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Thus Spake the Body: Delineating Social, Cultural and Linguistic 'Othering' in the Indian Adaptation of Eve Ensler's Monologues

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ABSTRACT:

Women are taught how to detach themselves from their bodies. This is discussed by Judith Butler in her book 'Gender Trouble' (1990). She discusses how the concepts of gender - male and female, or, masculine and feminine are placed according to Foucault's power matrix. She points out how the heterosexual dynamics outcaste or 'other' different social or sexual dispositions. Eve Ensler's 'The Vagina Monologue' (1996) was an attempt to highlight that such power-matrix works within the heterosexual society as well- marginalizing women and their bodies. The paper discusses how the Indian audience reacted to a body-part that is, the Vagina , when it was discussed , it made the misogynist angry and women empowered. These monologues lay bare the prominence of one's identity and an acceptance of it in its

entirety. In this study, our purpose is to extract how the adaptation aforementioned in India is different, why it is different and how this change has contributed in the development of *l'écriture féminine* in Third-World countries.

KEYWORDS:

bodies, language, power-matrix, marginalize, vagina, identity, feminism, *le'criture féminine*, adaptation, third world countries.

What is a woman? 'Tota mulier in utero' (Beauvoir, 13), says that woman is a womb but should we limit her existence to somebody who conceives, carries and then delivers? A woman and her ovary constitute what is known as the feminine mystique, since it is her ovary which leads to the divine experience of motherhood (which she might disagree with later on). The woman is defined by how successful her eggs are and her existence is limited to the flexibility of her uterus. It is striking to note how the prefix 'wo' in woman is a cultural construct and has nothing to do with her anatomical differences. This is symbolized in Genesis where Eve is depicted as someone made from a supernumerary bone of Adam. Thus, 'man' is seen as the absolute while woman has always been viewed as 'other' in the patriarchal society. A man never begins by introducing himself as an individual of a particular sex. It is naturally implied that he is a man. Terms like 'male' and 'female' are mere elements used as a matter of form, as on official papers.

Women have ovaries, a uterus, these oddities detain her in her subjectivity, represent her within the confined space of her own nature. It is often said that a woman thinks with her glands. Men adeptly disregard the fact that they also have glands, such as testicles, and they secrete hormones. He believes that his body has an immediate and existing connection with the world, which he thinks he fairly understands, whereas he regards the body of a woman as an obstacle (Beauvoir). When Beauvoir first wrote the controversial 'The Second Sex' she received the kind of response which was, at first mockery and then fear. She was lampooned, ridiculed and made fun of but later on she was feared and hated by the bourgeois, the liturgy and the hired-press. This duality of the 'Self' and 'Other' is usually placed according to the parameters of good and evil. On this ground, women are denied any role in the history of 'mankind' and religion has always held them responsible for the ultimate 'Sin'. Hence, man and woman share a relationship which is shared by God and Lucifer, where the self is the creator and the other is the temptation.

To decline to be the 'other', to refuse to be a party to the deal – it would be for women, to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste. Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance (Beauvoir).

From the Suffrage to Bra-burning to radical feminism like that of *The Vagina Monologues*, the struggle for empowerment has come a long way. Thus, is the journey from Mary Wollstonecraft pleading the men of letters to take the lead and enlighten their women to Helene Cixous's *The Laugh of Medusa* (1975) where she develops *l'écriture féminine* (woman's language) and firmly believes that women are more than just ovaries, uterus or a womb. In her essay she propagates the idea that women are driven away from writing about or discussing their bodies. She writes in her essay:

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal.

Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement (Beauvoir).

In the late 1950's, majority of American women only dreamt how to be perfect wives and mothers. They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside their homes; they wanted the men to make decisions. They glorified their role as wives, and wrote proudly on the census form - Occupation: Housewife (Freidan, 18). But the pertinent question is why should women talk about their bodies and how are the experiences of their bodies different from men? Freud has already given five stages of "libido development" oral, anal, phallic, latent and the final genital stage where sex is differentiated. While discussing the sexual experience he also talks about how it is different in both genders. For men, their arousal depends on their penis whereas for

women it is a two-way process. One is clitoral and the other is vaginal, the former is present since childhood whereas the latter is attained during puberty. Thus, for men this transition begins and ends in childhood but women, keep on evolving sexually. Thus, to attain pleasure for men is subjective but for women it is more objective and more complex. Freud also made a point, which Beauvoir highlights in her criticism, that the sexual essence revolves around men. He writes that the libido, regardless in which way it is produced, is channeled in men and he completely negates the presence of female libido. Thus, he says that a woman as a girl suffers from castration complex which is instilled in the mind when she is around five years old. She identifies with the mother and tries to seduce the father. Hence, castration complex and Electra complex works simultaneously. He assumes that woman feels that s/he is a mutilated man. (Freidan, 65) The answer to this statement is given by Beauvoir in her book, she writes:

In woman the inferiority complex takes the form of a shamed rejection of her femininity. It is not the lack of penis that causes this complex, but rather woman's total situation...The place the father holds in the family, the universal predominance of males, her own education- everything confirms her in her belief in masculine superiority (Freidan, 67).

Thus, this 'phallus envy' attitude is embedded in a woman's mind and she tries to equate this with the birth of a child, hence, reducing her existence merely to a womb.

The other factor which represses a woman's sexual desire is religion which somehow becomes the dominant culture. Naomi Wolf wrote in the book 'The Beauty

Myth' (1990) 'technically, the female sexual organs are what the older religions feared as insatiable cunt. Sexual yearning is controlled by external factors. From a natural behavior it becomes a taught and learned behavior. Sexual violence becomes very accepted, and in fact, some women approved of sadomasochism. Many American and British laws undermined that an erect penis is obscene whereas an aroused vulva or breast is sexual curiosity. A nearly perfect woman is shown in an act which is fulfilling and important. But the impression is very subjective. Those perfect legs, thighs or breasts highlight the insecurity of a woman. Thus, she starts to hate what misogynists hate. Hence, sexual pleasure for women becomes directly proportionate with how 'perfect' they look whereas for men it remains at who they are looking at. Dr. Garcia Hutchinson surveys that around 60 to 65% women have suffered anxiety because they are unhappy with their bodies. 'Ladies, love your cunt' (Woolf) became a famous sentence during 1970's but still there were surveys and readings which suggested how women found their vaginas ugly and how the smell was repulsive and any discharge was dirty. "It is a totally ridiculous, completely unsexy word. If you use it during sex, trying to be politically correct – "Darling, could you stroke my vagina?" -- You kill the act right there. I'm worried about vaginas, what we call them and don't call them" (Enslar, 2).

The kind of acceptance of the body which was needed, comes forth in *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) written by American playwright and feminist Eve Ensler. Charles Isherwood of the New York Times has called *The Vagina Monologues* probably the most

important piece of political theatre of the last decade. It was first performed in a basement of an American cafe. It took this 'acceptance' to another level of discussion. This led to the creation of V-Day, celebrated on Fourteenth February, a global activism for violence against women. However, she feels it is the reaction of women after seeing her play that leads to the formation of this non-profit organization. She gained world-wide repute when in 2004 actors like Jane Fonda and Oprah Winfrey performed this 'play with explicit content.' When this was performed, banners like 'Rape Free Zone' were displayed and Oprah Winfrey read monologues like 'Under the Burqa'. Hence, this evening was a perfect distillation of contemporary feminism. The basic agenda was to re-educate women about what in a true sense 'women's liberation' meant- accepting what is meant by being a woman and why does it matter? However, this too was not accepted by the 'society' since it dealt with something which everybody knew existed yet nobody wanted to acknowledge. It was 'unsexy' when the lights were off and repulsive in the broad daylight. It was the Vagina.

Thematically, this play is an amalgamation of monologues which are delivered by women of different age, class, race and ethnicity. The Monologues work in a unified dynamic- they talk about how women irrespective of their cultural or religious roots share the same bigotries. Thus, it appeals to women's psyche which is blurred by the taboos of the society and talking about body becomes one of them. However, they are monologues which means that there is only one speaker and most of the narratives begin with 'I' but it should be noted that this 'I' is not individual but universal. The play

opens with the sentence 'I am worried' (Enslar, 1) which Eve Enslar tried to indoctrinate in the ethos of the society which cannot pronounce this word without a lot of discomfort. She says in an interview that's why "I began this piece... I was worried about what we think about vaginas and even more worried that we don't think about them. I was worried about my own vagina. It needed a context of other vaginas—a community, a culture of vaginas" (Enslar, 1). She believed that these monologues had the potential to change the attitude attached to the discussion of the bodies. Hence, this play is not only a concrete image but a metaphor for life and change. When we become accustomed to the use of the 'V-word' (Enslar), we have the audacity to talk about violence, rape and murder. Primarily, the vagina symbolizes sexuality- core to a woman's identity and on the whole it stands as a metonym- a part of a body and an experience nested in the female psyche. Enslar's focus on the vagina is to such a degree that it becomes the essence of the body and not something to be ashamed of. In the later monologue, she writes, "to be present in our vaginas, to speak of them out loud, to speak of their hunger and pain and loneliness and humor, to make them visible so they cannot be ravaged in the dark without great consequence." (Enslar , 118). Hence, these monologues in the most interesting manner deal with the serious issues like genital mutilation which was prevalent in the African communities to personal experiences like masturbation, sex, scents, orgasms etc. These monologues are a collection of real-life experiences of 200 American women which Enslar interviewed but it has a universal appeal. Linguistically, the monologues use repetitive symbolism and metaphors to

particularly emphasize the terms that are not acceptable to say out loud in the society. For example, The Vagina Workshop starts with a woman comparing her vagina to a shell, a flower and its delicate scent. In the other monologue, a woman compares it to a cellar where little animals and things get caught (Ensler, 11). It is also fascinating to note how one term has different colloquial names in different regions. 'Vagina' is called a Pooki in Westchester, Twat in New Jersey, Mimi in Miami, Split Knish in Philadelphia, Schmende in the Bronx (Ensler, 2).

At first women were reluctant to talk. They were a little shy. But once they got going, you couldn't stop them. Women secretly love to talk about their vaginas. They get very excited, mainly because no one's ever asked them before (Ensler).

The feminists who propagated the concept of the essential-self were critical about these monologues. They conjectured that Ensler condensed the existence of women to a body-part and thus, objectifying her in the process. Since, vagina is primarily associated with sex and child-birth hence, discussing it reduces her subsistence to a womb. To this school of thought, Ensler appeared to be idolizing the concept of the 'Other' sex and authenticating such accounts of history which asserts that women were not a part of it. This 'sex' is captured in the idea of sex and in the state of self-denial; hence, the identities are bound with their bodies.

Do you squirm in your seat when you hear words like vagina, a**hole, c*nt or get mortified when people discuss their sexual experiences in detail? If your answer is yes,

stay away from all versions (Hindi and English) of *The Vagina Monologues*! Its bold disposition isn't suitable for the inhibited (Times of India, May 18, 2012).

In crossing borders, efforts were made to create a vagina dialogue. It is interesting that when the play was being first performed in India, many actresses who were approached for the show denied it in light of the fact that they were hesitant to say vagina straightforwardly. Due to its controversial element, the theatres refused to host performances in most cities. But today, these shows have gained a lot of popularity, simply because it makes you believe that every woman's vagina talks to her – whether it's happy, sad, angry, bored or hurting. One of the Indian adaptations of *The Vagina Monologue* entitled *Yoni Ki Baat* is composed by distinctive writers, presenting their own stories and their own truths. 'Yoni' is a Sanskrit equivalent for the word 'vagina'. The stories of *Yoni ki Baat* (Talks of the Vagina) throw light on the unusual challenges and circumstances experienced within the Indian socio-cultural context, either in native lands or in relocated homelands. The intense monologues are enthralling in their power, their sensitive messages questioning societal standards, acumens and prejudices. However, to pronounce the word 'Vagina' for a 'Third World Woman' does not come easily. But to understand the fabrication of such woman, we need to understand what the vitals of the Third World are. The Third World was normally seen to include many countries with colonial pasts in Africa, Latin America, Oceania and Asia. The Third World has also been connected to the world economic division as "periphery" countries in the world system that is dominated by the "core" countries

(Third-Worldism). It ought to be of some political significance at least the term 'colonization' has come to denote a variety of phenomena in recent feminist and left writings in general. From its analytic value as a category of exploitative economic exchange in both traditional and contemporary Marxism, to its use by feminist women of colour in the U.S. to describe the appropriation of their experiences and struggles by hegemonic white women's movements colonization has been used to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called the "Third World" (Mohanty, 333). Many White writers use the narrative strategy which codifies the 'Other' as non-white females, thus, claiming themselves to be better off than their non-Western counterparts. Therefore, it becomes a necessity that there should be a distinction between Western Feminism and Eastern Feminism.

There are no biological differences but other than that there are no similarities-histories, anthropologies and sociologies are highly distinctive. These heterogeneities are responsible for shaping the sensibilities of that particular culture and when they are asserted, we see how they are related to the identity issues. Feminism, in India, could be traced to the reforms that were introduced by radical thinkers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Atmiya Sabha initiated in 1914. These early feminists regenerated the basic structure of the Hindu caste-system and practices like Sati, child-marriage and dowry-deaths (Third-Worldism). Thus, in 1920, the power of Vote was first given to women in Cochin and Travancore and in 1921 in Madras presidency. Many laws have been passed

after 1947, like the Hindu Marriage Act and Hindu Succession Act of the 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971, which gave a wide spectrum of right to Indian women (Third-Worldism). The issues that were considered too provocative to discuss in public were now written and performed in the countenance of street- theatre. However, these plays were written usually by men and it somehow appeared that these writers couldn't do justice while delineating women characters. The arrival of *Vagina Monologues* in India was taken as a blow to "Bharat" and its *Sanskriti*. It was first produced in 2003 by Poor- Box Productions. To avoid cultural disparity, the ethnicities were changed. For example, the monologue 'The Flood' was performed by Jewish woman but in this version the stage is occupied by a Maharashtrian woman. But the content and its validation remains the same.

The actor-producer Mahabano Kotwal in an interview given to The Guardian on 7th May, 2009 shared her experience of how challenging the journey had been producing an adaptation in India. She discussed the problems that she as a producer faced. The sponsors thought that such play will prove detrimental to their reputation. Hence, it took her a year and half to accommodate all the nuances to pull off the first performance. Interestingly the first performance was a blockbuster, to her surprise; audience was highly receptive to the monologues. But the picture was not entirely rosy. To celebrate its success American actors like Jane Fonda came to see the play in Chennai. However, their entry in the city was banned.

The play was adapted in several aspects to suit the Indian sensibility but translating it into Hindi was a major issue. The substitutes other than Yoni for Vagina were abuses which were not only degrading but also accentuate the violence that they were fighting against. From writers like Virginia Woolf to gender theorists such as Judith Butler have accentuated that language has evolved with Man as the centre and Woman as the periphery or 'other'. Therefore, despite supplying Indian flavour, the monologues were presented without many changes. One of the many techniques that Kotwal used was to chant the word 'Vagina' before the actors went on stage with different intonations and stresses, as reported by a visual report by BBC India on 8th March 2013. Before every performance Kotwal makes an appearance on the stage and asks exquisitely rhetoric yet deep question like 'How many of you are comfortable with the word Vagina?' or 'How many of you have seen or felt or thought about your vagina?' The response of the audience is a potpourri of bafflement and a subtle confession that the V-word is as scary and sick as the F-word. The V-word is such a taboo that the troop was asked to call it V-Monologue instead of Vagina Monologue- since to address it as the former, takes away the pride and acknowledgement that these monologues propagates. The protest came from their fraternity. In an interview given to The Indian Networker on August 30, 2013 she talks about how their performance was banned by the National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA) and by other reputed colleges and universities.

Another adaptation that is dealt with in this paper is by the Theartix IIMK on the occasion of Women's Day in 2014. The stage is dark as soon as the curtain rises and soft Indian classical music is played, perhaps trying to situate the Vagina Monologues in the Indian mentality. A very urban voice lightens the dark area and talks about vagina, unlike Kotwal, in a highly intense manner. She briefs on the themes of the monologues like sexuality, masturbation, orgasm and violence that is unleashed every now and then on women. The voice also gives a dimension to think about while watching this performance i.e. vagina as a metaphor for women empowerment and not something to be ashamed of. The stage is lit-up and four women appeared and delivered the first monologue in the series 'We are Worried'. The second part which is definitely more interesting is when these actors step-down from the stage and interact with audience-asking what they call or 'don't call' their vaginas or what is the local name for it. While most of the audience men and women both choose to call it vagina, few among them dared to be truthful and said what they call a Vagina-some unconventional names were twat, pussy, cunt. These young women then went on to perform the rest of the monologue in which they touched upon the topics like the pubic hair, sexual urges in women, homosexuality etc.

I didn't raise my hand, but I had had orgasms. I didn't raise my hand because they were accidental orgasms. They happened on horses, on bicycles, sometimes on the treadmill at the gym. I did not raise my hand because although I had had orgasms, I did not know how to make one happen. I thought it was a mystical,

magical thing. I didn't want to interfere. It felt wrong getting involved – contrived, manipulative. It felt Hollywood. The surprise would be gone, and the mystery... (Enslar, 14)

Hence, behind these varied adaptations the agenda remains the same. The Vagina and its story of negligence and violence remains the same. Judith Butler, a gender theorist opines that heterosexual relationship is 'performed' irrespective of the choice that one has. Similarly, the stereotyped gender-roles are a social construct and they have absolutely no biological testimony. Therefore, these monologues whether performed in India or in any other part of the world dealt with somewhat identical response. First it was condemned and later it became the part of a revolution that woman as an individual and women as a community are participating in, that is, for acceptance. Vagina becomes a tool for identification and the monologues deal with the experience which is same irrespective of class, race, ethnicity or any such bifurcations. The Vagina bring all women on one platform and all socio-political boundaries are blurred and they all discuss their vaginas and are not apprehensive of saying 'Ao karein Yoni ki Baat'.

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