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Eat Pray Love: consumerism is not empowerment

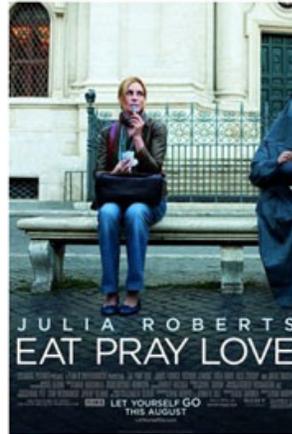
By selling her travel experience as a path to wellness, Elizabeth Gilbert's trip becomes part of the predatory self-help industry, marketed specifically toward women, argues Taraneh Ghajar Jerven

Eat Pray Love, the film adaption of bestselling author Elizabeth Gilbert's post-divorce quest for enlightenment, has bored critics and spurred misogynistic diatribes about self-obsessed women. Some feminists have leapt to defend it. Others find the film's message damaging to women.

"Sit, watch, groan. Yawn, fidget, stretch. Eat Snickers, pray for end of dire film about Julia Roberts' emotional growth, love the fact it can't last forever," [said Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian*](#).

BBC film critic Mark Kermode was even less kind. "An over-privileged woman learns that learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all," he blogged, sarcastically of course.

But since when is self-obsession banned from cinema? As a young feminist, it seems to me that mid-life crises are amusing or fascinating if they happen to men, like John Cusack in *Hot Tub*



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But since when is self-obsession banned from cinema? As a young feminist, it seems to me that mid-life crises are amusing or fascinating if they happen to men, like John Cusack in *Hot Tub Time Machine*, Kevin Spacey in *American Beauty*, not to mention most Woody Allen films. By contrast, a crisis is intolerable from Gilbert, even when banished to the chick flick category. And there's no question that the *Eat Pray Love* audience is predominantly female, except for the bored-stiff male film critics.

Eat Pray Love successfully commoditised the people Gilbert engaged with, along with the exotic backdrops. That being said, *Eat Pray Love*'s unfortunate and overwhelming message is that women are inherently flawed, a problem that can only be solved by spending a great deal of money on external help. By buying help, one can obtain self-discovery. Only when you have purchased this commodity, self-discovery, you can like yourself *and* get a man.

Julia Roberts plays Elizabeth Gilbert, a 40-something successful writer, who divorces her husband and embarks on a year-long travel quest. Gilbert is after enlightenment and recovery. She's a woman looking for a way to put her life back together. Leaving behind a country house, a Manhattan apartment and a sexy rebound boyfriend, played by James Franco, Gilbert zips off to Italy, India and Indonesia, in that order. Recovery, for Gilbert, takes a few different turns. In Italy, it means inhaling pasta: eat. In India, recovery is wolfing down lentils, chanting, and convincing a 16-year-old Indian girl that she has a feeling that the girl's impending arranged marriage will be great: eat, pray... meddle?

When Gilbert moves on to Bali, recovery is briefly listening to a toothless guru's sound bites about happiness. But very soon after, Gilbert ditches the guru to take solace in Javier Bardem's embrace: love. While many can easily identify with the need to rebuild after divorce, or disillusionment with standard life goals, in *Eat Pray Love*, Gilbert's solution to these common problems is disingenuous consumerism marketed as empowerment.

When one woman is financially able to use travel as a way to heal, it's a harmless personal choice. When Gilbert sells her exotic travel experience as a route to wellness, her trip becomes part of the predatory self-help industry that's marketed specifically toward women.

"Eat. Pray. Fall in love with Micato Safaris' Inspirational India Tour". Price tag: £12,500

Eat Pray Love skips mentioning that Gilbert can frolic around the world, despite a crippling divorce settlement, because of a fat book advance. In fact, the film's omission of money makes the money question pop: why is self-discovery so expensive?

According to *Eat Pray Love*, empowerment for women is the power to spend on themselves. This film is neither the first nor the last vehicle for this message. The *Sex and the City* films are another recent example of women who use spending, beyond the reach of average women, to demonstrate their empowerment - from Manolos to botox.

Feminist author Susan Douglas has highlighted the self-help and consumerism myth in reference to Oprah, who demands women turn with-in, find flaws and then purchase material things to fix themselves. Oprah encourages women to buy expensive organic groceries, bath products and home luxury items. Me-time via consumerism is the Oprah version of self-help and fittingly Oprah played a key role in marketing the book and the film.

The spending legacy for *Eat Pray Love* is already extensive. Along with seeing the film and buying the book, women can purchase jewellery like an "Eat Pray Love 109 wishes prayer turquoise bead necklace" (£96 or \$152), and a range called I Deserve Something Beautiful, which includes necklaces in the shape of lotus petals, and even an "Eat Pray Love meditate sterling silver om bead necklace". According to the spokesman for the Dogeared jewellery, the company that makes the line, these products: "Relate to the theme of a woman's journey for self-fulfilment and happiness."

Better still, you can spend a year travelling, which as espoused by Gilbert, is a necessity for finding yourself. A work-free year can cost anywhere from £20,000 and up, for the cost of living alone. Don't bother planning it yourself. Lonely Planet is *Eat Pray Love's* [official partner travel partner](#).

Elizabeth Gilbert looks to others to tell her what is wrong with her and how to fix it. It takes enrolling in Italian language school, booking a guru in India, and then hiring a Balinese guru, before Gilbert starts to feel fixed

Since Gilbert's book came out, Rome has had an influx of female tourists who are following in her footsteps, stopping by the San Crispino gelato shop she frequented. In India, although Gilbert's ashram is no longer accepting devotees, there are a number of new tourist options like "Eat. Pray. Fall in love with Micato Safaris' Inspirational India Tour". Price tag: £12,500. The film release has only exacerbated the tourist trend according to the New York Post article "Eat pray zilch".

You can also spend money on Ketut, Gilbert's spiritual advisor in Bali, who is now swamped with Western women seeking advice. *Eat Pray Love* successfully commoditised the people Gilbert engaged with, along with the exotic backdrops. Ketut quadrupled his palm reading prices since *Eat Pray Love* came out and his magic paintings run the average help-seeking woman about £285 or \$450 extra. Ngurah Wijaya, head of the Bali Tourism Board, said it's impossible to quantify how many tourists Indonesia is getting because of the film.

There are very real consequences to promoting consumerism as empowerment, besides lining Gilbert's pockets and helping the tourist industry. When women become dependent on purchasing happiness, they are hooked into a false spending cycle of buying more whenever they feel low, without finding a long term answer. More importantly, channelling empowerment into consumerism keeps women away from taking real political, economic and emotional agency, according to the self-help expert Joshunda Sanders, in her *Bitch Magazine* [article](#) "Eat, Pray, Spend".

Throughout *Eat Pray Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert looks to others to tell her what is wrong with her and how to fix it. It takes enrolling in Italian language school, booking a guru in India, and then hiring a Balinese guru, before Gilbert starts to feel fixed. Why not just confront the ex-husband, look within or attend a local church instead of paying for an 'exotic' Eastern religion experience? Apparently, for Gilbert, free options are not legit, local isn't glamorous enough for film, and a distant stranger's advice is better than self-knowledge.

The film's finale is the worst blow of all. While the most pleasurable life-crisis flicks make us feel connected to other lives, raise us up and inspire us, Gilbert's ending is a puzzling betrayal. Gilbert makes a point of labouring toward self-worth and emotional independence, only to solve all her problems with a new man. Even the Brazilian lover comes off as part of the consumable package. *Eat Pray Love* is intended to be a movie about self actualisation. It devolves into a story of spending with a mega Hollywood marketing campaign attached. It ends with the most appallingly dull solution: boy saves girl.

About the author

Taraneh Ghajar Jerven is a writer in London. She's glued to her laptop by day. By night, she's out carousing. She is fighting a losing battle with her addiction to hookah. She is fascinated by Gypsy Rose Lee
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