EZZA
AGHA MALAK

ANOSMIA

NOSTALGIA
FOR A FORBIDDEN SENSE

Translation
By
Cynthia T. Hahn

UNIVERSITY PRESS
OF THE SOUTH

2021

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Published in the United States by the University Press of the South. Printed in France by Monbeaulivre.fr

E-mail: unprsouth@aol.com ; universitypresssouth@gmail.com

Visit our award-winning web pages: www.unprsouth.com

www.punouveaumonde.com

Ezza Agha Malak.

Anosmia. Nostalgia for a Forbidden Sense.

Translated from French into English by Cynthia T. Hahn.

Second Edition in English.

144 pages.

Front Cover Design by Gilles Sicard and Rosana Sánchez.

1. Literature. 2. Novel. 3. Lebanon. 4. Anosmia. 5. Dysosmia. 6. Muslim Culture. 7. Women's Studies. 8. Lebanese Cultural Context. 9. Cynthia T. Hahn. 10. Ezza Agha Malak.

ISBN: 978-1-931948-89-5 (First English Edition: USA, 2008)
ISBN: 978-1-952799-36-5 (Second English Edition: Europe, 2021)

For my companion on luminous paths
For Gilles…who has helped me profoundly
With the material production, ideas and emotional content
of this work…

I have found that, of all the senses, the eye is the most superficial;
The ear, the proudest;
Smell, the most voluptuous;
Taste, the most superstitious and the most fickle;
Touch, the most profound.

—Diderot

The sense of smell is the first, the one that is ahead of, informs and governs all the others…

—Baudelaire

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The title of this novel has not always been what it is now; it underwent a radical change. Gilles sent me a word of warning: the title, "*In the middle of nowhere*" that I had chosen to metaphorically designate my novel and allude to its content, was already the title of another text and even the title of a song.

I was stuck. At an impasse.

This sonorous phrasing I had thought to be a marvelous creation, wonderfully adapted to the narrative structure and substance of my book, could no longer be my "property" because Others had created it, had "made it up" before I had. This title I had been proud of, had to be modified. In the name of the principle of "intellectual property."

The author's rights demand it!

I thought that I was the first to use this expressive wording. I had scrounged around in my cognitive consciousness for quite a long time to bring forth the magic words that would open Sesame's plot. It corresponded perfectly (sigh) to my novel's objective. No more! This title possessed the seeds and endings of the story.

It oriented it, at the threshold of the five senses.

Allusive, it encircled the olfactory system in which the sense of smell turned out to be a sense just as important, if not more so, than the other senses. It is in this evanescent kingdom of scents where time and space hold (or do not at all hold) a favored place, within memory.

My heroine, a woman with a very sensitive nose, becomes anosmic through the loss of her sense of smell. This means that she has no more memories to link her to her past; there where smells play the role of a real stimulant, able to provoke her to relive this past. Moreover, this pulls her away from a present she would like to experience with all her senses intact.

However, her olfactory state changes. From anosmic, she becomes hyposmic or dysosmic (excuse the use of these "barbaric" words which designate in act, a very agreeable malady!). But then, one scent and one alone, will live within her from then on. In fact, a very good one. It appears in the form of a

confused mix of fragrances whose intensity (and only its intensity) varies with the colors that Yara visualizes. Every bluish tint, whatever it may be, produces this odor—unique, mysterious, playful and altogether indefinable and which will emerge then under another form, under another label, that of a sweet “blue” scent!

This confusion will invoke others. Yara will no longer have the memories that smells would normally recall; it’s a question of an olfactory “loss” within the scented universe. Although real, it separates her both from a distant past as well as a present experience.

Her nose, this organ that captures and perceives, then loses its initial function, becomes useless, invaded by olfactory troubles, which trace the framework of an ambiguous and faulty sensorial world framework for my heroine. Illusory to sum up. Hallucinatory somehow. Phantasmagoric at times.

No longer belonging to the present, because of these olfactory illusions, detaching from the past because she has lost the memories which would engender a good sensory system, the woman finds herself in a kind of no man’s land, reduced to a phantasm where the most striking landmarks would be lost, as *in the middle of nowhere.*

An aborted title due to *Author’s rights!*

I finally opted for the current title. To name things by their name, directly, without ambiguity or metaphor. Yes. Why go further into twisted meanings and depart from the reality to expose? “Anosmia” or “Anosmie:” final decision for the title of my novel, defining a lived reality. Thanks to Gilles!

A title (don’t you know?) is for a book, like the partner in the couple. Inseparable one from the other. Besides, a title cannot be borrowed, and then repeated within fifty years of its birth, when time will have used up the words and their writer. It remains that the current title, *Anosmia, or Nostalgia for a Forbidden Sense* responds perfectly to the needs of the novel’s cause, specially fabricated, within the workshop of the cognitive consciousness.

EAM

PREFACE

Disturbing face of the Mediterranean world, whose catastrophic origin was more precociously designed than the beating of butterfly wings, the august nose of Cleopatra has left an indelible mark on the history of political power.

Closer, other heroes, Pinocchio or Cyrano, stirred us only because of the length of their nasal appendages. Established through formal appreciation, authors thus fed the mysterious taboo which governs its function.

The nose of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille shows then that the important thing is the perfume he designed and placed therefore its function center stage. *Perfum*e was born out of nowhere; it has a center. Under Michel Tournier's amused gaze, Süskind subjugated us to an elegant series of inverted myths, by developing through a luminous dark novel, telling us the story of a diabolical unscented being. But how dare he make us forget Lucifer's sulfurous track and his traditional representations?

Such audacity, audacity still. Ezza Agha Malak confronts, head on, the description of troubles which illustrate the true importance of the nasal organ, which has been generally maligned in literature as in esthetic surgery. Skilled novelist, she immerses us in her scented and singular world of Lebanon—crossroads, trembling or explosive—with Mediterranean religions and customs, one of the early sites of the emancipation of Middle-Eastern women. Tempted by withdrawal or exile, she opposes her strength of self-determination, the strength of judgment supported by her senses, her free will. The stakes: memory and hope...humanity.

"I don't smell anything anymore...I haven't come for treatment...but to know...", reveals Yara, Ezza Agha Malak's anosmic heroine.

We understand that her troubles, cleverly strung out, are not only olfactory in nature. The sage adventures of Yara's nose accentuate a tumultuous social evolution, visibly contesting the anesthetizing rules of life which deny her time and her gender.

Adapting to the evolution of the deficiency of her sense of smell, Yara grows. Her pain may recede. An illness in three periods: the saving absence, the

blue illusion and finally, moving beyond to a vital striving to register the sensory realities of her environment.

Here more than elsewhere, Ezza Agha Malak preaches directly for a respect of the senses, indirectly for the respect of sense. For tangible contact, for a reconquering of her sensory nature, the support of her very being, for an outspoken, feminine freedom, founded on the perception of contrasting beauty of the world, on perceived reality, rather than on virtual spaces or promises of redemption from who knows what sins. This call to the senses magnifies her novel, her body of work, and beyond that, our lives.

GILLES SICARD
Docteur ès Sciences
Neurophysiologist
Olfactory Specialist
Dijon, February 2004

PART ONE

Perfume acting upon the contemplator's imagination is more general, even more flagrant that on its moods. If one perfume seems to us an aphrodisiac, it's especially because it evokes memories or it provokes in us this type of thought. It is such because it is the pretext of idea association, because we superimpose it onto other images, because in thought, we adorn a real or imaginary being with it. And it is within this state of mind that the composer sometimes finds himself.

Edmond Roudnitska
Une vie au service du Parfum (1991)

CHAPTER I : IN SEARCH OF THE LOST SENSE

“Doctor! I have not come to see you to be treated… No, I’m just fine as I am. I have come for some information…nothing more. To find out…if I can go on a trip tomorrow. I’ve been told that…my case could be considered serious. Yes! I don’t smell a thing! Absolutely nothing. I have no more sense of smell… I’ve lost my nose!”

Doctor Sirar looked at her with peculiar interest, this woman who was revealing her secret. A very interesting case for his research on olfaction. He even gave a certain importance to the inflections of the feminine voice which trembled at times. The young woman tried to disguise her fear with a kind of artificial indifference. He had noticed this right off the bat.

Gazing at Yara with astonishment, he forced himself to smile. He had never had a patient who had asked not to be cured, not to get him out of his unhealthy state. Otherwise, why would one go to be examined?

His female patient’s olfactory sense had completely deteriorated.

He was seized with strong compassion as he thought about it. The condition could be cancerous. Last week’s patient had a small nodal tumor which was pressing on the olfactory part of the brain. And this node was declared a malignant tumor necessitating, because of negligence and its development, lengthy sessions of chemotherapy.

He kept this idea silent, as he studied the possibility. He didn’t like to second guess or precipitate things before determining prognoses and diagnoses. Because of this illness which was still unclear in medical terms, many doctors had made incorrect diagnoses.

A short question followed and his eyes seemed to wrinkle up behind the lenses of his glasses:

“And for how long have you had this problem, Madam?”

“For many months, I don’t know anymore…”

“When did it start, exactly?”

His voice was serious. He had stopped smiling. His patient with the malignant tumor was still in the hospital.

“Honestly, I don’t know anymore…that would be about a year…soon…”

“And this *soon* would be in how many months?”

“I told you…I don’t know anymore…it’s been a long time!”

“And you waited until…”

There was a short silence.

She remained unperturbed. How many months had it been since the good old days when she was able to *smell*? When her nose was functional, so functional that it even bothered and disturbed others…

Good old days? Not really!

In the beginning, right at the outset, she thought she was lucky… Since she had lost her sense of smell, life seemed more beautiful, more pleasant, more agreeable. Everything was going well, too well, for her. The garbage bin, at the corner of her apartment building, didn’t bother her anymore, when the garbage collectors took their time on garbage collection day and she passed next to it. And body odors, even pheromones, which came her way from those she spent time with, no longer provoked a reaction in her. She was done with fleeting nausea, since, she no longer had a sense of smell.

This sense which had been indispensable to her during her childhood and adolescence, was now completely rejected by her. Or perhaps it had rejected her. In its time, her olfactory sense armed her with an extraordinary sensitivity which informed her on all surrounding objects and events. She drank in the good scents; bad odors disgusted her. She did not have a nose like other people. She had often been *reproached* for it.

How many times had she received reprimands from her mother because of a flask of perfume that had disappeared? Her mother knew that it was her youngest daughter who had taken it most often, in order to spray her books and papers in her book bag.

Yara did it without thinking, not knowing that the paper would hold the fragrance a long while, nor that it relaxed her. She only knew that she felt *good* when she stuck her nose into her book bag.

Faced with her mother's anger, she sometimes replied that this word "perfume" could well be, just like "para-chute" or "para-sol" or even "per-fuming", a *para-fume*…, that is, something that protects against fumes and disagreeable odors. This wit made her mother smile and sometimes made her burst out laughing: "Such a *terrible* nose…!"

This rather demented nose, which captured and registered deeply, always needed good scents for her good humor!

Could she forget Abou Mahmoud's soap shop and Nayef's perfume shop whose scents cajoled her nose and seduced all her senses? These two places which used to be her favorite places of escape, had become for her now, places without contours, because her nose refused to smell. The scent of olive oil soap and floral fragrances which had always put her in a state of ecstasy, by filling her nose, as soon as she stepped into the soap shop, now did nothing for her. Just like the aroma wafting from the oven when her vanilla cake began to swell.

In the past, it was her whole childhood which emerged from a distance, like Aladdin's lamp.

Now, there was nothing left of all that! Certainly, in this loss of smell, there was an advantage; she no longer had to deal with bad odors.

The good ones too?

Unfortunately, yes, that was the case!

However, she had gotten used to her new olfactory condition which was beginning to have its effect on her; it changed her particular world.

The young woman stared at the tip of her shoes in order to concentrate. Doctor Sirar examined her gestures while rummaging through a drawer.

Yara jumped when she heard him reply, interrupting the ideas buzzing around in her head:

"It's simple…You are *anosmic*, Madam! You have…*Anosmia!*"

These words thundered into the initial silence.

"*Anosmia*? Is that serious?"

What was this barbaric word? She had never in her life heard it, though she had a degree in French literature and another in History. But, she corrected herself, it must pertain to another literature she did not know.

She remained silent. One could not ask a doctor too many questions. One should be satisfied with ambiguous and incomprehensible commentary which could be disquieting.

And as if Doctor Sirar had read her mind, he added:

"Yes…*Anosmia*. That means the complete loss of the sense of smell. From the Greek, *Osmè*, that means *Odor*…the *a*— a negation!"

She wasn't interested in all that. It didn't even trouble her, as just some time ago, she had enjoyed a marvelous olfactory system in which her sense of smell worked quite well. She knew well what it meant to have that certain "flair," to have a "nose" for something. If she didn't have it now, too bad. The important thing was to know if it were serious or not, before she took her next trip.

She was to join her sister in Lyons, to regain peace and serenity, after the great commotion of her divorce. She wasn't asking much of her ear-nose-throat doctor. She just wanted to inform herself regarding her condition before leaving. Her eldest sister, the psychiatrist, had alerted her that the loss of the sense of smell could be the warning signal of a serious condition, and it was she who was pushing her to see a doctor right away.

She heard him continue:

"In any case, it could be due to polyps, or a lesion on the olfactory nerve itself, or even, and in all probability, it may be due to a tumor at the base of the brain…There!"

And he put his index finger between the two eyebrows of his patient.

There was a pause in which Yara, a bit nervous, hadn't completely understood what he had meant. She had always believed herself to be exempt from bad surprises.

"Come with me, Madam! You'll need an endoscopy; I can do it here, since I have the equipment. But for the tumor, a scanner is necessary, and I don't have one in the clinic. In the Islamic hospital, there is a very good MRI machine; they just received one as a gift from Saudi Arabia.

She paid little attention to the last remark. What did it matter to her if Saudi Arabia or some other country, Arab or otherwise, wanted to demonstrate its generosity?

He added:

"I must alert you, Madam. You cannot travel right away, not without having done what I've asked you to do. I propose that you delay your trip as long as possible. Wait for the results, OK? Follow me!"

She followed him, like a student follows a teacher, climbed up on the examination table as he requested, where she stretched out. He leaned close to her face, his fingers against the nose of his patient, in order to then introduce an optical tube equipped with a light into her two nostrils.

Fortunately she was anosmic, she thought. Last year, at the dentist, she had almost vomited, sensing the overwhelming smell of mandarin orange, which she detested, on his hands, while he was cleaning her teeth. Another time, it was the ophthalmologist who must have eaten some garlic. His mouth was near Yara's nostrils. She couldn't continue. Her nose and stomach couldn't take it.

And this Doctor Sirar who now leaned his head over hers? Perhaps his mouth contained a bad odor, that she couldn't sense.

Fortunately or unfortunately?

She congratulated herself on her *salutary* anosmia!

Salutary because it protected her at this moment from an eventual exhalation from the mouth of her ear-nose-throat doctor.

In thinking about it, she suddenly felt a sharp pinch in her nasal cavities, and then nothing more.

Doctor Sirar removed the device. The exam had not even lasted five minutes.

While putting away his endoscope, he gave the order for her to get down from the table, saying:

"There's nothing. No, no polyps in the nasal cavity. Perhaps a bit of congestion. I can try to cure your anosmia and return your sense of smell. There's a medication…But it's based in cortisone…"

“Cure?” How could one so easily cure a condition considered “serious”? Why had he changed his attitude, this doctor? Had he noticed her fear and nervousness, that he hoped to calm with his words?

She interrupted him as if shocked:

“Cortisone? No thank you! That causes water retention and I’m on a diet… No! I don’t want to gain weight! I took enough of it during my pregnancy. I have to lose my kilos…”

He smiled, a wide, friendly smile which made his small eyes shimmer behind his Armani glasses. Yara recognized the brand. The same as her ex-husband Abdoul, a friend of Dr. Sirar, in any case. So it seemed. Yes.

“…The most important step remains in the detection of a possible tumor—the scan. Go to Nini Hospital, it’s closer. You know where it is… Return with your scans as soon as you have them! I’ll wait for you…” he said, giving her the prescription with his recommendations: “MRI and detection of cranial trauma or tumor in the temporal lobes.” “Don’t be afraid, Madam! Your handicap can still be treated…as soon as a tumor is ruled out,” he continued.

Yara raised her trembling chin, trying to escape from the unsettling word, *tumor:*

“Why do you consider my condition to be a handicap? No, Doctor! I don’t want to see a handicap in what you call “anosmia.” For me, it’s the opposite: an advantage I’m enjoying…” she replied, sharing his smile and asking herself if the doctor’s breath smelled of garlic or tobacco, in short, if his breath were not fetid.

“Very well…very well…, we’ll see, come back quickly with your scans…” he stated, as if to conclude.

And he gazed at her like a compassionate explorer; it was one of these regards that registers to your assumed emotions and which confirms his professional competence.

She paid and left, putting the prescription carefully into her purse. She got into her car and immediately drove towards the hospital.