

Research Article



The Flâneuse in Turkish and Indian Fiction: Urban Inequality and Female Migrants

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Given the growing scholarly interest in feminist urbanism, literary narratives are emerging as powerful sites for articulating the lived realities of women in transforming cities. This paper contributes to contemporary feminist discourse by exploring how literature functions as a mode of urban analysis—what Tonkiss (2005) calls “the city’s unofficial archive”—that makes visible the spatial, affective, and embodied dimensions of gendered urban life. Engaging with the theme of “feminisms of our time,” it foregrounds the figure of the *flâneuse* as a critical lens through which to examine women’s mobility, marginality, and resistance in Istanbul and Delhi. In doing so, the paper aligns with calls from scholars such as McDowell (1999) and Kern (2020), who emphasize the importance of feminist re-readings of urban space, and it responds to literary critics like Rose (1993) and Rita Felski (1999), who argue for literature’s capacity to interrogate spatial norms and social hierarchies. The *flâneuse*, a female counterpart to the *flâneur*, has emerged as a compelling figure for examining gendered experiences of urban spaces. She is instrumental in constructing “a counter-narrative to [the city’s] existing narratives as a cosmopolitan city by recounting the lived bodily experiences of a migrant *flâneuse*” (Thomas, 2023). While the *flâneur* has traditionally been depicted as a leisurely male observer strolling through the city, the *flâneuse* challenges this notion by highlighting the distinct ways in which women engage with and navigate urban landscapes. This paper explores the figure of the *flâneuse* in the context of Turkish and Indian fiction, focusing on the experiences of female migrants in the rapidly transforming cities of Istanbul and Delhi. Both cities are marked by their historical depth, evolving modernity, and persistent inequalities that shape the lives of internal migrants, particularly women. Through an analysis of selected literary texts, this paper investigates how Istanbul and Delhi’s literary and artistic narratives construct gendered urban experiences and how female migrants embody the struggles and aspirations of city life. This is supplemented by ethnographic perspectives on gendered urban mobility. While Turkey did not experience colonial rule in the same way as India, the country’s modern trajectory has been shaped by postcolonial anxieties and aspirations toward Western modernity. In this context, the *flâneuse* becomes an interesting figure, navigating urban spaces that are at once historical and rapidly modernizing, inclusionary yet exclusionary, dealing with restricted mobility and limited perceptions that contrast drastically with the movement of male actors. In the selected texts, female migrants in Istanbul and Delhi negotiate space within cities that are shaped by economic disparities and patriarchal constraints.

Key texts include Pamuk’s *The Museum of Innocence*, *A Strangeness in My Mind*, and *The Red-Haired Woman*, Prakash’s *The Walls of Delhi* and Dasgupta’s *Capital*, among others. These works provide critical insight into the ways that female migrants experience exclusion, surveillance, and resistance in Istanbul and Delhi. The study is further informed by theoretical insights from feminist urban studies. Elkin examines how women reclaim public space, noting that, “Walking is mapping with your feet. Maybe it’s good to keep some distance from the things we know well, to always be slightly out of sync with them, not to pretend mastery” (2016, p. 12). Similarly, Wolff states, “There is no question of inventing the *flâneuse*. The essential point is that such a figure was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century” (1985, p. 45). These perspectives help frame the discussion of gendered urban exclusion and resistance in the two cities,

emphasizing the importance of literary representation in shedding light on marginalized voices and highlighting the ways in which the *flâneuse* navigates, resists, and redefines the urban landscape.

The contemporary period is seeing a formidable reorientation in “city writing”: it displays a conscious engagement with the conceptualization of the city, its pluralities, and its tensions. Indeed, “our contemporary is very much an act of the modern” (Banerjee, 2011, p. 266). This is inevitably reflected in writing on the megacity and goes all the way back to the 1920s–30s, the so-called “modern” period. The rapid urbanization of Istanbul and Delhi has led to complex socio-spatial dynamics and internal migration—particularly noticeable in the pandemic years—and plays a key role in shaping urban identities. Fiction appears to offer alternative perspectives on feminism and postcolonial urbanism. According to Lim, “We need an open system of incomplete urbanism which accepts conflict, chaos and complexity as well as welcomes new knowledge, cutting-edge innovation and unexpected progressive societal changes” (2011, pp. 262–263). This connects with migrants becoming squatters in two cities that have seen rapid anonymous corporate globalization, and the necessity to see female migrants as a sub-strand of this larger process. The characterization of the incomplete city burgeoning with internal migrants would contribute to the study of modern(izing) cities in the non-West and situate them in the contemporary moment, using them to get at the gendered condition of internal migration and the building of squatter communities, within which female migrants undergo further stratification.

The condition of migrants is the most precarious in the twenty-first century. Considering them unequal citizens of dense urban imaginaries could help articulate the complexity of migrant settling. Post-pandemic, their vulnerability has been exacerbated, leading to starker social stratification: as it is, when they move to cities, they are often not considered citizens but squatters. “The migrant is not on the margin of modern experience—he is absolutely central to it” (Berger and Mohrer, 2010). Migrant communities, pushed to the peripheries of the city, survived by creating new urban cores and infiltrating old ones. Stuti Khanna offers that the metropolis, as a broad literary field as well as a site of literary production globally, “enables and indeed encourages forms of writing and publishing that may be unorthodox, emerging from a spirit of experimentation and individualism ...” (2018, p. 334). Female migrants often appear as an afterthought and even a disappearance in a sort of *bildungsroman* format, that is, a journey of growth and evolution of individual identity within a peripheral community. This is especially clearly brought out in Pamuk’s *A Strangeness in My Mind* as well as *The Museum of Innocence*, wherein they experience marginalization in the urban environment. Gendered constraints appear to shape their relationship with the city, and they operate with limited mobility, restricted economic opportunities, and a dependence on public perception as against their public presence. For instance, in *The Museum of Innocence*, Füsun, a lower middle-class woman who is the beloved of the protagonist Kemal, moves from the village to the city and lives in a migrant neighborhood. The fact that she had participated in a beauty contest and had her picture printed in the papers is taken by Kemal to mean that she is of loose morals; thus, he does not treat her as he does his fiancé

Sibel, who is from a conservative upper-class family. Her life is marked by patriarchal control and confinement and provides a nuanced portrayal of female migrants' experiences in Istanbul, illustrating their marginalization within the urban environment and underscoring the challenges of reimagining the *flâneuse* in Turkish fiction.

Migration between the historic capitals of Istanbul and Delhi has been ongoing for centuries, and both countries display conservative politics and nation-building efforts in terms of their cultural and literary aesthetic. Chakrabarty (2009) indicates that inter-cultural studies can help us understand why such conversations did not happen before and why cross-national intellectual traffic may in fact be easier to carry on today. His position is fairly applicable to Turkey which, unlike India, was never formally colonized. Given the fragmentary nature of being in the city, analyzing migration literature becomes important. Both cities are rife with squatter colonies: the *gecekondu* in Istanbul and the *jhuggi-jhonpdi* in Delhi. India's long colonization left it struggling to come to terms with constructing a new identity in order to regain a sense of Indian culture and individuality. And while Turkey was never colonized, it displays an emergent history of similar effects as it was inundated with an influx of European merchants who demanded the gentrification of the area of Galata, where they were concentrated. Interestingly, in *The Red-Haired Woman* there is a reference to popular stories that films are made about, that it is the same in "Pakistan, India and Central Asia" as well as in Turkey. While this refers to tales culled from legends, it also shows a similarity in popular temperament, and a felicity in "making up" narratives that will best serve the moment (Pamuk, 2017, p. 151). The reference to artists as itinerant wanderers objectifies them as a community and belies the fact that they may have a place of origin and may in fact be on their way to somewhere else. It also negates the delicate precariousness of their existence and the particular focus on female migrants as possessing loose morals, which is echoed in *The Museum of Innocence* (2010).

These rootless theater migrants who danced so suggestively and told vulgar tales to entertain soldiers did not exactly subscribe to family values. Who knows, maybe Turgay himself cheated on his wife with other women. Maybe they entertained each other with tales from their extramarital adventures. Maybe tomorrow the Red-Haired Woman would tell Turgay about her night with me. Maybe she wouldn't even do that much and forget all about me instead (Pamuk, 2017, pp. 93–94).

This moves the discussion to the uneven regularization that the cities underwent in their westward aspirations. In Istanbul, this led to a Haussmann-like zoning and gentrification of specific parts of the city, as earlier mentioned. In Delhi, it resulted in a colonial construction of the city of New Delhi—as opposed to Old Delhi—which has since independence in 1947 been sought to be reimagined in literary contexts. These overlaps have been exacerbated by entirely makeshift neighborhoods, a consequence of significant rural-to-urban migration, particularly from the 1970s onward. This could be in part because several *jhuggis* and *gecekondu* have been legalized over the last few decades, making it easier for masses of people from villages to join their brethren. The latter, after struggling to establish themselves with no water or electricity piped to the squatter colonies, are now finally housed in shaky cemented residences and able to extend their largesse to people from their villages. The two cities, both hotbeds of political action have, therefore, for long been booming with colonies of squatters and their small businesses.

Situated in volatile nations, their microhistories are often shifting and being remade and rewritten: this is clear in the way such colonies have (literally) leapfrogged over vast swathes of land that are dotted with shanty houses, makeshift homes, and mountains of trash. Walking in the city as well as through trash is an act fraught with meaning for women in Istanbul and Delhi. Unlike the *flâneur*, who moves without restriction, the *flâneuse* must navigate gendered risks, from harassment to physical danger. In *Music by My Bedside* by Başar, for instance, the female protagonist experiences Istanbul as both an intimate and alienating space, reflecting the paradox of women's engagement with the city. Similarly, in Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Asya's movement through the city is shaped by her gender and social status, illustrating the limited spaces available for female autonomy.

Known as the City on the Seven Hills, Istanbul's urban sprawl literally expanded with migrants from villages that built hasty illegal constructs on hills in the middle of the night. As Neuwirth describes:

It was not yet a town when they seized the property. It was just a field full of weeds and snakes, land you wouldn't notice, ... way out on the Asian side of Istanbul, almost as far as you can get from the historic city ... and still be within the city limits. This was where they decided to make their stand. They waited until nightfall, then seized the land and built their homes (2005, p.143).

The squatters build their homes illegally purely because they are unable to afford any other place to live in. What occurs, however, from these humble origins is that they "produce something complex and sometimes harsh and unruly," they produce, indeed, a new city (Neuwirth, 2005, p. 3). When Cem, the protagonist of *The Red-Haired Woman*, is a boy, he goes to the town of Öngören to work as a well digger's apprentice during his summer vacation. The narrator speaks directly to the reader: "I say we were leaving the city, but I wouldn't want this to confuse my readers." He tells us that Istanbul's population has tripled that of its number in those days, when in passing the old city walls there were "fewer, smaller, and poorer" houses, and "factories, gas station, and the odd hotel" dotted the landscape (p. 11). The well digger, Master Mahmut, reminisces "fondly about the countless wells he'd dug in the poor neighborhoods behind Sariyer, Buyukdere, and Tarabya, ..." during which days "it felt as if the whole Anatolian population was coming to settle in Istanbul, building ramshackle houses on the hills overlooking the Bosphorus, where there was neither water nor electricity" (pp. 37–38). Master Mahmut is, from time to time, commissioned to dig wells in these neighborhoods, tying in with Neuwirth's findings. Chapter 3, "The Enterprising Individual Who Builds a House on Empty Land," begins the mediation on *gecekondu* (placed overnight) homes, "some of whose foundations had only just been laid, some with the walls only half built, and others awaiting the finishing touches." The narrator makes it a point to mention that most of them were solely occupied by men, highlighting again the absence of women. Over the next few years, the protagonist Mevlut's father and uncle build a house in Kültepe by hand, with "hollow bricks, cement, and sheets of scrap metal" and later they move into an unregistered house in the same area while claiming two empty lots in Kültepe and Duttepe (pp. 56–57). In the novel it is mentioned that no one in these squatter colonies "formally held title to their land" (p. 57). People would plant a few trees and lay a few bricks to mark their property,

getting it certified by paying a local councilman, who would “add a couple of words to widen the imaginary boundaries of the plot and insert some notations as to the positioning of ‘landmarks’ such as rocks, fountains, or adjacent plots.” However rosy this situation appeared to be, “[a] house on unregistered land could be knocked down by the authorities at any moment” (p. 57). This makes the presence of female migrants particularly precarious.

Delhi, much like Istanbul, presents a complex and often hostile environment for female migrants. Prakash explores the lives of the city’s invisible underclass, including domestic workers and laborers who struggle for recognition and security (2013). Similarly, Roy traces the journeys of marginalized individuals, including transgender and Dalit women, who experience the city as a site of both violence and possibility. Dasgupta describes Delhi as a city of vast inequalities, where wealth and deprivation exist side by side. Women’s movement is constrained not only by economic hardship but also by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that dictate their visibility and participation in public life (2014). Chaturvedi explores the lived experiences of women in the city, particularly those working in informal sectors who must constantly negotiate their right to urban space. In *The Walls of Delhi*, the title story opens with a snapshot of such workers, in which there is little to no mention of women, who are mostly in supporting roles of wife and mother and are generally employed as household help or vegetable vendors:

Sanjay Chaurasia’s paan cart stood less than five hundred yards from my flat; Ratanlal sold chai right next to Sanjay’s. Sanjay had come to Delhi from a small village near Pratapgarh, and Ratanlal from Sasaran. Their makeshift shops were on wheels so they could make a quick getaway in case an official came nosing around. Cops on motorbike patrol came by all the time, but they got their weekly cut. Ratanlal paid five hundred, Sanjay seven (p. 3).

In both Istanbul as well as Delhi, then, migrant workers pander to the authorities in order to escape indictment, and women need to further protect themselves by covering their heads (particularly in Delhi) or restricting their mobility. To build community, they locate themselves all along the same street so as to counter any looming legal troubles and refer their customer base to each other.

A few steps away was a[n] enterprise on wheels – the bicycle repair cart belonging to Madan Lal. And across the road from Madan Lal was Devi Deen, the shoe repairman, and just down the road ... was Santosh, a mechanic Santosh had come to Delhi four years ago, making his way from a village in Haryana, close to where Madan Lal and Devi Deen were from. All the vendors and hawkers set up camp wherever they could (pp. 3–4).

They are joined by an ice cream vendor, an egg seller, a tailor, various vendors of savory snacks, as well as rickshaw drivers who hailed from Bihar or Orissa. The literary execution of the pattern of migration mirrors the physical movement. But where are the women? It is telling that migrants, herded into indiscriminate groups, may be rendered speechless. Later in the story enters Ramnivas, who has lived in Delhi for twenty years, having moved “from Shahipur, a small village in Handiya district near Allahabad, along with his father, Babulla Pasiya” (p. 11). He builds a “makeshift house in Samaypur Badli village in northwest Delhi, itself a settlement of tin shacks and huts,” which is covered in

Sadana's book on the Delhi metro. Samaypur Badli was, in 2019, the last station on the Yellow Line of the Delhi Metro, a legitimizing move as its name is now displayed prominently in all the stations the train passes, as well as flashing on the train itself. It is also significant as this line links this long-outlawed land and its residents with stations which signify the seats of government such as Central Secretariat, New Delhi Railway Station, and the wealthier environs of south Delhi.

Khanna informs us of how the selfhood of Delhi as it is reflected in the texts merges seamlessly with the "identities, aspirations and trajectories of the rich cast of characters that inhabit it." Not only does it offer a physical stage upon which to play out their destinies, it also actively shapes those destinies and the forms of narrative they come to occupy. The word "occupy" is not only symbolic of the action of occupying; here it is ironic, for occupation would ordinarily be used in colonial terms. In Delhi's precarious city-ness, "to occupy" is to forever be "on the verge of sliding into the village" (p. 337). Indeed, this brash vulnerability is what makes its way into contemporary urban narrative composition. As Neuwirth asserts, "Squatters are the largest builders of housing in the world—and they are creating the cities of tomorrow" (p. 10). The "massive migration from rural regions to the urban centers of the world has been going on for thousands of years. And always, once they got to the cities of their dreams, the migrants have become squatters" (p. 11).

Migrants exercise the autonomy granted them by their mass to construct slapdash, illegal homes that are expanded over time to include more rooms, thus furthering the urban sprawl. In cities of the Global South, the modern experience is often that of the post-colony. India's colonization is echoed in the remnants of British infrastructure, and while Turkey was never colonized, it displays a similarly emergent and contentious history due to its gentrification from the mid-19th century onwards. In Delhi and Istanbul, migrant communities, when pushed to the peripheries of the city, survive by creating new urban cores and infiltrating old ones. Shrouded as their very existence is in a politics of denial, their transient housing mirrors the precarious nature of their shifting, seemingly invisible, population. However, from being part of a sub-culture such as, for instance, Samaypur Badli on the periphery of Delhi (which incidentally now has its own metro station on the Delhi Metro, thus granting it legitimacy) they often create illegal settlements right in the heart of the city. Delhi has been teeming with, in Dasgupta's words, an "abundance of poor migrants from the countryside, who were lodged in slums so conveniently close to affluent neighbourhoods, that the rich could cheaply buy any services they needed without having to go to the trouble of accommodating servants" (2014, p. 83). Here is where Delhi differs markedly from Istanbul, where migrant settlers commute long distances to reach their place of work. If we take the case of Chiragh Dilli, a formerly illegal settlement next to a *nullah*, it is in an area where property prices skyrocket. It provides cleaners and house help to the fancier neighborhoods of Panchsheel Enclave and Panchsheel Park, and the former public housing, now privately owned, Sheikh Sarai Phase 1 and 2. From being a *laal dora* (red tape or marked as illegal) area, Chiragh Dilli was cleaned up over the years. Its higgledy-piggledy, crazily built colorful homes and shops teeter in narrow formations that could be easily toppled over (and

rebuilt). Now, it also houses people from the middle class, students, offices, and start-ups. This former slum or *jhuggi* is like a Turkish *mahalle* of yore, with its temple and mosque that is near so-and-so's home, that is opposite a banyan tree, where you can see the electrical store, and so on and so forth. A growing *mahalle* in Istanbul had migrants from a resident's ancestral village or town joining it. Pamuk's *A Strangeness in My Mind* corresponds with ethnographic studies of migrant housing in Istanbul. Within the *jhuggi* and *gecekondu* themselves, there is a rapid shift from urban concrete-poured habitations to a more rural setup with mud houses and animals, mirroring the city itself in a sort of burgeoning miniature. When migrant housing extends its occupation into makeshift housing in the city center is when things get more interesting. Incomplete structures that lie vacant are prone to being occupied by migrants who now get the chance to extend their reach, their grapple for space in the best parts of the city mingling with a desperation to keep the daily rhythms of life intact. This delineates the high level of organization that squatters use in carving out their agency in a city where they otherwise seem to have no control over their lives, and female migrants create further niches of community in an otherwise extremely male-oriented setup, where even within the migrant settlements they are prone to gendered and sexual violation.

Dalrymple's quote is applicable to both Delhi and Istanbul:

The enveloped urban villages are complex places. ... Shorn of their fields and often exploited by corrupt bureaucrats and unscrupulous real estate agents, the villagers now find themselves besieged. ... [with this] boutiquefication and [erstwhile] ponds full of leathery water buffaloes now bizarrely fringed with designer clothes shops, visited by women in short skirts, high heels and Dior sunglasses, ... the villagers [remain] suck[ing] on their ancient water-pipes, deprived of even the most basic facilities. The cheek-by-jowl coexistence of a deeply conservative patriarchal rural society alongside the very different moral norms of a cosmopolitan modern city has helped create many of the city's tensions and caused some of its violence, but it gives [the city] a complexity and fascination like none other. ... The built city sometimes seems unfamiliar, the people becoming more anonymous."

Indeed, as Dasgupta describes Delhi, it is "a segregated city" where people are divided into "*housing societies* and *estates* which are contained in *blocks*, themselves sub-divisions of *sectors, enclaves* and *colonies*" (p. 16). Urban migrants are beset by the moments of otherness that this hustle grants them, and anxiously enter the race for gaining more and better shelter, and then the construction of entire colonies around such shelters. Migrant literature brings us into these makeshift residences of sorts to show us, in fine, how village migrants turn into city residents and, in acquiring confidence over a hard stay in the city with little access to basic resources, build their lives from scratch. The role of the *flâneuse* here becomes markedly complex. Contemporary literature in production will, no doubt, bring an even more nuanced perspective of internal migration to the forefront.

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