Mapping the Physical through the Emotional: The Gendered Space of Travel Writing in Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to look at the different perspectives at play in Cheryl Strayed's travel memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012), to study the language used and the role of gender in her narrative. *Wild* is a travel memoir of Strayed's 1,100-mile trek on the Pacific Crest Trail, undertaken alone. The book underlines a redemption quest of the struggling author who turns to nature and embarks on an extremely straining physical challenge in order to rehabilitate her life and deal with the grief of having lost her mother young. Drawing on Leigh Gilmore's and Suzanne Koven's feminist memoir criticism, Céline Lefort's reading of walking as restorative practice, and Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, the paper analyses how Strayed negotiates gendered anxiety, bodily vulnerability, and sexual agency on the trail. The main concern of this project therefore will be to navigate the importance of *Wild* in the predominantly male canon and the impact of gender on travel writing, mapping out the necessity and intent it plays in highlighting female agency and encouraging women to traverse alien landscapes.

Keywords: Cheryl Strayed, Female Agency, Gender in Language, Solo Women Travel, Travel Writing, *Wild*

1. Introduction

A 26-year-old, Cheryl Strayed embarked on a 1,100-mile journey, walking for three months, from the border of Mexico to Canada, turning to nature to redeem herself. Beginning from the Mojave Desert, she hiked through California to Oregon, ending her journey at the Bridge of the Gods, Washington. Strayed conquers nine mountain ranges, a parching desert, record snowfall and the unadulterated wild in order to find herself. The memoir published in 2012 has also been adapted for the big screen in 2015. The discussion around solo female travellers is ample and yet Cheryl Strayed attempts something new and vital which is magnanimously challenging as well as explorative, both in the context of pushing her physical boundaries and emotional experiences. *Wild* is primal, primitive and stripped down to showcase both human nature and nature itself in its rawest form.

The emphasis therefore shall be to explore the characteristics of the women travel writers in the context of exploring these natural landscapes, what implores them to travel alone, the impact of gender in their language and its subsequent reception amidst audiences in the 21st century.

Women's travel writing has flourished in the last twenty years but still its avenues of impact are undetermined. The genre of travel writing has always been gendered, for it requires women to essentially transgress their gendered roles in order to explore alien landscapes and through the external, map out their inner landscapes as well. The presence of travel writing books even in the past few decades is still dominated by male writers, exploring how adventure travel tended to be considered an entirely different genre and targeted solely the male audience. From time immemorial the traveller has been the man, from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* to Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, it's a quest to conquer nature.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that there exists a dearth of women travel writers who cater to the current tourism or contribute to this genre. Living in a patriarchal society is

already challenging, with gender determining what one can and cannot do. Thus travelling as a woman involves an indeterminate challenge of overcoming anxieties of traversing the alien landscapes while safeguarding one's security and safety. While travelling allows for the opportunity to be free from the gendered responsibilities entailed on a woman, it is also to be noted that such opportunities only come at the cost of distancing themselves from the roles of wives, mothers or daughters. Therefore, there exists a preconceived notion that a rather life-altering motivation needs to transpire in order to push the woman out of her inertia to overcome this gendered space, in the hope to explore self-realisation through the medium of travelling.

It is disputed that male travel writers often employ a style that is aggressive, dominant and resembles an adventure quest, with a man-vs-nature underbelly, whereas female travel writers are more so accused of mooring towards their inner landscapes, writing on the behest of what they feel on these journeys instead of the picaresque journey itself. This gendered space seeps into the language, style and manner in which a book is written, keeping in mind what kind of audience it caters to.

2. Theoretical Framework

Reviewer Leigh Gilmore writes that Strayed is "a believable mix of humanity and grit" (Gilmore 187), which can be traced to Suzanne Koven who writes that "*Wild* is at core, an account of how their authors became writers" (Koven 176). Women travel writers write extensively about the psychological dangers and the deep emotional and physical challenges they needed to overcome in order to make a journey to explore their emotional powers and strength.

Céline Lefort asserts that "walking served as a restorative force for the narrator, who could reflect on her life and identity, precisely because of the long-distance hike that she undertook" (Lefort 13). This paper will attempt to recast a light on gender residing in Strayed's

language and if her emotionally empowering travelling memoir was able to make a positive reception amidst the audience to utilise travelling for restorative purposes.

Laura Mulvey's theorisation of the male gaze illuminates the particular vulnerability of the solo woman in wild space. On the trail, Strayed's body is perpetually subject to an appraising, potentially threatening male vision, a dynamic that structures several key moments in the memoir and which this paper reads alongside Strayed's own account of her gradual displacement of that gaze through physical self-knowledge. Suzanne Roberts' observation in *Almost Somewhere* that "women don't enter the wilderness in the same way men do; we constantly return to our physical bodies and the ways in which they could be threatened, not by bears or bugs but by men" provides important comparative context: Strayed's gendered anxiety is not aberrant but paradigmatic.

3. Analysis

3.1 Grief, Self-Destruction, and the Decision to Walk

Cheryl, a woman from rural Minnesota, decides to walk 1,100 miles, or as she constantly puts it, "to put myself in the way of beauty" (Strayed 26), in the wake of the realisation that she has 'strayed' post the death of her mother. The loss of her mother when she was 22 disintegrates her remaining family and Cheryl dives into a series of infidelities which results in the collapse of her marriage with an honest man. Finding herself at the brink of self-destruction experimenting with drugs and lost in the wilderness of her grief, Cheryl renames herself Strayed, in the event of her divorce and immerses herself in the actual wild, in order to walk back to "the person my mother raised me to be" (Strayed 27).

Trekking the Pacific Crest Trail is indiscriminately challenging, from requiring arduous training to rigorous planning regarding the cost of travelling for months on end, to packing one's food, water and shelter on their back; the hike itself is akin to a transformational journey. And irrespective of the more technical difficulties, the trail forces one to reconcile with the

universal anxiety of one's own loneliness, of tackling the unassailable wild, of bear, snakes, and in the case of women, the man. Thus what in part makes Strayed's narrative gripping is the palatable mix of fear and bravery, flexibility and curiosity which allows her to survive the trail alone.

Cheryl is not a character that the reader can easily sympathise with initially; her self-destructive behaviour sets in action her derailment from the once responsible, smart and good daughter she used to be. Having lost her mother at 22 to cancer is the catalyst to Cheryl's undoing. It is only when she aborts an unwanted pregnancy, coupled with her experimentation with heroin, that she fully grasps the reality of her situation, wanting to relocate herself to the woman she was before the death of her mother. "I had to change, not into a new person but back to the person I used to be – strong, and responsible, clear-eyed and driven, ethical and good" (Strayed 57). Unmoored by sorrow, she takes the decision of hiking the PCT, turning to the redemptive nature of travel, and what Cheryl lacks in experience, training and planning, she more than makes up for it in her resilience, grit and toughness.

The process entails inviting scabs, wounds, losing entire toenails, bruises and a world of physical pain to initiate healing. The conquest isn't merely physical, but even pre-dating the thru-hike, the journey begins by the conquest of the nerve, the courage, the defiance a woman has to choose in going through the PCT. It is as much the journey of conquering the mental as she quotes Emily Dickinson, "if your nerve, deny you, go above your nerve" (Strayed 117).

A naïve traveller, Cheryl's previous experience with nature lay limited to the rural 'up-north' 40-acre home she lived in. Hacking the PCT stemmed from her own indignation and it is this determination which is tested in the face of extreme physical pain she encounters on the trail. It is of note that Cheryl's circumstance as a 'stray' predisposes her of any responsibility that she might have had. Dropping out of college, with a loan she reckoned she would pay back when in her 40s, Cheryl saves up from waitressing to cover the cost of the PCT, barely. Her

naivety is evident in her underestimation of the cost, coming short of money at several instances and in picking a smaller size of shoe which costs her several toenails and blisters.

3.2 Gendered Anxiety and the Male Gaze on the Trail

Cheryl's experience is tainted with a gendered anxiety, evident in packing gear which included a saw and loud whistles, and in the prevalent dangers of hitchhiking which forms an integral aspect of the trail. "Horrible things happened to hitchhikers, especially women hitchhiking alone…left for dead" (Strayed 47).

On day 5, when she detours from the PCT in order to access a warm meal she realises, "I was the sole woman with three men of unknown intent, character, and origin watching me from the shade of a yellow truck" (Strayed 71). Even though she agrees to ride back to his house for a meal she desperately requires, it is evident how plagued with fear she felt: "I felt a creeping anxiety… that anything could happen… he could grab me and change the course of things entirely in an instant" with "each cell in my body on high alert" (Strayed 76). So much so that she outright lies that she was accompanied by her husband who was far ahead in the trail and therefore not alone.

Cheryl is made aware constantly of hiking alone as a woman, and the shortcomings it entailed. "You're the only solo woman I've met so far out here and the only one I have seen on the register too" (Strayed 88), says Greg, a fellow traveller, trained and experienced, averaging 22 miles per day where Cheryl barely managed 7. "But you are tough, and tough is what matters here" (Strayed 89). Greg is quick to notice the one thing that does indeed aid her survival, i.e. toughness.

While hitchhiking from Reno to resume her trek, she comes across Jimmy Carter, a reporter for Hobo Times, who comments, "Lady hobos, hard to find" (Strayed 178). Cheryl is self-aware that she is a free agent, untethered to responsibilities which otherwise engage women in a web of gendered responsibilities, not allowing them to just walk out of their lives.

The unshakeable fear resurfaces when Cheryl meets two bowhunters near a pond. One of the hunters, a sandy-haired man, makes remarks upon her body, clothes and puts an emphasis upon her being alone in the woods: “Here’s to a young girl, all alone in the woods” (Strayed 287). Forcing her to relocate her camp, Cheryl runs into the dark of the night, feeling unsafe.

Irrespective of all the good men she does meet, who helped her throughout the journey, Cheryl comments upon her realisation that her whole hike had also been massively dependent on luck. “That no matter how tough or strong or brave… if my luck ran out now… this one evening would annihilate all those brave days” (Strayed 287). This debilitating fear of being raped, dismembered or violated is a prevalent theme in women’s travel writing. Suzanne Roberts in her novel *Almost Somewhere* writes that, “Women don’t enter the wilderness in the same way men do; we constantly return to our physical bodies and the ways in which they could be threatened, not by bears or bugs but by men. Our bodies become a filter between us and the landscape, preventing us from enjoying both” (Roberts).

While the anxiousness of being a solo women traveller finds ample space in the narration, it can be noted how her gender allows her the benefit of the doubt. Throughout several instances, Cheryl is guided, receives advice and is given a humbler and kinder treatment, stemming from awe and curiosity. Three fellow travellers, the Three Young Bucks, nicknamed Cheryl perhaps aptly the Queen of the PCT, “because people always give you things and do things for you… they don’t do a damn thing for us, in fact” (Strayed 296).

3.3 The Body as Site of Transformation

Sex and sexuality both occupy a leitmotif in the narrative. Cheryl is unapologetic in her sexual desires, from the explicit series of infidelity to the inevitable fulfilment of this desire in the crevices of boulders on a beach; sex is primal as much as any other desire. While sex is often treated as a veiled topic in women’s travel writing, in *Wild*, sex is portrayed as the raw and natural desire of a woman.

In an interview with the Guardian, Cheryl notes that before the PCT she often fell back on traditional female power, i.e. the power of beauty and sexual appeal to men. However, out on the trail she felt stripped of it; devoid of the artifice of her sexual appeal, she was forced to learn to rely entirely on herself, turning to "other ways of feeling comfortable or accepted or valid in the world of men" (Strayed, "Walk").

The PCT is also transformational in allowing her inhibitions regarding her body image to fade away. All her previous insecurities with weight and her physical appearance take a back seat in the wake of the new purpose her body had to serve. She realises more and more that, "I didn't care anymore whether I was fat or thin, I only cared about getting more food" (Strayed 278).

Cheryl's body is central in indicating her transformation. An arena marking her struggle, it denotes her strength as she persevered. From averaging 5–7 miles, struggling immensely with her backpack (nicknamed Monster), to losing her toenails , "now the PCT and I were tied. The score was 5–5" (Strayed 279) , to the point where her muscles strengthen, her legs get toned and her hairy legs and tan become an indictment of a body well-travelled through nature. While the terrain of the PCT constantly shifts, so does her inner landscape, with the pain in the beginning being an all-consuming distraction from any kind of emotional catharsis. Eventually Cheryl had to trespass, suffer through the physical so much that it became second nature, for the scenic beauty to seep through the pain, the fear and mingle with her sense of gratitude, filling the void in her such that it becomes infinitesimally smaller.

The strength that she acquires isn't purely physical but is palpable in the mental resilience she builds as well. Cheryl's aching need for affirmation is akin to a survival technique, repeating the mantra again and again until she feels safe, in herself and in the world. She constantly repeats "I am not afraid" (Strayed 63) as a form of mind control, until it wasn't long before she wasn't afraid.

Cheryl journals her everyday experience, writing of the PCT and processing her inner conflicts. Reading and writing become an essential companion of the novice traveller, mitigating her loneliness. Cheryl marks that she was lonelier in her real life than she was on the PCT. She realises that she was perhaps more alone than anyone in the whole world, but that she was okay with that. Cheryl's painful but gradual return to sanity and strength is conclusive of the restorative quality of the great outdoors, and her determination and grit is an inspiration to readers across the world of what is conquerable.

4. Discussion

Men's travel writing does not exactly represent the anxiety, scepticism and therefore the guidance that necessitates for female travellers. It is herein where writers such as Cheryl Strayed come in. Nearly 2,000 people attempted the thru-hike in 2014, double the previous year, inspiring several other female travellers. One such traveller was April Sylva, whom Condé Nast covered in their issue; she commented that *Wild* encouraged her to take to nature to recover from surgery (Williams).

Carrie Speaking's observation that travel writing is "genderised" identifies precisely the constraint that *Wild* works against. Strayed's memoir indeed opened up new avenues and purpose for guidebooks, whereby her story instils confidence, encouraging women to turn to nature in order to rely on themselves. *Wild* is not stripped of the gendered anxiety, but rather explores the wonderful restorative energy of nature when one overcomes that anxiety, offering a reconciling balance and reflecting that the rehabilitation of nature is worth risking the dangers of travelling as a woman. There are several more women such as Cheryl who presented to the world that claiming outdoor physical spaces for women is attainable and how massively it changes the intrapersonal relationship with one's body and how one sees the world.

5. Conclusion

Thus, women's travel books such as *Wild* are the need of the hour to serve the constantly evolving woman to challenge herself. Strayed's memoir demonstrates that what society codes as 'interior' or 'emotional' in women's travel writing is not a diminishment of the genre but its most honest dimension. The physical and the psychological are not separable in *Wild*; they are the same journey. In refusing to separate grief from landscape, body from voice, or fear from agency, Strayed produces a travel narrative that is as rigorous and as necessary as any in the canon.

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