

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

WOMEN TRAVEL NARRATIVES: A REFLECTION OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND SELF- REALIZATION

SHWETA SHREE

IGNOU- New Delhi



ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to study women travel narratives in view of spiritual growth and self-realization that the authors go through during their travels. The texts taken up for study are memoirs by the writers which are factual accounts of their journeys. The study depicts the journey of two women writers and how they achieve conquest in their quest journey's and how the tryst with cultures, new shores, new people, unimagined encounters that they realise their limits and their potentials.

Keywords: Quest, Spirituality, Self, Women travels.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

From the readings available on contemporary travel writing by women, it is premised that travel is conducive to transformation when inward journey goes hand in hand with the outward voyage. It's comparable to a pilgrimage which one undertakes for self-realization. Reading renowned travel writers have also been seen to have influenced individual culture and societal outlook. Travel writing is significant and impressionistic also because it is true first person account of an author's journey namely autobiographical in nature and follows a structured pattern which is linear and chronological and depicts the travel to the reader.

Till early 19th-century travel narratives were focused only on factual accounts of men writers as women did not accompany them on the journeys. Their lot was, wait for the heroes to return to their fold depicting masculine valour, scientific exploration and colonised status of the places visited. It was only after the 19th century that it took the form of a memoir or novel. It was then that self-discovery and metaphorical presentation of heroes' quest and inner journey also became a concern as averred by Dann,

[q]uest romance, based on the idea of hero setting out, experiencing trials and adventures, and returning home victorious and changed... Here the myth has been displaced by the traveller as a puny alien crawling over a territory with no roots, then returning to discover his/her true self. Thus travel book, as a type of successful literary performance, is a happy blend of reportage and parable, landscape plus incident doing the symbolic work of fable. (Dann)

Initially 'women travelled abroad' motivated by their male counterparts. They have always been concerned with exploration of interior landscape than the exterior as suggested by Marie Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* "...the men's job was to collect and possess everything else, these women travellers sought to collect and possess them. Their territorial claim was to private space, a personal room-sized empire. From these private seats to self-hood Graham and Tristan depict themselves emerging to explore the world in a circular expedition that takes them

out into the public... and then back to the familiar and enclosed.”(Pratt 160)

Women have as Virginia Woolf has put it somewhere to desire their own whole world as she says,

“As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world.” (Woolf)

For women travel also means escaping the constraints of society and family expectations and obscurant norms. The contemporary women travel writers chosen for the study have revealed as one of the dominant themes, the construction of self through self-imposed exile to satisfy their quest and conquest instincts. Travel gives them the fluid space to shun family pressures to conform to conventional norms thus by giving them the freedom of mind and spirit. And the space to evolve. As highlighted in the two travelogues by Rita Golden Gelman and Elizabeth Gilbert, both middle-aged woman, divorced and trying to overcome their loss, strive to re-live their dreams which they have buried long back and come to terms with their self-adapting to changing environments, habitat, culture and in the process achieve self-actualization.

Reflecting back on Rita Golden Gelman, she was living a charmed married life at the beginning of the book in 1985. Her life is filled with parties and celebrities, but she isn't happy.

I am living someone else's life. It's a good life filled with elegant restaurants, interesting people, and events like the Academy Awards and the Grammys. My husband of twenty-four years and I dine with celebrities, we see the latest movies before the rest of the world, and we're invited to all book parties in Los Angeles. (Gelman 3)

After talking to a woman, on an aeroplane, Rita realises that she wants something else and what all she is surrounded by is not her real identity. The female tells her about the business of booking sailing tours, and this kindles the dormant fire of travel in Rita.

As the woman spoke, I remember that once I'd dreamed of sailing around the world, of paddling down the Amazon, of sitting around a fire with tribal people and sharing their

lives. I had loved the person who had those dreams. She was daring and idealistic... and gone. My husband had no interest in boats and tribal cultures. (Gelman 3)

Rita decides to go sail on the Tigris in Galapagos Islands without her husband and Spectre too volcanic Islands, interacts with sea lions, and blue-footed boobies work the tropical waters and touch the magic of otherness.

And this one step before her divorce towards the new adventurous life makes her eschew the glamorous life she was living realising the futility of her living. Her thirst for discovery, for learning, for penetrating the unknown from now onwards becomes her drive in life. By living a married life, she knew that she can't continue this adventurous life of travelling. She realises that her successful career as a writer of children's books, her enrolling herself in UCLA University studying anthropology doesn't fulfil her desire for adventure and real travel. She and her husband were two different individuals. For various interests and attitudes in life, she takes a short break for two months from her married life knowing at the same time that there would be no turn on the route when she decides to set herself free from regime roles. Her destination is Mexico City. She does a lot of introspection about her staying alone in a hotel.

Who is this person in this strange hotel, alone for the first time in her life? Why am I here? What have I done? I feel as though I'm in play, following a script that was written by a stranger. Part of me scared; but there is another part, deep inside that is excited at the idea that I am about to enter the unknown. (Gelman 6)

She realises for the first time that the quest for the known has been there in her as a child,

“As a child, I loved the unknown.”(Gelman 6) She starts living a life of instincts. Her quest for knowing the unknown makes her participate in cultures by being emotionally involved in people's lives. I'm running toward...toward adventure, toward discovery, toward diversity. I can do whatever I want to do! And what I want to do is move through other worlds, learn what it is

that makes us all human and interact with people who are different from me. (Gelman 40)

The encounter with the unknown which to some extent is mystical makes her philosophical in examining what she sees, and solitude further paves the way for her to experience the Spiritual. For example, when her skin starts peeling away lying in bed one night she thinks about rebirth,

Then, as lie in bed one night, burning up and in pain, I get the first spiritual message of my life: in shedding my skin, I am being reborn. I am symbolically peeling away the person I have become and releasing the woman who has been trapped inside all these years. Soon this new me will be going out into the world on a journey of self-discovery. (Gelman 15)

She heals just not on an outer bodily level but internally too everything changes. Perhaps she has had the time and reflection to understand the morality and fleeting character of life for the first time. Thus after moving for fifteen long years, Rita has learned to enjoy and savour the present. She says:

When I am writing, I am inside the sound and meaning of the words, playing with them, curving them around each other. When I am eating, I luxuriate in the taste and texture of every bite. When I am alone, I listen to and communicate with the silence within me and the noises and messages of the world around me. (Gelman 302)

Even after fifteen years of nomadic life people are still her passion. Communication has never been a problem for her because she has learned to empathise, sympathise and enter into the world of others and other cultures. It is the spiritual transformation that makes her completely immersed in cultures of others. She reaches a state of stasis (composed mental status/equilibrium) which resigns her to accept people, culture, beliefs and customs without passing judgment or attempting to change or modernise them.

She had far less patience for Americans both at home and abroad. When one gets older, sometimes the dreams get shoved aside as one learns to make room in life for those around. As the families grow,

they become the centre of one's world, but sometimes those aspirations still linger in the backs of one's mind waiting for their turn. This book makes one think about the goals in life. It is a dream of everyone to travel all over the world and photograph and explore different cultures. Not far into the book, Rita made a statement that strikes one. She was looking to "uncover the person inside [her] skin." This is what this book boils down to--a woman's journey to discover her real identity and become comfortable with it. One cannot imagine the bravery and sheer determination it took for Rita to not only embark upon this adventure--but to stay on it--and she still is.

The second travelogue taken up for the study is *Eat, Pray, and Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, an American story writer, essayist and a novelist. At the time of writing, the book has sold more than 8 million copies worldwide 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 New York Bestseller, was made into a film by the same name in the year 2010 by Ryan Murphy.

Gilbert's travelogue is in line with other women travel writers such as Rita Golden Gelman, Nan Watkins, and Elisabeth Eaves, etc. who have traversed transatlantic and transnational boundaries for self-actualisation. Women it has been seen strive for an open space more so as a result of some experiential-existential exigency. In Gilbert's case, it is knotted in the restraints of domestic duty in gender ascribed roles. She begins to question the performative roles that have defined her, in the beginning, the chapter itself. "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). Thus Gilbert as some others women travellers like Rita Golden Gelman's also takes divorce a break free from restricting, inhibiting spaces around them to embark in search of fluid spaces. In a confessional mode, she unearths her relationship with her husband thus,

On September 9, 2001, I met with my husband face-to-face for the last time, not realising that every future meeting would necessitate lawyers among us, to mediate. We had dinner in a restaurant. I tried to talk about our separation, but all we did was a 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 in my city, as everything invincible that had once stood together now became a smouldering 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. (Gilbert 20)

Gilbert's narrative, which emphasises strengthens and fortifies her determination to 'do it alone' even in the backdrop of 9/11 tragedy.

She decides she will spend a year travelling in three countries and goes on to establish an explicit reason for visiting each—Italy (to explore the art of pleasure), India (to study 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).

It is noteworthy that Gilbert uses bead both in physical and symbolic terms for the physical and spiritual journey she undertakes through three countries. In Gilbert's Introduction the author explains the numerically symbolic construction of her book: 108 tales for the 108 beads on the "japa Malas," beads worn by Hindus and Buddhists for focus in prayer and meditation. The 108 tales are evenly divided into 36 sections, contained in three books, broken down by the three different countries in which each tale takes place. Weaving the holy number of three into the very foundation of her book, Gilbert utilises the power of Trinity, present in many faiths, to create an intentional space for her quest to become one with the Divine. Book One is

about the *Pursuit of Pleasure* is the story of Gilbert's quest for the enjoyment of life, rediscovered. After spending years in depression resulting from her divorce, Gilbert travels to Italy to learn Italian, a language she finds so beautiful that she must make it a part of her own. In Italy, Gilbert begins to unfold her history, showing glimpses of her former self. Recounting her tumultuous existence in New York, and her desperate conversations on the bathroom floor with "God", Gilbert sets the stage for her drastically different and decadent time in Italy. Infusing her story with the rich history of her host country, and spending four months exploring the language, culture, and cuisine of Italy, Gilbert emerges from the first third of her journey well rested, well fed, and ready to meet herself and the Divine in India.

Book Two is about *Pursuit of Devotion* which brings Gilbert to an ashram in India where she spends four months practising yoga and learning the art of meditation. The author shares her encounter with the overwhelming voices of self-doubt, blame, and guilt that distracts her from her meditation, explaining how she learned to channel those voices with love, and eventually make peace. Gilbert passionately and comically re-lives her most intense moments in the ashram, once again revealing her most personal struggles and conversations with God. It is here, at the ashram in India, that Elizabeth Gilbert gives religion and spirituality the nurturing love and respect that both deserve.

Book Three is about *Pursuit of Balance* brings Gilbert to Bali, seeking balance within herself and with the world around her. With Gilbert's notions of Bali being, "A perfect Eden with no history of violence or bloodshed ever" (236), the author discovers that what seems to be perfection may simply be an effort to find balance with reality. In a country of almost indescribable beauty and a history of political violence, Gilbert examines how her preconceived notions often contrast with actuality. It is in Indonesia, the last phase of her journey, that Gilbert is "free", stating "I don't mind anything these days. I can't imagine or remember discontent" (235) that she attains a composite state of mind, body, and soul. In "Book Three," Gilbert finds relaxation and love in a land where many come to leave their

world behind and bask in the physical beauty of an island that financially survives on the exploitation of wealthy expatriates. *Eat, Pray and Love* written with Elizabeth Gilbert's unabashed honesty, brings readers close to the author, providing a friend and confidant in which to identify. In a time when women are still figuring out how to balance their dreams with expected roles in society, Gilbert gives a voice to women who want to travel and live off the beaten path.

Neither Gelman nor Gilbert, at the outset of their journeys, has a firm sense of their living. It is the tryst with cultures, new shores, new people, unimagined encounters that they realise their limits and their potentials. For both of them, it's growth and awareness and cataclysmic change in their lives to adjust to a new environment that they are now faced with.

References

1. Gelman, Rita Golden. *Tales of a Female Nomad: Living at Large in the World*. New York: Three Rivers, 2001. Print
2. Gilbert, Elizabeth. *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India and Indonesia*. London: Bloomsbury, 2006. Print
3. Dann, Graham. "*Writing out the tourist in space and time*." *Annals of Tourism Research* 26.1 (1999): 159-87.
<https://eurekamag.com/pdf.php?pdf=003338000>. Pergamon. Web. 26 Sept. 2014.
4. "A Quote by Virginia Woolf." Goodreads. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Feb. 2017.