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## Book Review: Smell

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## BOOK REVIEW

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### Smell

By RADHIKA JHA

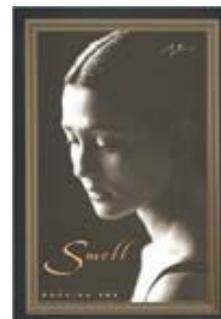
New York: Soho Press, 2001. 307 pages, \$24

#### Andrea Kempf

Radhika Jha's first novel is the latest entry into the Indian fiction sweepstakes in the United States. *Smell*, which is the story of a Gujarati young woman adrift in Paris, has been highly touted in India, where it was originally published by Penguin India in 1999. The novel tells the story of Leela Patel, whose father is killed during riots (of indeterminate date) against foreigners in Kenya. Almost immediately, Leela is thrust out of her secure life as the beloved daughter of an prosperous Indian-African merchant in Nairobi and discarded by her mother, who finds the encumbrance of a marriageable-age daughter more than she can manage in the search for a new life after her husband's death. This abrupt transition from being cherished to being unwanted colors everything in Leela's life thereafter. Indeed, the novel is a chronicle of Leela's insecurity as she lurches from one unsatisfactory situation to another.

First, she is sent to an aunt and uncle in Paris, who exploit her as unpaid help in their kitchen and their shop. After the aunt and uncle unjustly accuse her of loose behavior, Leela flees their claustrophobic household to live briefly with a self-absorbed, high-class courtesan, who then passes her on to the Baleine family, a couple who are in need of both an au pair for their children and a new mistress for the husband. From the Baleines, Leela goes on to become the mistress of a wealthy and powerful businessman. When that relationship palls, she becomes a consultant in a public relations firm whose owner exploits her for her exotic good looks. That position also falls apart. Finally, Leela realizes the truth about herself while riding on the Paris Metro, and the reader hopes that this will enable her in the future to become an equal partner in some nonexploitative relationship.

What sets Leela apart from the run-of-the-mill heroine/victim is her phenomenal sense of smell. She becomes a marvelous cook because the spices speak to her, telling her how to combine them. She is literally led around Paris by her nose, and the author's evocative descriptions of what Leela smells are some of the best passages in the novel. Every one of her men also has his own distinctive odor, pleasant while the relationship is fulfilling and rancid as it ends. The worst odor for Leela is her own "feral" smell, which assails her



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whenever she is involved in some activity that runs counter to her personal sense of values. What is Leela's smell? Is the author using it as a metaphor for shame, or sexuality, or foreignness?

In the final chapter, Leela finds an unlikely guru on the Metro, is enlightened, and is quickly exorcised of her self-consciousness about her personal smell. Jha is certainly not the first foreign writer to make the odors of Paris her obsession. The German novelist Patrick Süskind, in *Perfume*, and the American writer Tom Robbins, in *Jitterbug Perfume*, have both capitalized on the city's redolence. Nor is Jha the first writer to chronicle the exploitation of a young beautiful woman who is without the protection of a family. Unfortunately, the combination of hapless female and Parisian odors seems contrived. The first chapters of *Smell*, set in Africa before Leela is separated from her family, and even those set in Paris before she leaves her uncle's home, have an authenticity that the later part of the book lacks. Jha's personal experience working with the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation in New Delhi, providing education for the children of terrorist victims, is evident in her depiction of Leela's anguish over her father's murder. Despite its limitations, *Smell* is an interesting debut by a talented writer.

**Andrea Kempf** is a Professor and Librarian at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas, and an alumna of the East-West Center's Asian Studies Development Program. She is a regular reviewer of fiction for *Library Journal* and was named LJ Fiction Reviewer of the Year - 2000.

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