

Journeying into the Self: A Postmodern Feminist Reading of Select Female Travel Narratives

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Abstract

The rejection of attributing fixed essences to anything is known as non-essentialism. It refers to the rejection of assigning men and women fixed qualities in the context of postmodern feminism. This essay uses a postmodern feminist lens to examine and compare Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India, and Indonesia* with Shivya Nath's *The Shooting Star: A Girl, Her Backpack, and the World*. As Shivya Nath challenges the stereotypes surrounding independent women travelers and strives to escape being confined to a set of guidelines for how a single woman should travel, Elizabeth Gilbert, in her mid-thirties, is forced to consider whether or not she truly is happy and leading a fulfilling life due to a failed marriage. They both embarked on quests to find solutions. Both travelogues offer an insightful look into the minds of their respective authors, discussing how they defy expectations and deal with patriarchal rules. In the process, Gilbert and Nath both change and come to terms with who they are.

Keywords: Travel, Postmodern Feminism, Female Solo Travel, Discovery of self, Non- Essentialism

1. Introduction

Postmodern feminism started as part of third-wave feminism. Gender is viewed as a socially constructed phenomenon in postmodern feminism, unlike the first and second waves of feminism. Postmodern feminism rejects traditional essentialist practices. Judith Butler is one of the most influential theorists in postmodern feminism. She talks about the term 'gender performativity' (Butler, 2022). It is based on the notion of destabilizing gender identities and categories. Postmodern feminism rejects the attribution of fixed essences to men and women. Gender identity cannot be biologically located. One can be born a man or woman, but gender identity as a man or a woman is ascribed by many constructs of the society.

Women's travel writing saw a rise in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many women travel theorists came about during this time like Sara Mills, Susan Morgan, Maria Frawley and others. They all vouch for the fact that women travel writers were treated differently by editors, publishers and even readers (Mills, 1993). Thus, traveling and writing a book about it and getting it published were all a challenge for them compared to men. Women travel writers had to face more challenges compared to men. It was no different from the general state of women in society. Women who traveled usually consisted of wives of aristocrats who accompanied their husbands to places like Lady Mary Worthley Montague or adventure seekers like Alexander David Neel or Celia Finns who traveled throughout England and Scotland on horseback. Another notable woman travel writer is Isabelle Eberhardt who died prematurely at twenty-seven in a flood in Algeria. She used to travel disguised as a man:

When a travel writer is writing about a foreign country, the writer is representing his own biases and judgments through his real-life experiences. These writings can never be objective, as human error is always present. When it comes to women writers, these judgments intensify as they suffer comparatively more societal restrictions from childhood. This bias is evident in women writings (Palmer, 2009).

Many women travelers like Mary Kingsley who explored Africa and documented her experience in *Travels in West Africa* (1897) were considered eccentric by society. They couldn't accept the fact that a woman was capable of traveling alone and she could document meaningful insights she acquired during her travel. The Victorian travel writer Gertrude Bell is also an important figure in women travel writing. She explored the Middle East and was a powerful figure during her time since she was the first female British Intelligence officer. Bell's huge experience as a traveler was used by the British intelligence agency to make her a spy and assign her the job of drawing the map of Iraq.

Traveling was considered a practice taken up only by men. Women were programmed to believe that it was dangerous for them to be out of the confines of their homes let alone travel to distant places. Society has restricted women, with a set of rules for her to follow. Shivya Nath and Elizabeth Gilbert reject this attribution of different rules to men and women. Postmodern feminism talks about the same. This paper attempts to read Shivya Nath's *Shooting Star* and Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* from a postmodern feminist perspective. Shivya Nath in her *The Shooting Star: A Girl, Her Backpack and The World* tries to break free from various prejudices associated with solo women's travel, especially in a country like India which is deemed unsafe for women. Shivya Nath quit her well-paying nine-to-five job to travel the world. She chose an unprecedented path and had to face a lot of difficulties before becoming a successful blogger. *The Shooting Star* is a travel memoir inspired from her journey to over fifty places and her various experiences – both good and bad. More than a documentation of the author's experiences, the book portrays Nath's internal journey as well. She discovers herself in the process and finds a meaning and much-needed purpose to her life during the travel. In the case of Elizabeth Gilbert, in her mid-thirties, a failed marriage urges her to question her own identity along with the fact of whether she is really happy and leading a fulfilling life. She sets out on a journey seeking answers to these questions. She refuses to conform to the norms and fulfill the expectations of society. Along the year-long journey, she comes to realize that the answers that she was looking for are not anywhere else but within herself. The experiences that she gains help not only in identifying herself but also in reconstructing her identity. *Eat, Pray, Love* is an inspiration for women who are exhausted of the presumptions that society holds against them and want to break away from the presumptuous society by finding and re-establishing one's own self.

2. Review of Literature

The article "New directions or the end of the road? Women's travel writing at the millennium" makes a comparative study of the travel narratives, *Desert Places* by Robyn Davidson and *Terra Incognita* by Sara Wheeler. It analyzes both of these works from the perspectives of the author's goals and accomplishments, the motivations behind their travels, their choice of destination, and their interactions with the people they meet along the way (Mulligan, 2000). The article "Postmodern Feminist Perspectives in *Eat Pray Love*" explores how traditional gender standards are defied and how the protagonist of *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert reconstructs her identity through travel (Basotia & Kothari, 2020). The research paper published in the Indonesian Journal of Tourism and Research "Solo Travel and Well-Being Amongst Women: An Exploratory Study" talks about how solo travel can have a huge impact in the physical and psychological health of women. The study concludes that the reasons behind women embarking on solo travel can be for empowerment, finding happiness, growth as a human being, an escape from the mundane and self-discovery (Hamid et al., 2021). The article "Encounters with the Self: Women's Travel Experience in Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*" examines how the authors challenge the conventional tropes of masculine and feminine travel. They give up on their previous lifestyles, reflect on their past and ultimately become successful in taking control of their lives back (Rutkowska, 2021). "Women Image in Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray and Love*" talks about how Gilbert can be classified as a modern, independent, educated woman who doesn't allow any external factors to become hindrances in her choices regarding her life (Kristin et al., 2021). The research paper "Flânerie in female solo travel: an analysis of blogposts from Shivya Nath's *The Shooting Star*" concludes that female solo travelers can provide a distinct viewpoint on self and society. Their desire for freedom and adventure opposes conventional notions of femininity and solo travel provides an opportunity for them to challenge gender stereotypes (Basu Chaudhuri, 2020). The research article "A Journey of Exploration and Reconstruction of the Feminine Self: Reading Shivya Nath's *The Shooting Star: A Girl, Her Backpack and the World* (2018)" demonstrates how women reconstruct their own identities and redefine themselves in order to survive. Travel provides women with an opportunity to delve deeper into themselves by providing answers to questions that were buried inside them (Chotia, 2020).

3. Methodology

A qualitative method is adopted in the research where textual analysis is used to analyze the novels *The Shooting Star: A Girl, Her Backpack and the World* and *Eat, Pray, Love*. The research paper involves a comparative study of these novels by Shivya Nath and Elizabeth Gilbert respectively. The paper employs the theoretical framework of postmodern feminism and its various aspects like non-essentialism and intersectionality to analyse the texts.

4. Discussion

4.1 Renunciation of Essentialism

Gender essentialism considers biology as the deciding factor in determining a gender. Basically gender is determined at birth according to this. The colour pink being associated with women, and blue being associated with men is a gender essentialism. Similarly gifting and expecting boys to play with guns, cars and similar toys and girls to play with dolls also comes under that. What if a girl child doesn't want to play with dolls, what if she likes blue colour and hates pink colour. It is difficult for society to accept that. Essentialism expects females to have only feminine essences and males to have only masculine essences. Gender Essentialism in the case of females believes that there are certain essences or traits that are common to all females i.e. there are certain characteristics that they share. There is no possibility of change or scope for change or change is limited in gender essentialism. This is a flaw because all females wouldn't be having the same experience. Some factors can be universal but the experiences a woman goes through depend on many social, cultural and political factors. There is also a tendency to consider the experience of privileged women as the norm. This is exactly why anti-essentialists argue against essentialism. In essentialism, the man and woman are expected to behave in a certain way and any deviance from it would not be tolerated. Non-essentialism promotes or advocates this deviance and rejects the idea that women or men should behave in a set manner.

Shivya Nath talks about how women travelers are looked upon with a kind of wonder by others. Through her memoir she constantly tries to

justify the fact that women are completely capable of traveling alone. They cannot be put into a box and Nath refuses to conform to any norms other than those of her own. This non-conformity is part of postmodern feminism. She questions the prejudices pertaining to solo female travelers and tries to break away from the rules and regulations as to how a woman should travel if at all she is allowed to. Similarly, Elizabeth Gilbert also challenges the essentialist notions society thrusts upon women. Gilbert confronts gender essentialism when she goes ahead with her decision to get a divorce and be liberated from the roles society and her family expected her to adorn.

Elizabeth Gilbert's work *Eat, Pray, Love* is a fascinating and enthralling story of self-discovery and renouncing the essentialist ideas that society puts on women. Elizabeth Gilbert finds herself at a stage where she feels that she doesn't know herself anymore. At thirty-four, she is divorced, her lover has left her and she is in a state of utter despair and confusion. Her mind is filled with a lot of questions- Questions regarding her marriage, love, job, career, but most of all questions regarding her existence. To find answers to these questions she sets out on a year-long journey, first to Italy, then India and finally to Indonesia. In Italy, she explores various cuisines and eats to her heart's full. She explores the spirituality in her in India. Gilbert finds a balance between the material and the spiritual in Indonesia. She finds love in Bali, Indonesia.

Elizabeth Gilbert recalls that she and her sister have always lived an essentialist life- following the norms and practices that society considers to be apt and normal. Both her mother and sister married by their mid-twenties and had children when they were around thirty. Thirty was considered to be the deadline by society to have children. Gilbert didn't want to do that. She was an independent, educated woman, in fact, the main breadwinner of her family. In spite of this, she was pressured by her family to bear children when clearly she was not ready for it. She wanted to focus more on her career. Gilbert recalls the time when the firm she worked for wanted to send her to New Zealand for writing an article about squid and she remembers how happy she was. She didn't want to have babies unless and until she felt that kind of excitement and joy about it like she felt when she was asked to go to New Zealand to write about giant squids.

Gender essentialism pushes Elizabeth Gilbert initially to believe that what she was doing was wrong when she was planning for a divorce. Looking from the outside she was leading a perfect life. She had everything a third-world country woman wishes for. Since Gilbert is a woman from the first world she was considered more privileged than other women. But the sad fact is that she was also oppressed, maybe not in a similar way, but oppressed nevertheless. Gilbert questions her choices and she seeks answers to the unhappiness and existential crisis she is facing:

How could I be such a criminal jerk as to proceed this deep into a marriage, only to leave it? We'd only just bought this house a year ago. Hadn't I wanted this nice house? Hadn't I loved it? So why was I haunting its halls every night now, howling like Medea? Wasn't I proud of all we'd accumulated...I had actively participated in every moment of the creation of this life—so why did I feel like none of it resembled me? (Gilbert, 2022, p. 12).

4.2 Intersectionality

Postmodern feminists explain the notion of intersectionality with relation to the inequality meted out to women. Intersectional feminism is a lens through which one can aim towards a more equal world. Kimberle Crenshaw explains intersectional feminism as, "a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other" (Wood, 2020). Shivya Nath in her book also talks about the inequalities she had to face while growing up. She talks about how she had been brought up with less freedom compared to her brother, how her overprotective parents were always concerned about her safety wherever she went, how the curfew for herself and her brother were different. She was constantly made to feel that she was not safe and her stepping alone would only invite trouble for herself:

When some of my more adventurous friends from school got together to hike or drive their bikes up to nearby hill towns, I didn't get permission to leave home. If a longing to explore the world that lay beyond was within me then, it remained buried under a heap of fear, insecurity and paranoia that I had imbibed at home (Nath, 2018, p. 21).

If Elizabeth Gilbert took time in realizing her true happiness and was in a state of confusion for a long time before taking a strong decision to move away from the predetermined roles society has endowed upon her, Shivya Nath noticed the different rules meted out to women and men from an early age. She also had to pave her way disregarding all of the prejudices but she was a bit bolder than Gilbert in taking the first step. Even though Gilbert questioned her decisions at first, eventually she realized that she needs to stand for herself and take tough decisions in order for her to find her identity. She recalls being happy every time she found out she was not pregnant, that she got one more month to live. She was afraid that being a mother would domesticate her and rob her of the moments that she used for writing. That was her choice and she believed that she had the right to exercise her choice whether she wanted to have a child at that point of her life or not. Neither society nor her family members, not even her husband had a right to judge her based on her decision to not have a child and give priority to her career. But Gilbert was judged and she was even made guilty for the decisions she took for herself. She was exhausted to lead a life where all she was expected to do was being a good wife and becoming a mother. She as a woman was expected to do the sacrifices- whether it's her desires, dreams, passions or career, while her husband could take time in deciding his career and finding his foot and nobody expected him to make any sort of sacrifices. He could take all the time in the world to settle himself but a woman's priority should be having a child according to the norms of society. The disparity in the efforts a woman and man has to take is huge. There is no comparison at all. The alarming problem is that most people, even most women for that matter, think this practice is completely normal and acceptable. This has been done for generations and it is difficult to make a change in that mentality. It is not impossible but definitely difficult. It's been immersed in the minds of people that women should be a certain way and any woman moving away from that fixed set of rules is considered an outcast and people would view her as not fit for the society. She would have to face brickbats even though she has taken a decision that is concerning

her own life. Gilbert decides to take matters into her own hands and initiates a divorce. Even though Gilbert was the so-called privileged white woman from the upper strata of society, she had to overcome a lot of pressure and judgemental opinions to go through her divorce. She was made the villain and people sympathized with her husband because she took the decision to end a seemingly happy marriage. The difficulties she went through in that seemingly happy marriage were understood by no one. For the first time in her life she decided to listen to her heart and make herself the first choice, to make herself her priority. She later gets into a relationship with a much younger man called David. This relationship soon ends in a breakup. The emotional breakdown that follows was too much for her to take. She was not herself anymore and she wanted to find out her true self without the interference of the prejudiced society. All these incidents urge Gilbert to venture into an year-long journey that helps her to rewind her entire life and introduce her to a new Elizabeth Gilbert, who is much more confident, happy, and at peace with herself. When it comes to Shivy Nath, she was considered a rebel when she decided to quit her job and do full-time traveling and blogging. Society and her family expected her to do a nine to five job and be settled before thirty. She didn't want to play safe because her dream was to be free and travel without any restrictions. She knew for a fact that she would not be happy if she would be restricted to an air-conditioned cabin for the rest of her life. Comparatively, Shivy Nath was much more confident than Gilbert because she was very clear about her decisions from the beginning. Gilbert took time in keeping herself a priority. Shivy Nath goes on a mission to make others understand that she was just exercising her right to achieve free will just like men exercise theirs. Shivy Nath had to fight discouragement and hindrances from her family and society when she decided to take a plunge and follow her heart. She had to convince her folks that she knew what she was doing and was absolutely capable of doing it. According to her, fighting against her own inner demons and inhibitions was much easier than convincing her parents that she craved freedom and she needed to get away from everything familiar and comfortable so that she could identify her true calling.

4.3 *Autonomy and Self-recognition*

The Shooting Star and *Eat, Pray, Love* are introspective journeys into Shivy Nath and Elizabeth Gilbert's psyche respectively. They both undergo a transformation and discover themselves in the process. They wanted to take the reins of their own life without any restrictions or bondage. This is the concept of autonomy in women travel writing. "Autonomy motivations positively influence the feel dimension of solo women travel experiences because for women the possibility of making their own choices and control their own actions create feelings of control and independence" (Wilson & Harris 2006). While Shivy Nath had an unquenchable urge to prove that women need not have a male support to take care of her and or to escort her wherever she wishes to go, Elizabeth Gilbert tried to find her true inner bliss and peace in the places she traveled. Shivy Nath felt a sense of satisfaction and happiness and a new feeling of independence and freedom when she finally traveled alone to places and mingled with people from various cultures. She wanted to normalize female solo traveling and wanted to stop society from alienating women travelers. They should not be looked upon as distinct beings:

The desire of travelling solo had perhaps sprung out of the inherent frustration of growing up as a sheltered girl in India. One who couldn't even take control of her own life. One who always needed a man to protect her. One who, even after becoming financially independent, needed to rely on others to make her own decisions (Nath, 2018, p. 72).

Elizabeth Gilbert also exercises her autonomy by making choices for herself and rediscovers herself in her adventurous and fascinating journey. In Italy she seeks pleasure. She heals her body through food. Italian cuisine is famous for the exquisite taste and variety it offers. She is fascinated with the Italian language as well. She used to study Italian when she was in New York. She fulfilled the desire of speaking the language when she traveled to Italy. All those suppressed dreams and desires were being realized by her one by one when she decided to listen to her heart and let go of the thought of what society might think:

It is kind of a fairyland of language for me here. For someone who has always wanted to speak Italian, what could be better than Rome? It's like somebody invented a city just to suit my specifications, where everyone (even the children, even the taxi drivers, even the actors in the commercials!) speaks this magical language (Gilbert, 2022, p. 39).

After being in Italy for four months Gilbert travels to India to explore spirituality. She lives in an Ashram in pursuit of a spiritual guru. She meets a young girl named Tulsi while living in the Ashram. Tulsi represents a postmodern feminist woman. Even though she is only seventeen she has clear views and opinions on life. She is not looking for a marriage and wants to pursue higher studies despite the fact that her parents are planning to get her married the moment she turns eighteen. Elizabeth Gilbert views Tulsi with a kind of admiration since she is able to make clear decisions and follow her heart despite the restrictions around her. Tulsi becomes an inspiration for Gilbert. Tulsi's conversations with Gilbert makes one realize that society expects women to always be under men whether it is in India or New York. Tulsi mentions certain facts that could be considered a hindrance for women in India to find a husband. Horoscope, age, skin colour are all factors that are considered to be rubrics for Indian women to pass, so that they can find a suitable husband. Irony is the fact that only women need to fulfill these yardsticks and tick these boxes, men need not. Women are not given an option in choosing their life partners. Even if they happened to be educated or rather more educated than the man that is considered to be a negative. If she is in a higher position and is earning higher, that is also considered to be a minus mark when it comes to marriage. The travel to India helped Elizabeth Gilbert find a much-needed discipline and calmness to her character. If she healed her body in Italy, she healed her soul in India. The next trip to Indonesia was to find a balance between the two- the body and the mind. Here she meets with Felipe and falls in love. For the first time in life she is with a man who is not emotionally withdrawn. Since she had bitter experience in her previous relationships she finds it difficult to trust and accept Felipe initially. But she takes a leap of faith and gives herself a chance at love, a chance at being truly happy. This is the transformation that she goes through.

Shivya Nath's primary objective to quit her job was to escape from a mundane life which no longer excited her. She wanted novelty and some kind of inspiration in her life and that is when she decided to explore the world. In the article "Meaningful travel: Women, Independent travel and the search for self and meaning", Erica Wilson and Candice Harris explain the concept of 'Self-recognition' (Wilson & Harris, 2006). It is a process of realizing one's true potential and recognizing one's inner self. Shivya Nath wanted to identify herself through exploring the world. She wanted to come out of her comfort zone and be in places she has never been to, mingle with people she never knew, live in places which were not very comfortable or luxurious. She wanted to experience all that, she wanted to experience life, which she never had an opportunity to, owing to the cocooned life she was brought up in. She wanted to do all that the society and her family told her not to do just because she was a woman. Elizabeth Gilbert also goes through this process of recognizing one's true self. She was distorted at the beginning of this journey. Towards the end her life experiences makes her matured, balanced and a much calmer individual who believes in herself. She understands that she herself rescued her. She is the hero of her story. She turned over a new leaf and was able to find happiness, peace, and contentment at last:

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. I think of everything I endured before getting here and wonder if it was me – I mean, this happy and balanced me, who is now dozing on the deck of this small Indonesian fishing boat – who pulled the other, younger, more confused and more struggling me forward during all those hard years (Gilbert, 2022, p. 345).

Elizabeth Gilbert and Shivya Nath both thus realize their self-worth and exercise their right to autonomy by taking their own decisions and giving importance to their dreams and desires, perhaps for the first time in life. The freedom and independence they felt while making choices for themselves when traveling solo made them realize that they were the heroes of their life and elevated their self-esteem.

5. Conclusion

Shivya Nath is a pioneer in the field of solo women travel writers in India. Her life and her journey portrayed in her book is an inspiration for millions of young women in India. She, being a small-town girl, had the courage and determination to chase her dreams, refusing to be bogged down by societal pressures and prejudices. She is a champion of the small-town girls who desire to travel far and alone and want to feel liberated without being concerned about the preconceived notions society has for women. Her journey is so relatable to every middle-class girl, who has grown up amidst restrictions but still dreamt of exploring the world outside. She considers herself a nomad with her home being wherever her heart is. She overcame her own fears and insecurities, indecisiveness and self-doubt and took a step towards freedom. It was not an easy journey for her. It was a challenge to venture into unknown territories and unknown cultures but Shivya Nath still took that challenge head on. Shivya Nath through *The Shooting Star* advocates taking solo trips not only because it helps one identify with oneself and transform oneself but it gives a sense of self-esteem and confidence and helps in improving the mental well-being of the traveler. Women feel empowered when they broaden their horizons and do things they always wished to do and when they have a choice in deciding how they live without any constraints. Once a woman tastes such kind of empowerment she feels liberated. Shivya Nath hopes to inspire young women to travel and find their own destination and their own magic and realize the fact that the world out there is not such a bad place after all. Even though she realizes and accepts the fact that the world is not a bed of roses and dangers are lurking in various corners, she believes that the majority of people are warm and welcoming. Shivya Nath urges solo women travelers to keep faith in humanity and advocates traveling while immersing in the local culture and traditions of the place. Mingling with people helps in gaining different perspectives and in the development of character and confidence in women travelers, who were denied that opportunity in the patriarchal society. Development of self is only possible when one comes out of his or her own comfort zone and understands others. Shivya Nath promises herself and her readers that she will continue to challenge conventions much like the postmodern feminists and will continue to venture into uncharted territories, rediscovering herself each day.

Elizabeth Gilbert similarly, challenges all sorts of essentialist ideas projected by society in every step of her transformative journey. She was able to find her true inner self and also reconstruct that self in the process of her travel. For the first time in life she actually listened to her heart without feeling weighed down by the roles that society expected her to play- whether it was the role of a wife or that of a mother. At the end of her journey she didn't feel guilty anymore for choosing herself- her dreams, her desires, her passions. She felt liberated and finally was at peace with herself. Elizabeth Gilbert's memoir is all about the strength of her character. It is about the resilience she had shown while a series of tragedies were gobbling her up left, right and centre. The courage with which she got back up on her feet and took the reins of her life back in itself is inspiring for women struggling in life to make tough choices. *Eat, Pray, Love* served as an inspiration for many women readers to take action, get out of their miseries and stand for themselves. The book helped them to express their desires, chase their dreams and exercise their right to make decisions that affect their lives. The book is an ode to not only women but everyone who wishes to experience something different in life and not be confined within four walls. It encourages one to step out, grab the opportunities, explore the beauty of creation, be open to adventures and while doing so heal the wounds within and come out as a better version of oneself.

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HariPriya Sreekumar was responsible for the data collection and drafting of the manuscript. Dr. A. Poongodi was responsible for proofreading it.

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