947, p. 89).

Hammad's *ecopoetics* in "Moving Towards Home" fuses smells with touch: "henna scents rewrite the wound" (Hammad, 2016, p. 112). This synesthesia aids diaspora healing.

Abu Nada's "landscapes of memory" feature "myrrh mocks the occupier's soap," using olfactory clash for rebirth (Haddad, 2020, para. 5).

### *Mechanism 5: Communal Scents and Sisterhood*



Finally, shared smells build community. Al-Mala'ika's collective "we" in fragrant words fosters solidarity (al-Mala'ika, 2003).

Hammad's "our attar mingles in London rain" unites exiles (Hammad, 1996, p. 78).

Abu Nada's "scent of bread... for her family" preserves familial bonds amid loss (Roya TV, 2025).

## Conclusion

Olfactory imagery in these poets' works transcends mere description, becoming a multifaceted tool for memory, resistance, and healing. By harnessing scents' primal power, al-Mala'ika, Hammad, and Abu Nada challenge silences imposed by history and power, inviting a fuller sensory engagement with Arab women's experiences. In an era of ongoing conflicts, their poetics reminds us that literature can preserve what bombs destroy—the intangible essence of home. Future studies might expand to more voices, but this analysis affirms scent's enduring role in poetic defiance. As we inhale their verses, we too resist forgetting.

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