

That ‘Indian’ Girl Strolling on the Streets of Europe: Conjecturing and Decoding the *Flaneuse* in Vikas Bahl’s *Queen*

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Abstract: Globalization has only lately expanded itself by making the supposed “third world countries” a part of it, something which is basically an aftermath of colonialism. The post-postmodern world in which we live, has time and again proven that our ethnic and cultural identities are always in a state of flux. With the rapid global exchange, migration and tourism giving rise to hybrid and diasporic cultural identities, it wouldn’t be eccentric to see a South Asian woman on the streets of a European city, closely gazing and being gazed at by the men and women who don’t look/speak/dress like her. And if we are to look at this from a third-world feminist perspective, deciphering of identities becomes even more convoluted. This paper would attempt to conjecture and decode the character of Rani (played by Kangana Ranaut) as a *flaneuse*, the female street stroller who transcends from the inner space of home/*ghar* to the outer space of the world/*bahir* (literally because she goes to a foreign/Western land), in Vikas Bahl’s film, *Queen* (2014). The paper would argue how the film uses the metaphor of *flanerie* as a foundation of self-discovery for this naive middle class Indian girl, who before this of course, had never stepped out of home without her younger brother, and during the course of the film, very ironically to her Indian persona, transforms into a *flaneuse*.

Keywords: *Flaneuse*, *Flaneur*, Indian feminism, Third-world feminism, Tourism, Hybridity, Diaspora, Postcoloniality, Postmodernism, Globalization

Strolling as a concept has to be age-old, because walking is the first thing that a human or any creature for that matter learns. With the coming of the urban modernity of the nineteenth century, the practice of sauntering had got a sassy new name, *flanerie/flaneur* that was introduced by Charles Baudelaire, and had originated in France. For Baudelaire, certainly, *flanerie*, the act of strolling on the streets, was a way of encountering the vitality of the city; it was a way of reading and understanding the urban space. The *flaneur*’s activity was/is mainly wandering, watching around, witnessing and observing modernity from a critical point of view. The metropolis then became a space where intellectuals, poets, and artists (all of them male) would meet with their prototype, in an attempt to interact and exchange impetus. It was

also occupied by nomads, madmen and prostitutes, but no “chaste” woman made an appearance in public on the streets of a European city. This concept hence had a gendered social type. It was assumed that only men enjoyed the freedom to roam around the streets of a European city. However, recent scholarship has introduced the concept of the “invisible *flanuese*” (Janet Wolff), the female onlooker, who was very much there but either got unnoticed, erased or was self-consciously hidden from the public gaze.

Entering *bahir*, or the public space, symbolically gives meaning to the lives of those walking the streets, exchanging glances as well as feeling powerful for being able to transcend the boundaries of *ghar* or the inner space, if we look at the concept of *flaneur* from an Indian perspective, as pointed out by Partha Chatterjee in the essay, “The Nation and its Women.” He asserts:

The world (*bahir*) is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home (*ghar*) in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world and woman is its representation. (120)

Many if not all women in India, have always been asked to look, dress and behave in a certain way, without really being asked for their opinion in the matters that fundamentally concern “them” in the first place. Many of them are forbidden to step outside their homes all by themselves, without being guarded by a husband/father/brother figure that would “protect” them from the impure and unchaste energies of the public space. This public space is still considered dangerous for women in many Indian communities and they would want their women to stay in the confined spaces of home; however the practice is changing, even when it's not a massive change. The world was considered a dangerous place for women back in the day in the West as well and I would like to quote Ranjani Mazumdar in the support of this. She declares:

Elizabeth Wilson has shown how in much of European urban writing, women’s presence in the city was seen as a source of both pleasure and danger. This dual-edged relationship produced an anxiety wherein the lure of the city was not only seen as dangerous for women, but women’s very presence seemed to make the city a dangerous place. The public-private divide intensified during the industrial period, leading to tremendous anxiety about women’s presence in the streets. (80)

The female stroller was associated with danger and pleasure in the West in the past, and her taking to the streets is still considered taboo in the third world countries, which also charts out the huge difference between the East and the West, something on which I would shed more light in a while. Talking about the presence of a female stroller in recent Indian cinema, I would say that she has always had a mysterious (not dangerous) back story that would make her the subject of the Indian diaspora, as someone who is always on the move, transcending and transgressing boundaries of conformities, nations, race and gender. Vidya Balan in Sujoy Ghosh's *Kahaani* (2012) for instance plays a pregnant woman who is Indian, London-returned and in search of her missing husband. Anurag Kashyap's *That Girl in Yellow Boots* (2010) similarly narrates the life of Ruth (Kalki Koechlin), a British Indian, who roams on the streets of Mumbai in search of her Indian father she has only heard of. There are also other films that are not as dark as the aforementioned films, like Homi Adjanian's *Cocktail* (2012) and Shashanka Ghosh's *Veere Di Wedding* (2018), both of which deal with female bonding and women strolling the urban streets of the world together. There are also films like Bahl's *Queen* and Gauri Shinde's *English Vinglish* (2012), which stand out and become mouthpieces of female liberation.

Cultural and ethnic ambiguity has started to intertwine with the representations of Indian women on celluloid, and Bahl's *Queen* (2014) is just another example, and the best of the abovementioned pack. It is rather fascinating that in *Queen*, an Indian girl is presented as wandering and reconnoitering the streets of Paris, from where the very concept of *flaneur* has originated. This speaks volumes about the fluidity of culture, culminating towards the idea that people from different parts of the world would always be on the move exploring spaces that are new to them, no matter what culture/country they originally belong to. It showcases that ethnicities are ambiguous and flexible as people do not stay in one place forever. They move and travel as much as they can in their lifetimes, and their interaction with different people across the world is nothing but a global culture exchange, which Rani (Kangana Ranaut) also endorses in the film, because she carries her national identity with pride wherever she goes and whenever she meets new people.

Queen amalgamates concepts as diverse as postmodernism, feminism, postcolonialism and hybridity so subtly and seamlessly, that spectators never realize they are watching a film that has a deeper meaning associated with what it furnishes with on the surface. The film ends up breaking many stereotypes, and it does so during the course of the film so that the spectator can let go of them along with its protagonist, Rani, a homely Punjabi girl from Rajouri

Garden (an urbanized, but middle class locality of Delhi, India that mostly has a Punjabi population), who slowly and steadily adjusts herself to the streets of Paris and Amsterdam. The story begins when just two days before her wedding, Rani is dumped by Vijay (Rajkummar Rao), her London returned/based fiancé, who after a long courtship with her, stops finding her suitable for himself. Heartbroken, Rani decides to go on her honeymoon alone, to explore the cities of Paris and Amsterdam, and in the process, ends up exploring herself. Towards the end of the film, Vijay proposes to her again, something he is propelled to do after gazing at the never-seen-before avatar of hers, when she accidentally shares her changing-room selfie with him. The photograph brings Vijay to the streets of Amsterdam from London and he chases Rani again, just the way he used to chase her back on the streets of Delhi. He starts to believe that she has changed and is no more a *behanji* (slang used for simple and plain-looking women who are looked down upon by men in Northern India), which is why she becomes suitable for him, again.

The moment Rani steps out of her home, and literally the country, we assume that she would become the exotic *flaneuse*, the never-seen-before prototype strolling on the European streets ready for the gaze of the occident, the men and women. Bahl however subverts this idea by making her very much a part of the European culture, without really othering her just because she is an Indian woman. It would have been exciting if Bahl had chosen a dusky actor in place of the *gori-chitti* (“fair-skinned” in Punjabi) Ranaut. He instead chooses a dusky actress, Lisa Haydon to play another significant role in the film, who is everything that Rani is not. Her character’s name is Vijaylakshmi, shortened as Vijay, the same name as Rani’s ex-fiancé. She is half Indian, half French-Spanish, who Rani first meets when she is having sex with a stranger. Vijaylakshmi introduces Rani to the streets of Paris, before her stint of walking alone on the streets goes so erratic that she decides to go back to India at one point.

Rani wears her innate naivety like armor against the pitfalls that she faces on her incredible voyage of discovery through Paris, the city of love, and Amsterdam, a below-the-sea-level megalopolis where she finds herself and a lot more than she could have haggled for, including her first kiss with a handsome Italian restaurateur. As Rani who always belonged to *ghar*, comes in contact with the enormous, shady world of *bahir*, she makes mistakes as frequently as she makes friends. In exchange, she gets a whole new world for herself. In an isolated Paris street, she fends off a thug and is thrilled to narrate the incident to random strangers outside a Parisian club. Relentlessly dependent on a much younger brother, Rani for the first time learns to live life on her own, and on the streets, bars, and hotels of Paris and

Amsterdam, she finally discovers her potential to be on her own. Before parting ways with Vijaylakshmi, in all her innocence, she advises her not to sleep with all and sundry. She interestingly gets to know widely “different” people, from different cultures, with different interests; people she had never imagined existed. While in Amsterdam, she meets all manner of new people and automatically connects with them. These include a Pakistani pole-dancer (Rukhsar/Roxette), a graffiti artist, a Black French musician, and a tsunami victim (the last three being men and her roommates in Amsterdam).

Queen makes a feminist statement, but it does not put up the “ism” at its core for display like a conspicuous banner. It slams female stereotypes and challenges the notions society holds about women. The entire film is from Rani’s perspective, rejecting the male gaze. At no point in the film are the female characters judged or objectified; the innumerable roles are in fact celebrated. Somewhere between love, Rani also discovers the distinct and ambiguous meaning of identity while she is on the move. The film then becomes progressive in many ways, including the fact that it celebrates singlehood over marriage, and the happy ending is arrived when Rani learns to count the blessings of being single, and rejects marriage in favour of singlehood. *Queen* also mocks the West Delhi bourgeoisie and their way of life: the kitty parties and the salons, the afternoon naps and shopping, the meaningless lives that many women embrace. The film celebrates freedom of being a part of the larger world, of accepting everyone, away from the restrictions of a secure home and a normative life. Even the soundtrack of the film supports the theme of female liberation. The song “Jugni” for instance celebrates Rani’s liberation, as she symbolically breaks the fetters of conformity, patriarchy and established constructions. The song stays true to the Punjabi folk legend of *jugni* (Punjabi term for “a female firefly”) and makes Rani, the perfect fit for it, as the *jugni* is supposed to wander, witness, observe, and comment, things that Rani learns to perform while she is transforming herself into a *flaneuse*. As Kaustav Bakshi points out, it’s not without reason, therefore, that on the film’s poster the word “Queen” appears in rainbow, possibly colouring Rani’s “queerness”—queerness in the sense that she would finally be able to break free of the established constructions within which life is usually lived, by maneuvering, walking, crossing and transgressing the boundaries of conformities both literally and symbolically, making her a perfect *flaneuse* in the process. Rani could have gone into depression, could have become a psycho, or could have become a man-hater; in bygone days any of these would have been her fate, had the groom walked out of the marriage only two days before the planned date (Bakshi). Typically traditional, timid, passive, and protective of her chastity,

Rani surprises everyone by announcing that she would in any case, go for her honeymoon in Paris, a city she had always wanted to visit. As Rani's worldview expands, she slowly understands that what she had been lamenting all this while, could have cut her wings off forever, which is possibly why she thanks Vijay for calling off their wedding. She would have never been able to discover the potential of finding herself if Vijay had married her. The appallingly shy Rani, who does not let go of her old cardigan even in bridal finery, steps out in a graceful summer dress, and rejects a seemingly contrite fiancé in favour of a rock show. Rani arrives, finally. Once she lets go of the old cardigan, the winter of her life comes to a "symbolic end" (Bakshi).

In the past, many women were the objects of the *flaneur's* gaze while today, many of them are the subjects, the actresses of *flanerie*, due to their economic independence, the transformation of the cultural model and of lifestyles. New York is one of the more illustrative cities for investigating *flaneuse*, the best example of which could be the comedy series *Sex and the City* (created by Darren Star), where the female protagonists challenged classical stereotype of the male *flaneur* by taking on to the streets, and celebrating singlehood in many ways. Commenting on the gaze with which a woman on screen is looked at, Laura Mulvey says:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, and their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (62)

For Mulvey, cinema duplicates the role of the spectator, constructing idealized onscreen images for him/her to identify with and aspire to. She argues that a cinematic text is systematically patriarchal, where men are active, independent and in control of their fate, while the role of women is merely to satisfy the male gaze of the cine goer, and eventually to be possessed by him and the male co-actor she is paired with on screen. This is something that is debunked in *Queen*, where it is the female protagonist who is looking at things, and the spectator who may be a man or a woman, has to witness the adventures through her eyes, as well as the eye of the camera, that could be synonymous with the spectator himself/herself. *Queen* then furnishes its spectators with the third eye, who become *flaneurs* themselves

whenever they look at the screen. Through this third eye, the spectators are able to witness the borderline between the West and the East, the orient and the occident, and the self and the other. Through looking at this intersection of the contrasting religions, ethnicities, and languages, the spectator is able to see that on the edges of this binary, rests a culture that has been hybridized. It sketches a portrait of absolute strength through Rani, Vijaylakshmi and Rukhsar, who assimilate into the world around them without losing or debasing the blood from which they were raised. The women carry their histories and language with them, in fragments, like afterthoughts at the end of sentences.

The female body is intentionally put on display throughout the film, depicting the realities of urban life, while the male body is being looked at in an attempt to invert the gaze. The women become objects of male gaze (primarily), something I would like to call the “public” gaze in case of this film at least, because Rani is also looked at by other Indian women, and she looks at other men and women as well. For instance, when Rani goes to meet her aunt who stays in Paris, she is looked at by her with pity, even if it is phony and she doesn’t really mean anything she says. Her purpose is rather to prove to Rani and Vijaylakshmi, how fluently she can speak the *firang* (a word used for white people and culture, mainly in North India) French; however, in an amusing scene, we witness how she struggles and can barely speak it. Even in the final scene, Vijay’s mother glances at Rani’s body, complimenting her on her “modern”/“straight-haired” look.

Bahl also plays with the stereotypes in the film using tools of gaze, be it virtual in the case of spectators looking at the screen while Rani Skypes with her family back in India, or the act of gazing at the “other” when Rani screams with fear after looking at her Black French roommate for the first time. Bahl reveals her inherent racism with him while reinforcing other stereotypes we’ve inherited including Vijaylakshmi’s dangerously alluring dusky sexuality versus Rani’s fair-skinned chastity. The only difference is that he confronts our perceptions with humour. Rani’s middle-aged father tucks in his potbelly while the overweight younger brother gazes at Vijaylakshmi’s breasts as she bends into the frame while Rani Skypes with the family. Both the “men” lose interest when she exits the screen. The scene visibly and consciously ruptures our hypocrisy with a smart candour. These touches, plus the strict dodging of any romantic liaison, even with the Italian restaurateur who persists in calling Rani “pretty lady,” make *Queen* the trendsetter of unconventional feminism.

Throughout the film, Bahl's aim is to expose the patriarchal Indian society that casts women according to its standards, and they happily accept roles assigned to them without even realizing that they are being subjected to various kinds of inequalities just because they are women. When Bahl wrote the script of the film, he based Rani's character on the people he had observed while growing up in Delhi. Commenting on the film, Bahl during one of the interviews said, "I know, life for girls is planned out for them by their families. They lose their own perspective on life and they are okay with that." In a setting where as a girl crosses the age of twenty, her family gets busy to get her "settled," she never plans anything by herself, unless as in this case of Rani, marriage plans go cockeyed. Thus the script was developed so that in the first half, Rani gets over Vijay while she is meeting new people on the foreign streets, and in the second, she gets over herself. There are a couple of other instances in the film that very subtly depict how women like Rani become victims of patriarchy in India. The film has an interior monologue shown through flashback scenes, something that is presented as a stark contrast to the life that Rani is living on the streets of Europe as a *flâneuse*. One such instance shown in the flashback is when she is scolded by Vijay for dancing at a wedding, even when she declares that she loves to dance. The scene is crosscut to the present, where Rani is seen drinking and dancing her heart out in a Parisian club with her hair open, without really caring about the "society." The West then becomes a sort of savior of the East that apparently suppresses and curtails the freedom of its women. While going back to her hotel room from the club in the cab, Rani says that girls are not allowed to do anything in India, not even burp in public, to which Vijaylakshmi responds that they can do anything they want in Paris, something that again charts out the massive difference between the East and the West. The fact that Rani endorses that she is Indian wherever she goes and communicates in Hindi even when others cannot, speaks volumes about how the film celebrates nationalism, even when we are simultaneously witnessing the innumerable trials and tribulations faced by her daily in her very own country.

To sum up, Rani, cannot as Chandra Talpade Mohanty would say, "represent" all the women of India because of its complex ethnic and cultural diversity, however, can still manage to give voice to many of them, who are always guarded by a male figure (a relatively younger brother in this case) whenever they step out of *ghar*, to the *bahir*. The roving, hippie culture that Rani witnesses and embraces in the cities of Paris and Amsterdam is what makes her the perfect example of an Indian *flâneuse* on the European streets. After all, traveling and meeting new people is what makes our life what it is. The journey motif then becomes

symbolic of the transformation of our protagonist, charting out that it is the edges of the *ghar* and *bahir* where her life rests primarily and not inside or outside of it. In the beginning while she is on the streets of Paris all by herself, she is exploring the urban space without any purpose. She becomes the stranger who moves through the public space with her loneliness. While a *flaneur* is supposed to be a native that becomes a foreigner, *Queen*, however inverts this relationship as Rani becomes a tourist who settles with her newly acquired alienated identity as an observer. Her purposeless strolling on the streets of Paris is a counter-narrative to the Indian heroine who before this was seen on the marvelous European locales, only singing and dancing in the presence of a man. As Rani moves to Amsterdam, and shares her room with three men, her wandering finds a meaning, as it becomes a well-defined intercession and concoction of global identities on a foreign land. Rani clings to the ideal figure of a *flaneur/flaneuse* who touches the urban spaces and leaves, without making an effort to establish permanent relationships, as her larger aim is to discover herself by discovering the unknown people and the unknown streets. She is able to be singled out from the crowd and create an independent identity of her own, by ironically becoming a part of the crowd, proving the dual role of both “self” and “other” on her own. It is Rani, the *flaneuse* who guides and leads her three male roommates to the sex shop where Rukhsar works as Roxette. It is her who drives them back home when they are drunk, while she was ridiculed by her ex-fiance for her poor driving skills back in India. Just like Bahl’s *Queen*, Shinde’s *English Vinglish* is another cinematic text that showcases a female protagonist wandering on the streets of the United States, in order to learn the colonial language. In both these films, the female protagonist is positioned on the edge of new opportunities. They are the onlookers and witnesses of urban modernity, both of them not having a major purpose to roam on the streets, but a very strong intent to do so. And this intent is nothing but a figurative extension of the presence of Indian women on the streets of the world, to meet their other female halves lost in the process of conforming to the ideal roles.

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