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A Tropical *Flâneuse* in Ahmedabad: *Flânerie* as a Decolonial Act

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Abstract

This paper reads Esther David's book *Ahmedabad: City with a Past* as a tropical *flâneuse's* exploration of the city of Ahmadabad. To this end, the article draws from Baudelaire and Benjamin's idea of the *flâneur*, and re-articulates this masculine and temperate character. Esther David, the decolonial tropical *flâneuse*, critiques neocolonialism, manifested through the nexus of capitalist globalization, rapid urbanization and consumerism that has drastically altered the face of the city. This is done mostly by bringing out Ahmedabad's hybrid identity of an old heritage city and a modern metropolis. The paper further analyzes the *flâneuse's* connection with the postcolonial identity of the city and her endeavour to extend *flânerie* to domestic interiors exploring their relationship vis-à-vis the city.

Keywords: decolonial *flâneuse*, tropical *flânerie*, global consumerism, neoliberal capitalism, neocolonial, postcolonial Indian city, domestic interior

The Tropical City of Ahmedabad

When Sultan Ahmed Shah built the walled city of Ahmedabad in 1411, as mentioned in Esther David's book *Ahmedabad: City with a Past* (2016), it was unimaginable that centuries later, capitalist globalizing forces would pervade every corner of the city. When Mahatma Gandhi, weaving khadi on his spinning wheel in Ahmedabad, encouraged colonized Indians to boycott British goods in favour of indigenous products, who could have imagined that less than a century later, neocolonialists would monopolize the Indian market and flood it with imported goods. Yet Ahmedabad has witnessed and survived it all, leading Howard Spodek to refer to it as the 'Shock City of Twentieth-Century India' (2011). In more recent times, the city has been drastically transformed as the post 1990s Indian economic reforms gripped the country in a nexus of capitalist globalization, rapid urbanization, and rampant consumerism. Essentially, the city has undergone a form of neocolonialism. Ahmedabad embodies the concept of yin and yang, with its contrasting old heritage city and modern areas together creating a relational whole, which forms the central theme of Esther David's book *Ahmedabad: City with a Past* (2016). Throughout her work, she compares the city's present with its past, often nostalgically ruminating about the older ways of life that have now disappeared. She not only traverses the city's trajectory of history, but also navigates extensively across the expanse of the city. We contend that her movement throughout the city, experiencing the kaleidoscopic metropolis and capturing its nuances, establishes her as a tropical *flâneuse*. We further contend that Esther David is a decolonial *flâneuse* who reveals the neocolonial aspects of neoliberal globalization through her act of *flânerie*. Also, unlike traditional *flâneurs* who confine their perambulations to the city streets, she explores domestic interiors, which have been underrepresented in city narratives.

In its simplest definition, a *flâneuse* is a female version of a *flâneur* who walks the city streets, observes the surroundings, and often documents the urbanscape (Elkin, 2017, chap. Flaneusing). Comfort and Papalas (2021, p.2) draw a parallel between a *flâneur* and a geographer in that the former's engagement with the cityscape is similar to the latter's engagement with Earth; both of them, metaphorically or literally, write about their respective subjects of concern. Given that meandering is central to *flânerie*, a brief idea of the climate conditions and pedestrian infrastructure of Ahmedabad is imperative to understanding its walkability. The tropical city of Ahmedabad experiences hot weather and has a semi-arid tropical climate. The city is expected to continue experiencing high temperatures in the future (Shroff, 2016;

Marcotullio, 2021; Azhar et al., 2014). Several studies have revealed the city's inadequate pedestrian infrastructure, which exposes walkers to the risk of severe injuries and fatalities, with the highest number of pedestrian deaths recorded in 2021 (Krambeck, 2006, p. 47; Leather et al., 2011, p. 4; Shastri, 2022; Times of India, 2022). These factors render Ahmedabad unsuitable for sauntering around by foot, particularly during busy hours and in the summer. Hence, Esther David prefers to wander around the city in an autorickshaw. Moreover, her mobility is also facilitated by the fact that Ahmedabad is considered one of the safest cities in India for women to travel and move around in alone, even at night (Iyer & Bhatt, 2017; Firstpost, 2013).

Esther David's work has a tropical imagery subtly built throughout the book. Summer is the longest season, influencing the daily routine of the citizens. Sabarmati, a monsoon-fed river flowing through the heart of the city, recedes during the hot months, offering playgrounds to youngsters, a temporary circus ground for amusement, or space for vegetable cultivation. To cope with heat stress, the inhabitants like to sip on 'panna,' a concoction prepared from raw mango. Interspersed throughout her book, are other mentions of summer fruits and delicious items prepared from them, creating an appetizing imagery of tropical flavours. Offering respite from the harsh heat, stand large old Banyan trees, providing cool shade even when the mercury goes up. The people, concerned for the birds, have built chabutras¹ around the city to provide them with water and food. Esther has lived all her life in Ahmedabad and knows the city inside and out. Her impassioned desire to experience the city in all its vibrancy takes her on frequent autorickshaw rides.

Following the *Flâneur* / *Flâneuse*: From Past to Present

Epitomized in Charles Baudelaire's work *The Painter of Modern Life*, the *flâneur* emerges as a key figure of mobility, wandering and observing the streets of nineteenth-century Paris. Constantin Guys, Baudelaire's quintessential *flâneur*, was characterized by a heightened curiosity to read the modern city through its citizens (1964, p. 5-9). He also compares the *flâneur* to a dandy, an aristocratic, well-groomed, and non-conformist man (1964, p.9). Walter Benjamin, informed by Baudelaire, expands upon the theorization of *flânerie*² in his seminal work, *Arcades Project*. Baudelaire, himself a poet, saw the sensibilities of a poet in a *flâneur* (Tester, 1994, p.2), whereas for Benjamin, the Marxist thinker, the *flâneur* is one who goes

¹ A chabutra is a tower-like structure specially built to feed birds. Usually, it has an octagonal or pentagonal compartment at the top, open on all sides, so that birds can use it.

² *flânerie* is activity undertaken by the *flâneur*

“botanizing on asphalt” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 372). Benjamin believed that the figure of the *flâneur* was endemic only to the nineteenth-century Paris arcades: “Paris created the type of the *flâneur*” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 417). It was apprehended that Haussmann’s ambitious Paris renovation project, which involved razing down the arcades to the ground, would relegate the *flâneur* to a redundant historical figure. However, Vila-Cabanes advocates against Benjamin’s reduction of the *flâneur* to a particular time and space and contends that “the *flâneur* continues to thrive, now on a global scale, as a topic in artistic production and also as a paradigm for the interpretation of urban existence” (Vila-Cabanes, 2020, p. ix). Susan Buck-Morss (1986, p.103) introduces an alternative way of imagining the *flâneur* beyond its historicity and as an embodiment of particular aspects common to contemporary society: “If the *flâneur* has disappeared as a specific figure, it is because the perceptive attitude which he embodied saturates modern existence, specifically, the society of mass consumption”. Buck-Morss further proposes the resurrection of the *flâneur* “into a myriad of forms,” which however still “bear his traces, as *Urform*”³ (Buck-Morss 1986, 105). And she notes that even Benjamin discovers the *flâneur* figure within other urban inhabitants such as the reporter, the detective, and the photographer (Buck-Morss 1989, p. 306).

Both Baudelaire and Benjamin perceived the *flâneur* as a male figure. Although an urban observer as a female figure is not uncommon in their works, such a figure is usually described as the “prostitute, the widow, the old lady, the lesbian, the murder victim, and the passing unknown woman” by Baudelaire (Wolff, 1990, p. 41), or is studied as a commodity by Benjamin. Keith Tester contends that a woman can never become a *flâneur* since “A woman idling on the street is to be ‘consumed’ and ‘enjoyed’ along with the rest of the sights that the city affords” (Tester, 1994, p. 28). Tester suggests that women on the streets were the ones to be observed and not the ones to observe, and his remarks conflate a number of issues that need to be studied separately. Besides the obvious commodification of women, such arguments discourage any probe into female *flânerie* by extinguishing any possibility of discovering female *flâneurs* historically. Also, as a negative impact of such an argument, the women who are already acknowledged as urban observers are stripped of any agency. Walter Benjamin’s unfinished work, *Arcades Project*, contains Benjamin’s notes and quotations from other works that he wished to draw from for his project on Paris. A particular citation is relevant to our study. He quotes Charles Blanc’s observation that the apparel of French women before the Second Empire was designed in such a way that it hindered movement (Benjamin, 2002, p. 74). However,

³ A close translation of the German word ‘Urform’ would be ‘original form’.

for the sake of mobility, women started to ditch the voluminous long garments, and their fashion changed (Benjamin, 2002, p.74). Coincidentally, it is around the same time that Deborah Parsons suggests that the prototypes of female *flâneurs* emerged. Parsons (2000, p.6) contends that women as perambulating urban observers emerged in the “late nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” contradicting the urban imaginary developed through the male perspective. Karin Baumgartner presents a real-life instance of a *flâneuse* in the early nineteenth century in young Helmina von Chezy, the chief editor of a monthly journal, *Französische Miscellen*. Chezy analyzed and provided commentary on different aspects of Paris from a woman’s perspective and “reveals that female spectatorship, was, indeed, possible, at the beginning of the nineteenth century” (Karin, 2008, p.363-364). Karin (2008, p.343) also refers to Deborah Parsons finding that the term “*flâneur / flâneuse*” was first used in a gender-neutral sense in 1808, much before Baudelaire popularized it.

However, the above observations are strictly confined to the European context. The *flâneur’s* movements have been largely restricted to Europe and America. In Benjamin’s *Berlin childhood around 1900* and his contemporary Franz Hessel’s *Walking in Berlin*, readers encounter *flâneurs* sauntering the streets of the German capital. Dickens has been widely read as a London *flâneur* (Hollington, 1981; Willis, 2003), a label attached to Ian Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd in contemporary times. Criticisms of theorizations on the *flâneur* point out that its scope is limited to “cities in the global north – such as Paris, London, and New York and thus is geo-historically entwined with the colonial metropole” (Chaudhury & Lundberg, 2018). To a great extent, the *flâneur* seems to have been restricted to the Northern Temperate region, while his female equivalent is seldom observed perambulating outside the Euro-American milieu. Anita Lundberg has stressed the need for new scholarly explorations pertaining to the tropics (2016), and though there have been notable improvements in other subject areas, not enough forays have been made into the potentially rich domain of *flânerie* in tropical cities (Chaudhury & Lundberg, 2018, p. 79). There has been a recent development in studying the theme of the *flâneuse* in the tropics. In *The Uncertainty of Hope*, the female protagonist’s perambulations through the Zimbabwean city of Harare are interpreted as acts of *flânerie* (Pfalzgraf, 2021). The central character in *Inqilab ka Ek Din* by Zahida Zaidi is read as a “radical flâneuse” (Rasheed, 2021). Sneha Chaudhury and Anita Lundberg shed light on the previously unexplored area of the tropical *flâneuse* by ethnographically exploring the centres of art in the tropical metropolis of Singapore. Our article positions the *flâneuse* in the tropical city of Ahmedabad, a heritage city that also mirrors the rapid forces of neocolonialism in the garb of globalization and neoliberalism.

Wandering in Ahmedabad, the Real and the Mythical

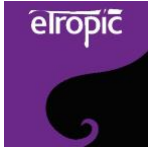
The concept of the *flâneur* or *flâneuse* bears resemblance to that of a tourist, albeit with a nuanced distinction between the two. Typically, a tourist embarks on a journey to “a place away from home” (Wearing & Wearing, 1996, p. 231), adheres to a pre-planned itinerary, and consequently, tends to visit specific sites in a rapid manner (Hahn, 2012, p. 208). In contrast, a *flâneur* or *flâneuse* is often a local resident (Morawski, 2014, p. 184) whose leisurely amblings enable meticulous observation of the urban spectacle. Esther David, who was born and raised in Ahmedabad, is intimately familiar with the city and, like a true *flâneuse*, embarks on regular expeditions around Ahmedabad. Her book takes the reader on a comprehensive tour of her city, covering its bustling bazaars, winding gullies⁴, historic pols⁵, bridges, mosques, temples, old bungalows, lush gardens, heritage architecture, and also the esteemed Indian Institute of Management. Through her vivid descriptions, she acquaints the reader with the city's culinary offerings, including the delectable treats found in bakeries and eateries, as well as the tropical fruits and trees that are characteristic of the area, such as banyan, palm, and peepul. Other highlights of her tour include the picturesque riverfront, the vibrant kite market, and various other noteworthy sights.

A city is not a mere topographical location with a built environment. It becomes an organic whole that breathes through its inhabitants, and “What are we but our stories?” (Patterson, 2004, p.95). Esther David undertakes her *flânerie* through the history of Ahmedabad, the official as well as the mythical and fantastical. While taking the reader on a tour of the city through her writing, she stops at landmarks and places to reveal the myths, stories, and legends⁶ associated with them. There are centuries-old stories: of Goddess Laxmi being made to stay back in the city for its prosperity; of a saint beckoning the river Sabarmati with outstretched arms, requesting her to flow through the city when she had changed her course; of sage Manecknath, after whom Maneck Chwok is named, taking down walls by pulling out threads from a quilt; of Hasti Bibi healing children by making them laugh; of “shaking minarets” and “sites dedicated to a walking saint, coughing saint and talking saint” and innumerable legends that lend the city a magical character (David, 2016, p. 52-54, 80-81, 59, 68).

⁴ In India, a gully refers to a narrow lane

⁵ “A Pol is like a cool, shaded lane, as the close proximity of the houses does not allow direct sunlight to fall in a Pol house, which is a typical architectural form of Ahmedabad. Known as vernacular architecture, Pol houses are typical residential areas in the walled city, where people live in close proximity to each other like one big family” (David, 2016, p. 37).

⁶ These terms are used by the author herself.



Contemporary scientific thought, which is founded on reason and logic, discards anything that cannot be validated empirically, yet these oral stories of the tropical city have survived in the imagination of its citizens.

Decolonizing the Neocolonial City: Exposing Neoliberal Globalization

Neoliberalism is a term used to describe economic theories and policies that have gained momentum since the late 20th century (Steger & Roy, 2010, p. 22; Thomas, 2007, p. 91). Around this time, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO)—the major players in global economic policy—exercised pressure on debt-ridden, developing nations to liberalize their economies (Steger & Roy, 2010, p. 53). Neoliberals advocate for global capitalism, supported by free market policy, reduced tax regulations, and limited state intervention, and oppose governmental spending on social welfare programs and public services. (Harvey, 2007, p. 2; Antonio, 2007, p. 67; Patel, 2022, p. 1; Kotz, 2022, p. 64). Neoliberalism and globalization emerged concurrently, with the former playing a significant role in promoting the latter: “globalization...was also a direct consequence of the worldwide dominance of neoliberal ideology” (Steger & Roy, 2010, p. 51). Arjun Appadurai argues that globalization, the transnational flow of goods, people, ideas, and cultural practices, is not a new phenomenon in history, but in contemporary times it has assumed a greater “speed, scale, and volume” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 37).

Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, argued that even after the postcolonized countries achieved freedom from colonial rule, they were still controlled by their ex-colonizers as well as superpowers like America through transnational corporations and international monetary bodies. He refers to this as neo-colonialism, which, he explains, is more “difficult to detect and resist than the direct control exercised by classic colonialism” (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 178). David Madeley’s book *A People’s World: Alternatives to Economic Globalization* is derived from interviews with experts on globalization. Some of the interviewees, like Vandana Shiva and Devinder Sharma, share their apprehension that economic globalization is just a facade of “new colonialism” (Madeley, 2003, p. 20). Shiva contends that the type of integration that globalization aims for is completely aligned with corporate interests, with little intention to promote positive connections between communities worldwide. Challenging the notion that globalization is a recent phenomenon, she argues that “it has happened before in history, it came earlier as colonialism” (cited in Madeley, 2003, p. 20). Sharma perceives globalization as a system that connects the rich and influential individuals across the world, who wield significant influence over

governments, leading to their ultimate control over the entire world. Madeley (2003, p. 20-23) shows, along with Shiva and Sharma, that many other intellectuals believe that globalization strives to assist multinational corporations in earning maximum profit from the global market and engenders a power structure in which global capitalists assume a dominant and exploitative role, thus perpetuating a system reminiscent of colonialism. Greer Hartwiger (2016, p. 2) argues that globalization should not be perceived as a “recent, disjunctive phenomenon” since it will make “the historical system of global capitalism” that was ideologically colonial appear as ahistorical.

In the 1990s, India's economic liberalization ushered in a new era marked by phenomenal growth in information technology, the service sector, foreign direct investment, industrial expansion, etc., and Ahmedabad emerged as one of the key contributors in the nation's manufacturing sector (Spodek, 2011, p. 10). Esther David, the tropical *flâneuse*, wanders about Ahmedabad, observing the transformational effects of neoliberal globalization on the financial capital of Gujarat, just like the 19th-century *flâneur* roamed about Paris, interpreting the high capitalism that gripped the French capital. However, unlike Benjamin's *flâneur*, who to a certain degree reveled in the new modern forms of the city, Esther disapproves of the city's changing socio-cultural landscape, where subtle forces of neocolonialism are detected. Her endeavour to challenge the new face of the city emerges as a decolonial act. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2013, p. 73) explain that decolonization entails the revelation and deconstruction of all manifestations of colonial power. This encompasses the unveiling of covert facets of institutional and cultural entities that perpetuated colonial power and continue to exist even after the attainment of political autonomy.

Malcolm Barnard argues that globalization is similar to colonialism because it also entails the domination of one group by another (Barnard, 2020, p. 746). The dominant groups do not necessarily maintain their power through physical coercion, but through the inculcation of a specific ideology in the consciousness of subjugated individuals. Like the classic colonialists, the international capitalists, mostly from the temperate North, disseminate the narrative of their culture being superior to the rest, mostly the tropical South, with complete disregard for local cultures, traditions, and indigenous knowledge systems. In a decolonial act, Esther David aims to expose the cultural imperialism perpetuated by the neoliberal capitalists through the encouragement of imitation of western culture and adoption of western customs in various domains of human existence, including language, attire, and dietary habits. In *Decolonising the*

Mind (1986), Ngugi wa Thiong'o requested African writers to discard the colonizer's language, which acted as an instrument in perpetuating neocolonialism. Majhanovich (2009) argues that in Asia, the English language has become an instrument of neo-colonization and globalization. Esther points out that unlike her generation, which attended Gujarati-medium schools, the current generation mostly goes to English-medium schools. The citizens' proclivity for English is causing Gujarati to lose its prominence and become more like a secondary language. Her depiction of the attrition of the Gujarati language is a means of promoting awareness of the need to preserve indigenous languages. This effort can be viewed as an act of resistance against the neocolonial agenda of promoting the status of English as the lingua franca. Arjun Appadurai (1996, p. 41) argued that globalization is associated with "instruments of homogenization" like "language hegemonies and clothing styles," both of which have been probed by the *flâneuse*, Esther, to decolonize the culture of western admiration and imitation. She points out that the traditional Gujarati way of draping sarees has become redundant, and women often prefer jeans and shorts as casual wear. Men too are seen wearing jeans, shorts, and 'Bermudas'. Western foods like "double-decker club sandwiches, vegetarian hamburgers, pasta..." (David, 2016, p. 28), have proliferated, and feasting on them while sitting in a posh restaurant or a shopping mall bolsters the consumer's idea of being global and cosmopolitan.

Sunil Bhatia (2017, p. 36) argues that shopping malls, skyscrapers, and modernistic constructions reflect the "larger neoliberal cultural and social transformation that was occurring in much of urban India". Particularly, shopping malls are "symbols of Indian modernity that were giving rise to new narratives of mimicry, cultural icons, hybridity, elite mobility, and upper- and middle-class anxiety about being recognized as "global citizens"" (Bhatia 2017, p. 36). Hence, as a decolonial *flâneuse*, Esther visits shopping malls to observe and critique the global capitalists' success in creating a consumerist society, which has undergone a simultaneous neo-colonialization through the adoption of a western lifestyle. She mentions that malls have replaced non-functioning mills in Ahmedabad, following the trend of western countries. The exteriors of malls are designed to allure passersby to enter a space of westernized exclusivity, while the interiors flaunt an opulence that the middle class aspires to and the rich enjoy. In addition to the products on offer, ambience is commodified in these malls, through music, decor, attractive lighting, air conditioning, and the presence of well-dressed staff. The above argument plausibly explains Esther's observation that people visit malls not to buy essentials, but rather for family outings. She compares such a market place to a seductress who "comes in the most glamorous packaging" (David, 2016, p. 24) and explains that once lured into these malls, people cannot

return empty-handed. They fall into the trap of offers like “buy one get two free” and end up buying more than needed (David, 2016, p. 24). Arjun Appadurai (1996, p. 42) coined the phrase “fetishism of the consumer”, to refer to a consumer’s false assumption of having a say independent of the market’s allure and thus “being a real social agent”. Appadurai (1996, p. 42) argues that this illusion is weaved by the producer, who is “the real seat of agency”. Esther David’s observations on the allurements of shoppers to buy and consume more than necessary elucidate how the ‘fetishism of the customer’ is actualized in the shopping mall. These shopping malls, along with other upscale market complexes and luxurious restaurants, with their enclosed air-conditioned spaces, not only keep out the tropical heat but also provide an exclusive space where the Indian landscape and its environment are rendered invisible and absent. Their western interiors provide the customers the appropriate space to imitate the western images that have been mediated to them through television, newspapers, etc., and which Appadurai calls mediascapes.

It seems that Esther carried on her *flânerie* in malls with the sole purpose of decolonizing those spaces, as she never made any purchases from there. She prefers to buy items from the traditional markets and bazaars and from shopkeepers she has known for years. She mentions that in the past, housewives would explore the city at length to buy the best-quality essentials at reasonable prices. Esther still performs these *flânerie*-like wanderings in the city to buy local items. Shopping in the old way entails establishing a shopkeeper-customer relationship where both get to know each other; that does not happen through “impersonal shopping at malls” (David, 2016, p. 24). This change in the shopping culture also mirrors the fact that, due to globalization, multinational corporations have monopolized the market, impacting local and small-scale enterprises and industries. For instance, in shopping malls, the proliferation of international brands selling western products is starkly noticeable.

At the very onset of her book, Esther David shows us that the capitalist phantasmagoria that once presented itself in the arcades of Paris, has consumed even the interior and domestic spheres of Ahmedabad. Her book commences with her visit to Zen, the home of an affluent industrialist. The house named Zen, which in Buddhism refers to a meditative and relaxed state of mind, ironically makes her uncomfortable and feel choked (David, 2016, p. 6). The house is the epitome of the amalgamation of luxury and state-of-the-art technology. It had interiors, staircases, a dining table, and chairs made of imported Chinese glass, while cameras and intercoms were installed in every corner. Bedrooms resembled movie sets, with food

elevators that transported meals directly to each room. The bathroom featured a digitally controlled sauna and steam bath, and the kitchen was equipped with a designer chimney, enormous freezers, and numerous other modern appliances. (David, 2016, p. 6). Zen must have been to Esther what the arcades with glass and iron architecture appeared to the Parisian *flâneur*, both reflecting nouveau technology and society's consumerist indulgence. However, all the pomp and splendour of Zen doesn't entice Esther, and she yearns to return to her childhood home in the old city. The tropical *flâneuse* is able to challenge the phantasmagoria of Zen and refers to it as an "unreal world" (David, 2016, p. 2). The glass dining table and chair do not serve their purpose and are merely showpieces. The inhabitants of the house hardly eat together: "Everybody ate separately" (David, 2016, p. 4), indicating an alienation and estrangement common to contemporary society. Zen is thus an illusion, a phantasmagoric simulation of an idyllic world of progress measured by consumerism.

She challenges the prevalent capitalist regime that fosters a society of endless greed, mindless consumption, and a craving for instant gratification. The pace of transformation of cities reflects the modern obsession with speed. The historical *flâneur* was characterized by a leisurely, idle walk, but the traffic and congestion of present-day Ahmedabad make slow-paced mobility an impossibility. Buck-Morss (1986, p. 102) attributes this to the "speed-up principles of mass production," which had already started hampering *flânerie* by the time of Benjamin. Esther David, the tropical *flâneuse*, shows that this 'speed-up principle' has permeated every aspect of human lives in contemporary times, one of the prominent examples being the changing eating and food habits of Gujaratis, who now consume a lot of fast food and packaged food and frequently eat out at restaurants. Fast food consumption denotes society's affliction with speed, where each person is in a rush (Smart, 2014, p. 173). David contrasts this obsession with fast food and processed food to the older food habits of Gujaratis, when women prepared snacks and pickles at home, cooked traditional Gujarati dishes and shared them with neighbours, and often complimented those who prepared mouth-watering delicacies. Hence, food was not only a consumable item but also a means to foster social bonds and maintain community feelings. However, fast food and restaurant cuisine lack such social elements and exacerbate the alienation of contemporary society and the obliteration of cultural memories. Besides, the availability of innumerable cuisines from across the world mirrors a society where one is spoilt with food choices. It reflects the consumerist attitude of people whose eating habits convey a sense of gluttony. Esther also highlights the commodification and commercialization of festivities and their associated customs like garba, a traditional Gujarati dance form that is now typically

organized in exclusive clubs and necessitates the purchase of admission tickets for participation (David, 2016, p. 44).

The Eurocentric approach prioritizes writing over oral traditions (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 75), and to challenge this subordination of unwritten narratives, Esther David deliberately weaves oral narratives such as myths and legends into the fabric of her book. She narrates the fabled tale of Ahmedabad's origin, according to which Sultan Ahmed Shah decided to build the city in its current location after he witnessed a hare attack and chase a dog which attempted to prey upon the hare's offspring. Impressed by the spirit of the hare, he decided to build his city there. These oral stories, lacking written documentation, are typically shared among the inhabitants, ensuring their preservation over the years. Esther gathers a story of Sarkhej Roza, an old mosque and tomb complex, from autorickshaw drivers and the man who keeps slippers at the Roza. Legend has it that once a long silver chain hung from a ceiling of the tomb and when some thieves tried to steal it, the chain formed a noose around them pulling them upwards and dropping them afterwards. Though the chain is still there, nobody dares to touch it now. There is also a legend associated with Shah-e-Alam Roja that houses the tomb of a woman. The woman conceived a child after seeking blessings from Shah Alam but the child's gender would change every time it visited Shah Alam; until it was permanently turned into a boy upon further request by the mother. At the end of the book, Esther acknowledges the citizens who shared with her the stories of Ahmedabad. These stories form part of the collective consciousness of the city.

The notion that neoliberal globalization is a form of colonialism is proved by its profit-driven objective of exploiting natural resources, similar to the actions of colonial powers in the past (Lodigiani, 2020; Harvey, 2007, p. 174). Esther David, at one time, resided in a location known as Ambawadi, which was named after a mango orchard that once thrived there. Urbanization has destroyed the orchard completely and replaced it with apartments and shopping malls, leaving only the name as a reminder of its former existence. While journeying through a rural area in a bus, Esther notices a hoarding about New Maninagar, indicating an upcoming urbanization project. She apprehends the chopping down of old trees to make way for high-rise buildings and shopping complexes. She captures the rustic scenery with green fields, cowherds in traditional attire, their domestic animals, small waterbodies, mango groves, and banana plantations. Her declaration of admiration for this rural life challenges the narrative of neoliberalism, that considers the destruction of natural environments and the expansion of urban areas as development.

Postcolonial *Flânerie* in Ahmedabad

Baudelaire defines a *flâneur* by examining whom he believes is its quintessential manifestation, Constantin Guys, who is "very cosmopolitan" (Baudelaire, 1964, p. 6). Simon Gikandi picks up this cosmopolitan trait and ascribes it to what he defines as a postcolonial *flâneur*. Adebayo Williams is probably the first to coin the phrase 'postcolonial flaneur' without explaining it. He posits that a *flâneur* espouses a master narrative because of his lack of acknowledgement of other *flâneurs* and hence their narratives (Williams, 1997, p. 821). Based on Williams's writing, Greer Hartwiger (2016, p. 6) suggests that "the postcolonial flâneur is a figure who might undo the master narrative of globalization and resituate it within the context of colonial projects". As evident in our previous analysis, Esther David assumes a similar role, decolonizing and exposing the global capitalists' veiled attempt at psychological colonization, particularly in the global south. Thus, the principal purpose of a postcolonial *flâneur* / *flâneuse* is to decolonize any existing forms of the colonial system. However, there is a conspicuous void in the literature of postcolonial *flânerie*. First, it predominantly emphasizes the immigrant experience, whether in the host or home country, with little attention given to the prospect of postcolonial *flânerie* by locals. Gikandi, Hartwiger, and Sendton assign the epithet 'postcolonial' to the cosmopolitan *flâneur*, who is not only a person of privilege, but also an immigrant perceiving the city both as an insider as well as an outsider (Gikandi, 2009; Hartwiger, 2016, p. 7; Sandten, 2020). Second, the postcolonial *flâneur* figure has always been perceived as male; until very recently, Rania Said presented an alternative situation, studying postcolonial *flâneuses* in Tunisia. She notes that critics who have attempted to advance the theme of postcolonial *flânerie*, such as Hartwiger and Minnard, have used "a male wanderer in western metropolises" as their subject of study (Said, 2021, p. 19). Esther's work, featuring an indigenous *flâneuse* in a postcolonial urban context, serves as a compelling case study for addressing the gap in critical understanding of postcolonial *flânerie*.

The classic *flâneur* assumed an objective position while immersing himself⁷ in the crowd, thereby embodying a hybrid identity of both an insider and an outsider. The postcolonial *flâneuse* embodies a similar hybrid character, but in a distinct manner. Within the same city, Esther feels comfortable, relaxed, and enjoys wandering in certain areas, and conversely, experiences a sense of unease, displacement, and apprehension in specific locations. The first category comprises the old walled city in

⁷ The classic *flâneur* was mostly imagined as a male.

general, and locations that have preserved a traditional, pre-neoliberal atmosphere and a connection to nature in particular. On the contrary, the second category pertains to places that prominently exhibit the effects of globalization, neoliberal capitalism, urbanization, and consumerism, such as towering skyscrapers and opulent shopping centres. The pervasive effects of globalization causing the postcolonial *flâneur* to experience a sense of “being out of place” have also been echoed by Minnard (2013, p. 84). Esther, as a postcolonial *flâneuse*, finds it difficult to adapt to an ultra-modern life, which was previously depicted in her uneasiness and awkwardness at shopping malls and the lavish house of Zen. In another instance, upon relocating to an upscale neighborhood known as Satellite area, she finds herself unable to acclimatize and consequently opts to rent out her apartment. Cecile Sandten (2020, p. 204) highlights the potential of a postcolonial *flâneur*, as depicted in Amit Chaudhuri’s *A New World*, to challenge the concepts of speed and progress inherent in modern and postmodern urbanity by observing mundane objects and places. Here, postcolonial *flâneuse*, Esther David, refutes the neoliberal idea of progress by continuing to practice some aspects of older, disappearing ways of living. Shunning modern shopping centres and malls, she procures all her goods from “shops tucked away in hidden lanes” (David, 2016, p. 24). She had a tough time finding an expert to repair a vintage wood and cane planter’s chair since its type has now been replaced by plastic alternatives.

Ahmedabad holds a significant position in India's history of resistance against British colonialism, being home to Mahatma Gandhi’s Sabarmati Ashram. The Ashram also houses Gandhi’s residential cottage, a museum, a library and book store selling books, and CDs of Gandhi’s *bhajans*. The Ashram serves as a site of memory of India’s colonial past. Gandhi occupies a legendary position in India's freedom struggle, and being within the premises of his residence evokes a profound sense of being in the physical world once inhabited by Gandhi himself. Esther mentions that being in the Ashram and sometimes touching the bark of a tree beside Gandhi’s cottage makes her feel blessed (David, 2016, p. 92). She further informs us that even international tourists take back with them a small piece of bark from the tree as a souvenir (David, 2016, p. 92). Gandhi's stature surpasses that of an ordinary human being to such an extent that the material remnants associated with him have acquired a totemic significance.

In Ahmedabad, Gandhi started the Swadeshi movement to establish India's economic self-sufficiency and combat British economic dominance by advocating for the boycott of British goods and promotion of indigenous products. In response to

Gandhi's appeal, numerous textile mills emerged in Ahmedabad. Hence, these mills, in a way, symbolized India's rejection of foreign goods and emphasis on indigenous products and a self-sufficient economy. However, around the 1980s and 90s, these mills started closing down and recently many of them have been razed to the ground. Shopping malls have come up in their place. Esther David recalls that the skyline of the city used to be lined with the chimneys of these mills, and the city used to wake up to the sound of sirens (David, 2016, p. 36). The disappearance of these mills has, in a way, led to obliteration of what also served as sites of collective memory of India's anti-colonial movement. Yet, individuals attempt to preserve these remnants of the past. Esther mentions how a paan⁸ seller, Kailashsinh Chauhan, roamed around the city on his bicycle, carrying a camera he bought with his life's savings, just to capture the closed mills. These mills had an indirect connection to the city's artistic heritage, given that many of their owners were affluent and engaged in philanthropic endeavours. The mill owners played a pivotal role in establishing major educational institutions and sponsoring remarkable architectural projects by renowned architects like Le Corbusier and Louis Khan.

Esther David also highlights Gandhi's contribution to Gujarat's art and architecture. He was a source of encouragement to Ravisankar Raval, who transformed Ahmedabad into a significant art destination. Gandhi played a pivotal role in strengthening the artistic ties between Tagore's Santiniketan in Bengal and Chitra Kala Sangh in Gujarat. The lasting impact of this connection remains evident even today. The city is inhabited by various unrecognized talented artists and craftsmen. During her *flânerie* around the city, she meets women living in huts, among whom she discovers talented artists. She meets Devobeen, a skilled quilt designer, and Lavingben, an illiterate widow who recycled gunny bags to feed her seven children and yet discovered her gift as a sculptor. Esther discovered another "accomplished craftsperson" in Pushpa Rajaram, who approached Esther for work, to earn a living after Pushpa's husband met with an accident (David, 2016, p. 134).

The Interior as a Mirror of the Exterior

Baudelaire defined the perfect *flâneur* as a man of the crowd who would be comfortable "everywhere" outside home (Baudelaire, 1964, p. 9). His description implicitly projects the home interiors and the exteriors of the city streets in binary contrast to each other. Benjamin's theorizations on the *flâneur* and nineteenth-

⁸ Paan is a betel leaf wrapped around areca nut and various fillings, offering a distinct blend of flavours and mild stimulant properties when chewed.

century Paris, which notably inform urban culture studies, also make this chasm perceptible (Marcus, 1999). Sharon Marcus points out that Benjamin assigned a rigid definition to the domestic interior while a flexibility of meaning was noted in his reference to the street or exterior: “Benjamin suggests that while the street can be “homelike” and “cozy” and still be a street, homes can only retain their domestic character if they are enclosed, hidden, static” (1999, p. 13). Not only Benjamin’s essays, but, as Marcus elucidates, other seminal books on Paris have presented home and city as irreconcilable entities. These books show a disparity in representation of the interiors in city narratives:

The list of sites they identify as urban includes parks, boulevards, sewers, cafes, monuments, barricades, markets, world’s fairs, department stores, restaurants, hotels, transportation and of course, streets, but the houses that dominated the built environment of Paris do not enter their lists of urban location (Marcus, 1999, p. 6).

Rob Shields (2014, p. 65) regards *flânerie* as “a spatial practice of specific sites: the interior and exterior public spaces of the city”. However, the interiors Shields lists are public spaces like arcades and malls, and not domestic spheres. Morag Shiach traces the underrepresentation of domestic interiors in the studies of modernity. Shiach (2005, p. 252-253) highlights Walter Benjamin and Michel de Certeau’s assertion that the modernist spirit of transgression was exhibited through walking across city streets. She also notes that Benjamin and de Certeau’s argument was critiqued by Janet Wolff, who contended that such a subversive act of walking was a privilege limited to men and hence gendered (2005, p. 253). Wolff’s argument is countered by Rachel Bowlby’s reading of Virginia Woolf as a *flâneuse*. Bowlby argued that the modern city allowed women to be consumers, a status they could attain by leaving the domestic space and venturing out into the streets, an act of subversion (Shiach, 2005, p. 254). Even though Virginia Woolf’s essays have a substantial amount of writing devoted to rooms and interior spaces, Bowlby’s reading completely ignores them (Shiach, 2005, p. 254). Analyzing the works of Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and Ezra Pound, Shiach sheds light on the domestic space, heretofore underrepresented in urban writings. However, an exploration of fast-paced modernization in a tropical city through a study of its domestic interiors, has not been undertaken as of yet.

Growing up in a joint family surrounded by women, Esther David observed traditionally female-dominated spaces like the kitchen and hence could decipher the

impact of neoliberal globalization on the configurations of these internal household worlds. New technology modernized the kitchen and interiors of the house, but the sisterhood once shared among women disappeared because families became nuclear. She nostalgically writes about household tools and items that once formed a crucial part of her family's quotidian lives but are no longer in use, such as a sev⁹ making machine, a big water heating vessel called a bumbo, jars for homemade pickles, and a dining table used for miscellaneous purposes. She perceived their worth in the value those items added to their lives, both because of their utility and their association over the years. Yet, in the end, they were sold off as scrap materials, their use value being completely overshadowed by exchange value, a phenomenon characteristic of capitalism. The term 'use value' refers to the worth of any product based on the purpose it serves, while 'exchange value' refers to the amount of goods and services it can fetch when exchanged in the market (Beasley-Murray, 2000, p.106; Keen, 1993, p.103). Marx suggests that in an economic exchange, the customer's motive is to consume goods, whereas the capitalist aims to "realize capital" and considers only the exchange value, and hence in "capitalism, the economy is organized around and driven by exchange rather than use" (Beasley-Murray, 2000, p.106). Esther seems to be fully aware of capitalism's disregard for old, discarded, and non-functional things and their possibility of being obliterated from social history. She resists this phenomenon, ascertaining each item's value through remembering and physically collecting them like Benjamin's *flâneur* once collected the fleeting images of the modern city.

The contemporary fast paced world has taken to ready-made packaged food, and the older ways of preparing delicacies at home are slowly being forgotten. Just like Esther David tries to archive redundant household items, she aims to preserve the previous culture of food preparation in her writing. Earlier, recipes were treated like legacies handed down through generations that were not to be tampered with. Their preparation processes were detailed and supervised by the elderly women in the house. Food was cooked on coal stoves. Esther's grandmother's advice to cook the perfect mutton biriyani was all about the right intensity of flame, and the placement of the burning coal, and an appropriate technique to seal the lid of the cooking vessel (David, 2016, p. 10). If Baudelaire's *flâneur* carried out non-ambulatory food *flânerie* in cafes and restaurants (Smart, 2014, p. 166), Esther does the same, but in the domestic interior. She also depicts how the mango was used to prepare items like pickles, aam panna, and mango juice, and even the leftovers of the fruit were used

⁹ Sev is a type of Indian snack

to prepare soup. Her constant depiction of tropical dishes reaffirms her status as a tropical *flâneuse*.

Final Musings on the Tropical *Flâneuse*

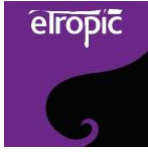
In spite of the many unfavorable conditions for *flânerie* in Ahmedabad, Esther David's unhindered movement throughout the city and her observations and documentation of diverse aspects of the city successfully establish her as a decolonial tropical *flâneuse*. She explores Ahmedabad, the geographical city as well as the fantastical city built on oral narratives, that lives on in the collective imagination of its citizens. Her book offers new perspectives on understanding the effects of capitalist globalization and consumerism, and their inherent neocolonialist tendencies, on the tropical city of Ahmedabad through the eyes of a *flâneuse*. She exposes the hegemony of neoliberal capitalists, whose monopoly in the global market is reminiscent of the classic colonizers' domination of the masses in the colonies. Similar to the colonizers in the past, the transnational corporations and western superpowers, who form the coterie of global capitalists, aim to fulfill the neocolonial purpose of extracting maximum profits from the global south. To this end, they promote mindless consumerism cloaked in the narrative of development and progress. These capitalist neoliberals, holding the reigns of the global market, hence emerge as neo-colonizers. Esther emerges as a decolonial *flâneuse* in her deconstruction of the narrative of progress championed by capitalist enterprises. The decolonial *flâneuse* exposes the attempt of neo-colonizers to justify the exploitation of nature in the name of urban development and to subjugate the local language, culture, and knowledge systems to perpetuate cultural imperialism. She reveals the effect of globalization in Ahmedabad by comparing its past with its present and by drawing attention to a spectrum of changes such as in architecture, green cover, interpersonal relationships, lifestyles including food and eating habits, fashion, domestic interiors, etc. She also exhibits the traits of a postcolonial *flâneur*, feeling at once like an insider and an outsider in the tropical city. Finally, Esther David explores the effect of the city's transformation on its domestic spheres. On an ending note, her wanderings through the tropical city of Ahmedabad have the potential to spread awareness about, as well as encourage women's mobility across, tropical cities, inspiring them to assume the role of *flâneuse* and also contribute to *flânerie*-writings in the tropics.

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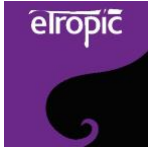
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