

## A Journey from Lost to Found, a Reading of Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love* and Barbara McNally's *Unbridled*.

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the theme of self-discovery in the memoirs: *Wild* (2012) by Cheryl Strayed, *Eat Pray Love* (2006) by Elizabeth Gilbert and *Unbridled* (2013) by Barbara McNally respectively. The female protagonists of these novels i.e. Cheryl, Liz and Barbara having faced psychological traumas take upon a series of adventure be it a Pacific Crest Trail or visit to different countries in order to restore their stupor lives. The psychological crisis in their personal lives leaves them shattered. Therefore, they decide to travel in order to find themselves and their identity. In due process, they undergo the process of individuation which gives them an identity of their own. They completely reject the stereotypical notion of the society of hanging into a broken marriage and transgress into a world of freedom. This world provides them a divine strength and happiness from which they were bereft for quite a long time. The journey to their self-discovery has not been an easy one but they remain stubborn to their goals. The quest for a new identity makes them violate their gendered identity.

**Keywords :** Gender, Identity ,Self, Society, Women

### Introduction

The first memoir, *Wild* (2012) is authored by Cheryl Strayed. In her novel, Cheryl in the first few lines of the prologue said, "The trees were tall, but I was taller". This marks her happiness and her undaunted spirit to conquer the impossible and challenge her own potentials. She called her world as the Pacific Crest Trail. Her decision of becoming "solo wilderness trekker" had many latent observations. She was tired of her life as a wife, an adulterous, an ambitious overachiever, a drug addict and as a woman with multiple sex partners. She longed for something new and adventurous. Mentioning "how loose she was in her world" Cheryl reveals herself as an "actual stray".

The second memoir, *Eat Pray Love* (2006) is written by Elizabeth Gilbert . In the novel, she tracks her journey in finding peace as well as rediscovering herself. She loses interest in her life and hence heads for a divorce. She decides to move out of her comfort zone and risk everything only to travel across Italy, India and Bali. Her trip to Italy made her realize the importance of friendship. She travelled , learned and encountered many incidents which

left some lasting impressions in her mind .She reanalyzes her life and her take on relationships. The visit to India brought in her a transcendentalist view about life.

The third memoir, *Unbridled* (2013) is authored by Barbara McNally. Her novel *Unbridled* is her first attempt into the world of writing. Her main motivate behind her foundation is to liberate women from troubled relationships and other problems. She speaks about her marriage to her lover. She has the perfect life with her husband and two daughters. Yet she couldn't make her marriage survive. Therefore, she follows the footsteps of her adventurous grandmother i.e. Grandma Pat and sets off to explore herself through a journey to find her roots. Her journey from Ireland to Jamaica makes her experience the 'unbridled freedom' for which she was longing for a long period of time. Thus, the memoir gives us the notion of the spontaneous freedom which she acquires finally at the end of her journey.

In the considered novels, the basic area of interest lies in the liberation of woman from the social constraints and let them live freely. The protagonists of the novels rediscover life in them after a series of adventurous journeys

which they undertake. Initially they pay heavily due to their personal losses. Disturbed childhood, failed marriage, adultery, infidelity, death, oppression and sexual promiscuity are the certain reasons which led them to live a life of anonymity. Like other women they too submit to the basic American Dream but after few years, they realize their missing part. These three women represent the troubled lives of any quintessential oppressed woman who loves life but under the weight of the wedding bands their dreams crumbles like a cookie. The paper highlights the process how these women discovers themselves by going against the societal rules. The only connecting link between the three women is travel. It is the sole medium which connects their stories and explores the hidden ones in them.

### Discussion

The quest for self discovery in women with reference to the characters –Cheryl, Liz and Barbara is elaborated. The paper discusses the events as a result of which these women chose the path of self-discovery and sets on their journeys respectively. The hunger for freedom and identity makes them search for their roots. The implicit idea lies in the phenomena of ‘individuation’ which takes place in their lives. The sudden realization of the ‘self’ and the emergence of the ‘new woman’ who can take up a solo journey is one of the remarkable things to notice in the memoirs. The identity crisis and the breakdown of their emotions are certain areas which have been explored in this chapter with instances from the memoirs.

The theory of Travel as a medium of self-discovery is discussed. It is evident from the memoirs how the three protagonists undertake solo-journeys to their destinations respectively and explores the places in search of their lost identity. This study focuses on the fact how travel become a symbolic representation in the course of their self-discovery. The characters travel to different places and finds solace according to their own perception. Their view regarding the choice of place differs from each other but their motive remains the same. One finds solace in praying and the other in dancing. Similarly, the third one finds solace in trekking. These are the ways by which the protagonists find themselves through their journeys.

In a nutshell, they take travel as a therapy to recover from the traumas. In relation to this

travel therapy, memory plays a very noteworthy role in sculpting their memoirs. For psychologists, the memory goes through three stages while processing any data/information. They are ordered as ‘Encoding’, ‘Storage’ and ‘Retrieval’. Similarly the protagonists also encompass the same criteria. They travel, experience and scrutinize. A parallel can be drawn to their past too from which they escaped in order to travel along and form their identity. Carl Gustav Jung, the famous psychologist expressed the phenomenon of becoming aware of oneself and the way to discover one’s inner self and soul as the Individuation Process. Although the process looks lucid but the labyrinth beneath the actual meaning demands a better understanding of a person. For example: all human beings during their life ask one intriguing question to oneself i.e. who am I? It is difficult to find an answer to it but Carl Jung’s individuation has clear answer to it. On the first hand, he introduces us to the term the ego which definitely point towards “Me” or “I”. It is the initiation of realization/consciousness and it manages to distinguish one from the other. It provides the person with an identity of her own. It makes her aware of her own capabilities. This identity would help her to represent herself in the society as an individual. It is completely a psychological process and gives one the confidence to stand aloof. It makes one believe of her uniqueness. Considering the novels, the three women characters have the same problem. They failed to identify themselves among others. Her internal turmoil receives a voice only when Ketut (the medicine man of Bali) says referring to the human androgynous figure:

To find the balance you want.  
This is what you must become.  
You must keep your feet  
grounded so firmly on the earth  
that it’s like you have four feet  
instead of two. That way you  
can stay in the world. But you  
must stop looking at the world  
through your head. You must  
look through you heart. That  
way you will know God.(28)

With this he ignited the passion in Liz of *Eat, Pray, Love*. His reference to the androgynous figure gives us the notion that he wished for the empowerment of Liz. She possesses the power to discover herself as the wanderlust. Ketut’s advice to Liz that she is a world traveler makes

her to rethink about her present life. No doubt she has everything but the curiosity of getting better and finding herself made her follow her dream. Liz on one hand is said to be a person looking for spiritual solace for which she undergoes a series of event such as divorce, displacement. On deciding over her choice of place for a period of one year she says:

It was more that I wanted to thoroughly explore one aspect of myself set against the backdrop of each country in a place that has traditionally done that one thing very well. (31)

She aspires for transcendence. This function has the capacity to amalgamate the opposite propensities of the personality. The goal of transcendence is the apprehension of all facets of the personality as they were fundamentally obscured in the one's center, and the growth of the potential unity. The transcendence is the means to grasp the unity of the archetype of the Self. Self-transcendence is the termination of the self-actualized individual into the "whole." 'Whole' in this case refers to the collective consciousness which embraces Divine Consciousness which draws a reference towards the almighty. It is the "Awakening" or 'Enlightenment' process described in many religions. This phenomenon is not actually the individual realizing that exist within the whole, but the individual dissolving of "self" and becoming one with the 'whole'.

Similarly in the second novel *Wild* (2012) by Cheryl Strayed, the protagonist Cheryl faces similar situation. In her life the process of individuation begins with becoming conscious of the Persona. The mask which we adore everyday and present ourselves. And gradually, we become aware of our repressed self under the various norms. She says:

At which point, at long last, there was the actual doing it, quickly followed by the grim realization of what it meant to do it, followed by the decision to quit doing it because doing it was absurd and pointless and ridiculously difficult and far more than I expected doing it would be and I was profoundly unprepared to it. (9)

She falls in love with the silence and the absence. She says:

The silence was tremendous. The absence felt like a weight this is what I came for, I thought. This is what I got. I was a pebble. I was a leaf. I was the jagged branch of a tree. I was nothing to them and they were something to me. (83)

This can be related to Carl Jung's personal unconscious. The memories related to personal unconscious can be evoked in one's life. Sometimes unintentional associations can focus the underlying meaning in it. Likewise, some of her characteristics are clear in the memoir. They express the repressed self which Cheryl has fostered in her. She says:

I'd never been a girl forever, after all, familiar with and reliant upon the powers my very girlness granted me. Suppressing those powers gave me a gloomy tinge in the gut. Being one of the guys meant I couldn't go on being the woman I'd become expert at being among men. (111)

Cheryl's detachment with everything is a resultant of the traumas. According to Jung, the personal conscious only belongs to you. It is the anthology of subliminal perceptions, repressed or forgotten memories, wishes, and emotions in an individual. therefore we can conclude that through all sorts of problems Cheryl manages to find her "Self". The self is the individual's voice. It is what we are in reality. The Self includes the ego, the conscious and the unconscious.

In the third novel *Unbridled* (2013) by Barbara McNally, she communicates to the readers about her journey which helps her to understand herself better and explore her memory better. Her memoir envelops her multi-roles as a wife to a solo traveler. Her role as a home-maker repressed her wishes. Barbara often referred herself as Barbie inside the house. Since her childhood she has been oppressed and has been the victim to the society. Psychoanalytic feminists explain women's oppression as rooted within psychic structures and reinforced by the continual repetition or reiteration of relational dynamics formed in infancy and childhood. Because of these deeply engrained

patterns, psychoanalytic feminists wanted to alter the experiences of early childhood and family relations, as well as women's oppression as rooted within psychic structures and reinforced by the continual repetition or reiteration of relational dynamics formed in infancy and childhood. Because of these deeply engrained patterns, psychoanalytic feminists wanted to alter the experiences of early childhood and family relations, as well as linguistic patterns that produce and reinforce masculinity and femininity. Critical of Freudian and neo-Freudian notions of women as biologically, psychically, and morally inferior to men, psychoanalytic feminists addressed political and social factors affecting the development of male and female subjects. Like radical feminists, they saw as key issues sexual difference and women's "otherness" in relation to men. Similarly, Barbara mentions about her vulnerability in the memoir:

I was trapped in a cage of my own making. It was up to me to find my way out of the mess. The door had slammed shut on the life. I'd once known, I had no idea what it was going to look like on the other side. (14)

Her discovery of her "self" and the "totality of her- self" which point towards the quest in her to rediscover herself is one of the major issue of her memoir. Precisely, she never gets aware of her "being" as she was the dominated one. The patriarchal pressure always asks her to keep quiet but the divorce changes her opinion about her marriage. She later on associates it with a cage, a box where she was kept as a victim. Individuation in her life starts at a point where can start a new life. Barbara has never been alone since her marriage but the sudden coldness, isolation restart her life as an individual with a new identity. The answer to her question who am I? is rhetoric.

Barbara, Liz and Cheryl portray the image of the "new woman" who transgresses the societal boundaries and seeks freedom. They stand as an individual by the end of their memoirs with new identities. Feminist writers from Mary Wollstonecraft onwards have sketched the way in which dominant discourses in society stimulate norms in relation to which subjects

regulate their own bodies and those of others. "Our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the prevailing historical forms of ... masculinity and femininity". These women too face the same woes and later on goes for transcendence. Their ego and their self realization compel them to move forward in live and experience the world as solo travelers. It takes a lot of patience to veil the pain and emerge as a strong woman who has the strength to stand for herself. The persona they endorsed leads them nowhere but their inner voice forces them to go for self discovery. The society even abnegated their roles. Therefore, they had to go for introspection, exploration and discover the freedom which they were bereft off in their lives. Their respective journeys help them to retain themselves from getting lost. They experienced, felt and learned better things. They tried to obliterate the prevalent norms and establish themselves.

## CONCLUSION

Cheryl, Liz and Barbara portray the image of the new woman who manages to cross all hurdles in order to revive themselves. It is evident from their memoirs that they lived the perfect American Dream but despite of all material happiness they find a lack in them. They were controlled by the society and kept in cages. The self absorbed society in which they dwell is stacked with the critical issues of burdening a woman with lots of responsibilities under which her own image fails to rise. Each of the considered novels have different story to speak although the finally goal is self discovery.

In a nutshell, the theme of self-discovery is evident in the three memoirs. The freedom to live which these writers seek in their journey makes them realize their worth. They liberate themselves from all social constraints and emerge as the 'independent woman'. The urge for individuality and introspection is further enhanced in their memoirs. The soul seeking journey makes them explore themselves in tranquility. They meet, explore, travel and learn. The impulsive liberation of these writers from the cocoons and hold their identities in the world raises the concept of the new woman. This colossal idea of solo travelling, intruding into new places, experiencing love, reminiscing

past and then changing oneself for a better life is a worthy assignment one can partake in her life. Especially for a woman to liberate herself into a self discovery mission and taking decisions alone challenges the stereotyped notion of the concept of woman. And these women set examples to the world by experiencing life as in marriage, children and then releasing them from the same. But if we compare their journey towards self discovery in one of the most difficult task they commence in their lives.

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