

Reader Response to Feminism in Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*

Wu Shuangnan

Abstract—This study is about reader response to feminism in *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* by Elizabeth Gilbert (2006). The topic is analysed under the guidance of reader-response theory proposed by Louise Rosenblatt. The objectives of this study are twofold: first, to collect related readers' response to feminism on the Goodreads website, one of the biggest and most famous book review websites worldwide; secondly, to discuss readers' underpinning views towards feminism and their expectation for women in the 21st century. This paper seizes on qualitative research. The primary data of this study is gleaned from the Goodreads website. Other sources of data include literary works, book rating websites and news reports. The conclusion is that feminism is deemed as self-indulgence or a kind of self-discovery by different readers and such fact reflects, to some extent, what people expect for women in the 21st century.

Index Terms—Eat, pray, love, feminism, reader response.

I. INTRODUCTION

Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia (Penguin publishing house, 2006) is a memoir by American author Elizabeth Gilbert. The book remained on The New York Times Best Seller list for 187 weeks and has been translated into over 30 languages, with more than 10 million copies sold worldwide. In 2010, starring Julia Roberts and Javier Bardem, *Eat, Pray, Love* was released in theatres.

In the book, Liz, the mid-30 protagonist, had everything a modern New York woman was supposed to crave—a husband who loved her dearly, a huge country house and a successful career—but instead of feeling happy and fulfilled, she was consumed by the feeling of empty panic and confusion. Therefore, she decided to let go of everything and find what she wanted. Then she went through a disastrous divorce and soon embarked on a journey in the hope to find who she was and what she wanted for her life [1].

There have been over 20 papers published from 2010 to 2020 on *Eat, Pray, Love*. Among them, 12 have touched on feminism embedded in the book or have adopted feminism criticism theories. Moya [2], Herawati *et al.* [3] and Abdullah *et al.* [4] discussed the main character's behaviours whilst interpreting them as manifestations of feminism. Subramanian and Lagerwey [5] broached the same subject but took on a western feminist point of view and focused on the book's western audiences. Most of these papers held that the memoir promoted the empowerment of women in the 21st

century, whereas Mickey [6] regarded *Eat, Pray, Love* as a feminist “bullshit” for the author found it not applicable to the real-life elite female society. Other researches focused on translation strategies [7], particularly those related to English to Indonesian translation since Indonesia played an important role in this book and the book became popular among Indonesians, tourism industry [8] and orientalism [9]. The literature review lay bare that, regarding this book, there have not been enough researches that considered reader response.

II. UNDERLYING THEORIES

Reader-response theory [10], particularly the transactional theory of reading and writing, focuses on the readers or audiences and their experience of a literary work. This theory recognises the reader as an active agent to the work and completes the meaning through interpretation [11].

Feminism is the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes [12]. It manifests itself worldwide by activities promoting women's rights and interests. That is to say, feminism encourages women to pursue their own happiness by their own means. By this standard, Liz's decisions to divorce, initiate new relationships and travel can all be considered as ideas of feminism. In this paper, the term “feminism” or “feminist” will be represented by three scenes in the novel as listed in the following sections.

Therefore, by analysing reader response towards feminist scenes related to women's decision to pursue their interests and ways of life, the author seeks to explore readers' views on feminism and their expectations on how women should live in the 21st century.

III. CHOICE OF READER RESPONSE PLATFORM

This paper's main data source is Goodreads. Goodreads is an Amazon-owned book-based social web site for members to share books, read, review books, rate books, and connect with other readers. [13] Users of the website can create their own groups of book suggestions, surveys, polls, blogs, and discussions. They can also like other people's book review to express agreement or disagreement. When readers comment on books they have already read, they assist potential readers in choosing their next books. This paper opts for Goodreads as the main source of rating and reviewing data mainly because it offers a review filter function through which one can sift out comments related to a certain scene or character.

IV. READER RESPONSE TO EAT, PRAY, LOVE

Up till now, there are 1, 462, 833 ratings and 53,705

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reviews for *Eat, Pray, Love* on Goodreads (as shown in Fig. 1). With an average rating of 3.57/5, the comments are generically polarised. 270, 966 readers, roughly 18% of the whole reader group, think the book deserves no higher than 2/5 whilst 814, 662, around 54% of the people, generously leave a 4 plus mark for this book. According to the commentators' language statistics, 48764 of 53,705 reviews are in English. Therefore, book reviewers for *Eat, Pray, Love* are mainly made up of English-speakers, who take up 90.8% of the whole readership. This paper only considered and analysed English book reviews on Goodreads.



Fig. 1. Goodreads' page for *Eat, Pray, Love*. (Goodreads, as of September 2020).

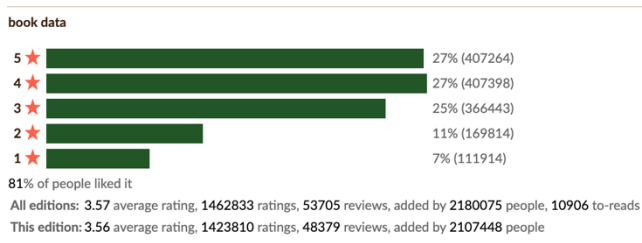


Fig. 2. Rating details for *Eat, Pray, Love*. (Goodreads, as of September 2020).

As feminism is frequently represented by a woman's choice of romantic relationships, the right to pursue her interest and pleasure [14], this paper chooses three related scenes from the book. Respectively, the three scenes are about divorce, new relationship and a long trip taken by the main character to find her identity, interest and inner balance.

A. Scene One

One night, while weeping and praying on the bathroom floor, Liz had an epiphany that she did not want to be married anymore. Soon, she initiated a divorce to end her 8-year-long marriage. Her husband, however, did not understand her choice and was not keen on this development.

B. Scene Two

During the divorce process, Liz embarked on a rebound relationship with her yoga coach, which did not work out and left her devastated and alone.

C. Scene Three

Liz travelled around. She spent four months in Italy, eating and enjoying her life ("Eat"). She then spent three months in India, trying to find her spirituality ("Pray"). Finally, she ended her year-long trip when she went to Bali, Indonesia, striving to look for the "balance" between "eat" and "pray". In Indonesia, she also found "Love" when she fell in love with a Brazilian businessman.

Reader response towards these three scenes is largely polarised, with roughly 20% of readers being annoyed by

Liz's behaviours, 55% of readers finding her choice relatable. This research will focus on these two groups.

Readers who hold negative ideas about the feminist scenes tend to regard this book as a "self-centred neurotic cheesy monologue" of an "American Princess" (see Fig. 3) in "her mid-thirties". The supportive readers hold the belief that this book "touched the world and changed countless lives, inspiring and empowering millions of readers to search for their own best selves". It is natural for people to have various critiques towards any works of literature. But for *Eat, Pray, Love*, such a huge variance between these two contradictory ideas embeds a clash between readers' expectation of a female living in the 21st century and of feminism itself. This paper will analyse reader response from both sides whilst exploring their views towards feminism.



American Princess and Her Journey of Cultural Appropriation

Fig. 3. Kat's review on *Eat, Pray, Love*.

V. FEMINISM: SELF-INDULGENCE

A. Reader Response to Scene One

According to the top 300 reviews on the book (Goodreads ranks all reviews based on how many likes each has received) that mentioned "divorce", most people put Liz's divorce and her new relationships into the category of self-indulgence.

For the very first plot where Liz was struck by a thought of ending her marriage, some readers consider it as an immature and irresponsible whim. To quote from Feijoa (the second most liked comments that mentioned "divorce", as shown in Fig. 4), the following is what actually happened: One night, whilst bawling on the bathroom floor, a habit Liz has grown fond of, she is struck by a flaky attack of "twaterry", which is considered by her a divine experience with God or thereabouts. Just like Feijoa, for most readers, Liz gave up an 8-year-long marriage, a husband who had been loving her even when she was trying to divorce him, a beautiful house that they have been working for and potential children—all because of her crazy whims. This is considered a behaviour in great lack of responsibility and rational thoughts. As can be seen from Fig. 4, 1159 agreed with Feijoa's comment by clicking the like button (as of September 2020). A great number of readers hold that such behaviour is, in essence, brimming with self-centred philosophy.



Fig. 4. Feijoa's comment on the first scene.

This group of readers also think that Liz failed to mention the reasons behind the divorce. According to the most liked

comment that mentioned “divorce”, which was liked by 1458 people on Goodreads, some readers are curious about where the divorce came from. They feel like Liz divorced her husband out of no proper reason, therefore it is hard to relate to such irrational, unfounded decision-making.

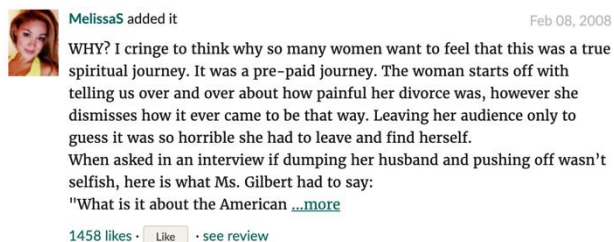


Fig. 5. MelissaS' comment on the first scene.

They believe that a so-called normal divorce should at least contain a trigger—cheating, violence, children, etc., and that divorce should be a bilateral decision. But Liz's unilateral decision to end the marriage, which hurt her husband deeply was solely based on her “ideally manifestation of God” and “self-indulgence”, which upsets a great number of readers. Such impact only multiplied when audiences found that the book is not even a fictional literary work, rather, it is a memoir. This has made some of the readers target Elizabeth Gilbert in real life as she is the author and the real protagonist, who is deemed selfish and self-indulging because of the book.

Such impressions of self-indulgence and irresponsibility on Liz and the author has been somehow strengthened further after Elizabeth Gilbert went on an American talk show to discuss her book. According to the most liked comment mentioning “divorce” (as shown in Fig. 5), the author inadvertently deepened this so-called irresponsible middle age daydreamer image when she went to Oprah Winfrey's show, in which she complained to Oprah: Oh, responsibility...why Americans are so obsessed with responsibility and productivity? Can't we just leave some time for ourselves to find the self that we want to become?

B. Reader Response to Scene Two

Moving on to the second scene, readers of this group seem furious about Liz's decision to embark on a rebound relationship with a young, sexy, yoga-obsessed new-love called David, especially when she has decided to remain celibate for a while. Readers feel that Liz was adding insult to injury, based on the fact that this affair was happening way before she finished the divorce case with her husband.

This plot is bombarded by angry readers who believe that Liz is nothing but a phoney self-absorbed cheating woman who gave up on a proper marriage with the belief that she would be fine all on her own but instantly hooked up with the first man she set eyes on in a yoga class. When it eventually came to the point where the new relationship began to crumble into ruins, some readers feel that Liz “deserves the punishment from karma” and that what comes around goes around. At the same time, as divorce negotiations did drag on, once again, Liz was kneeling on the bathroom floor. This time, however, it was on David's bathroom floor. And David, just like Liz's ex-husband, seemed unimpressed by such displays.

Some readers commented as follows: men are interested in

women for their unique and interesting qualities but not women's fantastic ability to put on dramatic. This kind of comment shows that “dramatic shows” are still part of people's stereotype towards women since Liz's simple act of kneeling on the ground would be considered “dramatic”. This also hints that women should act in the purpose of pleasing men rather than pleasing themselves.

C. Reader Response to Scene Three

Next, and the most exciting part—travelling. What happened was that Liz had signed a book contract before she even set foot on her journey. The publisher wanted her to write about her journey in Italy, India and Indonesia and pre-paid her, which enabled her to afford this whole trip.

Based on this, many readers who give the book below-average ratings believe that the trip cannot be called a self-discovery but rather a self-indulgence luxurious business trip because the traveller did not even have to worry about financing herself for the whole year. She rented a house in Italy, settled at a temple in India and lived in a fantastic exuberant villa in Bali, Indonesia. All of these could not have been realised if Liz had not been paid in advance. Therefore, about 20% of the readers who leave their reviews on Goodreads believe that, by all means, it was a pre-paid, task-oriented business trip where the author had been guaranteed that the book would be published once she had finished it. And most people tend to believe that the financial source of the trip has been downplayed in the memoir.

Also, there is another major reason why people would hold the thought that Liz took a fairly self-centred escape—she mentioned that the names of the three countries that she had chosen to go all started with the letter “I”. And in the book, she said that such coincidence meant these three countries, i.e. Italy, India and Indonesia, were somehow guiding her to find about “I” (her identity), which indicates self-discovery. But this explanation is not widely accepted.

Some readers use the exact statement to illustrate that she is self-absorbed. They cite that Liz did not bother taking care of her family and old friends during the whole year due to her trip. She did have a meet-up with her sister in Italy, but that happened only when the latter flew in to visit her. According to this group of readers, leaving families and friends aside to seek the so-called self-discovery was the pursuit of self-enjoyment and pleasure. For example, Liz gained quite a lot of weight because she had too much delicious food whilst staying in Italy, and though she had set her mind to resist any sexual intercourse during her trip, she enjoyed the pleasure of flesh by sleeping with a handsome Brazilian businessman. Because food and sex are two typical worldly pleasure, her behaviours are deemed as choices of selfishness. And the fact that *Eat Pray Love* is a memoir rather than a fiction only made certain readers more furious towards the author.

VI. FEMINISM: SELF-DISCOVERY

A. Reader Response to Scene One

For scene one, the large majority of the Goodreads community seem to be able to relate to Elizabeth's epiphany. One of the most liked five-star comments reads that “all those cynics out there who criticising Gilbert for writing a too

cutsey memoir that seems beyond belief and who claim that she is selfish for leaving her responsibility are missing the point". In terms of the sudden divorce, the five-star commentators hold that Liz was in an unhappy marriage and that she cannot force herself to be happy. They applaud her for doing something that "many people are afraid to do" and support her decision because "she had no children so the responsibilities she neglected were minimal".

Readers who are fond of the first plot even criticised those who believe differently, saying that they cannot sympathise. The supporters believe that the finger-pointers have never suffered a "life-changing tragedy", never have felt paralysed by fear, anger, or disappointment, never have had to go through a healing process that seems endless, which culminates in their inability to relate to the memoir. Readers who went through divorce themselves are rather grateful for this book, saying the memoir has helped them come to terms with their years-long divorce healing process. Some also say that this book has "guided" them through difficult periods and brought them comfort.

The 49.7% of readers who rated the book higher than average tend to believe that this plot is Liz's first step towards her effort to seek pleasure, devotion and balance. They consider Gilbert brave for being so open and candid about her struggle with depression, anxiety and her search for spirituality in the later chapters.

B. Reader Response to Scene Two

For the second plot, the supporters praise the protagonist for her courage to confront her "disastrously pathetic" marriage and to embark on a new journey to find true love. They do not consider this rebound relationship as infidelity. On the contrary, they tend to believe that since Liz and her husband were negotiating their divorce issues and financial distribution already, there was no romance between them. Therefore, Liz had every right to seek love elsewhere. When David turned out not the perfect match, Liz was tormented by both the divorce negotiation as well as her broken love affair. So again, there she was, kneeling on the bathroom floor, asking God for help. Readers of this group consider the classic knee-down-and-talk-to-God scene very appealing because it "shows the connection between the transcendence and human beings" and inspires people to listen to God in real life. Rather than the stern critiques of "dramatic shows", the supporters hold that seeking love and religious help are part of women's inalienable rights.

C. Reader Response to Scene Three

Moving on to scene number three. The fervent lovers of this book strongly believe that travelling around the world has nothing to do with being selfish. It is just a way to find enjoyment and pleasure for those who have wanderlust. Some think the best way to find oneself is to step out of one's comfort zone and put oneself in a wider world, which seems to justify Liz's decision to take this huge trip. Even though the trip was pre-paid and was for the purpose of publishing a new book, by all means, this is what authors do for a living.

Moreover, for those who cannot see the point of travelling, this group of readers believe that individuals are capable of making on their own judgements on what brings happiness to them and how they want to live their life. Liz simply did what she wanted to do. Maybe travelling is not everyone's cup of

tea, but at least that was what made Liz smile.

The fact that Liz was a writer is much appreciated because she supported herself financially and she did not need to depend on a man to survive. Some extremist commentators, like Amelia, even said that all the hatred towards Liz's "wanderlust" is all of the facts that the haters have not got any opportunity to do this kind of trips around the world and they are simply jealous.

VII. CONCLUSION

In general, readers hold different views about feminist scenes in the book. Such difference comes down to modern women's values towards marriage, worldly pleasure and travelling, which are two types of thoughts on feminism and how a modern woman should be like.

While the former refers to feminist plots as phoney, irresponsible drama, the lovers of the book hold that women should be encouraged to seek their own pleasure and their passion by their own means.

According to the transactional reader-response theory led by Louise Rosenblatt and supported by Wolfgang Iser, there involves a transaction between the text's inferred meaning and the individual interpretation by the reader influenced by their emotions and knowledge. And their response plays an active part in the work as a whole. *Eat, Pray, Love's* polarised reader response shows people's expectations for women in the 21st century and their attitudes towards feminism. On the topic of marriage, should women stay open and feel free to divorce solely based on their own feelings? Should they feel that they have the responsibility to give birth to children and keep the whole family together solely for the family's sake? When it comes to what they love, for example, travelling to foreign countries, enjoying delicious food and expressing their love and devotion to God, should they bear no guilt at all? And lastly, when it comes to discovering their identity, should women fearlessly and courageously start their journeys and focus on what matters for themselves and their own lives rather than on people around them?

Those are the questions we need to think about both when analysing feminist works and in real life. The answers to these questions are crucial to the empowerment of women in the 21st century, and more broadly, they remain essential for the equality of both sexes in our society.

One of the limitations of this research is that it only took English book reviews into consideration. Therefore, the research results, i.e. people's points of view on feminism, are prone to be influenced by English-speaking culture. Because *Eat, Pray, Love* has been translated into 30 languages, among which are some non-western languages such as Chinese and Japanese, future studies can look into reader response in non-English languages. This would help to paint a more completed picture on how people, particularly non-English speakers from a non-western cultural background, think of *Eat, Pray, Love*, and more significantly, on their views of feminism and their expectations of women in the 21st century.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Wu Shuangnan collected data from Goodreads and other book rating websites. She also analysed related scholarly papers before writing and polishing the paper.

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