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The 'Woman' of the Crowd: Exploring Female Flânerie

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Abstract

Modernist literature is rife with figures of the flâneur, strolling down the city. When Edgar Allan Poe wrote 'The Man of the Crowd', arguably one of the best depictions of this spectator figure, he names this figure the 'man' of the crowd, leaving one to wonder if there ever was a woman of the crowd? Or if at all there could be such a figure - a female flâneur in a man's world. This paper tries to explore this elusive female counterpart to the man of the crowd by examining their course in literary and artistic works born out of early twentieth century Europe.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Modernism, City, Urban, Flânerie

While cities were by no means a phenomenon of the nineteenth century, the advent of industrialization meant a gradual relocation of more and more people from the rural areas to urban centres. As the cities grew, they became the new focus of civilization, a fact that was reflected in the works of nineteenth century European writers and artists. By the arrival of the twentieth century – and of the modernist movement – cities were the focus of all arts, and indeed life itself. A new form of urban lifestyle came to be, which became the subject of most modernist works.

While some modernists “perceived urban living in terms of decay and degeneration ... for others, the city was a source of inspiration and beauty”(Kjattansdottir, 2012). Amidst this culture emerges the figure of the flâneur as a “key figure in understanding the modern, urban living brought about by industrialization in Europe” (Kjattansdottir). While the french noun 'flâneur' means 'stroller' or 'saunterer', Walter Benjamin first turned the scholarly focus onto the flâneur. Describing him as the iconic figure of the modern existence, Benjamin portrayed the flâneur as an urban spectator of the society, but one who is alienized from it. This flâneur as “the quintessential figure of modernity, a figure linked to modernity's changing modes of observation, subjectivity, spectatorship and literary production and illustrative of urbanization, industrialization and technologization of the modern era” (Coulthard, 1999). Serving as both an emblem for the modernist city as well as the modernist writer, the flâneur moved through the crowd of the city by himself, observing and noting the details of passersby and events around him, but carefully remaining anonymous to the crowd. Baudelaire describes the flâneur in the following words in *The Painter of Modern Life*:

“The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—impartial natures which

the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito.” (Baudelaire, 1995)

The figure suggests the contradictions of life in the modern city, exploring the relationship between people, modernity and the urban environment within and without himself, “caught between the insistent mobility of the present and the visible weight of the past” (Ferguson, 1994).

In many ways, the unknown man from Poe's famous short story, “The Man of the Crowd”, whom the author pursues as he remains at the centre of the crowd in London, himself unnoticed, moving through the city relentlessly is the archetypal flâneur figure. However, it goes to show much about the contemporary gender roles that he is a 'Man' of the crowd. Traditionally, the flâneur is a man. The very fact that he is a man who ambles along the city all day long and manages to sustain himself – perhaps even devote time to the arts that he gathers inspiration for in the streets – would it make safe to identify a flâneur as a gentleman stroller, thus limiting him from the perspectives of both class and gender. Even if there could have flâneur been a certain amount of flexibility in the class situation, the public sphere of the city would always, without any exception, belong to men. Kevin Milburn illustrates this further:

“throughout history, the city in western society has tended to be a gender bound space; women have traditionally had less opportunity to engage in indulgent practices such as ... urban strolling, principally due to gendered conventions concerning the expectation of looking after children, as well as safety concerns, concerns often propagated by men” (Mulburn, 2009).

Benjamin himself has been subject to fierce feminist criticism. His flâneur “has been repeatedly accused of being shaped by his masculine subject position” (Ivanchikova, 2006). There are very few women in the world of Benjamin's flâneur. Leslie Kathleen Hankins accuses Benjamin's analysis of being limited by his misogyny:

“Where are the women in the bourgeois interiors, streets and cityscapes of Benjamin, how do they function? Women in his streets are objects of resentment and rebellion when he writes of the passive-aggressive rebellion against his mother he performed by lagging behind her on her shopping trips through the city, or objects of illicit desire, commodities as in “Beggars and Whores”. ” (Ivanchikova)

If women are there in the narrative of Benjamin's flâneur, then they are merely fleeting images that his flâneur sees on his way. Or, they are images of desire and inspiration that his flâneur observes and objectifies at his leisure, for his pleasure, or for his art. Alla Ivanchikova writes that “the woman that appear on the pages of Benjamin's descriptions, are relegated to being an object in his gaze, and generally constitutes a context of his wandering and a subject matter of his physiognomies”. In Flaubert too, one can see this same sexism. In *L'Education Sentimentale*, the city is repeatedly associated with a woman and the exploratory flâneur with male desire (Ferguson).

However, in the twentieth century, the wider changes taking place in socio-economic scenario meant that more women were in fact able to transgress boundaries of domesticity and step out into the streets. The First World War opened up the professional world for women, giving them a reason to step out onto the streets. In time, the 'New Woman' arrived, inclined to walk and to work and to own the city surface the same way that their masculine counterparts did. The emergence of the departmental store gave women a reason to step out of their homes and walk through the city, navigate their way through the large stores, observing the activities within

these microcosm of cities. The coming of the departmental store meant the undoubted ushering in of capitalism into the life of the city, which meant the end for the flâneur and marked the beginning for the flâneuses. Given that the flâneuse is a consumer, unlike her male counterpart, it is safe to say that the flâneuse is a combination of the flâneur as well the badaud. While she experiences the city, a part of these experiences is her consuming it too.

Then there were also those – like the prostitutes – who were already on the streets. Elizabeth Wilson argues that “the prostitute, because of her stable presence on the streets, was ultimately the flâneuse of the nineteenth century” (Wilson, 1992). The prostitutes, as a part of the public space, were beings in which the concept of commodification found their realization. They are, in a way, a symbol for the rise of consumer culture and urbanization. Wilson continues:

“Prostitution becomes ... a metaphor for the whole new regime of nineteenth-century urbanism. Both Baudelaire and Benjamin view the metropolis as the site of commodity and commodification above all else. Prostitution comes to symbolize commodification, mass production and the rise of the masses”.

However, this stepping out of women from their designated corner of the homes to the world outside has not been an easy process. Wilson, in her essay, discusses how Janet Wolff famously argues that the flâneur is a wholly gendered idea and there were no female flâneurs at all, that the contemporary socio-political milieu would not allow for it. While it is no doubt a strong argument, Wolff has been criticized for being too rigid in her views. Her idea, for starters, excludes figures of women who were already walking the streets with the flâneurs. The prostitute – named, quite tellingly, the streetwalker – is one such figure. According to Kjattansdottir, “the [main] problem with Wolff’s article is that it fails to distinguish between ideology, that of women being confined to private sphere, and reality”. A detailed reading of Baudelaire reveals female figures tucked in places – the lesbian, the prostitute, the widow, the old destitute women, the female passer-by who could be any of these – suggesting that while a patriarchal structure ignores them, female strollers may well have been present in the city of the nineteenth century, the kingdom of the flâneur.

In a gradually changing society, the ideas of flânerie were also bound to change. Although more and more women were beginning to walk to streets, the question remained if they could be called flâneurs. The New Woman was walking to get to work or to typing school, the shopper was walking to reach the departmental store. How many of them were walking through the streets for the pleasure of it, to walk through the sea of the city, at one with the crowd? Most walked through with purpose, which defied the entire idea behind that of the flâneur. The very coming of the capitalism that enabled these women to come down to the streets from their homes was, in fact, the very thing that brought about the death of the flâneur. It may, though, be argued that female flânerie was a breed of its own, not quite defined by the same measures or terms as that of the male flâneur. Akkelis van Nes and Tra My Nguyen comment that “the flâneuse is not a female flâneur but she is [rather] a version of the flâneur. She does not experience the city the same way [that] he does” (Nes and Nguyen, 2009) .

The growth of the identity of the female flâneur or the flâneuse is a a problematic one. Some, like Janet Wolff, would like to believe it was a non-existent concept altogether. Women in public spaces were not acknowledged in art or literature, as, say the flâneur or the badaud was. If they were, they would be fleeting presences within the field of vision of such a flâneur or a badaud. There is not even an appropriate term for the female flâneur. The term 'flâneuse' was the Feminine of the term 'flâneur' the same way a female massage practitioner was a 'masseur'. It did

not, in any way, define the identity of a female flâneur as something unique, something separate from the identity of the male flâneur. However, as discussed, the two figures could not be defined as the same being, merely separate in sexes. When a flâneuse did walk the same street as her supposed male counterpart, she was scrutinized at every step by men and other women, thus robbing off her the necessary anonymity of the male flâneur. According to Chris Jenks

“The male gaze has been formative of the cultural products and traditions of modernity. While excluding the feminine it has systematically disempowered the feminine, and one symbolic representation of this is a gendered imbalance of ocular practice. Women do not look, they are looked at.” (Jenks, 1995).

Thus the male gaze will not allow the woman the anonymity, and hence, will not let her be a flâneuse. Amidst this social milieu, the prostitute is perhaps an example of the flâneuse who is used to being objectified by the male gaze, her identity defined by this commodification.

It was the very sexuality that the prostitute handled with ease as she walked about came in the way of the flânerie of other women. One of the ideas behind locking women up inside their homes was to contain female sexuality. With women out on streets, this venture was failing, posing a severe threat to the stability of the male individual. Elizabeth Wilson writes that “with the intensification of the public/private divide in the industrial period, the presence of women on the streets and in public spaces of entertainment caused enormous anxiety”. While the prostitute had been a street walker for a while, the coming of respectable women onto the streets deeply unsettled the existent value system. Wilson continues that “the very presence of unattended – unowned – women constituted a threat both to male power and to male frailty”. This is where the literature and the arts come in, bringing with them, the image of the flâneuse, gradually appropriating her existence, fixing for the female flâneur a permanent position both on the cityscape and on that of history and the arts. As Wilson mentions, “it proved impossible to banish them from public spaces. Women continued to crowd into the city ...”. Writers like Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield or Jean Rhys “employ the flâneuse's subjective fragmentation in order to imagine a new urban self that opens towards urban space”(Eliasova, 2009).

While the figure of the flâneuse attains its all-important shape primarily in the works of modernist women novelists, a very early example of the figure may be seen in Baudelaire himself. In 1860, Baudelaire wrote his famous poem “À une passante” (“To a passer-by”). Apparently a poem about a flâneur, it addresses a passing stranger as she comes across in his line of vision. When she passes him by, Baudelaire mourns her departure and the fact that they will never meet again. The unusual climax of the poem states “A lightning flash... then night! Fleeting beauty / By whose glance I was suddenly reborn” (Baudelaire, 1954). Surprisingly, the woman gazes back at the poet, the flâneur, matching his glance with hers. Amidst a body of work that grants no presence to women as distant objects of desire, there is a sudden presence of a flâneuse who crossed the path of the poet- flâneur, perhaps marking for herself the territory of the town, but subtly so. The poet does not recognize that a flâneuse had walked through his streets and his poetry.

Deborah L. Parsons, in *Streetwalking the Metropolis* insists that “female writers of modernism have created an alternate vision of the city that is not predicated on omniscient vision and exclusions” (Ivanchikova). This comes across in works of leading female modernist writers: Katherine Mansfield's short story “Pictures”, Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, and most famously, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* etc are all examples of

female flâneur character. Mansfield's Ada Moss, the heroine of "Pictures" is a struggling actress who is an occasional prostitute as well while Richardson's Miriam Henderson is a working girl (Seal, 2012). For Sasha Jansen, the heroine of *Good Morning, Midnight*, "life, which seems so simple and monotonous, is really a complicated affair of cafés where like me and cafés where they don't, streets that are friendly, streets that aren't ... and so on" (Pantazi, 2013). And of course, the titular Mrs Dalloway is one of the most famous flâneur-figures in literature. Kjattansdottir writes that "*Mrs Dalloway* is Woolf's ultimate 'London novel'" (Kjattansdottir), and its heroine the ultimate flâneuse.

Often, the writers of these flâneuse characters were flâneuses themselves. Rhys and Woolf particularly were enthusiastic participants of the culture of flânerie. These writers and their characters therefore appropriated the identity of the flâneuse, commanding their presence over the city as well as the literature, which had been, so far, the arena of the gentleman flâneur primarily.

To focus on Woolf, it would not be an exaggeration to say that she marks "a shifting point in women's presence within the city [in the novel and otherwise]" (Kjattansdottir). Her characters are often acutely city-centric and their finer nuances often only come to life in urban exchanges, while her writing moves beyond realism to create a stream of consciousness feeling – typical of her time – that almost creates a real-time effect of walking in the streets, within the pages of her writing. She achieves this quite masterfully in "Street Haunting: A London Adventure", in which, she leaves her home to buy a lead pencil, but indulges in flânerie, both in the city that is her subject and on the pages that document said subject. Her account is surprisingly like that of Poe's in "The Man of the Crowd", except that while Poe followed said man, Woolf herself becomes a woman drifting through the crowd, her mind taking her far away from the scheduled destination. The fact that her supposed purpose of walking the streets – buying the pencil – is undermined by her flâneristic tendencies, is also a counter to the claim that women did not classify as flâneurs because they would only take to the streets with a purpose at hand. However, she does allude to the female shopper, one of the avatars of the female flâneur, when she arrives at second-hand bookshops and is taken by them considerably. What is interesting is that she buys the pencil she originally set out to buy, and yet, sustained the aimless pleasure of a Baudelairean flâneur's walk. Her activities prove that the flâneuse in herself combines the characteristics of both the flâneur and the badaud.

Woolf claims for herself a part of the tradition of the flâneur as creator as well:

"Passing, glimpsing, everything seems accidentally but miraculously sprinkled with beauty, as if the tide of trade which deposits its burden so punctually and prosaically upon the shores of Oxford Street had this night cast up nothing but treasure. With no thought of buying, the eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances." (Woolf, 1930).

The London streets are for her fodder for creation, which set her imagination off on a course like the one she takes through the city itself. She also touches upon the idea of the flâneur's anonymity, stating that she could be anyone amidst the crowd:

"Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves?" (Woolf)

Remarkably, Woolf turns the glance of the gentleman flâneur, fixated on the female presence on the street, back at the men in her work: “There, too, was the melancholy Englishman, who rose among the coffee cups and the little iron tables and revealed the secrets of his soul—as travellers do.”(Woolf). It is now the flâneuse fixating on the man, as opposed to the other way round. She also touches upon the idea of the flâneur's desire in her essay: whereas the male flâneur only desires the woman as an object, she hopes to find a best friend in a man she comes across in the streets; perhaps, she seeks love from a stranger as well. Even in a short piece such as this, thus, Woolf makes the difference between the flâneur and the flâneuse quite evident: while their realism are the same – the streets – there is a difference in their manifestations, in their approaches, in their identities. Bobby Seal writes that “[Woolf] depicts landscapes that reinforce boundaries of class and gender, rich and poor, men and women; each of them lives in a different London. She also creates dichotomies of public and private, internal and external and past and present” (Seal). It is, therefore, no surprise that the inherent dichotomy between the male and the female flâneur too becomes apparent in her works.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf subtly brings forth the problems of the development of female flânerie. Saga Kjattansdottir believes that because “Clarissa is a product of nineteenth-century ideas about femininity[,] her relationship with the city is formed by the gendered division of spaces. Therefore, she is bound to the social, domestic sphere of life, opposed to the public, professional life of her politician husband”(Kjattansdottir). The very gendered public/private division of spaces that is behind the anxiety about the flâneuse – and perhaps is behind the supposed absence of her from the modernist city, as claimed by some – is reflected in the relationship between Woolf's heroine and her husband. In comparison, Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth has been raised with twentieth century 'modernist' values. While Clarissa returns to her home and to her party planning, she has stepped across the threshold of the domestic sphere and has ventured out into the city. It is indeed where she claims to be at her happiest, moving through the city, seeing and observing all, reminiscent of the long tradition of flâneurs walking through various European cities. In that, as a matter of fact, Clarissa is at one with her creator. Kjattansdottir writes:

“[Woolf] was a great lover of London, the city in which she was born and where lived for the greatest part of her life. She frequently took walks in the city, both for pleasure and for inspiration. In 1928, she wrote in her diary: 'London itself perpetually attracts, stimulates and gives me a play and a story and a poem, without any trouble, save that of moving my legs through the city ... To walk alone in London is the greatest rest’”.

Woolf's heroine echoes her sentiment when she says “I love walking in London” (Woolf, 2012). Clarissa does not belong to the values of the older world that she is tied to. Bobby Seal writes that “Clarissa Dalloway is a woman who likes to dally along the way; in other words, she is a flâneur”.

The greatest moment of female flânerie in the novel, however, occurs elsewhere. It is when Peter Walsh spots a woman near Trafalgar Square, a passerby, their encounter reminiscent of Baudelaire's poem:

“she's extraordinarily attractive, he thought, as, walking across Trafalgar Square in the direction of the Haymarket, came a young woman who, as she passed Gordon's statue, seemed, Peter Walsh thought (susceptible as he was), to shed veil after veil, until she became the very woman he had always had in mind; young, but stately; merry, but discreet; black, but enchanting.” (Woolf, 2012).

Peter Walsh himself is the typical flâneur, a Baudelairean figure. And yet, the sight of this one woman – what would have been a fleeting image – stops him in his track. When Baudelaire wrote his poem, he lamented the passing of the moment in which the woman met his glance and wonders if they will ever meet again but does nothing to change his own route, Peter Walsh follows her while she continues on her way. Bobby Seal's analysis of this scene is particularly accurate:

“Woolf subverts the conventional norms and, in this encounter, transforms Baudelaire's objectified *passante* into an assertive flâneuse. Although Peter Walsh is presented as being able to wander the streets of London with freedom and detachment, Woolf's depiction of his attempts to pick up the young woman he encounters in Trafalgar Square in a way that subverts his confident desires with an eventual realization that he will never possess her. He follows her, imagining himself as ‘a romantic buccaneer, careless of all these damned proprieties’. But, as she reaches her house and puts her key to the door, she quickly turns and snubs him with ‘one look in his direction, but not at him’”.

This episode marks the presence as well as the development of female flânerie – from Baudelaire's *passante* to Woolf's flâneuse. As a woman herself, Woolf engages with London – the modernist city being her setting as well as her subject – and presents it from a deliberately feminine perspective. A number of flâneuses appear in the texts – Clarissa, Elizabeth, the unknown woman Peter Walsh follows. In terms of sheer visibility of women on the streets in Woolf's novel, it would almost appear that London is a city of flâneuses. And of flâneurs too, but that had been established long before Woolf. Ching-fang Tseng writes that “by appropriating the trope of the flâneur, [Woolf's] novel presents a simultaneously domesticating and un-domesticating portrayal of the modern city which contests and redraws the reified boundaries of the city and the home ... [It] undercuts the modernist flâneur's cosmopolitan outlook located in the metropolitan city, and at the same time inscribes women's emancipation from domestic spaces and their incipient presence in the public city space” (Tseng, 2006).

The visibility of women in public spaces became a trend in contemporary art too. Griselda Pollock, in her famous essay “Modernity and the Spaces of femininity”, discusses how artists like Cassatt and Morisot began to draw pictures of women in public spaces. Very few men were noted in these paintings, and if they were, they were almost always in the background. These mark a distinct break from the Baudelairean idea of women on the streets (Pollock, 1998). Their visibility in visual representations of the time also indicate that female flâneuses were not quite as invisible as critics like Janet Wolff would lead us to believe. Greg Thomas, in his essay “Women in Public: the Display of Femininity in the Parks of Paris” cites Cassatt's *Women and Child Driving* “as a prime example of images that portray women as equally self-possessed public figures and that ‘represent women as competing equally with men for domination and definition of public space’” (Warren, 2007).

Female flânerie in twentieth century Europe was certainly existent. It had marked itself a niche for itself, amidst the much-walked paths of the male flâneur in the streets of contemporary Europe. However, there were inherent differences between the identities of the male flâneur and the female flâneuse; they were not merely separated by gender, but by all that separated the respective cultural performances of those genders. In a sense, in fact, the flâneuse was a combination of the flâneur and the badaud, combining within herself the alienation of capitalism of the former as well as the consumer figure that is the latter. In that respect, the flâneuse too is caught between the same insistent mobility of the present and the visible weight of the past as the flâneur was allegedly caught in. Their identities found unexpected intersections amidst the

deviations. The presence of the flâneuse on the street was strengthened by their presence in the arts and literature, which was, in turn, mirroring their presence on the street. With contemporary impressionist artists as well as leading women novelists of the time taking it upon themselves to exhibit female flânerie in real life as well as their artistic counterparts, the female presence in the public space became undeniable. The presence of women in the political, public sphere of life was indelibly imprinted on both the streets and the arts. The female flâneur continues her march through the urban landscape, fictive and real, till date, observing the world around her, deriving inspiration, stopping by a store window perhaps, and always reflecting on the city around her, a woman of the crowd.

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