

Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* as a Voyage of Self-discovery

Kusum Srivastava

Abstract

Travel literature typically records the experiences of an author touring a particular place, for the pleasure of travel or for any other motive. An individual work of this nature is sometimes called a travelogue. Travel literature may be cross-cultural or transnational in focus, or it may involve travel to different regions within the same country. The literature included in this genre is in the form of letters, memoirs, records, diaries, stories, novels and histories.

All of us have read Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" which is one of the best examples of travel writings of ancient times. In the 15th century some women also tried their hands in this field. They were recording impressions of their travels on paper. The Book of Margery Kempe, 1446, is one such example. Ever since then, women across the globe have taken to this field.

The novel which I have taken up for my paper is Elizabeth Gilbert's *-Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*. Spanning three countries, this book is a memoir of soul-searching and self-discovery. All memoir is, by definition, self-involved. If novels are mirrors held up to nature, memoirs are mirrors held up to the self.

This memoir is an eloquent account of Gilbert's pursuit of worldly pleasures in Italy, spiritual devotion in India, and a balance between worldly enjoyment and divine transcendence on the Indonesian island of Bali. The memoir describes how Gilbert leaves behind an excruciating divorce, tumultuous affair, and debilitating depression as she sets off on a yearlong quest to bridge the gulf between body, mind, and spirit. She sets out to examine three different aspects of her nature, set against the backdrop of three different cultures.

Written in a direct and succinct narrative style, this travelogue, itinerary or memoir is an appealing invitation to fresh-air hungry literary visitors to explore these countries. Gilbert's book is one of the best books in the travel literature genre that I've read in recent times.

Key words : Worldly pleasure, sensual, self discovery, spiritual enrichment, self exploration

Introduction

From sacred to secular, classical to folk, plays to poetry...a repository of literature in different languages has been created in the world over the centuries. Amongst this literature can be included some wonderful books with the theme of self-discovery through travel. The journeys of these writers has been life changing for them. The novel *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*, by Elizabeth Gilbert is one such example. The sub title of the novel is illustrative of the fact that it is a quest of some kind. It is an irresistible, candid, and eloquent account of

Gilbert's pursuit of worldly pleasure, spiritual devotion, and what she really wanted out of life.

The novel emphasizes the fact that one should go exploring for self-betterment

Eat, Pray, Love, presents the memoir of a magazine writer's yearlong travels across the world in search of pleasure, guidance, experience and wholeness, to bridge the gulf between body, mind, and spirit. At a crossroad after a divorce, Gilbert takes a year-long sabbatical from her job and steps out of her comfort zone, risking everything to change her life, embarking on a journey around the world that eventually becomes a quest for self-discovery.

In her wondrous and exotic travels, she discovers the true pleasure of nourishment, by eating in Italy, the power of prayer in India, and finally and unexpectedly, the inner peace, balance and true love in Indonesia. In the course of her travels she rediscovers and reconnects with her true inner self.

Elizabeth Gilbert is an educated, ambitious American woman who has everything one was supposed to want—a husband, a house, a successful career. But instead of feeling happy and fulfilled, she was consumed with panic, grief, and confusion. "It can be embarrassing sometimes when you've got everything, but what you really want, you don't have," she says.

"There's a constant level of closeness that I really need from the person I love. But it just destroys me to not be able to count on that affection when I need it" (87).

Gilbert went through an early-onslaught midlife crisis - a divorce, a crushing depression, another failed love, and the eradication of everything she ever thought she was supposed to be. These life-changing events drained her of all energy and motivation. So she decided to make drastic changes to her lifestyle.

For her plan to return to mental and physical health, Gilbert took a radical step. In order to give herself the time and space to find out who she really was and what she really wanted, she got rid of her belongings, quit her job, and undertook a yearlong journey around the world—all alone. Gilbert divides the yearlong journey into three sections, each section four months long. This tenure of four months she spends in three dissimilar countries, exploring her competing urges for earthly delights and divine transcendence. In fact, the entire novel is Gilbert's journey of "reclamation" and "renovation."

She writes, "It wasn't so much that I wanted to thoroughly explore the countries themselves; this has been done. It was more that I wanted to thoroughly explore one aspect of myself set against the backdrop of each country, in a place that has traditionally done that one thing very well. I wanted to explore the art of pleasure in Italy, the art of devotion in India and, in Indonesia, the art of balancing the two. It was only later . . . that I noticed the happy coincidence that all these countries begin with the letter I. A fairly auspicious sign, it seemed, on a voyage of self-discovery" (31).

Now the question which arises at this juncture is, why did Gilbert choose to come to Italy first and then India and later on, the Indonesian island of Bali? It could have been the other way round. But as we all know that spiritual enrichment is not

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possible unless the body's physical needs are catered to first, hence Gilbert came to Italy first to satisfy her sensual desires and only later did she go to India for spiritual fulfillment. She knew that for laying the foundation for a fulfilled life -spiritually and physically- required balancing the body's physical needs by feeding and with spiritual enrichment by being grounded by the precepts of God's word. In her opinion both of them should be seriously adhered to, to avoid faster wear and tear of the body systems. Being physically nourished without enrichment of the inner spirit is spiritual death and being spiritually enriched without taking care of the body kills you faster, whichever way you look at, was her verdict.

Let us dwell upon the art of pleasure first.

Section A

"The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page". Saint Augustine.

For the first four months, she devotes herself to simple pleasures. Now, that can take a lot of different avenues, but in Gilbert's case the focus was on the pure, unadulterated bliss of truly allowing oneself to indulge in a fantastic meal.

This corresponds to the "Eat" portion of the memoir which is dedicated wholly to the pursuit of pleasure. In the initial stage of her journey, she had only one thing in mind – pleasure, pleasure and pleasure alone. And there was a valid reason for it. She had endured more than she could in her marital life.

When Gilbert decides that she requires a year of healing, her first stop is Italy because Italy is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful countries in the European continent with plethora of sensual pleasures. This country offered her a self-restoration remedy rooted in pleasure and chastity, (she had sworn off sex for the duration of her time there) a peculiar pairing she describes as the antidote for decades spent sublimating herself to lovers with the dedication of "a golden retriever and a barnacle"(30). Moreover she felt she needed to immerse herself in a language and culture that worships pleasure and beauty. Gilbert writes that "the appreciation of pleasure can be the anchor of humanity"(32).

Finding pleasure and sustenance in Italy may be a bit of a literary cliché, but that did not stop Gilbert from enjoying herself. She revels in the sensual pleasures of Italy, primarily its food, by taking a mouthwatering tour of Italian cuisine.

When she gets to Rome, the first meal she eats is spaghetti carbonara(home made pasta) not to mention veal, a side of sautéed spinach and garlic, fried zucchini blossoms with cheese, warm bread with olive oil and salt, tiramisu and a bottle of red wine and felt the early symptoms of contentment. Richard from Texas, a former truck driver, nicknames her "Groceries" because of her appetite at meals.

Amongst Italy's buffet of delights can be included – the world's best pizza, free-flowing wine and Gilbert savours it all. Roaming around the streets with frequent cappuccino and gelato refreshment breaks became a matter of routine for her during her stay in Italy. Gorging these delicacies Gilbert gained the happiest twenty-three pounds of her life. "I came to Italy pinched and thin" (84). she writes, but soon fills out in waist and soul. But she remains unfazed. Her contention is- pleasure must be

savored wherever it's found." Pleasure cannot be bargained down. And sometimes the meal is the only currency that is real" (120).

Gilbert chose Italy for another reason also. She was attracted by the beauty of its mother tongue. She writes, "Italian is the most seductively beautiful language in the world" (46). She experienced happiness while studying this language. Gilbert was drawn towards the Italian language class for no practical reason but simply to roll the sounds over her tongue and revel in the texture of the mellifluous language. She learns to speak the beautiful Italian language from her dashing conversation partners and even flirts with some of the local men because their romantic language soothed her aching heart. To quote her own words: "It's kind of a fairyland of language for me here" (39).

In Rome, she meets Luca Spaghetti, who becomes a friend and introduces her to the pleasures of doing nothing, although she does suffer some Puritan guilt over enjoying the delights of the flesh. Ten days into the trip, Gilbert allows loneliness and depression to bring her down; she plunges into sadness over the end of her affair with David, the guy with whom she moved in soon after her divorce. She is still stalked by Depression and Loneliness, which she casts as "Pinkerton Detectives" — They frisk her, "empty my pockets of any joy I had been carrying" (49) and relentlessly interrogate her about why she thinks she deserves a vacation, considering what a mess she's made of her life. Sounding the curtain call on personal demons — she allows her own desires (gelato for breakfast!) to take center stage.

Her old travel talent for making friends with anybody and everybody, comes in handy during six weeks of travelling to different Italian cities. She visited major Italian cities like Venice, Bologna, Sardinia, Florence, and Sicily and gorged cheesy pizzas and tasted some of the finest wine wherever she went. Leaving Italy, plumper and happier, she is all ready for her four months of meditation in India.

Section "B"

"To travel is to take a journey into yourself" -Danny Kaye

Pleasure having triumphed, Gilbert is prepared for the next leg of her journey: an ashram in India. Here she wanted to experience the power of prayer. Now spirituality and mystical charm have always drawn people from all over the world to India and Gilbert was no exception. In fact, the novel itself has a spiritual getup. It is creatively constructed in three parts, each consisting of 36 short segments, matching the 108 beads on the traditional Indian prayer necklace or a *japa mala*. This beaded necklace is used as an aid in many strands of Eastern meditation.

Gilbert, in one of her interviews, said that this kind of structure kept her storytelling in order, preventing her from rambling digressions. And the idea of the prayer beads kept her on topic emotionally too, reminding her at every moment that this book was ultimately a spiritual exercise, an offering.

The locale of the 36 segments in the second part of the book is an ashram in a remote rural village in India. Even though Gilbert does not mention the name of the ashram, where she stayed but in one of her interviews she has confessed that it was

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Gurudev Siddha Peeth in Maharashtra, whose head was Gurumayi. The transformation that takes place in Gilbert during her stay here is from a neophyte (who can't stop her racing thoughts long enough to meditate) to someone who assists others on their spiritual journey.

In this ashram under the tutelage of a wise and aged guru, she explores her spiritual side. With the help of this guru and Richard, she embarked on four uninterrupted months of spiritual exploration. Now Spirituality is an inner quest and Gilbert came to India, knowing full well that India was and is, even today, a treasure trove of spirituality for all humanity. The knowledge which she gains here is that spirituality is one word which puts a human being on the highest pedestal of life and it denotes living life as it was meant to be, not as we may have desired or wanted living it.

Gilbert realizes that a spiritual journey begins not with a journey outward, but with a journey inward. The successful spiritual journey is not a forced exit. It is a natural outgrowth of asking ourselves where we need to be, where we are most likely to fulfill our life's purpose.

But at the same time the successful spiritual journey is not only about our inner lives, or even limited to ourselves, Success on our spiritual journey, wherever it may take us, is measured not only by the personal fulfillment which it brings to us, but also by the goodness it brings to those around us.

In the course of her spiritual journey in the ashram, Gilbert spends long hours sitting in meditation, sometimes practicing strict silences and taking only short intervals to focus on her physical needs. Meditation involves exercises with your breathing. It is a technique of self-realization and purification. It tries to create harmony of the body with the mind and soul.

It will not be any exaggeration to say that the novel itself can be called a meditation-a meditation on love in its many forms—love of food, language, humanity, God, and most meaningful for Gilbert, love of self.

In India, Gilbert learns a stoic, ascetic meditation technique. In Bali, she learns an approach based on smiling. As Gilbert's Balinese teacher suggests, "To meditate, only you must smile. Smile with face, smile with mind and good energy will come to you and clean away dirty energy" (242). It's important to find out what makes you, personally, smile with your face and mind, but many have found the intersection of our world and the divine in nature, art and music.

In the ashram Gilbert spends her days in meditation and contemplation. Meditation helped her realize that everything is connected. She writes, "One of the amazing things about meditation is that if you practice it long enough, and you watch your thoughts come and go, what you slowly realize is I am not made out of these thoughts. I am not composed of this. I am composed of something else that is watching this" (205).

Her work assignment is to scrub the temple floors and she scrubs them as part of her devotional duty. Gilbert analyses her job metaphorically as scrubbing clean the temple i.e. her heart and polishing her soul. With, prayer and rigorous meditation she sought communion with the divine. Gilbert emulates the ways of yogis in gruelling

hours of meditation, struggling to still her churning mind. Her racing thoughts finally yield to successful meditation, though after strict practice and discipline. Already familiar with the yogic path, Gilbert knows that discontentment, is due to our belief that “our limited little egos constitute our whole nature” (206).

The driving force behind this leg of Gilbert’s journey is pursuit of truth and divinity. ‘You sometimes must reach out of [the world’s] jurisdiction for help,’ she explains, ‘appealing to a higher authority in order to find your comfort.’ She knows she is lost and, having reached the end of herself, she cries, ‘I just want God’.

Gilbert’s trip may be indulgent, but her search is earnest. In the course of her spiritual journey, she says she had an encounter with God while meditating. She writes: “I am suddenly transported through the portal of the universe and taken to the center of God’s palm” (208). Her perception of God undergoes a change. Now she defines God as- “The perfection that absorbs,” she says. “It is the perfectness of the universe which can bring you into that state where you are absorbed in that perfection, then you will know it. ... I was absorbed in that perfection for a brief, glorious moment, and I knew something in that.” (209). Whereas initially when she attempted to speak directly to God, she said-, “It was all I could do to stop myself from saying, ‘I’ve always been a big fan of your work’” (208). .

Having grown up in a non-religious family, she approaches the road to spiritual enlightenment with a fair degree of skepticism. Now at the ashram, she is keen to practice yoga and find God. Yoga comprises of body postures using hands and legs, that help an individual to develop a sense of physical, mental, emotional as well as spiritual well being. Yoga in all its forms tries to create harmony of the body with the mind and soul.

Later on, Gilbert is given a new work assignment of taking care of the guests at the ashram, while maintaining silence. She serves with silence and the knowledge that dawns upon her is that silence heals and rejuvenates, silence gives you depth and stability and brings creativity. Service alone can bring contentment in life, but service without silence is tiresome. Service without spirituality is shallow and cannot be sustained for a long period of time. The deeper the silence, the more dynamic the outer activity becomes. Both are essential in life. And on the spiritual path, one learns to handle things with intuition and inner freedom. The lesson that she learns here is- surrender is the right mode on her path of devotion.

The other knowledge which dawned upon Gilbert in the course of her spiritual journey was that self-discovery requires the insights of others. In one of her interviews she says- “I think sincere self-exploration requires the insight of everyone. One of my guru’s most helpful instructions is to “become a scientist of your own experience,” which I take as an invitation to explore every possible line of human spiritual thinking. The world has been blessed with some extraordinary teachers over history — use them! That said, studying can only take you so far. At some point you have to lay aside the books, hope that your mind has actually absorbed some wisdom, and just sit there in silence, letting your soul ascend to its own leadership. And that’s something nobody can do for you” (216).

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From the pursuit of her spiritual study in the ashram Gilbert learned the wisdom of living a balanced life. Her spiritual path also helped her to be more emotionally centered, to be more understanding of those that disagreed with her. She also learnt how to let go of some of her power issues so that she could bring a sense of humility to her work — while still having the self-confidence to be effective.

Gilbert finds enlightenment in the ashram, and from here she moves on, calm and grateful, to the final destination of her journey ie. Indonesia

Section "C"

"Travel is the only thing you buy that makes you richer".

Gilbert goes to the tiny Hindu island of Bali for the final leg of her spiritual odyssey. She wants to find some balance between worldly pleasure (Italy) and spiritual devotion (India)." The whole book is about my efforts to find balance"(1) and further adds "the Balinese are global masters of balance, the people for whom the maintenance of perfect equilibrium is an art, a science and a religion"(249). Here she reconnects with Ketut, the medicine man she met two years earlier, and they develop a fine relationship. Gilbert also meets a medicine woman who proves to be a very important person in her own emotional education as she tries to hold steady in this chaotic world.

By the time she reaches Indonesia she has shed her grief, and has full faith and conviction regarding her own ability to control her reaction to life's events. Gilbert herself admits that the stated purpose of the visit has already been accomplished. "The task in Indonesia was to search for balance," she writes, "but the balance has somehow naturally come into place"(272).

In these concluding 36 beads of the novel we find Gilbert palling around with an ageless medicine man, a Balinese mother and nurse- Wayan, who is a refugee from domestic violence, and some other colorful characters. In Bali, Elizabeth interacts with a few local Balinese and her impetuous involvement in their personal lives is quirky and amusing.

This section is also devoted to the pursuit of "Love". There was only one thing missing in her life — romance — Gilbert here meets a charming old Brazilian businessman, 18 years her senior who calls her "darling" and says things like, "You can decide to feel how you want to, but I love you and I will always love you" (299). The book then meanders into Elizabeth's romantic dalliance with this Brazilian businessman. Gilbert plunges into a charged love affair with him. And finally after 18 months of self-imposed celibacy, she finds mature and true love. And some great sex, too. Gilbert realizes that sharing love is the most fulfilling experience in life, but one needs to be filled with love in order to have love to share. Not only this, learning to love yourself is what fills you with love. In her own words: "To lose balance for love is part of living a balanced life"(312).

Love heals her psychic wounds. She is healed enough by now to render a really good deed. She raises enough money (from her family and friends back home) to buy a plot of land for Wayan- a single mother about to be rendered homeless

In this section we find that Gilbert, who came to Bali looking for balance, found love, and finally and unexpectedly, the inner peace.

A reading of the novel discloses that Gilbert's journey through space and time takes her from sensuous (though celibate) pleasure in food (Eat) to spiritual sacrifice (Pray) and eventually romantic love (Love). The narrative logic of this sequence, it is argued, consists in sensuous, culinary enjoyment preparing her for the meaning of sacrifice through spiritual commitment. These two phases of her journey, or existential quest, become intertwined. Happiness, Gilbert comes to realize, "is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive for it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it." In fact, it can be said that the entire novel is about Gilbert's search for happiness and sense of self, about really taking time for yourself and honouring and celebrating yourself, about living life with passion.

Gilbert says that these experiences can transform a person and instil in them a greater sense of who they are and what they want. She says. "It's really been wonderful. I'm sort of reminded that when you discover the world around you, you also discover the world within you" (305).

"When you operate from a place of doing those things that help you step into your own worth, when you fill up your own skin with yourself, that alone becomes your offering" (308).

I would like to conclude my paper with these words- To eat, pray and love is to celebrate the body, the spirit and the human need for relationships. Could there be three things more fundamental? In fact, one could probably summarize all of life in these three moves.

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