

Walking Daydreams

by

Maliha Khan

Sometimes, while daydreaming about a better life, I imagine myself walking in New York City. It's cold; I have a long woollen coat on, over layers of a tight body-hugging thermal and turtleneck, a chic beanie to cover my ears from the wind and a pair of Chelsea boots—stylish but comfortable enough to walk in. In my fantasy, I add some gloves too, probably for added measure because I come from a city that only has borrowed winters. Even after all that layering, I am not as warm as I'd like to be. But I am happy to have the cold breeze slash across my flushed face, my long dark curls tangled but effortlessly swept away as I brave the weather I am not used to—block after block, one boulevard to another. In some of these montages, I am even running sometimes like Greta Gerwig does in her film, *Frances Ha*, pirouetting through zebra-crossings, as my coat becomes a cape in the wind, making me feel like a superheroine in my own film.

I could never be Frances Ha in my city. Living in Karachi has been the closest I have come to experiencing New York. I see it in my fantasies even though I have never been there because I know the pulsating energy of fast-paced city life—always on the go. Also, probably because the American movies and television I have grown up watching show strong female characters I have always aspired to become like, walking through the busy streets of NYC.

I started walking in my city pretty early. Being the first-born, my father wanted to raise me as a strong, independent woman capable of doing anything. I was sent to buy everything in the neighbourhood from as early as the age of four. Milk, bread, vegetables, medicines—I was the errand boy my father thought even a

girl could be. The radius of traversing my city on foot only increased as I grew older. By the time I returned to it after leaving for several years, I had come to realize how difficult it was for me to walk in Karachi again.

During my A Levels, I started taking the public bus. I went to a Catholic missionary school set up by the British in a part of town seeped with history. There was no direct bus to the school — I had to walk a few kilometres from home to catch one and another few to get there after getting off. My modest school uniform made it easier — a grey kameez over a white shalwar with a white dupatta covering my underdeveloped bosom. In the morning, the shops were barely open, their dusty grey steel shutters lining the boulevard I would walk to get to the makeshift bus stop. One had to practically beckon the bus driver to stop, sometimes amidst their race with another, with a raised hand hoping to catch their eye, when it was neither too far, nor close enough to miss the driver's eyeline.

The walk to the school after quickly getting off would become slightly trickier. Even with the uniform, which I had hoped would camouflage me in the city's greyness, my tiny female form would stand out as men began to take over the empty morning streets. Being chronically late helped as time — more than anything it seemed then — quickened my pace while I kept my head down, avoiding any gaze until I got to my school gates. Even with those hurried steps, however, it was difficult not to take in the scene — a row of black and yellow vehicles resembling rickshaws but not quite the same as the ones in the rest of the

city. They would be lined up empty in perfect symmetry, fortunate enough to be still snoozing, yet to be woken up by their owners to drive the people of the surrounding areas around. Sometimes, a few horse-drawn carriages would be parked along the way as well, transporting me to an era Karachi has seen which I could only walk in my morning reverie.

As I gained more confidence to travel in dilapidated public buses — mostly out of necessity — not owning a car or a driver to take me around like many of my peers, walking in the city became imperative, rather than a choice. With the uniform being no longer an option, an outfit had to be carefully curated to meet the needs of stepping out onto the streets and the rebellious desires of a coming-of-age woman with fashionable tastes that often didn't conform to the society I was living in. Was my shirt long enough to cover my buttocks and hide their shape from the fitted jeans I had fought so hard at home to wear? Was the outfit too Western to attract attention in an Islamic Republic? The sun made my eyes water, but sunglasses had to be left behind at home. On the streets where nobody wore them, they made me stand out too much.

Once, a friend of mine said to me, “You walk as if you're on a mission!” Another told me, “You walk like a man!” While the former was meant as a compliment and the latter, not quite sure what, both the observations, incidentally made by men, are absolutely true. Not only did I need to embody a sense of purpose while stepping out on the streets, but I also had to adopt an attitude of toughness. ‘You can't mess with me!’ — that's what my gait would say to the

onlookers. In Karachi, when men passing by me would cry out, “*Mashallah!*” in absolute awe of my beauty, I would turn around and call out, “*Subhanallah!*” What better time to praise the lord! On days when my patience was shot, I had even dared to show them the middle finger. Other times, a piercing stare filled with simmering anger had to be employed for those who seemed to be following me to declare that I wasn’t afraid. While it worked most of the time, there were a few occasions when I had to pick up rocks from the side of the road to warn my stalkers that I was armed.

My favourite writer, Vivian Gornick, spends a lot of time walking in New York City in her memoir, *Fierce Attachments*. Sometimes up Fifth Avenue, sometimes west on Twenty-third Street and so on with her mother, who she calls an expert walker elbowing her way free of the crowd, sometimes stopping to chat with an Eastern religionist distributing copies of his leader’s writings or with a familiar face from another life she recognises in a crowd. I like to consider myself an expert walker too, although I don’t need to shove my way through a crowd. I am tiny and flexible enough like a cat that can slip through tiny spaces between bodies, or like a river that meanders even through the tiniest cracks in the rocks.

Taran Khan, in her book *Shadow City*, explores Kabul on foot and writes about her complicated relationship with walking, having grown up in Aligarh, a city in northern India. While I have never been to Aligarh myself, I imagine it to be not too different from any other South Asian city where walking on the streets for

women means being subjected to intense male scrutiny. Her experience certainly mirrors mine growing up in Karachi where I, too, had to have “a reason to place my body on the street” and had to learn “to display a posture of ‘work’ while walking and to erase any signs that may hint at my being out for pleasure, for no other reason at all other than to walk,” as she writes.

The first time I walked in the streets, nay took a stroll was at the age of fourteen when I went to live in the US for a year as an exchange student. In the beginning, I remember it to be quite nerve-wracking with my scrawny brown foreign body on display around white people. I lugged my rigid, anxious body straight to school and back home, clinging to my backpack like my life depended on it. Gradually, however, I realized nobody cared who I was, where I was going, or even what I was wearing. With a realization like that, such an ease came over my flesh and bones that the family hosting me started wondering why it was taking me an hour to return home from school when it only took twenty minutes earlier. I couldn't explain that I was simply enjoying my strolls, a freedom and luxury I didn't have in my own country!

When I moved to Delhi in 2016 and lived there for almost six years, I was reminded on a regular basis that it was the ‘Rape Capital’ of the world, apparently. Yet, I felt safer than ever before walking in that beautiful city, even getting lost in it. When asked by curious people back home in Pakistan how India was different from our side of the border, I observed that it practically looked and felt the same

except for the signages in Hindi and more women on the street! For the first time, I had the pleasure of walking around a South Asian city, more or less undisturbed by the male gaze. Perhaps, it was the presence of other women around me that made my female form just another figure walking in the city. I ventured into the tiniest lanes of Old Delhi, marvelling at old worn down doors and architecture, slipped through crowded thoroughfares, and stumbled into centuries-old monuments I encountered along the way. It is where I learned to truly enjoy the act of walking in a city, looking up at trees, and chasing the sweet, familiar smell of *Saptaparni*, famously known as the Devil's Tree, winter after winter. That remains the one thing I miss the most upon leaving my beloved *Dilli* to return to live in Karachi in 2022.

When I came back to my city, I was heartbroken and grieving the loss of a marriage, a home I had made and a city and country that were never mine but had always felt otherwise. I was clinically depressed at the time, so an Indian friend of mine with whom I had gone on a few walks in Delhi messaged saying, "Just get out of the house! Go for a walk!" I was speechless and embarrassed. I did not know how to explain to him that where I now lived — on the city's outskirts — there weren't even proper roads in my new gated colony, let alone a woman walking on the sandy unpaved paths yet to be laid with cement and tar.

Then one day, angry at my complete lack of mobility, I just got up and went out. Impulsively. Without thinking or even knowing where I was going. It had already been dark after sundown and I felt like I had a death wish. My rage fuelled

my fearlessness. The guards at my colony's gate eyed me with part curiosity, part worry as I rushed past them, like a woman on a mission, onto the open, mostly empty street. I saw a young man on a motorcycle coming towards me, and clutched my purse with my phone and wallet in it a little tighter under my shawl while reciting the *Ayat-ul-Kursi* in my head. He rode past me and I relaxed my shoulders. I entered the neighbouring colony and was pleasantly surprised to see freshly made roads and beautiful houses all around me with young trees and flowering plants outside. It was no Nizamuddin East, my old neighbourhood in Delhi I had left behind but for the first time since coming back to Karachi, I felt I could perhaps start over. On the way back, a friendly stray dog walked beside me and escorted me home.

Soon after, a realization crept in: I may not be in New York walking or pirouetting in between intersections like Frances Ha yet, but I am ready to reclaim the streets of my city once again, one daring walk at a time.

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