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“IS THIS LIFETIME SUPPOSED TO BE ONLY ABOUT DUTY?”

**FEMALE IDENTITY IN ELIZABETH GILBERT’S EAT,
PRAY, LOVE**

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“There is only one thing that makes a dream impossible: the fear of failure” Paulo Coelho – *The Alchemist*

To that little girl who dared to dream despite of fear! You made it!!

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ABSTRACT**“IS THIS LIFETIME SUPPOSED TO BE ONLY ABOUT DUTY?” FEMALE IDENTITY IN ELIZABETH GILBERT’S *EAT, PRAY, LOVE***

This present study has the objective of investigating the construction of the narrator’s female identity in *Eat, Pray, Love*, by Elizabeth Gilbert, during her journey across Italy, India and Indonesia. After a turbulent divorce and a love disappointment, Gilbert decides to travel in search of what she calls “everything”. Within this context, for being in touch with other people, the narrator undergoes significant transformations that lead her to ponder about her life, personal relations and her behavior. Travel, as a transforming agent, can be considered as a “ground zero”, and provides Gilbert with the opportunity to rebuild her identity (Blanton 29). There was a time when people traveled to discover new places, to conquer distant lands and to gain recognition for their deeds. These activities were usually led and carried out by men, who were also in charge of documenting these travels. From the XIV century, travel writing expanded beyond providing the reader with information about unknown places and peoples. With the idea of the world land area has already been covered, the author of travel narratives returned to an inland territory and, thereby, displacement became part of an even more special search: the search for oneself. Within this context, this study presents a brief overview of travel literature and its development, including travel narratives through the perspective of women taking into account the works of theoreticians such as Youngs, Pratt, Blanton and Bassnett. Furthermore, this study observes Gilbert’s travels as a facilitator for the narrator to develop her “provisional identities”, according to each place visited (Smith and Watson 33). Furthermore, it also points to privilege and cultural encounters issues and discusses how these elements add for a “mediating consciousness” between the narrator and the transformation of the self (Blanton 4).

Key words: travel literature; journey; *Eat, Pray, Love*; female identity; self

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RESUMO

“A VIDA É PARA SER SÓ SOBRE OBRIGAÇÕES?” IDENTIDADE FEMININA EM *COMER, REZAR, AMAR* de ELIZABETH GILBERT

Esta dissertação consiste em investigar a construção da identidade feminina da narradora em *Comer, Rezar, Amar* de Elizabeth Gilbert, durante sua jornada pela Itália, Índia e Indonésia. Depois de um conturbado divórcio e uma desilusão amorosa, Gilbert decide viajar em busca do que ela chama de “tudo”. Dentro deste contexto, por entrar em contato com outras pessoas, a narradora passa por transformações importantes que a fazem refletir sobre a vida, sobre suas relações pessoais e seu comportamento. A viagem como um agente transformador; pode ser vista como um “marco zero”, e dá a Gilbert a oportunidade de reconstruir sua identidade (Blanton 29). Houve um tempo em que as pessoas viajavam para descobrir lugares novos, conquistar terras distantes e ganhar reconhecimentos por seus feitos. Estas atividades eram geralmente lideradas e executadas por homens, os quais também eram responsáveis por registrar e documentar as viagens. A partir do século XIV, a escrita de viagem se expandiu para além de somente trazer ao leitor informação acerca de lugares e povos desconhecidos. Com a ideia de que as terras do mundo já eram conhecidas, o/a autor/a de narrativas de viagem voltou-se para um território interior e, com isso, o deslocamento começou a fazer parte de uma busca ainda mais peculiar: a busca de si mesmo/a. Dentro deste contexto, esta dissertação faz um breve apanhado histórico da literatura de viagem e sua evolução, até a inclusão de narrativas de viagem pela ótica feminina levando em conta teóricos tais como Youngs, Pratt, Blanton e Bassnett, entre outros. Além disso, este estudo observa as viagens de Gilbert como agentes facilitadores para que a narradora desenvolva suas “identidades provisórias” de acordo com cada lugar visitado (Smith and Watson 33). Também aponta para questões de privilégio e encontros culturais, e discute como esses elementos contribuem para uma “consciência mediadora” entre a narradora e a transformação do *eu* (Blanton 4).

Palavras-chave: literatura de viagem; jornada; *Comer, Rezar, Amar*; identidade feminina; “eu”

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CHAPTER I

The Challenges of a Woman Traveler: From Being Invisible to Writing Bestsellers

“As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.” Virginia Wolf – *Three Guineas*

1. Introduction

Displacement has always been part of human nature. In fact, all the things that are part of our knowledge today are a result of brave people (men and women) who dared to leave their own homes for the most varied reasons, and face the remote. The travel writer Raphael Kadushin confirms this idea by saying that: “We’re always leaving home because we’re partly looking for something else” (qtd. in Youngs 7). The search that moves the traveler can be physical or emotional, and it usually results in some kind of transformation. Based on that premise, this study analyzes how Elizabeth Gilbert, as the narrator in *Eat, Pray, Love*, deals with the unexpected events that happen during her trip and that help her to reinvent her “self”.

Contemporarily, many women travelers have become well-known in the travel writing field and many of them are best-selling authors around the world. Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love – One Woman’s Search for Everything* (2006), even though it is not considered a travel book, is an example of a book that brings travel as the context for other things to happen. Gilbert’s bitter divorce and the sense of frustration that comes with it impel her to move away from what she sees as her personal chaos and to travel to Italy, India and Indonesia. This decision triggers all the happenings that take place in the story, such as: discussions on gender issues, identity, cultural encounters, privilege and the quest that leads Gilbert to travel for a year in search for *her* everything.

This study aims to engage with the field of travel writing studies even if traditionally, travel literature has been seen as a genre that focuses on the cultural otherness in the sense of describing places, people,

customs, etc. In contemporary times, travel literature encompasses more than texts that just describe the other. According to Tim Youngs, there is space in the genre travel literature to rethink travel not only as a way to search for the other but also the search for the self (94). Thus, in this regard, the approach of Gilbert's book through travel literature is relevant because it is in displacement that the author carries out a rereading of herself as a woman (or even as an American woman).

The choice of Gilbert's book represents a challenge to bring popular literature to the academic environment. Although canonical literature undoubtedly plays an important role for academics, it has been argued by cultural studies scholars since the 1960's that non canonical literature is one of the means towards understanding contemporary life. Popular literature is important for bringing to surface issues that are related to the new configurations of our society as a whole. Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* is one example of a bestseller from popular literature that brings travel as the background context for a discussion on new perspectives about modern women's life. Moreover, there has been a rising interest in travel writing studies and, according to Hulme and Youngs, travel "has recently emerged as a key theme for the humanities and social sciences, and the amount of scholarly work on travel writing has reached unprecedented levels" (I). The authors affirm that academic disciplines such as literature, geography, history and anthropology were very reluctant in accepting travel writing as an important component of knowledge for these and other areas of study; however, over time, travel writing studies allied to these disciplines began to "produce a body of interdisciplinary criticism which will allow the full historical complexity of the genre to be appreciated" (Hulme and Youngs I).

Within this context, this research focuses on analyzing a contemporary book that has displacement not as the main star of the story, but as the vehicle to all the events that allow the protagonist to journey. Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* narrates a period of the narrator's life where she has to face a complicated divorce that leads her to a series of questions and to a destabilization of the "self". In order to find the answers and a sense of direction, she goes to Italy, India and Indonesia and the trip is a broader context for all the happenings in the narrative.

Another relevant point is that Gilbert's book does not present a thorough analysis of some of the points I find important to mention in this study; however, some elements tackled in Gilbert's text reflects some

aspirations in relation to gender issues, imperialism and identity. Even though Gilbert's text is a bestseller and attempts to reach a wide audience, it still is a formulaic text, which might not necessarily deeply explore the complexities of cultural encounters. Yet, it is exactly because the book became a bestseller that it is important to analyze the sorts of issues that surface in it. Hence, the more research on this field, the better will be the reflections upon women's role into travel writing in modern times.

1.2 My Research Journey

In order to establish a reasoning line and to understand the process of research, this study takes a look at the historical origins of travel writing. Hulme and Youngs and Sidonie Smith are the basis to present the gendered characteristic of travel writing, and chapter two analyzes the origins, motives and insertion of women in a brand-new genre. Then, with women as protagonists of traveling and writing about it, we bring Mills and Bassnett to discuss how these productions were seen by critics as a unified object, despite the great difference among these women writers.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, with more autonomy to travel, women began to ally displacement with the opportunity to write about themselves, opening space to self narratives that have the journey as a door for transformation, be them external, internal or both. Smith and Watson are the main authors that help to ground this discussion, as well as Tim Youngs and Casey Blanton. This possibility of transformation provides the writer with the chance to, once in transit, re-invent his/her identity according to the places and people they have contact with. Stuart Hall's studies about cultural identities contribute to a better understanding of the travel writer's position. An important aspect of this study focuses on how *Eat, Pray, Love* is directly related to the imperialistic features that Pratt mentions in *Imperial Eyes* (1992), as well as the privilege issue debated by Bob Pease.

Chapter three brings the analysis of some passages of the book that I find more important to exemplify my theoretical framework. By following Gilbert's tracks through Italy, India and Indonesia, we can see the narrator's challenge in accepting the changes, the ends and the restarts that travel has offered her. Within this context, I want to answer the following questions:

- 1) How does Elizabeth Gilbert present herself before, during and after the trip?
- 2) How does travel contribute to the reconstruction of the narrator's identity?
- 3) What is the importance of the cultural encounters for Gilbert's reinvention of identity?

Chapter four presents a recuperation of the main aspects found in the research and a conclusion of my investigation and indicates possible suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER II

The prerogative of not being “sessile”

“A person does not grow from the ground like a vine or a tree, one is not part of a plot of land. Mankind has legs so it can wander.”

Roman Payne – *The Wanderess*

2.1 Historical Track

Travel has always had an important role in establishing connections among peoples, lands and cultures. It is an activity as old as any other that humankind has carried out. As part of this process, mapping and writing about the new-found lands have proved to be relevant in order to legitimize what had been told and seen in those travels. Documentation about places and people was an important factor involved in those travels because they could contribute to the travelers themselves or their sponsors. According to Hulme and Youngs, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (2002), the historical account of the first travel writings dates back to ancient times (2). Within their work, Hulme and Youngs also present an overview of how traveling and writing have become much more than an ordinary way to report on foreign landscapes, customs, and people. In order to understand travel writing as a concept, we shall define it first.

As a genre, travel writing is not necessarily an easy term to define as Tim Youngs avows in *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (2013). However, this genre has been viewed as one that produces narratives of travel usually told in the first person, whose content brings information about a different place which the writer does not belong to, and because of that, the writing assumes a more personal feature. In fact, as it involves narrative, the literary and fictional aspects are present in these kinds of texts and, many times, interrelated in this genre. Another element that is important for this working definition of the genre travel writing is its autobiographical aspect since, in this sort of texts, narrators choose what to tell about their own experiences “through personal

storytelling” (Smith and Watson, 2001). The relation between traveling and writing helps to display the transformation this genre has gone through and how this relation still informs contemporary accounts of geographical movements.

This chapter explores the concept and history of travel writing, having Hulme and Young’s work as basis. Then, I look at women’s perspective within the genre of travel writing observing the relations between gender and genre issues (Smith). Afterwards, having discussed women’s role in travel writing, I move to more subjective issues, such as the relations between travel/quests/self - that are important because of the object of my research (Hulme and Youngs, Smith). Next, I approach the issue of travel and self-narrative and identity, and how this relation may interfere in autobiographical travel writings (Smith and Watson). Finally, I explore the connection between travel and privilege present in Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray Love* which constitutes a theme for analysis and criticism (Pease). Other scholars and authors are also analyzed and discussed further in this research in order to promote a new perspective on women’s travel writing studies.

2.2. The pioneers of a brand-new genre

Historically, the process of moving from one place to another may have the most diverse reasons for its practices and, according to Hulme and Youngs, the “traveler’s tale is as old as fiction itself [...]” (2). The records of travel writing date back to times when such adventures were passed orally from generation to generation. There are reports that go from ancient tales told in Egypt during the Twelfth Dynasty to biblical stories from the Exodus, for instance (Hulme and Youngs 2). The early forms of travel accounts are from the most diverse contexts and most of them have a man as protagonist and hero. Thus, it is important to understand the concept of travel writing. As aforementioned, it is agreed among some scholars that travel writing, as a genre, does not have a singular definition, since it encompasses many features that have helped to form what the genre is now. Many writers have their own definition for the concept of travel writing. In the *Cambridge Introduction* (2013), Youngs affirms that “travel writing consists of predominantly factual, first-person prose accounts of travels that have been undertaken by the author-narrator” (3). In the same book, he brings the definition by Hulme, who believes that “for texts to count as travel writing, their authors must

have travelled to the places they describe” (4). Another definition that endorses the authors previously mentioned is by Even Korte, who says:

[A]ccounts of travel depict a journey in its course of events and thus constitute narrative texts (usually composed in prose). They claim – and their readers believe – that the journey recorded actually took place, and that is presented by the traveler him or herself. (qtd in Youngs 5)

It is possible to cite many definitions from different authors and they would agree in one or more issues; however, I believe it is important to establish a definition that is more coherent with the book I have been working with and which brings aspects that go beyond the accounts of foreign places. I understand travel writing as a hybrid genre, which involves accounts of travel and, therefore, allows the writer to make use of the literary characteristics of narratives. Thus, fact and fiction are elements present in these narratives because the travel experiences are actually reinvented in the story. The narrator reconstructs his or her experience by telling or omitting what he/she believes is more important to the narrative. From its origins, it is understandable why Jonathan Raban says that travel writing is a “notoriously raffish open house”, since the genesis of this sort of writing has many different forebears¹.

In the *Cambridge Companion* (2002), William H. Sherman presents a detailed historical overview of the types of writers who helped travel writing to become what it is now². From merchants to pirates, from ambassadors to scientists, Sherman shows that the act of travel and of writing about distant lands was always marked by the kind of authority travelers had over what they had seen. For instance, most of the publications from the merchants of XVI and XVII century were about trade and profit “whether in the author’s and printer’s desire to make money or in the sponsorship of specific ventures” (25).

¹ Jonathan Raban’s quotation appears in the first chapter of *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* from Tim Youngs (2013, p 2).

² It is crucial to inform that the historical recovering of the genre and the discussion presented in this research is considering an Anglophone context - of travel narratives mostly published in English.

In her book *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing* (2001), Sidonie Smith also maps the history of the first European travelers and tells that basically they could be divided into three different kinds: the scholar, the crusader and the pilgrim (1). Each one of them was responsible for reconfiguring the impact travel has had on different places and cultures. The scholars, for instance, became important for searching and gathering classical and sacred texts to rebuild libraries and restore knowledge by traveling around Europe, the Middle East and the Far East after the “barbarian invasions of the fifth to ninth centuries [that] destroyed central libraries and scattered classical texts, and with them classical knowledge” (1). The scholars’ presence in foreign places brought not only their will in recovering knowledge, but also their own customs and beliefs such as Christendom. This favored other sorts of travelers, the pilgrims, who aimed to journey to sacred territories such as the Holy Land. Their narratives benefited the Christians who could not cope with the length and difficult of such displacements (2). Then, the medieval crusaders were “religious pilgrims in militant dress charged with gaining, recovering, and protecting the sites that ceaseless pilgrimages had sacralized” (2). Later, this sort of travelers gave way to the adventurers, to the sailors and soldiers who faced the unknown of the seas and became the new “European heroes” for the fact that surviving and overcoming obstacles and dangers seemed to be the motive to write about. By the time they returned from these trips with their mapping and writing, their “accounts became cultural forms through which Europeans relocated themselves in an emerging natural history of the world” (3). Hence, these travelers and their displacements were also responsible for helping the spread of colonialism, making the European supremacy stronger.

According to Sidonie Smith, “the political and religious life of other cultures was primarily an observational activity” for the previous travelers, but by the time different types of travelers started to exist, observation gave way to conflicts and inequality because some narratives from that period show that the colonizers’ intention was to take possession of those foreign lands, and thereby, impose their notions of civilization (Smith 6). Sherman even emphasizes the importance of editors in gathering documentation of the first travel accounts. According to him, “some of the greatest names in early modern travel writing are neither travelers nor writers but editors” (Hulme and Youngs 22).

Nevertheless, this heterogeneity of the travel text helped giving shape to what would become a new literary genre (Hulme and Youngs 30). Since its origins, travel writing places men as the heroic-adventurer-explorer dauntless figure. Despite the masculine plurality in the accounts aforementioned, the traveler remained strictly masculine, the “one who stands in awe, supplicates, survives, conquers, claims, penetrates, surveys, colonizes, studies, catalogs, organizes, civilizes, critiques, celebrates, absorbs, goes “native” (Smith 10).

Nevertheless, even with this strong male feature, travel narratives do not represent a “universal expression of masculinity” just because they were mostly produced by men. Smith affirms that the “versions of masculinity are plural” which is endorsed by the different backgrounds such as social class, ethnicities, generation and interests all these male subjects belonged to (Smith 10). With this overview in mind, some questions start to arise: where are all the women in this scenario? Were they present in these dangerous travels? And most importantly: were they protagonists of travels and travel writing? We cannot suppose women were not present in these traveling adventures just because of the male prerogative of being in charge of such a hazardous deed. Thus, the next section will shed some light on the female role in travel writing and how women have also had much to contribute to the genre.

2.3. Women and Travel: A gender gap in travel writing

As we have seen in the previous section, since its genesis travel writing was formed and based considering the male perspective on travel accounts. In Sherman’s survey presented in the *Cambridge Companion*, for example, there is not a singular reference to women in the early accounts of travel. Due to the risky and adventurous feature the act of travel had in its origins, men assumed the position of main characters of travel accounts by performing and writing them, especially because they could “move more freely in the public sphere” (Bassnett 225). Smith also speaks about travel writing as a “vehicular gender” and, as such, it grants

men more autonomy in traveling. Quoting Leed³, she says that traveling is a means towards male immortality because the boldness in crossing countries, seas and cultures and then writing about them is a way to reaffirm men's superior position and become immortal. This sense of immortality, or deceiving death, would come from traversing the world and recording their deeds in "bricks, books and stories" (Smith 10). Through what Leed calls the "spermatic travel" experience, men are provided with not only self-defining opportunities but also with achieving recognition (Smith 10). Thus, male narratives about travel helped to portray the archetype of the hero, who would travel the world searching for fortune, glory and recognition; women's presence in those productions was either stereotyped or restrict.

For patriarchal reasons, the common role expected of women concerning acts of travel was that they should be sessile, and wandering was out of question. The term sessility was used before by Leed, and it is a term borrowed from Botany. The meaning of being sessile is to be permanently attached or established, not free to move about; and this is a very appropriate metaphor for what was expected from women: to stay home (Smith 11). Smith affirms that this traditional position of sessility credited to women reiterates the role of women as 'home' or 'shelter' and in order to address agency to women, this idea must be revised (11). She also argues that although travel and men have always been associated and "travel genre has functioned as a domain of constitutively masculinity", women have always been and continue to be on the move (Smith 17). In the past, through the act of traveling, women challenged the protocols of gender, or in other words, they challenged what was expected from them as women assuming a position, even if on temporary basis, of being undomesticated and it is through these "protocols of gender out of which, through which, against which they negotiate their movement from sessility to mobility" (Smith 11). Besides actually traveling, women also wrote about their journeys and their contribution was important to the genre because, according to Bassnett, narratives produced by women tend to "provide serious, detailed social documentation" (Bassnett 230). Although the accounts produced by women travelers have become more common nowadays due to the new configurations of our society, (now women travel for varied reasons such as doing business, giving speeches,

³ Eric J. Leed is a historian, writer and scholar on travel writing. He published the book *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* in 1991.

performing, working in politics and even tourism), that has not always been the case.

In her historical contextualization of the genre, Smith lists examples of women travelers that cover the most diverse background such as: pilgrim women to bourgeois women. She presents the case of Margery Kempe's travel, a very religious woman who used to travel to the "sanctioned routes of spirituality legitimized by the medieval church" (12). In her travels, Kempe used to wander claiming her spiritual authority, something that was not well accepted by the medieval church. Perhaps one of the issues related to not being sessile was in the fact that some women claimed a position usually denied by patriarchy and the church. Smith affirms that Kempe used travel and narrative for her own agency, to legitimize her religious authority and to impose her own voice. However, that voice "was suspect because it issued from a body contaminated by what the medieval church condemned as excessive sexuality and worldliness" (12). The fact that she was married and a mother of fourteen children could grant her the sanctity the church would expect and women who used to wander around preaching or claiming religious authority were usually condemned for heresy.

Regarding European colonization and exploration of new lands in the early modern periods, Smith suggests that women's participation actually occurred when the adventurers, discoverers and soldiers had already crossed "oceans and lands" and settled in new places to start a new society in the mid-seventeenth century (12). This new configuration brought to new colonies women from very different backgrounds, such as women from wealthy families, colonists, missionaries. Destitute women were relegated to serve the colonizers, the incarcerated ones were sent to penal colonies or "transported to service the sexual needs of colonists and to help maintain the "purity" of European racial stock in the contact zone" (12). There were women that were forced to let their lands and were sent as slaves from Africa to many places around the world. Such a big diversity of women had its importance in establishing the Anglo-Saxon domain in British colonies (13). The fact that women were forced to live in other places than their homes opened space to a very important aspect: survival. Not only men had to strive for survival in unknown lands, but women faced the same challenge as well. There are reports from 1682 about the first American captivity narrative, written by Mary White Rowlandson. After being released by the Amerindians who

had kept her hostage, Rowlandson decided to write about her experience, which was only possible if it was in accordance with the traditional female role and the protocols of the Puritan authorities of that time (13). The patriarchal standard would never allow a woman to write about herself, and Smith points out another example of this when she mentions Isabela Godin de Odonais, whose survival story from the eighteenth century is retold by her husband (13). As women were not allowed to travel alone, it is interesting to notice that even in situations of forced mobility and in survival cases, women's travel stories could only come to surface if endorsed by a male figure. Hence, Smith avows that a female travel narrative "could not be left unattended"; in other words, their stories and experiences had to pass through the inspection of the patriarchy (14).

On the other hand, due to the condition of wives of prominent men in distant places, there were women whose presence in travels helped to write another page into the travel writing genre. That was the case of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu who was married to the British ambassador in Turkey. As the ambassador's wife, Montagu spent "two years in transit and in residence in the Turkish capital" (14). During this period, she wrote several letters to friends and family back in England, and in these letters she used to describe in details what she saw regarding women's behavior, dress, practices and organization. Montagu's letters were published after her death and against her family's wishes, but they are very important because, by assuming an "authoritative position" in her written accounts about Turkish women, Montagu supersedes the previous accounts observed and written through the male perspective (15).

From the eighteenth century on, the scenario for women travelers and for their reports started to become wider. In "Travel Writing and Gender", Susan Bassnett observes that women's production of travel writing in the nineteenth century was considerable and had an audience. However, by the 1970s, much of what had been written by women in travel writing as well as their achievements was already out of print. During the feminist revival in the 1970s, the interest in women travelers returned, leading the British publishing house Virago to reprint some oeuvres, and "classic travel books written by Isabela Bird and Mary Kingsley, while a number of anthologies and studies of Victorian women travelers began to appear" (226). For Bassnett, although this action intended to reconstitute popularity to female travel accounts, it focused on

the so-called eccentricity applied to women travelers. Titles such as *Ladies on the Loose*, *The Blessings of a Good, Thick Skirt*, and *Spinsters Abroad* confirm the jocular tone the editors gave to these former publications (226). It was only in 1990, by publishing *Wayward Women*, that Jane Robinson added more relevant bibliographical information and condensed biographies of female travelers. Her work brought to light a great deal of information about 400 women travelers writing in English (226). Robinson compiled an anthology with travel writings published by different sorts of women writers called *Unsuitable for Ladies* (1994), where she struggled to recognize the differences between male and female writing style (226).

This difference claimed by some scholars has not reached a common agreement yet. In *Discourses of Difference* (1991), Sara Mills mentions that this gender difference is “a common assumption” between critics on women’s travel writing, although the work to underlie this assumption has not been enough (28). Mills affirms that in order to find these avowed divergences one strategy is to reduce the complexity of these texts. But in doing so, many other elements that are important will have to be ignored (29). Thus, it is essential to analyze female travel writing as a complex work, not as a unified object. Even with the great amount of women’s travel accounts, it is not right to affirm their productions are similar only because they are made by women. This sort of idea helps to reduce women’s importance and contribution to the genre travel writing. Mills suggests that “women’s writing practices can vary because of the differences in discursive pressures but they will also share many factors with men’s writing” (30).

There are many details that can be taken into consideration when analyzing some early women travel accounts; however, some critics prefer to focus on depicting female travelers as mere observers in travels; or they prefer to picture women travelers in a positive way that shows them as strong individuals without losing their feminine traits. Mills continues saying that some critics on female travel accounts do not talk about the politics of these women’s mobility and how they managed to move unaccompanied. In fact, in order to build a sanitized history of female travel writing, some critics also glossed over important facts from the early travel accounts such as the imperialist and colonialist inclination in women’s writings; leaving behind reports of cruelty and portraying women as emotional beings who show feelings towards the natives and

the land, something usually conferred to women (Mills 34). Many other features could be mentioned regarding women travel accounts. Hence focusing on only one aspect or concentrating on the genre as a unified object, as some critics tried to do, is denying the importance of all of them to the genre's formation.

Though scholars still keep searching for visible differences and gaps regarding gender in travel accounts, one item some of them agree with concerning women and travel is the fact women are given autonomy in travel which is generally granted only for men. Through exercising such autonomy, women travelers are also provided with a possibility of transformation – the departure point or the destiny are no longer the primary objective, but rather the process of traveling itself – which might offer these women a possibility to actively change (internally and externally) their episteme and share such change with their readers (male or female). If transformation was something to be feared and avoided in the past, in more recent times, it is a possibility for traveling women to have access to experiences usually different from the ones they would have at home.

2.3. The visible and invisible sides of travel writing

In the previous sections, we have discussed important issues that helped to create the base of the genre of travel writing. In this section, we will discuss other aspects that are more abstract, but essential to understand the object of this research. As aforementioned, travel writing took some time to be accepted as a literary genre. About that, Tim Youngs repeats the quotation from Jonathan Raban saying that “as a literary form, travel writing is a notoriously raffish open house where very different genres are likely to end up in the same bed” (Youngs 2). Despite this not very glorious past, travel writing is nowadays a genre able to give accounts of distant places, cultures and life style through narratives that might explore the travel as ways to endure personal issues and, at the same time, produce countless bestsellers around the world.

As narratives, travel texts are stories or accounts of events and experiences that might be true; however, their description might be constructed using elements of narrative in order to enhance the story. Having in mind the fact that travel writing is a literary genre and, as such,

it is not responsible for telling the truth, gives us the awareness that in a story, the writer might want to highlight some aspects more than others. Narratives have a structure that usually follows a logical order, and a narrator who is responsible for organizing the events in the story and for telling it. Sometimes, the story has a first-person narrator who is directly connected to the story or a third-person narrator who will act as an observer and report on the events. In this sense, some narratives emphasize different aspects of the story if compared to others, depending on the kind of structure or theme. Some are organized chronologically (like a journal, divided in days, months, etc) and some focus on different kinds of narrative patterns. Considering that travel writing is one kind of narrative, one aspect I investigate in this research is the theme of quests, mainly because, in Gilbert's text, the protagonist claims to be questing, searching for everything. In order to satisfy their own curiosity or fulfill requests, travelers look for a great deal of things that could concern other matters and motivations.

According to Tim Youngs in *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (2013), travel quests “may be spiritual or material, pacific or martial, solitary or collective, outward into the world or inward into the self - [...] Challenges have to be confronted and overcome. The obstacles to be surmounted may be human, animal, topographic or facets of one's own psyche” (87). Youngs affirms that a quest is “not merely a part of the content of travel accounts” but that a quest can be compared to a metaphor. He says:

The protagonist embarks on a mission, encounters impediments, removes them (more often than not), attains his or her goal and sets out on the return voyage, having increased his or her (usually his) own worth through the successful completion of the objectives (unless the nature of the quest precludes return). (Youngs 88)

This citation actually highlights the literary and fictional nature of travel writing. Even if the travel has happened and the travelers affirm that everything is exactly how they describe, the trip works as a background for the narrative – the background for the construction of a new literary place, constructed by imaginative images and subjective ideas, which are far from concrete and are justified by the feelings, emotions and perceptions of narrators. According to Youngs, the ancient

models of questing give us a perspective of the society that reproduced them and how we look at this society (Youngs 88). He affirms that many explorers usually bind the quest to the figure of one of the most famous quester: Odysseus, which reinforces the masculine mindset related to the quest and establishes the model to other authors such as John Steinbeck and James Joyce, among others (88).

However, it is not possible to overlook the imperialistic drive behind those quests. In her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Pratt affirms that the European quests were responsible for creating the “domestic subject of Euroimperialism”, which reinforced the dynamic of possession (of lands) and innocence (from the explorers) present in some travel narratives (4). According to her, the European travel narratives are not innocent accidents, they constituted an unequal relation of power between “colonizers and colonized, travelers and travelees” (Pratt 7).

Pratt also affirms that these travels established what she calls “contact zone”, which are the space where colonial encounters happened, and it is “ a space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (6). These issues are only a part of the imperialistic heritage that marked European explorations.

Over time, with the changes occurring in a more contemporary world, the search for exotic places becomes less original and the figure of a hero explorer starts to fade causing an impact upon the literary fiction and poetry, giving place to a less heroic character in travel writing, or at least, changing the perspective of the quest but preserving the structure of the quest narrative (Youngs 89). The “sense of loss, of something missing” that Youngs affirms to be present in the new quest narratives causes a destabilization and pushes the protagonist to discover what it is (90). He raises relevant issues saying that once the “age of discovery is over” what is left to be quested? What is still essential for people to be “in search of”? Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love* goes even beyond such questioning because she claims to be a woman in “search of everything”, which shows an incompleteness that needs to be solved.

We can trace a parallel between Youngs and Casey Blanton's *Travel Writing: The Self and The World* (2002), where Blanton affirms that the change present in new forms of travel narratives consists of seeing the hero as "one who travels along a path of self-improvement and integration, doing battle with the 'others' who are the unresolved parts of himself or herself" (Blanton 3). Thus, if before questers were in search of the exploration and appropriation of the unknown peoples and cultures, nowadays the outward travel is a resource for travelers' personal benefit. According to Youngs, questers "use the land for their own purpose" and in this case, instead of questing for others they might quest for themselves and for matters of the self (94). Travels that represented an individual search began to rise and the search itself or the questioning along the search could be more important than the answers one might find (Youngs 90). Youngs avows that these "inward journeys" were not something new; literature was familiar with the pilgrimage as the most lasting kind of quest (102).

From the Christian pilgrimage to the Hindus and Muslims, these quests are part of the history of many places and some of them are still popular, for instance, the pilgrimage of Santiago de Compostela in Spain (Youngs 91). As popular as they were, pilgrimages or spiritual quests had in some cases a great meaning to the participants, making them perceive themselves as changed people. Change was something to be feared and avoided in previous centuries as Youngs points to the "whites' narratives of captivity by Native Americans or Barbary pirates" (93). In more modern times, quests may contribute for the travelers to experience transformation, which according to Youngs, is the aim of the quests (93). The transformation may change the ones who embark on deeper quests, the inner ones. In a chapter titled "Inner Journeys", Youngs discusses about the journeys, which according to him, are the ones taken into the self. This sort of travel is "identified by critics as a feature that distinguishes modern travel from its precursors" (Youngs 102). The reason is that in this kind of journey, there is a sort of "romanticism" between the inner journey and the outside world. With the advent of psychoanalysis in the nineteenth century the interest in exploring deeper and internal journeys became more thought-provoking, giving the impression that "there are few or no places left in the world to discover" but the self (Youngs 102). The concept of "a divided self-driven by unconscious fears and desires" by Freud has changed the idea of a stable, valid author-narrator (102). With the idea that travelers "had already been

everywhere” the inward-looking eye showed that destination was a way to write about the self.

This destabilization of the self reflects on the travel narrative as a genre. Casey Blanton affirms that: “Whether fiction or nonfiction, there exists in the journey pattern the possibility of a kind of narrative where inner and outer worlds collide” (Blanton 3). This idea actually puts a dividing line in travel accounts, where on one side there are the pioneers of traveling journeys such as the “sailors, pilgrims and merchants” with their own reasons and purposes to travel and with their narratives that focused on peoples and places. On the other side of this line, according to Blanton, there is a great production of “autobiographical travel books that we have come to expect today as travel literature” (4). The travel literature of the twentieth-century started to focus more on “social and psychological issues than facts about places and events”, and the travel narrator has developed a “mediating consciousness that monitors the journey, judges, thinks, confesses, changes and even grows” (Blanton 4).

So, it is this “self-consciousness” that guides the narrator in travel accounts and is a resource for subjectivity. Blanton affirms that after the World War I writers such as James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway and D.H. Lawrence left for exile to other places than the “dull, colorless, cold and insular England”, as an antidote for the chaos, dissatisfaction and exhaustion after the war (Blanton 21). So, after many changes in the world, it is right to affirm that travel writing has developed and adapted to new times. At the end of the twentieth century, travel books are no longer guides to distant places; however, the “relationship between self and the world” remained (Blanton 29). This connection that has always been part of travel accounts contributed for the development of the genre and it is “closely aligned with the changing role of subjectivity in other kinds of literature, especially fiction and autobiography” (Blanton 29).

In *The Traveling and Writing Self* (2007), Marguerite Helmers and Tilar Mazzeo point out the complexity in writing about the self. They say that “the efforts these writers make to collapse the distance between the personal self and the speaking author are frequently occasions for innovative experiments in that impossible straining for autobiographical realism” (Helmers and Mazzeo 6). For the authors, what the writer is and what he writes about himself/herself may not be true. It is important to keep in mind that there are major differences between travel writing and

autobiography, especially when we take into account the audience, or reader; however, there is also a strong connection between them, once the outer journey permits an inner journey, which gives the opportunity for the writer to choose what to show and what to hide about him or herself. As Helmers and Mazzeo state, “the autobiographer writes to an audience that is often first the self and only secondarily other, while the travel writer, though employing the ‘I’, typically writes for a public audience” (7). In *Metaphors of Self – The Meaning of Autobiography* (1972), James Olney declares that the best way to analyze autobiography is by considering it “neither as a formal nor as a historical matter [...] but rather to see it in relation to the vital impulse to order that has always caused man to create and that, in the end, determines both the nature and the form of what he creates” (3). Thus, according to Olney, autobiography is a production that is always in process because the person has the power to mold his/her own story in the course of his/her life, so much he affirms that it rather be called lifework instead of autobiography (Olney 3). Olney compares a person’s autobiography to a magnifying lens which will focus and intensify particular aspects of one’s life “that informs all the volumes of his collected works; it is the symptomatic key to all else that he did, and naturally, to all that he was (4). The use of a magnifying lens is a good example of what usually is expected from autobiographies and we know there is a fine line between what is written and what has happened, since life is too vast to put into paper, writers have to choose what they want to tell.

On the other hand, in *Reading Autobiography-A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson affirm that autobiographical writings are more complex than what they seem. One must take into consideration that the more traditional definitions of autobiography were connected to the Enlightenment and represented a sense of centered, unified self. Then, defining the self-referential practices become somewhat challenging because “the writer becomes, in the act of writing, both the observing subject and the object of the investigation, remembrance and contemplation” (1). The definition of the term *autobiography* comes from the Greek and means briefly “self-life writing” (Smith 1). In the long run, the term has changed and among many scholars who attributed meaning to *autobiography*, Philippe Lejeune is one who affirmed that autobiography “is the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story

of his own personality” (qtd in Smith 1). Instead of using this term, Smith and Watson choose the term ‘life writing’, which for them is more encompassing, once it refers to texts that include many self-referential practices.

So, we see an advance in the classification of what autobiography is, because according to Smith and Watson, when life is inserted in the writing, autobiography undergoes an expansion to explain “how one becomes who he/she is at a given moment in an ongoing process of reflection” (Smith 1). Basically, autobiography has had a great deal of definitions by the time more scholars started to study it as a genre. Smith and Watson affirm that “in earlier centuries, terms such as “memoir” (Madame de Staël, Glückel of Hameln) or “the life” (Teresa of Avila) or “the book of my life” (Cardano) or “confessions” (Augustine, Rousseau), or “essays of myself” (Montaigne) were used to mark the writer’s refraction of self-reference through speculations about history, politics, religion, science and culture” (2). Later, other terms such as *testimonio*, *autoethnography*, *psychobiography* have also been considered new forms of self-referential writing (Smith and Watson 3). In the end of the eighteenth century, many other kinds of self-referential writing emerged and this diversity suggests these terms must be observed. Smith and Watson affirm that self-referential writing modes include: life writing, life narrative and autobiography, however, there are important differences among them (3). Smith and Watson explain each term as *life writing*: it refers to a “general term for writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject”. They affirm that this term can encompass biographical, novelistic, historical characteristics and can be “an explicit self-reference to the writer” (3). For the authors, *life narrative* considers some elements such as memory, identity, agency, among others that are important for the autobiographical acts in life narrative. The authors affirm that life narrative can be “approached as a moving target, a set of ever-shifting self-referential practices that engage the past in order to reflect on identity in the present” (Smith and Watson 3); and finally *autobiography* is seen as a term that refers to “a particular practice of life narrative that emerged in the Enlightenment and has become canonical in the West”; over time, the term has gone through changes to show the field of self-referential writing is a wider field (Smith and Watson 3).

By narrating the self into their journeys, travel writers also produce what could be considered autobiographical writing. Smith and Watson

define travel writing as a genre not distinct from autobiography, “it can in fact be read as a major mode of life narrative, in this case the reconstitution of the autobiographical subject in transit and encounter” (Smith and Watson 150). To the authors, autobiography or life narrative does not fit into a simple form, it is “a historically situated practice of selfrepresentation”, where writers select their experiences to be told (14).

Though they are two different genres, travel writing and autobiography are comparable in many terms. The trip works as a premise to changing or reinventing one’s identity by changing one’s place. The traveler changes during the trip and he/she builds, through the narration, a version of him/herself to share with the readers and during these descriptions of the self, we get in touch with features of the character as we do during the reading of autobiographies. Smith and Watson avow that “autobiographical acts involve narrators in “identifying” themselves to the reader” (32). In travel accounts, it is possible to find what Smith and Watson call “provisional identities” (33). Why is that? Identities might change in different contexts as people interact in different social organizations and they are also related to other aspects such as: gender, work status, class location, to name a few. As human beings with the most varied activities, sometimes in very different places and social contexts, it is possible to say that nobody has an only, fixed identity (Smith and Watson 33).

In “Question of Cultural Identity”, Stuart Hall has already talked about identity and its unfixing condition. He affirmed that the conception of identity could be divided in three. The first concept refers to: 1) identity as inherent to the individual, which was well accepted during the Enlightenment period, and refers to “a conception of a human person as a fully centered, unified individual”, who was born with consciousness and capacities that remained the same during the individual’s existence (Hall 597); 2) the sociological subject: refers to the idea of the individual’s identity development in relation to the “significant others” who are the mediation between the subject and the “values, meanings and symbols – the culture – of the world he/she inhabits”(Hall 597); 3) the post-modern subject: refers to the subject and its fragmented identities, a product of the innovations of a more modern and globalized world that contributed to the understanding of identity as something in constant state of flux (Hall 598). Smith and Watson also agree with Hall as they affirm that “identities are constructed and discursive” (34). They declare that

identity and consciousness are dialogical and their relation is established during social interaction.

Thereby, in autobiography, as well as in travel writing, the narrators have the possibility of interaction with different social groups and therefore, they “come to consciousness of who they are, of what identifications and differences they are assigned or what identities they might adopt, through the discourses that surround them” (34). This way, we can agree with Hall that identity is “a production”, which is always developing according to the context they are inserted. Thus, travel narratives can contribute for the production/construction of the narrator’s different identities because they offer physical and psychological room for them to change, adapt, improve, hide or show who they are. It does not mean that these changes only happen in travels but, it means that it is in the movement from one place to another that the narrator is able to see what he/she needs to be in those particular places.

Smith and Watson also mention that life narrators follow some models of cultural identities that are available for centuries such as “the sinful Puritan seeking for salvation, the self-made man, the struggling and suffering soul, the innocent quester” among others, and these models are applied by autobiographers in their narratives as a way of selfrepresentation (34). However, when telling a story, autobiographers may also assimilate assorted models of identity, this way, assuming multiple identities that are presented for particular occasions (35). According to Smith and Watson, the supply for the autobiographical storytelling “is drawn from multiple, disparate, and discontinuous experiences and the multiple identities constructed from and constituting those experiences”, which means that because of these differences, narrators find conflicts in these multiples identities they might be (or not) aware of (35).

In *Eat Pray Love*, it is possible to notice the narrator assuming her multiple identities according to the places and people she finds during the trip. There is also the fact that Gilbert uses the “magnifying lens” to highlight what she believes to be more important for the narrative. All these characteristics help to endorse the story that is being told; however, it goes beyond a simple story about a successful trip that results in a bestseller. I opened this section claiming travel writing has two sides that I defined as visible and invisible: 1) the visible side: when the narrator describes actions, places and people; when exotic food and sights are

presented and the reader goes along with the characters, the detailed parts of the story that give the reader a feeling he/she is traveling too; 2) the invisible side: the subjective aspects of the narrative related to feelings and personal changes that the narrator goes through and decides to state in the story and are important for the narrative's development; and especially in this analysis, it regards to women's identity in *EPL*⁴, the invisible side is important to understand how Gilbert, as a writer, builds Gilbert as a persona.

2.4 A privileged traveler

In *Imperial Eyes* (1992), Mary Louise Pratt writes about the relation present between European travel and exploration writing and European economic and political expansion. Pratt also gives examples of women who found their way in displacements helping to write an important chapter of travel writing history such as Maria Graham and Flora Tristan who traveled and wrote about Chile and Peru, respectively. Flora Tristan was the only daughter of a Peruvian aristocrat and grew up in the middle of Spanish America high society. After Flora's father's death, she and her mother found themselves with economic problems because there was no will to protect them financially. Flora started to work and ended up marrying the owner of the print shop she used to work at.

Over time, after three children and an unfortunate marriage, Flora leaves her husband and more problems occur due to the dispute over their kids' custody. Because of this disagreement, her ex-husband shoots her and is sent to prison. Flora survives and after years of "struggling to support herself and her children" decides to go to Peru "in hopes of claiming an inheritance from her father's family and thereby gaining financial independence", which was denied due to a "legal technicality" used by her relatives (Pratt 156). Flora spent one year with her relatives in Peru and returned to France in 1834, where she fought for feminism and economic justice and wrote many pieces in favor of women's rights (Pratt 156).

⁴ *EPL* refers to the title *Eat, Pray, Love*. I chose to use an acronym to make the reading/writing straightforward.

Maria Graham Calcott is well known for her *Journal of a Residence in Chile during the Year 1822*, a piece that is “highly valued in Spanish America as a perceptive and sympathetic source on Chilean society and politics in the independence period” (Pratt 157). Graham’s path to travel writing is similar to Tristan’s, only less traumatic. She was married to a British navy captain in charge of aiding in the war against Spain. During the trip, Graham’s husband dies and instead of going back to England, she decides to stay in Chile for a year (Pratt 157). After this period, Graham sets out to Rio de Janeiro and becomes a tutor to the Portuguese royal family until her return to England. Pratt affirms that “by the time of her South American trip Maria Graham was already an experienced traveler, travel writer, and political observer” (Pratt 157).

Therefore, one of the many important contributions of these women in the places aforementioned was the possibility of breaking with the gendered tradition of traveling and exploring in their writings. As Pratt says, these women “reject sentimentality and romanticism almost vehemently as the capitalist vanguard did. For them identity in the contact zone resides in their sense of personal independence, property, and social authority rather than in scientific erudition, survival or adventurism” (159). This reinforces what Smith has said previously about the undomesticated position some women travelers had to assume in order to move from sessility to mobility and take possession of their own territory. Once men were used to collect and possess everything else, “these women travelers sought first and foremost to collect and possess themselves. Their territorial claim was to private space, a personal room-sized empire” (Pratt 160).

Perhaps in present times the territory is more internal and more specifically in Gilbert’s narrative, the trip is a way she finds to move from the sessility of a failed marriage and to give her time to stop and think and decide which way to go from there. This outward travel reflects on the inner journey she goes through.

In *EPL*, the outer journey provides Gilbert with ways to deal with personal matters precisely when she moves away from them and, this way, she has the possibility to look at them from a different perspective. Also, the many encounters she has with other people and culture help her to deal with her feelings, which are important elements in the story because they interfere in the reconstruction of her identity. Although

these encounters might be temporary, they help Gilbert to develop the ability to journey into herself many times. This journey into the self is repeated every time she meets the other characters of her narrative, and it is when she becomes the observer of others' lives that she manages to find peace and balance to look at hers, which according to Blanton, is an "interplay between observer and observed" (Blanton 5). Gilbert not only describes foreign places and cultures, which is the core of travel narratives, but also manages to embark on a lifetime trip that many people dream of.

If we go back to Pratt's examples of Tristan and Graham we cannot fail to notice that, despite the aforementioned problems these women had to overcome, both of them were privileged women who travel to different countries because they had the financial means to do it. Moreover, Tristan and Graham established in the contact zone "a sense of personal independence, property and social authority [...]. No less than the men, these women occupy a world of servants and servitude where their class and race privilege is presupposed, and meals, baths, blankets, and lams appear from nowhere", a characteristic that is easily associated to imperialistic roots (Pratt 159).

Similarly, when we think of a trip that aims to visit three countries in two different continents and that will last for a year and the traveler seems not to worry about money during this time, it is not absurd to consider this traveler a very privileged one. One of the reasons *EPL* received negative criticism is related to the fact that Gilbert's book is not the first of its kind but it is a good example of the genre called "priv-lit".

According to Joshunda Sanders in an article called "Eat, Pray, Spend" for *Bitch Magazine*⁵ (2010), priv-lit is "literature or media whose expressed goal is one of spiritual, existential, or philosophical enlightenment contingent upon women's hard work, commitment, and patience, but whose actual barriers are primarily financial" (2). Still according to the author, this genre is excluding because it encourages people to put themselves first, but does not offer a real solution for the "astronomically high tariffs - both financial and social - that exclude all but the most fortunate among us from participating" (2). Hence, privilege

⁵ *Bitch Magazine* is part of Bitch Media, a nonprofit, independent, feminist media organization dedicated to providing and encouraging an engaged, thoughtful feminist response to mainstream media and popular culture.

is one issue that cannot be disregarded in this analysis, since Gilbert is the embodiment of a privileged woman in her narrative.

The meaning of privilege, according to the dictionary, is a special right or advantage that a particular person or group of people has. Based on this principle, it is needless to say that privilege is excluding and that we live in a world of inequality due to its many social divisions. In his book *Undoing Privilege – Unearned Advantage in a Divided World* (2010), Bob Pease analyses this topic and affirms that all sorts of “social inequality in Western societies, including economic inequality, status inequality, sex and gender inequality, racial and ethnic inequality and inequalities between different countries” have been studied and many books have been written to provide understanding (Pease 3).

These studies produce important concepts to understand the “dynamics of modern capitalist societies such as: social exclusion, social division, social problems, discrimination, disadvantage, powerlessness, exploitation, oppression, and to a lesser extent, the concept of elites” (Pease 3). However, even though these concepts ought to be analyzed in order to understand the dimensions of the social inequality of marginalized groups, Pease affirms that the same concepts are not suitable to analyze the ones who are favored by social divisions and social inequalities “[n]or do most of these books examine how these inequalities are reproduced by and through the daily practices of privileged groups” (3). Such theorists tend to verify in what extent these social division and inequality impact political and legal institutions. Nevertheless, they “do not explore the responsibility of privileged groups for maintaining these social arrangements” (Pease 4).

One of the responsibilities addressed to privileged groups concerns discrimination. According to Pease, any sort of discrimination, “whether this [is] in form of class, race, sexuality, age or gender” is usually related to individual or groups behaviors; however, attitudes of discrimination such as the ones mentioned are “socially reinforced and normalized” (Pease 4). For Pease, “the concept of discrimination puts too much emphasis on prejudice and it is too narrowly focused to address the complexity of dominant-subordinate relations” (4). We can observe in Gilbert’s narrative some aspects of discrimination; for instance, when we read the passage where she and her Brazilian boyfriend come to conclusion that Wayan, a Balinese medicine woman, is lying to them about an amount of money Gilbert has given her as a donation to buy a

house. This passage takes many pages to be told and solved, because Gilbert puts herself in a delicate situation: she asked money from her friends back in America to help this Balinese mother to buy a nice house for her and her daughter. For Gilbert, Wayan's procrastination is only an excuse for not using the money properly, when according to Gilbert's narrative, the procrastination is the way Balinese people deal with money, buying and selling. Gilbert mentions in the book that everything they (Balinese people) do in terms of business has to be in accordance to their god's wills (Gilbert 321). The Balinese culture and beliefs are, in my point of view, somewhat discriminated in this part of the story, and Gilbert manages to describe the situation as she is the generous American woman who asks her more generous American friends to help a poor Balinese mother to buy a house. Race, class, gender and economic issues are so significant in this situation that it is not possible to overlook them in terms of seeing the "dominant-subordinate" relation established between Gilbert and Wayan

Narrowing down a little more the aspect of privilege regarding *EPL*, we see in its narrator the embodiment of the American, white, wealthy, educated and successful woman; these are concepts that Pease analyses in his book in different chapters. However, the position of the narrator can be discussed through one concept: elitism. Gilbert is part of the elite of economic and political supremacy and according to Pease, the "elite theories identify privilege and power as being based upon considerable wealth and political and bureaucratic positions of authority, everyone else constitutes the 'non-elite'" (8). This idea finds a rapport into what Sanders avowed in the article aforementioned, as the subtitle of Gilbert's book suggests "one woman's search for everything", is definitely not for every woman.

Therefore, the idea of privilege is present in *EPL*, even though the narrator does not seem to emphasize this concept. Thus, it is right to say that a piece of travel writing written by a woman does not represent a compilation of all the characteristics that encompass women's travel writing. In the beginning of this chapter, I addressed the diversity of women's travel writing produced by women from the most diverse contexts. As many critics have already discussed, travel writing as a genre is always ambivalent: it allows a re-reading of the self (reinvention of the self) but it also demonstrates the kinds of privilege involved in traveling and writing about other cultures. Travel writing as a genre might

represent “a quest for ground zero” involving the self and the other, as suggested by Blanton (29). According to Almeida and Wasserman, travel writing “can offer both justification and sharp critique of self and the culture where it was formed – that same self that marks its allegiance to its cultural origin in the act of living” (Almeida and Wasserman 10). And we can also confirm this reinvention of the self, especially in Gilbert’s, in the way the narrator rebuilds her experiences and attributes new meanings to them as a “re-discovery of self and other in historical and geographical dislocations” (Beck and Cunha 10).

Thus, we have seen in this chapter some issues related to travel writing that are important to ground this study. First, we have seen that travel writing is a long-standing activity, nonetheless it is a difficult genre to define, due to its origins (Hulme and Youngs 2002). Then, a deeper look at the formation of the genre travel writing shows its gendered feature, which always privileged the figure of the hero, the explorer, placing women’s participation as secondary (Smith 2001). Although women may have been invisible in travel writing as a genre for some time, it does not mean they were not present nor contributed to the genre (Smith 2001). Mills affirmed that when travel accounts written by women started to appear, critics decided to focus on minor details such as considering them as only observers and not actors of their travels; or emphasizing the positive aspects or characteristics they thought to be important as femininity (Mills 1991). According to Mills, this attitude was a way to generalize or unify the complexity of the genre’s formation.

Considering the discussion presented here, in the next chapter I will analyze how Gilbert’s text articulates the issue of quest and journey as discussed by Youngs. I will also show how the questing pattern in Gilbert’s text helps her to observe a self- transformation. Contemplating Smith and Watson’s discussion on autobiography, in the next chapter I will demonstrate how Gilbert grasps the new meanings of her experiences during the travel. Finally, with the assumptions discussed by Stuart Hall and Bob Pease, I will analyze how, in her “search for everything”, Gilbert re-creates her identity at the same time she asserts her privilege traveling to Italy, India and Indonesia. I also look at how cultural encounters happen in the narrative and how they impact the narrator’s transformation of the self

CHAPTER III

Italy, India, Indonesia and I – Going away to find oneself

“I once wrote a book in order to save myself. I wrote a travel memoir in order to make sense of my own journey and my own emotional confusion. All I was trying to do with that book was figure myself out.”

Elizabeth Gilbert – *Big Magic*

If Literature “adds to reality”, as C. S. Lewis once affirmed⁶, reality in its deeper and complex and chaotic sense is the fuel to many writers who seek a journey to redemption⁷. Sometimes, it is by facing reality and dealing with all that it might bring along that the writer has the visibility to see beyond the chaos. In travel literature, as we have seen in the previous chapter, traveling to map new lands as it used to be in the past is no longer the main way of traveling or the only way one has to map out any territory, although it is an activity still done. All the technological innovations such as satellites, probes and other advanced machines have contributed for the task of mapping new lands to make this activity somewhat easier. So, if the outer lands have already been explored and mapped, what is left to be known by contemporary travelers? Perhaps, this is the reason why many writers return to a territory which is never fully known or totally explored: the traveler self and all the implications related to it.

As previously mentioned, travel writing has gone through a huge transformation since its origins. The ability to move freely from place to place and the entitlement to explore and write about it were traditionally granted to men while women’s presence in those trips was usually neglected. In the chapter “Travel Writing and Gender”, Susan Bassnett

⁶ The quotation by C. S. Lewis says: “Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.” <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/30083> Web Dec. 20th, 2016 ⁷ The concept of reality herein refers specifically to my reading of Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*, as she moves from what she sees as the chaos of her reality in search of something that helps her to find balance again. Reality means life, and all the ups and downs related to it.

affirms that “the travel text as ethnographic or social commentary transcends gender boundaries, and increasingly in the twentieth century, male and female travelers have written self-reflexive texts that defy easy categorization as autobiography, memoir or travel account” (225). In the long run, women started to travel unaccompanied and their observations on the world also began to contribute to the genre travel writing.

These self-reflexive texts open space to productions such as the one analyzed in this thesis. *Eat, Pray, Love – One Woman’s Search for Everything across Italy, India and Indonesia* was written by Elizabeth Gilbert and first published in 2006. The book is considered a memoir rather than a travel book, although the travel functions as a backdrop for all the elements of the narrative and at the same time, it is important to observe the characteristics of the book that connect it to travel writing as a genre, especially regarding the issue of quests. As the title suggests, the protagonist departs in search of things she considers important and it is through the journey that she is able to narrate the self in an attempt to rebuild her identity (Smith and Watson 150).

At the time it was launched, the book got more visibility when mentioned and endorsed by Oprah Winfrey in her book club and also on her former TV show. The book was a publishing phenomenon and sometime later, became a movie starred by Julia Roberts as the protagonist Elizabeth Gilbert. Such fame enabled *Eat, Pray, Love* to become a highly successful product, and according to Gilbert’s website, only the book itself achieved “over 10 million copies sold worldwide and was translated in over thirty languages”. Such popularity allowed *Time Magazine* to name Elizabeth Gilbert as “one of the 100 most influential people in the world”.

Firstly, I find important to clarify that when I refer to Gilbert’s last name in the analysis of the book, I refer to the narrator of the story and not the author herself. Even though the names are alike, they refer to different people. Smith and Watson explain this feature of autobiographical subjects in life narratives and they say that this “producer of the story is not a flesh-and-blood author, whom we cannot know, but a speaker or narrator who refers to herself” (58). Thus, I am aware that when Gilbert tells her stories in the first person she is not referring to herself as a ‘real’ woman, she refers to this narrator she

created who helps her in the attempt in understanding and constructing the self.

But, what does *EPL* bring to explain such success? The book reports a period of Elizabeth Gilbert's life, a mid-thirties New Yorker, who lives unbalanced moments after a divorce. At the same time, she is a successful professional, and therefore, enjoys the rewards of her career; she presents in the very first lines of her story a profound anxiety and dissatisfaction. Without giving specific details, Gilbert reports she is attached to an unhappy marriage which she wants to end, she cannot find a way to free herself without causing any harm to her husband. Eventually, she files for divorce and this fact unleashes a series of problems between her and her ex-husband, causing both of them pain, sorrow and a dispute over material goods. In order to overcome the bitter end of her relationship, Gilbert jumps in another relationship with a man named David, but the differences between the couple contribute for another uneasy break-up. Alone and heartbroken, Gilbert decides to change perspectives by leaving New York for good and embarks on a one-year journey to Italy, India and Indonesia in order to search for everything she lacks in her life.

The outer journey serves for the protagonist to embark on a selfjourney, which results on a story with appropriate elements for an appealing romance: a single woman who travels to three different countries and, once away from what she sees as the chaos of her life, has a range of possibilities to reinvent herself and find happiness again.

Elizabeth Gilbert was born in Waterbury, Connecticut, in 1969. She grew up in a small family and attended New York University where she divided her time studying Political Science and working on her short stories. Traveling has been present in her life since she finished college and decided to travel around the country, "working in bars, diners and ranches, collecting experiences to transform into fiction" (Gilbert's website). Despite having written other books, it is when she decides to write her own story that she reaches the worldwide recognition and success. *Eat, Pray, Love* is written in the first person and brings a mixture of elements that draw the attention of the reader such as: a woman who is unhappy in her marriage, then gets devastated by a bitter divorce, and then decides to travel to places that are usually shown as heavenly spots where people go on vacation to enjoy life pleurably, and where she has

the means to find (or at least to try to find) answers to her innermost questions.

The book has received positive and negative criticism in the media due to the combination of factors that made it a success. On one hand, Gilbert's writing skills are praised and the book is truly well accepted. An article from Melissa Whitworth on the British *The Telegraph* says that "the heart of Gilbert's story is universal" because it appeals to a human condition of hoping for something better when one is enduring life's setbacks. As Whitworth affirms "any tale addressing the search for love and human happiness is always going to have an audience"⁷. The audience to which she refers might represent a group of people (women in their majority) who can connect to the protagonist herself for reasons that women share and understand such as: unhappy marriages and failed romantic relationships, things that are common in human relations.

On the other hand, some critics have also bashed the book for fostering a way of life that makes women "move away from political, economic and emotional agency by promoting materialism and dependency masked as empowerment with evangelical zeal", affirms Joshunda Sanders in her article "Eat, Pray, Spend: Priv-lit and the New, Enlightened American Dream"⁸ (2014). Gilbert's book has also been criticized for being part of the culture "New Age Spirituality" that has Oprah Winfrey as a spokesperson. In the chapter called "New Age Soul", Karlyn Crowley says that Winfrey "validates the personal, which for many women means listening to one's own experience and intuition" (35). As an icon of the American popular culture, in the past years Winfrey has established not only an empire, but also has influenced what people wear, eat and read. Crowley affirms that Oprah encourages her audience, most of it women, to find agency, to have mind and thought control which are fundamental for the New Age spirituality (35). Having this in mind but approaching *Eat, Pray, Love* not as a book about spirituality, (even if it brings elements that are part of Gilbert's beliefs and life style such as meditation and spiritual practices), it is not

⁷ The article by Melissa Whitworth cited here is an online version found in the Telegraph's website, that is why page numbers are not mentioned.

⁸ The article by Joshunda Sanders cited here is an online version found in Bitch Magazine and do not contain page numbers.

surprising to see how well received the book has been by Oprah's audience.

Furthermore, some scholars have considered books such as *EPL* as a hybrid text because they blend travel narratives and writing strategies found in self-help books, which are more concerned with questions of being. In her article "Eat, Pray, Loathe: Women's Travel Memoir as Moving Metaphysical Journey or Narcissistic New-Age Babble?" (2011), Kate Cantrell says that these "middle-aged travel narratives" written by women follow a certain pattern where usually the former protagonist of the travel narrative is replaced by a "restless female who is writing at mature age and usually, in the midst or aftermath of an existential crisis" (3). The crisis is usually related to a personal, domestic issue and the writer "emphasizes in the narrative a desire for personal growth and balance, [and] employs travel as the register for this self-realization" (Cantrell 3). Thus, these mature women seek psychological answers in physical displacements.

In order to better understand Gilbert's journey and all the events that outlined her narrative, it is crucial to observe how she sees herself at "home". She has been married for eight years, lived in a big house in the suburbs of New York and has been expected to have a baby soon. Her husband seems to be patient with her delaying in finally deciding to have a baby but this domestic, low-profile life does not seem something she longer wishes. Gilbert feels so confused that she looks at her own life and ignores it, it seems that this life she lives is not the one she wants to live, or better, her current life does not fit her current self anymore. We can see this gap, as we read:

Wasn't I proud of all we'd accumulated – the prestigious home in Hudson Valley, the apartment in Manhattan, the eight phone lines, the friends and the picnics and the parties, the weekends spent roaming the aisles of some box-shaped superstore of our choice, buying ever more appliances on credit? I had actively participated in every moment of the creation of this life – so why did I feel like none of it resembled me? Why did I feel so overwhelmed with duty, tired of being primary bread-winner and housekeeper and the social coordinator and the dog-walker and the wife, and

the soon-to-be mother, and – somewhere in my stolen moments – a writer...? (Gilbert 12)

It is from this lack of recognition of Gilbert's own life that I shall start my study, because the woman that now looks at all those things is not the same woman who wanted all those things. There is a fragmented self that makes Gilbert not only search for an overcoming of a failed marriage but also a confrontation with what she thinks is expected from her. She *has* everything. She is rich, a successful writer, she has family and friends, she has a steady relationship, therefore, she *should* be happy. However, Gilbert summarizes the only certainty she has by saying: "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 10).

Thus, it is clear that there is a rupture in the narrator's identity and this is what impels her to move. To understand this process of outward/inward search present in Gilbert's narrative, I decided to divide this chapter into three sections, following her path through the three countries she travels to. This way, I aim to investigate the role of the journey in Gilbert's book and also the changes in her identity before, during and after this trip. The sections are related to the countries she visited and to the most important aspects of her passage in each place because I believe it is important to follow the narrative as it was constructed. I also focus on the relation between travel and the cultural otherness Gilbert comes across in such a diversity of places, and this way, I observe how this exchange might have an impact on the (re)construction of her identity.

3.1 Italy: Restarting among feasts, pleasure and guilt

Gilbert opens her first chapter with the title: "Italy" or "Say it like you eat it", or "Thirty-six Tales about the Pursuit of Pleasure". There is a close connection between self-discovery and the idea of pleasure in this passage of the book because in the beginning of the narrative we see an unhealthy woman. Anxiety, sadness and fear are mental disorders that, in excess, affect the body and it is not different with Gilbert. She emphasizes this situation when she describes the scene where she is "sobbing so hard [in the bathroom floor] that a great lake of tears and snot was spreading

before me on the bathroom tiles, a veritable Lake Inferior⁹ (if you will) of all my shame and fear and confusion and grief” (Gilbert 10). Thus, the trip to Italy is the first step to ‘heal’ her body, to recover from what she sees as traumatic experiences by giving the body nutrition; hence, health and pleasure.

The titles are really important for the narrative, starting with the title of the book which displays three verbs, three actions that represent human needs. Eating is one of the most basic needs for people’s survival and, besides that, it is also a pleasant activity. Thus, Gilbert relates her travel to Italy with pleasure for obvious reasons. The Italian cuisine is one of the most appreciated around the world. The variety of pasta, cheese, wine, espresso, to name a few, makes Italy a place that is definitely the trip of a lifetime for many people who enjoy spending time around a table appreciating a rich meal.

In Gilbert’s case, Italy is the kick-off of her journey for a simpler reason the language, as we see in this excerpt:

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 39)

Back in New York, while she was planning her trip, the idea of joining business with pleasure was also on her mind, as we read “I’d also been dying lately to get over to Italy, so I could practice speaking Italian in context, but also because I was drawn to the idea of living for a while in a culture where pleasure and beauty are revered” (Gilbert 30). She mentions in the narrative that she was a student of the Italian language; therefore, traveling to Italy would be a good opportunity to achieve her goal of speaking Italian fluently. Thus, the idea of living in a place where

⁹ Gilbert plays with the words here as she makes reference to the Lake Superior, the largest great lake of North America, which is a good metaphor to explain and give dimension of her feelings.

enjoying life seems to be the ultimate dream of a tourist, even if for a short period, drives Gilbert to carry it out.

For Gilbert, it seems that life in Italy is limited to the common sense that Italians live *la dolce vita*, full of pleasure and time to enjoy it the most. This idea, which is embedded in what has been taught about the ancient Romans in history books, for instance, has hitherto been sustained. In the book *Cultural Encounters: Representing Otherness* (2000), Elizabeth Hallam and Brian Street affirm that there is a “partiality of cultural and historical truths that raises questions about the cultural effects of any given representation such as: how does it operate to exclude, silence, translate or exaggerate others?” (2). We can see this exaggeration about the representation of others in the explanation Gilbert gives about the difference between how Italians and Americans relax and enjoy their time off.

On chapter 21, Gilbert wonders what she is doing in Italy, once she does not know how to appreciate the experience of doing nothing, as we read: “While I have come to Italy in order to experience pleasure, during the first few weeks I was here, I felt a bit of panic as how to one should do that. Frankly, pure pleasure is not *my* cultural paradigm” (63). This feeling has to do with her family background, immigrants who came to the USA from other countries and had to work hard to build life in America; her parents had a small farm where she and her sister were used to work since very young, as well as developed other virtues, as we read:

We were taught to be dependable, responsible, the top of our classes at school, the most organized and efficient babysitters in town, the very miniature models of our hardworking farmer/nurse of a mother, a pair of junior Swiss Army knives, born to multitask. We had a lot of enjoyment in my family, a lot of laughter, but the walls were papered with to-do lists and I never experienced or witnessed idleness, not once in my whole entire life (Gilbert 64).

Taking this idea into account, it is noticeable how Gilbert stresses the difference between the life she used to live since childhood and the life she was experiencing in Italy. The “exaggeration” is in affirming that she and her family, and by extension all the Americans, are hardworking

people, obsessed with self-fulfillment and achievements, and that all these characteristics might be shared with other cultures; however, in a lesser degree if compared to others such as Italians. It might be true what Gilbert says about her family trait of hardworking, diligent people but there is also an excess in the way these characteristics are shown.

We find support to this idea by analyzing what Luca Spaghetti, Gilbert's friend in Italy, says: "We are the masters of *bel far niente*" (Gilbert 64). In this passage, Gilbert avows that Italians have always been hard workers and she gives the example of the *braccianti*, sort of farmhands who worked really hard and could only count on the strength of their arms (64). However, even though she recognizes the same diligent trait in the Italian people, she mentions that the "beauty of doing nothing" has always been an Italian life style. She says:

The beauty of doing nothing is the goal of all your work, the final accomplishment for which you are most highly congratulated. The more exquisitely and delightfully you can do nothing, the higher your life's achievement. [...] For me, though, a major obstacle in my pursuit of pleasure was my ingrained sense of Puritan guilt. Do I really deserve this pleasure? This is very American, too – the insecurity about whether we have earned our happiness (Gilbert 65).

Thus, with this polarized idea in her narrative, Gilbert keeps the representation of what has been said about Italians and Americans once these characteristics are either magnified or reduced, depending on the narrator's will and what she considers important to the narrative.

However, this "ethnographic authority" can be contested if we take into account what Clifford avows in *The Predicament of the Culture* (1988), where he says that these images (of different people and cultures) are constituted and as a result of "complex concrete images of one another, no sovereign scientific method or ethical stance can guarantee the truth of such images" (23). Then, it is sensible to have in mind that the differences between the two cultures may be relevant to be mentioned in the book but they do not represent an absolute truth about Italy and the USA. What I see in this part of the narrative is that going to Italy allows Gilbert to open herself to the pleasure of simple things, different from the

fancy life she had in New York. Italy provides her with the pleasure of enjoying food and drink without feeling guilty, and getting rid of guilt is one step towards the rebuilding of her identity.

Even though *Eat, Pray, Love* is a memoir and brings Gilbert's personal experiences without the intention of a deep ethnographic analysis, more moments of cultural encounters are shared during the narrative. Other example of this dynamic is in the Thanksgiving celebration that occurs in the story. As a traditional American holiday, Thanksgiving is celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November.

Coincidentally, it is the same day of her Italian friend Luca's birthday, who really wants a combination of the two parties, as we read: "Luca Spaghetti's birthday falls this year on America's Thanksgiving Day, so he wants to do a turkey for his birthday party. He's never eaten a big, fat, roasted American thanksgiving turkey, though he's seen in pictures. He thinks it should be easy to replicate such a feast (especially with the help of me, a real American)" (111). On the other hand, there is also a sort of a reversed cultural look, since Luca's expectations creates an environment where Thanksgiving might take place because he has a "real American friend" in Gilbert.

Some points in this part of the story must be mentioned for us to understand how complex this cultural encounter is. First, the idea of celebrating his own birthday in the traditional American molds might have been a way Luca Spaghetti found to please his new American friend and also to be inserted in a culture that he has never been before. He is so unaware of the time it takes to prepare such a feast in the very traditional American style that he thinks it is possible to roast a twenty-pound turkey overnight; a task that is kindly explained by Gilbert as impossible to be done, which she suggests: "Luca, let's make it easy and have pizza, like every other good dysfunctional American family does on Thanksgiving" (112). Thus, Luca's expectations are not fulfilled in the sense of appreciating a turkey for his birthday dinner; and by saying that some families do not prepare the traditional dinner with the massive roasted turkey but eat pizza instead, Gilbert reports a different reality that her friend Luca might not have thought of; that not every singular American celebrates Thanksgiving as we are all used to see in movies. So again, the amplified/reduced view over the other is present in a small context which represents only a "partial truth" (Clifford 1988).

This cultural encounter (the Thanksgiving dinner) allows Gilbert to face the complexities of self-transformation on the road. The dinner takes place in one of Gilbert's friend's house with a group of people that includes an American friend who joins her for Thanksgiving, and as tradition dictates, Deborah the American friend, suggests they follow the custom of holding hands and giving thanks (114). Each guest says what they are grateful for, and the moment gets very emotional. When it is Gilbert's turn, she starts in Italian: "*Sono grata ...*", but then she cannot find the words to express her thoughts. At the same time she is grateful for being free from the depression that had been chasing her for so long, "a depression that had chewed such perforations of my soul that I would not, at one time, have been able to enjoy even such a lovely night as this" (115), she decides not to mention this personal issue and focuses on something more positive, saying that she is grateful "for old and new friends" (115). This moment is interesting in the narrative because at the same time she traveled to Italy aiming to speak fluent Italian, she finds it difficult to verbalize her feelings in other than her native language. As Karen Connely affirms, "the body's complexity involves language, including speaking other languages" (199); however, in this part of the story, the long-dreamed foreign language is not enough for the narrator to express that complex moment where she realizes a step towards her recovery from a disease, her self-recognition and willingness in talking about it, and finally, one of the stages for the (re)construction of the self.

Second, the imperialistic trait of the American culture embedded in this moment might not be as explicit as we read; however, it is present. The gathering is emotional due to the affectionate expressions of friendship, the countless bottles of Sardinian wine the group has consumed, and also because it is their last meeting, since Gilbert is preparing to leave Italy. Nevertheless, it is impossible not to observe that the narrator facilitates an Americanization of such moment. Luca Spaghetti actually had his Thanksgiving holiday (without the turkey) and if any of his guests questioned why such celebration occurred that way, it is not mentioned by the author. Gilbert's position is very neutral in this situation and everything happens as normally as possible. Despite the mocking observation about "dysfunctional American families" she gives earlier, nothing else is said. We see the American culture spread and absorbed where she is the only representative of this force, which makes me question her behavior. If one decides to travel to another country in order to live there for some months with the intention of

learning and living the culture of this country, to accept the celebration of the party as it happened helps to reinforce the American cultural imperialism even if that was not the intention. Regarding her experience of travel and living in other countries, Karen Connelly, also a travel writer, affirms that she “set out to become the other” and that she was “adopted everywhere” (201). If we have in mind Gilbert’s attitude in this part of the story, we see that she does not present the same attitude towards the foreign culture.

Although Gilbert has been “adopted” by her foreign friends, she has not become the other, at least not in this Italy moment. She remains the American woman, whose cultural aspects are so strong that overpower whichever the ambience, making a friend’s birthday party be all about a foreign celebration. Gilbert, as well as Flora Tristan and Maria Graham Scott cited in chapter two, are representatives of what Pease affirms in her book about the privileged elite, where class and race often reinforce this condition (2010).

The important aspect about the Italian incursion in Gilbert’s narrative is her first attempt to step aside and see her problems from a different perspective. In the beginning of the narrative she seems too attached to the complaints of her situation and does not seem motivated to do anything but complain and cry. In my point of view, going to Italy makes her stop victimizing herself to finally take action in order to deal with her personal problems as a grown-up. Moreover, the first stop in one of the most visited cities of the world, the birthplace of art and beauty, is surely a good starting point for a recovery that aims to heal the body first. In addition, as a woman who is in “search for everything”, we can call Gilbert a contemporary quester who uses the sojourn in Italy for her own advantage, which according to Youngs, is what questers do. Youngs affirms that for questers “places and people they meet on the way are subordinated to those and exist in relation to the quest, aiding or hindering its accomplishments” (94). Hence, the representations of otherness in *EPL* are diluted, diminished or used for the narrator’s own purpose (Youngs 94).

After spending four months in Italy, Gilbert leaves feeling differently from the one who had arrived some time earlier. The restart of a new *self* begins when she decided to study the language and after “reading some words from a dictionary” she realized the possibilities of recovering and finding herself (Gilbert 121). The assimilation of her own

problems, her behavior towards guilt, her time to think over unfinished personal issues and her total surrender to pleasure made her able to take the next steps. She affirms how different she was from when arrived in Italy:

I came to Italy pinched and thin. I did not know yet what I deserved. I still maybe don't fully know what I deserve. But I do know that I have collected myself of late – through the enjoyment of harmless pleasures – into somebody much more intact. The easiest, most fundamentally human way to say it is I have put on weight. I exist more than I did four months ago. I will leave Italy noticeable bigger than when I arrived (Gilbert 122).

We see in this excerpt that Gilbert goes away from Italy with a sense of self-knowledge, as if she is finally putting together the pieces of the self and closing an important cycle of personal reconstruction. As a memoir that has travel as a means of telling a story, Gilbert's book confirms what Casey Blanton affirms about contemporary travel books, that they are “metaphors of a quest for ground zero – a place where values are discovered along the way, not imported; a place where other cultures can have their say; a place where self and other can explore each other's fiction [...]” (Blanton 29). In *EPL*, the travel to Italy represents a quest for ground zero, a fresh start for the protagonist where she can deal with the bitterness of the divorce and failed relationships, where she ponders on aspects of her personality and on how she deals with things and people and where she finds friends and locals to help her go through all of this and make her ready for the next travel.

This recipe will repeat itself in the narrative with some peculiarities and differences, regarding each place visited. It is possible to see how the “provisional identities” take place in the narrative, as affirmed by Smith and Watson (2001). In the beginning of Italy's journey, we see an insecure and lost woman who is extremely attached to things and people she must leave behind in order to move forward. Thus, after treating the body and feeling “bigger”, as stated in the previous quote, it is time for Gilbert to mend her soul, which is another step into this healing process. The next stop is in a place where she goes seeking

for her spiritual awakening and maturity and where she finds a sense of belonging that represents another chapter into her self-discovery journey.

3.2 India: Scrubbing floors, cleansing the soul

In the opening of this chapter, Gilbert declares that the India sojourn will be about the “pursuit of devotion” (123). Gilbert is a yoga practitioner and fond of Indian spiritual practices and, when in New York, she used to take yoga classes. After four months in Italy without meditating once, the idea of arriving in India, staying in an Ashram¹⁰ and getting back on track was long-awaited. Before going to India and moving into the Ashram, Gilbert knew a little about the Indian spiritual practices but she had a romantic view of it, as we read:

My God, but I wanted a spiritual teacher. I immediately began constructing a fantasy of what it would be like to have one. I imagined that this radiantly beautiful Indian woman would come to my apartment a few evenings a week and we would sit and drink tea and talk about divinity, and she would give me reading assignments and explain the significance of the strange sensations I was feeling during meditation (Gilbert 26).

Gilbert did not have a clear idea about how a guru guides their spiritual students. She was first introduced to a living guru by her former boyfriend David the first night she went to his apartment (Gilbert 25). There was a picture of her on his dresser and it showed a “radiantly beautiful Indian woman” (25). Since then, she had this fantasy that if she had a personal guru they would have a close, friendly relationship. But she realizes this would be impossible when David tells her this spiritual teacher is an international guru, and the idea of drinking tea with her and sharing personal impressions quickly disappears (Gilbert 26). However, with this part of the story, the reader can observe the narrator’s thirst for

¹⁰ Traditionally, an Ashram (Sanskrit/Hindi) is a spiritual hermitage or a monastery.

spirituality or, as the subtitle of the chapter suggests, a pursuit of devotion.

To explain this pursuit, Gilbert says that the reason for people to practice yoga is vast and the meaning of *yoga* in Sanskrit is translated to “union” (Gilbert 127). Therefore, the goal in practicing yoga is finding union – “between mind and body, between the individual and her God, between our thoughts and the source of our thoughts, between teacher and student, and even between ourselves and our hard-to-bend neighbors” (127). In addition, for Gilbert, there is also another meaning which conforms to her pursuit – a pursuit that made her cry for help lying in the bathroom’s floor when she was still married – a search for God (Gilbert 13). That is why she affirms that Yoga is a way to “find God through meditation, through scholarly study, through the practice of silence, through devotional service or through mantra – the repetition of sacred words in Sanskrit” (128). So, it is in this search for balance between mind and spirit that Gilbert goes to India in order to find what she had asked for when she was attached to all the things that held her back before leaving New York.

A pursuit usually demands time and energy, it is not always an easy task. And in order to do that, Gilbert has to adapt into a new reality in the Ashram. In contrast to her stay in Italy, where she rented an apartment and had free time to do whatever she likes, in the Indian Ashram she has to share her room with other roommates, she has to get up before dawn to meditate and she has to do hard work. Gilbert has been assigned to cleaning the temple floors, which she sees as a metaphor, as we read: “I’m aware of the metaphor – the scrubbing clean of the temple that is my heart, the polishing of my soul, the everyday mundane effort that must be applied to spiritual practice in order to purify the self, etc., etc” (Gilbert 137). However, the most difficult aspect of being in the Ashram is the meditation practice that she takes daily, because meditation requires the act of listening which is extremely hard for her:

I can prattle away to God about all my feelings and my problems all the livelong day, but when it comes time to descend into silence and listen...well, that’s a different story. When I ask my mind to rest in stillness, it is astonishing how quickly it will turn (1) bored, (2) angry, (3)

depressed, (4) anxious or (5) all of the above (Gilbert 138).

In many pages of the book, Gilbert shows her struggle with meditating correctly, and as the days pass, she becomes more and more anxious without being successful in her daily meditation. Gilbert wages a daily battle in her mind to triumph over the meditation and her eating habits. She tells that the food in the Ashram is good and healthy, but she cannot control herself and eats too much, which is considered not good in the Indian life style; she says her guru encourages everyone to “practice discipline when it comes to eating” (Gilbert 145). It is in one of these moments of self-control before a plate of food that she meets a man that will be important in her stay in the Ashram and because of this voracious habit he gives her the nickname of “Groceries”. Richard, from Texas, a “reformed junkie and alcoholic”, is very different from Gilbert, as we read:

Richard from Texas is not a guy who worries about a lot of stuff. I wouldn't call him a neurotic person, no sir. But I am a bit neurotic, and that's why I've come to adore him. Richard's presence at this Ashram becomes my great and amusing sense of security. His giant ambling confidence hushes down all my inherent nervousness and reminds me that everything really is going to be OK (Gilbert 146).

The importance attributed to a male figure in this part of the story is somewhat awkward because it makes us wonder why she needs to feel safe in a place where supposedly people feel secure and protected, and where they are, after all, looking for spiritual rise. Then, if we go back in the story we understand that this is another facet of Gilbert's identity, a woman who has always been attached to a man's company as she explains:

I got started early in life with the pursuit of sexual and romantic pleasure. I barely had an adolescence before I had my first boyfriend, and I have constantly had a boy or a man (or sometimes both) in my life ever since I was fifteen years old. [...]

And I can't help but think that's been something of a liability on my path to maturity (Gilbert 68).

It does not mean that Richard from Texas is the character's next affair, but it explains Gilbert's sense of security due to the presence and company of a man. This idea is in accordance with Kristi Siegel's argument in a chapter titled "Women's Travel and Rhetoric of Peril" (2004), where she affirms that the representation of a women traveler was always attached to the male figure: "women traveled to find a man, get away from a man, or both" (64). Even though this assertion is about Hollywood movies from the 1930s to 1980s, the rhetoric is still current in movies and books where women travel alone. Gilbert's relationship with Richard from Texas is based on a short but mutual friendship because the Ashram is a temporary house. However, the idea of counting on the male strength to feel safe reinforces the archetype of fragility always associated to women, especially women travelers. Also, the fact that he is also American may have been important to Gilbert; it is a way to recognize part of her culture in him.

Besides Richard from Texas, who is the male character Gilbert has the closest relationship with in the Ashram, there is also a young Indian girl called Tulsi who works with her scrubbing the floors of the temple. They get along well and Tulsi, despite being only seventeen years old, is very mature and has strong opinions about many things, especially marriage. Tulsi comes from a traditional Indian family that expects her to get married after turning eighteen, which is promptly rejected by her and is not comprehended by her family, as we read: "In my family, they have already given up on me as too different. I have established a reputation for being someone who, if you tell her to do one thing, will almost certainly do the other. [...] I'm considered a difficult girl. I have a reputation for needing to be told a good reason to do something before I do it" (Gilbert 190). So, the reader has the view of such a strong character, a rebel for the Indian patterns and much more fearless than Gilbert. Being adventurous and bold is expected from teenagers but we can see that Tulsi represents a different kind of woman in the story, a woman who, in contrast to Gilbert who is already free from the marriage constraints, is in search of freedom.

The freedom that moves Tulsi is related to her dream of going to college and not having an arranged marriage. She refuses to participate in any wedding ceremony of her family because she knows that, once present in these events, she confirms by her age that “she will be regarded as a legitimate marriage prospect”; and by not going to these events Tulsi attests how different and difficult she is, even knowing this step is important for the family (Gilbert 189). Gilbert asks Tulsi what else counts for a girl in India to be considered a difficult girl unable to find a husband and Tulsi answers:

If she has a bad horoscope. If she’s too old. If her skin is too dark. If she’s too educated and you can’t find a man with a higher position than hers, and this is a widespread problem these days because a woman cannot be more educated than her husband. Or if she’s had an affair with someone and the whole community knows about it, oh, it would be quite difficult to find a husband after that...(Gilbert 190).

Tulsi knows well what she is talking about and that is why she wants to follow another path to break free from this complex and millenary culture where the custom of arranged marriages still prevails, even in more modern times. When Gilbert hears all these Indian requirements, she realizes how significantly different her life as an American woman and Tulsi’s life is. She even jokes about it saying that she would not suit as a potential wife in India, as we read: “I don’t know whether my horoscope is good or bad, but I’m definitely too old and I’m way too educated and my morals have been publicly demonstrated to be quite tarnished...I’m not a very appealing prospect. At least my skin is fair. I have only this in my favor” (Gilbert 190).

This idea of marriage in this part of the story does not suggest Gilbert wants to get married in India or anywhere, and according to the list given by Tulsi, Gilbert does not meet the requirements nor it is something she is looking for. Gilbert set out to India to find balance in spiritual things, but she became an observer of the other, their culture and habits and, at least, she is trying to grasp something from this experience. However, as an observer, Gilbert has the opportunity to reflect on her own privileges as an American woman by looking at the other. Yet, she

mentions the fact that the only thing in her favor is her skin color. Of course, this line opposes to what Tulsi has said about an Indian girl not to be too dark skinned but it has a deeper meaning. Since Gilbert's fair complexion is not her only advantage, she does not speak about the huge difference between her and Tulsi, and by extension, other Indian women. As she affirmed before, she is way too educated, she is more mature, and she does not count on astrology to guide her love life. It seems to me that, even though she knows all these things, Gilbert does not acknowledge them as the symbols of her privilege.

If we take into account feminist theoreticians such as bell hooks, we see there are many aspects that put Gilbert in a better position than the women she mentions in this part of the story. Even though she mentions her problems with relationship, the divorce, depression, insecurity, these issues do not create a common ground with all Indian women for instance, even if the problems are the same among them. In her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), bell hooks talks about this difference. When hooks says that the premise of modern feminist thought is "all women are oppressed" this implies that women "share a common lot, that factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference, etc. do not create a diversity of experiences that determines the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women" (5). So, by saying that her light skin is the only benefit she has in that society is a partial truth because, according to hooks, being oppressed means the "absence of choice" and here is the major point that separates Gilbert from Tulsi; they do share many issues that permeate their experiences as women, issues that establish a bridge between them. But these experiences cannot be considered something that homogenizes them due to all the factors that are involved. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty in "Under Western Eyes – Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse" (2007), the "connection between women as historical subjects and the representation of Woman produced by hegemonic discourses is not a relation of direct identity, or a relation of correspondence or simple implication. It is an arbitrary relation set up by particular cultures" (334).

This idea helps to endorse the differences between Gilbert and Tulsi again, showing that it is not possible to compare their experiences only because they are women, I dare say that it is because they are women that these differences are so blatant.

Gilbert, as a white woman, educated and privileged in all the ways, has much more than her light skin in her favor, she has had choices. She could choose entering into a marriage and getting out of it, she could choose trying another relationship without judgment, she could travel alone to other countries in order to solve her problems and find herself and, more importantly, she has had the support (material and emotional) to do all these things. So, there is a lack of empathy from Gilbert in this moment to recognize that not all the women have choices or at least the possibility to choose, but if they have, they may be able to live a life with qualities that go beyond the appearance of their skin.

Within this daily interaction in the temple, Gilbert still struggles to achieve the balance between mind and soul. The period spent at the Ashram passes, Richard goes away from India and returns to Texas and Gilbert continues in her search for the Divine and the excellence in the meditation practice, which eventually she finds. Gilbert's sojourn in India serves to align her previous knowledge about Indian spiritual practices with the real experience of living them, but it is also a part of the story where the contact with others and their personal problems puts her at distance to observe hers.

In India, we see Gilbert trying to understand the purpose of her own existence and finding love again, but a higher sort of love; or better, the love for herself. After four months in the Ashram, Gilbert feels alive and healthy due to "Yoga, the vegetarian food and early bedtimes" (213). On one sleepless night, she decides to go for a walk in the Ashram gardens and feels all the perfumes and warm air of the place and has the epiphany of having achieved something she always wanted, and she says: "I'm in India!" (213). Then she states: "But it was pure, this love that I was feeling. It was godly. I looked around the darkened valley and I could see nothing that was not God. I felt so deeply, terribly happy. I thought to myself, "Whatever this feeling is – this is what I have been praying for. And this is also what I have been praying *to*" (Gilbert 213). She had to travel far away to realize that what she had been searching for was near her and within her.

Furthermore, Gilbert is aware this period in India brought her many questions that she was able to finally answer. She says:

I've spent so much time these last years wondering what I'm supposed to be. A wife? A mother? A

lover? A celibate? An Italian? A glutton? A traveler? An artist? A Yogi? But I'm not any of these things, at least not completely. And I'm not Crazy Aunt Liz, either. I'm just a slippery *antevasin* – betwixt and between – a student on the ever-shifting border near the wonderful, scary forest of the new (Gilbert 215).

To understand this affirmation, we have to go back a little to the days in Italy, when Gilbert and a group of friends were chatting about the idea that every city has a single word that defines it and identifies most people who live there. Their assumptions were the ones such as: the word that defines New York is *achieve*, Naples - *fight*, Rome – *sex*, Vatican – *power*, and so on. When asked what her word would be, Gilbert could not answer at the time (Gilbert 109).

It was only in India, in her last week at the Ashram, that she found the word to define her. During a reading time, she found a word in Sanskrit: *antevasin*, which means “one who lives at the border” (214). This word was assigned to ancient spiritual seekers who used to leave “the center of worldly life to go live at the edge of the forest where the spiritual masters dwelled. The *antevasin* was not one of the villagers anymore – not a householder with a conventional life. But neither was he yet a transcendent – not one of those sages who live deep in the unexplored woods, fully realized” (214). Thus, when Gilbert sees the word and understands its meaning, there is a strong identification with the word; she sees herself as a modern border-dweller. As she mentions in the narrative, the forest and the border are figurative but it is also an inviting place to live. Gilbert says: “You can still live in that shimmering line between your old thinking and your new understanding, always in state of learning” (214). By recognizing herself as an *antevasin* or a borderdweller, Gilbert shows she is moving, learning, in constant state of flux, as affirmed by Stuart Hall (598).

Thus, the India journey provides Gilbert with the chance to put the pieces of the self together and understand and respect this process. By scrubbing the temple floors, she was able to cleanse her soul, find comfort and be ready for the next step. In her search for devotion, Gilbert found much more: flexibility, discipline and the understanding that sometimes the “chaos may have an actual divine function, even if you personally

can't recognize it right now" (217). After Italy and India, which helped Gilbert to face the first steps towards the balance between body and spirit, the next step will be responsible to close a chapter of the book as well as Gilbert's life. As the title of the book suggests, the next step is related to love, and as I mentioned before, that is not what she was searching for in the two previous places she has been; however, when body and soul, or if one prefers, body and mind are well and connected, the person may be available for affective questions. The travel to Indonesia is an open door to new experiences and, as Gilbert says, "the pursuit of balance".

3.3 Indonesia: "To lose balance sometimes for love is part of living a balanced life".

So far, we have seen Gilbert's attempts to recover from the suffering caused by her divorce and problematic relationships. These issues unleash a destabilization in Gilbert's self and are the cause for her to travel to the cited places in search for everything that may help her overcome these problems and find stability.

The trip to Italy and India were new experiences for Gilbert as she had never been to those places before. Indonesia was an old acquaintance since Gilbert had traveled there before for a magazine assignment where she was supposed to write an article about Yoga vacations (Gilbert 27). It is in this first visit that she meets the Balinese medicine man called Ketut Liyer. Gilbert describes him as a "small, merry-eyed man, russet-colored old guy with a mostly toothless mouth, whose resemblance in every way to the Star Wars character Yoda cannot be exaggerated" (Gilbert 27). Ketut is a central character in the Indonesian part of the narrative because he predicts that Gilbert will come back to Bali and stay there for some time. He will teach her everything he knows and, in return, she will practice English with him. Even though a little skeptical, Gilbert believes in his foresight as we see: "Now, I'm the kind of person who, when a ninth-generation Indonesian medicine man tells you that you're destined to move to Bali and live with him for four months, thinks you should make every effort to do that" (Gilbert 29).

Then, after four months living in an Ashram in India, Gilbert lands in Bali without any plan, except staying there for at least four months to conclude her sabbatical year. She has no idea where to live or what to do and no friends to welcome her. It turns out that her plan to stay in Bali

for four months is no longer possible because she is allowed a one-month tourist visa. This incident at the airport makes her state: “It hadn’t occurred to me that the Indonesian government would be anything less than delighted to host me in their country for just as I pleased to stay” (Gilbert 225). There are some passages of the narrative where Gilbert is ironic, such as the one just quoted or the episode in Italy when her friend wanted to have a real Thanksgiving dinner because he had a “real American” with him. Perhaps using self-irony is a way she finds to destabilize her sense of entitlement, even if, in fact, this episode at the airport reveals that she has not considered some of the complexities this long period of travel could present. In any case, Gilbert does not make clear in the narrative how she solved this matter; the fact is that she lives in Bali for four months, making the prophecy of the Balinese medicine man to come true.

After staying in a hotel and making friends with one of the employees, Gilbert heads to Ketut Liyer’s house. Their meeting, two years after the first one, is a very emotional moment for Gilbert, because at first, Ketut does not remember her and when he does, he says:

I’m so happy!” he says. We’re holding hands and he’s wildly excited now. “I do not remember you at first! So long ago we meet! You look different now! So different from two years! Last time, you very sad-looking woman. Now – so happy! Like different person! I give up trying to hide my tearfulness and just let it all spill over. “Yes, Ketut. I was very sad before. But life is better now”. “Last time you in bad divorce. No good.” “No good”, I confirm. “Last time you have too much worry, too much sorrow. Last time, you look like sad old woman. Now you look like young girl. Last time you ugly! Now you pretty!” (Gilbert 233)

From this moment on, Gilbert and Ketut see each other every day. She helps him with the English language and he teaches her his knowledge about life and simple things as homemade medicine. Ketut is a very simple man, everything he knows he has learned from his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. His knowledge about medicine is a combination of knowing the therapeutic qualities of plants and the belief in black magic and he is also an artist who occasionally sells his paintings

and drawings to local galleries (244). Ketut is a special person and he knows it, as we read: “I’m fourth caste in Bali, in very low caste like farmer. But I see many people in first caste not so intelligent as me. My name is Ketut Liyer. Liyer is name my grandfather gave me when I was little boy. It means ‘bright light.’ This is me” (Gilbert 244).

Their relationship is based on long-hour conversations when Ketut is not seeing people of all ages and problems, who look for him and his healing skills. These moments are time-consuming and let him exhausted, but still he always finds time to talk to Gilbert. The idea of teaching him English however is a pointless deed, as Gilbert affirms: “I’m not teaching him any English, not really. Whatever English he already learned however many decades ago has been cemented into his mind by now and there isn’t much space for correction or new vocabulary” (254). Thus, the moments spent together are more about sharing experiences. One night after working a lot, Ketut asks Gilbert to talk to him about her travels to Italy, India and her life in America. Then, Gilbert realizes what she is doing there as we read:

That’s when I realized that I am not Ketut Liyer’s English teacher, nor am I exactly his theological student, but I am the merest and simplest of pleasures for this old medicine man – I am his company. I’m somebody he can talk to because he enjoys hearing about the world and he hasn’t had much of a chance to see it (Gilbert 254).

The feeling of being helpful to a man who has never been off the island of Bali is certainly a motive for gratitude. The reader has the chance to see in Bali a Gilbert that seems much more interested in the other. Being present for Ketut, a humble man that dedicates almost all his day to others is, perhaps, a way of being less self-centered. She does not mention the past too much and seems willing to bury all the misery she has gone through. Furthermore, as a narrator, Gilbert shows and hides whatever she pleases and maybe the crucial point of the story is to construct the narrator’s overcoming in each period of her travel. Bali represents the last part of Gilbert’s journey and after all this time, maybe, she has finally left behind all the “shame, and confusion and fear” to give room for a new, strong and selfless woman (Gilbert 10).

Besides Ketut, other local inhabitants are mentioned in the book as local acquaintances that help Gilbert to get around in the city. With the help of Yudhi, an Indonesian young man, she rents a house outside downtown and follows a routine that includes meditating every morning and visiting Ketut in the afternoon. In one of these days, on her way to Ketut's house, Gilbert gets hit by a bus and hurts her knee. The small injury gets infected and Ketut advises her to look for a doctor, a recommendation that surprises her, after all he is a doctor, a medicine man. She says:

But for some reason he didn't volunteer to help and I didn't push it. Maybe he doesn't administer medication to Westerners. Or maybe Ketut just had a secret hidden master plan, because it was my banged-up knee that allowed me, in the end, to meet Wayan. And from that meeting, everything that was meant to happen...happened (Gilbert 265).

Wayan Nuriyasih is also a Balinese healer and probably the woman with whom Gilbert has the greatest bonding in the trip, because of one detail: she is also divorced. Gilbert and Wayan get to know each other after the bus accident, and because of the knee infection, Gilbert spends five hours in Wayan's shop and hears her story. She tells Gilbert that while married she was constantly beaten by her husband and that she could have been killed (Gilbert 268). Wayan has a daughter called Tutti and has a small shop to sell medicinal herbs and treat occasional patients. Wayan explains to Gilbert that, in Indonesia, a divorced woman does not have the same rights as a woman in America, for instance. Wayan had only two options: keep the marriage and be physically abused or "save her own life and leave, which left her with nothing" (268). She left her husband without receiving any financial support, no security and a young daughter to raise, who was also a reason for dispute, since in Indonesia, in case of divorce, children belong to the father. Gilbert says: "Wayan is just lucky Tutti was a girl; if she'd been a boy, Wayan never would have seen the kid again. Boys are much more valuable" (269).

This sad story makes Gilbert get closer to Wayan and Tutti and after finding this new friend, she divides her time in spending the mornings with them, "eating and laughing", the afternoons with Ketut

“talking and drinking coffee” and the evenings at her “lovely garden, either hanging out by myself and reading a book, or sometimes talking to Yudhi, who comes over to play his guitar” (271). Wayan knows many people, local and foreigners, in the city and she happens to know a Brazilian woman called Armenia who, besides a client of her shop, is also Wayan’s friend. Armenia is in Bali for a couple of days and she travels the world running “a multinational marketing business called Novica, which supports indigenous artists all over the world by selling their products on the Internet” (Gilbert 277).

The first thing that calls Gilbert’s attention about Armenia is her look; and beauty is something that Gilbert really appreciates, as we notice in her narrative. She describes Armenia as: “She was so dynamic, this woman – so Brazilian. She was gorgeous, elegantly dressed, charismatic and engaging and indeterminate in age, just *insistently* sexy” (Gilbert 277). I believe that Armenia’s participation in this brief passage (as it happened to Tulsi in India), has a specific purpose. It serves Gilbert to reflect on her vanity, and consequently, her love and sexual life; an area that she had set aside for some time.

Armenia’s depiction contrasts with Gilbert’s figure so much that Wayan points out the difference, asking Gilbert why she does not try to look sexy as the Brazilian woman and get rid of her daily outfit composed by an old t-shirt and a worn-out pair of jeans that makes her feel anything but sexy. For Gilbert, being sexy as a Brazilian woman is something bigger, something hard to explain and then she turns to Armenia that says:

Well, I always tried to look nice and feminine even in the war zones and refugee camps of Central America. Even in the worst tragedies and crisis, there’s no reason to add to everyone’s misery by looking miserable yourself. That’s my philosophy. This is why I always wore makeup and jewelry into the jungle – nothing too extravagant, but maybe just a nice gold bracelet and some earrings, a little lipstick, good perfume. Just enough to show that I still had my self-respect (Gilbert 278).

Two things are worth mentioning in this passage: Armenia’s characterization as a Brazilian woman and the way Gilbert constructs Armenia’s speech. The first quality that stands out about Armenia is her

appearance. About her professional life, Gilbert says that she used to work for the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees. And the next sentence emphasizes even more Gilbert's reverence to beauty, as we read: "Back in the 1980s she had been sent to El Salvador and Nicaraguan jungles during the height of war as a negotiator of peace, using her beauty and charm and wits to get all the generals and rebels to calm down and listen to reason" (Gilbert 277). It is not possible to know if Armenia has said this about herself, or if Gilbert assumed her successful professional journey derives from beauty and sex appeal.

If we consider what Smith and Watson affirm that, in some cases, narrators "work to conform their self-representation to particular identity frames", we understand that Gilbert projects in Armenia a self-confidence that she has not found yet (Smith and Watson 35). When Gilbert highlights Armenia's appearance even in the middle of the war, it might remind her own "unattractive" appearance lately in the whole process of her self-transformation. She even says that she does not remember the last time she wore lipstick (Gilbert 279). Anyway, Armenia is the representative of a sort of woman that is very different from Gilbert. She is exuberant, self-confident and owns her attractiveness as something natural, and perhaps, Armenia is sort of a mirror for Gilbert who, still in search of self-transformation, has the chance to think of being sexy and attractive again. Nevertheless, the way Gilbert depicts Armenia, in my opinion, is somewhat problematic. She emphasizes aspects that are not important in war zones.

Gilbert builds up Armenia's speech considering things such as makeup and jewelry in the jungle, the attempt to look nice and feminine in all places and circumstances, which means that one must not contribute for the "misery of others by looking miserable [one]self" (Gilbert 278). It seems like these words resemble how Gilbert, in a way, added misery to people close to her by looking sad and miserable while she was married, and later when she was dating David; but also, they attribute Armenia a cold and superficial personality. It seems like Armenia has a lack of empathy and compassion, that people from these places where she worked were secondary, and the political conflicts, death and sorrow were easy to be solved if one wore a golden bracelet.

I am not saying that it is wrong for a woman to be vain or to dress up and take care of her look, if that is important for her to feel good;

however, emphasizing this as “enough to have her self-respect” is too shallow. I believe Armenia’s personality displays something beyond a sexy, well-dressed woman who wears fabulous shoes in the streets of Bali. She represents an encouragement for Gilbert to look at herself as a beautiful, strong and healthy woman ready for the next steps of her life, but if Gilbert’s intention is to show the Brazilian Armenia just as a sexy lady, the difference is well emphasized.

Although Armenia’s participation in the story is short, her function is important because she is the one who introduces Gilbert to the Brazilian man who will be responsible for change in her love life. An unpretentious invitation for Gilbert to go to a party where there will be *feijoada* and Brazilian drinks and dancing is the decisive moment to this meeting. Since the beginning of her solo journey, Gilbert did not have any romantic relationship, not even a quick affair and her celibacy has called Wayan’s attention since after the bus accident when Wayan told her:

“I can tell by your knees that you don’t have much sex lately.” I said, “Why? Because they’re so close together?” She laughed. “No-it’s the cartilage. Very dry. Hormones from sex lubricate the joints. How long since sex for you?” “About a year and a half.” “You need a good man. I will find one for you. I will pray at the temple for a good man for you, because now you are my sister”. (Gilbert 271)

As we see, it seems there is a common sense, that a woman ultimately needs a man, or a romance to finally be ‘healed’ or feel complete. And this passage is even more interesting if we remember that Wayan is also single, but she does not speak about her lack of sexual life. This passage of the story shows a sense of conformity to the expectations over women, that they can only find happiness if linked to relationships. Thus, after meeting Armenia and being invited to a party where she could socialize with other people, Gilbert decides to go and finds herself living something she had long put aside, as we read:

The dinner with the expatriates was great fun, and I felt myself revisiting all these long-dormant aspects of my personality. I even got a little bit drunk, which was notable after all the purity of my

last few months of praying at the Ashram and sipping tea in my Balinese flower garden. And I was flirting! I hadn't flirted in ages. I'd only been hanging around with monks and medicine men lately, but suddenly I was dusting off the old sexuality again (Gilbert 279).

At this moment, we see Gilbert experiencing worldly feelings without guilt or regret. She feels free to do these things, she feels free to embrace her sexuality again and she feels very attracted to the Brazilian man called Felipe. They flirted at the dinner party and ended up getting along really well. Felipe undermines Gilbert peace of mind because after their first meeting she cannot stop thinking of him, she admits to "have a crush on him" (Gilbert 288). Felipe is divorced as well and older than Gilbert, what makes her think:

But he's fifty-two years old. This is interesting. Have I truly reached the age where a fifty-two-year old man is within my realm of dating consideration? I like him, though. He's got silver hair and he's balding in an attractively Picassoesque manner. His eyes are warm and brown. He has a gentle face and he smells wonderful. And he is an actual grown man. The adult male of the species – a bit of a novelty in my experience (Gilbert 288).

Gilbert's experience with love and relationship has left a mark in her heart that prevents her to get involved again. Even admitting that Felipe is interesting and more mature than the other men she got involved with, this is not enough for her to let things happen, as we read: "I don't think I'm ready for it. [...] I don't feel like I'm going through all the effort of romance again, you know?" (Gilbert 289). And it is Felipe who takes the first step and asks her in a very straightforward way: "Should we have an affair together, Liz? What do you think?" (297).

After all the disappointment with her ex-husband and ex-boyfriend and the material losses caused by the divorce, her concern is understandable; even Felipe understands it and that is why he says:

For another thing, I think I know what you're worried about. Some man is going to come into your life and take everything from you again. I won't do that to you, darling. I've been alone for a long time, too, and I've lost a great deal in love, just like you have. I don't want us to take anything from each other. It's just that I've never enjoyed anyone's company as much as I enjoy yours, and I'd like to be with you (Gilbert 298).

Thus, even afraid and knowing that her new-found balance is being tested, Gilbert decides to give Felipe a chance and most important, give her a chance to live a new love story. To me, the Bali period represents the place where Gilbert comes to terms with her past and opens her heart again; this time more mature and sure of what expect from her and from the other. She falls in love with Felipe and decides to live this story; however, I see a woman who had to walk a long way to find and understand what kind of love she deserves. Even though the end of her narratives suggests that the whole journey was an excuse to write a love story, I see a narrative that was constructed to show the journey as an interesting process of self-transformation.

Gilbert is aware of this transformation, and she knows she owes it to only one person: herself. As she says: "Yet what keeps me from dissolving right now into a complete-fairy tale shimmer is this solid truth, a truth that has veritably built my bones over the last few years – I was not rescue by a prince; I was the administrator of my own rescue" (Gilbert 344). By rescuing herself, Gilbert developed her self-esteem again, and a truly sense of love for her body and soul. As Wayan's comment, used as the title of this sub-section: "to lose balance sometimes for love is part of living a balanced life" (Gilbert 312). Gilbert lost the balance of her life with the divorce and the fruitless affair with David; however, after a year and a half, she is finally aware of how long she has gone to find peace and contentment. She says:

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. The already-existent oak, who was saying the whole time: “Yes – grow! Change! Evolve! Come and meet me here, where I already exist in wholeness and maturity! I need you to grow into me! (Gilbert 345)

At this point in the narrative, one sees that Gilbert has taken a journey to Italy, India and Indonesia, coincidentally or not, countries that start with the letter “i”, perhaps as an unconscious reference to *I* (the self) and self-discovery. She even affirms in the book that she had not noticed the “coincidence” before, but it was very appropriate for such search as she wanted “to thoroughly explore one aspect of myself set against the backdrop of each country” (Gilbert 31). Going away to find oneself is the motto of journeys such as this one, where the narrator makes from the outer journey a way to identify and solve inner issues or, sometimes, as we have just seen from Gilbert’s final speech, to understand that all the answers she is searching for are within her.

Bassnett mentions this when she says that some journeys promote “self-awareness” for the traveler/narrator (Bassnett 237). She affirms that some works reflect “personal, social and political changes so that the journeys they recount are both inner and outer journeys, towards greater self-awareness as well as greater knowledge gained through experience” (Bassnett 238). Then, it is possible to see the layers of self that overlap each other, depending on the context. There is the Gilbert wife, journalist, daughter, sister, friend, lover, girlfriend, student, traveler, seeker and many others, but all of them were defined by what Gilbert was to others. Beck suggests that the constitutive ambivalence of travel narratives relies on this dynamic of how “we speak about ourselves and others in cross cultural encounters” (Beck 93).

In this context, as Gilbert became the person she always wanted to be, a woman who did not want to stay married and have kids because this was expected from her, she could finally get rid of the guilt of not playing the pre-established roles for her due to the experiences she lived in this gap year. In the beginning of the narrative she questions this: “But why

must everything always have a practical application? I'd been such a diligent soldier for years – working, producing, never missing a deadline, taking care of my loved ones, my gums and my credit record, voting, etc. Is this lifetime supposed to be only about duty?" (Gilbert 24).

All the experiences Gilbert has lived served to help her find the emotional clarity she was looking for. Now, in the end of her journey, she could answer the question: no, this lifetime is not supposed to be only about duty. According to Dawn Eyestone, Gilbert needed this "therapeutic journey" for self-discovery, which was not linked to the places she visited but certainly the places, or better, the journey made the self-discovery possible (32). It was the process of traveling, the trajectory that helped Gilbert to make her "inner and outer world collides", as stated by Blanton and then, make her reinvent herself.

Youngs affirms that questers are always in search of something that helps them to reach their goal. Questers may seek "new homes, temporary or long-term, through choice or necessity; they pursue leisure, sex, self-improvement; they aim to find spiritual reward or psychological repair in enactments of the inner journey" (Youngs 87). No matter the obstacle, it has to be surpassed, bringing the traveler the sense of accomplishment. As we saw in this analysis, Gilbert's *EPL* represents a contemporary quest where the traveler searches outward for everything she lacks inward, which results in a process of constructing the identity.

CHAPTER IV

Attraversiamo: The Beginning of a New Life

“I look at the Augusteum, and I think that perhaps my life has not actually been *so* chaotic, after all. It is merely this world that is chaotic; bringing changes to us all that nobody could have anticipated. [...] one must always be prepared for riotous and endless waves of transformation”. Elizabeth Gilbert – *Eat, Pray, Love* (79)

As we have seen in the analysis from the two previous chapters, women travel narratives have not always had the importance for the genre as it has gained in the past years. The origins of travel writing analyzed here show how inherently gendered this literary genre was as affirmed by Hulme and Youngs (2002). However, women had their share on the genre and produced important pieces that opened space for a new generation of women travelers (Smith and Watson 2001). In the long run, lands and peoples, once the reason for traveling and writing became secondary, giving space for travelers to use the travel as a way to discuss issues about the self (Blanton 2002).

In this big umbrella of travel writing, we put Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love* as a travel memoir that brings the journey as a vehicle for the protagonist to find answers in her self-imposed exile. In the narrative, we follow a part of Gilbert’s life; a young woman who leaves New York after her divorce and a failed relationship with another man and who goes to Italy, India and Indonesia in order to “search for everything” that she believes to be important for her. Gilbert’s narrative follows a chronological order and for the reader it is easy to notice how the transitions and changes of her identity happen during the trip. The narrator associates each place to steps of her search and accomplishments. Italy is the place chosen for the first step towards the healing of Gilbert’s body. Gilbert mentions in the narrative she struggled with depression and anxiety due to her unfriendly divorce. These things had an impact over her health and, in Italy, she had the opportunity to recover her strength by eating well and nurturing her body but more

importantly, by surrendering to pleasure without feeling guilty. It is in Italy where Gilbert takes the self-indulgence very seriously because, in my point of view, it is a crucial moment for the narrator to scrutinize her feelings and admit the final cycle of some things in her life. It is her “ground zero”, the beginning of a very important stage of her life (Blanton 29). As the title of the book suggests, “to eat” as one of the most important human activities associated to pleasure gives room to a full, physically strong and happier woman. There is ambivalence in Gilbert’s journey because besides the trip giving her the knowledge about herself and allowing her to restore her identity, the journey demands from her a large amount of strength and energy, especially mentally and emotionally.

Then, the healed body needs a healed mind, and the next part of her journey provides Gilbert with Indian spiritual practices, which are important for her to find the balance between body and soul. According to the title of the book, by praying, meditating, controlling her negative and selfish thoughts, she would reach God and the divine. Moreover, Gilbert has the opportunity to develop patience, resilience and she becomes less self-centered by understanding that the chaos was necessary for her transformation. Finally, the last part of the trip was in Indonesia, where she seeks the balance in her life, which is represented by the narrator making peace with her past, accepting that she needed to go through that process to evolve as a person. And, more importantly, I believe that Gilbert learns to recognize love. The “pursuit of balance” is a result of body, mind and heart united; it is a sort of search which is really appealing to many readers, and as Melissa Whitworth affirmed in *The Telegraph*, it is the fuel for a well written story in terms of a book that aims to entertain the public. There is a happy ending that pleases the readers and closes the narrative with a golden key.

Through the point of view of a researcher I recognize the elements that might have contributed to the book’s bestselling success; however, I cannot overlook some issues I consider problematic in the narrative such as the strong imperialist traits aforementioned and feminist issues related to the women's characters presented in the narrative. As a Brazilian woman, I must raise my voice to the uncomfortable and yet continuous erotic and exotic stereotypes granted to the two Brazilian characters: Armenia and Felipe. If we want to avoid such stereotypical readings of

Brazilians or other cultures, these issues have to be addressed and discussed because they do not represent an absolute truth.

Nevertheless, besides all these aspects, it is important to keep the focus on the objective of this study, which is to analyze the interrelation between travel and identity, and *EPL* is a story that confirms how journeys might be a transforming agent in travel narratives, in this case, allowing the traveler to find *her* everything. It is in this ambivalent process of "restlessness of dislocation and the quiet needed for stories" that Gilbert finds space and time for her endeavor of constantly confirm and destabilize the self (Wasserman and Almeida 2009).

Gilbert's *EPL* displays the narrator's identity in an ongoing process insofar as the travel is happening. As affirmed by Smith and Watson, the experiences lived by the narrator are selected and shared by "personal storytelling", this way, it is possible to affirm that many of the events narrated in the book are there for a reason that benefits the writer (Smith and Watson 14). In my opinion, Gilbert chose the right ingredients to tell her story and gain the sympathy of many readers, especially women who relate to the story. However, I also agree with Joshunda Sanders who affirmed that the privilege Gilbert has to accomplish this deed is hold by a minority of women. Privilege is a very delicate issue in the story and I believe that Gilbert embodies it well, especially if compared to the other female characters in the narrative, because they represent the opposite of privilege in any kind, which reminds us of what Pease says about the responsibility of the ones who have privilege, that is to look at the ones who are discriminated or undergo any kind of prejudice.

It is also important to remember that the book was not an incident, something Gilbert decided to do without any previous plan. She wanted to write about her trip and this affirmation is in the book (Gilbert 31). Obviously, the happenings experienced in the trip were unpredictable but, as aforementioned, travel narratives are fictionalized and the writers can show, omit and enhance whatever they want because they are telling a story.

Nevertheless, from my perspective, *EPL* is a book with a potential to engage the reader, who usually sympathizes with that heartbroken woman, who is desperately in need of help. We feel sorry for her and we want to see her overcome all the problems and be happy again. As a

researcher, I see aspects that could have been better explained or depicted, such as the portrait of Armenia, or Wayan for instance. Then, we go back to the theory and understand that Gilbert's life, her narrative, her accounts and they (the other characters) are somehow used for Gilbert's purpose (Youngs 94). Another point that is worth mentioning is my personal impression that Gilbert, many times, behaves as a 'whiny girl' over some things that are not as problematic as she sees, but I also believe that this behavior in the book just indicates her process of learning and evolving. In addition, it is important to highlight that as *Eat, Pray, Love* is a memoir, I focused on the narrator of the book and her trajectory. But I strongly believe the book has many other elements to be analyzed and one of the things that call my attention is about the other female characters mentioned in the story. The book has been adapted into film, which could also be a field of investigation.

Therefore, in conclusion, this study shows that, even though in the beginning of travel writing women had to struggle to affirm their presence and contribution for the genre, this struggle certainly opened space for women to gain autonomy to move. This autonomy, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, provided these women with the possibility of transformation. In the case of *EPL*, the narrator crosses three countries in search of everything that allows her to be free from the social constraints that are commonly attributed to women in her culture. Moreover, besides giving Gilbert this freedom, the trip also allows her to undergo a selftransformation that enables her to reinvent her identity through the traveling process. Although there are many other possibilities for further research, in this study it was possible to perceive that displacements are still a vehicle for transformation, as they were in the past; and that Gilbert's narrative presents travel as a transforming agent, which produces significant changes in her life.

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