

The Divergence in Narrative from a Memoir to a Film: Understanding Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*

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Abstract

The article attempts to study the difference between reading a memoir and watching the same as a film and to understand the shifting dynamics of the transition between these two mediums. Does the medium also decide the selection or rejection of some narrative instances? Is the audience preference kept in mind when such selections are made by the filmmaker and is the essence of the memoir sometimes lost in the process? The endless debate between readers and film-goers about how a film always falls short to making a narrative impact can be understood by critically studying a text and its transformation into a film adaptation. How can teachers alert their students about these subtle variations? To assess these issues, I analyse Elizabeth Gilbert's memoir *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything* (2006) and its film adaptation with partly the same title, which was released in 2010 starring the famous actress, Julia Roberts.

Keywords: Memoir, film adaptation, divergence in narrative, pedagogy, simplification

Memoir as a literary genre focuses on a life narrative which can be studied as a non-fictional story of an individual's life journey with a certain socio-cultural significance. Memoirs have become a significant part of contemporary culture because of their persuasive tendency to put forth ideas and images from a writer's perspective. Unlike fiction, memoirs seem to be more convincing because they rely on portraiture

of real-life incidents, giving them a certain credibility. According to G. Thomas Couser in his book *Memoir: An Introduction*, he explains that a memoirist has two obligations: a correct historical and biographical depiction of herself and others involved in the story, and because the portrayal of absolute factual truth is not possible, there must be some degree of veracity (Couser, 2012). Therefore, the writer must navigate through the choice of events, what truths must be told and what must be withheld. When a memoir is adapted into a film screenplay, a similar choice is made when the filmmaker carefully selects the significant aspects of the narrative and refashions it for a film audience. This article makes a study of what happens in the process of creating a memoir screenplay. Memoirs establish an intimacy with their readers because these first-person narratives inspire an emotional response in the readers as they are distinctly aware of the veracity of what they read. Does the film also inspire the same reaction or does something get lost midway? Finally, the paper will also attempt to study the pedagogical practices a teacher can adopt to make these subtle variations available for her students. How can we look at films with a critical lens and understand the deeper meanings of the images they showcase? In this article, I have chosen to study a 'popular' film based on a memoir and not a canonical fictional text, so that a more critical enquiry of contemporary culture can be made.

Elizabeth Gilbert's book *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything* (2006) is a story of a woman who journeys across continents in search of love and peace. She is an American journalist who was given \$200,000 by her publisher to undertake a trip and write about her experiences. The result was a memoir which Gilbert titled *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything* and was later adapted into a film in 2010 with part of the same name. Her memoir is a personal treatise of self-exploration and an act of redemption, an attempt to reclaim her life after a painful divorce and a failed love affair. It begins with a vague prologue referring to her visit to India, to a holy ashram to gain spiritual answers to her worldly struggles. Gilbert makes the introduction a captivating discourse of one's life experiences divided into beads of a *japa mala*, 109 in total, and the 109th bead is the final moment of regaining balance, to take stock of one's trajectory in life, a reminder of lessons learnt and a prayer of gratitude for the struggles surpassed. Hence, the writer divides her story into three parts (Italy, India, and Indonesia) and each part has

36 chapters, which makes a total of 108 chapters. The 109th chapter in *absentia* provides a promise of healed wounds. This recuperative and self-transformative touch at the start of the memoir effectively situates it in the larger narrative of self-discovery and assures the readers that the end will be conclusive and comforting. This genuine feel-good factor of the memoir is transmitted into the film, which attempts at remaining authentic to the memoir, making it entertaining yet inspiring.

The film *Eat, Pray, Love* has its screenplay written by Ryan Murphy and Jennifer Salt and has Julia Roberts, Javier Bardem, James Franco and Richard Jenkins in the lead roles. Unlike the book, the film begins in Bali not in India with Elizabeth, played by Julia Roberts, cycling on the streets of Bali speaking about her psychologist friend Deborah, who is asked by the Council of Philadelphia to offer psychological assistance to Cambodian refugees who have undergone tragic experiences of genocide, rape, violence, starvation and life in refugee camps. Deborah feels intimidated by the extent of their suffering and is unsure how to provide support to such people. But to her surprise, the counselling sessions revolve around the quintessential human experience of wanting love and fears of abandonment. The beginning clearly sets the tone of the film, which will be a woman's search for love. In the film Liz (Elizabeth) is sent to Bali to write an article for a magazine where she meets a ninth-generation medicine man named Ketut Liyer, a role played by Hadi Subiyanto, and discusses the fallout of her relationships. Ketut tells her she will have two weddings, will lose all her money and earn it back, and will come back to Bali and learn from Ketut. The wanderer in Liz impels her to find the truth behind such life instances and the rest is about how she navigates through three different countries to learn important life lessons.

The film, when released in the United States, made a revenue of nearly \$42.7 million after its first ten days, as stated by Brandon Gray from Box office News, scoring second after *The Expendables* (2010). Another film critic stated that the film lacked both the book's self-congratulation and its sense of captivating sorrow that propels the protagonist to metamorphose into a wiser being (Morris, 2010). Hence, the question arises, does the film succeed in truthfully capturing the emotions of the book? Do the changes made in the content also change the intent and impact or does the final message conveyed remain the same? According to Lester Asheim in the essay "From Book to Film: Simplification", the

writer compares the treatment of the material in two different mediums: one 'elite' and the other 'mass'. Hence, all changes made in production are based on the decision of profit-making: ultimately, the film must be a box office success. In any memoir, the writer chooses her preferred life experiences which may add value to the narrative, whereas in the film / screenplay, alterations are made on the basis of audience preferences.

The use of technology as a teaching tool has gained recognition over time. Film screenings are an easy way to engage young students and make their learning process more entertaining. When a teacher teaches a text in class, and for added visual aid chooses to show the film based on the text, recounting the differences in the storyline becomes an essential pedagogical tool. This helps the students reflect upon the reasons behind the changes being made and how these add value to the script. A film screening can make the students more conscious of the social, cultural, economic, and moral themes which may otherwise be missed. The teacher can explain these characteristics in detail, such as, aspects of the plot, changes in the dialogues, the improvisations of the artists, how these are devised for audience appeal, and this transformation is based on the gentle mix of the filmmaker's vision and viewer's maturity. Such changes are essential because, unlike a reader who can revisit a page on account of any narrative complexity, the film audience can only rely on the simplification introduced by the filmmaker, keeping contemporary tastes in mind yet keeping the film version closest to the original text. There are several such alterations made in the sequence and choice of events in the film *Eat, Pray, Love* to give it a more synchronic rhythm.

According to Lester Asheim (1951), a film is always explicitly specific about its moral theme because of the audio-visual aid and does not rely on implicit subtleties that a book offers (Asheim, 1951). The emphasis on the major idea and scenes which accentuate that idea are carefully selected for the film and the rest gets discarded. This process of deliberate simplification gets adopted by every film to reduce the complexity of the original, which may compromise the richness of details. The film *Eat, Pray, Love* also reworks itself on the same principle.

In the book, when Liz is in Italy, she writes an email to her lover, David, finally breaking off their relationship. She confesses that she rejects his idea of being unhappy for life yet, staying in together for the fear of abandonment. This is followed by her bouts of excessive

crying. This incident gets changed in the film where her childlike crying is completely omitted and she rather makes a reference to visiting Augusteum with her friends, giving her a deep insight. Whereas in the book her visit to Augusteum is a separate event described as part of her own lonely six-hour walking tour which warns her to not get over attached to obsolete ideas. The film scene loses its power because the powerful image of a woman in tears coping with deep loss and her relentless pursuit of romantic pleasure getting wasted is diluted. The Augusteum as a symbol of perseverance amidst chaos is significant, but merging the two events together at the cost of portraying primordial human emotion reduces its authentic impact. Similarly, in the book her experience in Italy is pain-stricken as she wrestles with depression and loneliness. Liz overcomes each of these hurdles with a revived spirit which is elementary to her individual and spiritual progression, and this makes the story inspirational for its readers. In the film her fight with depression is completely erased. Instead, she is shown as a woman decisively moving towards emotional maturity. Certain deflections and omission of moments of deep emotional vulnerability in the film diminish the pain of the protagonist, which pulsates throughout the story and is an essential aspect of the book. Hence, the dismissal of some incidents central to the storyline and overt simplification of psychological complexities can be the reasons that a film fails to stir an intense emotional response in its audience.

It is true that a film is compelled to obliterate a few artistic concerns and make its best attempt to duplicate the essence of the original. Some critics feel that in the film-book comparison the book should only be seen as a raw material for the film which gets adapted by the filmmakers to satisfy his own artistic sensibilities. The filmmaker is not morally obliged to faithfully replicate the book, rather is seeking inspiration to start anew primarily using visual images and not language. But when working with a memoir, these liberties cannot be easily allowed as compared to any other fictional narrative. Another example of simplification in the memoir is when Liz visits India seeking spiritual answers she makes friends with many people, and one of them is a plumber/poet from New Zealand who compels her to heal herself from the post-divorce trauma. He guides her with steps to let go and release herself from the guilt of a failed marriage. Whereas, in the film, the same scene is played out with Richard from Texas, who is another close friend. This change

was made because the filmmaker prioritizes the significance of personal transformation over the specificity of a character who catalyzes the process of change for Liz. This is a powerful scene in the film because it empowers Liz to move ahead in life and it is portrayed even more impactfully because it is mediated through the character of Richard, who plays an important role in Liz's stay in the ashram.

Today, we live in a world which heavily relies on social networking and the formation, transmission, and circulation of knowledge also depends on a media-based economy. There are mega-trends which influence production and consumption of symbolic visual content and the context of its use. Cinema holds a special place as a powerful medium which plays a key role in shaping the production of images and influencing public memory. Cinema works to propagate these by advertising certain trends and products, such as, showing fashion trends and products which have a high consumer aspirational value attached to them. According to F. Guattari (1984),

It is impossible to separate the production of any consumer commodity from the institution that supports that production. The same can be said of teaching, training and research. The State machine and the machine of repression produce anti-production, that is to say signifiers that exist to block and prevent the emergence of any subjective process (1984, p. 34).

This means that consumer/audience desire is conditioned through various unconscious enforcement procedures via cinema, which can be dissected and deconstructed through educational institutions. Cinema may promote rampant effects of capitalism which can be questioned and destabilized in a classroom. This means that teachers must inspire students to respond to images critically and analyse how films may incite a reactionary buying response in viewers. For example, in the film Liz is largely shown devouring delicious food, making friends, learning Italian, travelling and largely having a good time. This not only endorses touristic gratification by travelling to exotic destinations but also promotes the idea that to beat emotional chaos within, one might look for solutions outside. Pleasure-seeking tendencies can provide relief, even if momentary, and eventually lead to healing. This inflated idea of 'pleasure equates happiness' is largely a consumerist idea which gets hugely advertised through films. Once this intellectual cinema-thinking is incorporated into the classroom, it can not only facilitate a

better understanding of the original text but also equip students with an open-mindedness to look at images with a 'new thought'. According to Cole and Bradley, this systematic reprogramming of the students can help in giving them a "more subtle, less dogmatic and less prescriptive approach" to assess movies for understanding their true intent (Cole & Bradley, 2016, p. 7). Hence, the pedagogy of cinema can inspire socio-political transformation in an educational way. According to Bradley, "the work of developing cinema-thinking is a political task because education itself is encased in a global-economic situation that produces and reproduces images of what it means to think (e.g. governmental and corporate-think), which can lead to the standardised, repetitive and unimaginative interpretation of film" (Cole & Bradley, 2016, p. 11). There are many instances in the film *Eat, Pray, Love* where the use of a formulaic depiction to please the audience can be detected. For example, starting the film by showing the scenic beauty of Bali instead of the dilapidated suburbs of an Indian ashram, sets the tone of leisure and entertainment at the onset. Any film aspires to provide its audience with sensory gratification, which this film ensures too. The emotional drama is much reduced and the issue of spiritual enlightenment is kept minimal in this film. Films promote explicit rather than implicit ideas so that subtleties become intelligible to a larger audience. It is a characteristic of film presentation that complex ethical or moral concepts, such as enlightenment or worshipping a godman, will be diluted. The Hindu ideas of *karma* and the possibility of *nirvana* by breaking the cycle of life and death may seem challenging to an audience who has faith in Heaven/Hell post-death. Lawrence Baines discusses in his essay that films have a reduced propensity for the use of "polysyllabic" language, which also insinuates simplification of plot, character and theme for a favourable reception (Baines, 1996, p. 615). Hence, the film chooses to focus on individual choices for spiritual growth instead of religious dogma. The teacher can use these instances to sensitize the students about differences in faiths and teach tolerance for new cultural values.

Films can be used as an interesting pedagogical tool to aid social and moral understanding, to teach cultural values and character building in students. By taking the case of a memoir adapted into a film, such captivating examples can be used to teach 'true' stories which are concept-driven and not entirely plot-driven. The differences between the 'true' story and the film can help students understand the market

forces driving behind the changes in storyline and how some ideas get privileged over others. Such critical thinking can instil in students a deeper knowledge of characters, story deviations, forces propelling such changes, and the desired audience impact. It will stimulate the students to see beyond the formulaic portrayals and evaluate the films beyond entertainment value. It will also encourage them to read books with critical insight and look at films as supplementary to the text and not as a replacement. By encouraging students to read memoirs, we can help them seek inspiration from real-life narratives and draw wisdom from others' journeys. This memoir in particular teaches the protagonist the idea of *attraversiamo*, an Italian word that literally means 'let's cross over'. This teaching can influence students to galvanize an informed opinion about life and movies and provide them with fresh perspectives on socio-cultural issues and value systems.

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