

# TRANSCENDENCE OF SELF IN ELIZABETH GILBERT'S EAT PRAY LOVE

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## ABSTRACT

The paper on Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love* suggests that there is a way to deal with most of the problems in life and the process of achieving the solution through self-discovery. This notion is introduced through the medium of 'Travel' because it has a significant role in the life of the author. It helps her to come to terms with the issues which troubled her a lot. The protagonist is a depressed divorcee who embarks on a physical journey to resolve her emotional unrest due to her divorce and the relationship after the divorce. The author has decided to overcome the depression in her life and determined to take up a travel to Italy, India and Indonesia which ultimately provides great pleasure and inner peace. The recollection of memories and coming out of the comfort zone extended a helping hand to get rid of certain troubles by herself. The argument happens mostly within the 'self' and that brings out the realisation of her nature. She tolerates the visiting of depression and loneliness, faced all the commotion and finally manages to overcome everything by welcoming it inside and keep control over the emotions. The food in Italy gives her a kind of physical nourishment, the mind becomes fresh through meditation in Indian Ashram and eventually satisfied by finding the true love in Indonesia. This paper seeks to establish that self-realization is a cure for every melancholic women because it will lead us to the hub of calmness.

**Keywords:** Brooding - Searching - Travel - Food - Love - Devotion - Transcendence of the 'Self' - Solution.

## INTRODUCTION

Travel literature is an interesting genre which gives descriptions of the landscape, geography, history, culture, tradition and lifestyle of the people along with the memoirs of the person who undertake the journey. It includes the events and its reflections according to the physical and emotional attitude of the traveller. The portrayal could sometimes have a great impact on the reader and it may even induce to them to take up such a kind of trip. The exploration of the traveller is captured alive by the narrative skill of the author.

The genre of travel literature exists from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D Greek geographer Pausanias. He was considered to be the early travel memoirist in western literature. Pausanias' *Description of Greece* is the early example of travel literature. In early days, it was called 'travel record literature' as it is written in prose, essay and diary style. The genre also presented a philosophical and moral argument as its theme in the later days. Petrarch wrote about his ascent of Mount Ventoux by making comparisons between the success of reaching the mountain top and his moral progress in life. He has recorded his obstacles and efforts of achieving the Pinnacle. This literature is not new, but it has taken new dimensions at present.

Travel literature was commonly known as the 'book of travels' in the 18th century. Most of the famous writers of that period tried their hand in this genre. Captain James Cook's diaries received much popularity. Some of the works are translated to various languages and it influenced later naturalists. By the mid 18th century, the Grand Tour was undertaken by wealthy young English men of Oxford through France and Italy in search of specific works of art, culture and roots of the European continent. It went on from several months to years and a knowledgeable guide accompanied them. Robert Louis Stevenson was considered as one of the tourism literature pioneers. He has written *An Inland Voyage* and *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* about his travels in France.

Elizabeth M Gilbert is an American novelist and memoirist, born and brought up on small farm in Litchfield, Connecticut. Books were the only source of entertainment for her as there was no other means of time pass at her home. She took up writing plays and books as her favourite pastime. After her graduation from New York University she tried a different career. Her experience as a cook was explored in her short stories. Later, she worked as a journalist for various National magazines and made a career as a freelance writer.

Elizabeth Gilbert *Eat Pray Love* is the memoir published in 2006 based on her personal exploration to three countries Italy, India and Indonesia. It is rightly named as one woman's search for everything as it gives the best definition of the plot. The decision to spend the entire year in celibacy is a brilliant idea for a melancholic woman to regain the lost spirit. It needs a great effort for a divorcee to face and overcome the troubles all by herself. This paper attempts to bring out the various possibilities by which a melancholic woman is exploring her 'self' and finding a cure to her disturbed heart. Her experience at each circumstance taught her certain tactics to face the problems and made her to move forward in life. This amazing autobiography is a call to all women for realising one's own self.

## UNIQUE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book *Eat Pray Love* has been structured in a unique way like a traditional japamala which has 108 beads. This number is considered to be auspicious as it is a perfect three digit multiple of three and its components adding after nine which has three times three. Number three represents supreme balance in spirituality. This idea is more coinciding with the efforts taken by the author to find balance through the travel to three countries, namely Italy, India and Indonesia. The story is a string of hundred and eight tales,

36 tales for each country. It makes greater sense as the author is writing the book during her 36<sup>th</sup> year and she has clearly elaborated the structure of the book as 109<sup>th</sup> bead.

## TRAVEL THROUGH LIFE

The physical and mental journey of Gilbert's life goes side by side in this work. The scrutiny of the self and the search for happiness is intellectually exposed in the travel to the three countries Italy, India and Indonesia. Gilbert is very strong in her plan and stated thus, "*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... on a Voyage of self discovery*". She rejoices in speaking the seductive Italian language and the double-mozzarella pizzas and gelato made her physically happy, the spiritual energy in India strengthened her mind and the heart attained balance with the help of a medicinal man. The ultimate happiness is achieved when she finds the true love in Indonesia.

Gilbert loves to speak more Italian and eat more during her stay in Italy. She enjoys varieties of food which gives her a kind of satisfaction. She couldn't estimate the amount of pleasure derives on speaking Italian. She craves to discover more about the language and the food. She says, "*I found that all I really wanted was to eat beautiful food and to speak as much beautiful Italian as possible*". The extremity of liking for food shows obviously that she is very much depressed.

In spite of the pleasure she derives, depression and loneliness track her down often, especially when she is left alone. Depression and loneliness are personified like two evil men near her. They occupy her right and left like in escort and squeeze out the essence of joy from her heart. She is constantly scrutinized by both. This always made her to feel the taste of bitter past. The role of depression is to pull her down reminding of the past events and loneliness will make her stand like an accused and enquires the reasons for all that had happened. "*Depression has a firm hand on my shoulder and loneliness harangues me with his interrogation*" (50).

Slowly, the hard grip of these personifications and their torture reaches its peak and distressed her a lot. She started ruminating and it brings up the thought of committing suicide by jumping off a building or blowing the brains out with a gun. But something or the other stopped her and alarmed that she shouldn't end up in a bad decision. She senses the need of a friend to share her feelings. She never imagined to face such a desperate situation, "*I cannot walk another step further – somebody has to help me.*"

She was achingly depressed most of the times but consoles herself that she is undergoing all such difficulties for a reason. So she feels comfortable to pray for the courage to encounter anything with equanimity. Ultimately, she finds the solution for all discomforts through meditation, food, and from her new friendship.

## TRAVEL THROUGH SELF

Gilbert was an extremely precocious child by nature. When she was turning from nine to ten, she got extreme fear that life was passing swiftly. She feels that everyone else around her is also aging fast like her and they are going to die soon.

*“ This panic I was feeling at age ten was nothing less than a spontaneous and full out realization of mortality’s inevitable march, and I had no spiritual vocabulary with which to help myself manage it”(160)*

She felt helpless because she couldn’t understand the speed of time at that age. All she wanted is to have some emergency brake on the universe till she comprehends everything. *“The closer I watched time, the faster it spun...” (161)*. The hypersensitive awareness of time’s speed has made her experience lifepass with greater speed and she feels like leaving the earth soon. She was always in search of contentment through so many ways andrealises that all the achievements can only bring her down. *“Life if you keep chasing it so hard, will drive you to death” (163)*

Richard is a good friend of Gilbert in the Ashram. He always comes for the help when she is about to drown in some serious thinking. Richard helps to analyse the problem clearly, so that she could come out of the issue on her own. When she opens up her heart and told that how strongly she believed David to be her soul mate and it’s very hard to get over this guy. Richard’s opinion about soul mate is, *“soul mates, they come into your life just to reveal another layer of yourself to you, and then they leave” (157)* A true soul mate can only be a mirror. The problem is that she couldn’t agree with the truth that her relationship with David had a very short shelf life. Richard cleverly says,

*“ you’re like a dog at the dump, baby --- you’re just lickin’ at an empty tin can, trying to get more nutrition out of it. And if you’re not careful, that can’s gonna get stuck on your snout forever and make your life miserable. So drop it”(158).*

Richard is the one who finds the exact problem of Gilbert that she got some serious control issues. *“Instead of trying to forcefully take thoughts out of your mind, give your mind something better to play with. Something healthier” (148)*. Finally Richard wishes that she can take her time to heal, but should not forgot to eventually share her heart with someone. The realistic solution for the problem of love is, *“sometimes the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else”. (198)*. He suggested ‘pure divine love’ as a therapy to let out her troubles. Throughout his stay in the Ashram, Richard acted as a saviour of Gilbert from her messed up thoughts, which goes in a wrong direction.

## REACHING THE SELF

Brooding or searching for something is her nature and she continues to do that. Throughout her travel, she made so much of self-analysis. Every place she visits, every person she encounters and all the situation she comes across made her learn about her ‘self’. She experiences the changes physically, spiritually and emotionally in the three countries, Italy, India and Indonesia respectively. The experience

gained through travel is a treasure for her as it has served as a medicine for her troubles as well as a solution for the problems from which she wants to escape. She remembers one of her guru's teachings about happiness, *"Happiness 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."* (272)

Realisation of the 'self' happens at many instances of her journey. When she rides back to the Ashram, after Richard's departure at the airport, she senses that she has been very social and chatty all the time. Even in the Ashram, she manages to create a party like environment around her. She realizes that this is the time for her to change. She thinks that silence and solitude is followed by the sages for some good reason and that's why they are included in universally recognized spiritual practice. Disciplining one's speech is very important because it prevents the energies from spilling out from the mouth, instead of filling the world with *"words, words, words instead of serenity, peace and bliss."* (199). She has decided to have a disciplined act of devotion and to imbibe the idea of complete quiet experience in the Ashram.

She learns most of her 'self' when she ventured for the search of God through yoga and meditation. She realizes various aspects of life in her spiritual journey in the Indian Ashram.

*"The Yogic sages say that all the pain of a human life is caused by words, as is all the joy. We create words to define our experience... we get seduced by our own mantras (I'm a failure...I'm lonely...I'm a failure...I'm lonely...) and we become monuments to them."* (340)

The mind can never be silent. It always brings up some memory or the other. It is up to an individual to handle the memory and lead it in a proper track. If it is ignored, all thoughts will get tangled up and it will become a great stress in the mind. Once in the beach, when a small boy asks so many queries about her origin and the reason for her sadness, she gets irritated and says, *"What are you – a transcript of my most evil thoughts."* (341)

Gilbert learnt that it is mandatory to learn silence and it is essential to have balanced thoughts. She finds peace in the search of God. She prepares herself to locate the problem, analyse it by exploring the causes and the problem will gradually unlock itself. The lesson taken is that the mind shouldn't be touched by any sort of disturbance and it's good to have a safe distance from the peace of mind. So she said to her mind, *"Show me your anger now" ... "Come into my heart now. You can rest there. It's safe now. It's over. I love you."* (342)

She has accepted the reality that there is no magic in the world to change something that had happened. When some thought comes to the mind constantly, it's difficult to move further, she says, *"My unhappy mind was a battlefield of conflicted demons."* (339). She is determined to work for any extreme to get rid of all her nagging thoughts. The necessity of action is felt strongly as she is going to perish sooner if the mind is not at peace with her thoughts.

She formulates herself for the battle with her mind. She brings in every life incident that brought her anger, shame, disappointment, melancholy and irritation to her mind. The moments of betrayal, loss, injustice and so many other stressful instances came to her mind. She remembers the worst part of her life and everything got settled down silently. She realizes that *“this is how god loves us all and receives all, and there is no such thing in this universe as hell, except maybe in our own terrified minds”* (343). That is the way, God forgives and accept everyone as it is. Forgive, forget and accept whatever comes on the way and fortify the mind so as to keep only pleasant things that pleases the mind.

## CONCLUSION

Liberation happened on its own accord when the ‘self’ is realized. Peace and contentment accompanied with the liberated woman. Gilbert achieved wholeness and maturity by diving deep into the self.

*“I think about the woman I have become lately, about the life that I am now living, and about how much I always wanted to be this person and live this life, liberated from the farce of pretending to be anyone other than myself”* (345)

One can find a lost thing in a place where it is lost. Similarly the solution for the problem lies within the problem. Here ‘self’ is the problem of Gilbert and that same change of ‘self’ is the solution. Life gives bitter experiences that even choke you, but the liberation mantra from that suffocation lies within yourself. Gilbert says that she becomes very strong in the last few years because of the solid truth, *“I was not rescued by a prince; I was the administrator of my own rescue”* (344).

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