

## Post-Aural Story-Telling and the Iranian Flâneurs: A Benjaminian Reading of Sina Dadkhah's *Yousef Abad, Street 33*

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### ABSTRACT

The city has fascinated the street wanderer as the contemplation of modern life. Walter Benjamin's conception of 'flâneur,' originally borrowed from Charles Baudelaire, could be taken as the true legacy of such fascination. There is always a sense of nostalgia being revealed through the flânerie of the city stroller passing through the metropolis, its shopping centers, and boulevards nourishing the mind of the bohemian storyteller with tales of post-aural experience and memory. Adapting Walter Benjamin's concept of 'flânerie' in the streets of Paris to those of Tehran, the present paper attempts to explore Sina Dadkhah's *Yousef Abad, Street 33* in order to demonstrate the post-aural stories of the flâneurs in an Iranian milieu. This article focuses on the modern aspect of the Iranian contemporary society and explores the immediate consequences of modernity on the individual subjectivity of the characters represented in the novel. Considering Dadkhah's novel as a product of the urban literature of a generation dealing with modernity of the arcades and other lures of the megapolis on the one hand and feeling of nostalgia for their past spirit on the other, the paper simultaneously reveals the close affinity between the subjectivity of the characters and Benjaminian tenets of flânerie and modern storytellers. The flâneurs represented in the novel, by rambling through and about the city of Tehran, are turning to be the storytellers who narrate their 'post-aural' experiences. In *Yousef Abad, Street 33* the central characters are, as fully manifested in the paper, deeply engaged in the experiences of a modern sense of living while wandering to console their wistful longings despite the everyday challenges.

**Key words:** Aura, The Post-aura, Flâneur, Nostalgia, Storytelling, Phantasmagoria

### INTRODUCTION

Urban literature has experienced a tremendous and considerable revival in the past two decades. The genre, which used to depict the dark, gloomy, and usually violent side of the city life, changed to be the voice of city lovers who are narrating their stories of love, friendship, and actual living in the air of the urban atmosphere not always dark and quirky. Urban literature found its place not only in its western archetypal metropolis, including New York, London, and Paris, but also lures the easterners to tell their own stories of urbanity. In recent years, there have been novels and short stories written in Kabul, Tokyo, New Delhi, Tehran, and other cities in the east which zealously seek to delve into the deep layers of the city and narrate peculiar stories from the point of view of different characters, personalities, ethnicities, and backgrounds.

Urban literature has found its place in Iran's literature within last fifteen years. Significant amount of literature has been produced in the genre recently elaborating the expe-

rience of city-dwellers intermingling with their nostalgic feelings of the past decades. Sina Dadkhah, as a significant figure in the contemporary Iranian literary discourse, is a novelist who has focused on a particular and unique aspect of urban literature that is street and shopping center wandering. Dadkhah himself calls his art of storytelling as 'Teh-ranning': wandering about the streets of Tehran in his sole integrity to reflect the intuition he gets from this roaming in his novels. *Yousef Abad, Street 33* happens in the most memorable and emblematic locations in Tehran. Dadkhah, himself a middle-class young author, attempts to narrate the reflections of living in modern Tehran by a detailed description of people and places that shape the novel.

What makes *Yousef Abad, Street 33* a significant instance of urban literature is the author's in-depth analysis and observation of daily life of the bourgeois middle-class, particularly its young generation. The novel is made up of four parts each being narrated by a narrator who is one of the four main characters in the novel. These narrators are inseparable parts

of the city and its spirit who are the thorough embodiment of Iran's young generation. *Yusef Abad, Street 33*, endeavors to be nonlinear and avoids a straight forward plot precisely to emphasize the spirit of the main characters to be unconventional bohemian city-wanderers who are expressing their own tales.

The central argument over which the present paper is developed finds its way throughout the tangible consequences of encountering modernity in a middle-eastern society, the sharp break of which is dramatically indicated in the novel. The major objective of this research is to demonstrate how the individual subjectivity of the characters both in a developing society and throughout the novel is due to profound changes as compared with the traditional mode of thinking. This paper first presents the plot summary of the novel in that it has not been translated into English up to now. The coming section after that includes the review of the recent literature available on the novel. The theoretical framework of the paper and the research methodology follow next. Additionally, the core section of the paper is presented which includes a thorough investigation into the characterization of the individuals in terms of the Benjaminian concepts of flâneur and post-aural stories; this section also addresses the significance and application of the modern practice of photography with reference to the concept of nostalgia. Finally, the concluding section comes next which includes the major findings of the paper.

## PLOT SUMMARY

The novel, *Yousef Abad, Street 33*, includes four chapters each being narrated by a different narrator. In the first chapter the reader encounters Saman, a dedicated young photographer whose fashion-loving habit is the pivotal axis of the story. The next chapter is narrated by Leila, a vulnerable forty year old woman – who used to wear chador before Iran's Revolution – whose inner monologues reflexes her character. Professor Nejat is the narrator of the third chapter. A rich young man at the time of revolution, he has passed many controversial experiences through years until the first years of the twentieth-first century, the time of the story, including participating in religious courses, living abroad, and many other ups and downs. Professor Nejat finally settles down as an English teacher and photographer in Tehran.

Neda narrates the last chapter who is a young and talented Tehran University student whose mind and behavior is lively and reminiscent of her childhood. The coordinating link of all these narrators is love embedded in the context of urban living. Tehran is consequently the heart of the novel depicting it as a vivid picture of the early twenty-first Iran's capital, contemplated through the strolling of the characters in the city and its veins. The story is conducted through the love developing between two pairs; Leila and Hamed and Neda and Saman. Hamed Nejat, finding back his old beloved of twenty years, Leila Jahed, tries to persuade himself to tell this fact to Neda, his young English student who falls in love with him temporarily. Simultaneously, Saman is trying to replace Neda with his ex-girlfriend since Neda seems to be more compatible with his passion for brands and shopping-center

strolling and love for photography. Consequently Neda tries to catch the sense of her youth through Saman's love.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Novel, as a major narrative genre of contemporary literature, has always been a source of scrutiny for critics in the area of social and cultural studies. *Yusef Abad, Street 33* has been numerously analyzed in terms of this vein. Youth culture is one of these tenets that is deeply incorporated in the novel and its textual representation. An in-depth textual analysis of the novel would thus lead to an invaluable source of youth culture and literary topography in contemporary Iran. Blake Atwood, in "Tehran's Textual Topography: Mapping Youth Culture in Contemporary Persian Literature" offers an in-depth and authentic analysis of youth culture in Iran regarding three contemporary Persian novels including *Yusef Abad, Street 33*. Atwood focuses considerably on the spatial specificities of the city of Tehran in the novel and relates them to the economic complications, commodification, and capitalism that are highly interwoven with the youth culture especially major character's obsession with fashion industry and brand loving. Atwood maintains that malls play a key role in *Yusef Abad, Street 33* which is a direct offspring of the above mentioned attachment to consumerism as a part of the youth culture: "In *Yusef Abad*, malls do more than just provide a stage for the performance of an idealized modern identity: they are also places where that identity is purchased and consumed" (Atwood, 145). Further, he argues that this economic overtone is intermingled with a kind of social sexuality: "I examine how *Yusef Abad* represents the spatial practices of Iranian youth and in particular their relationship with Golestan Mall and the city of Tehran. I propose that, far from political resistance, the spatial acts of Iranian youth in the novels reveal economic concerns and a social-sexual Tehran, but not a Tehran whose hyper-sexuality resides indoors and underground" (Atwood, 137).

City and its complications are recent notions that attract critic's attention in the domain of narrative fiction. The concept is so crucial to such criticism that Urban Literature has recently been an independent category of the novel form which is welcomed by critics. The city and its representation in fiction is complicated. However, being incorporated in a novel, it gives the readers ample opportunity to delve into the layers of an omnipotent which is usually susceptible to ignorance. Seyed Abbolhassan Riazi, in "The Representation of Tehran in the novel *Yusef Abad, Street 33*" elaborates on the role of city space in contemporary Persian literature. Riazi believes that city representation is one of the most complicated and controversial aspects in narrative fiction and that is why he chooses *Yousef Abad, Street 33* as his main source of inquiry. Defining the features of the metropolis, Riazi maintains that Tehran has a non-dependent identity in *Yusef Abad, Street 33* which is one of the rarest instances of its kind. He argues that the role of the city is so colorful in the novel that by its omission the overall structure of the novel would collapse: "The third and the most important reason is the independent character of the city in the story of *Yusef Abad, Street 33*. Perhaps it can be declared

decisively that this novel is among those rare examples that the city is featured as the place that all the events happen in an objective and tangible manner which also has an identity and concrete time dimension. The place of Tehran in *Yusef Abad, Street 33* is so pivotal that its omission would lead to the destruction of the whole novel" (Riazi, 178).

As for further socio-cultural analyses, one can refer to Nematollah Fazeli's work which considers such a role in regard to the notion of the city, its spaces, and its overall spirit from a purely social aspect. In "Feminizing City: with an Emphasis on the Spaces in Tehran", Fazeli analyzes Iran's contemporary demographical and anthropological changes. His survey concentrates on the features of modernity especially the role of women in contemporary Iran's urban spaces. Fazeli maintains that Dadkhah's Tehran is purely feminine which is also crowded with women who are among main residents of the city and this is the focus of his article:

Sina Dadkhah, the author of the novel, represents his 'experience of urban living' and living in a metropolis like Tehran as a young 25 year old middle class Tehrani and tries to explain why these people inherently love Tehran and to elaborate on their lifestyle. The characters in the novel definitely are not created to show women's place in Tehran's city space, however, one point that this novel demonstrates explicitly is the presence of women in the space of Tehran as a metropolis and it is my main focus here (Fazeli, 11).

The generation gap among the characters is another socio-cultural concept that is problematic in *Yusef Abad, Street 33*. Mohammad Reza Javadi Yeganeh, a university professor elaborates upon this notion in *Yusef Abad, Street 33* and argues that the generation gap between the two pairs of major characters in the novel are devoid of authentic nostalgic experiences of the older pair. Javadi Yeganeh thus elaborates on the narratology and its problematics in the novel which lacks a somber experience of the older generation.

Narratology and textual analysis of *Yusef Abad* still faces another aspect of such criticism. Ramin Mostaghim, in a note on the novel, "The New York Style *Yusef Abad*" argues that the language Dadkhah uses in the novel is highly time-dependent and the slang used in the novel makes it undecipherable for an older generation reading the novel. He maintains that such a difficulty in reading a text written by a young author is in fact an indication of the failure of the state to stick to the fanatical ideologies of the previous generation: "He just talks from his own point of view and this is useful for me as a journalist because I come to this conclusion that mottos and propaganda are unsuccessful in action" (Mostaghim, 81).

Analyzing textual and ideological concepts in urban literature such as *Yusef Abad, Street 33* usually tends to contribute to an analysis of the socio-cultural implications of contexts in which the literary work has been produced. This is evident from an overview of the literature produced on novels like *Yusef Abad, Street 33*. However, what is absent in these papers is an in-depth observation of the characters in relation to the city as Benjaminian flâneur. Moreover, the experiences and insights of the characters in the novel that lead

to a kind of post-aural intuition are often ignored in these papers. Nevertheless, these notions would be the main focus of the present study.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CRITICAL CONCEPTS

### The Rising Number of the Flaneurs

Walter Benjamin's final incomplete book, *The Arcades Project*, was written between 1927 and 1940, which is about Parisian city life in the 19th-century. He utilized quotations from a variety of published literary, philosophical, and artistic sources, and added his own reflections and commentary. Walter Benjamin was in close affiliation with Frankfurt School; a close friend of Bertolt Brecht and Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem, he extensively corresponded with Theodor Adorno. Although Brecht and Adorno suggested Benjamin to move more toward the political, Benjamin exchanged the mystical exegetical hermeneutic for a more political under the direction of Adorno. The essay is a remarkable text focusing on some of the key questions being a philosopher's queries: How should we understand the world around us? How should we interpret this world? How should we understand its time? What are social phenomena, history, philosophy, and criticism? Benjamin called *The Arcades Project* "the theater of all my struggles and all my ideas" (qtd. in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, xxii)

During the Nineteenth-century, however, there emerged an experience of landscape within the urban space. For most cultural theoreticians, Paris was the place where this shift occurred from landscape outside the city, to cityscape. Louis-Sébastien Mercier is supposed to be one of the first authors looking at Paris as a 'picture', as a 'scene.' In the twentieth-century context he returned to the concept of "Flânerie" in his work. Most famously developed by Baudelaire, the flâneur is the casual, often aimless urban roamer, who leisurely ambles through the city streets. Unlike his counterpart, the thoroughly modern man who passes by in his routinized hurry, the flâneur takes up a new stance to the world he passes through. He embodies a simultaneous attitude of detachment and involvement, disengaging himself from the crowds and humdrum street life, yet nonetheless engages from a distance, gazing and probing his surroundings. The flâneur experiences the urban scene as a "cityscape", as Benjamin literally says, the "old Romantic sentiment for landscape" is replaced by a "new Romantic conception of landscape" (*The Arcades Project*, 420). Whereas the old Romantic experience of landscape was spatially located outside the city, the metropolis has become "the properly sacred ground of flânerie" (421).

According to Benjamin, the flâneur experiences the crowds of the modern metropolis as a kind of shield but also as an object of observation. The flâneur is not only drawn to the streets and their architecture, but also to the social spaces where crowds gather, "like railway stations, exhibition halls and department stores" (455). It is significant to recognize that flâneur is not just strolling around, but it transforms

urban observation into cultural work. A flâneur might be a poet, painter, journalist, sociologist or a cultural theorist. If Benjamin, himself, is included in the group of passionate flâneurs, it could be thus inferred that flâneur is related to a critical cultural theory of city life.

### The Significance and Function of Story-Telling

Benjamin suggests that events in the modern world, particularly World War I, have led to a general devaluation of human experience. He argues that “never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power” (*Illuminations*, 84). If experience is no longer meaningful, then it follows that the exchange of experience in meaningful ways, including the fundamental requirement of effective storytelling, is no longer possible.

The loss of the ability to convey experience is clearly related to the concepts of alienation and reification. Moreover, Benjamin sees the devaluation of experience in the modern world as the consequence of a long historical process. Always concerned with the relationship between works of art and the physical technology available to produce and distribute those works, Benjamin thinks that the demise of storytelling began with the invention of the printing press and occurred as part of the shift from oral to print culture (from stories to novels) that has characterized Western society for the past centuries. He thus contends that “the earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times” (87).

Benjamin has demonstrated that “what distinguishes the novel from the story is its essential dependence on the book” (87). He argues that “the dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing” (87). What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature, including fairy tale, the legend, even the novella, is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. In contrast to the communal activity of telling and listening to stories, both the reading and the writing of novels are for Benjamin solitary activities. Benjamin contends that:

The story teller takes what he tells from experience his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it in the experience of those who are listening to his tale.

The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual. (87)

Benjamin’s suggestion that print technology has impeded, rather than enhancing human communication, echoes the concern of early commentators such as Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, who felt the new print technology disrupting the role of humanity as a special creature of God, given language is imitation of the Divine Word. Benjamin differs markedly from conservatives like Swift in that he does not necessarily see the breakdown of traditional forms of communication as an entirely negative development.

Benjamin suggests that Marxism is related to theology much as an automaton is related to its operator. Despite its illusory determinism, Marxism is really articulating a theological response to capitalism-as-religion. Every generation

is endowed with a ‘weak messianic power’, in that every past generation hoped for redemption or resurrection in the future. Benjamin implies that present revolutions ‘redeem’ or are in continue of past revolutions; there is a line connecting them but not that of linear time. Though nothing is completely lost to history, the past is comprehensible only from the position of redemption. The ‘spiritual’ is present in class struggle even when it comes to material things as the drive towards redemption. The truth of the past is visible only as a tentative image which threatens to slip away. This image is apparent in the continuity between past and present struggles.

### Aura: Present or Deteriorating?

Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) is an essay of cultural criticism proposing that the aura of a work is devalued by mechanical reproduction. The subject and theme of the essay have much influenced the fields of art history, architectural theory, cultural studies, and media theory, and have provided a general history of changes in art in the modern age. Benjamin’s insight here is that each human sensory perspective change with social changes, or changes in “humanity’s entire mode of existence.” In Marxist fashion, Benjamin sees the transformation of art as an effect of changes in the economic structure. Art is coming to resemble economic production. Historically, works of art had an ‘aura,’ an appearance of magical or supernatural force arising from their uniqueness. The aura includes a sensory experience of distance between the reader and the work of art. Benjamin defines the aura in the following way:

The aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 5).

The aura, according to his notion, has disappeared in the modern age in that art has become reproducible. For example, one can point to the way a painting is used as a poster, or, the newer forms of art including TV shows. On the other hand, the experience of staring at an original work of art in a gallery, or visiting a unique historic building, is totally distinguishable. The aura is an effect of a work of art being uniquely present in time and space. It is connected to the idea of authenticity. Authenticity cannot be reproduced, and disappears when everything is reproduced. Benjamin perceived that this kind of ‘aura’, a work of art’s uniqueness or authenticity, was threatened by the profusion of reproductive technologies which places the aura of the work of art in decline. Every reproduction made, be it a print of a famous work of art, takes it a little away from the aura of the original object. Benjamin states:

The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a differ-

ent traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura. (6)

The waning of aura is important as Benjamin explains that art without aura has never been experienced in any previous culture. Aura implies authenticity though there is no authenticity without its destruction in mechanical reproducibility. Confronted with its manual reproduction the original preserved all its authority. Benjamin thus argues that "The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (4).

Aura is associated with the traditional, nostalgic notions of artwork and is lost with the onset of photography. Benjamin states that "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (3). Benjamin states:

Today, by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental. Today photography and the film are the most serviceable exemplifications of this new function. (7)

As for photography, Benjamin is one of the pioneers in the aesthetic theory behind the mechanism of art in this area. He argues that:

In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line. But cult value does not give way without resistance. It retires into an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. (8)

Furthermore, Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," also known as "Theses on History" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History" addresses the question of social transformation and develops his messianic ideas most completely. For Benjamin, though modern technology has destroyed the traditional Quasi-religious wholeness, or "aura," of the work of art, this destruction leads to a changed mode of aesthetic reception that produces a new kind emancipated reader, free of the quasi-religious enthrallment associated with art in earlier eras and thus able to resist the authority of received ideas and read in challenging and critical ways.

## INVESTIGATING YUSEF ABAD, STREET 33: A BENJAMINIAN READING

### Representation of Flânerie in Modern Settings

Sina Dadkhah establishes the commodified materiality of the city and its core relation to his protagonist, Saman, as early as the beginning pages of the novel. *Yusef Abad, Street 33* begins with Saman waiting for her date, Neda, in a cold winter

evening at Golestan shopping center, a fashionable shopping destination for the youth in the time of the story. While waiting for her, Saman is thinking about his experiences with his ex-girlfriends in the same place and also, while watching the window shops, he dips deep in his dream of being a fashion photographer. His story of fascination with the world-class fashion system is embodied in his thorough knowledge of the famous brands which is a direct short-circuit to the modern city with all its material ventures for the young flâneur. Fascinated by the hustle and bustle of Golestan he maintains:

Getting around with girls in Tehran's shopping centers would be a life-long profitable opportunity for Shetab (banking) system. Anyway, wandering in the city should do some good to capitalism and I am in love with capitalism. Finally I would become a fashion photographer and Fashion TV would show me 24 hours a day, photo shooting the world's most gorgeous top models. (14)

The city's aimless stroller, the flâneur, due to his nature, is intoxicated with the commodification of his surroundings and this intoxication is more decipherable in the social context in which the flâneur places himself. Flâneur finds his solace in the streets and the department store is his resort. Sina Dadkhah intimates his story exactly from this safe point. The beginning lines of the novel target Tehran in general and its shopping centers in particular, including Golestan, purposefully since the flâneur sees the commodification of the streets in such places. Saman chooses Golestan as the site of his rendezvous and contemplates on his thoroughly commodified dreams of fashion world and even further, he elaborates on famous brands including Nike, Chanel, and Dolce & Gabbana to illustrate his fascination as a flâneur with all the modern associations with city life and eventually capitalism. Saman basically is a city-stroller whose gaze upon the metropolis is to a great extent capitalist and commodified. Saman, the flâneur, is totally in agreement with what defines the modern Western world as an arena of commodification and capitalism and sees his dreams as a fashion journalist in parallel with such an attitude. Nevertheless, this kind of phantasmagoria exhibited by Saman, at the same time alienates him from himself and pushes him forward to the crowd in which he seeks his comfort. Benjamin argues that this gaze is that of the flâneur.

The incessant flow of internal monologues issued by Saman, while waiting for Neda, makes an interesting yet confusing amalgamation of the flâneur being in the crowd and still as someone who stands at its margins. Saman is bridging the gap between this peripheral situation and a more centralized one by precisely seeing himself as an iconic fashion journalist. However, this dream is intertwined with one of the most controversial and emblematic aspects of capitalism, that is modern banking system, which in Saman's city framework is called Shetab, and it is what makes the flâneur as an uprooted persona from its more romantic sight of Paris streets to a pure post-modern city-wanderer in a commodity-stricken universal flânerie.

The prolonged conversation with himself continues for Saman even when he meets Neda in Golestan. The mutual incarnation of Saman in the city and the city's embodi-

ment in a typical shopping center pushes him further to his simultaneous attraction and distraction to the crowd while he is contemplating on the power of the city to absorb him in itself. Neda, apparently in search of a pair of boots, is looking at the windows while listening to music through her iPod. Saman makes little attempt to attract her attention since he himself is submerged in his beloved cradle; the cozy city space that is called Golestan Shopping Center. He ponders that looking at the shops and boutique windows is a kind of therapy for a wandering young mind as his:

Saman! For the last time ask yourself what are you doing here in Golestan? Each shopping center is an ocean and the city streets are big rivers which finally flow towards the shopping centers. All rivers finally come to oceans. What do I do with a leaking boat in the middle of the ocean? I'm nuts and speaking nonsense. Neda! Is your window-shopping therapy working? Window-shopping therapy is like hydrotherapy. You should first immerse your body, and then your head to the water and then go straight to these windows with your head. (25)

As quoted, Saman, the flâneur, finds his solace in the shopping center in an epiphany in which he considers each shopping center as an ocean. Attracted to the city in all its entirety, the flâneur sees it as a labyrinth in which all the city streets are absorbed to the shopping center and it is eventually dissolved into the city as the convergence of rivers to the oceans. Saman finds himself in such a labyrinth and although he is shocked by this self-presence nevertheless, longs such an indulgence since the flâneur is incessantly in a dialectic of the city space and his loneliness (individuality). By comparing the streets of the metropolis to the big rivers which eventually come through an ocean- the ultimate rest place of the mass consumers: the shopping center- Dadkhah once more reminds the reader that the flâneur in its contemporary context is not out of joint with the commodification of his interest in the interior of capitalism.

In further submersion in such a self-desired labyrinth, Saman hails Neda to accompany him in his surfing the ocean to the point that he puts his sweet remedy of window-shopping therapy on a par with hydrotherapy. Saman urges his companion to immerse in this labyrinth of commodification-resort-mass consumption-metropolis from top to toe since it is the flâneur final resolution to the sensual-spatial phantasmagoria of the metropolis in general and the bazaar in particular. The city-stroller, in its Benjaminian concept, is surrounding himself wholeheartedly to the city space once again to show that the flâneur is not just a mere idler, rather his engagement in the metropolis is a kind of watchful observation that demands a thorough presence of the individual in his experience of truancy. The flâneur is a phoenix like entity that refreshes himself by the act of seeing and observation that is embodied through the act of window-shopping in the story of *Yusef Abad, Street 33*.

The story's narration passes from person to person to reach Hamed Nejat, the middle-aged artist-flâneur who is the bridge between the narrators. The interior monologues which the story owes much for its development is at work in Nejat's chapter. Hamed Nejat, a U.S resident for many years,

now is in Tehran preparing for a photograph gallery focusing on the city of Tehran. Saman is the apprentice for the photographer and managing his small atelier. Encountered with the complicated stories he is facing in his temporary stay in Iran, and trying to understand the love affair between Saman and Neda, his intelligent student, Nejat thinks that Saman owes him very much since he is the person who teaches him to see Tehran in a way that a photographer should do. Hamed Nejat believes that a city like Tehran is an inseparable part of its people's mind and soul:

You owe me boy! I have taught you how to see Tehran in your pictures. You may say it was already within you. Right! But this city is in all its citizens' blood, but why they all are afraid of bloodshed? Someone should come and show them the results of their blood tests to see the percentage of Tehran in their blood is much more than the percentage of their white blood cells and this is Tehran that is defending them and their bodies against diseases. (60)

Hamed Nejat, the city photographer proves to be a thorough embodiment of the flâneur since photography, as the acute form of observation, is what makes the flâneur distinguished from an aimless wanderer. The flâneur-photographer is watchful of his surroundings and insists to teach it to his young disciple, Saman, to see Tehran not merely as a contingent entity, but as an object of the gaze of the flâneur. Furthermore, since the flâneur finds his resort in the crowd and since his truancy finds its transcendental meaning within the mass of expectators, a place like an art gallery, would be like a heaven for Mr. Nejat who is used to see the city by the watchful eye of his camera. Nejat is telling even something more than what is expected from the flâneur when he tells the reader that not only he taught photography to Saman, but how to see Tehran, and this how-ness is the quality that has to be attached to the flâneur.

The watchful city-stroller incessantly lives a kind of phantasmagoria within the city-space and gradually learns to read off the people in the city and their intuitions and inner feelings readily. Mr. Nejat and Saman repeatedly show such a disposition in their long contemplations. That is why Hamed vigorously sees Tehran in the blood of its citizens as the final winner of a battle between an unknown disease and the narcotic effect of its presence in their bloods. Hamed Nejat, by the asset of his age, is a more experienced city-wanderer in comparison to Saman and that's why he urges him to trust him in his dialectic of flânerie.

### The Significance of Story-Telling to the Flâneurs

The story of *Yusef Abad, Street 33* is constantly oscillating between past and present through flashbacks and flash forwards. Hamed Nejat is introduced to the novel in his present situation. Nevertheless, his past is precisely as vital as his present to the story. He had a dramatic love affair with Leila Jahed in a quite eventful era in Iran's contemporary history; the early post-revolution days that are extremely ideological. Hamed Nejat is forced to leave the country in those fervent days and it is after nearly two decades that he is back home. Reunited with his beloved Leila, Hamed is contemplating

on having a few calm days at their villa in Damavand after Leila leaves the hospital. Hamed is planning this romantic getaway in his mind as if he is talking with Leila:

We will go to our invisible Switzerland and I'll pick *A Farewell to Arms* from the little library in the villa and will read again and again a chapter in which the captain and Katherine are paddling through Lausanne Lake to escape from Italy and reach to Switzerland and keep away from world war. I am the American captain too and have a lake like Lausanne Lake. I have Katherine too. (57)

In a breathtaking comparison, Nejat echoes his story wonderfully in relation to the famous classic *A Farewell to Arms*. However, the big difference between Hamed and the American captain is that Hamed is experiencing such an escape in his life and thus telling his story immediately out of his own experience. In other words, whereas the American captain is a mere character-type in a novel, Hamed is himself the story teller of his experience; to run away from the horrors of war. Moreover, as elaborated earlier, Hamed Nejat shows the reader the signs of a true flâneur and thus his finding comfort in the presence of the others makes a contrast out of this comparison since the novelist, be it of a famous world classic, is conveying a thoroughly solitary presence either for his own or for his audience. Nejat however is seeking for a companion to listen to his story and even shares some of the pleasures of the peaceful atmosphere of his villa with his beloved Leila.

Comparing his story with that of a well-known novel has another asset for Hamed as a story teller. As quoted, Hamed is talking in his dreams with Leila and tries to persuade her to come and listen to his story. By assimilating himself to the American captain and insisting to have the same Lausanne Lake, Hamed makes his story more tenable and simultaneously fixates it in the memory of the listener. Hamed brings about the situation to a thoroughly tangible milieu for Leila to decipher and this is the art of story teller who by doing so forces the listener to repeat the story somewhere else and this is what actually the reader is going to read in the stories of Leila. Moreover, Hamed Nejat not only attempts to make his story in parallel to a classic novel, but also imprints his presence on it by shifting the place from Europe to a suburb of Tehran and thus becomes a part of his own story to be told.

Hamed Nejat is teaching English temporarily during his stay in Iran and Neda is introduced to *Yusef Abad, Street 33* as the English student of Mr. Nejat. However, Hamed gradually feels that Neda is not just a simple student but apparently a lover, and since it is an impossible union, Hamed tries to settle down the issue with her in a friendly way and thus invites her to a café. In this meeting, the couple encounters unexpected events and Hamed excitedly looks forward to retell his story to Leila. Meanwhile Hamed is thinking about the reasons that Neda is attracted to him and concludes that it is because of the power of his story-telling:

A story to feel young. I should try to speak to Neda through a story. A regular story: an illustrated one. I should try to tell her stories by pictures. An improvisation with pictures. It is romantic but troublesome and

difficult and probably she would feel that she is entering an epic. Is she yearning an epic when she was falling in love with me? (78)

Storytelling, according to Benjamin, always accompanies psychological shading. The more the story teller is apt to appeal to the listener, the more his story would be remembered by the listener and Hamed, as the story teller, knows it very well. He is entangled in a predicament facing with a very young and delicate lover that demands a very smart reaction and Mr. Nejat chooses storytelling. He believes that he can tell whatever he wants through some stories and this bright idea is of great value at least from two different aspects. First of all by his emphasis to tell a very down to earth story, Hamed finds out readily that even a descend story would be memorable and effective for his listener since it directly comes from his own experience and thus he can have the imprint of his mature feelings to Neda in a decisive and firm ground. Second, Hamed places his approach a level up to a story and calls it an epic and therefore satisfies himself that his story would be impressive since an epic affects the listener immediately upon its rehearsal since it carries all the excitement the listener needs in such a situation. Basically Hamed thinks that Neda wholeheartedly demands such an epic-style story when she fell in love with a much older man and only an epic-style story can save her from this illusion.

Moreover, the reader is introduced to the character of Hamed Nejat as a photographer who is having a gallery in Tehran by the time of the story. Therefore, to see things differently and somehow more accurately than the others is an indispensable part of such a flâneur-photographer. Here, in the above quotation, once again the reader sees the impact of such an identity. Hamed, the flâneur-photographer, attempts to challenge a very dramatic situation by being now a story teller. However, he intermingles his sense of photography with his desire to storytelling and claims that by a kind of illustrated story he would be more successful to persuade Neda. Hamed believes that to improvise a story with pictures would be so romantic that the listener-Neda- would immediately finds herself at the presence of a true mighty epic and eventually would be surrounded with the situation by heart and soul.

*Yusef Abad, Street 33* basically revolves around storytelling. This taking refuge in the nostalgic layers of the past is so strong that Hamed Nejat talks about those past events even with his old Chevrolet Nova. As going to meet Neda to settle down some misunderstandings, Hamed tells his car a new story, the story of Touchal (a mountainous resort in Tehran), since he firmly believes that a listener is always eager to listen to a new story to keep in mind and recall later:

Listen to my story well, to the story of the ashy queen. Listen my American beauty! Listen to the story of that morning when I fare welled all the arms. Let me lengthen my story a little more. Let my tongue wander anywhere it wishes while I'm telling my story. The story of Touchal would be more beautiful and would be different from the previous ones and you would be more eager to hear it. But be sure! I would finish the story on time and it is just seven minutes to seven. First I should bring you to an air of storytelling. (65)

Hamed Nejat's exciting conversation with his Chevrolet Nova foreshadows the well-established trend of *Yusef Abad, Street 33*, which are interior monologues. Hamed in fact not only speaks with himself but is telling himself stories. As elaborated earlier, the storyteller talks about his own experience and thus is in sharp contrast to the novelist either in his individuality or his embodied imagination. Mr. Nejat, in the above quotation, places himself exactly amidst a story of his own to remember his memories of being in Tehran before his unwanted migration to the U.S. Hamed Nejat, the storyteller believes that he should review his stories to see what is he doing now and to decipher his being in the current situation. Hamed needs his past experiences to make the right decision in the present and therefore he should confirm his place as a real storyteller who firmly farewells the imaginary fictitious stories of the novels. Moreover, Hamed appears from the outset to be a flâneur in search of the true spirit of the city through his photography and now, by telling stories not only to himself but also to who and whatever he is encountering with, and by refuting the stories being told in isolation in the novels, he once again pushes the reader to confirm the fact that the storyteller flâneur is enlivened in the society in which he can tell his stories and definitely in which he has listeners to hear them.

Furthermore, in this warm and agile conversation, Hamed mentions to another aspect of storytelling that is of great importance in its Benjaminian context, which is the meaningfulness of the act of storytelling. Hamed knows it well that for his stories to be effective, they should be meaningful and also exciting. He tells his Chevrolet Nova that he wants to lengthen his story and wander in and about his story since he thinks that this way his story would be different from the previous ones and thus more effective. The effectiveness of the storytelling is what is faded away in modern times and the storyteller has to do something to keep it effective; what Hamed is doing by telling his story every time with a twist to keep the listener eager. Hamed is well aware of such a common twist in the novel and that's why he prefers to farewell all the novels and their well-established frameworks and to freshly tell stories every time with a new air of phantasy and reality to be memorable and transformable to and by the listener.

### From the Aural to the Post-Aural Condition

Hamed Nejat continues to his warm conversation with his beloved Chevrolet Nova, he contemplates on different directions of Tehran within his view and in an aural revelation he contemplates in the nostalgic perception he receives from Tehran mountains and concludes that to place himself in a balanced distance between space and time he can keep his own mental balance:

How forgetful I am! I have been talking all the time about the ashy queen and Yusefabad while I was moving toward the south. I was getting away from the north, and now that I'm moving to the west, the north gets visible. This is very good.... You know better than me, the north means to think properly for me. My logic in Tehran means the north. As I see the northern mountains, a right decision comes to my mind. How I've forgotten such an old formula? This is the north that is emancipatory for me while I was moving southward. (63)

Tehran, as the final resort of the flâneur and as the ultimate locale for the storyteller, now becomes the aural space for Hamed Nejat that surrounds him overwhelmingly. Aura, as the peculiar and simultaneously complicated appearance of a distance nevertheless close to the perception, shows itself to Hamed in the centrality and direction of Tehran mountains. Aura, understood as a lost nostalgic notion with the complications of modern life, is recaptured by Hamed Nejat when he starts to see Tehran northward and thus to think rationally again. It is precisely here that aura intervenes space and time together, even though it is lost within the horizon of a metropolitan deprived of aural revelations. Hamed, nevertheless grasp the notion in a critical moment and turns a post-aural state moving to the north of Tehran to regain his free emancipation.

Moreover, an aural moment of perception is revealed to Mr. Nejat through his understanding of the importance of space in his moods and even thinking. He believes that looking at the northern mountains is his salvation to sobriety and rationality. However, since the mountains and their spatio-local position are always the same in Tehran, it is Hamed himself that is under the permanent gaze of the mountains and distance is precisely the aura reflected through its object when he turns to be alert to such a gaze. Furthermore, the post-aural perception occurs for Hamed just at this moment of awareness, the moment in which he is able to look back to the distance which separates him from the mountains as an agent of aura to preserve his soul blank and pure.

The post-aural revelation continues for Hamed Nejat and he further elaborates on his contemplation on Touchal in his newly acquired state of mind. He focuses on an old picture of an antique radio and its peculiarity and concludes that such old and nostalgic pieces are in-between mechanical reproduction and originality:

This radio works with a single wave and at present there remain just a few more examples. The radio's station is an open place near Touchal cable car.... This radio deals more with the eyes of its auditors rather than with their ears. Is it wonderful? This radio temporarily changes ears and eyes. Changes places to living beings and makes them to speak about the places they have seen. (80)

Talking about radio immediately foreshadows its usage primarily as a medium. However, this particular radio that Mr. Nejat is focusing on is of double importance according to its being a medium and its being old and bizarre. This unique old radio is an auratic element for Hamed not only in its technological aspect of the medium but also in its pure Benjaminian concept which is its being an in-between agency for the aural perception. Hamed, in this auratic moment, sees that radio within such definition and maintains that it mediates through replacing auditory sense with a visual one and even further replaces the motionless places to lively human beings to talk about those places which they are simultaneously at a distance and so close to him and it is that auratic moment that Walter Benjamin insists on when he is making a link between the esoteric and transcendental medium of perception and the spatio-temporal attachment of the subject of aural moment.



The radio that Hamed contemplates on is a controversial issue in the age of mechanical reproduction. Radio in general is an early symptom of modernity that was capable of transforming many experiences and the senses being transformed through radio are of the quality that is hindered from its originality. In contrast, the old transistor radio in *Yusef Abad, Street 33* is not an epitome of mass production but of a limited edition. Hamed even tells the reader that it is a kind of mysterious wavelength of mysterious radios. By placing this odd radio in confrontation with itself in its two separate aspects, Sina Dadkhah locates Hamed Nejat in an indecisive moment to challenge his auratic intuition of seeing this exotic radio as a means of mechanical reproduction that exceptionally preserves its sense of originality and authenticity, that is not eradicated through such a mass production and aura happens in this in-between moment for Hamed Nejat.

Neda, the art student in university of Tehran, is the youngest character in *Yusef Abad, Street 33* with apparently less nostalgic memories in comparison with Hamed Nejat and Leila Jahed. However, she is also an inseparable part of the story and she is struggling with her own worries and feelings. The interior monologue that established the novel from its outset, do its job for Neda to the point. Neda is waiting for Saman in a park with lots of memories for her. In the meantime, she is talking with an avant-garde statue as if she is chatting with a close friend talking about her old sweet memories:

Nowadays there are lovely buddies all over the city, but you were my first buddy honey! I knew that you well understood how it feels to be a good buddy for a statue with a bronze or concrete heart. You old statues are the only worthy things in this city..... I was just a kid when I came and sat in your welded lap and listened to your breathing. You were telling me your memories and I wanted to pick out the arrows shot at you, from your injured body but I was unable. (85)

Neda, with her artistic personality, naturally perceives her surroundings according to this mindset. She deciphers a very modern kind of bronze or concrete statue with strange and unconventional dimensions as a buddy and therefore prepares the reader for a new encounter with a city-space and one of its components, the statue. On the other hand, the statue is a simulated creation of friendship and thus humanity whose lap is a kind of comfort zone for Neda as a kid. Eventually to see the statue again as an in-between medium in its Benjaminian sense the auratic intuition perceived through the exposure to a genuine piece of art, a statue for instance, encounters a simulated one in its aural perception of a modern kind of statue. While the statue is a distorted kind of art work, it is nevertheless the source of aural moment for Neda that pushes the post-aural condition of modern art in decay and its perception in a face to face challenge with a genuine aura inspired at the presence of an original artwork in a perfect state of equilibrium since art, modernity, and mass reproducibility are summoned in the spirit of the strange statue as a very dear friend.

Neda reveals to the reader that her friendship with the lovely statue is an old one and she remembers her childhood moments with her friend listening to its memories. The Benjaminian aura has always been connected to the concept of *memoire involontaire* and in the above quotation Neda is the

beholder of such nostalgic memory. Neda involuntarily remembers her childhood stories with the statue right at the moment she is supposed to maintain her distance from an edgy huge welded statue as a child. This intermingling of distance and closeness appeals to the unconscious for whoever is at the presence of such a spatio-temporal experience, like Neda and that's why her childhood memory of the statue appears fleeting and the auratic perception of the past slides swiftly to her present state of mind with still the same feelings toward her friend the statue, to finally announce that it is one of the worthiest creatures still alive in the city of Tehran.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Throughout the present paper the central characters of the novel under consideration are referred to as flâneurs, which is the Benjaminian term for a modern subject who joyfully experiences the modern sense of living. Flânerie, in its Benjaminian definition, is the indispensable part of the city space and the flâneur truancy is expressed through an immediate kind of story-telling that comes from the city wanderer's experiences. The combination of both features is of great significance and convenience to Benjamin's readers. The flâneurs in *Yusef Abad, Street 33* tend to be great story tellers who in fact found their true identity as the urban roamers within their own stories. The aural moments which are experienced by Nejat, Saman, and Neda are thus considered more meaningful when they are related to the condition of Flânerie. Furthermore, spatial and temporal aspects of the metropolis help the characters of the novel to experience such moments with a great sense of joy.

While the story teller in *Yusef Abad, Street 33* contemplates on every instance of the modern experience of life – even the mundane ones – and while he/she narrates it to his/her listeners, the aural moments are transformed to the post-aural manifestation of those moments. This condition is mostly achieved through being exposed to an aspect of art, considered as a more elevated means of meditation, including the welded statue, the photo gallery, modern buildings, and crowded streets. However, the keen reader can simply observe those moments when the characters, although defined as modern subjects, are hit by their nostalgic feelings. Whereas they proved to be the ideal example of a modern subject living in contemporary Iran, a part of their subjectivity is still living in the good old days. That is why they are designated as incomplete modern subjects dangling between modern and traditional modes of life.

On the other hand, as the flâneur wanders aimlessly in a big city and as he/she is absorbed to the waves of population, the commodification known to the modern settings becomes foregrounded to him/her. *Yusef Abad, Street 33* demonstrates the corresponding alienation emerged in modern settings in general and in contemporary Iran in particular. The novel addresses the act of story-telling as a good venue for flâneurs, which can happen everywhere in a modern setting, even in solace and isolation. Clear examples in this regard are Leila's story narrated in the hospital and Hamed Nejat's story which is recited in a calm and romantic resort like Damavand. These instances are conveniently taken as what Walter Benjamin

called the significance of story-telling to the flâneurs, who move from the aural to the post-aural condition where they can embrace a wide range of experiences and situations.

The experience of modernity, emerged and developed in the West, went through an imbalanced and non-comprehensive path in the middle-eastern societies. Iran, because of close geographical affinities with the European borders, encountered modernity much earlier than most of the other middle-eastern countries. The experience of modernity in Iran has been explored both theoretically, as conducted in research studies, and creatively, as represented in contemporary literary works. Sina Dadkhah's *Yusef Abad, Street 33* is a novel about the personal aspects of the modern mode of life in the Iranian capital, Tehran.

## CONCLUSION

*Yusef Abad, Street 33* embodies the representation of flânerie in modern settings of contemporary Iran and particularly in Tehran of the past two decades. Hamed Nejat, a major character in the novel, who is the city photographer, proves to be a thorough embodiment of the flâneur in that photography, as the acute form of observation, is what makes the flâneur distinguished from an aimless wanderer. This figure of flâneur-photographer is watchful of his surroundings and insists to teach it to his young disciple, Saman, in order to see Tehran not merely as a contingent entity, but as an object of the gaze of the flâneur.

The other conspicuous feature of the novel is that it points to the significance of story-telling to the flâneurs. Hamed is a modern story-teller whose story is compared with that of a well-known novel. Hamed is talking in his dreams with Leila and tries to persuade her to come and listen to his story. By assimilating himself to the American captain and insisting to have the same Lausanne Lake, Hamed makes his story more tenable and simultaneously fixates it in the memory of the listener. Storytelling, according to Benjamin, always accompanies psychological shading. The more the story teller is apt to appeal to the listener, the more his story would be remembered by the listener and Hamed, as the story teller, knows it very well.

The novel demonstrates the shift from the aural to the post-aural condition in that it represents, for instance, the post-aural revelation of Hamed Nejat and his contemplation on Touchal in his newly acquired state of mind. Also, Neda, the art student in university of Tehran, who is the youngest character in *Yusef Abad, Street 33*, has apparently less nostalgic memories in comparison with Hamed Nejat and Leila Jahed. On the other hand, Hamed Nejat focuses on an old picture of an antique radio and its peculiarity and concludes that such old and nostalgic pieces are in-between mechanical reproduction and originality.

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