

THE CULTURAL TRANSLATION OF TRANSCULTURAL POPULAR CULTURE – APROPOS OF A POSTFEMINIST NOVEL’S RECEPTION IN HUNGARY

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Abstract: My paper mobilizes postfeminism as a theoretical instrument to discuss connections between globalized and local cultures; more specifically, it deploys postfeminism to analyze the ways localized cultures embed and translate transcultural phenomena, such as popular television series like *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, as well as books like Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Love, Pray*. The focus falls on discourses about femininity, arguing that the popularity of postfeminist cultural products in Central European countries attests to localized cultures’ deep investment in popular representations of femininity that parallels at least some of the postfeminist pressures and anxieties in Anglo-American societies even though Central European national public discourses do not recognize postfeminist concerns.

After presenting some of the definitional complexity of the concept of postfeminism, a discussion of the ways in which Gilbert’s novel was received in Hungary follows arguing that its appeal to Hungarian audiences lies in its negotiation of the postfeminist idea of choice. Eventually, postfeminism will appear as a critical tool to examine how local cultures bring meaning to transcultural popular culture.

Key words: postfeminism, gender, popular culture, Central Europe

Surveying the hit sensations of mass-marketed popular culture targeted at a female audience in the past decade in Hungary, one cannot but wonder why they tend to be identical with those in Western Europe or the United States since the local cultures of Central Europe promise only seemingly similar female life trajectories to women to those further West (see Hausmann, Tyson & Zahidi, 2012); therefore, one would assume that Central European women’s lived experience should also result in somewhat different choices with respect to their cultural consumption. In what follows postfeminism is mobilized as a framework to discuss connections between globalized and local cultures in order to move closer to understanding how Central European localized cultures embed and translate transcultural phenomena, such as the

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immensely popular television series *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, as well as books like Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Love, Pray: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* or E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy. Postfeminism is deployed as a critical tool for analyzing the ways discourses about gender, more particularly about femininity, are integrated into Hungarian mainstream popular culture, which eventually, generates insights into the Central European cultural climate.

At the outset, a disclaimer is in place though: the approach suffers from some degree of schizophrenia since postfeminism is not simply a concept that has sprung and then evolved into an f-word in Anglo-American western societies (the United States, Canada, and Great Britain) but it does not even exist, or rather, its existence has never been acknowledged by scholarly, let alone, public discourse in Central Europe. Yet, the popularity of the television series mentioned and of postfeminist novels like Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* and James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* in Central European countries as well attest to localized cultures' deep investment in popular representations of femininity that parallels at least some of the postfeminist pressures and anxieties experienced by women in Anglo-American societies. I propose that the f-word should be considered as a valuable piece in the critical toolkit of spatial cultural studies because although Central European national public discourses do not recognize postfeminist concerns, the consumption of popular culture as manifested in practical choices (what people watch and read) shows that the local cultures of the region are equally entangled in the themes crystallizing around notions of femininity as advanced by the works referred to.

In what follows, I first make a gesture at presenting some of the definitional complexity of the concept of postfeminism, then turn briefly to a discussion of Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* with an eye to arguing that the novel's appeal to Hungarian audiences lies in its negotiation of the postfeminist idea of choice. Eventually, the f-word will appear as a theoretical instrument to examine how local cultures bring meaning to transcultural popular culture.

Postfeminism

The definitional complexity of postfeminism requires a balancing act worthy of a tightrope walker since not only does it contain multiple, even contradictory claims but in its twenty-odd years of existence it has generated two approaches at the extreme ends of a definitional continuum (the tightrope), one celebratory and one denunciatory also. Susan Faludi (1992) sees its emergence as the result of the backlash against the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Angela McRobbie

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calls it outright “the active, sustained and repetitive repudiation” of feminism (2004, p. 257), which turns postfeminism into the scourge that disciplines women into accepting traditional notions of femininity. Chris Holmlund (2005), who examines in what ways the term is understood in critical practice, draws the outlines of three groups: chick, grrrl, and academic postfeminism. To him, chick postfeminism epitomizes the backlash that each successful feminist movement has spawned starting with the suffragette movements bringing the vote for most women and culminating today in the hostility against second-wave feminists who found equality between women and men in the workforce and in the family desirable. Chick postfeminism showcases either a hostility towards second-wave feminist goals (such as the thematization of rape, battery, rights to one's body – abortion, birth control – equal pay, the breaking of the glass ceiling) or an assurance that the goals fought for earlier have been accomplished, there is nothing more to do than sit back and either party and date as one chooses or tend to “hearth, hubby, and kids” (Holmlund, 2005, p. 115). Postfeminism, others also argue, works to depoliticize feminism and thus undermine its potential to change social practices. Although it takes feminism “into account” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 12), it presents the movement as emptied of its rationale for existence (see also Parkins, 1999; Vavrus, 2000; Kinser 2004; Tasker and Negra 2007). In McRobbie's rendering: “postfeminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (2009, p. 12).

Yet others see postfeminism in a more positive light because it provides different opportunities for the negotiation of gender from the ones available before the 1990s (see also Lotz, 2001; Arthurs, 2003; Gerhard 2005; Brunsdon, 2005; Genz & Brabon, 2009). Holmlund's second group, “grrrl postfeminists,” also known as riot girls, are for instance playful about femininity, but non the less engaged about women's issues (see Baumgardner 2000, 2004, 2007). (The third group of postfeminists in Holmlund's categorization, academic postfeminists, in turn, continue to theorize about postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial, and queer issues, somewhat oblivious to the lived experiences and actual choices of women.) Although postfeminism in this rendering participates in the continuous transformation of women's issues, in criticism, Holmlund claims, the postfeminist woman has habitually appeared as white, not belonging to any class, therefore middle, or rather upper-middle class), young (or desiring to look young – which with the availability of Botox and various plastic surgery interventions seems eternally within one's reach), and heterosexual – in addition, almost invariably in search of a romance.

The setting of these definitional debates is mostly the United States and Great Britain. But how do they relate to the localized cultures of Central Europe? Since the

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term is not even an f-word in this cultural region, I now turn to discussing a specific example of postfeminist popular culture in the hope of proving that postfeminism can be successfully deployed in understanding the gender regime of Central European local cultures.

Local consumption: a case study

The text singled out for scrutiny is Gilbert's narrative, which has enjoyed, if not an unprecedented, at least a phenomenal appeal worldwide, which turned it into, in the author's words a "megajumbo international bestseller" (as cited in Yabroff, 2010). Its critical analysis seems especially relevant in the context of my argument because as Joanne Hollows (2000, p. 27) puts it: "the analysis of popular culture is always the analysis of power relations."

The selection of the text is governed by three reasons, two theoretical, one personal. I start with the personal reason: I received a copy of *Eat, Love, Pray* for Christmas with the remarks that the book received raving critical acclaim in the Hungarian public media (a free, state-financed, national public service that aims to continue the popularization of "high," "quality" culture while entertaining a deep disdain for popular, read mass, globalized culture). So the giver of the gift was assured the present would be appreciated by someone who is both personally and professionally interested in the study of gender and literature but not so much in reading popular literature female readers are customarily associated with (romance) in her freetime. The assurance was all the more solid, since reviewers emphasized the exemplary status of the model of femininity advanced by the work. I started reading with eagerness that soon changed into wonder, then impatience, and lastly incomprehension. I just could not understand why Gilbert's narrative has become so successful in Hungary. One could suspect a brilliant marketing gimmick of course, but the film version of the book enjoyed a similar popularity. Based on the assumption that not even creative marketing gurus can deceive the same buying community twice with essentially the same product, I had to look for other reasons.

The second reason governing the choice of the text for critical scrutiny is that it exemplifies the importance of considering the localized incorporation of individual works in and inclusion into public discourse. Hungarian public discourse about the work took surprising directions when compared to its American counterpart. Hungarian readers, I hypothesize, read this text as differently as they do *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*.

This leads to the third reason, which could be summed up as the generic indeterminacy of the text: American media tended to downplay some of the text's generic features while emphasizing others, whereas Hungarian readers received

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generic clues that directed their interpretation into different directions. The differences in reception serves as a cautionary tale about the need to pay careful attention to all historical, cultural, and technological conditions subtending the text's production and distribution in specific locations.

Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* was first published in 2006, and it soon became in a *New Yorker* critic's words "a kind of bible for the dissatisfied educated woman" (Denby, 2010). In it the heroine, a New York-based writer undergoes a breakdown at thirty-two, has a tough divorce, begins and ends an affair, and she escapes into the large world promising gustatory and spiritual gifts in Italy, India, and Bali. She is in fact the twenty-first century version of Henry James's heiress, the young American abroad acutely curious about foreign cultures. In fact, for a travel narrative the work is a most entertaining piece with a bit more navel gazing than would be necessary.

In the United States the book was marketed as an aesthetically rich memoir, a true relation of personal experience and of the search for spiritual fulfillment. Its author freely talked about the difficulties of the period in her life in the media, twice invited to Oprah Winfrey's talk show. In 2007 and 2008 it seemed to be everywhere in the US, it topped *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* list of "What they're reading on college campuses" (2010) bespeaking an appeal to young adult audiences as well. By 2012 it has sold over 10 million copies (ElizabethGilbert.com, "Home") and it topped the *New York Times* Paperback Nonfiction Bestseller list for 200 weeks (ElizabethGilbert.com, "Eat, Pray, Love").

Although the work was mainly marketed as a memoir, reviewers have also mentioned its blending of genres as different as the travel narrative, the self-help story, the conversion narrative, and old-fashioned romance. Surprisingly, the American reading public, though well-prepared for its reception as a neo-confessional memoir of the New Age, seized it as a self-help manual that could provide guidelines as to how one should streamline one's self after relationship difficulties (if it has worked for someone, it could help for you as well). Gilbert has been virtually turned into a celebrity self-help guru who can explain universal laws and truths in an entertaining form. A telling example is that Yabroff (2010) describes her as the embodiment of a new BFF (Best Friend Forever) in a *Newsweek* article, and whose advice does one take if not your best friend's. The fact also speaks volumes that hundreds of women embarked on a tour to follow her track: 'EPL-themed' expeditions are organized to Bali, travel companies promise transformational journeys trading on the possibility of romance on the beaches of Bali, finding inner peace while visiting the Taj Mahal and eating out in Rome (McDonagh, 2010, p. 16). Gilbert was indeed chosen among the one hundred most influential people of the year by *Time* in 2008 (Hodgman, 2008).

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In Hungary the book sold well, as did the film. Book reviewers affiliated with publishing houses and online bookstores highlighted two features of the narrative: that it is a memoir and that it focuses on a woman who wanted to leave her earlier life behind; that is, official reviewers repeated what worked in the American publishing business, with a difference though. Probably, some of the reviews were translations of American ones, but the emphasis shifted to the theme of the felt need to change. A review, which repeats the official American marketing line, for instance runs as follows: "Honest, funny, and emotional; her book talks to all of us who have already felt like we needed a change. A woman who does not want to live up to expectations. A woman who has let go of her present, and who has found happiness" (Libri.hu, "Eat, Pray, Love").¹ That is, what the main character wants is change.

Independent reviews differed in as much that they frequently alluded to the text's sentimental overtones. Tóth (2010), for example, writes:

Liz seems to have everything: husband, house, family, friends, career and money. But there is a problem. While everyone around her expects her to go along the stages of life and build an empire on motherhood, which most women desire, she breaks down under the burden of the traditional ideal of femininity. The expectations push her towards a life she finds alien, she is sick of the thought of having to live every day of her remaining life closed inside their boundaries. [...] She seeks to put herself into the foreground and do things that make her happy, that she has always desired but never had the time for, or that she simply has found irrational and useless. But she starts to realize that the key to happiness lies outside reason.²

Independent reviewers, in fact, were more willing to locate the work in the tradition of the universal everywoman's *Bildungsroman* that should be read more as a fantasy than an autobiography (somewhat in the tradition of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*) in

¹ "Őszinte, humoros és mély érzelmű könyve mindannyiunknak szól, akik ébredtünk már úgy, hogy 'ettől a naptól kezdve változtatok az életemen.' Egy nő, aki nem akart többé megfelelni. Egy nő, aki elengedte a jelenét, és megtalálta a boldogságát."

² "Liznek látszólag mindene meg van: férj, ház, család, barátok, karrier és pénz. Csakhogy van egy kis bökkenő. Míg környezete elvárja tőle, hogy az élet stációján végighaladva felépítse maga körül azt a családaya-szerep szerű birodalmat, melyre a legtöbb nő vágyik, ő összeroppan a hagyományos értelemben vett női ideál súlya alatt. Az elvárások egyre inkább egy olyan élet felé kényszerítik, melytől teljes mértékben idegenkedik, még a gondolatától is rosszul van, hogy ezek közé a keretek közé szorítva kelljen leélnie hátralévő életének minden egyes napját. [...] Próbálja önmagát előtérbe helyezni, és olyan számára boldogságot jelentő tevékenységekkel foglalkozni, melyekre bár eddig is vágyott, de sosem fordított időt rá, vagy pusztán logikátlanak és haszontalannak ítéltetett. Ám kezd rájönni, hogy a boldogság kulcsa nem a rációban keresendő." (Tóth, 2010)

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their works even if they gestured at the text as life writing. Tóth's insistence that it should be read against the tradition of sentimental literature, where feeling pits itself against reason, and where feeling only is able to bring about the desired goal, happy ending, most of the time, is indicative of this impulse.

Eat, Pray, Love in fact reached the Hungarian audience as a female *Bildungsroman* rather than as an autobiographical self-help guide. This benefited the sales number of the book since as a self-help guide it could have little relevance in the economic reality of the majority of readers. The lifestyle of an upper-middle-class thirty-something character living in New York is a far cry from the lives of women in Central Europe; the main character's *choice* of getting away from it all for a year and travel around in the wide world could hardly function as a model solution in times of personal crisis for the everywoman of the region.

Readers' internet comments support this claim. Bloggers and comments, if they refer to the autobiographical rootedness of the text at all, state that they, in the words of a blogger, "could live with it," i.e., with the fact that the book purports to document one person's life in a specific period. Others excused the unevenness of the text on account of its autobiographical roots (Puderlak.hu, 2011).³ Most comments however reflect that the readers were expecting something else, mostly more of something like a plot, less self-reflection, even less writing on Indian spirituality. On one blog site of the sixteen comments written by readers who actually read the book to the end, nine complained about its virtual unreadability because of the, for a Hungarian audience at least, too much soul-searching; the rest would not directly recommend it to others, though they would not try to convince anyone of never reading it (Puderlak.hu).

Nonetheless, there was one issue that all reviews, blogs and comments highlighted: that of choice. Choice functions as a meeting point where the differences in class, age, and location between fictional characters and viewers/readers disappear. Choice represents a discourse in the narrative that Central European women can relate to however different their lived experiences are from those presented.

At this point, I suggest reading Gilbert's text against the background of popular culture, especially popular television, because it provides a window onto the specific concerns of representational politics, i. e., how popular texts "reflect, select, and deflect" (Burke, 1966, p. 45) social realities and turn them into iconic moments in popular consciousness. This move provides the opportunity to remove the text from the authenticating generic discourse of autobiography, which, however compelling, is of little help in explaining why *Eat, Pray, Love* could turn into a "megajumbo" bestseller. At the same time, it takes Bonnie J. Dow's (1996) claim to heart that one

³ "És mivel ez egy memoár és nem egy bravúrosan megírt regény, néhol botladozik, nem szimpatikus egy-egy karakter, de hiszen épp ettől hiteles :)" (Puderlak.hu, 2011)

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needs to take commercial television, especially if it is prime time, seriously as a player in cultural debates about femininity. In fact, I suggest reading the narrative as a postfeminist work whose dilemmas perhaps not incidentally coincide with those of the “Sex and the City generation” (Thronham, 2007, p. 33). Despite its overtones of personal narratives, I argue, it is most usefully seen as an exploration of the themes popular culture, especially, primetime television represents: the exploration of the relationship between femininity, female *Bildung*, and fantasy in the cultural context that is characterized by the f-word: postfeminism. The parallel between *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives* and *Eat, Pray, Love* seems all the more appropriate because all three are deeply immersed in the problems and complexities of femininity.

Eat, Pray, Love is not habitually read as a postfeminist narrative though it shares several characteristics with iconic postfeminist works: it presents a white, upper-middle class, educated female of independent means, in an idealized setting which appears as a place removed from the world of domesticity as much as it is possible; its world is that of a newly feminized world of freedom and safety that serves the protagonist's needs (compare the New York of *Sex and the City*, the Wisteria Lane of *Desperate Housewife*, where domesticity is a threat, and the never dangerous, always welcoming Rome, Naples, backwoods India and Indonesia). Also, there is an emphasis on disembeddedness offering the promise of relocation: Bridget Jones, Carrie Bradshaw, Anastasia Steel rent rather than own their homes; Liz loses her house during divorce.

A further similarity between all these texts is the fact that female characters enjoy sexuality, although their sustaining relationships are with other women, who provide a constant support for each other. Yet, heroines are never satisfied because they dream of getting it all: professional success and the safe harbor of an emotionally satisfying heterosexual relationship. Relationships can be satisfying however only if they are authentic. Authenticity is guaranteed by a natural, i.e., all-consuming love, whereas domestic life, the safe harbor, is represented as fundamentally inauthentic.

What is conspicuously missing in postfeminist works, and from these as well, is what is referred to as compensatory patriarchal approval. This trope could take several forms: it can be represented by a single dad proud of her daughter's achievement, for instance or by a male boss to whose success the heroine's work is indispensable. In fact, postfeminist female characters resolutely avoid contact with males who follow overtly traditional gender roles. In contrast, they seek nurturing and sensitive men, at heart at least, who constantly assure heroines of their worth and willingly put the heroines' needs before their own. It would not be too far-fetched to claim that these male characters are just as fully feminized as the locations that the heroines ever tread. They are embodiments of the romance fantasy hero, who at one point recognizes his emotional dependency on the heroine, just as Janice Radway

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(1984) described in her pioneering work on romance. In postfeminist works men have learnt, or always knew, the lessons of feminist romance; it is the female characters who are slow learners: heroines are constantly anxious about the rightness of their choices, their professional, as well as about their emotional lives whereas the heroes invest their whole trust in them.

Also, life is presented within the discourse of “lifestyle culture” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 261), that is, individuals can and must choose a lifestyle. In postfeminist works one's life route is conceived as a matter of personal choice, which posits an active agent ready for weighing arguments for and against each option and then for making responsible choices accordingly. In this context the earlier unprecedented wave of self-help guides, life coaches, gurus, makeover shows, etc., appearing on television and the book market providing guidance for women obsessed with the idea of self-improvement since the 1990s gains meaning. The characters of postfeminist texts constantly monitor themselves: they write diaries, life plans, career plans to see both their progress and the spots where they fall behind – Bridget Jones's diary, Carrie Bradshaw's columns, Mary Alice Young's voiceover reflective narration, Anastasia Steel's inner probing and self-reflection and Liz's memoir nicely fit the line. It also should be noted though – and this is a most welcome change – that characters are confident enough to admit failure in whatever segment of their lives; they might even be highly ironic about their failure to live up to both their plans and the coveted ideal.

There is one major point where Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* differs from most postfeminist works: although the economic advantage of the protagonist is taken for granted rather than problematized (she spends a year traveling carefree without worrying about bills, hotel prices, and future expenses), its attendant insistence on fashion is missing. This is a major difference because it is this element that has deflected attention from the postfeminist discourse of the narrative. Postfeminist works, especially *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* are infamous for the fashion consciousness of their female characters; the heroine of *Eat, Pray, Love* however shows little interest in self-adornment. Also, it is this point that allowed the Hungarian public media to perceive the work as “high,” “quality” art and not as a “trite” travelogue, memoir, sentimental novel, or romance.

To understand why this is possible one needs to see that in Hungary a heightened fashion sense is strongly associated with global capitalism that assigns a peripheral role to the cultural and intellectual potential of Central Europe while attempting to monopolize it as a market. The lack of fashion sophistication Gilbert's protagonist shows thus is interpreted as a sign of her authenticity, her disavowal of fake values; her spiritual search in the Far East might seem misdirected (most blog commenters claim to have suffered while reading the second section of the narrative, while others

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simply skipped it), but in the end she still found what is really valuable in life, romance, which further validates the “quality” of Gilbert’s text.

This is also possible because the discourse of choice that structures the heroine’s character for American and British audiences in Central Europe is not translated against the background of individualist ideology upon which postfeminism rests. In the region choice is contextualized as buying power; it is the opposite of constraints. The Central European discourse of choice reflects a desire to fully integrate into the Western, read globalized, world as real player in the game and not as a peripheral market or cheap workforce. This is why Gilbert’s narrative could be smoothly incorporated into the local culture of Hungary with its specific Central European disdain for popular culture in favor of “high culture” because it speaks to the fantasy that one just needs to decide to leave constraints behind.

The narrative’s postfeminist individualism goes unnoticed because, as mentioned at the outset, while postfeminism constitutes a by now evergreen topic in Western, globalized, academic discourse, in the localized culture of Hungary both academic and national discourse has disavowed feminism, first, and ignored postfeminism, second. Feminism was an f-word in post-socialist countries well before it became one sometime in the 1990s in the United States. As a telling example it could be noted that a feminist research group has counted 52 mentions of the word ‘feminism’ in Hungarian print media between 1990 and 2001 altogether, mostly in a denunciatory or an outright demonizing context (Imre, 2009, p. 397).

Feminism is evoked in one of the following three contexts in the region: it means foreignness force-fed to Hungarians resisting globalized capitalist influence, or state-run Soviet type of quota feminism, equally disdained, and/or it appears as an unnatural aversion to real feminine values (Imre, 2009, p. 397). Postfeminist popular culture, *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, for instance, is largely ignored in Hungarian academic discourse out of disdain. Readers, however, respond to its romance element without problematizing its discourse of choice. Whereas the happy ending of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, *Sex and the City*, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy and *Eat, Pray, Love* is read as either the natural element, and the final goal, in women’s lives or as a generic convention, the differences in the discourse of choice goes unnoticed.

Conclusion

In the Anglo-American context postfeminism has been much berated for its depoliticization of women’s issues, the fragmentation of feminist collectives, its lifestyle politics that reduces the female body to an object of surveillance while sexualizing it, its obliviousness to “the contradictions that most women [...] experience in juggling the pressures of their domestic and public lives” (Rapp, 1990,

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p. 361), and its creation of a “choiceosie” (Probyn, 1993, p. 278). This last concept is the result of a backlash culture, theoreticians argue, because it claims that the problems contemporary women face (emotional insecurity, the woes of singleton life, the ticking biological clock, infertility, the shortage of marriageable, sensitive, supportive and committed men ready for romance, or the second shift, double burden, juggling with professional life and daycare, to mention a few) are the result of their choices and not of the sex/gender system that limits women's possibilities (Dow, pp. 120-121). One should always remember that postfeminism has its roots in the neo-conservative 1980s with its insistence on the individual and the individual's responsibility for his/her own fate. And as every era formulates its fantasy, so has postfeminism done also: it has created a fantasy that promises women's empowerment in work and their relationships while preserving the framework of the heterosexual romance. In short, it has formulated the fantasy of “having it all” (Genz, 2010): that one can choose to have both a career and a family, or one or the other depending on one's own free will; one just needs to learn to make the right choices.

Anglo-American audiences read Gilbert's *Eat, Love, Pray* as a neo-confessional narrative that documents a woman's route to the right choices and that could provide a model for other women in personal crises. At the same time its discourse of choice, the responsibilities of individuals, and femininity as a postfeminist fantasy romance is veiled over by the autobiographical gestures of the text. Central European readers however respond to the text as a romance made possible by the fantasy of choice – turning the text into a transcultural bestseller.

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