



WORDS
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Walk Like a Woman

Tokyo can fill up your senses, making you feel as if you continually need to make more room for it. As if your faculties need to quickly prepare for the stimulation train headed their way.

The shops that line the street leading to the Sensō-ji temple in Tokyo's Asakusa district keep you from the main attraction with their temptations: Sweet buns, deep-fried pastries, an assortment of *kokeshi* dolls, miniature bento art models, and *katana* replicas. Delectable-looking, incredibly realistic models of food in restaurant windows periodically fool your brain into states of hunger. The dazzle and beep of electronics is everywhere. You'll find it at the city's loud Pachinko parlours, vending machines generating food tickets, or in the teeming manga, anime, and video games stores in Tokyo's 'Electric Town' of Akihabara. And then, there is the neon blitz of night-time Shibuya. The city's iconic vertical signage surrounds you, as does the energy, colour, and jazzy motion of its digital billboards and 3D animated displays.

As I waited amongst thousands of others for the traffic lights to change at Shibuya Scramble crossing a few weeks ago, my mind raced back for a moment to Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003). It was the film that first made me want to walk, like its female protagonist, through the streets of Tokyo. Like her, I wanted to ride the city's trains, loiter in its video game arcades, and sing in its karaoke bars. I wanted to walk through the famed Shibuya intersection while gaping at the moving images projected onto the buildings all around — a giant outdoor 360-degree movie screen all of its own. Left on her own after her husband heads off on assignments, the film's young, newly-married philosophy graduate Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) turns into that quintessential modern urban subject: *A flâneuse* (a female *flâneur*). She becomes a lonesome figure who wanders in and observes the city.

And yet, my yearning wasn't just for what she saw in that city, but also for how she could be in it, exploring it unbothered, and,

at least for a while, unescorted. Public spaces have never fully welcomed women, especially those seeking leisure. Charlotte's freedom, although tied to the relative safety of the city she travels to and the spaces of that city she traverses, felt irresistible. I first discovered Tokyo with her, so to speak, seeing another place through another's eyes.

Like Charlotte, several women have walked through the cinematic cities they have travelled to. They allow film viewers to discover these cities and their intoxicating urban life vicariously. The figure of the *flâneuse* in each of these films highlights the unique ways in which women discover, occupy, and navigate urban spaces. These activities are replete with both danger and freedom.

There is Rani (Kangana Ranaut) who in *Queen* (2014), directed by Vikas Bahl, travels solo to her honeymoon in Paris and Amsterdam after her fiancé unexpectedly calls off the wedding. We see her before famous tourist spots such as the Sacré-Cœur Basilica and the Eiffel Tower in Paris and in the streets of Volendam, a traditional fishing village in the Netherlands. She also walks into sex shops, strip clubs, bars, window brothels, and casinos for the first time, letting her viewers have these 'foreign' adventures with her — a proxy middle-class Indian experiencing the West and its wild, tantalising offerings for the rest of us. Rani's European escapade is also transformative, allowing for the recognition of a self that had thus far been hidden away. In the course of her travels, she gets drunk, dances with abandon on pavements, shares a hostel room with men, drives a car, burps loudly in public, gets offered a job, and has her first kiss. She discovers courage, confidence, and freedom, a freedom — and lack of fear — that of course has much to do with the fact that she travels in Western rather than Indian cities.

In *Kahaani* (2012), directed by Sujoy Ghosh, like Charlotte and Rani, Vidya (Vidya Balan) travels to a new city, although, admittedly, not to see it but to solve a mystery in it. The three women are veritable outsiders — an attribute that makes them

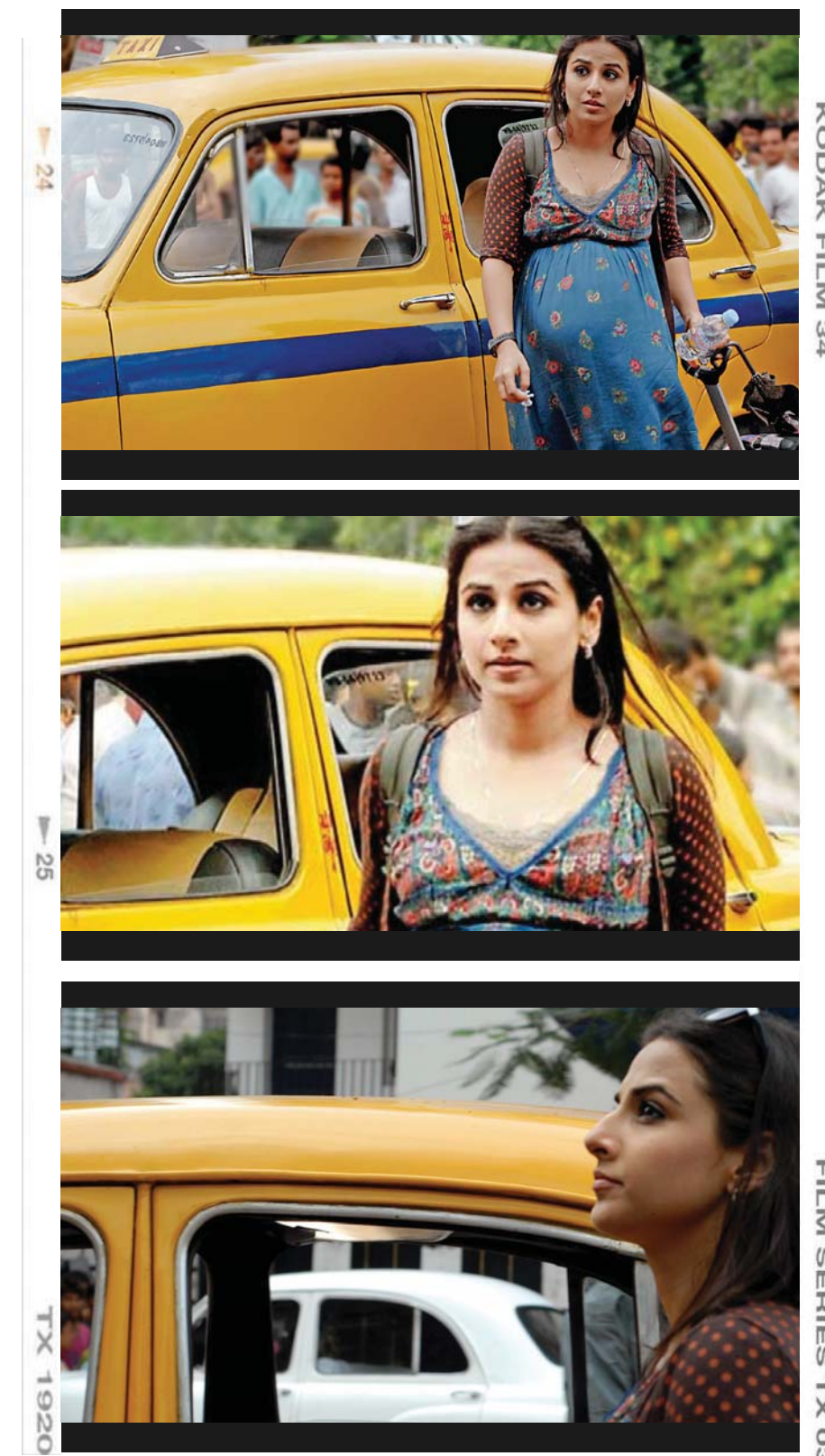
perfect stand-ins for audiences experiencing these cities with them for the first time. The city in question is Kolkata, its heaving, frenzied fabric, and heady urban culture captured in the camera's hungry gaze. As Vidya walks through the city's dingy lanes and busy roads, Kolkata — with its yellow ambassador cabs, historic trams, and restaurants, feverish dressing up for its annual carnival, din, and chatter — materialises around her. Vidya may not see (or hear) it — harried as she is — but we certainly do. *Kahaani* enables a virtual walk through a bustling metropolis, making a kind of *flâneuse/flâneur* of us all.

Society has historically linked *flânerie* to men. Women loitering, that is, occupying public spaces without clearly demonstrating a reason to do so (like shopping or commuting) are immediately seen as streetwalkers, or at the very least, sexually available or easy targets — observed rather than being an observer. In *Kahaani*, strangers constantly stare at and size up Vidya — her pregnancy and western clothing making her presence more prominent — not to mention the very real threat posed to her by the presence of a roving hitman. And yet, she walks. They all do. *We all do*.

Films about women walking in cities like Agnes Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961), Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* (2012), and Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light* (2024) are records of this defiance, the re-claiming of a space, the returning of a gaze. Rani's long, triumphant walk in *Queen* as she leaves her ex behind is an emergence into the world, a willing participation in its wonders and uncertainties, and a refusal to shrink from its threats. She knows not to stop and not to give in to attempts to hold her back. She knows that she must keep walking. The glittering neon-lit streets, the jazzy cafés, the bustling night markets — all await.



Through Charlotte, *Lost in Translation* (2003) discovers Tokyo's permission



Kahaani (2012) — Kolkata materialises as Vidya Bagchi refuses to disappear