

**Reinforcing/Countering the Patriarchal Ideologies and
Sexist Tendencies: A Post –Feminist Reading of Elizabeth
Gilbert’s**

‘Eat, Pray, Love ’.

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Abstract: *The present paper is mainly concerned with the question of women’s empowerment and the many problems that continue to hinder the objective, realistic, balanced, nuanced, un stereotyped, and empowering portrayal of women in today's fiction.*

For this purpose, this paper investigates whether the so-called concept of "women's empowerment" has surely found its place in today's incredibly popular, post- feminist genre of women fiction known as 'Chick lit' or not. Sensing that there is something troubling about these narratives, the researcher seeks to understand whether these narratives can truly offer a way for women to resist the patriarchal structures imposed on their lives; or more precisely speaking, whether they can sincerely provide a platform for women's empowerment, or is it a case of disempowering through empowerment?

By administering an approach that blends Michel Foucault's theory of Power/ Knowledge and Stuart Hall's theory of Representation / Stereotyping, and by conducting a content analysis to an important woman- centered chick lit, Elizabeth Gilbert's 'Eat, Pray, Love', the researcher reaches the conclusion that the incredibly popular afore-mentioned genre is actually a tool of manipulation and a means of both domination and subversion. Regardless of the women - friendly culture and the promising false fantasies that Gilbert's 'Eat, Pray, Love' may offer, the narrative under consideration does limit (not expand) women's options by reinforcing the very regressive gender – based stereotypes and sexist tendencies it claims to break, through a combination of conflicting messages, power dynamics and gender practices in which females are objectified and disempowered.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment – Chick lit – Stereotyping – Power Dynamics – Gender Roles – Post-Feminism – Cultural Studies – Feminist Studies.

The tension between women's increasing awareness of themselves as human beings and men's desire to maintain the patriarchal status quo has long been central to a wide variety of scholarly debates and academic controversies. Though their lives appear relatively liberated and though

they have made great strides in different aspects of life, women – nowadays – are still manipulated by patriarchy in all spheres and cultures, undoubtedly in different ways by prescribing values, norms, gender roles and ethics to keep women in an underprivileged position and retain the male dominance at the top.

This on – going conflict , of course , has generated a lot of reaction from activists, theorists, novelists and dramatists to advocate for the cause of women, goad their empowerment and stir their liberation from the shackles of sexist ideals and stereotyping tendencies. For this purpose, a post - feminist genre of women fiction known as 'Chick lit' has recently appeared, claiming to be engaged in the struggle for a fundamental change in power/gender relations. The practitioners of this incredibly popular genre assume that this genre recognizes the role of women as full and active participants in the development process; offers a way for women to resist the patriarchal values that undervalue their identities, confine their roles to biological duties and constrain their womanhood to their bodies; provides a platform for women's empowerment and extends inspiring images of strong powerful women.

Assessing the credibility and evaluating the potentiality of women's empowerment – that many may see in this incredibly popular genre require that we first reflect upon the internal impediments to exercising women's free choice, the tangible obstacles to its realization as well as consider the objectives, research questions, methodology, rationale, and significance of this paper.

The main objective of the present paper is to consider the incredibly popular Chick lit as a widely disputed and deeply contradictory genre of literature, with the aim of highlighting its embedded limitations and manipulative tactics in relation to cultural standards and feminine subjectivities. By exploring the way by which the female characters are generally represented and gaining insight into the role of power in women's lives, this paper's major objective is to understand whether this genre can provide a platform for women's empowerment, or does it only reflect and possibly reproduce dominant discourses through contradictory constructions of femininity.

To narrow her Chick lit search, the researcher did not only seek to find a literary work that best represents Chick lit as a genre, but that represents women who are seemingly empowered. Moreover, the researcher was keen on looking for a literary work that has achieved a

tremendous commercial success to counter its wide appeal by highlighting and assessing the genre's limitations and shortcomings . Finally, the researcher was eager to select a woman – centered narrative that was written by a woman to show that women have been-nonetheless-severely under represented on both counts-male and female. By restricting the choice, the researcher was finally able to locate "Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India and Indonesia" – a 2006 chick lit by American author Elizabeth Gilbert.

This paper aims to answer the following research questions: First, what are the prevalent stereotypical misconceptions attached to women in the context of many cultures? Second, is there any real progression in the way of presenting women in the contemporary literary productions of these societies? Third, why the 'Happily – Ever – After' notion in modern Chick lits is extremely different from what it looks on the surface? Fourth, show does Gilbert question, challenge, and/or completely construct her own vision of 'women's empowerment'? Fifth, in what ways does the selected chick lit reinforce gender stereotypes, patriarchal ideals and sexist tendencies? And, finally, does the incredibly popular post – feminist genre of women fiction known as 'Chick lit' truly empower women, or is it a way of disempowering through empowerment?

Since Chick lits operate on multiple levels, this paper employs two particularly distinct critical approaches and theoretical lenses to analyze the widely– read, emergent genre and understand its layers before engaging with one of its prominent and popular literary productions . For this purpose, the researcher has drawn on post – feminist studies as her critical framework and has made use of an approach that blends Foucault's theory of Power/Knowledge along with Hall's theory of Representation / Stereotyping, with the aim of deconstructing the ideologies that inspire the text and making salient what this text conceals.

The rationale or the basic underlying reasons behind choosing this area of study is the thought of the genre's immense popularity as a cultural and literary phenomenon. This thought has instigated the researcher to navigate one of its popular and best- selling narratives. Moreover, the researcher felt that there was something troubling about these novels that must be discussed. But what inspired the researcher even more were the rich narrative possibilities and ideological dimensions offered by such experience.

This paper-it is hoped- provides a powerful lens to view contemporary socio-cultural realities of women and the issues they face in their everyday lives. It offers new angles of understanding Post – feminism, women's empowerment, and Chick lit issues, since all of these

issues are still problematic. More importantly, it opens doors to re-thinking and re-configuring future female subjectivities.

Starting with the shackles of sexism and the hegemony of patriarchy, this paper maintains that the struggle for the recognition of women as equal partners dates back to ancient Greece, where women were not allowed to vote, nor allowed on stage. Not only Greece, but also other patriarchal societies have long objectified women as the “other” and have signified them with specific negative traits of passivity, helplessness, submissiveness and dependence. Imprisoned by these male – dominated societies for years, women have long been denoted as the weaker, more unstable sides of humanity, who possess inherent qualities of inferiority and unfortunate set of emotions that require masculine virtues to balance them out. For this purpose, the hegemony of patriarchy has created two ways of keeping women subordinated: The principal of domesticity and the model of beauty.

Oppressed in many areas of life, women are always ultimately subordinated to men. Women in the past were denied to identify themselves as free human beings and had no chance to show up their existence in society. Their main roles were to support men, be placed in the kitchen, take care of children, yearn to surrender and be dependent on a dominant masculine figure. Brought up to think of men as the center of their world, most women, thus, are grown up to believe that they are inferior to men and as such must obey them without question. Therefore, men can think of themselves without women, whereas women cannot think of themselves without men, as they (women) are simply what men define. Bressler discusses this further and adds:

In this masculine world, the feminists declare that it is a man who defines what it means to be human, not a woman. Because a woman is not a man, she has become the 'Other', the not – male. Man is the subject, the one who defines meaning; woman is the object, having her existence defined and determined by the male. The man is, therefore, the significant figure in the male/female relationship while the female is subordinate. (107)

What is shocking is that this problem lays out in the form of behaviour on the part of women – who come to internalize these essentialist ideas, reproduce them, and redirect them towards each other as statements of truth, instead of questioning these tendencies. While these forms of behaviour – i.e. , women's adherence to these social norms and practices – could be said to reflect 'choice', they are also choices which stem from – and serve to reinforce – women's subordinate status, undermine their own wellbeing, restrict their own sexual autonomy, and provide the 'ideological justification' for their objectification through the biological aspect of males sexuality.

Apart from the essentialist views of domesticity engendered through the generations by the dominant discourses of femininity, another way of keeping women subordinated is created through the illusionary powers of beauty and sexiness. Living under the constant evaluation of the male gaze, women are constantly regarded as desired objects and are thus mainly defined by the male characters in terms of their physical appearance, sexiness and beauty. It appears as if the relationship between women's bodies and their selves are always presented within the framework of male, heterosexual sexuality. This means that women are only allowed to be essential and successful as long as they remember their position as visual objects and sexual beings. For men, women are sex – absolute, sex and no less (Beauvoir, XVIT).

With the developments of commercial imagery in an economy based on capitalism, the demand on being beautiful extends to incorporate all women in society (Sichterman , 47). By encouraging the consumption of beauty products and services, these commercial images create the demand on women to groom their bodies and the promise to be beautiful. However, what these images of 'beauty' have actually provided, are the tools for a patriarchal and capitalist society. Deprived of their rights, women, instead, are offered 'beauty' as something to strive for, to feel empowered by and to invest in financially. And, though the images of 'beauty' are often directed at women, they are built – however – to stand the evaluation of men, and by doing so, women are placed in subordinate positions (Bartky, 81).

The patriarchal system seems to have been affecting also the masculine traditional literary canon. Every item in these texts aimed at affirming sexist values, boosting male ego and psychology, re-emphasizing male dominance, situating women outside the representation, negating their struggle for emancipation, and circumscribing their contribution to social development. The

constructions of women's image and experience have never been adequate, for the simple reason that this experience was described, explained, and conceived primarily from the single point of view that is the male's. The over-riding focal thrust of male authors has always been to foreground the mental, physical, psychological, emotional, moral and prurient negative nature of women. There are a few, however, who portray women as talented and capable of achieving great things.

Ever since the early writings of Aristotle, women have been negatively perceived and presented as defective and dangerous beings. Aristotle once said that "the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (Cited in Bressler, 145). Whereas St. Thomas Aquinas was of the view that "a woman is an imperfect man, an incidental being" (Cited in Bressler, 145) for being formed from the rib of Adam ("Genesis 2", 22). Unfortunately, most contemporary male authors are not able to free themselves from this age – old image of women. Their texts have not only adopted Aristotle's demeaning ideas about women but a powerful set of disciplinary practices that reinforce the notion of women as sex objects, docile mothers and wives, and dangerous or trivial creatures. Soheir El -Kalamawy provides an illuminating portrait of the woman in phallogentric texts when she says :

A capricious vamp, a playful and beautiful slave, a she devil imbued with cunning and capable of a thousand artifices, an explosive danger versed in all the arts of deceit and conspiracy, a seductive mistress captivating in her passion. She is as positive and dynamic as Satan and his evil spirits, wherever matters of sex and love are concerned. Women in all the aspects of the role she is made to play, whether it be that of a queen or a slave brought from the market, remains a slave. (Cited in Saadawi, 521)

Though this patriarchal system has successfully caged and confined most women not to go beyond their comfort zones to attain greater heights, yet other women refused to be satisfied with their society – carved out roles and managed to break free from this cage. Seeking to eliminate women's subordination, oppression and inequalities, numerous feminist movements and ideologies have developed over the years

representing different viewpoints and aims. Among the forms of feminism that have aimed to change the existing power relations , a second generation of feminists – springing from the feminist movement of the 1970s – has emerged under the name Post-Feminists. Their approach represents a process of ongoing change within feminist theory and politics. These Post-Feminists encourage women to seek their individualism and to choose their own way of life whether being single women, married women, career women, or anything they want. They manage to clarify for women the powers they exercise daily and to show them the ways these powers can be used to resist sexist domination and exploitation (Turner and Maschi, 151-162).

Post - Feminism does not negate feminism. Its practitioners have only made a shift that makes them different from the past generation of feminists. For the Second Wave Feminists, if women celebrate their femininity, this means that they are associated with passivity, disempowerment and dependence. In becoming feminine -for Feminists – women are thus colonized by patriarchy and become implicated in oppression. Post–Feminists, however, give space for women to celebrate their femininity and gain their power at the same time. What is proposed by Post - Feminists is actually a movement beyond feminism, to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose what they want to be and still gain their femininity (Beck in Mc Robbie, 259).

Regarding empowerment as much more than a relationship of power, domination, or an attempt to direct or control the behavior of others, these Post- Feminists have had an alternative vision of power based on a humanist vision of self–actualization, self-definition, and self-determination. They have tended to understand power not as power-over but as power-to (Wartenberg ,12-17), i.e. , transformative power, aiming at empowering those over whom power is exercised.

Critical of the conception of power in patriarchal cultures, Jean Baker Miller claims that "women's examination of power can bring new understanding to the whole concept of power" (241). Miller suggests that women's perspective of power is different from the masculine conception which is understood as domination. Defining power as the capacity to produce a change, Miller views that women may want to be powerful in ways that simultaneously enhance, rather than diminish, the power of others" (247-248).

A recent phenomenon in the field of social sciences and an essential part of feminist theory, empowerment, thus, is a process of challenging unfavorable power relations; a process of change by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It

means not only extrinsic control but also growing intrinsic capability; greater self- confidence and an inner transformation of one's consciousness (Batliwale, 127-138).

Enabling women to overcome external barriers to accessing resources or changing traditional ideologies, empowerment implies the ability to make choices :To be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choice. The ability to exercise choice can be thought of in terms of three inter – related dimensions : resources, which form the conditions under which choices are made; agency, which is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them; and achievements, which are the outcomes of choices (Kabeer ,13-15). Empowerment thus refers to the expansion of one's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied.

Sensing that Foucault's concept of power fits today's reality, philosophy and literary expression, this paper has thus drawn on Foucault's arguments to develop a more complex analysis of gender and power relations and to move toward a more profound understanding of the often complicated ways by which women's experiences, self-understanding, and capacities are conceived .

Viewing power from a Post–Structural perspective, Michel Foucault endeavors to offer an alternative vision, “a micro-physics of power” (Discipline, 26) by criticizing previous and existing models. Challenging the traditional ways of thinking about power as fundamentally centralized and repressive, Foucault maintains that power in modern societies is primarily productive rather than repressive (Discipline, 194). He contends that social control is achieved not by direct forms of repression and constraint but by means of subtler strategies of normalization - strategies which produce self-regulating, 'normalized' individuals. As Foucault puts it, "power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objectives and rituals of truth" (Discipline, 194). It also produces subjects.

From this Foucauldian perspective, knowledge thus is to be understood as an instrument through which power and authority are exerted. In other words, the individuals' desire to conform to discourses of norms and normality that this knowledge establishes leads individuals to sustain their own oppression voluntarily. In the same way, women's seemingly willing acceptance of and conforming to the various prevailing norms and practices of feminine beauty and attractiveness that promote

their larger disempowerment is a perfect embodiment of Foucault's perspective. By generating skills and competencies that depend on the maintenance of a stereotypical form of feminine identity, these disciplinary practices thus subjugate women and reduce them to docile bodies. By taking hold of women at the level of their bodies, gestures, desires and habits, disciplinary power thus fashions women who 'voluntarily' subject themselves to self-surveillance and self-normalization.

Foucault's genealogies of Power / Knowledge is coined in the term "bio power", a term that refers to the ways in which power is embedded in discourses and norms, and is manifested in the form of minute daily practices, routines, and interactions. By claiming that modern regimes of power operate to produce us as subjects who are both the objects and vehicles of power, Foucault has thus provided a vocabulary that describes the way that knowledge, or more precisely speaking, dominant discourses are constructed to produce, maintain, and internalize power to the advantage of dominant groups in society (Discipline , 28-29).

Foucault's work on power thus suggests that power is strongest when it is able to mask itself : "Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (The History of Sexuality, 86). The manipulation of desire is one mechanism by which power masks itself – by making that which is constraining appear positive and desirable. Moreover, when power meets with resistance, it is not overcome, it simply asserts itself and responds by finding new ways of manifesting itself: "... power can retreat here, re-organize its forces, invest itself elsewhere ... and so the battle continues" (Power/Knowledge , 56) and women's objectification persists.

Believing that the issue of power can never be bracketed from the question of representation, the researcher also draws on Stuart Hall who has taken a more focused approach to the discussion of power through one of its central concepts, namely, stereotyping. Understanding through Hall's approach that representation is always linked with power and that those groups who wield power in a society influence what gets represented through different practices of representation (media, literature, etc.), the researcher argues for a new view to Gilbert's "Eat, Pray, Love" – as one of the most prominent Chick lits – with the aim of showing that an image can have many different meanings and that there is no guarantee that images will work in the way the author thinks they will when he/she creates them.

Evoking Foucault in dissecting the nature of power at length, cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, offers an extended meditation on power. Like Foucault, Hall agrees that power involves far more than direct force, physical violence, economic exploitation, coercion, repression or constraint. Like Foucault, Hall does not think of power in terms of one group having a monopoly of power, simply radiating power downwards on a subordinate group by an exercise of simple domination from above. It includes the dominant and the dominated within its circuit. Hall's discussion of power thus closely parallels Foucault's Power/Knowledge argument : Disciplinary power works by being productive as it produces new truth, new meanings, new discourses, new kinds of knowledge, new objects of knowledge, new practices and institutions (Discipline, 194).

Taking a more focused approach, Hall goes on to examine the nature of Foucault's power in more detail by assuming that power operates in terms of other strategies, namely, a set of representational practices known as stereotyping. To Hall, power is understood in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to mark, to assign, to classify, and to represent someone or something in a certain way within a certain 'regime of representation' (Representation, 237).

Reducing people to a few, simple, and essential characteristics, stereotyping – as a form of representation – exaggerates, simplifies, and fixes them without change or development to eternity. Thus the process of stereotyping reduces, naturalizes and fixes 'differences'. Deploying

a strategy of splitting, stereotyping excludes or expels everything which does not fit - which is different. It divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable. So, another feature of stereotyping is its practice of 'closure' and exclusion. It symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong. Moreover, it tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power, where it classifies people according to the norm and constructs the subordinate or the excluded groups as different or 'other' (Representation, 248).

Stereotyping thus is considered by Hall as a form of power and one aspect of the habit of ruling groups, as it attempts to fashion the whole society according to their own worldview, value system, sensibility and ideology. Thus, Hall's theory of representation indicates that literary texts play a key role in attitude formation as they select information the public receive, and that selection is culturally constructed and ideologically motivated. Approaching representation as the medium or channel through which meanings are produced and circulated, Hall assumes that “objects

and people do not have stable, true meanings, but rather that the meanings are produced by human beings, participants in a culture, who have the power to make things mean or signify something” (Representation, Meaning, and Language, 19).

By affirming that representation does not only mediate the knowledge we consume but also affects this knowledge through fragmenting, negating and stereotyping, Hall thus affirms that representation constructs knowledge. What is helpful about Hall's theory of representation is Hall's invitation to stop thinking about representation in terms of merely representing people or objects but rather to approach representation with an eye toward the relationships, power relations, ideologies, processes, and social structures through which representations are produced, valued and exchanged (Representation, Meaning, and Language,15-30).

A Post-Feminist genre and a highly successful and commercial literary phenomenon, chick lit is a female – oriented form of fiction, a literary genre that is described as being "written by, about, and for women.;" (Genz and Brabon , 73). Originated in the mid-nineties, the term Chick lit was coined by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey De Shell in their edited anthology" Chick lit: Post - Feminist Fiction" published in 1995 (Mazza , 8). Chick lit proved its popularity in the world of literature after the appearance of Helen Fielding's novel 'Bridget Jones's Diary' (1996). Since its publication, Chick lit has generated a lot of academic interest and has been an increasingly growing popular, cultural and commercial phenomenon. As Kate Zernike indicates, the genre has experienced amazing commercial success and has caused a "commercial tsunami" (1).

More associated with female audiences, and well known for having a female lead role, Chick lits typically capture the anxieties of today's transitional, contemporary, cosmopolitan, single, female characters in their 20s and 30s and their everyday struggles with work, home, friendship, family, or love. Chick lits are about women who are often strong - minded, economically - independent, sexually - assertive, well - educated and professionally - successful. Seeking success in the work place and more power in love relationships, these women go through a succession of relationships in an active, though often frustrated, search for emotional satisfaction. Not afraid to make their own choices, these women grow up and figure out who they are and what they want (Gill, R. and Herdieckerhoff, E.).

In considering this genre and its social and cultural implications, the researcher finds it difficult to bypass the recent tremendous critical and popular success of Elizabeth Gilbert's 'Eat, Pray, Love' which has resonated with many women across the globe and has been explicitly tagged as specifically appealing to women.

An international best seller, 'Eat, Pray, Love' was published in 2006, translated into over thirty languages with over 10 million copies sold world - wide, and a Hollywood film adaptation – starring Julia Roberts – that grossed nearly \$200 million worldwide. Praised as everyday women's guide to self - discovery, self-insight, self-affirmation, and self-empowerment, Gilbert's personal narrative depicts how female identities are confronted and-supposedly- reconstructed in post - modern society, how framing and interpretation of women's crisis influence their different choices of action, and how women are represented –assumingly- with new possibilities for recreating their own identities and rebooting their ways of thinking.

'Eat, Pray, Love' details Gilbert's decision to leave an unsatisfying marriage and embark on an international year – long journey of self – actualization. Having everything a modern woman is supposed to have – a husband, a house, and an incredibly successful writing career – yet aside from all the pleasures she already have and instead of feeling happy and fulfilled, she finds herself consumed by panic, loss and confusion. Finding herself stuck in an unhappy eight - year marriage, and realizing that change is needed, Liz files for her divorce from her nice husband, Stephen, without giving him a chance, without giving him an explanation, and with no real indication of emotional stress on her part.

Now divorced and at cross roads, Liz moves on to another much younger ambitious guy, David. However, this new infatuation dies off because of David's selfishness and ignorance of her. So, once again, Liz's love relationship fails, and ends in sickening heart break. Thus, Liz makes a decision to step out of her comfort zone, to risk everything, and embark on a journey around the world that becomes a travel quest for self-discovery and self-empowerment.

Looking for a way to put her life back together, Liz hurls to Italy, India and Indonesia to recover. Recovering, for Liz, takes a few different turns. In Italy, it means discovering the pleasure of eating; in India, it means finding spiritual clarity. In the Indonesian island of Bali, it means balancing life through attaining inner peace and finding true love. Thus,

Liz's two failed relationships incite her self-exploration, and by the end of the story, she vows to spend her life with another man!

Reading Gilbert's 'Eat, Pray, Love' from the standpoint of Feminism, one sees it as one of those women's empowerment Chick lits that demonstrate that women sometimes have to take a step – or a leap – out of their comfort zones to figure out who they are and what they want. Living in a patriarchal culture whose social norms do encourage women to cultivate a personality of selflessness and to sublimate their own needs to attend to the needs of others, Liz embraces a feminist notion of empowerment and rebellion by not conforming to these patriarchal social norms and expectations, by deciding to go abroad for a year, and by becoming the author of her own narrative. Liz once said :

When I get lonely these days, I think: So BE lonely, Liz. Learn your way around loneliness. Make a map of it. Sit with it, for once in your life. Welcome to the human experience. But never again use another person's body or emotions as a scratching post for your unfulfilled yearnings.
(Gilbert, 68)

Struggling so greatly to live a life defined by her own desires, and coming to realize a large impediment in her relationships with men, Liz does acknowledge the risks posed to her in refusing to follow the "universally" recognized paths for women – marriage and motherhood – but also she does illustrate the rewards in questioning this path, noting that it "may bring a far more interesting existence to a woman," even if it will be "more perilous "(95). Liz thus declares:"I could use a little break from this cycle, to give myself some space to discover what I look like and talk like when I'm not trying to merge with someone" (65-66).

From the outset of the narrative, it is clear that Liz is a restless female, in the midst or aftermath of existential crisis. "Whose life am I living in? Who am I married to? Whose values are these? Whose body is this?" (4) This crisis is often knotted in the restraints of domestic duty:

I was supposed to want to have a baby. My husband and I ... had built our entire life around the common expectation that after the doddering old age of thirty ... I would have grown weary of travelling and would be happy to live in a big, busy house

hold full of children and home - made quilts, with a garden in the back yard and cozy stew bubbling on the stove pot (19)

The narrative's primary objective thus is to establish Liz's sense of discontent. Beginning to question the performative roles that have defined her, Liz tells the reader: "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 "(10). She explains that she is tired of being "the primary bread winner, the house keeper, the social coordinator, the dog-walker, the wife and the soon – to – be – mother "(11). She further illustrates: "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? (11)"

These questions, prompted by the dissolution of her failed, childless marriage, become the catalyst for Liz to attain empowerment, without having to fulfill society's or other people's expectations:

Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive for it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it. You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings. And once you have achieved a state of happiness, you must never become lax about maintaining it. You must make a mighty effort to keep swimming upward into the happiness forever, to stay afloat on top of it. (76)

For this reason, Liz turns outward to the possibilities presented to her by other people, religions, and cultures, along her journey – all which ironically prompt her to look inward to find the answers. Through this interaction with the native cultures, especially those of India and Bali, along with her inward journey, Liz – seemingly – comes to reframe the exigence of her identity crisis, demonstrates her personal definition of happiness, and eventually reconstructs an identity-as she assumes- framed within the context of spiritual empowerment.

In this way, Gilbert – branding herself a woman on the brink of becoming a self-governing individual – invites other middle aged women to reflect on the 'Good Life Fantasy', on the normative family unit as an unfulfilling imposition on women's agency as individuals. In this sense,

Gilbert aims at demonstrating that the normative domestic roles of women are actually obstacles to women's flourishing. Travel, thus, is Gilbert's vehicle for what she believes is her search for spiritual empowerment.

Certainly on the surface, Gilbert's "Eat, Pray, Love" seems to support women's empowerment and seems to lead the female readers to the development of their critical consciousness, their awareness of their own desires, and their realization of the larger social forces that seek to rob them of their capacity to live out those desires. Problematically however, Gilbert's explicit messages of liberation, empowerment and self-rescue have actually offered a significant challenge to feminism by prompting the opposite of what Chick lits claim to promote.

Reflecting an inversion of its own explicitly expressed value system, ' Eat, Pray, Love ' moves women away from political, economic and emotional agency by promoting materialism and dependency masked as empowerment. Newly single, though not for long, Gilbert brands herself as a woman on the brink of becoming a self-governing individual. Her narrative – which emphasizes a desire for personal growth and balance – employs travel as the register of this self-realization. Thus, heroically, Liz brushes herself off from the imposition of selflessness, refuses to succumb to wifedom, enjoys pampering herself, and embarks on a travel adventure that is based on undermining the decisions she has made in the past, in an attempt to facilitate activism, empowerment, and change in the future. Then, she goes onto establishing an explicit reason for travelling and for visiting each country –Italy (to explore the art of pleasure), India (to explore the art of devotion) and Indonesia (to learn the art of balancing both). "It was only later," Gilbert writes, "after admitting this dream, that I noticed the happy coincidence that all these countries began with the letter I"(31). Liz's journey thus comes to represent that of a woman reclaiming her "right" to be selfish. As such, Gilbert's text supports the production of the female neo liberal subject in which she is "not a citizen with claims on the state but a self – enterprising citizen – subject who is obligated to become an 'entrepreneur' of himself or herself " (Cited in Marchand and Runyan ,4). Thus, the female neo liberal spiritual subject becomes solely responsible for "create [ing] her own circumstances by thinking positive thoughts and making good choices" regardless of the material conditions in which she lives (Peck ,220s). Thus , by focusing on strategies to pamper herself, Gilbert reconfigures the feminist value of empowerment to convert gender inequality to an individual affair.

Moreover, by explicitly embedding the experience of self-empowerment within the logic of consumption, Gilbert thus subtly encourages females to pursue their spiritual empowerment via consumer practices, via the act of spending– a fantasy which the market place is eager to accommodate. Liz's admissions that "I want to go to a yoga class," or "I want to buy myself an new pencil box" (23) are rendered not as fairly straight forward consumerism, but as very real personal victories and a viable method of rebelling against the oppressive norms of this patriarchal society.

Justifying Liz's consumer practices by their supposedly healthy goals – acceptance, self-love, and the ability to heal past psychic wounds, Gilbert assumes the work of feminism is largely done. It is as if what Gilbert means by 'empowerment' is the females' power to spend their own money. The trick this Chick lit offers is that while the protagonist may not actually be living in a world in which gender justice prevails; through consumption , Liz believes herself to be combating her society's social forces and breaking its patriarchal patterns. Liz fails to see these realities as her gaze is distracted by her pursuit of self-discovery and self-empowerment.

Using spending beyond the reach of average women to demonstrate Liz's empowerment, this text narrative thus doesn't provide much hope to those women who can't afford the same tour as the main character – eating out every meal in Italy, renting a glorious bungalow, meditating in exotic places, and having exotic romantic interludes. Ultimately this paper 's question is: What would have been the fate of the protagonist if she didn't already have those financial resources to escape for a year ? 'Eat, Pray, Love' seems to say that in order to be strong , empowered and happy, you ought to have money!

Regarding the novel's finale, it is the worst counter blow of all. While 'Eat, Pray, Love ' is intended to be a Chick lit about self – empowerment, it ends with the most appallingly patriarchal solution: Men save women! Gilbert makes thus a point of labouring toward self-worth and emotional independence, only to solve all her problems with a new man! Even the Brazilian lover – "the love that moves the sun and the other stars"(48) - comes off as part of the consumable package .Thus Liz , unconsciously , reinforces one of the most sexist , patriarchal ideals : Women cannot think of themselves without men .

Investigating Gilbert's "Eat, Pray, Love" from Foucault's perspective, the present paper discerns that a great part of this narrative is concerned with training Liz through the imposition of constraints, prohibitions and obligations. The beginning of the novel sets the tone of this spell of obligation. Placed in a complex power relation owing to her complacent acceptance of those regressive patriarchal absolutes that remain unchanged across time and circumstance, Liz is framed, defined, regulated, restrained, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of the modern structures of power – the very structures of power through which her emancipation is sought. As a disadvantaged citizen, Liz is seen as socialized into a 'false' view of her own interests – a view which serves the interests of those who are powerful. So, the power of the patriarchal belief system has made Liz – like any other woman – socialized into accepting values, beliefs, and gender roles which constrain her opportunities. Moreover, the dominance of this system's discourse has made Liz's inherent patriarchal ideals virtually unthinkable, and her way of viewing the world, and of acting normal and right, while alternatives become deviant and wrong.

Furthermore , Liz's social objectification and mind colonization are exercised without Liz's intention. They work through Liz, rather on, Liz herself. For even at the time Liz resists by actively challenging male authority, power and ideological socialization re - assert themselves through the ideals of femininity that render Liz docile, or even incapacitated. In other words, Liz is basically in a passive constrained position even at the moment she initiates an active self-formation. Evoking Foucault's notion of power, this Chick lit – in this mode of 'objectification' – has made Liz's self-formation takes place through a variety of everyday practices on Liz's own body, soul, thoughts, and conduct. These cunning practices – fashioning Liz and operating in a capillary fashion - subtly make her subject herself to self-surveillance and self-normalization, while actually entailing a false process of self-understanding and self-empowerment. Rather than experiencing this as repression, Liz sees it as liberating, an expression of her own will, self - control, and self-mastery.

Investigating Gilbert's "Eat, Pray, Love" from Hall's perspective, the present paper holds the idea that Gilbert's message is unconsciously connected with the way that power operates in any representation. In other words, every time we see Liz we see the way in which stereotyping is exactly an attempt to fix .Through Liz we see how a stereotype functions. Our picture of Liz is thus built up out of the information we

accumulate from Gilbert's positioning her within the few, simple, essential women characteristics, which are represented as fixed by nature. What Gilbert is, unconsciously, doing is a powerful way of circulating a very limited range of definitions of who Liz (as a woman) can be, of what she can do, what her possibilities in life are, and what the nature of constraints on her is. In accordance with Hall's stereotyping theory, Gilbert's representation of Liz is producing knowledge; what we know about Liz is how we see her represented. What Gilbert has actually done is that she has unconsciously reduced and naturalized the representation of Liz to the point where we – as readers or viewers – come to accept this representation as just part of the real and natural worlds, and cannot see that anybody ever produced it. It seems to be just what Liz is. It's just how she looks; that is just what reality is.

An all pervasive system, patriarchy – over the centuries and since primitive times – has conditioned the way in which men and women live and relate to each other. This was done through a series of masculinist and sexist discourses and institutions that consistently reduce women's sphere of action and limit their involvement in social affairs. On the other hand, Chick lits are chief amongst the new genres that have claimed to break conventional formulas of masculinity and traditional constructions of femininity through expanding women's options, offering new versions of heterosexual relations, and appropriating innovative feminist terms of female empowerment.

Even though this genre has been celebrated and marketed as a Post - Feminist genre emerging to counter the dominant objectified image of women in male authored work, the present paper maintains that such rhetoric of agency and individualism is still haunted by the ghost of patriarchy, and still cannot provide an agenda to rely on in a context in which gender equality is not yet prevalent. Promoting the opposite of what they claim to promote, assimilating the same patriarchal ideologies they contend to reject, and reinforcing the same sexist practices they avow to subvert, Chick lits have instigated the researcher to tap into their emotional capital and familiarity and subvert the hidden subtext of one of its most prominent narratives, i.e., 'Eat, Pray, Love'. The researcher's aim is to demonstrate that Chick lits are not the 'all cure' that their earlier practitioners hoped they would, and to unravel their ambiguous ideological implications and contradictory messages by adopting two distinct approaches: Michel Foucault's theory of Power/Knowledge and Stuart Hall's theory of Stereotyping / Representation.

A final look at Gilbert's 'Eat, Pray, Love' clearly illustrates several of Foucault's key points: Power operates through self-discipline and self-surveillance, constructing an illusory experience of empowerment and resistance, and thereby hiding its constraining nature. It is true that Liz succeeds in one front, but she merely substitutes a new form of power for an old one. Moreover, citing Hall's outlook, the researcher maintains that there is something radically wrong with the way Liz is handled by and represented in this Chick lit. Liz appeared in objectifying and stereotyping positions, despite liberal assumptions and empowering premises. Gilbert's representation of Liz is thus used to assign meaning to what is being shown or presented. The way that Gilbert's representation of Liz is constructed helps in distorting and defining the meaning we – as readers or audience – should give to what happened in real life.

Though initially reinforcing the idea of choice by making her protagonist adopt an alternative life style that does not conform to the dictates of the traditional, patriarchal ideologies, Gilbert eventually internalizes the same patriarchal discourses by propagating the all – pervasive idea that being in a relationship (whether love or marriage) is the most suitable option for women. Although Liz demonstrates, throughout, her negative attitude towards marriage; and in spite of the many aspiring images of empowerment that Liz's travel might have brought with it; the prevailing idea, at the end, is that getting married is

a positive step . Reaching the end of the story, Liz becomes convinced that family and marriage are the greatest achievements in life, as they provide further security, stability and satisfaction than any other alternatives. Liz's quest – at the end – thus invalidates any possible discourses of independence or empowerment during the course of the narrative, and jeopardies all criticism that Liz could have exercised over patriarchy in this story.

Another issue that contributes to the reinforcement of patriarchal ideologies in 'Eat, Pray, Love' is Gilbert's depiction of women's empowerment and agency as a purchasing power, and their identity as being intimately linked to consumer capitalism, while lessening women's need for social change to improve their status. What is devastating is that Liz's journey has become part of the fierce capitalist industry that's marketed specifically toward women. By managing to convince women that the pursuit of self- fulfillment via consumption and spending is akin to exercising empowerment, and by selling her exotic travel experience as a means to wellness, Gilbert thus simply channels consumerism through false empowerment. Rather than offering a female model to aspire to through consistent attainment of progressive, realistic goals, Gilbert's

'Eat, Pray, Love' terrorizes its consumers or trusting women readers with the implication that self-improvement and self-empowerment are demonstrated by 'works' of spending. The arresting thing is that the travel's hidden subtext and over whelming message seem to say that women are inherently flawed, and in order for them to be happy, strong and empowered, they have to have money, go on a holiday for a year, and spend a great deal of money.

Worst of all, the Chick lit under consideration begins and ends with a man. At the beginning, Liz's failed relationship instigates her self-exploration; by the end, she pledges to spend her life with yet another man! By rewarding real-life women with a happy ending, Gilbert thus encourages them to follow Liz's example or to adopt the "ethos" of the depicted experience. This Gilbert has done through conveying the message that women are happier and their salvation is guaranteed when they yield to traditional, patriarchal way of thinking – by means of marriage. Gilbert simply suggests that after Liz's risk-taking, rule-breaking, and soul-searching, man is the reward! This notion of 'happily – ever – after' suggests that no matter what Liz accomplishes personally or professionally, she alone is not enough. A woman needs a man to be happy. And, the stereotypical notion of the 'happily – ever – after' wouldn't be complete without both.

To conclude, while many Post – Feminists celebrate the empowering potentials they see in Chick lits, the present paper maintains that the Chick lit under consideration – considered one of its most successful and wide appealing Chick lits – is not a viable answer to the concerns of most women's lives, and acts as though it leads no - where. Failing women's expectations, most Chick lits' hidden subtexts, thus, unconsciously reinforce the very regressive gender – based stereotypes, defend the traditional status quo, and perpetuate the same sexist tendencies they claim to break. By viewing men as a means for producing happiness and as a tool of accessing security and fulfillment, and by assuming that the male gaze is still the main focus of the construction of the female character, Chick lits thus deliver many conflicting messages, implicit contradictions and false fantasies. Eventually, by providing a combination of power dynamics and gender practices in which women are disempowered and objectified; and by constructing a new gender regime that celebrates women's freedom and choice but that often means a return to traditional gender roles, Chick lits thus are still rooted in the long – standing patriarchal way of thinking and empower women

throughout –only to disempower them at the end! Hence, it is high time we demand that truer narratives become inspiring – and, dare we say it, empowering.

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