

The Dramatization of the Female Body: Discourses of Resistance and Power in of Eve Ensler's The Vagina Monologues

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Abstract: *Eve Ensler's The Vagina Monologues (TVM) is an atypical play that centers on the most intimate part of the female anatomy: her vagina. This paper analyzes the double play of "jouissance" as the site of pleasure and resistance through the body and words. As a hearing and sharing of women's experiences with one another, Ensler's play delineates a new aesthetic grounded in the performance of individual and collective stories through the mediation of their voices/bodies. This paper analyzes the dramatization of the female body as site of resistance and power.*

Keywords: *play, body, voice, resistance, discourse, Eve Ensler*

Introduction

Eve Ensler's proclaimed play, *The Vagina Monologues*, is a celebratory piece of theater, which centers on the female genital or vagina as a source (subject/object) of both discursivity and contestation. The woman's body, in general and her vagina in particular, are reunited as a single and self-conscious political entity. Personalized and acting as a full human being, the vagina talks, dresses, expresses its anger, dislike and wants on stage. Its desires defy the natural, limiting sexual and biological capacities traditionally granted to women. Above all, Ensler's vision of the vagina unifies women across races, cultures and social conditions into a homogeneous category. Analyzing this transnational and transcultural play, Hall warns that "The text aims to empower women, and to critique dominant cultural discourses about women's sexuality and the female body. But not all women are empowered by this text. It can, in fact, be seen to reaffirm discourses that participate in the oppression and exclusion of some women" (Hall, 2005: 100).

Challenging womanhood as an inclusive category, Bell Hooks carefully scrutinizes the often silenced experiences of African American women. She

pinpoints the double-edged sword position of Black women in these words: the opening of "oppositional spaces where sexuality can be named and represented, where we (Black women) are sexual subjects—no longer bound and trapped"¹ in racial stereotypes, sexuality is positivized as a subversion mechanism.

At the heart of this play, the playwright underscores the new orientation in feminist discourse that emphasizes the body as a heavily loaded signifier of female oppression. Many feminist intellectuals have vehemently criticized the political restrictions, economic denials on women which have been used in patriarchal systems to control women through their reproductive and work capacities. In such a phallogocentric system, motherhood, rape, exploitation, female genital mutilation converge like the spokes of a wheel. Re-appropriating the essentialist mode and turning it upside down, the biological and reproductive functions of women become, in this feminist play, avenues for

¹ Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representations*. New York/ London: Routledge, 1992: 75-77

empowerment of women. As they embrace headlong their sexuality and feel pride in their own bodies, women renegotiate and subvert the logic of oppression.

Building on feminist ideology, *The Vagina Monologues* raises awareness on women issues. It also challenges male domination by appropriating and subverting the patriarchal structures of power. As it focuses on the female body and vagina, the play mediates different experiences which are contingent to history, geography, and culture, offering a new perspective into women's culture. The idiosyncratic and personal experiences of women become the basis for political claims in that it solidifies an organic link between women regardless of their race, social class, or sexual orientation. As the center of female consciousness, Enslers's thinking, talking and rebellious vagina enables women to voice their unspeakable suffering and terror they are confronted with in the patriarchal system.

In Eve Enslers's play, the vagina appears as an inclusive category of analysis that bridges race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, geographical location, cultural differences, and historical contingencies. In other words, the vagina becomes a self-referential point of individuality, a site of alterity stemming from "jouissance" or the pleasure of the text in Roland Barthes' terms. In this logic, the vagina stands for the center of women empowerment mechanism that introduces various female voices on stage. It similarly creates a unity of consciousness and opens an orgasmic horizon by inscribing a vaginacracy made of liberation in contestation of the phallographic and normative social model. Specifically with *The Vagina Monologues*, the invisible vagina becomes the source of pleasure free of the heterosexual matrix, which derives from the hierarchical construction operating through binaries. This transgressive step turns the traditional boundaries upside down and redraws, in the process, female agency and sexual pleasure. Enslers redefines a new eroticism, a new

female sexual subjectivity that celebrates the female body and vagina. As she forcefully said, "The Story of a woman's vagina is the story of her life"(Maufort and Wager: 2008, 250)

The problematic at the interplay of language and body as a feminine mode of discourse and political contestation speaks to the issues developed in the play. In *Parler n'est jamais neutre*(1985) Luce Irigaray, a French feminist, argues that to speak is never neutral. Any discourse reflects the unconscious matrix that produces it. In fact, to speak can be a social act which can bear a political function. Speaking through the most intimate part of one's anatomy is actually revolutionary. *The Vagina Monologues* focuses on the female body/vagina and it opens a new perspective for change in the history of female domination, of identity formation that blurs racial, class, sexual boundaries. What are the pitfalls of such an approach which sexualizes the female body and turns it into commodity for consumption? Can the vagina be seen as the unifying principle of the category woman? Is the vagina a struggle concept to which race, sexual, historical, geographical, social, and cultural differences do not apply?

I/TheVM as an Iconoclastic Play

The mostly talked about play "*The Vagina Monologues* or "*V-Monologues*" has been a real social phenomenon in the US as well as worldwide. Surprisingly enough, it has mobilized many women and activists alike in their attempt to draw the world's attention on violence against women. As an eye opener and a thought-provoking play, *The Vagina Monologues* appears as a wonderful tool for propaganda allowing women to regain power over their selfhood.

The enormous advertisement and press releases this play received clearly illustrate the incredible public exposure it has had. The recurrent message pouring from newspaper articles, universities and colleges worldwide are irresistible invitations to

see the play. This is undoubtedly indicative of how the exchange value of the play took over its literary value. The commodification of the play is obvious with the “vagina products: vagina glass hand sculptures, clip lollipops, vagina puppets, vulva lamps, cone-shaped art pieces” (*TVM*, xxix) and the large sums of money generated. In spite of the market value, the power of this play to rally troops has proven to be phenomenal. *The Vagina Monologues* is not just a play. It is actually a social movement that problematizes and shares the intimate stories of women.

Like the French artist, Gustave Courbet, who painted the then outrageous painting entitled “L’origine du monde,” in 1866, *The Vagina Monologues* can be viewed as a radical play as well. Composed of thirteen monologues, it centers on the vagina as an autonomous subject. Combining theater and performance pieces, it stands out as a development of female enunciation, the assertion of female consciousness and pride. As the title indicates, the play uses graphic language to voice the once unspeakable and whispered terms very loudly. These subliminal and rhetorical techniques aim at bringing the mute vagina into acquiring speech abilities. As such, the play gives resonance to the hearing and sharing of women’s experiences, thoughts, deeds, and preoccupations that set a new perspective.

How does this (re)-inscription of the female genitalia, the taboo in many cultures, speak to or about feminist posture? Is this play the signpost of a new form of ludic feminism? To some of the opponents, this type of shameless rhetoric and vulgar language for some reverse all the gains made by feminism recently. In *Ludic Feminism*, Teresa Elbert argues that ludic feminism “is founded upon poststructuralist assumptions about linguistic play, difference, and the priority of discourse and thus substitutes a politics of representation for radical social transformation” (1996: 3). For a feminist like Elbert, we can

assume, the social impact of this play on the power dynamic is not significant. It is, in Elbert’s view, just discursivity at play if not plain pornography. To others, it demystifies and decenters the discourse of objectification to use Derrida’s terms. There is doubt that Ensler’s text propels the repressed and secret words or vagina discourse into the public arena.

Ensler’s play uses rhetorical strategies to engage with the social, economic structures of exploitation and domination against which women are struggling to free themselves. It re-inscribes women’s fight into discourse. There is no doubt that *The Vagina Monologues* has become a cash cow of many feminist movements in the western world. And it helped launched a worldwide movement to assist women in wars (systematic rape, murder), religious fanaticism, political or cultural oppression (female genital mutilation). The play was performed not only on college and university campuses, but it was also staged in small and big communities alike. There is a clearer attempt to educate the masses to the plight of women and mobilize them so as to stop what many feminist activists perceive as gender-based violence. *The Vagina Monologues* breaks away from all the convention to re-invent a new liberated female voice.

2. *The VM: A show not a play?*

The Vagina Monologues significantly transgresses the traditional play because of its activist priorities. It aims at creating a community of women who are connected by their bodies. Significant in this chain the “vagina is a metonymy for the whole female consciousness”(Cooper, 2007: 732). Furthermore, it is not arranged on the format of a drama, that is, in acts and scenes. In addition, there are no stage directions, no costumes, or sides specifications as to how the stage should be lay out, etc...This play breaks away from the traditional format of the play to a large extend. It is a performance wherein the play is on the narration of the stories of

women's experiences. As the playwright points out in the introduction:

I was never a performer. It did not occur to me that I was performing *The Vagina Monologues* until I had been doing it for about three years. Before this point, I felt merely as if I were telling very personal stories that had been generously told to me...I could not move when I was telling the stories. I had to stay seated in a high-back stool, with a place to rest my feet. It was like climbing into a spaceship every night. I had to speak into a microphone, even in places where I could easily be heard. The microphone functioned as a kind of steering wheel at times, an accelerator at others (VM,xxv-xxvi).

What is atypical about this play is that it is continuously evolving script. At its core is an ongoing building process whereby new pieces can be added and old ones can be modified. It is not only incomplete, but it is also flexible in its theatricality. As new pieces are added, it is enriched by past and new experiences of the women all over the world. Thus, Ensler filled the gap inserting some missing pieces like rape, childbirth, masturbation, lesbian experiences the letters and stories of women. This possibility for growth indicates the incommensurable task and the multiple perspectives the play embraces. It remains opened to changes and additions as long as the violence against women continues in various forms and in different geographical areas. What remains unchanged is not only the spirit set by V-day movement, but also the play's endless process of making and re-inventing itself over and over again.

This play also uses a unique typographical contrast, opposing regular characters to italics to signal the shift of characters, underlining different voices, and/or to simulate a dialogic format. Though a non-linear structure, *The Vagina Monologues* evolves thematically as it articulates the coming of different speakers to sexual maturity. On the one hand, it indicates a shift from

past ignorance about sexuality to more awareness. On the other hand, it is a developmental process from childhood through traumatic experiences to adulthood and sexual exploration and ultimately liberation. Ensler subverts the male dominated discourse, which for centuries has excluded women. She subverts without appropriating the conventional male forms and literary aesthetics as well. This binary construction of the play shows the transformation from a position of victims into a self-assertive subject. Sexuality operates like an initiation ritual, a journey through life, which grants women self-knowledge and agency. *The Vagina Monologues* is a dramatization of the female body and the most intimate part of her body, namely the vagina. As a groundbreaking play, *The Vagina Monologues* opens new avenues in the feminist debate on gender and sexuality. Its impact is most visible through its shocking discourse of empowerment and resistance to what Kate Millet calls sexual politics.

3. The Politics of Sexual Resistance

The Vagina Monologues is the result of a series of interviews, stories, and confession by women about their sexuality. Imagining a play out of the stories of different women all related by their genitalia, Eve Ensler acknowledges the existence of a community of women. In addition, she has brought the vagina into the discourse as a discursive subject and an aesthetic object as well. As they hear and hear the experiences of others, women are bearing witness of their different experiences, lives, geographical location, social and cultural spaces. As a new point of entry into discourse, the vagina becomes the point of pride, of claim, of rally for the oppressed women. In this way, Ensler strips the vagina of its secrecy and the shame attached to it by ritualistically liberating it from the fetters of shame and taboos. She inverts the shaming ritual in which the vagina has long been enclosed by substituting the intimate with the extimate. This is revealed by the diversity in the ages, races, social, and economic statuses, and

cultural background of the women who were interviewed.

The public exposure of the vagina through the “chanting of the word vagina with four thousand wild women in Baltimore, or having thirty-two public orgasms a night” (*VM*, xxiii) shows the desecralization process of the vagina. Eve Ensler has reversed the mechanisms of the shaming ritual. Indeed, what becomes the source of shame is not the vagina itself, but the violence, torture, and maiming inflicted on girls, women in the safety of their homes. Thus, she writes wrote: “Night after night I heard the same stories—women being raped as teenagers, in college, as little girls, as elderly women; women who were terrified to leave; women who were taken sexually, before they were even conscious of sex, by their stepfathers, brothers, cousins, uncles, mothers, and fathers” (*TVM*, xxxi).

In *The Vagina Monologues*, Ensler not only displaces sexuality and its taboos from the private sphere and transferred them into the public domain, but also reverses the vulnerability and shaming related to being sexually victimized from the victims onto the perpetrators. This destabilization of the logic blurs the public/private binary and opens a space for resistance. The rupture is double in that it not only signifies sexuality, but the female genitalia also loses its secrecy and become an object of public scrutiny and a subject of discourse of resistance.

The V-day is the embodiment of the social and activist nature of the play. As Willa Shalit, Executive Director of V-day points out in the appendices of the play that: “V-day is a movement,...a vision,...a spirit,... a catalyst,...a vital ongoing process,--a performance that simply demand that the violence must end” (*TVM*,174). The political agenda of V-day is multiple but the goal is the same, that is, to end any form of violence against women everywhere worldwide. Through the subversion of the traditional form of drama, Eve Ensler gives more flexibility and

freedom to possible performances. Each performance of the play becomes itself unique in that it differs from others. Creativity is a principle of the play, because it has no rigid rules or format to follow.

The celebratory tone of the play is rooted in the acknowledgement of the unity of the self. By reclaiming the previous negative connotations, and renaming the vagina, Ensler reconnects women with their genital organ. Violence is a disruptive force against women. Ironically, it is their point of entry into the discourse of constellation as well. Their self-awareness stems from dissociation of the self-submitted violence, which is conducive to self-hatred, the negation of the self. In “because if he liked to look at it,” the narrator's denial, and culturally imbued ideas about her-self are transformed by Bob. She declares: “I began to feel beautiful and delicious - like a great painting or a waterfall. Bob wasn't afraid. He wasn't grossed out. I began to swell, began to feel proud. Began to love my vagina” (*TVM*, 57). The narrator points out to the roots of self-hatred in women as “only the internalized repression and hatred of the patriarchal culture” (*TVM*, 53). Thus, the eradication of patriarch system of domination, its power structures, and sexual dynamics in favor of a safe space where women connect with women are vital.

The pervasiveness of the culture of violence against women is illustrated by the high number of rapes and atrocities committed against women throughout the world: rapes, incest, murders, economic exploitation. This is exemplified in Edgar Montane's punch between the narrator's legs which “feels like he breaks my entire self” (*TVM*, 78). This violent sexual intercourse pinpoints the realization of women's unity with their vagina (through the violence to which they are submitted due to men). Rape at home or in war zones, incest, medical practices are patriarchal forms of violence imposed on women. Most men are threatened to women unless they are able to

contemplate the vagina for its wonders. Bob, the vagina "connoisseur" is the only man depicted in a positive light. In fact, he loves the vagina of his female partners for what the female genital organ is with no intention of domination or subordination. The celebration and empowerment of the female body operates through the renaming of the previously secretive vagina.

4. The Body and the Power of Naming

A grass-roots play, Eve Enslers's *The Vagina Monologue* opens a public space where women can discuss about the most intimate part of their anatomy. She fosters a community of women wherein the vagina develops through dressing and language. Naming is a celebratory way to re-inscribe in discourse and withhold the negative connotations of the terms. Naming is taming:

I eventually named all parts of my body. My hands—Gladys. They seemed functional and basic like Gady's. I named my shoulders Shorty—strong and a little belligerent. My breasts were Berry. They weren't Veronica, hut they weren't ugly either. Naming my "down there" was not easy. It wasn't the same as naming my hands. No. it was complicated. Down there was alive, not so easy to pinpoint. H remained unnamed and. as unnamed, it was untamed, unknown, (*TVM*, 87)

Un-naming and renaming the different parts of her body create a dialogue between the woman and her vagina and bring her to the understanding of the unity of the self. The multiple characteristics of the vagina in terms of smell, texture, desires, forms ("mouilf", "plate", "black hole" (*TVM*, 44) make it a mystery like "the Bermuda triangle." (*TVM*, 4) In "Because He Liked to Look at it," the speaker justifies self-hatred in these terms: "Our self-hatred is only internalized repression and hatred of the patriarchal culture (*TVM*, 53). Therefore, re-naming the intimate part of the body plays the role of an empowering process wherein women free themselves from shame and ignorance. As women publicly reclaim

the terms such as "cunt," "vulva," "powderbox," "derriere," a "poochi," a "poopi," a "peepe," a "poo plu," a "poonani," a "pal" and a "piche," "toadie," "dee dee," "nishi," "dignity" (*TVM*, 6), they break away from the previous rules of political correctness. More importantly, they demystify these degrading insults, infusing them with new meaning and re-familiarizing with them in everyday language.

Various humorous words are also used to designate female genitalia in this performance. Slightly childish and comic terms like "wee wee," "horsepot," appy "dugout," "mongo," "pajama," "fannyboo," "mushmellow," a "ghoulie," "possible," "tamale," "tottita," "connie," a "Mimi" in Miami, "slit knish" (*TVM*, 6) pinpoint the development process of the female child through adolescence and adulthood. Although the terms change with time, their extra-linguistic referent does not change.

With pride, Enslers re-inscribes these terms with new denotations and connotations. The straightforward language she uses in her play shows, without any doubt, the reversal of the epistemic violence and domination. She tries to naturalize by naming the forbidden, the unspoken into discourse. In this light, she voices the systematic violence, rapes, and genital mutilations on women and girls of all ages on all continents. Although these archaic or secular practices are still alive in many parts of the world where the patriarchal system is firmly rooted, they are exposed for everybody to see. Enslers offers a radical way to deal with women issues by building global and local networks of grass-roots actions.

Enslers unveils or breaks open all the cultural taboos synonymous with shame. The female body is redefined in excess in the sense that it is wrapped up into multiple names, scents, colors, forms, textures. Being able to talk about, to name the vagina or the vulva is a liberation act and self-recognition. It is also a step to break away from the traumatic violence induced by silence and

ignorance. Sexual pleasure and erotic energy appear as forces that free women from patriarchal control and the matrix of heterosexuality. This delineates a different sense of power.

5. A Different Sense of Power

In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine the notion of woman writer and they pinpoint the penis as a metaphorical pen...the essence of literary power. Borrowing Virginia Woolf's terms, they argue that "kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been killed into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the monster in the house, whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity"(1979: 17). Ensler's play re-appropriates this metaphor of paternity and reverses it into a metaphor of maternity. In other words, women enter what Jacques Lacan calls the symbolic realm². In fact, the play gives the vagina a voice to signify the new and empowered speech of women. As creative and transformative power, the totally women-centered themes of the play and the reintegration of the words vagina, cunt or vulva confirm the exclusion of the male subject. The uninhibited exposition of the "female body, her desire and sexuality to public scrutiny are indicative of an autonomous locus of creativity. By writing the female body into a text and through it, Ensler discusses the gendered body, sexual desires and points to the infinite richness, and creativity of femininity.

The Vagina Monologues posits women's bodies and sexuality as an art form fulfilled through orgasms, masturbation, or mutual exploration of intimacies. In this light, female sexuality and pleasure bring about forces that liberate creative

² Jacques Lacan calls language the symbolic realm in that it is language that teaches all forms of social and cultural differences as children grow up.

energies and enable the in-depth and hidden voices of women to be heard:

There is a clit moan (a soft, in-the-mouth sound), the vaginal moan (a deep, in the throat sound), the combo clit-vaginal moan. There is the pre-moan(a hint of sound), the almost moan(a circling sound), the right-on-it moan (a deeper definite sound), the Grace Silk moan(a rock singing sound), the WASP moan (no sound), the semi religious moan(a Muslim chanting sound), the mountaintop moan (a yodeling sound), baby moan (a googie-googie-googoo sound), the doggy moan (a painting sound), the southern moan (southern accent—yeah!yeah), the uninhibited militant bisexual moan (a deep, aggressive, pounding sound), the machine-gun moan, the diva moan (a high, operatic note), (he twisted-toe-orgasm moan, and finally, the surprise triple orgasm moan"(TVM,110-111).

The plurality of moans illustrates the diversity and creativity that sexual pleasure induces into the female bodies. The vagina itself is "an archeological tunnel, a sacred vessel, a Venetian canal, a deep well with tiny stuck" and it changes colors from "blue," "tomato red," to "gray pink," "dark" (TVM, 122). This almost mystical description of the vagina in childbirth exemplifies the miracle of creation, bringing to life as the ultimate form of art exclusively belonging to women. The theme of multiplicity of issues and diversity of women is thoroughly dealt with in the play through the multiple narrative perspectives, diversity of the experiences, and the repetition the word vagina in different languages, heterosexual and homosexual scenes.

The traditional binaries sex/gender, male/female, masculine/feminine are reimagined. Thus the old matrix of power are replaced by what Bartky termed a "political anatomy" (Bartky, 1988: 130). This indirect call for a universal feminism does not focus on sisterhood or motherhood, but rather on the vagina. By deconstructing the previous binary oppositions and worshipping the

vaginas, Enslers reverses the old paradigms and power structures as well. Her new configuration of gender paradigm is a "mimetic" or a simulacrum of the old binaries in that it is founded on mutually exclusive categories. Thus, she attempts to separate sex from gender in order to imagine a "free-floating artifice" wherein gender is contested, not taken for granted.

Still, to theorize and contest sex and gender as a continuum in which the biological markers get translated into the social, and the political realities will require more than rhetorical strategies. As Susan Bordo also argues "the body is a medium of culture.... A powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysics of commitment are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body? The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture." She continues to say that "the body is only a text of culture" (Bordo, 1993: 90). It will simply be a Utopian vision to imagine the biological outside of the cultural, which gives it all its meaning. To paraphrase Judith Butler, one can say "if gender is constructed," "social determinism," it opens no room for "agency" unless its hierarchical structures are leveled or reversed. In other words, for feminism to be a counter discourse to male dominant discourses, it has to be aware of the dyadic perspective that social construction gender implies.

Conclusion

"Does talking about vaginas ruin the mystery, or is that just another myth that keep vaginas in the dark, keeps them unknowing and unsatisfied?" (TVM, 117). *The Vagina Monologues* is a feminist play with a difference in the sense that it gives women access to their own language and subjectivity. Although it is voyeuristic and it draws primarily from male sexual fantasies, it is also deeply rooted in the feminist struggle for female sexual liberation. It relies on grass-roots actions and it embodies a strong activist impulse. Through international and

local mobilization, Enslers's play stages the plights of women. Unlike ludic feminists Utopian models often lost in science fiction and futuristic models, Eve Enslers's play is laying the ground for social and political action by using shocking language as a form of therapy.

The debate on gender and women's position in western societies is an old one. In her early theorizing of feminist thought, Simone de Beauvoir had argued in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman" (1949: 263). *The Vagina Monologues* deconstructs this ongoing mode or becoming process, by imagining a community of women wherein women instruct women on their quest for sexual pleasure. Even if heterosexuality is not a norm, coming to consciousness as a rendered subject is part and parcel of this ongoing process and "the power of saying the unsayable" (TVM, xv). As a result, gender and identity break away from performativity in that the subject does not conform to the prescriptive gender expectations and norms. *The Vagina Monologues* brings to the stage women's experiences, their collective struggle and mobilization to eliminate all forms of gender-based violence. Through its exposure of violence against women, *The Vagina Monologues* calls for legal, social and cultural protection of women all over the world.

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