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Eve Ensler's Vision of the Body in *The Vagina Monologues*

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Abstract: The paper makes an attempt to analyse and interpret Eve Ensler's perception and vision of women's sex and sexuality, centred round the metaphor of the vagina. It seeks to understand the playwright's unique feminist viewpoint via the issue related to sexual violence, exploitation, and organized crime against women from America and Europe to Asia and Africa, and her own political, social and literary activism, as nuanced in *The Good Body* (2005), *The Vagina Monologues* (2008), *Insecure at Last* (2008), and *In the Body of the World* (2013). She endeavours to create and shape a female discourse of resistance to the violence and brutality that permeates the world today, threatening women's existence and identity every now and then. However, it is her vision of women as microcosm of the cosmic energy that makes her different from other feminists. She sensitizes women everywhere to be in harmony with men, nature, society, world, and the universe.

Keywords: sex and sexuality, women's body, consciousness, feminism, empowerment.

The writer of the Obie Award winning play, *The Vagina Monologues* (2008), is a feminist activist who has been advocating the rights of women and girls and making efforts to end the sexual violence, domestic abuse, genital mutilation, and other forms of oppression, perpetrated against the female. Eve Ensler has been raising voice against various parochial bigotries and assault on the female body in the name of race, clan, religion, community, and nationality just as she has been critical of the insular habits and prejudices, as far as the women’s reproductive choices, sexual needs, ostracization, or stigmatization in various parts of the world is concerned. In fact, awareness of women as the hardest hit in various conflict/war zones such as Congo, Bosnia, Croatia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq etc. is crucial to her aesthetic vision, especially as the stories of war sound the same everywhere; only the locations differ, as do the identities of the victims and the aggressors.

In her memoir *In the Body of the World* and the play *The Vagina Monologues*, she speaks as a woman for many women. As she discovers herself, she feels she is one of many, a vaginal symbol. Her worldview integrates selves in sexual encounters of woman and man, as part of feminine wholeness, or Prakriti. Like Anais Nin she suffers from cancer and undergoes an inner struggle. Despite immense physical pain and suffering, her spirit remains serene and positive, enabling her to reveal the mystery of womanhood.

Body and Self

In many literatures and cultures of the world the body has been given prime importance. *The Bible* says ‘Know thyself’. Knowing includes seeing the body naturally, as it is, with respect for its outer and inner structures and features, knowing the physicality itself. Thus, the body becomes a tool to unravel the self and the being of women.

Ensler, through her oeuvre, indicates that the concrete, tactile body is the only means to realize and acknowledge existence of a woman. In the preface to the play *The Good Body* Ensler quotes Marion Woodman, a great Jungian analyst, saying, “instead of transcending ourselves, we must move into ourselves.” (Ensler 2005, xiii)

Emphasizing the importance of the body in her memoir *In the Body of the World*, Ensler notes, “a mother’s body against a child’s body makes a place. It says you are here...” (Ensler 2013, 1) She also points out that the female body is the very cause of creation and if treated badly it can turn into the destruction and collapse of humanity. In her view, the female body is sacrosanct.

She emphasizes different facets and dimensions of womanhood which includes woman’s physical self, consciousness, and being, their relationship with other beings which does not exclude men, nature, society, and world at large.

The body is divine. It is the gateway to know the truth about the world. Knowing includes the innermost physicality and divinity within. Ensler addresses herself to this vital aspect and contemplates that whatever wrong that happens to the women’s lot is the result of their own failings. She narrates personal experiences of women around the world and concludes that there is among women much shame, secrecy, and mystery surrounding their physicality.

Women do not know themselves. They do not know their own hidden body parts. Knowing the body is to become aware of it all the time – entering into its complexities and demystifying the wrong notions and prejudices that are attached to it. In the preface to the play *The Good Body* Ensler rejects female objectification and says:

Tell the image makers and magazine sellers and the plastic surgeons that you are not afraid. That what you fear the most is the death of imagination and originality and metaphor and passion. Then be bold and LOVE YOUR BODY. STOP FIXING IT. It was never broken.
(xiii)

One should rely on one’s own experiences of the body, truth about sex and sexuality, thereby shedding inhibition and becoming free, realizing the significance and beauty of the body, that it is not sacrilege. To know the body is to know the reality of the world. It is the search of a hermit for God, or the Ultimate Truth.

Metaphors of Sex and Sexuality

Ensler is a pro-sex feminist with a spiritual bent of mind. She is not against conjugal relationship, which means she does not decry sex. In one of the monologues she emphasizes that “vagina is nude. It does not want to wear anything anymore”. Sex is natural. It should be taken as it is. She does not like any kind of distortion to it. It already carries life and beauty. There is no need for any kind of embellishment or affectation. In the preface to the play *The Good Body* Ensler says, “I am stepping off the capitalist treadmill. I am going to take a deep breath and find a way to survive not being flat or perfect,... or better. I am inviting you to join me, to stop trying to be anything, anyone other than who you are...” (xiii)

She offers a non-moral view of sex, one can have sex with or without marriage. But, one should know its consequences. So one should not mistreat one’s body, or sex. Knowing the intricacies of sex means entering into it, exploring it, experiencing it, and being aware of the attached notions of sex and sexuality, saying what happens to the body when it undergoes sensory experiences, to its response to all that.

She explores how physicality leads to creativity and divinity at the end; how female stands in relation to male; how they become the balance point of each other; and how this harmony between the two ultimately brings harmony to the universe. In her feminist belief, sex is not bad; talking about it and knowing it is basically broadening one’s understanding of life. Talking and knowing about sex and sexuality is not something to be ashamed of. It is rather the most pious reality and truth to be explored about the world, culture, civilization, and humanity.

She stresses the need for making women shun all the wrong notions (like looking down upon one’s body parts, and to have hesitation, shame or inhibitions about one’s sexuality) about physicality, sex and sexuality. One has to rely on one’s own observations and experiences about life. In the play *The Vagina Monologues* (2008) Ensler reveals the fact about female nature of seeking pleasure in coition:

The clitoris is pure in purpose. It is the only organ in the body designed purely for pleasure. The clitoris is simply

a bundle of nerves: 8,000 nerve fibres, to be precise. That’s a higher concentration of nerve fibres than is found anywhere else in the body, including the fingertips, lips, and tongue, and it is twice...twice...twice the number in the penis. Who needs a handgun when you’ve got a semi-automatic? (51)

The monologues are vignettes, glimpses into the secrets and pleasures of women-types. Each one explores one specific aspect of the vagina, metaphorically, one specific issue related to women’s sexuality. She talks about hair, adrenalin, menstruation, sex, incest, female genital mutilation, masturbation, rape, pleasure, discovery, moans, female power, derision against objectification of female body, lesbian experiences, sex outside of marriage, redeeming the word ‘Cunt’ of its derogatory designation through reclaiming it as an emblem of female power and energy, and the difficult experience of parturition. The monologues also offer comic descriptions of what we call vaginas, such as what they would wear if they got dressed, and what they would say if they talked.

Her focus is not only to address women’s self-hatred and fear of their bodies but also to break through the American culture’s taboo about discussing vaginas. Ensler was inspired by a conversation with a friend who was in menopause, and made self-loathing comments about her vagina. In her own New Age feminist style, she crusades to erase the shame surrounding female genitals. She deserves credit for presenting female sexuality and the vagina in a more vocal way than has been done before, especially in mainstream theatre performance.

Philosophy

Ensler’s exploration of sex, which is the investigation of everything, is akin to the Chinese philosophy of Yin-Yang: She stresses how apparently opposite or contrary forces are actually complementary, interconnected, and interdependent in the natural world, and how they give rise to each other as they interrelate to one another. Male and female are thought of as physical manifestations of the duality of Yin-

Yang; the feminine and masculine principles are the two opposing cosmic forces into which creative energy divides and whose fusion in physical matter brings the phenomenal world into being. Thus, men and women together create new generations that allow the race they mutually create, and come from, to survive. They transform each other as they interact. What matters is the balance between Yin and Yang qualities within oneself that is necessary to retain inner peace and harmony. If Yin and Yang become imbalanced, one of the qualities is considered deficient or has vacuity (Yin and Yang).

So, the quintessential truth about sex is that both male and female are part of a whole and their sole aim is to create. Both of them are prominent and essential as they lead toward creation and sustenance of human civilization. They have to be in balance with each other, in balance with other beings, and in balance with the universe. In fact, etymologically the word Vagina has its origin from a word meaning sheath and sword. It upholds the male and creates, and there will be imbalance if they are bifurcated because it is the union of the two energies or forces both the male and the female that was there since the inception of humanity and is the very cause of creation.

Women’s Consciousness and the World

What Ensler’s point is that women stand in relation to the world in which they live. Whatever wrong that happens outside affects women at domestic level. Since the US and its allies decided that Iraqis needed a regime change, for instance, women there have had to contend with abductions, death, torture, forced marriages, rape, and sexual violence of all sorts. Sexual violence against women is pervasive in places like Congo, Bosnia, Shabunda, Bunyakiri, Goma, Bukavu, Afghanistan, and Iraq. As a social activist, Ensler believes in social reform. She is pro-poor and seeks to transform the world to a better and safer place for women, particularly the down trodden ones who work as labourers and are being physically and sexually exploited and raped, women who are underpaid for their services and deprived of civic amenities.

Ensler cherishes the dream when these underpaid people would be paid the most and would be free from sexual slavery. In her Memoir *In*

the Body of the World she shows a Leftist leaning. While lying in the hospital bed she comes across a nurse named Cindy who is not paid for the services that she provides to the patients. Ensler broods over this injustice and wishes that when the world is right then these people will be on the top. She waits for the day when women will indulge in social and political affairs and will drift away from all that limits their inner and outer growth. In the preface to the play *The Good Body* Ensler says:

This play is my prayer, my attempt to analyse the mechanisms of our imprisonment, to break free so that we may spend more time running the world than running away from it; so that we may be consumed by the sorrow of the world rather than consuming to avoid that sorrow and suffering.... (xii)

The uplift of humanity lies in the uplift of the soul of an individual. In the introduction to the play *The Vagina Monologues* Ensler says, “the trick has been to live in the contradictions while maintaining principles, beliefs, and purposes...” (xiii) Thus, she indicates to women to never let themselves down or feel disheartened while surrounded with problems. Rather one should have the courage to surpass everything that least matters and is harmful in achieving full growth of one’s personality and evolution of one’s spirit.

Ensler believes in human goodness and meaningful existence. Compassion and hard work are the keys through which the society and world would become a better place to live and grow. In the Memoir *In the Body of the World* she cites the example of Muhammad Ali and says:

I put on my signed Muhammad Ali gloves. I box with myself in the mirror. I watch *When We Were Kings* for the sixth time. Kinshasa. Ali and Foreman. The Rumble in the Jungle. Biggest upset in history. That’s what I’m going for. It was Ali’s staying power. Foreman was young. He gave him everything he had in the first round, just like this infection. Ali stayed on the ropes absorbing the hundreds of blows to his body. Even Ali’s greatest supporters had their money on Foreman. But he was

fighting for other things, bigger things. He dropped Foreman in the Eighth round. (73)

Thus Ali through his perseverance and endurance won the battle against Foreman. Ali outlived hundreds of blows of bad fortune because he was fighting for other things, bigger things.

Reality has to be accepted as it is. One should not be passive or inactive. One should make efforts to transform ones situation, to flourish, to grow as oneself. She believes in losing everything to achieve one’s own identity and self. Suffering least matters: “...it’s one of those almost impossible photographs where time has stopped. Ali is standing, Foreman is on the ground. Ali has clearly won, but it’s not the glory that hits you, it’s the shock and the stagger of the struggle...” (110)

Likewise Ensler ponders over death and love. She suggests not to be afraid of anything and to abandon everything for the greater love, that is, love for the entire humanity, and particularly women. She quotes, “Live as if you were already dead.’ Zen admonition” (210). Further she insists, “Your dying, my dying is necessary and irrelevant and inevitable. Do not be afraid, no, death will not be our end. Indifference will be, dissociation will be...” (212). Ensler’s belief about love is also idiosyncratic. She loves humanity and especially women. It is just an elevation of love to higher plane and greater ends. She says:

Now I see my fear was not about sex. It was about being caught, determined, lined up. It was about being cornered in the love stall. It was about packaged love, couple love, dead-and-done-with-permanently-in-the-house-with-the-children love. About love that screamed isolation and church and control. That screamed,” care about your own, protect your lot.” About parsed-out love and regulated love and prevented love. (167)

All her values are aimed at social good and benevolence toward women. One can trace strong influence of Oriental Philosophy and Religion on Eve Ensler’s consciousness. She believes in the principles of Buddhist Philosophy and Hinduism. She refers to Hindu Goddess

Kali and Buddhist Goddess Tara, “Tara who came through Buddha’s heart” and “appeared in a woman’s body.” Kali stands for female sexual power which controls the creation and destruction of humanity.

In Foreword to the play *The Vagina Monologues*, Gloria Steinem mentions that in Hindu Religious Culture in ancient times women were being worshipped as a vaginal symbol in temples. The oval shaped structure that holds Lingam half inside and half outside is the Vagina. It is because of patriarchal domination over matriarchy that made it shift to the Tantric practice and Occultism which is again not included in the mainstream Hindu Religion. Then she goes on explaining how several religious temples around the world resemble female anatomy and modelled vagina in their texture and sculpture.

The basic agenda and strategy of the playwright in writing and performing the play *The Vagina Monologues* has been to awaken people by giving them a shock. On being asked how she had been working to overcome objections to the play by religious communities in order to move V-Day forward, Eve Ensler responded to the questioner, “Well, the people who seem to be opposed to the play, in my experience, are usually people who haven’t been to it. So, part of what we have been working on is inviting people to come before they have objections....” (Roark 2007, 36)

The playwright’s aim is to make people aware of the issues related to women and expose their perception about female sex and sexuality, as also to make them accept a new belief and value. She is not against religion. Her aim is to make one think. In an interview with Carolyn Roark, Ensler defends Vagina monologues saying, “Part of what we are trying to do here is that the vagina is sacred, is honoured, is to be cherished and is to be protected, and so in some ways, we are not at all at odds with the Church or any church. I think that our differences are that we believe in speaking about it openly and it is important because where things remain hidden, and dark, and isolated, usually abuse occurs and usually some forms of perversion occur.” (Roark 2007, 36-37)

Ensler as a social activist visited university dormitories and pleaded to turn those places Rape Free Zones. As she believes, “the task of all

Christians is to work toward the end of violence because all of us as God’s children deserve to live in a safer world....” (Roark 36-37) Ensler looks forward to greater tolerance and acceptance of differences of thoughts.

Social Concerns

Ensler condemns rich people, industrialists, corrupt politicians, and corporations that pillage African nations of their oil, gold, minerals, and crops and that are indifferent toward native people’s suffering. Instead superpowers send militaries to rape women there, as in Congo.

She decries the monopoly of a powerful section that has access to and privilege over wealth and the rest of the people are condemned to suffer perpetual poverty and hunger. Ensler draws attention to the issues related to women where one out of three women will be raped and beaten up around the planet.

She thinks that change is necessary. In fury she envisages uprising, bloodshed and revolution. But this is against her humanitarian values. So, she wants transformation in the situation of women with change in mind and attitude. In the play *The Vagina Monologues* she expresses her concern for women, finding it bizarre that they were being raped and mutilated in Bosnia in the Middle of Europe in 1993 through a systematic tactic of war and none of the institutions, people, organizations, and nations paid any attention to their insuperable plight. She spent two months in Croatia and Pakistan in 1994, interviewing Bosnian women refugees and rape survivors of 1993. She says:

When I returned to New York after my first trip, I was in a state of outrage. Outraged that 20,000 to 70,000 women were being raped in the middle of Europe in 1993, as a systematic tactic of war, and no one was doing anything to stop it. I couldn’t understand it. A friend asked me why I was surprised. She said that over 500,000 women were raped every year in this country, and in theory we were not at war. (Ensler 2008, 60)

Ensler seeks to free women of sexual slavery which is possible with each woman’s personal growth. Women should be actively involved in public affairs rather than sitting back at home. They have to actively contribute to the processes of social change as independent individuals, rather than be satisfied with marriage and parturition.

Wherever war occurs it harms women to a great extent. Women are being physically and sexually exploited in countries of Eastern Europe, West Asia, Africa, and Middle East due to war. It is not only that their bodies and sex organs are being mutilated or distorted. Distortion extends to the level of their self and being. Their body is dislocated and their soul splits off. Ensler interviewed Bosnian rape survivors and was in awe of their spirit and strength, “My vagina a live wet water village. They invaded it. Butchered it and burned it down. I do not touch now. Do not visit. I live someplace else now. I don’t know where that is.” (Ensler 2008, 63)

Sexual and physical abuse splinters their psyche. She believes that women’s emancipation lies in their self-empowerment. They have to be self-reliant and have to shun self-pity and self-hatred. They have to overcome their victimhood and have to struggle for their survival. Women have to come out of the shell of propaganda and accept reality as it is. Through their own efforts they have to undo the wrong that happens to them.

Ensler also understands that violence leads to spiritual degeneration of both the perpetrator and the victim. In order to live with the guilt of the wrong that is done to harm someone’s person, the perpetrator has to turn into “the other”. In the same way to bear the pain being inflicted, the victim’s personality splits off. Violence degrades the self and harms both of them. (Roark 2007, 36)

Yet, Ensler envisions a better future for women. She has established sanctuaries to save female species from extinction. She has established City Of Joy in the Congo for empowering women. She says:

We are the people of the second wind. We, who have been undermined, reduced, and minimized, we know

who we are. Let us be taken. Let us turn our pain to power, our victimhood to fire, our self-hatred to action, our self-obsession to service, to fire, to wind. Wind. Wind. Be transparent as wind, be as possible and relentless and dangerous, be what moves things forward without needing to leave a mark, be part of this collection of molecules that begins somewhere unknown and can’t help but keep rising. Rising. Rising. Rising. (Ensler 2013, 216-7)

The second wind is symbolic of recuperation and revival of the self to transmute bad into good, worse into better and beautiful, and ultimately to change society for the common good, to transform the world seeking welfare of all humans, including women.

Ensler’s Vision

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, one of the most prominent Kenyan writers of contemporary African Literature, in his book *Decolonising the Mind*, mentions that all human beings are born in a situation that to a great extent determines their being. One faces nature and other humans as two forces that influence one’s understanding of human situation. These two forces in turn are responsible for the making and unmaking of the self of an individual. It is encountering these two forces and evolving out to be oneself that determines one’s being and self into the world. (Thiong’o 1986, 114)

Ensler focuses her attention on everything including human relations, nature, society, and the world at large. That is how one discovers one’s own worth as an evolving entity. It is in relation to the other that one defines oneself, and connects. A tree by the hospital window where she was being treated for cancer turned out to be the point of connection and meditation as mentioned in her memoir. She associates infection in her liver with the gulf oil spill of Mexico destroying sea life. She says:

As Michaela washes my naked head, I realize this water holds the best and the worst of us. The greed, and the

recklessness that led to the drilling explosion, and all the lies that got told before and after. It’s the gulf that I swam in at the age of sixteen reciting T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock.” The gulf where both my parents died, their last gaze directed out on that horizon. It’s the gulf, the wide hole, between my mother and me. The gulf dividing tribes, Families, continents, and colours. The gulf washing over my head, melting in Michaela’s lap, suddenly indistinguishable from my salty tears. (Ensler 2013, 176-177)

She goes on reflecting human relations. Her relationship with her father, Arthur, who molested her; her relationship with her mother, Chris, who made her feel alienated; her relationship with Laura, her sister, who did not undergo childhood abuse like Ensler did; her relationship with her brother, Curtis, her stepson Dylan, her daughter-in-law Shiva, and her granddaughter, Coco. Ensler reflects her relationship with Coco and says, “she once told me I was “her person” and she was mine”...not merged so much, but joined in affinity, in worldview, in energy, in lifetime of connections...” (Ensler 2013, 96-97)

She extends this relationship to the women of Congo, Shabunda, Bunyakiri, Kosova, Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Goma; considers them as her own tribe, wants to save them from sexual violence, and make them sexually free.

Spiritual influence

Stressing her essentially spiritual being, she observes: “What I believe is that we have this extraordinary spirit inside ourselves, which for me is our Buddha nature. I believe we are in the process of opening and getting closer and closer to our Buddha nature and stripping away all that is covering it...I think to be honest, that being is inside.” She refers to the five elements, namely Earth, Water, Air, Fire, Spiritual Sky or Akash and how these fractions of molecules are the catalyst to form the matter, or Rupa. They uphold this very Body, Soul, Self, Being, and Consciousness of every human being.

In Buddhist philosophy it has incorporated all these elements as the basis for understanding that leads one through unbinding of ‘Rupa’ or materiality to the supreme state of pure emptiness or ‘Nirvana.’ Our body or any solid material is the physical manifestation or ‘Rupa’ born out of these great elements. The results of these qualities are the inputs to our five senses, colour, smell, taste, and sensations of body. The matter that is perceived in the mind is just a mental interpretation of these qualities.

But the matter is not something that is constitutive of external mind-independent reality. It is how one perceives or meditates through mindfulness.

“...just as if a skilled butcher or his assistant, having slaughtered a cow, were to sit at a crossroads with the carcass divided into portions, so a monk reviews this very body...in terms of the elements: ‘there are in this body the earth element, the water element, the fire element, the air element’, so he abides contemplating in body internally...” (Mahābhūta)

Not only one body but all the other bodies and creatures and living beings are born out of the synthesis of these great elements. Ensler indicates these elements as the energy that propels her around the planet looking for human connections. The Body is not something derogatory. It should not be desecrated. Rather it is the means to attain spirituality and to know the truths of life.

It is the centre of women’s existence and the way home for them. She juxtaposes the deadly disease cancer that has invaded her body with all the wrong and horrendous acts of violence that is perpetrated against women in the Congo and around the world. She elevates this crisis of the female body to the spiritual plane. The cancer of the body and the acute danger surrounding female existence work as a talisman for Ensler. Throughout this process of love and care she realizes that millions of women are in dire need of cure, love and respect. Women are in need to be rescued and conserved.

However, there has to be radical change in women’s attitude and perspective to view themselves in relation to their body and the world outside. They will have to view their body as important, not bad. They are in need of company of other self-conscious women. It is basically seeking a way home as one is comfortable with one’s own body and being.

There are innumerable possibilities awaiting. This harmony within female community will bring other beings in harmony and finally will culminate in a balanced human existence, balanced world, and a balanced universe.

Eve Ensler is a feminist in her own right. She is her own brand. She seeks sexual freedom for women. Sex is biological and it should not take one into dark corners. She talks about sex in concrete and clinical terms to shed all the taboos and prejudices. Through several religious, cultural, and literary anecdotes she emphasizes the significance of female power and their crucial role in society. Women stand in relation with men, nature, society, world, and the universe. They are the very centre of creation and destruction of humanity.

Finally, women are their own revolution. They carry inside them that sparkling light, that ultimate consciousness which can vanquish the hard shell of the lesser self and transform them into a fully conscious being. This is what Ensler believes and she wants women to be their own Messiah. They can change themselves through realizing their fully grown Buddha nature and it is in the process of knowing themselves that they will surely come to know the reality about the world. Thus Ensler’s approach is self-emancipatory.

Eve Ensler speaks with the voice of a world citizen who places her personal, racial, and national experience within the context of the human experiences as a whole. She shares her self-discovery with every woman who is persuaded to explore her inner body, mind, and self for emancipation from physical exploitation and sufferings on the one hand and ignorance, prejudices, and fears on the other.

Ensler’s apparent physical agenda is in fact her spiritual agenda culminating in the Buddhist sanctuaries for empowering women inwardly with a sense of pride in their sex and sexuality and inner freedom to view themselves and the universe in accordance with each other ever-expanding, ever-rising, and ever-evolving.

She understands the truth of her being by living the questions she raises. Her bodily adventure is to realize the spiritually illuminating ‘sat-chit-ananda’. She seeks ‘bliss’ (*ananda*) boldly, without fear as it brings her, and every woman, both her consciousness (*chit*) and her being (*sat*). She speaks with awareness of her ‘core’ or ‘centre’, metaphorically ‘vagina’, which is inside her, and knows when one is on the beam or off the beam, that is, when one stays in the centre, one has one’s bliss.

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