

How does Eve Ensler challenge taboo in *The Vagina Monologues*?

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	p. 2
TVM overview.....	p. 3
Language choices.....	p. 4
The small issues: Body Hair.....	p. 6
The double V: Vagina and Violence.....	p. 8
Universality of the issues.....	p. 11
Conclusion.....	p. 12
Bibliography.....	p. 15

Introduction

“Vagina Ladies”¹ is what society needs today. In fact, these “ladies” were needed historically. Sexually and physically violated by her own father, the feminist artist Eve Ensler published “The Vagina Monologues” in 1996. Premiered in New York, the play marked the beginning of the global vagina movement today, which fights violence against women.

Eve Ensler explores the most personal parts of women’s experiences with their bodies. In her play she tackles themes from menstruation and masturbation, to gynecological exams, childbirth, sexuality and sexual liberation, through which she targets the cultural and social taboos which surround these intimate and personal experiences of women’s bodies. “Ensler’s interest in disrupting the taboos that surround the vagina is driven, in part, by the fact that she believes that these taboos help to perpetuate a culture of silence in which women are rendered more vulnerable to various forms of violence. Ensler’s concern is this: if we cannot talk about the vagina openly, respectfully and publicly, how can we ever hope to change the attitudes that underlie violent and oppressive practices that are visited upon women?”² This is exactly what the essay attempts to discuss, how the author tries to break a long-lasting cultural taboo and its aftermath; the hidden and justified gender based violence that comes with it.

¹ Eve Ensler. *The Vagina Monologues*, United States: Villard Books, 1998

² Michele L Hammers, *Talking About “Down There”: The Politics of Publicizing the Female Body through The Vagina*. *Women’s Studies in Communication*; Fall 2006;

TVM overview

“There’s so much darkness and secrecy surrounding them - like the Bermuda Triangle”³, Ensler writes in the first monologue. She explains that because of such secrecy that surrounds vaginas, she “decided to talk to women about their vagina, to do vagina interviews, which became vagina monologues”⁴. As the book was inspired by women and their stories, it was published as a platform, primarily, for women. Thus giving them, who probably never had a ‘vagina talk’, the chance to hear the word vagina in a scene and feel uncomfortable, finally. She uses the word ‘vagina’ 128 times throughout the monologues. It was and still is a medium through which women can embrace their given bodies shamelessly.

However, the “vagina lady”, presents different layers of the ‘vagina issue’ in her play, where the taboo on the word itself is not the biggest of all. Initially she tackles the issue by yelling the troublesome word, vagina, in her audience’s ears. This forces the audience to unconsciously start to push past the long-lasting taboo of the ‘down there’. Start a discussion about the vagina, is what she firstly wants to achieve. But through this she only guides the audience towards the more serious problems - violence. Starting with the vagina and the pubic hair, ending up with themes like rape and sexual abuse, she addresses gender based violence. After all, if one can't even say the word vagina, how is one expected to be able to talk about rape and other types of violence for instance?

³ Eve Ensler. *The Vagina Monologues*, United States: Villard Books, 1998, p. 3-4

⁴ Ibid, xxiv

Language choices

“A word after a word after a word is power”⁵ are the words of Margaret Atwood. Ensler enhances the power of words through her language choices, literary devices , including euphemisms, foreshadowing and personification between the many others.

It is not something surprising to know that vagina, as a word, is a taboo. This is explicitly touched upon in the first monologue. “It sounds as an infection at best”⁶, Ensler ironically describes the word. “Ridiculous” and “unsexy” are two of the adjectives further used by the author when describing it. The fact that substitute labels are used to avoid the “unsexy” and “politically incorrect” word, concerned Ensler significantly. In the first monologue she mentions 35 different vagina euphemisms used in various states in the US. Euphemisms are frequently thought as a technique used to temper a sensitive subject matter; the end to the words that are less inflammatory and, therefore, less likely to evoke extreme reactions.⁷ “I was worried”⁸ are the starting words of her play. This demonstrates how she started this piece, when acknowledged the fact that people hesitate to talk about vaginas. By naming only 35 euphemisms out of many more different societies use

⁵ “Spelling - Poem by Margaret Atwood”. *Poem Hunter*. January 3, 2003. <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-city-planners/#content>

⁶ Eve Ensler. *The Vagina Monologues*, United States: Villard Books, 1998, p. 5

⁷ Lauren Rosewarne. *American Taboo: The Forbidden Words, Unspoken Rules, and Secret Morality of Pop Culture*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2013

⁸ Eve Ensler. *The Vagina Monologues*, United States: Villard Books, 1998, p. 3

when referring to vaginas, she enlightens the issue in front of her audience- the taboo surrounding the female body. This massive number of existing euphemisms displays the necessity and emergency for the 'vagina' to be known as vagina and none of the substitute words used. Thus, justifying the use of personification firstly in the title, which remains present throughout the whole play.

The title itself indicates and foreshadows what the whole play is about. "Vagina Monologues", vaginas speaking. Giving so a voice to a forgotten, unspoken about, objectified subject - the vagina. Personification used by Ensler, it's one of the most highlighted parts of the play. Questions like "What would your vagina wear?"⁹, or "what would it say?"¹⁰ provoke the audience. Invites them to form an opinion from another perspective, while making them feel uncomfortable and talk about the troublesome topic of vagina simultaneously. The author starts easily with what the vagina would wear and say, just to break the discomfort with which the discussion for this matter is surrounded. The audience might even find it humorous and silly to talk about clothes an organ would wear. However, this is a smart strategy used from Ensler to push the audience beneath the superficial discussion for the taboo. From 'My vagina would wear...' to "My vagina is angry"¹¹ Ensler develops the idea through personification. With an angry, rebellious and disappointed tone she addresses the theme of commodities used to "decorate"¹² vaginas. Showing to the reader how vaginas are being viewed as profit objects in multiple dimensions, from

⁹ Eve Ensler. *The Vagina Monologues*, United States: Villard Books, 1998, p. 15

¹⁰ Ibid, 19

¹¹ Ibid, 69

¹² Ibid, 70

tampons to underwear. She addresses the issue of the holistic worldwide existing idea of standardized female body beauty from the 'down there's' point of view. Thus empowering the message of the monologues even more.

The small issues: Body Hair

“The hair on the top of women’s heads is valued and admired, spoken, written and sung of as one of the ultimate signs of femininity. Body hair, on the other hand, is described as ‘unfeminine’, ‘excess hair’, ‘superfluous hair’ or ‘unwanted hair’.”¹³

In the time when female body has to meet certain societal expectations, which often conflict with the freedom of women over their bodies, Eve Ensler comes to her audience with a cultural shock. She writes not only about the ‘down-there’, but expands to what’s around it - the hair. She presents hair as a symbol of growth and adulthood by saying her hairless vagina made her look “like a little girl”¹⁴. Little children are associated with need for protection and safety. The symbolism of hair later on in the play becomes even clearer. “There was no protection”¹⁵ she describes the shaved vagina, hence closely connecting pubic hair to safety.

The story talks about a man wanting his woman to have a shaved vagina. While writing “He made me shave my vagina”¹⁶, Ensler not only displays how the woman’s vulnerability was created by a man, but simultaneously touches upon

¹³ Karin Lesnik-Oberstein. *The Last taboo: Women and body hair*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007

¹⁴ Eve Ensler. *The Vagina Monologues*, United States: Villard Books, 1998, p. 9

¹⁵ Ibid, 11

¹⁶ Eve Ensler. *The Vagina Monologues*, United States: Villard Books, 1998, p. 9

another crucial part of the female body. The strong modal verb 'made', takes off the body ownership of the woman. This translates to the vulnerability women have when it comes to decisions that are theirs to make, but they are not allowed to do so. Thus, loss of authority of one's own body is another undiscussed matter brought up by Ensler.

The "Hair" monologue is written in a humorous tone, unsurprisingly making the audience laugh, and maybe even get confused with the effort Ensler puts to talk about something seemingly small such as pubic hair. Exactly this, is the author's purpose: make the audience look at how something seemingly small can be so ingrained in our culture and way of being that we don't question it. If one doesn't question the issue of the vagina, and then hair, cannot be expected to question, maybe even challenge, the issue of objectification and oppression, loss of body ownership, which are high likely to lead to other serious issues. By addressing this and giving it attention, she pushes us past taboo, to talk about something we take for granted and don't challenge. After all, the fact that possession of hair remains a radical expression and controversial performance ¹⁷ rather than embracement of the natural and a matter of free choice, is significant enough to prove the existence of structural violence towards women. Violence which prevents women from enjoying freedom by engraving shame, discomfort, and guilt around their own bodies, which makes them feel vulnerable.

¹⁷ Karin Lesnik-Oberstein. *The Last taboo: Women and body hair*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007

The double V: Vagina and Violence

In a superficial look one might conclude that Ensler's work is against what the feminist doctrine preaches for. Women are more than vaginas. And it is true. Women are indeed more than an object. Ensler doesn't disagree with this. Instead she powerfully agrees and writes a whole book to reclaim the vagina as our own. To stop the cycle, vagina-woman, woman-vagina, and make these two pieces a symbiotic one. First, she introduces the audience to a new topic of discussion-vagina itself. What the vagina would wear or what it would say, are some of the questions the author uses to start going. She does so in an attractive and entertaining way for the audience. "High heels", "emeralds", "costume eye mask", "a large hat full of flowers", "something machine washable"¹⁸ are some of the responses to one of the aforementioned questions. Short, catchy, entertaining and attractive answers.

After Ensler starts with the vagina, she talks about the hair, since according to her these two go together, "you can't love a vagina unless you love hair"¹⁹. She continues to other unspoken about 'issues' such as "The Flood", which refers to the woman's "cum". Smoothly she develops the female body anti-taboo, by shifting from the "woman's flood" to the woman's blood, menstruation, in the "I was twelve. My mother slapped me" monologue. Having done so, in the next monologue "The Vagina Workshop", she jumps to the exciting part of sexual

¹⁸ Eve Ensler. *The Vagina Monologues*, United States: Villard Books, 1998, p. 16-17

¹⁹ Ibid, 9

liberation, through the theme of masturbation. To make her message clearer, the author dedicates a separate part “Vagina Fact” on the clitoris. Explaining how “it is the only organ in the body designed purely for pleasure”²⁰.

Through all these monologues, Ensler introduces the vagina, its surrounding (hair), how it looks like and what it is capable of doing (“the flood”, periods and sexual pleasure it brings). She finalizes the body acceptance message in the following monologue named “Because he liked to look at it”. She tells the story of a man for whom looking at the vagina and appreciating one is the greatest pleasure. Because of his love for the vagina, the woman “began to feel beautiful and delicious”²¹ and “began to love [her] vagina”²². The significant detail in the monologue is the fact that the woman comes to find her beauty only when the man finds it in her. This could be interpreted as the man is the society as a whole. A patriarchal society who teaches young women to keep secrecy of the most important parts of themselves -vaginas, period, hair, masturbation, “cum”. Ensler’s idea is that if you can’t speak for the vagina itself, how you can expect from one to be able to speak for issues such as sexual assault, abuse and rape.

After the ‘introducing the vagina’ part, the author writes “My vagina was my village”, where the main theme is rape. Not only she brings up the story of a raped woman during the war, but she sends the audience into a ‘Let’s get to know all the details’ trip. “Not since I heard the skin tear and made lemon screeching sounds,

²⁰ Eve Ensler. *The Vagina Monologues*, United States: Villard Books, 1998, p. 51

²¹ Ibid, 57

²² Ibid, 57

not since a piece of my vagina came off in my hand, a part of the lip, now one side of the lip is completely gone”²³, writes Ensler with an emotional and desperate tone. Such descriptive register, enhances the power of the revealed truth about what happens behind the hidden topics for the female body. But the issue of such violence doesn't stop here.

In the “Vagina Fact” parts, Ensler describes other unfortunate practices females go through. With a reference to “The Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets”, she brings up the clitoridectomy for curing masturbation²⁴. Pure example of violence towards women, which takes the sexual liberty away from them. She enforces the truth for sexual abuse on the next “Vagina Fact”, where female genital mutilation (FGM) is the focus. With use of logos, builds credibility. Thus makes the message clearer, trustworthy and action-incentivize. These sections of “Vagina Facts” where she only refers to data, statistics, and academic information, differ from the monologues. The register is formal, academic. Structured in paragraphs and with contracted information. With a very objective tone, it creates a healthy contrast from the powerful language filled with literary devices and emotional tone one can find in the monologues. Here relies the importance and the added value of the play as a whole, since it contains a fruitful combination between ethos, logos and pathos.

Ensler was raped by her own father, which gives her enough trust worthiness to try pass through a taboo around vaginas, and reach the revelation of truths about

²³ Ibid, 62

²⁴ Ibid, 66

violence. Besides the ethos element, the emotional component is visible in each and every monologue. She conveys her messages from different characters of different backgrounds. Which increases the likelihood that each reader will find her/himself in, or will be able to make an emotional connection with one of the pieces of the stories. Ensler's descriptive language helps in this direction, since it pushes the audience to create physical imagery in their minds, and show empathy. Last, but not least, the author gives the audience something more than just an artistic interpretation combined with real stories. Besides the pathos component, she makes a great use of logos. Scientific data, research, and academic information with reference to all kind of sources is provided. By making this logical connection between the subjective stories and objective research which support these stories' claims, the book gets a holistic coverage on the taboo breaking mission. Thus, empowers the message of TVM - talk about vaginas, so you can talk about the bigger issues that come with it; violence of different types. And only then, one can start the new mission of fighting this oppressive and marginalizing violence.

Universality of the issues

The Vagina Monologues addresses many issues connected to the female body. It is a weapon produced, purely to fight patriarchy and patriarchal thoughts, which later translate into oppressive violent actions towards women. However this is a fight where different groups of people need to be allies in order to win. "An important feminist strategy for destabilizing the status quo is making the private public,

political, even if this is simply through talking about ‘troublesome’ topics”.²⁵ Eve Ensler, as one of the most significant feminists of the third wave feminism, follows this strategy. However, the impact differs from the way the message is conveyed. What Ensler does is: show the real problems to the audience in the most straightforward and plain way, but persuasive and action-calling at the same time.

“I talked with over two hundred women. I talked to older women, young women, married women, single women, lesbians, college professionals, actors, corporate professionals, sex workers, African American women, Hispanic women, Asian American women, Native American women, Caucasian women, Jewish women”²⁶, Ensler explains in the book. Besides explicitly targeting women, she ensures to target men as well. While telling the stories in the monologues, she builds physical imageries through different similes which appeal to every gender. For instance, she makes comparisons to beards, mosquito bites, smell of fishes, nuances of colors. All in all, her strategy to make the private, the taboo, a publically discussed topic comes from a holistic background. This further enforces the power of the work itself by making it more persuasive to the audience when it comes to the significance of the taboo Ensler is challenging. The variety of stories, which contain various issues, used by the author highlights the need for this work to be produced, since it shows how the tackled issues are not happening in one part of the world, in only one age group, in one community of women of one race. In fact, it’s a global issue which intersects culture, age, race, sexuality and ethnicity, and

²⁵ Virginia Braun. *Breaking a Taboo? Talking (and Laughing) about the Vagina*, First Published August 1, 1999

²⁶ Eve Ensler. *The Vagina Monologues*, United States: Villard Books, 1998, p. 4-5

harms women regardless of all these. Thus, the piece displays the universality of the existing taboo around female body and the need to push past it.

Conclusion

“(She) was worried about vaginas”. Ensler’s play is focused on taboo themes from the word vagina itself, menstruation, and masturbation to sexuality and “women’s flood”. The cultural and social norms which have built these taboos help perpetuate gender-based violence, direct and indirect. Ensler tries to push past this violating taboo through first-person narrative perspective conveyed from different personas, which demonstrates how the discussed issues are universal.

Eve Ensler builds the path to the taboo’s destruction slowly. The hair monologue is a great example. Her purpose is to make the audience look at how something seemingly small can be so ingrained in our culture and way of being that we don’t even question it. She uses little pieces to create the bigger picture. So, the structure of the play as a whole is essential. Through all the monologues, Ensler introduces the vagina, its surrounding (hair), how it looks like and what it is capable of doing (“the flood”, periods and sexual pleasure it brings), and step by step, she goes to parts of rape, violence and sexual abuse. Ensler wants to show her audience how one cannot expect women to talk about bigger issues like gender-based violence, while they can’t even talk about the vagina itself.

Successfully, she increases awareness on how harming taboos can be. She does so through diversity in her targeted audience, and most significantly through using

persuasive methods - by using pathos and reaching that emotional connection with the audience through the first-person narrative perspective, and finally by not ignoring the importance of logos, hence exposing the audience to facts and references to academic sources in the “Vagina Facts” parts. Moreover, Eve Ensler had a great credibility and trust-worthiness to produce this work since she is a victim of gender-based violence, and who better than someone who experienced violence would know the consequences of it, and the necessity to push past taboos which perpetuate violence.

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