

Exploring the Concept of *Flânerie* in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: Concept of *flânerie* is considered the basis for the study of city and its landscapes; the buildings, parks and architecture and more importantly how the wanderer known as *flâneur*, artistically paints the picture of it. The research article proposes to seek the practical application of chosen theory in the contemporary literature. For this purpose, the study aims to analyze the cityscapes, the haptic and intimate experience presented as '*Flânerie*' in the selected text.

Methodology: It is a qualitative-theory based study and has used the concept of '*Flânerie*' by Walter Benjamin as the theoretical framework to achieve the objectives of the study. The analysis of the study is based upon Mistry's novel '*A Fine Balance*' and textual analysis is adopted as the research tool to analyze the two main characters of the selected text.

Findings: This research article proposes that literature, whether belonging to past or the contemporary times, offers textual *flânerie* to its readers, turning them into wanderers of places and spaces within the confined walls of their exposure.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the concept of '*Flânerie*' is not just limited to act of roaming through cityscapes, rather it includes the study of texts within the city that are in the forms of advertisements, signboards, shop names, streets, buildings and architecture etc. Studying and understanding of these texts turns the reader into a *flâneur* and indulging the reader in the act of textual *Flânerie*.

Keywords: *Flânerie*, *Flâneur*, Wandering, City Landscapes, Contemporary Literature.

Introduction

Imagine walking down the streets, you come across different shops, buildings, advertisements, which presents before you, life in the modern cities and, to explore this life you delve deeper into the city by walking, roaming and observing the metropolis. This "act of wandering" the streets and observing the "city life" is known as *Flânerie* (Argin et.al, 2019, p.6), and this concept holds a significant position in literature especially in City literature, as it provides the basis for the study of the city and its landscapes; the buildings, parks and architecture and more importantly how the wanderer, artistically paints the picture of it.

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During the 19th century, Baudelaire (1863) defined these wanderers as *flaneur* who roamed the street to observe the modern city life while being detached. So, this *flaneur* delves deep into street life, comes into close encounter with everyday practices yet remains detached as such that biases and personal experiences are said not to influence his thought (Isabel, 2018). However, the city that was once the home of *flaneur* underwent drastic change because of rapid industrialization. Therefore keeping this drastic change in mind, Benjamin (1999) interpreted Baudelaire's work to present his own definition of *flaneur*. Thus, Benjamin's *flaneur*, being the product of industrialization and consumer culture, is actually a "non-detached observer" of modern city life (Rowshon, 2019, p.3). Sontag (1979) adds that Benjamin's *flaneur* through his "microscopic gaze" captures the fleeting and mundane experiences of everyday life through which we see the world (p. 19).

Now, this male – *flaneur* cleverly made his way through the town, but the women – the *flaneuse* couldn't do so. The reason was because of her limited urban mobility which according to the critics made them invisible, as most of their strolling was limited to shopping (Murail, 2017). Wagner (2019) in her article, analyzes the British and American authors Jean Rhys and Djuna Barnes, and American author Anita Loos, and states that the *flaneuse* does exist and in fact plays her part, both conventionally and unconventionally. She is "often the object of the male gaze, but sometimes the subject, often the detached observer, but sometimes the immersed onlooker, often the emotionally aloof, sometimes the sensually intermingled" (Wagner, 2019, p. 3). The *flaneuse* in each text observes and interprets the urban and the social in ways thoughtful, provocative, and unique.

However, this concept of *Flânerie* is not just limited to the act of walking/ strolling, rather it is actually the study of texts within the city. For example, the advertisements, the signboards, shop names etc. all of these indulge the *flaneur* in the textual *Flânerie*. As rightly pointed out by Featherstone (1998) in his article, the *Flâneur, The City and Virtual Public Life*, *flânerie* is a method of "reading texts, for reading the traces of the city". It is also the method of "writing, of producing and constructing texts" (Featherstone, 1998, p. 3). These recorded experiences serve as textual *flânerie* for its readers because the text about the urban landscapes or the metropolis helps in understanding the places and the spaces one occupies and the *flaneur* theory serves as the basis for understanding these literary texts.

Thus, the aim of this study is to analyze the cityscapes and the haptic and intimate experience they present as 'Flânerie' in the selected text: *A Fine Balance* (1995) by Rohinton Mistry. Primarily a fiction it focuses the life in Bombay, India covering the 'State of Emergency' (1975-77) declared by Indra Gandhi, the then prime minister of India. It covers the life of two main characters *Om and Ishvar* who survived by helping each other under the hardships faced during the *State of Emergency*. Mistry, very artistically, covers the Indian society in a broader spectrum, painting a realistic picture of city life, urban life as well as life at mountain hill station.

Mistry's novel also discusses the historical period dealing with the post-colonial conditions of Indians at home and abroad, trying to cope with the loss of their traditions, identity etc. in the modern society. This realistic novel represents the real-life stories based on social and personal experiences of the people with a historical reference along with detailed sketches of modern Indian life. The novel has an omniscient narrator who very quickly and deftly switches over to the point of view of various characters, and back and forth to time periods such as independence and the partition. This depiction of culture i.e., the rural and urban space provides us the opportunity to look at this text from the perspective of a *flaneur*.

Problem Statement

Flânerie – an activity, was considered to be solely carried out by a male – *flaneur* during the 19th century, and this *flaneur* possessed enough resources to roam the city, simply limiting him to streets and arcades. Therefore, this research article intends to explore the notion of contemporary *flaneur* who has transcended the streets and arcades and slipped into the common places to explore modern life. For this purpose, Benjamin's concept of *flaneur* is used to analyze the selected text: *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry.

Research Objectives

- To explore the concept of Flânerie in the selected text.
- To investigate the venues of class division and haptic presence experienced by the selected characters while carrying their journey as flaneurs in *A Fine Balance*

Research Questions

- What venues Flânerie opens for haptic presence and intimate urban experiences?
- How has the selected characters painted the picture of modern life in Mistry's *A Fine Balance*?

Literature Review

The literature analyzed for this study is primarily based on the articles, journals and other texts written about studies conducted on the selected novel and the concept of flaneur, and human conditions in the continuously urbanized environment.

Flanerie and Flaneur

Urban space is the core aspect of flânerie as it provides the opportunity to flaneur to roam round the city as the man of the crowd and share the experience by sketching a very detailed picture. Lefebvre (2002) argued that space is the embodiment of social interactions that takes place within it. Therefore, the contemporary society (space) is not just limited to streets, buildings and parks, rather it is the embodiment of globally connected networks converting the urban space into a cyber space. Bauman (1998) provides an insight to the useful perspectives of a postmodern society while referring to the monumental changes undergone by it and the kind of experiences it brings. He talks about society as a system of networks which defines human relationships and posits a major influence on the city dwellers. He also talks about the effects of aggressive consumerism on contemporary society (Bauman 1998). Similarly, De Certeau (1984) developed a theory about the banal in life. It talks about the society which has transcended production and is more focused on consumption. Though his focus is on everyday life, but not primarily on city dwellers and on the man of the crowd – the flaneur.

However, Benjamin tried to explain the role of the flaneur and the way he captures the experiences of city life. He, through his interpretation of Charles Baudelaire's work, provided a concept of flaneur in *The Arcades of Nineteenth Century Paris* (1969, 1973). From the basis of these interpretations, he developed flaneur theory that is still relevant in contemporary society, but Benjamin was not able to satisfy all the critics. One such critic is Lauster (2007), who believes that Benjaminian flaneur ignores other significant authors of the 19th century such as Poe and puts all its focus on just one aspect of Baudelaire's writing. She further argues that this concept holds limited value to study the 20th century urban experiences and can simply be seen as a hurdle in understanding it. She contends that Benjamin misapplied the modernist aesthetic notion of self-loss to produce this undesirable impact (Lauster, 2007).

Benjamin's work does not enlighten urban modernity about itself; rather, it obscures it. However, Lauster (2007) acknowledges the value of *The Arcades Project* that highlights the phenomenon of novelty based on the excerpts from 19th century sources on the exhibitions, department stores, gaslights, panoramas and arcades. By acknowledging the significance of these findings, Lauster (2007) appears to accept the applicability of their source, - the strolling observer who compiles mental notes collected on leisurely city walks and records them in writing, in simple words - the flaneur. The observations of a flaneur, a spectator who enjoys losing himself in the world of high capitalist civilization, may be seen as the observing tool via which Benjamin developed his own theories about modernity, which ultimately led to a Marxist criticism of the fetishization of commodities.

Friedberg (1991) in her analysis of Benjamin's work, argued that Baudelaire can be seen as the main driving force behind Benjamin's notion of flânerie and *The Arcades Project* contains the history of the

capital of 19th century Paris, whose street serves as a vascular system of imagination. Whereas, Parson argued that the major purpose of Benjamin's writing was to preserve the cultural legacy of past in order to comprehend the present. This included not only past treasures but also abandoned cultural objects and detritus. Thus, for Benjamin, flaneur holds a key position in understanding modern urban literature. Parson further explained in her book: *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* that two types of flaneur are found in Benjamin's writing: one is the bourgeois arcade wanderer and the other one is his homeless counterpart, the rag-picker (Parson, 2000). She claims that these two serve as the vehicles for his theories on urban modernity: both explore the city in the form of a book that is to be read, documented, revised and then rewritten. The flaneur leisurely roams the city to take-in its story while the rag-picker acts as a scavenger to roam the city in order to collect, reread and rewrite the history.

Nonetheless, this early flânerie movement only existed for a short period of time during the height of arcade fashion. Benjamin was more interested in acquiring the critical information required for a revolutionary break from the most recent configuration of history than he was in harboring nostalgia for the past. He insisted that the past could only be "lighted by the present" and that the reverse was also true: "Every present is determined by those [past] images which are synchronic with it" (p. 458). However, many writers and critics have tried to redefine this concept out of the context of the 19th century Paris and into the postmodern society. For instance, Keith Tester is the most prominent writer who tried to reconceptualize the concept of flaneur and came up with a modern definition, "*the flâneur has been allowed, or made, to take a number of walks away from the streets and arcades of nineteenth-century Paris.*" (Tester 1994). He called it a post-flaneur who has deviated from the traditional concept of flânerie and has adopted the new methods of capturing the experiences he gains from strolling into the urban spaces.

The Post or the Cyber flaneur uses the latest technology like mobiles, cameras etc. to photograph what he experiences instead of painting it. The physical urban space has also been changed into virtual space, where this cyber flaneur shares these captured photos with the rest of the community. Some critics call it the end of flânerie whereas some call it the evolution of this concept because according to Tester (1994), "flaneur is used conceptually to comment on issues of urban life without limiting him in terms of time and place". Thus, this flaneur is no longer limited to streets and arcades of 19th century Paris, and "has walked into the pages of the commonplace" and contemporary urban culture (Tester, 1994).

However, due to technological advancements, the flaneur is faced with constant surveillance and this surveillance, on the other hand, is a way of control to establish conformity in society. With the integration of cameras in urban space as a means of surveillance, the nature of space has been changed. This gives the frame to study visual discourse with the focus on gender and gaze under surveillance in the space (Koskela 2003). Gleber (1999) explains the gender of the flaneur which is always questioned in contemporary society. He highlights that women no doubt faced obstacles while roaming on the streets, but their presence as a flaneur cannot be denied. Glucksman (1986) compared women's presence with a metaphor of commodity because they are seen as an object of desire and of gaze. Even the products are gendered female to increase the purchase and consumption of it. Ven Eden (2006) argued that for women, act of strolling in the streets, is carried through shopping and is considered merely an act of pleasure for them. This definition restricted the freedom of females on streets and made them the objects of male gaze, and shunned them from performing flânerie.

A Fine Balance

Mistry through his novels has been shedding light on the social issues and has given ample room to the readers to analyze it from different perspectives. He talks about the "history of India as a palimpsest" which at times can be studied as an epic or myth and at other times as a burning tragedy (Nair, 1997, p.120). While talking about *A Fine Balance* Nair adds that the political turmoil faced by the Indian history turns it into an "action thriller" (p.123). He further adds that it is the job of the writer to talk about the grave social and traumatic issues to keep the memory alive (Nair, 1997). So, that the people won't forget

what they have been through or what their ancestor had suffered in the past. Multiple articles have been published about this novel. For example, James W. Johnson (2015) in his article on *A Fine Balance*, talked about the issue of beggary faced by the nation. Keeping in mind character of *Bagger Master*, the author sheds light on the mafia behind this profession who disfigures the bodies of the young and the old for their potential profitability. Their bodies are a metaphor for historical sufferings being faced by these beggars at the hands of the Beggary Mafia (Johnson, 2015).

Payeng (2019) in his analysis of *A Fine Balance*, studied the hierarchy of social status with the focus on the 'marginalized'. He talks about the feudal society of India and analyzes the power gap that resulted in marginalization of few groups through the study of the three main characters (Dina, Om and Ishvar) of the novel. Additionally, Zafar and Batta (2018) in their article studied the issue of identity crisis faced by the characters and threw light on the cruelty, injustice and the resultant atrocities faced by the four main characters, with special focus on the two (Om and Ishver) belonging to untouchable cast. The study's analysis highlighted the sufferings of these characters (Zafar & Batta 2018). Another article on *A Fine Balance* explored the impacts of globalization on the community. In this article Kaela Jubas (2006), argued that studying this fictional novel boosts learning and critical thinking. Through his analysis he found that a complex process like globalization can also be analyzed through the incorporation of formal or informal adult learning.

Research Gap

This research is different from the above-mentioned studies as its focus is on exploring the concept of *flânerie* in the selected text: *A Fine Balance*. Though the novel has been explored from various angles highlighting the aspects of class division, patriarchy, capitalism etc., but it still has the room to be explored from the eyes of a flâneur. Therefore, this research's focus will be on exploring the textual aspect of *flânerie* and to study the ways Mistry's characters present themselves as flâneurs to successfully execute the act of *flânerie*.

Research Methodology

Research methodology lays down the path, the researcher intends to follow in order to achieve the set goals. It explains in detail what approach the researcher will adopt to find solution to the problem under study or to achieve its objectives. According to Birks and Mills (2022), methodology is a "collection of concepts and guiding principles" that illustrate how a research study is to be conducted (p. 4). The current study falls under the qualitative research methodology as the research article intends to explore textual *flânerie* carried out by a flâneur in contemporary times. The sample selected for this purpose is a novel: *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry. The study is limited to two main characters, namely *Om and Ishvir*. The theoretical framework upon which the analysis of the study is based, is Benjamin's notion of flâneur.

Research Method

A researcher while carrying out a research requires certain techniques to achieve its objectives and these techniques are known as research methods. Since this study is a qualitative research, therefore it employs Belsey's (2013) model of textual analysis to analyze the selected text. Textual analysis is one of the key methods used by qualitative studies as "it helps to understand a text by interpreting it in terms of its historical, social and cultural contexts" (Arya, 2020). Thus, with the help of close reading of the text, appropriate textual evidences are filtered out from the selected text for analysis.

Theoretical Framework

During the twentieth century, Benjamin using Baudelaire's conception as his starting point, presented his own idea of flâneur to explore the impacts of modern city life on humans. He characterized these impacts into two terms in *The Arcades Project*. The first one is *Erlebnis* and is defined as the "shock-engendered experiences" caused by the intense burdensome life in the modern city somewhat similar to the detached subjective experiences of the workers confined to their scheduled labor (p. 515). The second term is

Erfahrung and is defined as “wandering and cruising of flaneur” and holds a positive connotation for the unmediated experiences the city offers to the flaneur. For Benjamin, the city especially the arcades were a source to evoke the lost memories of the past. As Morris (1986) states, “it is the material culture of the city, rather than the psyche, that provides the shared collective spaces where consciousness and the unconscious, past and present, meet” (p. 136).

Benjamin assigns key importance to thresholds in exploring the ‘imagined city’. In ancient times, people had the ability to move from ‘one state of consciousness to another; from reason to myth and they achieved this ability through any transitional phase or any event that triggered their consciences. Benjamin is of the view that this ability has been lacking in modern people and flaneur can serve as the modern equivalent in facilitating psychological and spiritual “thresholds” (p. 13). Similarly, advertising as Benjamin states has a surreal impact because it has the ability to connect the products with human imagination and has used this power to create a world that can achieve a form of transcendence. “Modern idlers attempt a kind of partial transcendence that temporarily overcomes the shock experience of modernity” (Buse et.al, 2006).

By exploring the Paris arcades, Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project* that the exterior of the buildings reflected the interior of it and vice versa. That's why he puts huge importance on the arcades because he believed that they possess the ability to bring together a variety of consumer goods in a setting with heterogeneous “interiors and exteriors” (p. 760). He advocated that the flâneur perceives the streets as an interior because he was interested in the spatial. This interior unifies all eras, all regions of the earth, and all modern-day social problems. According to Benjamin (1982), a single glimpse may intoxicate a flâneur, stimulating his whole being and causing him to physically internalize the commodities of the material world.

Therefore, for Benjamin, flâneur is the tool that can analyze contemporary society because he is the wanderer who observes the city centered around commodities. He never questions this system rather tries to align himself with this cultural shock he experiences as part of the modern world. Benjamin further argues that the need of the flaneur is to guide us towards awakening of a state where the present and past should be recognized and this can only be achieved through empathy. “Empathy with the commodity is fundamentally empathy with the exchange value itself. The flâneur is the virtuoso of this empathy” (p. 448).

Analysis

Flânerie is an act of walking or strolling into the city and this act is carried out by a Flaneur in order to bring forth life of the streets, city and urban landscapes, to shed light on the social and cultural practices, and ways of living which were unknown to the wider world. This act of walking and observing is not a new concept rather it had existed for centuries. But this notion had gone under change through the 19th century and that change gave birth to a detached observer, who according to Walter Benjamin is an artist, a painter of modern life. So, Benjamin through his interpretation of Baudelaire’s concept of Flaneur, gave the definition of the 19th century flaneur, who roamed into the Arcades of Paris city (1969, 1973). According to his definition, a flaneur - preferably a male, wanders into the streets and observes the crowd, painting a subjective view. He is the one who gives us a very close picture of the life of other cultures – that was un-pictured or unobserved before, with the intention to pen it down. The flaneur helps notice how modern life and social practices have changed due to modernity and helps disregard the constructed notions of places and spaces (Lefebvre 2014).

Numerous texts can be analyzed from this perspective, but this study will only focus on the novel *A Fine Balance*, which gives us a detailed picture of Indian culture and the miseries of life in rural and urban space through the two main characters: *Om and Ishvir*, set during the State of Emergency. The novel starts with one of the flaneur Omprakash who is wandering on the railway station. Being new to this place, he tries to sketch a true picture of everything that is present there. As the lines indicate,

“Rough shacks stood beyond the railroad fence, alongside a ditch running with raw sewage. Children were playing a game with sticks and stones. An excited puppy danced around them, trying to join in. Nearby, a shirtless man was milking a cow. They could have been anywhere. The acrid smell of a dung-fire drifted towards the train. Just ahead, a crowd had gathered near the level-crossing...” (p. 12).

This shows us the essence of a flâneur’s description, like how beautifully he is highlighting the minute details of a place that is totally alien to him. This is what flânerie offers as the intimate urban experience while drawing a line of class division.

As we try to delve deep into the picture, we come across a beautifully sketched transition of the journey from the village to city and then from the city to slums. This journey of the two flâneurs: *Om and Ishvir*, is full of curiosity and excitement as they come across,

“Buildings, electric lights, water that flowed from taps – everything so different from the village, and so amazing... watching the street and seeing a universe of frightening chaos...” (p. 136).

Ishvir while roaming, paints the frightening situation caused by the partition of sub-continent, which led to massacre and immense destruction. *Ishvar* as the flâneur sketches the picture of the life lived by the lower class and the upper class, portraying the class division system in India with the special focus on the caste system. With the flâneur being introduced in the text as a “wanderer”, the reader cannot help but acknowledge the subjective view he presents.

While an amalgam of painful images begins to rise in the mind of reader, the flâneur does not come slow. The mountain areas being forcibly modernized showing the advent of industrialization, in contrast to words such as “*bloody Chamaars*” and “*killing of the innocents*”, evoke emotions of pity and sorrow among the readers, leaving them to ponder upon the plight and exploitation of poor masses at the hands of capitalist investors in the city of Mumbai and the Mountain area. Here, the point made by the flâneur, is that the extent of exploitation of working class and their suffering was such that even those who had not learnt to talk, cried out of “fear” of being crushed by their masters. This fear of being crushed is seen when *Ishvir’s* and *Om’s* whole family is murdered ruthlessly at the hands of the upper-class villagers and even years later they are forced by the officials to leave their slums in the name of “*City Beautification Project*” and are taken to construction sites to work for the capitalists without getting paid. “*Heartless animals! For the poor there is no justice, ever! We had next to nothing, now it’s less than nothing! What is our crime, where are we to go?*” ... (p. 338).

As modern city does not have the patience to tolerate the slums because they posit harm in the way of a city’s development and to reduce poverty etc. Therefore, the government introduced family planning, where the poor people are forced to comply with the process and as a side effect of forced ‘Family Planning’ *Ishvir* loses his legs. Through these two flâneurs, the writer is trying to highlight the fact that powerful leaders and the elites, force these poor people in every possible way, to achieve their goals. Besides, it is the flâneur who dives deeper into the places and spaces they occupy, to present before us the life of the un-touchable, who were treated like “*animals*” - “*The Chamaar donkey*” and this constant humiliation and treatment had engraved this in their memory as indicated by the following line:

“acquired all the knowledge... would need to perceive that invisible line of caste he could never cross, to survive in the village like his ancestors, with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions” (p.122).

Through the sketch painted by the flâneurs about the people belonging to the lower cast, we get to know that the *chamaars* were even deprived of the basic necessities of life. Even after years, the attitude of upper-class towards them was the same, “*The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals.*” (p. 167).

Similarly, the haptic presence in the novel is not restricted to the sense of touch only but extends to “*haptic visuality*” where seeing uses the eye as an organ of touch evoking proprioceptive emotions. As indicated from the following lines: “*when I find hair like this, I always want to meet the woman. I lie awake at night, wondering about her. What does she look like?*”. Another example is where Om talks about Shanti who lives in the same slum area. He imagines sleeping with her and explains this imaginative experience with Manek in a very proud tone and also, their discussing of the “*heroine*” on a “*film poster*”. Here, what needs to be noted by the reader is constant longingness of young girls and boys to find partners and satisfy their bodily urges. Furthermore, it is important to note how time and again, *A Fine Balance* turns out to be a perfect example of modern day flânerie. Where the text continuously offers intimate experiences of life in the streets. Where we see people having relationships without the intention to get married. Where a continuous struggle for a well settled life is posited. Where luxury is abused, and the poor become poorer. Where the darkness persisting in the streets lingers and engulfs the society as a whole and leaves the reader questioning the direction the generations to come will take.

Conclusion

The concept of flânerie is as old as literature and is defined as the act of strolling and observing the metropolis. But with the passage of time, this concept underwent change and produced a detached wanderer, known as the flaneur. This flaneur presented before us the picture of modern life and social practices that have changed due to rapid industrialization and consumerism. Eventually this rapid change influenced the flaneur in taking a shift from a detached to a non-detached observer. This non-detached observer studied the city and presented before us a very detailed picture which helped the readers to understand the space they are occupying. Thus, the concept of Flânerie is not just limited to the act of walking/ strolling, rather it is actually the study of texts within the city that are in the forms of advertisements, signboards, shop names, streets, buildings and architecture etc. Studying and understanding these, indulges the flaneur in the textual Flânerie. Hence, this concept of textual flânerie is studied through analysis of the selected text: *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry. Through close reading of the selected novel, the study has found three main features of flânerie: intimate urban experiences, class division and haptic presence, experienced by the selected two main characters of the novel. The journey of the two flaneurs *Om and Ishver*, depicts the life and cultural practices embedded in the Indian society. They also painted the picture of capitalism that takes over the city under the guise of the *City Beautification Project*. Based on the analysis, the study concludes that Literature, whether belonging to the past or the contemporary times offer textual flânerie to its readers, turning them into wanderers of places and spaces within the confined walls of their exposure.

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Conflict of Interest

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