

‘Seeing Double’: Exploring the *Flâneur*’s Gaze in Amit Chaudhuri’s *A New World*

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Abstract

The present paper explores the ambivalent existence of a modern urban figure, a *flâneur*, who is caught between the processes of grand and spectacular modernization and the gradual but uncertain withdrawal of the self from the external ‘reality’ through Amit Chaudhuri’s celebrated fiction *A New World*. The continuous ‘shocks of the new’ that the urban ‘advancement’ bombards upon the senses of a *flâneur*, develops a highly personal psychopathology in him/her. Georg Simmel calls this symptom a *blasé* outlook – a psychic structure characterized by sheer impersonality, which gives birth to an attitude of almost complete indifference towards the socio-political processes outside. The *flâneur*’s observation of a city remains always informed by a double vision – seeing yet disbelieving. Both the identity and the gaze of a *flâneur* keep on swinging incessantly between a modernity that creates a desire to become a developed subject and a subjectivity that is dismantled by an array of unfulfilled dreams beyond the scope of any premeditated determinism.

Keywords: *blasé*, *flâneur*, Georg Simmel, semiotic difference, urban modernity, Amit Chaudhuri

Introduction:

The experience of urban modernity may be conceived through the dialectical relationship between the processes of societal modernization and its aesthetic counterpart, cultural modernity, which D. P. Gaonkar calls ‘the dilemmas of Western Modernity’ (Gaonkar, 1999: 2), that “remains the major clearinghouse of global modernity” (Gaonkar, 1999: 1). While the rationalist principles of the capitalist modernity attempt to make the urban world a structure of highest impersonality and sheer objectivity, the same is responsible for the rise of a highly personal psychopathology – the *blasé* attitude – a staunch indifference towards any external happening because of frequent and repetitive exposure to countless stimuli. Simmel opines, “There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which is so unconditionally reserved to the city as the *blasé* outlook.” (Simmel, 2002: 14) This socio-psychological phenomenon is a direct outcome of the sensuous life that the spectacle offers. The nerves of a city-dweller are stimulated by the sensuous spectacles “to their utmost reactivity that they can no longer produce any reaction at all...” (Simmel, 2002: 14) This attitude makes a city-dweller a gazer of utter emptiness that lies at the centre of the urban space as it “hollows out the core of things, their peculiarities, their specific

values and their uniqueness and incomparability in a way which is beyond repair.” (Simmel, 2002: 14) So, the modern city-dweller is imminently locked into a culture of objectified sensuality from which s/he seeks his/her origin yet retracting into a fortified subjectivity, which does not find any meaning in its birthplace. An alienated citizen, especially an intellectual type, thus seeks an escape into a death, both an imaginary and metaphysical space of liberation from the physical embodiment of urban existence, which gives him a life. A casual city-stroller or a *flâneur* is one of the modern character-types, which are split between the concretized and spectacularized objectivity the modernization of the cities aims at simulating and the struggle of the modern subject for safeguarding the self against the threat of impending abstraction.

The casual city-stroller or the *flâneur* is an urban type, here in our context, better fitted as a narrator of the urban landscape and thus almost a mouthpiece of the author. Indeed, Chaudhuri is one modern author, who dodges or shies away from the question of autobiographical in his fictional writings. Although he admits, “So much of my work is, in that sense, autobiographical”, he has, rather, redefined the autobiographical in the context of literary. (Pande) To him what in the ‘most crude sense’ constitutes the autobiographical – the element of personal referencing – does not sufficiently justify the continuing popularity of the writings of V. S. Naipaul, Katharine Mansfield, James Joyce or Marcel Proust. He says, “[a]utobiography does not interest me. I’m not interested in telling people the story of my life...”. (Pande) Rather, he is more interested in autobiography as a mode of writing life as perceived and experienced by the writer and the ‘transformation of the imagination expressed through language’. (Pande) One of the tropes of Chaudhuri’s literary autobiographical in which transformation takes place paradoxically without the call of finality is that the autobiographical depicts “a life that is important only ironically...an impulse towards the anti-epic, or anti-great work.” (Pande) His writings are the vehicle for gravitating the everyday and the mundane towards a space of liberation, which has exhausted every possibility of reaching a brief goal remaining ever caught between its internal dilemmas. So that space never guarantees any actual sense of liberation yet it is interstitially placed among the networks of the grand narratives that weave the allusion of greatness. This aporiacal littleness informs his writings as, both as a person and as an author, Chaudhuri watches and registers the inherent contradictions of the cityscapes while remaining ever caught between the spectacular objectivity and a resistant intellectual subjectivity; the insistent (im)mobility of the present and the (in)visible weight of the past. This sense of ‘contrariness without finality’ is something of a philosophy that makes the writer deny even the separate existences of the ‘concrete terminologies’ through which all rational minds perceive the world. The *flâneur* is an element in the whirlwind of the modern urban society, which continues to loiter the city taking the discontinuities of its grand discourses at its heart and incessantly blurs the distinctions between its existential agencies. Chaudhuri says,

I don’t know about subjectivity or objectivity, but the *flâneur* and the loiterer have been of great interest to me definitely. I think it has sort of metamorphosed for me as well, this figure of the loiterer...There is no clear demarcation... then that’s one of the features of the arcades which Walter Benjamin talks of the relation to the *flâneur*; the arcade is neither inside or outside, it’s a public space but it feels like an interior.... It is possible to a certain extent but now my loitering leads me to understand that the globalised world has discontinuities in between. (Chatterjee, 2015)

Flâneur's Stroll through the Uneven Surfaces of History:

A *Flâneur* is a representative socio-psychic phenomenon of an 'exclusive' capitalist society, a singled-out outcast, who offers "[p]aradoxical, privilege of moving about the city without losing one's individuality" swaying "At once on the street and above the fray, immersed in yet not absorbed by the city." (Ferguson, 1994: 80) S/heⁱ is on the mission of creating a new episteme of neuroesthetics, in his "curiosity to investigate the city whose continual metamorphoses challenged the very possibility of knowledge." (Ferguson, 1994: 80-81) The *flâneur* is an epitomized embodiment of what Ferguson calls the 'discourse of disruption'. (Ferguson, 1994: 111-112) With all kind of contradictions coupled with speed and agility, the city does not allow a gazer formulate a meditated and theorized appraisal of what is knowable about the city, about its myriad enchantments and volitions. Yet the gazer, with all his/her unreliabilities and idiosyncrasies, keep on searching for an episteme that will fit the city's predicament because s/he knows that "The more uncanny a big city becomes, the more knowledge of human nature -so it was thought it takes to operate in it." (Benjamin, 1985: 40) The stroller-cum-gazer's search for the knowledge of a modern metropolis is fragmented and frustrated from the beginning and would finally lead to a mere circumlocutory conclusion regarding the unknowability of the city. This is primarily a methodological crisis for a *flâneur*, who finds it impossible to completely rely on the logicity of the events and their unpredictable consequences continuously hammered by the shocks of the new; any sense of historicist analysis becomes an impossibility given the ever incomplete and fragmentary nature of the city and its crowd. S/he then consciously gives up an intense subjective and critical enquiry of the metropolis purely on the basis of reason and thus detaches him/herself so that s/he may be at liberty to watch and not to build and create a specific knowledge of it. Ferguson observes this tension as inherent in every urban dweller "The problem of knowledge becomes an insuperable one, and yet every urban dweller must create a city that can be known and with which it is possible to cope." (Ferguson, 1994: 111) Benjamin sees in this contradiction in a *flâneur* in the incognito of 'an unwilling detective', who "only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant." ("The *Flâneur*" 40-41) Rather this detective is both dependent on rationality in his/her compulsion to watch but at the same time depend upon the sensuality to relish his/her unwillingness and to keep him/herself detached from the construction of knowledge, which s/he knows to be an impossibility. Benjamin writes, "Thus the detective sees rather wide areas opening up to his self-esteem. He develops forms of reaction that are in keeping with the pace of a big city. He catches things in flight; this enables him to dream that he is like an artist. Everyone praises the swift crayon of the graphic artist." (Benjamin, 1985: 41) Ferguson finds in the figure of a *flâneur* a proponent of a new aesthetics about the metropolis, which she calls the "science" of the sensual'. (Ferguson, 1994: 90) Ferguson writes,

The artist-flâneur, on the contrary, tempers desire with knowledge... In this fusion of science and sensuality lies the key to urban control.... The conception of Paris as female is hardly new, but Balzac pushes the connection to its extreme by associating flânerie with carnal knowledge....A manuscript of 1830 makes still more of the sexual resonance of the artist-flâneur's relationship to Paris. The city is "a daughter, a woman friend, a spouse" whose face always delights because it is always new. (Ferguson, 1994: 92)

This sensory aestheticism makes city an entity which not only is unknowable but also unreal. This aesthetics both retains and discards the reason as a tool to knowledge production and rather drags sensuality as an important paradigm in knowing the metropolis. It relies on both 'seeing'

and 'disbelieving', who at times registers "the concrete manufacture of alienation" and at others laments for "an abundance of dispossession." (Debord, 2006: 23)

Flâneur is historically a resident of Paris, which not only gave birth to him rather nourished and ripened him throughout ages. As Ferguson suggests the first and foremost mention of *flâneur* is found in the anonymous thirty-two-page pamphlet of 1806 in the name of "Le Flâneur au salon of Mr Bon-Homme: Examen joyeux des tableaux, mêlé de Vaudevilles", which presents Mr. Bonhomme, who is "in all Paris" synonymous with "*Flâneur*". (Ferguson, 1994: 83) Balzac develops this figure to a considerable extent into a literary-critical urban personae in his *Physiologie du manage* (1826) under the Restoration which, as Ferguson claims, is often misunderstood, as the first public appearance of *flâneur*. (Ferguson, 1994: 83) The Paris streets were abruptly flooded with "the modest-looking, paperbound, pocket-size volumes called 'physiologies'" in the early nineteenth century with advent of printing technology and the expansion of knowledge market using the availability of cheap paper. (Benjamin, 1985: 35) These volumes entered into a two-way dialogue with the then prevalent modernity by not only watching and registering the panoramic and dioramic urban space but also in the process themselves becoming the sites of those panorama and diorama. Benjamin writes,

They investigated types that might be encountered by a person taking a look at the marketplace. From the itinerant street vendor of the boulevards to the dandy in the foyer of the opera-house, there was not a figure of Paris life that was not sketched by a *physiologue*...In 1841 there were seventy-six new physiologies. After that year the genre declined, and it disappeared together with the reign of the citizen-king Louis-Philippe. (Benjamin, 1985: 35-36)

As Ferguson hints at the matter-of-fact, we realize that the reception of this figure was torn with contradictions. While the inactivity – only strolling around and gazing at the urban space often in the pace of a tortoise – has been associated by the July Monarchy with a "superior relationship to society" as a mark of bourgeois propensity towards leisure and comfort, the same inaction could not be accommodated into the growth of an advanced capitalist society characterized by greater agility with necessarily a bourgeois connotation. The sense of contradiction is more enhanced as the figure becomes the subject of criticism by the lower-class that could not afford to be as lazy as a *flâneur* because its socio-economic compulsion does not allow any of its members to become idly sit and yet carry on living. "A dictionary of "popular" (i.e., lower class) usage in 1808 defines "un grand flâneur" as "a lazybones, a loafer, man of insufferable idleness, who doesn't know where to take his trouble and his boredom." (Ferguson, 1994: 82) Gradually this figure has climbed the social ladder as 'capital' starts colouring the consciousness of the society and bourgeois sensibility starts gravitating towards the present day corporatism. Ferguson writes,

What is so remarkable about this figure is its progressive reevaluation... Instead of prompting a negative moral judgment, the flâneur's conspicuous inaction comes to be taken as positive evidence of both social status and superior thought. The flâneur grows into the rentier, in whose familiar, comfortable, and unthreatening contours the bourgeoisie can recognize one of its own. Thus solidly ensconced in the bourgeois world, and identified with the city, the flâneur is ready to be taken up and redefined yet again, this time by the writer for whom the flâneur's apparent inoccupation belies his intense intellectual activity. (Ferguson, 1994: 83)

The development of the figure follows a convoluted path with the logic that the more it has distanced from the dominant form of bourgeois market the more its physical inaction has been taken as intellectual superiority and thus fits to be reified with its possible profitability in a

consumer society. Ferguson's argument shows the figure's gradual takeover by the intellectuals and the creative writers, "Thus solidly ensconced in the bourgeois world, and identified with the city, the flâneur is ready to be taken up and redefined yet again, this time by the writer for whom the flâneur's apparent inoccupation belies his intense intellectual activity." (Ferguson, 1994: 83) The historical development of both of the facts – a writer's becoming a *flâneur* in search of an alternative space to the impending modernization and the *flâneur's* becoming a subject of research and of creative writing to canvass the fissures in the capitalist project of advancement – registers the presence of this figure amidst the economies of the intellectual market as a marker of an avant-gardism. Various researches on this figure and their publications in the form of books or journal papers, and a keen interest of the celebrated present-day writers like Chaudhuri in this figure situates him/her at the heart of the contemporaneity, in which s/he manages to hold the capacity of being packaged and sold by virtue of his/her being a detached, non-aligned subject on the face of a market economy. This changed image of *flâneur* in the hands of Flaubert and Baudelaire since the middle of the nineteenth century as both a part of and mostly not a part of the capitalist market economy, has become coloured with a deep-rooted empathy towards the poor, downtrodden, uprooted, marginalized, the "lower class", who was scornful to it for its essentiality and inevitability as a petit-bourgeoisie only thirty years back. This inherent dialectics has never escaped the essential existence of "*flâneur*, who goes botanizing on the asphalt," through the convoluted path of his/her career. (Benjamin, 1985: 36)

Gazing Home into Street: The Dialectics of Vision:

The *flâneur* is also one of the precursors of the modern obfuscation of the boundaries in between the home and the world – the dissolve of the person into the crowd. For the first time in history that a *flâneur* chose the Paris Boulevards as the interior:

The street becomes a dwelling for the *flâneur*; he is as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls. To him the shiny, enamelled signs of businesses are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon. The walls are the desk against which he presses his notebooks; news-stands are his libraries and the terraces of cafés are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done. (Benjamin, 1985: 37)

Hannah Arendt in her celebrated commentary on Benjamin has also situated *flâneur* amidst the 'four walls' of the city of Paris, which, according to her, "[i]s the only one among the large cities which can be comfortably covered on foot, and more than any other city it is dependent for its liveliness on people who pass by in the streets, so that the modern automobile traffic endangers its very existence not only for technical reasons." (Arendt, 1968: 21) She has found out a close connection among the hospitable and comfortably liberated spirit of the city, its arcades and the strollers loitering upon them. She observes how arcades have provided the loiterer a sense of ease at home,

...these passageways are indeed like a symbol of Paris, because they clearly are inside and outside at the same time and thus represent its true nature in quintessential form. In Paris a stranger feels at home because he can inhabit the city the way he lives in his own four walls. And just as one inhabits an apartment, and makes it comfortable, by living in it instead of just using it for sleeping, eating, and working, so one inhabits a city by strolling through it without aim or purpose... (Arendt, 1968: 21)

Her analysis points to the incessant and increasing disintegration of the demarcations called the personal and the public, the home and the world through the agency of a *flâneur* and the rise of a new frontier on the modern cityscape that cannot be definitely defined on terms of inside/outside. Chaudhuri, while writing about this commentary on Benjamin, has recognised this frontier as a space in which, “[t]he line that divides interior from exterior, domestic from public space, even the ‘natural’ from the urban and manufactured, is dimmed and blurred constantly for the *flâneur*; he loiters about on the street, inspecting its everyday marvels (or what to *him* is marvellous), as if it were an extension of his drawing room.” (Chaudhuri, 2012: 231)

Walter Benjamin has found a trace of the *flânerie* within the modern historiography of the metaphysics of ‘seeing’, which locates the desire of a modern citizen in spectacles. So, a modern person mostly unconsciously prefers seeing to hearing (or smelling, for that matter). Benjamin alludes to a quote of Simmelⁱⁱ that a person who sees but does not hear is more uneasy than a person who hears without seeing. This precisely is the effect of the dominance of spectacles over any other sensory form, which in turn results in increased desire for commodities or the other way round. So, one who only sees is more replete with insatiable desire for more, than the one who only hears and thus thrown away from commodity fetishism, the centre of modern desire. Benjamin argues this metaphysics of sight is also responsible from complicating the interpersonal relationships among the moderns, in the sense, that they keep on observing one another without talking and thus keep on carrying the loads of suspicion, which instead of opening up the windows of communication shuts them to prevent the horror of secrecy. He ascribes the development of public transport, the automobile industry and the railroads, to the modern consciousness towards seeing. In modern times, a citizen as a seeing animal is forced to ‘play detective’ as everybody around him is ‘a conspirator’: modernity is thus a time constantly prey to the terror of uncertainty, anxiety and terror. The demise of gas-light and the dazzling electric lights that illuminate the city marks an epoch in modernity. It tears up the serenity that the memory of connection with the pristine nature is trying to preserve so badly and dearly but with utter failure. The progressive notion of the public safety in the streets and the business places open for the whole night gets ruptured in such narratives of shock as Stevenson puts forward indicating the end of rhythmical effect of the gas lanterns: “Such a light as this should shine only on murders and public crime, or along the corridors of lunatic asylums, a horror to heighten horror...All was dark yet splendid...” (Qtd. in Benjamin, 1985: 51)

This is origin of detective story and simultaneously of a writer-*flâneur*. The watchfulness of a detective coupled with an indolent attitude to the happenings of the life around places the writer-*flâneur* or the artist-*flâneur* within a profitable interstitial space where this ‘unwilling detective’ sees ever new creative vistas opening up keeping pace with the march of the modern progress: “He catches things in flight; this enables him to dream that he is like an artist. Everyone praises the swift crayon of the graphic artist. Balzac claims that artistry as such is tied to a quick grasp.” (Benjamin, 1985: 41) The artist-*flâneur* keeps registering the ‘things in flight’ as he strolls the market for no reason. He sees the illuminated shops as the site of a decayed interior yet “he roamed through the labyrinth of merchandise” only because “The bazaar is the last hangout of the *flâneur*.” (Benjamin, 1985: 54) He is totally disillusioned with the horrific progress of the capitalist city, which has taken its birth at the cost of ‘what-has-been’, the broken and lost consciousness of ‘the trash of history’: “The *flâneurs* liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace. But this attitude did not prevail...” (Benjamin, 1985: 54) The *flâneur* being a product of a temporality of innumerable crosscurrents himself thus becomes the embodiment of the greatest struggle in the

entire dialectical history of modernity, the subjective versus objective, the crowd versus the individual:

The crowd is not only the newest asylum of outlaws; it is also the latest narcotic for those abandoned. The *flâneur* is someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he shares the situation of the commodity. He is not aware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effect on him and it permeates him blissfully like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the *flâneur* surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers. (Benjamin, 1985: 55)

A *flâneur* is the representational embodiment of the modern citizen "as someone condemned to live in the capital day after day" yet as induced forever by the spectacle of the capital from which he seeks the inspiration to live; he is the embodiment of the enchantment of the horror of urban modernity. (Benjamin, 1985: 55)

Contextualizing *Flânerie*: A New World as a Narration of Uncertainty:

Almost all of Amit Chaudhuri's novels are narrated by the (non)-omniscient narrators, who watch these works of language both intimately and from distance. He follows the characters very closely, their speeches and activities, to the extent that the reader is almost certain to believe that they control the course of events in their own whims. But this 'truth' about the omniscience of the narrator is shrouded with mystery as it raises question about who this 'truth' represents. In these narratives, the narrator seems to be playing a hide-and-seek game with the reader in the sense that in some way or the other the narration often foregrounds 'his choice of events' and thus hiding the choices of the characters. In some cases, he narrates who he wants to be narrated, and thus, in turn, chooses to foreground a psychological condition or a desire to 'get narrated'. It is not always the case that the narrator is narrating the characters or the events or the thoughts of 'Others' present in the novel; rather, contradictorily and always already simultaneously, he is narrating himself, his own choices and whims. This queer relationship of the text with its narrator evokes a politics of representation as the narrator's self invariably intervenes and colours the course of the events and the thoughts of the characters. The superficiality of an activity of 'presenting others' gives rise to a consciousness about the deep metaphysical impossibility of that activity as all action of 'presenting' is dislocated into a phenomenon of 're/de-presenting' and thus dwindling the possibility of any essentially inherent 'truth-value' to whatever the narrator 'presents'. If we take this narrator as an embodiment of narrator-*flâneur*, we must be aware that he is also in the danger of fetishizing his own account as he tries to find an alternative to the limitless commodity fetish these narratives (en)counter. By his trial in escaping from the all-pervasive domain of rational spectacles of a (com)modified society, his taking resort to all that is 'transient', 'fleeting' and 'contingent' in modernity may fetch him the accusation of objectifying all that are 'flotsome and jetsome' at the cost of 'the eternal', 'the immovable'.

The ambivalence between the narrator's gaze and its translation into reality, which is metaphysically untraceable, confers a sense of disbelief upon the narratives of Chaudhuri. This unreliability plays in unison with the narrator-*flâneur* an incessant game of dissipation and dissemination through blurring the distinctions among the fictional agencies of modernity.

Saikat Majumdar has located the *flâneur* in Chaudhuri's fiction in the long and rich tradition of the modernist writing on the city. He observes while primarily inquiring into the quotidian/banal element in Chaudhuri's fiction, "There is another quotidian lifestyle practice that

is a striking link between the cultural traditions of high modernism and Chaudhuri's fiction-walking in the city or as readers of Baudelaire, Joyce, Woolf, and Eliot have called it, urban *flânerie*. Very much in the tradition of Joyce's Bloom and Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway, *flânerie* plays a significant role in Chaudhuri's work..." (Majumdar 2007:458) His study also explores how the figure of *flâneur* has been fraught with contradictions and frequent involutions. As for example, he notes that the protagonist of the novel *A New World* finds the cityscapes simultaneously 'alien' and 'familiar' while walking 'aimlessly', which is in turn a continuous recognition with and a distancing from his urban *flâneur* self. He also comments that the element of *flânerie* "sets into motion the semiotic play of differences that not only define deconstructive textualities...but also mark the hybridity of postcolonial and diasporic subjectivities". (Majumdar 2007:459) He aptly sees the aimless walking of Jayojit reveals an indefinite play of differences that "stakes out both the startlingly unique color of the urban neighborhood and his own dislocation within it." (Majumdar 2007:459)

The narrator of *A New World* is detached from his volition to narrate the urban landscape as he has been separated from his own self. His desire for a family through a marriage, a sense of completeness, has been shattered by a modern social psychopathology called divorce. His is placed into such a delirium as to try to 'escape' into the superficialities of urban life means to be 'engulfed' more and more by some uncertain crater waiting to explode his consciousness. He now lives alone for six months and is accompanied by his only son for another six of a year. It has, like the scientific division of the earth in hemispheres, bifurcated the child, spatially, temporally and consciousness-wise. The father feels 'happier' when he is with his son while the sheer loneliness gives him the sense of an unusual 'liberty' when all familial ties are physically cut-off for six months. This is as if almost to conclude that either 'there is no happiness in liberty' or 'we cannot find any liberty when we are happy'. Both these paradoxical aphorisms are logical impossibilities but both reflect queer and cruel realities of the modern existence, which has been turned on its head. To revive the memories of pre-marriage individualism he takes resort to the restoration of the then 'glamour' of pizzas; but broken relationships are like frozen foods, which can only be consumed if supplied with heat, but warmth is not as easily available as fires at times of winter. So, both relationships and foods remain frozen forever and Jayojit keeps on putting on weight upon them. His father asked over the telephone, "Joy, are you sure I shouldn't call her parents? Mr Chakraborty could talk some sense in her..." But imparting sense is a senseless job in a world where the structure of 'faith' upon the reliability of 'truth' has collapsed: "Baba, there's nothing to salvage, he'd said, patiently waiting for the line to clear. 'It's finished.' *He had to say this to remind himself it was so.*" (Chaudhuri, 2000: 52, italics mine) He rather utilizes the individual space and unfettered time, which he has acquired as gifts in his divorce:

Ever since he had become single again he had begun to eat what he could in America, indiscriminately plundering the shelves in the supermarket for frozen food and pizzas. He first read about TV dinners in *Mad* magazine when he was growing up: what glamour pizzas had, then! These days, in America, he looked at food, as he did many other things, emotionlessly, as something that could be put to use and cooked quickly. (Chaudhuri, 2000: 24)

To such an enervated citizen, the city seems to be venomous: he is condemned forever to live in the capital when he madly wants to escape its boundaries:

This city irritated him; it was like an obstacle; yet he'd decided that it would give him the space for recoupment that he thought was necessary now. Nothing has changed from a

year ago;...He felt not so much a sense of déjà vu as one as one of ironic, qualified continuity. (Chaudhuri, 2000: 51)

This is a queer situation full of contradictions: on the one hand the city 'irritated' him like an 'obstacle' on the other, it is a source of his recuperation from deep emotional angst; he, like the detached *flâneur*, keeps on roaming around the streets of Calcutta in search of newness, which shatters the monotonous narratives of 'ironic' but 'qualified continuity' yet he cannot forget that this activity of 'gazing around' is absolutely meaningless and purposeless and thus repetitively compulsive.

He felt somewhat conspicuous as he turned back; he didn't know why.... Everyone else, whatever they look like, had somewhere to go, or seemed to; and if they were doing nothing or postponing doing something, as some of these people squatting by the pavement, who seemed to be in part-time employment, were doing, *it was for a reason*. (Chaudhuri, 2000: 52-53, italics mine)

The more he 'conspicuously' sees 'reason' in 'everyone else's' activity, the more he gets torn out from the fabric of the urban social life. The more his personae is condensed (and condemned) with sheer individuality, the more his seclusion demands for newness and he imagines the same repetitive journeys to and fro Bullygunge as "still new to him... 'everything' – seemed louder and more real to him than normal." (Chaudhuri, 2000: 53)

As he keeps on roaming for new sensations he finds the changing cityscapes over the years: through the turbulent time of independence to the post-independent era of socialist Nehruvism to the neo-liberal economic reforms, in which temporality the novel is placed. The present cityscape seems to be a queer intermingling of the proud contemporaneity of the large houses with their tall imposing gates "tremendously expensive to maintain" and are yet maintained on the logic that "Money creates money" (Chaudhuri, 2000: 54) with their predecessors in the incarnation of "bungalows of the rich Marwari entrepreneurs" which seem to hail from the 'old-world', "the fifties and the sixties, where everything seemed to be more sacrosanct than any other point in India's history, except perhaps its Golden Age" (Chaudhuri, 2000: 148) and again with the relics of a past in an avatar of an abandoned house, which at a point of time in history must have been "equally impressive if not more" bearing the name of an East Bengali landowner, signifying the loss of inheritance in the hand of proud historical winners and a subsequent relegation into a dream-world: "...East Bengal had long ago been transformed into fantasy; the driveway was covered with leaves that no one had bothered to clear away; space and an impartially surviving light co-existed in equilibrium before the awning. No one had even bothered to sell the house." (Chaudhuri, 2000: 55)

Steve Pile has observed the waves of building up and breaking down of the mansions according to the changing economic trends of the world as metaphor of delusive phantasmagoric modernity. He writes, "The modern world becomes a never-ending cycle of dream-like figures – a phantasmagoria – none of which ever fulfils its promise. Fashions come and go: ever more rapidly, in ever more absurd forms. Buildings are put up and torn down, its façades become make-up in a clown's parade of architectural forms." (Pile, 2005: 55)

The city is like a canvas of a surrealist artist, whose forms are indiscriminately scattered around it, to resist and counter the 'discreteness of the progressive moderns' claims toward a dazzling future. The narrator-*flâneur* paints that canvas in the spirit of an amused tourist, to whom the spectacles are especially and unconsciously enchanting for the 'glare' emanating from the sense of 'importance' and 'tradition' superimposed on and constructed around them by the

mechanism of the tourism industry and not for any personal choice. So, for him detachment is more relaxing than any subjective intellectual exercise; bits and pieces are more accepted as they easily come to him than the lost totalitarian metanarrative of big traditionalism and of sacrosanct historical religiosity that he has to 'explore' in whatever he tours. The narrator through Jayojit is thus casually having a look at the Hindu ceremony of marriage:

[h]e was one of those who had no time for tradition, but liked, even in a sentimental way, colour and noise; so he'd reacted to the smoke and fuss of ritual with the irritation of a visitor in a traffic-jam, but had said, with genuine delight, 'Absolutely wonderful: Bismillah Khan!' when he'd heard the sound of the shehnai. (Chaudhuri, 2000: 157)

He is like a sensual miniaturist, to whom (unknowingly) the logic is irrational sensationalism and thus who is strangely endowed with the capacity to feel the dialectics of his modern existence. This eerie sensationalism inherent in a modern narrator-*flâneur's* self gives him the strength to feel as opposed to a rational thinker; he thinks but through feeling. This is how he is able to sketch the strange temporality of a passing and contingent modern time filled with dreams for a Utopian past. The encounter of Jayojit with the banking lady makes me recall the classicality of the phenomenal epiphanic illumination of a female passer-by in Baudelaire's poem "A une passante" ("To a Passer-by") from *Les Fleurs du mal (The Flowers of Evil)*, one of the greatest depictions of a *flâneur* caught in an inevitable dialectics of modernity as he at the flash of a moment encounters in the "deafening traffic of the town":

Tall, slender, in deep mourning, with majesty,
A woman passed, raising, with dignity
In her poised hand, the flounces of her gown;

.....

A flash ... then night! – O lovely fugitive,
I am suddenly reborn from your swift glance;
Shall I never see you till eternity?

Somewhere, far off! too late! *never*, perchance!
Neither knows where the other goes or lives;
We might have loved, and you knew this might be!

(Qtd. in Benjamin, 1985: 46)

Let me now consider the episode of the "girl in a cotton sari" as Jayojit encounters her in a private bank equipped with the facilities of "foreign exchange". At first, the episode introduces the appearance and description of the girl, who had "an outline of kohl around her eyes". This introductory fragment then glides into the 'gazing' part – "She was not aware that he was looking at her again; until he let his attention drift and shifted his gaze towards the other people in the bank." (Chaudhuri, 2000: 118) The moment at which "At last! She was looking straight at him" is enmeshed with the culminating moment when "He had begun to daydream...He shifted out of the sofa; he felt conscious of his largeness, but he used his imposingness unobtrusively on these occasions." (Chaudhuri, 2000: 118) This fantasy-ridden space is crafted with all modern comforts, "There was an air-conditioner behind her", which makes the ambience much nicer than home for a divorced person living separated from his wife. There is very meager amount of words exchanged like soft unknown murmuring of words like 'Savings' and 'Fixed', with which "He was probably not as conversant with ... as he should be... He noticed that there was no vermilion in the middle parting. The pleasure this artificial breeze gave him never lessened..." (Chaudhuri,

2000: 119) This is followed by a guess about the marital status of the girl, whose not applying vermilion does not necessarily mean that she is unmarried, at least in these days. A fragmented picture of her sheer professional expertise coupled with work pressure of handling “ten different things” (Chaudhuri, 2000: 120) is then presented side by side different ‘speculations’ on both side of the desk, felt by murmurings and queer glances of surprise, such one on Jayojit’s part as “She needed the money to buy her saris and sticks-on-bindis. Maybe she had a boyfriend.” She feels a strong male gaze on her as “She adjusted her sari, as if she knew she was being watched.” (Chaudhuri, 2000: 121) The episode is concluded as Jayojit resolves to put all his money in that bank. The narrative is presented in such a manner with such an adjustment and deployment of words so as to offer a feel of modern media-induced eroticism. This flash of a moment – a sudden meeting, an exchange of glances, very few words and more murmurs, a sudden arousal of strong psycho-sexual desire, and an abrupt and ‘otherwise’ totally arbitrary conclusion – is symptomatic of modern condition. It is this ‘shock of the moments’ that keeps a human being alive amidst the deadly monotony, repetition, separation, fragmentation and compulsion of the ‘iron cage of modernity’. What Benjamin comments upon the condition of the male gazer in ‘A une passante’ is equally applicable to Jayojit in *A New World*:

What makes his body twitch spasmodically is not the excitement of a man in whom an image has taken possession of every fibre of his being; it partakes more of the shock with which an imperious desire suddenly overcomes a lonely man... The inner form of these verses is revealed in the fact that in them love itself is recognized as being stigmatized by the big city. (Benjamin, 1985: 46)

Conclusion

These bits and pieces of narrativity, as qualifiers of modern urban images, present by their dialectical nature a strange simultaneity of historically distant locales. On the one hand they flash the fleeting and contingent nature of the ‘now’ and on the other they retain in themselves the un-wipeable traces of history, like those in a palimpsest. At this point it is worthwhile to remember Baudelaire, who not only for the first time had used the word ‘modernity’ but in a dehistoricized context in the mid nineteenth century itself. In his essay “The Painter of Modern Life”, he describes modernity as a very temporal and floating phenomenon. He writes, “Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable...You have no right to despise this transitory to dispense with it”. (Baudelaire, 2010: 11) Clearly, Baudelaire here tries to grasp a sense of modernity at its very ‘presentness’, in opposition to the historicist trend of situating it in the schema of the old and the antiquity. His reading of the transient ‘now’ of modernity is markedly both in dialectical contestation and comparison with the ‘eternity’. The episodic narratives of Chaudhuri are laden with the Baudelairean tension and contradiction within the texture of the presentness of the urban existence and the continuous semiotic interplay both within and without the signifiers of urbanity that does not allow the readers reach a conclusion informed with stability and definiteness. This semiotic insecurity has been explored through the figure of *flâneur*, the narrator of the novel *A New World*, in its bits and pieces that deny Chaudhuri’s fiction the conventional status of the novel. The little and disjointed events that it describes are the modern counterparts of the mythical Phoenix; they are an ever ‘passing present’ with the reverie of a ‘Utopian’ past that never dies.

Notes

- i. Conventionally, the image of *flâneur* is attached to that of male gazer with his all heroics in resisting the aggression of the spectacles, while females remain the happily enmeshed shopper. For more discussion on this aspect, see P. P. Ferguson: "The *Flâneur*: The City and Its Discontents", 84. For exploration of a critique of *flâneur* as predominantly male and the possibility of a *flâneuse* or a female *flâneur*, see Deborah L. Parsons: *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, 2-8. For exploration of a lesbian *flâneur*, see Sally R. Munt: *Heroic Desire*, 30-53.
- ii. "Someone who sees without hearing is much more uneasy than someone who hears without seeing. In this there is something characteristic of the sociology of the big city. Interpersonal relationships in big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye over the activity of the ear. The main reason for this is the public means of transportation. Before the development of buses, railroads, and trams in the nineteenth century, people had never been in a position of having to look at one another for long minutes or even hours without speaking to one another." See Walter Benjamin: "The *Flâneur*", 37-38.

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