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## Re-Imagining The Flâneur: Chris Abani's *Graceland* and The Psychogeographical Experience

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**Abstract:** Psychogeography, an experimental approach proposed by the avant-garde movements in the mid-twentieth century, emerged as a critical tool for interrogating and understanding modern urbanism. Fundamental to this discourse is the figure of flâneur, the classical male wanderer, whose sensory and ambiguous interactions with the urban landscape help to investigate the emotional impact of geographical environments on human physiology. The psychogeographical flâneur, inheriting this observational capability, seeks to modify the lived experience of urban spaces, possibly. Chris Abani's *Graceland*, published in 2004, is an African Bildungsroman set in postcolonial Nigeria between 1972 and 1983, amidst civil war atrocities, a military regime, and globalisation. Through the protagonist Elvis Oke, the novel subverts the classical flâneur figure, relocating him within a postcolonial African milieu. Elvis's wanderings and interactions with the Nigerian landscapes are not purely aesthetic recollections, but rather a technique of exposing the city's persistent socio-economic inequalities, cultural dislocations, and systemic violence. This research paper examines how the psychogeographical flâneur is re-imagined to trace the grim realities of postcolonial Nigeria using Chris Abani's *Graceland*.

**Keywords:** psychogeography; flâneur; geographical environments; emotional impact; Nigeria

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**Introduction**

Psychogeography, as an avant-garde experimental behaviour, emerged in France around the 1950s, having been coined by the Lettrist International and Situationist International movements. It seeks to elucidate the influence of geographical environments on individual behaviours and emotions within the context of urban landscapes. Guy Debord defined it as, "...the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals" (Coverley 8). Although psychogeography's initial focus lay on exposing how the city reinforced the display of modern times through processes such as urban planning, consumerism patterns, and commodity capitalism, its significance to literary discourse has expanded drastically over time.

A core technique within psychogeography was the *flâneur*, the urban explorer. It was an ideal concept linked initially to nineteenth-century French urbanism, particularly in the works of Charles Baudelaire. According to Isabel Vila-Cabanes, a *flâneur* is someone "...who observes the ever-changing urban spectacle and reflects on the experience of a new lifestyle caused by a series of economic, political, and social transformations" (1). Traditionally, the *flâneur* represents a male, ambivalent persona of urban prosperity and novelty, capable of wandering through urban squalor with a sense of aloofness, deriving joy and pleasure from observing the city's cadence. While the idea originated in the modern city of Paris, it has since spread beyond Europe and become a gifted literary tool for examining urban existence and identity formation in diverse cultural and spatial contexts. In contemporary literature, the *flâneur* has been redefined to trace the rhythm of urban life in global metropolises, where exploring is not just an act of leisure but also a medium of negotiating socio-political realities. This research paper examines how the *flâneur* is re-imagined in the African postcolonial context, using Chris Abani's *Graceland*.

**Plot Overview**

Chris Abani is a Nigerian novelist whose works explore the complex and fragmented realities of the postcolonial world. His novel *Graceland* (2004) is a classic third-generation Nigerian Bildungsroman set in postcolonial Nigeria between 1972 and 1983, a period marked by social upheaval and cultural transition. The plot revolves around the teenage protagonist, Elvis Oke, a high school dropout who earns money by mimicking the American artist Elvis Presley for tourists in Lagos. Elvis is depicted mourning his deceased mother and reflects on childhood memories he spent with her in his native village, Afikpo. He is unable to mend his relationship with his father, Sunday, and struggles to make ends meet in Lagos. In the midst of political strife and adversity, his friend Redemption draws him into a world of crime and violence. Elvis, on his journey towards maturation, assumes the role of *flâneur*, traversing the contrasting landscapes of rural Afikpo and urban Lagos, revealing the interconnection between rural and urban representation, individuality, and the harsh socio-economic conditions of postcolonial Nigeria.

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**Key Characteristics of Flâneur**

Before moving on to the analysis part of this research study, it is necessary to establish the defining qualities and conceptual nuances of the flâneur in order to examine how the figure of flâneur is manifested in the novel *Graceland*. Historically, the flâneur is viewed as a purposeful yet aimless pedestrian who connects with the urban space through sensory and intellectual exploration. His stroll through the city is marked by indolence, acute observation, and an appreciation for the aesthetic beauty of the city. This state of inactivity or action is often understood as a covert form of protest against the mechanical lifestyle of modern cities. As an enthusiast of urban experience, the flâneur is caught between being detached yet involved, physically present but socially distant. This dual position enables the flâneur to engage with the populace from a historical, psychological, socioanthropological, cultural, and literary perspectives.

The flâneur's ambiguous nature allows him to assume both the role of detective and decoder of the city's symbolic and surrounding spectacle. The incognito strolls across the city space provide the flâneur figure a form of obscurity that allows for unperturbed observation, restraining his identity while immersing in the urban reality. In this regard, the flâneur is often contrasted with the 'badaud', the spectator or the gawker. The badaud's personality is often absorbed into the external surroundings, while the flâneur maintains a reflective distance from the external events. He remains critically aware and self-controlled, retaining his individuality. These defining traits of flâneur are rooted in European historical contexts; however, in *Graceland*, Abani has subverted and re-contextualised several of these key aspects to investigate the fractured realities of postcolonial cities.

**Flânerie in Rural Afpiko**

The flâneur is traditionally an urban figure; however, in *Graceland* Abani subverts the idea to a rural setting, introducing the concept of a rural flâneur. Elvis's early flânerie in his rural village, Afpiko, encompasses not only physical wanderings but also emotional and sensual experiences that signify his connection to the rural landscape, Igbo customs, and communal living. As a rural flâneur, he finds satisfaction in exploring his mother Beatrice's Garden, marked by the vivid imagery of "... the neat beds, the soft crumbly earth, the deep green of the okra, the red and yellow peppers, the delicate mauve flowers of the fluted pumpkin..." (Abani 72). This intimate relationship with the rural environment evokes an instinctive, sensual experience, serving as a symbol of familial warmth and collective memory. Similarly, Elvis's aimless flâneur to the riverbed with his companion, cousin Efuwa, is charged with rustic vitality. The following passage captures the acoustic richness of everyday country life and the emotional bonding Elvis experiences with its pastoral surroundings. To quote,

They could hear, further upstream, the sound of women talking as they fetched water and washed vegetables and roots for cooking; downstream from them, the squeals of children swimming and the shouted warnings from the adults in their separate bathing sections, the men closest to the children, the women around the bend, hidden by shrubs. A boy ran up the hill, glistening like a fish,

all sun and water. At the top, he yelled and ran downhill at speed, disappearing from view halfway down the slope. The sound of him cannonballing into the water carried up to them. Elvis and Efua loved it here: close enough to everyone to feel part of things, yet far enough away so that they could be alone (81).

These random moments of pedestrian drift reflect his tranquil coexistence with nature and his community, which differs sharply from his later urban *flânerie* in Lagos.

Elvis's ability to be a *flâneur*, within his village, "...is shaped by the relationship between his subject position, the qualities of the space and his own creative ambitions" (Coates 34). His wanderings in Afikpo are more than just innocent childhood playfulness; they gradually evolve into acts of self-enlightenment and artistic discovery. His initial undercover routine was discreetly visiting Mr. Aggrey's residence to observe him teach dance lessons. To quote, "Elvis watched every day, mentally adding the moves to the ones he already knew. He shuffled along in the shadows, unseen, knowing he would get a beating for not returning home on time after the dance lesson, but not caring" (Abani 166). This obscure observation transcends mere curiosity, evolving into an essential ritual of inner development and individuality. Elvis and Efua traverse the streets of Afikpo and watch films together, as Elvis earns money through dancing. These directionless wanderings represent their growing sovereignty and the fruitful transition to maturity.

Moreover, Elvis takes part in the Igbo traditional walk towards manhood in Afikpo. At the age of five, he is made to walk across his backyard to complete the distressing rite of passage ritual that impulsively shapes him into Igbo conceptions of manliness. This ritualistic walk signifies a violent rapture from innocence and forced acceptance of the harsh gender norms of his culture. In general, Elvis's *flânerie* in Afikpo is fraught with symbolic importance, representing his transformation from a child to a dancer and from a naive observer to a hesitant participant in traditional norms.

### **Flânerie In Urban Lagos**

As Elvis migrates to Lagos, he assumes the role of the *flâneur* sincerely. Elvis's experience is elucidated by financial distress and societal responsibility, as opposed to the traditional *flâneur* of European origin, which is defined by leisure and curiosity. The act of wandering is an essential requirement in the postcolonial Nigerian setting, rather than a leisurely gesture or artistic mediation. The conventional *flâneur*, strolling the city, represents a mode of detached exploration, but for Elvis, *flânerie* is a means of survival. Unlike the archetypal *flâneur*, whose explorations and watchfulness are typically purposeless aesthetic admiration, Elvis strides across Lagos, such as the shanties, bars, markets, beaches, clubs, and hotels, with the evident intention of meeting foreign tourists or local customers to whom he can impersonate Elvis Presley's dance moves and earn a source of income. Nevertheless, his hard work often remains unproductive and pointless, revealing the harsh socio-economic situation in Lagos, where being diligent does not guarantee recognition or appreciation. To quote:

Elvis strolled down to the ferry jetty as a cold wind began to blow. It had been a long day, and between Iddoh Park and Bar Beach, he had barely earned enough to get a good meal. It was hard eking out a living as an Elvis impersonator, haunting markets and train stations, as invisible to the commuters or shoppers as a real ghost. This evening, he had found himself dancing frantically against the coming abruptness of night, but nobody paid any attention; they all wanted to get home before the darkness brought its particular dangers. (30)

Moreover, the conventional flâneur is generally portrayed as detached and unaffected by the urban reality around him. In contrast, Elvis is intensely immersed in the city's chaos; he listens "...carefully to sounds, stories, scraps of quotations as well as search for clues amongst the 'dead data' of the metropolis – just like the detective; or in the archive – just like a historical social investigator ..." (Frisby 38). He is unable to escape the first-hand experience of urban reality, such as "...the smell of garbage from refuse dumps, unflushed toilets and stale bodies..." (Abani 10) or the noise of "Tin buckets scraping, the sounds of babies crying, infants yelling for food, and people hurrying but getting nowhere" (11). His impoverished neighbourhood, congested markets, and busy streets obstruct his capacity to maintain an aesthetic connection to his environment. However, Elvis's purposeful flânerie contributes to the creation of a psychogeographic map of Lagos, shedding light on its political, social, economic, and emotional magnitudes. The metropolitan landscape becomes deeply ingrained in Elvis' psyche, shaping his individuality and social identity.

Elvis differs significantly from the classic flâneur, who enjoys the social freedom to traverse the city without restriction. However, Elvis is constantly subjected to strict surveillance and control. His mobility is restrained by authoritarian power such as mafia, criminals, corrupt police officials, and cruel military authorities. A notable example occurs when he accidentally runs into a colonel at a dance bar and is charged and assaulted. To quote,

"Dancing, or collaborating to assault an army officer? Do you know that I am a full colonel?"

"It was an accident, sir."

"So you admit that you assaulted me intentionally?"

Before he could answer... six soldiers... came in at a fast trot."

Before he could answer, the front door of the club slammed open and six soldiers, who had obviously come with the officers and had been waiting outside, came in at a fast trot. (225)

Abani here powerfully depicts the unbalanced power dynamics that dominate public space in postcolonial Nigeria. As a young, needy individual, Elvis's incognito as well as his being subjected to relentless scrutiny and retaliation make him "...on the one hand, the man who feels himself observed by everyone and everything, the totally

suspicious person, on the other, the completely undiscoverable, hidden person" (Frisby 37). This duality is present in every move of his life.

During his *flânerie*, Elvis interacts with a diverse range of citizens, including beggars, gangsters, criminals, street vendors, drug dealers, musicians, police officers, army officials, and sex workers, providing a complex portrayal of Nigeria's social, cultural, and economic diversity. Walter Benjamin refers to this capacity of reading crowded impressions as "the phantasmagoria of the *flâneur*: reading off the occupation, the social origin, the character from the faces" (37). His interactions with the crowd contribute to a better understanding of the postcolonial challenges of living in Lagos. Unlike the conventional *flâneur*, Elvis assumes the roles of both an active observer and participant, gaining insight into the communal experiences of hardship, innovation, and resilience that define the metropolis of Lagos. His detached investigations and observations reveal the city's underground criminal networks and unconventional cultural expressions, such as street music, parties, and club dance. *Flânerie* thus becomes an effective narrative device to piece together a shattered sense of self-identity and national identity. Abani uses Elvis's observations to map not only the physical geography of Lagos, but also the emotional and cultural aspects of postcolonial Nigeria.

For Elvis, *flânerie* serves as a figurative journey of self-discovery, mapping both the physical terrain of Lagos and the internal landscape of identity, purpose, and personal aspirations. By the end of the novel, he has transformed into a new person as a result of the insights gained from his *flânerie* experiences. Elvis is no longer the innocent, impressionable youth of Afikpo. He has matured into a more self-aware, emotionally conscious young man, tamed by the urban realities of Lagos. Lagos, with its harsh conditions, adversity, and transient connections, serves as an ordeal for the evolution of his identity.

### **Conclusion**

Chris Abani deliberately subverts the romanticised portrayal of the *flâneur* to reveal the social wilderness of metropolitan Lagos. Through Elvis Oke, Abani reconfigures the *flâneur* from a figure of upper-class leisure into one negotiating hardships, impoverished conditions, systemic violence, corruption, and the socio-political unrest of postcolonial Nigeria, thus decoding the meaning of *flânerie* from aestheticising mobility to a form of critical obligation and mode of survival in the complex, fragmented landscape of rural Afikpo and urban Lagos. As Walter Benjamin suggests, it is not merely the *flâneur* exploring the city; it is the author "...exploring the texts of the city, the texts on the experience of modernity, the representations of modernity, all of which are themselves as labyrinthine as the metropolis itself" (43). Overall, by re-imagining the idealised *flâneur* figure, *Graceland* offers a raw, postcolonial psychogeography of Nigeria.

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