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A Feminist and Cultural Reconstruction of the Self: Rereading Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*

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Prajyoti Niketan College, Pudukad.Email: drmarypaul@gmail.comOrcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4664-8259>**Abstract**

Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India and Indonesia* occupies a unique place in modern literature. The novel has been translated into many languages and was on the New York Times Best Seller list for more than two years. A memoir that records the personal life of the author, the text explores spirituality, cultural differences and the energising experience of emerging from a painful divorce and an equally traumatic rebound relationship. Gilbert travels to Italy, India and Indonesia, spending her time equally among the three places. Each place represents a different stage of healing: pleasure, prayer and equilibrium. The novel emerged into a scenario in which self-help literature was on the rise. This paper examines how the journey undertaken by Gilbert is an assertive attempt to reconstruct her fragmented female identity. The paper scrutinizes how the new identity is forged through influential cultural factors layered along the tripartite structure. Each destination is not a place to visit but rather a deliberate attempt to venture into a new redemptive scheme, designed to reconstruct the self. *Eat Pray Love* remains a cultural touchstone, due to the fusion of diverse elements into one: the feminist overtones of the novel, the cultural implications embedded in the text that reproduce and expand the original version into infinite possibilities, the exotic lure of Oriental lifestyles that hold promises of rejuvenation and the fantasy associated with travelling to new places. Read closely, the text emerges as a deliberate projection of self-mythology.

Keywords: Cultural studies, Feminist concerns, Oriental overtones, Self-discovery, Travel narrative

Introduction

Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India and Indonesia* has carved a niche for itself in contemporary literature. A travel narrative that records the personal life of the author, the memoir explores spirituality, cultural differences and the energising experience of emerging from a painful divorce and an equally traumatic rebound relationship. Gilbert

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‘finds herself’ again, by travelling across three different places in a year, pursuing diverse venues of recuperation: pleasure in Italy, devotion in India and balancing everything together through a romantic relationship in Indonesia: “It wasn’t so much that I wanted to thoroughly explore the countries themselves . . . It was more that I wanted to thoroughly explore one aspect of myself . . .” (Gilbert 31). The novel was a phenomenal success in the twenty-first century, spawning many imitators, a film adaptation and it radically altered how Western readers contemplated self-discovery.

This paper examines how the journey undertaken by Gilbert in the novel is a deliberate and assertive attempt by her to reconstruct her fragmented female identity. The novel initially exposes the bleak and desperate moments of despair in her life after her painful divorce. A major change emerges later that invigorates her and enables her to construct a different personal narrative. The rebirth is moulded by a triological division of the structure of the novel, a confessional tone and ample splashes of humour and irony. The paper scrutinizes how the new identity is forged through influential cultural factors layered along the tripartite structure and also examines how that identity is informed by feminist concerns. *Eat Pray Love* emerged into a scenario in which self-help literature was on the rise. Therapeutic innovations, spiritual insights and cultural exchanges as centres of healing were finding their way into mainstream publishing. The memoir’s unique simplicity and endearing language, its focus on a theme that countless women face in life and the realistic episodes woven into its structure, marked it out as a narrative that many women could relate to easily. The mechanics of transformation projected through Gilbert’s life, emerge in a new light as partially replicable, a blueprint, rather than an aberration. This paper also examines the memoir from this angle.

Objectives

1. To explore the memoir as a script that challenges and reconstructs inherited notions regarding womanhood.
2. To scrutinize the cultural diversity embedded in the tripartite warp and woof of the text, as an invaluable foundation on which Gilbert forges her new identity.

Literature Review

Eat Pray Love spawned a number of sharply divided scholarly reviews that voiced various perspectives, including postcolonial critique, neo-liberal cultural outlook, feminist criticism, cultural studies and reception studies. The confessional note that emerged from Gilbert’s personal trauma reached out to many women in the throes of post-divorce mental anguish. This spurred the possibility of searching for meaning in hitherto unexplored realms, to forge new identities. Wu Shuangnan’s reader-response analysis of the book endorses the text’s therapeutic register. Noha Abdullah observes that the memoir simultaneously critiques and reinstates patriarchal assumptions, as Gilbert later gets romantically involved in Bali. Feminist critics voiced diverse concerns: one group, lauding the novel as a bold venture into a liberating future for women, and the other interpreting it as a reflection of entitled singularity garbed in spiritual attire. This paper amalgamates both perspectives, examining the memoir neither solely as liberating, nor as simply suspect. The next wave of responses was more speculative and critical. Many critics questioned the economic possibility of undergoing a journey for a year, across three countries, based solely on a substantial advance, provided by a publishing company. Joshunda Sanders and Diana Barnes Brown described the memoir as an instance of ‘priv- lit,’ claiming that the possibility of embarking on such journeys depended on financial resources that were not available to many women. Journalist Sandip Ray maintained that the all too familiar tropes of Eastern sites as familiar grounds for spiritual rejuvenation was a form of new colonialism. A similar argument can be discerned in Rachmi Diyah Larasati’s scrutiny of the text. She claims that Gilbert’s narrative relegates the rights of Eastern subjects, including Balinese and Indian natives to a position in which they merely

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serve as instruments in the Western woman's inner journey towards self-realisation. The next body of scholarship positions the text within the contours of neo-liberalism and wellness culture. Ruth Williams describes the 'neo-liberal spiritual subject' that is created by the memoir - an individual who pursues personal transformation as a project. The professional wellness culture that dominates the world today is the subject of Ethel Mickey's ethnographic research. Both studies imply that the memoir's commercial afterlife was an offshoot of the ideological role the text enacted.

A comprehensive survey of the reviews indicate that none of them integrate a detailed, structural reading of the significance of the three-part form and its ideological content to examine how feminist notions and cultural implications enable Gilbert to forge her new identity. This paper examines how the new self and identity are moulded within the politics of gender, class and Eastern ethos.

Research Gap

Two major separate readings, each well supported, engendered by the memoir were the feminist and culture studies responses. The feminist responses celebrated the way the text dismantled inherited scripts of sacrificial womanhood, while the other divulged the cultural implications inherent in the creation of Gilbert's post-divorce identity. Both bodies of responses proceeded independently, without examining how these two dimensions were created by the same narrative. This split posits a research gap that can be explored. Few studies have examined how the tripartite shape of the narrative organised in a quest framework, informs Gilbert's individual choices, which can then be read as feminist liberation and unexamined privilege simultaneously. The paper addresses how the feminist and cultural ramifications in the content of the memoir and the underlying architecture, converge to reveal the mechanics of reconstruction of the self and identity.

Methodology

1. Research Design

The research design implemented here is based on a hermeneutic approach rather than an empirical one. The text has been subjected to a qualitative analysis. A close reading of the same against feminist and cultural studies theoretical frameworks has been completed.

2. Theoretical Framework

The feminist and cultural studies theoretical lenses have been utilised here to address the objectives. The first one critiques the traditional notions regarding female agency including post-feminist scepticism towards idiosyncratic narratives of gendered expectations. The second lens focuses on the constructionist perspective of how identity is structured through discourse and performance. It also incorporates Said's concepts of Orientalism.

3. Primary Text Selection

Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* has been selected for analysis for three reasons: its prolonged status as a bestseller that was also commercially successful; its unique, self declared tripartite structure that offers possibilities for deconstruction and its subsequent adaptation into a film that promoted the tourism industry.

4. Analytical Procedure

The analytical procedure proceeds in four stages. First, the memoir has been closely scrutinized with special emphasis on the possibilities of the three-part structure and the pleasure-devotion-balance contours. Next, passages related to marriage, divorce, motherhood etc have been coded thematically and assessed against feminist perspectives to identify challenges and reinforcements of expectation. Third, a comparative analysis of the memoir's depiction of Italy and its depiction of the other two countries, using Said's framework to depict asymmetries in

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attitudes and assumptions has been completed. Finally, the findings have been cross referenced with previous scholarship in the respective areas to position new observations in the current critical situation.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in three major ways. In cultural studies, it enacts how spiritual commoditisation and wellness tourism can be connected to a single literary study. Thus it showcases durable commercial infrastructure that has a lasting effect. In gender studies it connects the distinction between narratives that question self-sacrifice and narratives that challenge the ambiances that generate self-sacrifice – an association that is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of popular, feminist narratives. As a literary text, the study highlights the book's three-country travel structure and its role in the construction of Gilbert's new identity. The confessional tone also exemplifies life-writing that builds persuasive authority, as such writings continue to engage critical attention and dominate bestseller lists.

Findings

The study produces three findings connected to the two objectives and the research problem. First, the analysis finds that the tripartite structure of Italy, India and Indonesia is not a random one, rather a deliberate attempt to reconstruct the fragmented self. Each country has been selected based on what it can offer best – pleasure, devotion and balance. This endorses the second objective - the construction of identity based on the tripartite warp and woof of the text. It also confirms the central argument that reconstruction of the self is authored rather than discovered. Second, the scrutiny reveals an individualised feminism, framed as personal idiosyncrasy rather than political critique. This connects with the first objective showing how the memoir both challenges traditional expectations of sacrifice by the female and reinforces the individualist assumptions that control the reach of that challenge. Third, the analysis points out to the prejudiced renderings of the Western and Eastern backgrounds. European settings are extolled while Asian settings are depicted as props to the self healing journey of the western protagonist. This asymmetry, considered alongside the memoir's role in promoting tourism in Bali after 2006, indicates the text's influence on commercial infrastructure, extending its ideological content in unprecedented ways. Thus, taken together, all three findings indicate that they are interlocking effects of a single narrative strategy.

Discussion

Feminist concerns: Gender identity and Annulment of Marital Vows

Feminist literary theory provides an angle with which to read the complexities of Gilbert's decision to embark on a journey of 'finding herself.' In the beginning of the novel, Gilbert presents herself on the floor of her bathroom, crying. Her inability to understand why a supposedly 'good' marriage has left her in a suffocated state of mind is a clear rejection of the assumption that marital stability equals contentment. She chooses to divorce her husband, to negate the traditional roles of wife and mother in order to stabilize her disintegrating psyche. "I don't want to be married any more. I don't want to live in this big house. I don't want to have a baby" (Gilbert 10). The established codes of stability within marriage and domestic responsibilities are undermined, as the grim prospects of a gradual erosion of self-identity looms large before her. Choosing to do so within a framework of consideration and respect (with as little blame or scandal as possible), she asserts her actions as part of self preservation rather than selfish inclination, reiterating her right to develop the real self within herself, a situation Williams notes as part of the general neoliberal amalgamation of feminist discourse into personal self-development (630). Simultaneously, the feministic aspect of the work is also bound up with the singularity of Gilbert's situation. She is able to undertake the journey because of her

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financial stability, her professional flexibility and the fact that she doesn't have children. The rigid, inflexible situations of many women, who are in similar unfavourable marital relationships, render them incapable of finding similar solutions or pursuing their interests. Thus the memoir challenges the long-standing tradition of feminine sacrifice at the altar of marriage and also exposes the limitations of the alternative delineated. Gilbert's ability to adapt is abetted by the lack of maternal responsibility and the financial security she enjoys. In this context, Shuangnan observes that *Eat, Pray, Love's* reader response exposes the current expectations for women and attitudes towards feminism. Many pertinent questions are asked regarding childbirth, divorce and independent decisions pertaining to the self (84).

Second-wave feminist critiques of the rigid role of the housewife and the compulsions of domestic life resonate with Gilbert's suffocation within her marriage. Her husband's desire for children represents patriarchal structures imposed on women that creates conflict with the person they want to be. Post-feminist theory, however, cautions against the assertive acts of the self, as proof of development, as the success of personal choices may obscure the structural differences that render some choices available to some women and unavailable to others. Gilbert's work resonates with the second-wave critique of the sacrificial feminine self and resolves this in a unique post-feminist approach: reconstruction of the individual identity through an individual stance, rather than promote a mass radical change.

A feminist reading of the text positions two perspectives in tension. Firstly, the work highlights the dire circumstances that make it inevitable for the protagonist to step out of the bounds of marriage. The focus is not on mutual blame, strategies to evoke shame or traumatic court scenes. Gilbert's need to 'find herself' is convincingly handled and tides over the dictates of the patriarchal system regarding marriage and responsibilities of the spouse. In Italy, she pointedly steers clear of romantic entanglements, focussing instead on self-nourishment. Later, her relationship with Felipe is negotiated on conditions that give paramount importance to independence. Scholars interpret this as prioritizing self-respect over familial scripts.

However, feminist critics have also endorsed the fact that her predicament is an idiosyncratic one that cannot be generalised into broader collective critique. Many women, in real life, cannot afford to travel as they please, much less leave their houses. The individualistic journey in the novel is associated with a modern neoliberal amalgamation of feminist insights into personal self-actualization. This is particularly evident in the discourses regarding motherhood. Gilbert's reluctance to be a mother is a matter of personal choice, a bodily inclination rather than a political argument. Pronatalist notions are not confronted or challenged, but quietly moved aside. Readers are persuaded to empathise with Gilbert's personal resistance to motherhood, without escalating into broader conversation. A twin effect materializes in the process - it validates her decision not to sacrifice herself for established societal expectations and also refuses to be drawn into a discourse regarding the impossibility of other women, with fewer resources, undertaking such a journey.

Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies is another theoretical framework through which the text can be analysed. A cultural study offers a perspective that suggests that identity can be subtly reconstructed through discourse and the serene influence of diverse milieus. Viewed from this angle, Gilbert's journey ceases to be a linear movement from one place to another, rather it assumes symbolic proportions onto which unique facets of the self are projected – dabbling in culinary flavours and pursuing linguistic delights in Italy; ascending transcendental realms in India and balancing both poles in Indonesia. Each destination is not a place to visit but rather a deliberate attempt to venture into a new redemptive scheme, designed to reconstruct the self. This aligns with the general cultural studies perception that identity and

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selfhood are greatly influenced by discourse and social exchanges. Gilbert writes her new identity into being, by planning a year of travelling in three phases to facilitate a trilogical reconstructing of the self.

Orientalistic Overtones: Depiction of India and Indonesia

The representation of India and Indonesia in the memoir has spawned a lot of criticism, mainly through the views of Edward Said's notions regarding Orientalism. The Western tendency to glorify Eastern cultures as deep-rooted in spiritual tradition and as centres promoting awareness about developing inner harmony has always been the subject of discourse. In the novel, the appearance of the 'Guru' in her life, the native practises of chanting and meditation followed in the *ashram* in India, the healing gestures of Ketut Liyer, inherited from his ancestors and the native medicines of Wayan represent Western notions about Eastern culture. India and Indonesia are depicted in the novel with affection. However, both serve as a milieu for the Western protagonist's need for recuperation. Putcha states that the memoir revives an escapist association between white women and India by promoting alternative means of spirituality and therapies (456). The natives in both places are not singled out for individual uniqueness, rather they are depicted as guides, healers and even sources for frivolous moments of personal delight, functioning in the background of her personal needs. This reflects the tradition in travel writing in which non-Western ambiances merely serve to complete the missing spaces in Western identities, fortifying the hierarchy that exists between the one who travels and the destination that heals. This is further accentuated by her treatment of Italy in a distinctive manner and the contrasting depiction of India and Indonesia. In Italy, the historical background is awe-inspiring, culinary skills are eulogised, the language is singled out for its speciality and Italian friends appear as refined, humorous and cultured individuals. In India and Indonesia, however, general details regarding the rigid, disciplined lifestyle in the *ashram*, folk-healer aphorisms and medicines made at home are depicted. In Bali, her attempts to raise funds to buy a house for Wayan and her daughter, has raised criticism for framing natives as beneficiaries of Western benevolence. The imbalance suggests a prejudiced attitude, with the European culture being lauded as a peer culture, worth emulating and the Asian culture being exploited solely for vested interests. Glimpses of this asymmetry that are often reflected in travel writing, as noted by post-colonial critics, occasionally flare up in the memoir.

Commoditisation of Devotion and the Wellness Industry

The Orientalist approach is also reflected in the memoir's role in the commercialization of spirituality. Religious practices and culturally significant folkways, including Balinese medicinal practices, yogic discipline and meditational techniques are extolled for their therapeutic value. Instances can be discerned of the widespread consumer culture that seeks to compartmentalise ancient spiritual traditions into tidy packages fit for Western consumers, who have the means and the inclination for it. In the years following its publication, *ashrams*, yoga centres and Balinese healing places, were hounded by Western consumers, and the phrase 'eat pray love' itself was recognised as a popular cliché in the wellness industry. Williams observes that the discourse of the EPL brand marketing produces a subject who defies patriarchal norms and expresses her empowered state by travelling to other places and consuming spiritual products. This depoliticized viewpoint blinds her to the consequences of her actions, "in places like Bali, her tourism mimics colonialism's blatant use of native populations. ... it marks both the neoliberal spiritual subject and the natives who labor for her as existing in a system of consumption and production" (630).

The memoir's tripartite structure enhances the commercialized approach. Spiritual seeking in India is neatly organised as a phase of the itinerary, downplaying the lifelong discipline it entails. This modular presentation of spirituality as a mere tool in a kit of wellbeing anticipated the onset of the modern wellness industry, one that thrives on contemplation apps, short intervals of retreat and

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customised, mindfulness packages – tools that market spiritual practices for the consumption of interested customers. Gilbert's personal mythology later became a template, based on which women could recreate their lives. Mickey's research on professional wellness indicates that wellness was repositioned as a feminised mechanism to develop a better economic subject, manipulating on women's anxieties regarding their bodies and their dual roles as workers and mothers (106). This was greatly conducive to the growth and expansion of the wellness industry. The self-reinvention had a dual impact, it not only recreated the protagonist as a public figure of transformation, but also forged a commercial infrastructure that served as a model for other women, who found themselves in similar circumstances. The film adaptation of the memoir reinforced the promise of recovery associated with the travel fantasy. The enormous influence of this narrative in tourism marketing is an indication of how personal quests for inner transformation can permeate into commercial systems with lasting effects.

Quest Narrative

Though *Eat Pray Love* is adapted as a memoir, it is structured on the contours of the quintessential quest narrative. The protagonist progresses from an initial stage of shock, disappointment and despair to a gradual reconciliation and acceptance of the events in her life and finally reaches a tranquil stage. Gilbert travels to Italy, India and Indonesia, spending her time equally among the three places. Each place represents a different stage of healing: pleasure, prayer and equilibrium. She enjoys the cuisine and the language in Italy, pursues transcendental and spiritual insights in India and attempts to balance both ends in Indonesia. The novel is organised in three parts, reciprocating the mala beads, usually used by the religious in meditation. Thus the psychic confusion and disarray associated with the dissolution of marriage, gradually recedes and her new identity is painstakingly pieced together again. The geographic destinations are deliberately chosen and events are meticulously executed to facilitate healing of the self. Quest narratives often depict purposeless wandering for long periods, finally culminating in realisation about destiny and purpose of existence. The quest pattern further endows Gilbert with the right of authoritative counsel. Her experiences, her interactions with various people of different cultures and the gradual piecing together of her fragmented self, enable her to speak and act from the platform of authority, a survivor, who can confidently provide inputs to others.

The quest structure however depends on a process of elimination, from which some aspects are chosen and others are discarded. Each culture embodies strengths and weaknesses. Every travel narrative is a finely sieved text from which several episodes that involve monotony, disarray and relegation to former positions are discarded. The memoir organises itself into neat pigeon-holes, in which each country is the backdrop of a single trait that is explored in its intensity. Everything adds up at the end to enable transformation, rejuvenation and healing. This is an inherent characteristic of this particular genre and functions on the ability to retain the symbolic. Gilbert's triumph lies in her skill in organising each section as an inevitable and natural precursor to the next.

Conclusion

Eat Pray Love remains a cultural touchstone, due to the fusion of diverse elements into one: the feminist overtones of the novel, the cultural implications embedded in the text that reproduce and expand the original version into infinite possibilities, the exotic lure of Oriental lifestyles that hold promises of rejuvenation and the fantasy associated with travelling to new places. Read closely, the text emerges as a deliberate projection of self-mythology. It meticulously constructs the new identity of the protagonist, in an ambivalent manner that is neither completely liberating nor wholly complicit. It raises discussions about the plight of women suffocating in marital relationships, and simultaneously exposes the privileges of class and flexible personal conditions that have not been properly examined. The

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cultural ambiances depicted are woven into a narrative that offers a template for how a personal experience can be narrated into a personal story of reconstruction.

This paper examines the post-divorce identity created as Gilbert travels through three countries. Feminist concerns are analysed in the light of the tripartite structure. Its original contribution lies in the connection between two dimensions that presents a broader angle of reading confessional memoirs. The memoir's quest architecture is not only a neutral vessel for a personal crisis, but is also subjected to ideological scrutiny. It generates feminist appeal and discloses unexamined privilege simultaneously.

The limitations of the study include the absence of an empirical study and the fact that it has not included a comprehensive study of the film adaptation and the translations of the text into other languages. The method adopted here is one of close reading, backed by secondary scholarship. It does not include an empirical study of how the 'feminism of temperament' identified here is actually received or resisted by readers. The comprehensive survey of the reception of the film adaptation and the translations of the text can provide further insights on what the text claims.

Future research can concentrate on three areas. Firstly, a comparative study of the memoir with other self-reinvention memoirs can reveal the individual aspects and the overlapping in the structural mechanism. Secondly, an empirical study using reader surveys can bear further light on the 'feminism of temperament' identified here. Finally, the memoir's tourism legacy and the material effects on the communities represented here also offers scope for further study.

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