

Eat, Pray, Loathe: Women's Travel Memoir as Moving Metaphysical Journey or Narcissistic New- Age Babble?

Abstract

This paper considers the contentious space between self-affirmation and self-preoccupation in Elizabeth Gilbert's popular travel memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*. Following the surveillance of the female confessant, the female traveller has recently come under close scrutiny and public suspicion. She is accused of walking a fine line between critical self-insight and obsessive self-importance and her travel narratives are branded as accounts of navel gazing that are less concerned with what is seen than with who is doing the seeing. In reading these themes against the backdrop of women's travel, the possibility arises that the culture of narcissism is increasingly read as a female discursive practice, concerned with authorship, privacy and the subjectivity of truth. The novel, which has been praised by some as 'the ultimate guide to balanced living' and dismissed by others as 'self-serving junk', poses questions about the requisites in Western culture for being a female traveller and for telling a story that focuses primarily on the self.

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Introduction:

At present, women's travel writing is intersecting new spatial hybridities that have not been crossed before. The genre of travel is still considered a suspect site of exclusionary practices in which masculinist ideology has dictated the formal and epistemological terms of the genre. The genre of self-help, however, is increasingly read as a female discursive practice that is more concerned with ontological questions of being. What we are seeing increasingly, however, is not a separation of the two, but a blending and stretching of the rules and conventions of both. The result of this fusion is the emergence of new kind of hybrid writing, which one academic from Park University calls, 'the middled-aged narrative' (Wood 2006).

The middle-aged travel narrative follows the traditional quest of the male hero who leaves home as a rite of passage, except the prototype of the protagonist has changed. The narrator is now a restless female who is writing at mature age and usually, in the midst or aftermath of an existential crisis. This crisis is often knotted in the restraints of domestic duty. Her narrative, which emphasises a desire for personal growth and balance, employs travel as the register for this self-realisation. She typically embarks on a travel adventure that is based on undermining the decisions she has made in the past, in an attempt to facilitate activism and change in the future (ibid).

The obvious implication of this, as Wood explains, is that if gender is a performance which defines identity, 'then identity can be changed, or redefined by new performances that may or may not still have the same gendered meaning' (2006, 4). On leaving home, for example, the female travel writer assumes two positions that have traditionally been cast as male roles—the traveller and the writer. While travelling, she may perform multiple roles in an attempt to resist the self that has been previously imposed upon her. In doing so, she attempts to develop an autonomous female identity, and then, to give voice to that process afterwards.

In considering this trend, and its social and cultural implications, it is difficult to move past the recent global success of Elizabeth Gilbert's travel memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*. At the time of writing, the book has sold more than 8 million copies world-wide on a seemingly simple premise: *One Woman's Search for Everything in Italy, India and Indonesia* (Gilbert 2006). The memoir, which spent 155 weeks on the number one spot of the *New York Times* bestseller list, found its success on the story

of a once happily married woman, who reeling from a contentious divorce, takes off around the world in search of what *Bitch* magazine calls ‘an international safari of self-actualization’ (2010, par 5). The work, which has been translated into thirty languages, has spawned multiple lines of *Eat, Pray, Love* merchandise, including goat pillows, prayer shawls (which retail at \$350 dollars), a Republic of Tea blend, a digital reader which comes preloaded with the book, a collection of fragrances and a fashion line by designer Sue Wong. The film adaptation, directed by Ryan Murphy and starring Julia Roberts, opened in August this year to mostly unfavourable reviews. The film also has its own official travel partners, namely *Lonely Planet* (who sell pre-planned *Eat, Pray, Love* travel packages) and *STA Travel*, who advertise various trips to the cities featured in the film. For high-end travellers, there are also invitations from more luxurious tour companies, such as *Micato Safari’s Inspiration Tour*, which encourages *Eat, Pray, Love* pilgrims or true devotees, to trace Gilbert’s steps in India for just under \$20 000.

The memoir then, which has become a global business phenomenon as well as a tourist mecca, appeals to a readership that is just as interested in self as with other. In the opening chapters, the novel’s narrator, Liz, a professional American woman in her mid-thirties, begins to question the performative roles that have defined her. She tells the reader, ‘I don’t want to be married anymore. I don’t want to live in this big house. I don’t want to have a baby’ (Gilbert 2006, 10). She explains that she is tired of being ‘the primary breadwinner, the housekeeper, the social coordinator, the dog-walker, the wife and the soon-to-be-mother’ (ibid, 11). Similar to Rita Golden-Gelman’s travel narrative, *Tales of a Female Nomad*, Gilbert also opens with divorce (Wood 2006, 8). She writes,

On September 9, 2001, I met with my husband face-to-face for the last time, not realizing that every future meeting would necessitate lawyers between us, to mediate. We had dinner in a restaurant. I tried to talk about our separation, but all we did was fight. He let me know that I was a liar and a traitor and that he hated me and would never speak to me again. Two mornings later I woke up after a troubled night’s sleep to find that hijacked airplanes were crashing into the two tallest buildings of my city, as everything invincible that had once stood together now became a smoldering avalanche of ruin. I called my husband to make sure he was safe and we wept together over this disaster, but I did not go to him. During that week, when everyone in New York City dropped animosity in deference to the larger tragedy at hand, I still did not

go back to my husband. Which is how we both knew it was very, very over (Gilbert 2006, 5).

Newly single, though not for long, Gilbert brands herself as a woman on the brink of becoming a self-governing individual. She decides she would like a spiritual teacher and constructs a fantasy about what it would be like to have one. She writes,

‘I imagined that this radiantly beautiful Indian woman would come to my apartment a few evenings a week and we would sit and drink tea and talk about divinity, and she would give me reading assignments and explain the significance of the strange sensations I was feeling during meditation’ (ibid, 7).

From the outset then, Gilbert articulates a desire to use (or misuse) travel as the vehicle for what she believes is her search for spiritual fulfilment. She decides she will spend a year travelling in three countries and goes onto establish an explicit reason for visiting each—Italy (to explore the art of pleasure), India (to explore the art of devotion) and Indonesia (to learn the art of balancing both). ‘It was only later,’ Gilbert writes, ‘after admitting this dream, that I noticed the happy coincidence that all these countries began with the letter I’ (ibid, 10). In Gilbert’s case, this constant reference to the e/motional ‘I’ is particularly telling of the preoccupations of New Age Travel. Increasingly, women are using travel to pose questions such as, Who am I? Why am I here? and What am I to believe? These questions not only reflect an absorbing feminist interest in questions of identity, but also highlight continued anxieties about a collective female experience, which *Bitch Magazine* describes as ‘wealthy, whiney and white’ (2010, par 5).

The hybrid text that arises is more concerned with a search for self than with a search for an authentic travel experience. That is, the travel writing is less preoccupied with what is seen than with who is doing the seeing. What we are finding repeatedly in the work of Western women travel writers, is a resurgence in the obsession with the self which has less interest in the other. At its worst, this kind of writing can be self-obsessive, self-important and self-serving, but at its best it can create a richness and intimacy which is lacking in more objective travel texts. The middle-aged travel narrative, in particular, focuses on travel as a metaphor for a spiritual journey. It is rarely, if ever, framed as an objective investigation into an unknown culture. As the travel that emerges then, is imagined rather than reported, and creative rather than

journalistic, the inward looking eye becomes more important than the outward.

The central problematic then, in many books sold as travel memoirs, is that they actually minimalise and even dilute the travels they seek to voice. In *Eat, Pray, Love*, this usually happens in one of two ways. Either the place Elizabeth Gilbert ventures to (for example, the Balinese village of Ubud) is romanticised as an exotic other, or it is reduced, in the case of Naples and Mumbai, to a backdrop in her personal dramas. As a result, the memoir pushes the boundaries between self-insight and self-preoccupation. The consequence of this pushing is that the female travel writer has come under close scrutiny and supervision. She is dismissed as a pulp producer, a pawn under industry pressures and an over-exuberant performer whose work emerges, in what Jonathan Raban calls, 'literature's red-light district' (1987). The consequence of this surveillance for the travel memoir, is that its reception draws polar responses from the reading public.

Since its debut, the novel has been accused of being self-absorbed and sexist, and even branded by the *New York Post* as 'narcissistic New Age reading, curated by [Oprah] Winfrey' (Callahan 2007, par 13). According to Karlyn Crowley, in *The Oprahfication of American Culture*, Winfrey is a mainstream spokesperson for this kind of writing, as 'she marries the intimacy and individuality of the New Age movement with the adulation and power of a 700 Club-like ministry' (2010, 35). In recent interviews with guests, Oprah announces to her audience, 'Live your best life!' She promotes the message again on her website, in her magazine and during her book club. But according to some critics, 'much of Oprah's advice actually moves women away from political, economic, and emotional agency by promoting materialism and dependency masked as empowerment' (Barnes-Brown and Sanders 2010, par 3).

Much of the backlash against the book then, is tied up in what readers perceive as Gilbert's own privilege, as well as annoyances they have with her everyday travel complaints and her preoccupation with sacrificing everything for David—a New York actor who she dates after divorcing her husband. On a trip to Bali, in which Gilbert is commissioned to write a story about Yoga vacations, she is invited to visit a ninth-generation medicine man. Gilbert, spends significant narrative time grappling over what she will ask him. She writes,

Our Yoga teach had told us in advance that we could each bring one question or problem to the medicine man, and he would try

to help us with our troubles. I'd been thinking for days of what to ask him. My initial ideas were so lame. Will you make my husband give me a divorce? Will you make David be sexually attracted to me again? (Gilbert 2006, 9).

Later, Gilbert admits, 'I was rightly ashamed of myself for these thoughts: who travels all the way around the world to meet an ancient medicine man in Indonesia, only to ask him to intercede in boy trouble?' (ibid). Many readers (who obviously agreed with Gilbert on the matter) voiced their own complaints online. 'Who does this woman think she is?' one blogger asks, 'Anyone should be so lucky to eat a pizza in Naples off their publisher's pay check.' 'If she thinks she has something to complain about,' writes another, (under the alias *Eat, Pray, Shove*), 'then she should try raising a child alone.'

In a recent interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Gilbert told how she has stopped going online to read her reviews. 'All you end up doing is defending yourself to people who you don't know,' she said. 'Two weeks later you're on a lovely walk in the woods with your dog and you're having an argument in your head with somebody from Amazon.com' (Valby 2010, par 6).

Perhaps the most gender-specific retaliation to *Eat, Pray, Love* is Andrew Gottlieb's travel memoir, *Drink, Play, F@#k*, which sold itself on the premise of *One Man's Search for Anything Across Ireland, Las Vegas and Thailand* (Gottlieb 2008). In the book, Bob Sullivan, 'a jilted husband', embarks on a quest to find meaning amongst the glitz and glamour of Vegas, rediscover his passion for drinking in Ireland, and finally, to experience the hedonistic pleasure palaces of Thailand. As the blurb reads,

After a life time of playing it safe, Mr. Sullivan finally follows his heart and lives out everyone's deepest fantasies. For who among us hasn't dreamed of standing stark naked, head upturned, and mouth agape beneath a cascading torrent of Guinness Stout? What could be more exhilarating than losing every penny you have because Charlie Weiss went for a meaningless last-second field goal? And what sensate creature could ever doubt that the greatest pleasure known to man can be found in a leaky bamboo shack filled with glassy-eyed, bruised Asian hookers? Bob Sullivan has a lot to teach us about life. Let's just pray we have the wisdom to put aside our preoccupations and listen (ibid).

Others, however, praise *Eat, Pray, Love*, as an everyday woman's guide to balanced living. A shared message that many female readers seem to distil from the novel is that a woman should not have to apologise for writing a travel story that is primarily about herself. As one bloggers explains, 'Gilbert has written about what she feels is the most important and defining time of her life, and millions of women like me, have found it useful and stirring.'

Despite this sense of belonging, or collective appreciation, Gilbert constantly wonders throughout the novel, how she will fit into some sort of community after she returns from her travels. Much of Gilbert's angst seems to originate from a sense of alienation from both herself and those around her. As her mother explains to her, 'You have to understand how little I was raised to expect that I deserved in life, honey. Remember—I come from a different time and place than you do' (Gilbert 2006, 29). According to Wood, Gilbert then attempts to answer 'the difficult questions of her life with the knowledge that, unlike Cinderella, she can choose not to go the ball' (2006, 11). It seems her struggle is, essentially, one of choice. In India, she finally finds a place for herself, not at a physical location, but in language—or more specifically, in the Sanskrit word 'antevasin' which Gilbert translates as 'one who lives at the border' (ibid, 70). She writes,

When I read this description of the antevasin, I got so excited I gave a little bark of recognition. That's my word, baby!...I'm just a slippery antevasin—betwixt and between—a student on the ever-shifting border near the wonderful, scary forest of the new (ibid).

In a recent interview with the *Borders Book Club*, Gilbert also describes how many women have attempted to follow her journey, literally.

Every once and a while, I get a letter from somebody who says, 'Okay, so I went to Italy, I found the gelateria where you ate that gelato and then I went to Naples and I found that pizzeria, and I had the pizza, and now I want to go to India. Can you tell me the name of your Ashram?' (2010)

This idea that happiness can be packaged through another's travel experience is not without consequence. Should readers of *Eat, Pray, Love* fail, the genre holds them accountable for not being ready to get serious, not "wanting it" enough, or not putting themselves first' (Barnes-Brown and Sanders 2010, par 7). Gilbert herself seems to acknowledge this, and affirm it, with a proclamation of what she calls 'The Physics of the Quest.'

If you are brave enough to leave behind everything familiar and comforting (which can be anything from your house to your bitter old resentments) and set out on a truth-seeking journey (either externally or internally), and if you are truly willing to regard everything that happens to you on that journey as a clue, and if you accept everyone you meet along the way as a teacher, and if you are prepared—most of all—to face (and forgive) some very difficult realities about yourself...then the truth will not be withheld from you.

Whether or not the book is the ultimate spiritual guide to balanced living or just self-serving junk, the central question that the memoir poses is perhaps more important than its reception. What is the requisite for being a female traveller and for telling a story that is focussed primarily, perhaps even extravagantly, on the self?

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