Re-Visioning Urban Walking and A Playful Flâneusian Gaze on Contemporary Karachi in *Karachi You Are Killing Me*

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Abstract:

In Anglophone Pakistani peripatetic literature, Karachi is mostly explored through the detached gaze of the male urban walker or the flâneur who wanders into the city and over-romanticizes it as an exotic female body[1]. In this paper, however, I try to capture the female gaze on the city and discuss how the selected novel explores the very act of experiencing the city in a female body. Drawing on Lauren Elkin's notion of flâneusing, I argue that walking is a corporeal experience and the gaze is always embodied. By deconstructing the notion of flâneusing as an aimless wandering, Elkin re-defined the notion of urban walking. According to her, both aimless wandering and purposeful walking are kinds of flâneusing. Similarly, her flâneuse like the flâneur is not a detached observer, but her gaze enables her to unveil gender politics prevailing in the city. Building on Elkin's idea, I intend to analyze how the urban walking changes its significance for the female journalist Ayesha in *Karachi You Are Killing Me*, over a period. Moreover, I further seek to explore that walking is not merely an individual act, but carries a transgressive potential for those female walkers who dare to walk in the places foreclosed to women. This very potential also transforms this transgressive act into a consciousness-raising activity. This paper is an important intervention in our understanding of gender and spatial politics in Karachi and introduces new insights about urban walking.

Keywords: Walking, Wandering, Flâneusing, Gender politics, Karachi.

[1] For further details see, Asif's Farrukhi's *Look at the city From Here*, Arif Hassan's *From The Demise of Cosmopolitan to its Its Revival: Trends and Repercussions in Karachi* , Asdar Kamran's non fictional works on Karachi.

Published in 2014, *Karachi You Are Killing Me* provides a deep insight into the spatial and gender politics of Karachi. The novel explores the political dimension of urban walking and challenges the preconceived stereotypical notions about the female flânerie or flâneusing. Using Lauren Elkin's notion of flâneusing, this article challenges Janet Wolff's notion that a woman cannot be a flâneuse, as it is impossible for a female body to be invisible in both public and semi-public urban spaces. By highlighting the political dimensions of urban walking, Elkin also questions the trend of presenting flâneusing as an aimless wandering with a detached gaze. Building on Elkin's notion of urban walking, I will mainly engage with three questions: (1) In what ways, the flâneusian gaze on the city unmasks the patriarchal politics that reinforce inside/outside, home/street binaries? (2) How do patriarchal urban spaces of Karachi control the flâneuse's mobility and force her to explore the transgressive potential of urban walking? (3) In what ways do these transgressive walks enable the flâneuse to re-vision walking as a consciousness-raising activity, which makes her rethink the question of home and belonging?

Elkin in her book *Flâneuse* criticizes Janet Wolff's assumption that a woman cannot be a flâneur. Janet Wolff argues that the spatial politics of 19th century Europe made it impossible for a woman to roam freely in the streets and not being noticed by the male gaze (58). Similary, Elkin also challenges the male psychogeographers's (Guy Debord, Will Self) tendency of representing urban walking as a masculine activity, which always places the question of visibility and invisibility at the center. These writers make the readers feel "as if a penis were a requisite walking appendage, like a cane" (Elkin 19). The above-mentioned narratives are ocular centric and focus more on lack rather than what the female walkers can do. An ocular centric perspective privileges the male gaze over female agency and it defines the notion of flânerie through limitations rather than female potential. Thus, instead of denying the existence of the flâneuse , it is more significant to redefine the notion of urban walking. And there is a need to reinvent such a figure who does not try to fit into a masculine mould. Elkin's flâneuse deconstructs the figure of the stereotypical urban walker who is famous for his detached gaze and aimless wandering. She postulates that looking at the world with a detached gaze is neither desirable nor possible for women. By emphasizing the political dimension of walking, she reinterprets how it becomes a transgressive act

when the female walker tries to go to the places where women are not allowed to go. And these transgressive steps further help the flâneuse to envision walking as "solvitur ambulando" or consciousness raising activity (Elkin 21). Drawing on Elkin typology of flâneusing, I try to re-conceptualize the notion of urban walking fit for a different urban environment. I posit that the representation of flâneur as universal masculine body has limitations, as a walker's body is always influenced by socio-political forces and always gendered or sexually oriented.Thus, the paper explores the effects of socio-political forces on the body of the urban walker and challenges the assumption that walking is solely a flâneur's privilege.

Much has been written about the novel from various important and insightful perspectives, but I intend to focus on exploring spatial/gender politics. Building on Elkin's typology of female flânerie, I seek to explore how a twenty-eight-year-old journalist Ayesha in *Karachi You are Killing Me* casts a playful gaze on Karachi and navigates its way in its patriarchal urban spaces through the help of various masks (costumes). Although Imtiaz's flâneuse does share some characteristics of the classical flâneur, such as observing, gazing, and interacting with the city in all possible playful manners, still it is hard to ignore its limitations. However, unlike the conventional flâneur, she knows how to be visible and invisible in the city and re-defines flânerie not merely the privilege of a white/brown heterosexual male but also of those who are marginalized on the basis of gender and class. In doing so, she challenges Janet Wolff's assumption that a woman cannot be a flâneuse. Through a playful use of masks (costumes), she cleverly enjoys her ever shifting role both as a spectator and an object of speculation in Karachi. Moreover, being a single unmarried young journalist, she also stands for a new generation and refuses to fit into a masculine concept of urban walker and re-defines the concept of urban flânerie. By combining her work and pleasure assignments, Ayesha also challenges this classical assumption that flâneusing is simply an aimless wandering. Ayesha's walking starts as an individual excursion to various places in the city, but soon assumes transgressive significance, particularly when she even tries to go to the places where women are not allowed to go. Before exploring the female gaze in detail, it is important to get an overview of a few works about Karachi that mainly highlight the male gaze on the city.

Mostly, the mainstream Pakistani literature explores the male gaze on the city. Steve Inskeep in his book *Instant City: Life and Death in Karchi* defines Karachi as an instant city which is growing so rapidly that even a returning visitor cannot recognize it anymore (144). Likewise, Kamran Asdar Ali in the afterword II of *Cityscapes of Violence in Karachi* also discusses the way the famous Urdu poetic voice of the late 1980s, Zeeshan Sahil portrays Karachi as a violent landscape in his poetry. Asif Farrukhi in *People All Around You: Locating Karchi in the poetry of Ezra Abbas* mostly highlights the way Azra Abbas's poetry engages with the violence embedded into the everyday life of the city. The flâneurian gazes on the city dwell more on boundary-laden discourses that define the city's identity either in ethnic or class terms. Farrukhi's claim that the literary representations on Karachi cannot do justice to the city's population and its socio-political landscape is partially true. The literary representation of the city in the anglophone Pakistani literature may not support this claim, but it does hold true for Urdu literature. In Anglophone Pakistani feminist novels like *Tresspassing* (2003), *Burnt Shadows* (2009), *Broken Verses* (2005), both Kamila Shamsie and Uzma Aslam Khan aptly capture the flâneusian gaze on Karachi.

Extending on the notion of documenting the female gaze on the city, I will further explore how Saba Imtiaz, like the above-mentioned writers, embodies Karachi's literary value in her work and tries to do justice to its socio-political scenario. Particularly, her journalist flâneusian's gaze documents the female experiences in the violent urban spaces of Karachi. Her wide range of domestic and professional experiences encompass the imprints of spatial and gender violence on the daily household routine of women. Moreover, Ayesha's bold movements in the public spheres also enable the reader to understand the uncharted domain of female sexuality.

Ayesha, a journalist, alternates between intentionally venturing into the city and indulging in leisurely wanderings. Initially Ayesha's walking provides her temporary relief from her dull monotonous life routine where nothing happens. And she learns to connect with Karachi in a more intimate way and becomes deeply aware of its everyday life. Elkin also defines walking as the most authentic way of connecting with the city, noticing "the unexpected beauty of the quotidian" (5). Georges Perec defines it as infra-ordinary, and it's like paying attention to what happens when nothing is happening. Thus, it is Ayesha's gaze that introduces

the cosmopolitan nature of contemporary Karchi to the readers and familiarizes them with the city's personality. Through Ayesha's gaze , Karachi appears to be more of a living character not simply a background.

Karachi emerges as a cosmopolitan city where the city and the female body re-write each other in multiple ways. The flâneuse does not view the city as a static entity, but becomes an active agent in the production space, place, and history. Her flâneusian gaze reflects how Karachi is changing according to the demographics, economic and psychological needs of its people. The residential neighborhood of the city is also being used for commercial purposes. The city is developing itself according to the human needs, such as the lack of space has created room for "shoebox café…the small crammed places which play seventies music" (Imtiaz 32-33). Because of commercialization of the residential areas, these shoe box cafes are getting famous. As Ayesha observes: "instead of tearing them down to build proper cafes and shop fronts, restaurants have just moved into the houses as they were, which makes you feel like you are having dinner in someone else's drawing room" (Imtiaz 24). This infra-ordinary city life also casts a strange effect upon its female inhabitants.

She experiences the city differently from her male co-workers. Unlike the male journalists, she cannot walk freely in the streets of Karachi. Being the subject of everyone's gaze and speculation become an unchangeable reality of her life. She can neither smoke nor walk freely on Karachi's streets. Moreover, she is subjected to daily harassment, as she narrates one such incident when 20-year-old boys throw water balloons at her. For instance, she documents one such incident in her diary "I'd reached dinner soaking wet, not because it was raining, but because a group of 20-something boys were throwing water balloons at every girl walking on the road from their car… And everyone on the street was laughing at these poor girls being soaked from head to toe. As if we've committed some sort of crime because we are walking instead of rolling around in an SUV" (27). Similarly, she also complains about her circumscribed life in Karachi, and how she cannot smoke freely on the road. As she observes, "even though I've been smoking for years, the question

always sends me into spasms of guilt.I want to tell the cop off for asking me this when every other man on the site is also smoking but I don't want to piss him off" (20).

The effects of cosmopolitan city are quite visible on the lives of the female inhabitants of the city. Ayesha's lifestyle also reflects the alienating effects of the modern lifestyle. Being a single unmarried woman, she is afraid of ending up alone in a city where "it is easier to hire an assassin than meet an attractive, intelligent, normal single man" (15). Moreover, she considers pre-marital sex and one-night stand as routine matters. Therefore, she also ends up having a one-night stand with CNN reporter Jimmy. Although the experience ends on a bitter note when Jimmy steals her intellectual work and publishes it in an esteemed newspaper. Making insecure choices based on Ayesha's inner fears only adds complexity to her life and deepens her loneliness and misery. As she confesses: "I vow for the umpteenth time not to engage with fuckwits for fear of being ending up alone" (Imtiaz 108). Georg Simmel (2002) observes in her essay "City And The Mental Health" that people in the modern city experience a sense of uneasiness, as they always adapt themselves to new rather strange situations. The modern city gives birth to "blasé attitude", which further produces fragmented consciousness and a sense of detachment. The novel depicts Karachi as a cosmopolitan city and Ayesha documents the blasé attitude of Karachites. Thus, her walking experiences enable the reader to understand the infra-ordinary life of Karachi and its ever-changing dynamics. Besides documenting everyday life in Karachi, her flaneusian gaze also highlights the social mores and patriarchal politics of Karachi that circumscribe women's mobility in the city. In the next section, I will explore how these choices reshape her feminist gaze and make her experiences different from a flâneur.

Envisioning Walking as a Transgressive /consciousness Raising Activity

The 19th century flâneur (Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin) always remained in the popular imagination, a solitary figure with a detached gaze, who also shared a detached bond with the city. The male psychogeographers's tendency of defining flâneuring as detached observation or presenting it as a critique of postwar urbanism becomes quite problematic with the female urban walker. The flâneuse envisions urban walking/gazing not as a detached activity but as a political act, carrying the potential for further subversion.

This paper explores the subversive potential of the flâneusian gaze on the city. I cannot draw upon the classical model of the 19th century's flâneur at least on two accounts. Firstly, the flâneur is a woman and secondly; I need to transpose it in a different setting and in a different time. Moreover, she experiences a different kind of challenges and problems compared to her 19th century counterpart. Her vision is not scopophilic[2], and she pays more attention to the gendered division in the city. Ayesha does share some traits of the classical flâneur, like romanticizing the city life and playing with the masks and disguises. But she does not have a detached gaze. In fact, her gaze documents the experiences of those who have been marginalized based on gender and class and who exist on the peripheries and edges of the city. She becomes a kind of new incarnation of the urban walker who transforms the significance of urban walking from an individual act to transgressive and transformational activity. By exploring the subversive potential of urban walking, I intend to redefine it as a political activity which draws our attention to the way spaces are not neutral entities and play a significant role in creating sexed bodies.

Imtiaz's flâneuse's lived experiences of Karachi inform her gaze, providing her a more realistic glimpse of the inherently gendered environment of the city. And her walking excursions not only enable her to highlight that the built environments are more suited to the needs of men but "what kind of spaces women have access to and, and which they are barred from" (Elkin 11). To address these questions more effectively, we need to understand the difference between the framing of everyday rights in city planning and the lived experiences of its female citizens. For Ayesha, both walking and gazing are more of everyday modes of exploration that transgress the abstract maps imposed on the city by the panoptic gaze of the city planners. Thus, it is not topographical lines on the map but her lived experiences of Karachi, which guide her. Ayesha creates her personal topography, which teaches her to remap the city poetically. Her poetic mapping enables her to piece Karachi together, even those areas which appear as distinct entities to an ordinary walker. Her personal topography guides her to understand the spaces and streets which are friendly to the female walkers, and which are not. Consequently, she learns to understand the significance of the invisible boundaries that divide the city. Karachi

[2] The term refers to the very act of deriving aesthetic pleasure from observing an object or a person.

is a dangerous place for the female walkers, where women walking alone need to be constantly aware of their surrounding. And they must learn to protect themselves from all kinds of dangers. Even one of Ayesha's friend warns her to take care of her personal security in a city where "even the juice guy has security guard, for the love of god, because he is scare someone will make off with his day's earning and the canned pineapples" (Imtiaz 215).The novel also draws the reader's attention to the way urban spaces of Karachi shape Ayesha's personal and professional choices. In fact, the gendered nature of those spaces affects her professional growth in the worst possible way. Ayesha's experiences make her question the traditional gendered perspective on both space and corporeality. Like her male colleagues, she cannot easily merge in the crowd. Neither can she save herself from the curious gaze of the crowd. Being both an observer and an object of observation further complicates her position. Nord also highlights the kind of challenges a female walker often experiences in a street, where she is often treated as "the corporealised other" (12) by the gaze of the crowd. Therefore, Ayesha's work strategies differ from male journalists. She faces a completely different set of challenges. As Imtiaz mentions in an interview with Anika, "there is a level of hesitance at times, and it is hard to get a same level of access that male reporters do_ particularly in crime and political beats or to build same kind of relationships with contacts" (Imtiaz 2017)

Imtiaz also confesses in an interview with a female journalist, Anika, that female journalists can access the domestic spaces more easily as compared to the public sphere. Therefore, most of the time, they go to meet the families of the victims or the culprits. But according to her, all these so-called "advantages are outweighed by how the odds are stacked against women because of their gender" (Imtiaz, 2017). Women journalists in Pakistani society are often judged based on a certain stereotype. Their work assignments often include covering fashion shows, not some serious journalistic work.

Imtiaz also points out this discriminatory behavior against the female journalists in an interview with Anika:

> despite the fact that women have excelled at every beat in journalism in Pakistan, the challenge is when women are only considered capable of reporting on beats that are considered 'safe' or 'easy'___ even though nothing is easy(not even fashion as some people assume" (Imtiaz 2017).

The editor often assigns Ayesha less important jobs, considering her not suitable for crime reporting and other serious assignments .Through Ayesha's gaze, we become familiar with the darker side of the world of journalism, where the life of an ordinary female journalist revolves around "the twilight zone of misery and bad news" (Imtiaz 7). Being an intern, her position is even more vulnerable. The office calls her and assigns her work at odd hours. Because of work pressure, she often cries at night. Her work routine creates a sense of isolation, as she confesses time and again in the novel, "for some reasons I feel like I am going to cry. I just want to put my head on and tell how miserable I have been" (Imtiaz 11). Ayesha's gaze also provides us with a deeper insight into the nature of her work, like how today's newspaper becomes "tomorrow's fish and chip paper" (Imtiaz 40). Even shopkeepers use her intellectual work to soak up grease from the *puris*.

City is not just a built environment but possesses a unique personality. Like all mega cities, Karachi is also known for its fragmented, sociopolitical structure. Cara Cilano rightly points out that the city's fragmentation captures "the complexity of claims of belonging to Karachi" (144). Thus, Karachi does not have a single identity, as it appears to be a mosaic of different worlds which represent various economic zones. Similarly, in an interview with Mazhar, she also confesses that the inhabitants of the city are "an interesting mix of people" (2014, 1). Therefore, it is difficult to describe the temperament of Karachites through certain reductive images. Ayesha learns to navigate all those worlds with the help of different masks and highlights the question of home and belonging. Unlike the flâneur who can merge in the crowd and belong to the city, the flâneuse considers herself a stranger, a body who feels out of place in the spaces dominated by the patriarchal politics.

To further understand the complicated dynamics of patriarchal spatial politics and the poetics of visibility and invisibility, it is important to comprehend why the notion of visibility/invisibility occupies such a central place in the entire debate related to urban walking. Elkin postulates that the flâneuse is not a new

term, as its usage began in 1840 and peaked in 1920. From above-mentioned perspective, the female walker has always been present in the city, but the male gaze has interpreted it as an interruption in the city, both "a symptom of disorder" and an unsolvable problem (Wilson 9). So, during the 19th century, no one seemed willing to view the female urban walker as a flâneuse. Therefore, they interpreted her as a hyper-visible body which is incapable of merging in the crowd. And for this very reason, the dominant peripatetic discourses claim that she can never be a flâneuse. Elkin questions Wolff's assumption that 19th century's spatial politics prevented women from wandering the streets and the female flânerie was almost impossible. By debunking her line of reasoning, she highlights the experiences of urban walking of the 19th century women writers who tried to engage with the city in all ways, but the dominant discourses ignore their experiences. Extending this debate further, Deborah Epstein Nord also draws our attention to the complexity of the poetics related to visibility and invisibility of the female body. The female body embodies "vexed sexuality" and both being a spectacle and an objective of speculation, learns to renegotiate her identity in patriarchal urban spaces (12). Nord focuses more on the complexity of the female gaze and what difference gender can make to the position of the observer (12). Grosz also highlights the same problem that the body cannot be a neutral, as women's identities are deeply rooted in their bodies. Thus, the female bodies have always been "sexually specific" and viewed as "the locus and site of inscriptions for specific modes of subjectivity" (241-43).

Within the Pakistani context, we can easily challenge the Western notion of visibility or invisibility which is usually attached to the figure of a flâneur. With the help of veiling, Ayesha easily merges in the crowd and becomes invisible, too. Wearing a Sari, she effortlessly stands out in the fashion show. Therefore, in Ayesha's case, visibility or invisibility does not remain a limitation but becomes a matter of choice. Karachi's changing sociopolitical conditions have a significant bearing on Ayesha's critical positioning within the urban spaces of the city. It redefines her choices like what to wear and what not to wear in the city. Her choice of clothing completely depends on the place or the event. This is the reasons that instead of focusing on an ocular centric debate, I am more interested in exploring the way Ayesha experiences the city where both visibility and invisibility become a personal choice not an unchangeable physical reality. By extending the argument further, I try to explore the following questions. Does the flâneuse want to be considered an individual or merge in the crowd? Does she want to stand out or

blend in? And the most important question is: Does she want to attract or escape the gaze of the crowd? Thus, from this perspective, visibility or invisibility become a personal choice not an unchangeable reality. She constantly changes her appearances on the occasions. She wears a casual dress when she hangs out with friends, wears a sari at a fashion show, and covers her head with a dupatta when she has to cover a religious procession. Using clothing as a tactic is not a recent phenomenon. The female walkers have always been using it to avoid the male gaze or kind of verbal or physical attack. In order to hide her body, she depends on various kinds of dress codes, and constantly changes her dress to navigate the patriarchal urban spaces of Karachi. For instance, she wears casual dresses in safe domestic spaces, wears saris at fashion shows, and covers herself with a dupatta to escape the gaze of the curious crowd.

With the help of veiling, she even dares to go to the places where her boss and her colleagues never go. By wrapping a massive dupatta around her body and face, she conducts the interviews of the ex-Guantanamo bay detainee and of the gangsters living in the gang-ridden neighborhood of Lyari. Her veil enables her to escape the worst situations. For instance, during her interview with the gangster in Lyari's dangerous neighborhood, her initial fear is, "he is going to rape me and leave me for dead here" (167). In such situations, the use veil prevents her from being viewed as a sexual object, leading the gangsters to treat her respectfully and even call her sister.Her professional life is quite tough, as it includes: "covering shoot outs, the aftermath of bombings and riding Rickshaws through the countryside while being pursued by bandits" (Santana 1). Ayesha narrates her experiences as a journalist in the following way: "I've interviewed so many that I have more of them on my phone than actual friends, for the love of God seminaries, rape victims, bootleggers, even the bloody fashion designer lot. I won't be unsafe, I promise" (Imtiaz 139). Ayesha deploys various masks to navigate those urban spaces.

Karachi itself appears to be a character in the novel. Imtiaz points out the same that the city "sculpts the way you live, changes your habits" (1). Imtiaz defines Karachi as a violent city: "For example, in any major city in the world, when your phone rings, you answer it immediately [regardless of where you are] but in Karachi you look around before answering it. Hopping not to get mugged"

(web Desk 2016). Time and again, Ayesha's gaze also captures the violent nature of the city. According to her, Karachi is known either for its economic disparity or the fear of violence that plagues the life of Karachites like a nightmare. Even the juice guy hires a security guard to protect his daily wages. Her gaze also depicts the contradictory nature of the city. In a few places, people consider alcohol consumption as a status symbol, whereas at other places, the image of a woman smoker can bring a crisis and it "passes for pornography" (Imtiaz 21). Ayesha documents in her diary that the image of a female smoker in the city indicates an end of humanity and some of her colleagues interpret it as a sign that the judgement day is near. Thus, she seems to share a love-hate relationship with the city and confesses several times: "I hate living in Karachi but it is so heartbreakingly beautiful when it sets one's mind to it" (Imtiaz 53).

Ayesha's flâneusian gaze reminds the reader that women have always been present in the city and interacting with it in all ways, but their experiences are left out of the dominant narratives. Similary, Elkin also points out the presence of women writers who have always been documenting the experiences of flaneusuing, chronicling their lives, telling stories, and interacting with the urban spaces in all ways. Ayesha's walking experiences enable her to capture the feminist gaze on the city. Her walking experience ends up becoming a consciousness raising activity, as it makes her acutely aware of the gendered division within the city. Her lived and imagined experiences of the city disrupt and disorders, a unified sense of Karachi and the power dynamics of its urban spaces that control the flow of bodies in and out of space.

The paper is an attempt to examine urban walking from the feminist perspective, which deviates from a largely male peripatetic tradition associated with the flâneur. The flâneuse reshapes urban imaginary in a new way and shifts the significance of walking from what is generally theorized as an individual act to a transformative experience. By exploring the flâneusian gaze on Karachi, I argue that Imtiaz's flâneuse invites all readers and pedestrians to question gender politics and inequality prevailing within the city. Her gaze reveals the way the 19th century flâneur's vision is not adequate to approach the everyday reality of the local and the impacts resulting from global capitalism. Thus, Ayesha's walking experiences provide an alternative vision of the city and reject an oversimplified and romanticized notion of belonging to a city.

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