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A STUDY OF EVE ENSLER'S PLAYS: FEMINIST IDEOLOGY AND ACTIVISM

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts Program in English

Department of English

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พุกษพรรณ บรรเทาทุกข์: การศึกษาบทละครของ อีฟ เอนสเลอร์: แนวคิดและกิจกรรมการเคลื่อนไหวตามแนวคิดสตรีนิยม (A STUDY OF EVE ENSLER'S PLAYS: FEMINIST IDEOLOGY AND ACTIVISM) อ.ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก: ผศ.ดร. คาริณา โชติรวี, 151 หน้า.

วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้นำเสนอการศึกษาเชิงวิเคราะห์บทละครของอีฟ เอนสเลอร์ ที่เขียนในระหว่างปี ค.ศ. 1995-2010 อันได้แก่ *The Vagina Monologues* *The Good Body* และ *I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World* บทละครทั้งสามเรื่องนี้สะท้อนอุดมการณ์และการเคลื่อนไหวตามแนวคิดสตรีนิยมของผู้เขียน โดยในเรื่อง *The Vagina Monologues* เอนสเลอร์ต้องการสื่อความหมายอย่างชัดเจนว่า การที่ผู้หญิงถูกกดขี่ และถูกเอารัดเอาเปรียบนั้น เนื่องจากผู้หญิงได้รับการอบรมสั่งสอนให้คิดว่าเรื่องเพศเป็นสิ่งหยาบคาย ภายหลังจากการใช้บทละครเรื่องแรกกระตุ้นสำนึกแห่งความเป็นหญิงแล้ว ในบทละครเรื่อง *The Good Body* เอนสเลอร์ตั้งคำถามถึงผู้หญิงยุคใหม่ว่า พวกเขาเหล่านั้นหลุดพ้นจากการกดขี่ทางเพศ แล้วจริงหรือ ซึ่งบทละครเรื่องที่สองนี้ เอนสเลอร์ได้แสดงภาพของผู้หญิงอเมริกันในสังคมบริโภคนิยม ผู้ซึ่งได้รับอิทธิพลจากภาพลักษณ์หญิงในอุดมคติที่ถูกนำเสนอผ่านสื่อต่างๆ ซึ่งเป็นตัวกดดันให้ผู้หญิงต้องให้ความสนใจกับรูปลักษณ์ภายนอกจนถึงขั้นถูกรอจ่าโดยภาพลักษณ์เหล่านั้น ส่วนบทละครเรื่องที่สาม *I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World* ได้แสดงให้เห็นถึงการผสมผสานระหว่างการละครและการเคลื่อนไหวตามแนวคิดสตรีนิยม เพื่อเป็นแรงบันดาลใจให้กับคนรุ่นใหม่ให้มาสนใจและร่วมต่อต้านการกระทำรุนแรงต่อสตรีในแง่ของการเคลื่อนไหวตามแนวคิดสตรีนิมนั้นได้นำเอากิจกรรมขององค์กร V-Day และ V-Girls ที่เอนสเลอร์เป็นผู้ก่อตั้ง มาใช้เพื่อสร้างอุดมการณ์ตามแนวคิดสตรีนิยมและปลุกจิตสำนึกในการต่อต้านการกระทำรุนแรงต่อสตรี นอกจากนี้บทละครทั้งสามเรื่องของเอนสเลอร์สร้างมาจากประสบการณ์ของผู้หญิง ซึ่งวิธีการดังกล่าวพ้องกับกิจกรรมการสร้างจิตสำนึก ซึ่งเป็นวิธีการที่ใช้กันในยุคเริ่มแรกของการเคลื่อนไหวเพื่อการปลดปล่อยสตรีเพื่อให้พวกเธอมีสิทธิเสรีภาพในสังคม การเรียนรู้ประสบการณ์ และเรื่องราวของกันและกัน ดังเช่นในบทละครทั้งสามเรื่องนี้ จะช่วยกระชับสายสัมพันธ์ระหว่างผู้หญิง และกระตุ้นสำนึกเรื่องความมีคุณค่าของตนเองสำหรับผู้หญิงทั่วโลกผู้ซึ่งมีอุดมการณ์สตรีนิยมร่วมกัน แต่ยังคงความเป็นตัวของตัวเองเอาไว้ เพื่อให้พวกเธอได้รวมพลังกันผลักดันการเคลื่อนไหวตามแนวคิดสตรีนิยมต่อไป

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สาขาวิชา.....ภาษาอังกฤษ..... ลายมือชื่อ อ.ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก.....

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PRUKSAPAN BANTAWTOOK A STUDY OF EVE ENSLER'S PLAYS: FEMINIST IDEOLOGY AND ACTIVISM. ADVISOR: ASST. PROF. CARINA CHOTIRAWA, Ph.D., 151 pp.

This thesis aims to present an analytical study of plays written by Eve Ensler between 1995 and 2010; *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), *The Good Body* (2004), *I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World* (2010) which reflect the writer's feminist ideology and activism. Eve Ensler declares in *The Vagina Monologues* that women have been oppressed and exploited primarily because they are made to think of their sexuality as taboo. Having provoked widespread concern about womanhood in her play *The Vagina Monologues*, Ensler continues questioning to what extent women are free from sexual domination in *The Good Body* that highlights the role of women in American consumerist culture of today who have been influenced by the ideal image of women represented through the media which later on conditions women to pay much attention to their physical appearance to the point of becoming an obsession. *I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World* demonstrates the merging of feminist drama and activism to inspire the younger generation, to participate in activities aimed at combating violence against women. In terms of feminist activism, Ensler has been actively involved in V-Day and V-Girls activities that aim to promote feminist ideologies and the awareness that leads women to protect themselves. Moreover, the three plays are created by gathering women's experiences similar to the consciousness-raising activities practiced in the early period of women's liberation movement. To learn from these experiences boosts up the strength of female bonding and self-worth in women around the world, who want to share their sense of feminist ideology as well as to express themselves individually, to join forces with each other so as to stimulate the growth of feminist activism.

Department : ..... English ..... Student's Signature .....

Field of Study: ..... English ..... Advisor's Signature .....

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## CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT (THAI).....	iv
ABSTRACT (ENGLISH).....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
CONTENTS.....	vii
CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER II <i>THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES</i> : EVE ENSLER'S RESOUNDING DECLARATION OF WOMANHOOD .....	19
CHAPTER III <i>THE GOOD BODY</i> : EVE ENSLER AND WOMEN'S BODY DISSATISFACTION .....	51
CHAPTER IV <i>I AM AN EMOTIONAL CREATURE: THE SECRET LIFE OF GIRLS AROUND THE WORLD</i> : EVE ENSLER'S FEMINIST IDEOLOGY AND ACTIVISM AIMED AT YOUNG WOMEN.....	81
CHAPTER V CONCLUSION.....	130
REFERENCES.....	135
VITAE.....	151

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Best known as the playwright of *The Vagina Monologues*, a play acclaimed by critics and its audience alike for its provocative message uniquely presented in the form of a series of monologues, Eve Ensler has emerged not only as a celebrated author but also an influential social activist of her time. As this thesis purports to demonstrate, Ensler creates her works not only with the intention of celebrating female genitalia and glorifying womanhood, but also for the purpose of raising awareness of prevention of violence against women as she stated in an interview given in Australia after attending the Justice for All Conference and delivering a lecture at the Australian Human Rights Centre in Sydney, Australia;

[I]n 1998 I called a group of friends together and I said, 'Look, I have this play, how could we use it to end violence against women?' Because by then I realised it was epidemic. And we came up with this idea of V-Day, Vagina Day, Valentine's Day, Victory Over Violence Day, and we thought we'd do one night in this huge theatre in New York, and we invited all these great actors, from Whoopi Goldberg to Susan Sarandon to Lily Tomlin, it was amazing, and they all said yes, miraculously. (Ensler, Eve Ensler on Art and Activism)

Soon after the play was staged, Ensler earned sensational acclaims winning the Obie Award for 'Best New Play' in 1996, resulting in the translation of the play into



over 48 languages and performances held in over 140 countries worldwide<sup>1</sup> (VDAY). The play was subsequently turned into a film starring renowned Hollywood actresses such as Glenn Close, Calista Flockhart, Jane Fonda, Whoopi Goldberg, Winona Ryder, Susan Sarandon, Marisa Tomei, Lily Tomlin and Kate Winslet. Backed by these famous figures and portrayed through an accessible medium, *The Vagina Monologues* continued to gain public attention.

The overwhelmingly positive public response to the play inspired Ensler to launch what she named the V-Day Organization on Valentine's Day of 1998. 'V' was chosen to stand for words like, Vagina, Victory and Valentine: as V-Day activities are normally performed between the months of February and April of each year and it is possible that the letter V is a shape strongly suggestive of the shape vaginas. The V-Day organization serves as an activist movement fighting against female

sexual abuse and intent in funding local anti-violence groups and communities not only in the U.S., but also in such countries as Kenya, Egypt, Iraq, Haiti and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Moreover, *The Vagina Monologues* has been performed in universities all over America free of charge in order to raise awareness of relevant issues such as reproductive rights and violence against women.

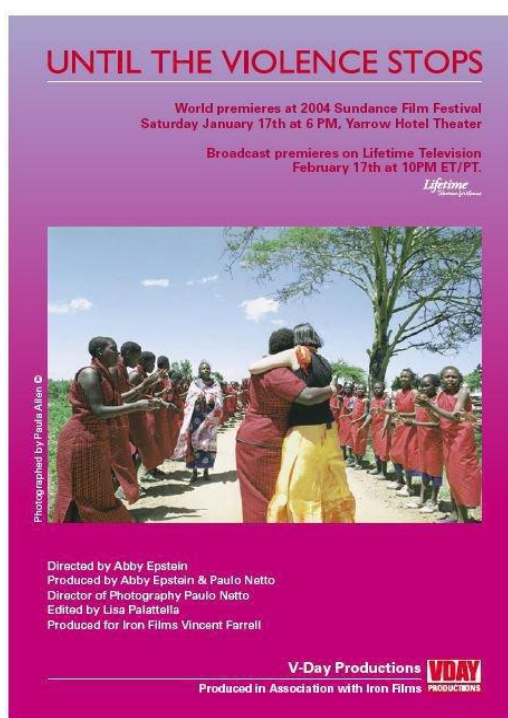


Figure 1. *Until the Violence Stops*, a documentary about V-Day

<sup>1</sup> The information was acquired in 2010 and can be found in [www.vday.org](http://www.vday.org).

Furthermore, Ensler has concerned herself with taking political action in war-torn Afghanistan by supporting women's cooperating in rebuilding post-Taliban Afghanistan. V-Day was notably one of several organizations that sponsored more than fifty Afghan female leaders to join the Afghan Women's Summit for Democracy in Brussels. In 2001 Ensler took the initiative to bring a group of Afghan women to the U.S. to meet with General Colin Powell, who, at that time, was Secretary of State, to articulate their need to participate in rebuilding their country on the condition that otherwise they would show disapproval of the support given by the U.S. government. Since 2000, V-Day has been a benefactor of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), an organization that supports Afghan women's rights and disarmament. Most of the money donated to Afghan women was raised from the staging of *The Vagina Monologues*, and it has been used to promote and support female education, public health service for women, and also includes the purchasing of hidden cameras used to film Taliban brutality towards women (Rassmusson 4).

### **Ensler's Subsequent Projects**

After enjoying overwhelming success from her phenomenal play, *The Vagina Monologues*, Eve Ensler went on to write a new play called *The Good Body*, an insight story of how women from different cultures are compelled to try to enhance their physical features to meet the norms of beauty. *The Good Body* is presented in the form of a series of interviews with women from different parts of the world talking about their efforts to achieve 'the perfect body'. Some women believe that their

appearance may be equated to their morality, in other words, looking good is being good (Valentine qtd. Dobscha and Ozanne 246). Therefore, women, largely driven by media images, are compelled to examine their bodies and put tremendous effort, often involving pain and large amounts of money. To some extent, it is a result of women being conditioned to develop a low self-esteem, internalizing their subordination and adopting the self-image they should have which is determined by the dominant group (Wolf qtd. in Dobscha and Ozanne 246).



Figure 1. *The Good Body*  
performed by Lake Dillon  
Theatre Company in April 2009

Enslar has worked tirelessly to produce works that draw attention to the significance of ending violence against women. Her latest work, *I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Lives of Girls Around the World*, highlights issues regarding girls' sexuality and sexual violence against them. This time, MTV, an influential music channel with teenagers as the main target group, has lent its cooperation with



Figure 2. Aubrey Plaza in MTV's "It's Your Sex Life"  
and "Digital Abuse" pro social campaigns

Enslar to broadcast some of the monologues on MTV channel and its official website, making it more accessible for teenagers to receive the message. Themes of the monologues correspond with the campaigns of

MTV which are *A Thin Line* and *It's*

*Your (Sex) Life* (MTV) that focus on sexual victimization through mobile phone and the Internet, and sexual education for girls. Together with the book, Ensler has been able to launch a new organization called V-Girls which is a development of V-Day organization where young women will be exposed to activism since they are considered to be the future generation of the feminist movement.

### **Ensler's "The Personal is Political"**

It has been suggested that Eve Ensler's feminist consciousness and lifelong advocacy for awareness of violence against women was fueled by her own personal traumatic experiences. Born into a wealthy family in New York, Ensler experienced the horrors of being victimized first hand when she was subjected to sexual molestation by her own father as early as at the age of five. Her mother, who witnessed incidences of such abuse, was unable to protect her child from such treatment that would scar her for life. Ensler blames her subsequent bouts with alcohol abuse during high school on her traumatic childhood and describes using alcohol as a means of seeking an escape, with the hope that it would bring her some form of comfort. According to "An Activist Love Story" by Paula Allen and Eve Ensler, Ensler's feminist activism project started at Middlebury College in the early 1970s. In spite of pervasive resistance throughout the college, Ensler succeeded in establishing the Women's Action Coalition (WAC) which broadcasted "a feminist radio program" and published "a feminist literary magazine" (413). Ensler struggled, however, with issues of feeling that she had failed as a leader to convince and persuade her members to be passionate about the issues stressed by the coalition. She faded out of the organization and once again turned to alcohol as a means of escape. It

was about that time that memory of her traumatic childhood resurfaced and came back to haunt her. Ensler describes how her personal lifestyle seemed to be in conflict with her feminist ideology as such;

The alcohol and early abuse of my childhood had split me. On one hand I was a militant feminist, on the other I was waitressing in Mafia bars wearing tuxedo tops with black fishnet stockings and high heels. I was a mess of contradictions. I could not live what I believed. (414)

After she resumed her restrained life, Ensler joined a political group in New York City called the Chelsea Against Nuclear Destruction United (CANDU) which mainly focused on issues of nuclear disarmament. Although CANDU was not based specifically on feminist ideology, the basic activism skills, such as leafleting, mailing, speaking, marching and civil disobedience Ensler learned from her participation in the group which prepared her well for future feminist activism. Besides gaining social activism skills, she was also trained in writing drama by renowned American actress and director, Joanne Woodward. Ensler began to write plays that were strong on social criticism, and particularly issues affecting women worldwide. Armed with both successful social activism skills and creative writing, it seemed that she had finally found a channel for her strong conviction and feminist fervor.

Realizing the profound impact on feminist activism Ensler has made might lead people to think that her work has an upward spiral. While achieving accolades in terms of praise, the feminist icon, nonetheless, has not escaped criticism. Several critics have been critical about her attitude towards women of color and those in the third world as well as her supposed bias towards lesbian relationships. According to

Intersex Society of North America, when Ensler mentions female genital mutilation in the Western and the non-Western world, she indicates that such violation against women in the West has now ceased. Ensler presents the Western world as it is moving forward to the future while the non-Western world cannot break free from the oppressive subjugation of women. Then women in the non-Western world are grouped solidly as 'Third World women' who are in dire need of a Western female role model (ISNA qtd. in Kim Q. Hall 103).

In addition, Ensler has been criticized over a particular chapter in *The Vagina Monologues* named "The Little Coochie Snorcher that Could" which depicts the rape of a thirteen-year-old girl by an adult female neighbor which Ensler describes as 'good rape'. She is questioned whether what she deems a 'good rape' is in fact another version of sexual violence perpetrated against women, and whether it is considered good because it is a homoerotic relationship (Fleming 110-1). Whereas the lesbian molesting is presented as 'good rape', Ensler portrays the sexual assault against a ten-year-old girl by her father's friend as a terrible situation which, to some extent, indicates her chauvinistic view of female sexuality.

Furthermore, Ensler's works have also attracted academic attention and scrutiny as her plays, notably *The Vagina Monologues*, have been studied for its connection between the movement of feminism and society. Jirye Lee has conducted a research under the topic *The Distance between Two Worlds: What Happened to The Vagina Monologues When It Crossed The Pacific Ocean?* to explore how the performance of *The Vagina Monologues* changed when it went across countries from the U.S. to Korea. Her methodology is comparing and contrasting the production of *The Vagina Monologues* in Korea and the original production in the U.S. In other

words, Lee looked at how the play was translated from English into Korean. The researcher found out that between the two productions there were three significant differences which were the design of production, the reaction and involvement of the audience and the acceptance of the society.

The last two differences are particularly related to this research which pays attention on feminist ideology and activism in Eve Ensler's plays. In terms of the reaction and involvement of the audience, Lee suggests that the audience in the U.S. tends to support and enjoy the play more than a Korean audience due to the absence of campaigns and feminist activities that were related to the play launched in Korea. It seems Americans are likely to see the play as part of a movement of feminist activity while Koreans consider it merely as a piece of theatrical work. It is also because the setting and characterization portrayed through the play is more American than Asian. Moreover, when the play was staged in the U.S., it was done with the intention to create a new movement in society. Whereas the play produced in Korea focused more on commercial accomplishment which can be observed through the tone of newspaper articles and reviews about the performance that focus mainly on the reputation of the performers, not the play as a means to raise social awareness (Lee). In some other places such as Thailand, the performance of *The Vagina Monologues* in 2005 by a group called "The Sisterhood of the Vagina" is associated with the campaigns of the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, an organization supporting activities related to public health promotion in Thailand. "The Sisterhood of the Vagina" mounted the "Health Promoting Street Performance: *The Vagina Monologues* on tour" campaign to stage the play in different university campuses. Performing the play in a form of edutainment, the group expected to simultaneously

educate and entertain the audience so as to raise awareness of gender equality. The production of *The Vagina Monologues* also involved preliminary exhibitions and activities held to provide the basic information about gender identity related to the play. Moreover, the group seems to show an earnest attempt to raise the awareness of gender issues and violence against women, which are the original intention of the playwright, as the group puts the finishing touches to the play through a group discussion about their attitudes towards the play and gender issues, and also surveys the audience about their understanding of gender issues before and after viewing the play.

There are several studies about Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, yet most of them are not directly related to this thesis. As for the secondary sources for Ensler's plays, especially *The Good Body* and *I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World*, which were published more recently, the criticism is limited to mainly to theatre reviews which provide an analysis of the performances quite different from the one that approaches the plays as a text. Moreover, the fact that Ensler is still living and writing plays means that her feminist ideology and activism are an ongoing process since she is constantly adding new monologues to her plays to highlight current social issues.



Figure 3. The Vagina Monologues performed by “The Sisterhood of the Vagina” in Thailand



One also takes into account that general feminist ideology and movement of third-wave feminism is controversial and cannot yet be clearly defined. This poses as another problem since there is no clear-cut trend of her movement.

### **Feminism and the Theatre**

The period during the 1990s is marked as the beginning of a new era of feminist movement which is labeled as third-wave feminism, a metaphorical time frame used to describe women's movements and activities. The first wave of the feminist movement rose to prominence in 1900 with major focus on female emancipation—the right to vote and the right to receive education, particularly in the 1960s which was the period of the second wave of feminist movement, in which there was a revival of old thoughts and ideas pointing to women's inequality within a patriarchal framework of society. Those ideas appeared in several books such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (Barry 121). In the United States, the feminist revolution that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s coincided with two political and civil rights movements: The Women's Rights Movement and Women's Liberation Movement (Zaretsky 193).

In the United States, concern for women's rights gained prominence after World War II because women, who during the war entered the paid labor force due to the shortage of male labor conscripted into the army, were being forced to return to their domestic sphere. Even though females were still ideally expected to be domestic workers after the war, the reality was that there were a number of women working as wage laborers, who consequently were discriminated against; jobs posted in newspaper

were separated by sex. The atmosphere of discrimination inspired women's rights movement which later led to some amendments to the law, for example, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 which stated that setting different pay scales for women and men for the same job was illegal.

While the women's rights movement pointed towards female discrimination, the women's liberation movement brought personal issues such as abortion, female psychology and lesbianism into the public consciousness, leading to the oft quoted statement that "the personal is political" (Zaretsky 200; Wright 214). Feminists in women's liberation movement made use of writing to discuss female oppression. Apart from that, consciousness-raising (CR) tactics which allow women to join in a small group and share their own innermost feeling as a woman were also encouraged.

As the CR groups were expected to comprise of women diverse in age, class, education, occupation, etc., we can say that the CR process brought about an atmosphere of sisterhood among women in the second wave movement of feminism. Nevertheless, the notion of sisterhood could not blend in with the realm of materialist feminism where the position of women is formed by class structured in capitalism. In terms of household matters, women's works such as doing chores and raising children are not fully recognized and compensated as these works are unpaid (Case 82-3). The unpaid work, then, shapes the situation and position of women in society as they are placed in a lower position than men who go out and make money from a professional undertaking. Because materialist feminists pay much attention to class and economics issues, materialism and feminism have become incompatible since feminism tends to embrace all women regardless of class, religion, occupation, education under its

notion of sisterhood but materialism differentiates women from different classes (83) which could lead to the lack of unity within the women's movement.

In Ensler's plays the notion of sisterhood is also a prevalent issue. Even though she illustrates facts about women in her three works; *The Vagina Monologues*; *The Good Body*; *I Am an Emotional Creature*, her representation of women of color is sometimes considered negative according to Sue-Ellen Case, a frontrunner expert in feminist theatre and lesbian critical theory, who maintains that the experiences the colored women have are different from the caucasians, therefore the description a white author makes of colored women can be distant from the truth. In addition, women who are in the ethnic minorities are faced with not only gender, but racial and class oppression at the same time which a white author has not experienced and thus cannot fathom (Aston 95-7).

As mentioned before, the feminist movement has reached its third wave which Heywood and Drake suggest has become "a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty, culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures" (qtd. in Vaccaro 2). The women in the third wave want to see themselves as an individual, as well as to share the connection of feminism (Henry qtd. in Vaccaro 2). In addition, the third wavers involve themselves in politics and activism as was the case with the second wavers, but they have gone further in terms of racial and sexual diversity, as well as global and ecological perceptions (Karlyn 62). Naomi Rockler-Gladen points out that the nature of the third wave of feminism is different from the second wave since the second wavers focus mainly on the activist goals of the day such as abortion rights and sex discrimination law while the third

wavers pay more attention to individual empowerment than social activism and societal change. According to this difference, Ensler's works, especially *The Vagina Monologues*, *The Good Body*, and *I Am an Emotional Creature* demonstrate how Ensler, as activist of the modern movement, has borrowed some ideas from second wave mothers such as the notion of sisterhood, and are affected by postmodernism that emphasizes multiplicity of individual identity.

As mentioned earlier that women in the beginning of the feminist movement adopted writing and CR process as a channel to express their personal life, emotions and ideas. In a way, such personal performances are similar to CR practices that was developed in 1970s to encourage women to express their personal experience, and that Sue-Ellen Case regards as the start of feminist theatre (Case 50-65). During this period, feminist theatre also flourished that female activists employed theatre as a tool to trigger a discussion about women's status and position in the society as the topics render around women's subordinate position in dominant culture and possibilities for change. Some organization such as the national Organization for Women (NOW) evolved strategies used to spread feminist ideology. This kind of movement is categorized as the liberal feminist movement that pays attention to reforming the U.S.'s system dealing with women's equality and is different from radical feminism, which focuses mainly on analyzing how women are alienated from the public sphere and put in the domestic area by patriarchal domination. Radical feminism made use of theatrical performance to voice women's culture and developed the CR process format to a proper performance to present female personal experiences (Wilmeth 255-6). In Ensler's three works; *The Vagina Monologues*; *The Good Body*; *I Am an Emotional Creature*, we can see that she has women talking about their personal

experience in a similar manner to the CR process which was inherited in the third-wave era of the feminist movement.

### **Ensler's Feminist Projection Related to the Women of Today**

Inspired by the residual pain caused by Ensler's mother, who Ensler felt should have rescued her from her father but rather left her with a lifetime of resentment, combined the practical advocacy skills acquired from CANDU, and her newfound ability to write an eloquent play, Eve Ensler devoted herself to using her work to raise awareness of social issues such as violence against women. For Ensler, art and activism are inextricably interwoven; as she professes in the preface to *The Vagina Monologues* "art has made the activism more creative and bold, the activism has made the art more sharply focused, more grounded, more dangerous" (*The Vagina Monologues* xiii). In *The Vagina Monologues*, Ensler places emphasis on the notion of 'sisterhood' amongst women in order to encourage them to share their personal experiences with one another and to embrace the plight of women in general as a means of forming a common community that emphasizes the respect of each woman's unique individuality. *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) and her more recent play, *The Good Body* (2004), both utilize an experimental writing technique adopted by Ensler herself in 1996. Both works are presented as fictionalized accounts written in a monologue-format based on interviews with a variety of women coming from different backgrounds. Throughout *The Vagina Monologues*, each character is called upon to narrate or emote an unpleasant or enchanting experience related to her vagina using the format of a monologue. Similarly, in *The Good Body*, women take turns,

one by one, to present a narrative regarding their frustration of societal pressure on physical matter.

Because Eve Ensler's works, which portray female sexual experiences based on factual information, have influenced feminist movements worldwide, it is worth studying the difficulties and situations women are facing, the position of women in our society today and the projection of the feminist movement in the future as reflected in *The Vagina Monologues*, *The Good Body* and *I Am an Emotional Creature*.



Figure 4. A march of 7,500 people in Juarez, Mexico organized by V-Day organization and Amnesty International to protest the inadequate response to the hundreds of missing and murdered women of Juarez.

To begin with, *The Vagina Monologues* addresses the different perspectives each woman has about her sexuality. Ensler points out the importance of saying the word 'vagina' out loud, claiming that women are dominated and abused because they are made to think of

their 'vaginas' as taboos. The thing that will set women free from male domination is to confidently talk about a matter that has been kept a secret for a long time. As Michael Foucault stated that body and sexuality are formed by cultures rather than nature (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy), the concept of the word 'vagina', is also from social conceptualization. Because we think of 'vagina' as a secret place, we think of sexuality with disapproval. Therefore, Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, which bolsters up women's confidence, could be a resounding declaration of women's liberation.

The issue of sexuality is quite important in Ensler's works. *The Vagina Monologues*, *The Good Body* and *I Am an Emotional Creature*, all present the oppression caused by the expected sexual role of women. A female 'body' is believed to exist to provide men with sexual pleasure. Ensler's works show us how women do not know and appreciate a female body as well as men do. Some women in *The Vagina Monologues* admit to having rarely experienced the pleasures of an orgasm. At the same time, the three works evoke empathy for women's suffering, and urge women to understand and love their bodies in the same way that Irigaray puts it in *The Sex Which Is Not One* that women own their sexual pleasure which resides within themselves unlike men who need mediation—their hands and woman's genitals in order to gain the pleasure (qtd. in Aston 50).

Even though Ensler explores a new history of female sexual pleasure, she also leaves her audience and readers with the question whether women can really be free from male domination. In *The Vagina Monologues*, women go as far as altering the 'smell' and 'look' of their vaginas in order to please their male partners. Moreover, the female body is also exploited to serve men. *The Good Body* and *I Am an Emotional Creature* illustrate pictures of women in a consumeristic culture who seriously pay attention to their 'appearance'. It begs the question whether they keep fit and enhance their physical beauty for the sake of themselves or for men.

Since the advent of industrialization, men have been working outside of the house and women, especially those from the middle-class, have been restricted in the domestic sphere as homemakers and consumers where they are strongly constrained by social expectations and material factors which are simultaneously enforced by the notion of beauty myths (Hollows and Moseley 145). The beauty myth is a term coined

by Naomi Wolf who contends that the norms of beauty and body image are adopted to control women. Ellen Whiteman interestingly points out that in Western culture the norm of beauty is thinness and whiteness with perfect hair, body and skin. If women cannot reach this standard, they are regarded as failures (Ellen 92). Therefore, women have been struggling to reach the goal of physical perfection, and sometimes have no recollection of being confined by their own beauty myths.

Similar to the word 'vagina', the ideal body is laden with cultural meaning. People see slender models, singers and actresses on movie screens, billboards or television, and want to adopt trim thighs and a flat stomach as a perfect body for women. *The Good Body* shows how having what is perceived as an imperfect body can harm women's self-esteem and how women strive to cope with their defective bodies. The similar illustration of girls suffering from debilitating eating disorders can also be seen in *I Am an Emotional Creature*.

When discussing the influence of the media, we cannot deny that girls nowadays are also affected by images presented through the media in a consumerist culture. Furthermore, due to modern technologies, teenagers have an easy access to reach 'unofficial and improper sex education' such as friends, porn sites, and porn movies where they obviously learn about their sexual needs and how to serve these needs. Enslar does not discourage girls from trying sexual pleasure, but she motivates them to love themselves and to maintain their self-esteem as well. This feminist playwright depicts sexual molestation and violence against girls in *I Am an Emotional Creature*, advises them to practice safe sex, and points out the dangers of sexual molestation and harassment. As mentioned earlier, MTV cooperates with V-Girls organization to encourage girls to be aware of sexual violation and to be confident to



speak out loud about their suffering by launching a feminist website and broadcast some monologues via the Internet and MTV channel. This method, which is very different from the second wavers', is seen as a way to prepare a new generation for the feminist movement.

As Janice Okoomian has argued that V-day and *The Vagina Monologues* have succeeded in filling the gap between the second and the third wave of feminist movements (219), it is interesting to find out how far feminist literature and activism have come, how their future could be and whether or not feminism and activism should go hand in hand. By reading and analyzing the plays in order to find out the strategy Eve Ensler adopts to promote feminist ideology in the period of the third wave of feminist movement, one finds that not only can Eve Ensler's plays be viewed as significant contributions to contemporary American theatre, but more so as a reflection of her own strong feminist conviction and a contribution to activism in the women's movement. This thesis aims at proving that *The Vagina Monologues* indicates that women can be free from sexual dominance if they simply start talking about their sexuality and articulating their needs; *The Good Body* illustrates a picture of women in American consumerist culture, who have been influenced by the ideal image of women represented through the media and conditioned to pay much attention to their physical appearance to the point of becoming an obsession; *I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World* demonstrates the merging of feminist drama and activism to inspire more women, especially the younger generation, to participate in activities aimed at combating violence against women. Above all, this thesis proves that the three plays reflect Ensler's strong feminist conviction and a form of activism in the women's movement.

## CHAPTER II

### ***THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES: EVE ENSLER'S RESOUNDING***

#### **DECLARATION OF WOMANHOOD**

I bet you're worried. *I* was worried. That's why I began this piece. I was worried about vaginas. 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. (*The Vagina Monologues* 3)

Enslar's presentation of verbatim accounts of the female sexual experience given by women from different ethnic backgrounds and generations around the world first appeared in *The Vagina Monologues*. The play, with a foreword written by Gloria Steinem, presents thirteen original monologues and three new monologues added to highlight recent situations where women are at risk such as "The Memory of Her Face", "Under the Burqa", "They Beat the Girl Out of My Boy ... or So They Tried" and "Crooked Braid". The monologues could be regarded as a way to reflect on the pain and pleasure related to the experience of having a vagina. Out of sixteen monologues, "Hair" and "The Flood" could be used as examples of a woman's harrowing experiences in relation to her sexuality. "Hair" demonstrates how a husband tries to take control over his wife's sexual organ and sexuality by asking the wife to shave her pubic hair in order to please his erotic fantasy. In "The Flood",

which is based on a true story of a woman in her seventies, Ensler also portrays women's suffering from the myth about female sexuality indicating that a good woman should be sexually reserved and chaste. Acknowledging the fact that women could derive pleasure from having a vagina, Ensler added monologues called "The Vagina Workshop", "Because He liked to Look at It" and "The Woman who Loved to Make Vagina Happy" to underscore the fact that women are able to gain sexual pleasure and that sexual pleasure does not belong to males only. Actually, the word vagina is regarded as a taboo subject in most cultures and, but in this play Ensler intends to adopt it as a mascot of female sexuality which make the play provocative. Her intention to encourage women to say the word that people generally avoid using, particularly in public, then, could be seen as women's breaking free from sexual oppression they have been encountering for decades. The intension leads to the assumption that women can be free from sexual dominance if they simply start talking about their sexuality and articulating their needs. This chapter intends to highlight how the vagina and menstruation, which is closely connected with the vagina, are depicted (1), the ability to talk about sexuality (2) and how Ensler merges her play with feminist activism (3).

To begin with, the play demonstrates how it is that women always avoid talking about the vagina as well as their sexuality which might be because the word alludes to a sexual act that is viewed as taboo. In the play's foreword, Gloria Steinem, a front runner of the modern American feminist movement, admitted that in her youth both she and her family members always quietly avoided directly referring to a vagina and instead referred to it as "down there" (*The Vagina Monologues* xxvii). The play also reveals that in many parts of the world, it is common practice that a woman's

sexual organ is referred to with terms connoting triviality, such as “powderbox,” “pooki,” “cooter,” “monkey box,” “coochi snorcher,” (6) making it more pleasant and less offensive to talk about. Additionally, the words also have the effect of trivializing the vagina and female sexuality itself as a petty matter and diminish the importance of both female sexuality and women themselves. In terms of linguistics, Stephen Ullman’s *Semantics* (1977) categorizes taboos into three types; the taboo of propriety that includes sex, a particular part of a body and body functions; the taboo of fear dealing with religious referents; and the taboo of delicacy which involves unpleasant subjects and criminal actions (qtd. in Calvo 65). By that equation, the vagina, which is a sexual organ pertinent to sexual activities, should then be considered almost a taboo or at least an inappropriate subject.

Words used to describe female genitalia can, in fact, be separated into three groups: the anatomical, the coy or euphemistic, and the derogatory which lead to a crucial question raised by Brigid McConville and John Shearlaw, “what can women call their own organs” (qtd. in Braun and Kitzinger). Interestingly, Janet S. Sanders and William L. Robinson, the authors of *Talking and Not Talking About Sex: Male and Female Vocabularies*, comment that anatomical terms such as vagina, vulva and clitoris sound “clinical and impersonal” while, a specialist in psychology and feminism, Jane M. Ussher suggests that coy or euphemistic avoidance of terms such as “down there”, “privates” and “crotch” turn female genitals to be something that is a taboo - too vague and mysterious to name. Besides, to Germaine Greer, renowned feminist and scholar, words such as cunt, gash and twat are derogatory “epithets of hate” (qtd. in Braun and Kitzinger). Ensler presents her perspective through one particular character in “The Vulva Club”, who is obsessed with naming things,

rationalizing that once she names a particular object, it becomes her friend and is able to be tamed and known, but ...

Naming [her] ‘down there’ was not so easy. It wasn’t the same as naming [her] hands. No, it was complicated. Down there was alive, not so easy to pinpoint. It remained unnamed and, as unnamed, it was untamed, unknown. (*The Vagina Monologues* 87)

This might imply that women habitually refuse to accept the actuality of their sexual organ, and they treat it differently. This attitude has been passed down from generation to generation; the woman in “The Vulva Club” was told by her baby-sitter to call her sexual organ as “Itsy Bitsy” which she peculiarly dislikes. Such are the constraints that she believes later on causes her sexual dysfunction. The play strongly suggests that as long as women are uncomfortable about their vagina, they can never be freed, “feel something unlock” (89), and talk about their sexual desire directly.

There exists a 1979 study by Janet S. Sanders and William L. Robinson about the change of sexual vocabulary depending on the listener. In this study, 200 college and university students aged 18-24 years old were asked to write down the word they use to describe male genitals, female genitals and the act of copulation. The participant had to describe the sexual vocabulary for four listener contexts; a group of same-gender friends; a group of mixed-gender friends; parents; and a spouse or lover. The most frequent words used to describe each sexual vocabulary are shown in table 1.

	Male genitals	Female genitals	Copulation	Male genitals	Female genitals	Copulation
Same-sex	<i>dick</i>	<i>cunt</i>	<i>Fucking</i>	<b>penis</b>	<b>Vagina</b>	<b>screw</b>
Mixed- sex	<i>dick</i>  <i>penis</i>	<i>pussy</i>	<i>Screw</i>	<b>penis</b>	<b>no response</b>	<b>make love</b>
Parents	<i>penis</i>	<i>vagina</i>	<i>intercourse</i>	<b>penis</b>	<b>Vagina</b>	<b>intercourse</b>
Lover	<i>dick</i>  <i>penis</i>	<i>pussy</i>	<i>make love</i>	<b>penis</b>	<b>Vagina</b>	<b>make love</b>

Table 1 Preferred Sex Terms by Gender by Context  
*Italic* = males **Bold**= females

The result shows that both men and women tend to adopt different words in different contexts. Moreover they show similar hesitation when naming female genitals. The researchers suggest that the act of copulation was named with greater frequency than the genitals because describing the genitals indicates more personal involvement than naming the sexual act (qtd. in Jay 130). One interesting outcome related to the analysis of Enslers's *The Vagina Monologues* is that the female subjects were unable to name their sexual organs when participating in a mixed-sex group. This probably indicates that when talking about their sexual organs, women might have the tendency to omit words that directly describe their genitals. In a way, it could be concluded that the female sexual organ and female sexuality are forbidden territory.

In most cultures, the vagina is considered taboo because it is associated with the impurity of menstrual blood which is claimed as women's embarrassment even though it can be argued that the word 'vagina,' like other words, is merely a set of

sounds articulated from our mouths in any particular language. However, people, when uttering any particular word, include beliefs, myths and social backgrounds within the context of the utterance. In Latin, the term for menstruation is 'sacer' a word with the double meaning both pure and impure. "Words used in other early cultures to describe menstruation and menstruating women carried such varied meanings as supernatural, mysterious, incomprehensible, spirit, deity and holy" (Walker qtd. in White 4-5). Some cultures consider menstrual blood as environmental pollution and harmful to females (Crawford qtd in Hindson 89). In ancient Near-Eastern religions, menstruants were believed to be impure and banned in the Temple cult. If a man has sexual intercourse with menstruants, both parties will be ostracized by the others (Koren 33-4). However, Thomas Laqueur's one-sex model indicating that a male body is the only type of body existing in the world, views menstruation as 'an ungendered flux' of a female body which is an inferior form of a body. In other words, menstrual blood is common for both males and females. It is possible for men and women to experience having menstruation as it is a natural process of balancing bodily fluids, but the large amount of menstrual blood gushing from women's orifice indicates the inferior quality of the body owners (Laqueur 61-2). Even though Laqueur's one-sex model mainly concerns the maintenance of bodily fluids, not gender inequality, the notion that female body is of poor quality since it produces larger amounts of menstrual blood accentuates the long-held notion that females are subordinate to the perfect body – males. Likewise, it should be noted that Aristotle, one of the most influential figures of Western philosophy, expounds that the inferior status of women is caused by nature or a female body itself, rather than culture. To him "the physical part, the body comes from the female, and the soul comes from the

male, since the soul is the essence of a particular body”, and the symbol of females’ inferiority is menstruation. He asserts that women are incapable of producing semen which needs “enough natural vital heat” from the producer. Thus women, with their colder body, will end up with menstruation, which is a dysfunctional process of semen production (Delaney, Lupton and Toth 46: Lord, O'Connor and Bodéüs 175). It is obvious that menstruation is an unavoidable issue in feminist discussion since the menstrual cycle is a unique quality for women which men, since ancient times, have been using to oppress women. Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, the authors of *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, maintain that “conservative sexual mores and taboos about menstruation sometimes led women to be further cloistered, which eroded the ability of women to contribute to the family and thus devalued them further” (Heim).

In the play, menstruation is presented from three different perspectives in the episode “I Was Twelve. My Mother Slapped Me”. The monologue presents a negative attitude of women towards menstruation, a positive reaction to menarche regarding as a female rite of passage, and the ambivalence towards menstruation due to the absence of counseling. The feeling of disgust and the belief that menstruation is a bad thing relates to the notion of menstrual taboos. The negative view towards menarche is evident in the play when the girls say, for example, “[w]hen I saw white girls in the gym with tampons, I thought they were bad girls” (*The Vagina Monologues* 38) and “[m]y mother gave me codeine. We had bunk beds. I went down and lay there. My mother was so uncomfortable” (36). In some societies menstruating women are banned in public and people tend to avoid talking about menstruation openly, especially when there are male participants. In primal times, menstruants were



regarded as tainted. They, therefore, were not allowed to prepare food or practice religious rituals. Moreover, menstruation is referred to as “the curse” because during their menstrual periods, women believe that they cannot control their bodies which results in their wrath and temper (Costigan 100), and because of the existence of the myth about ‘the curse of Eve’, a common term used to refer to menstruation. The myth of this biblical curse is what originates the pains of childbirth while menstruation, which is the signal of capability of procreation, is the outcome of Eve’s defiance of God (Vassallo 41). Women with menstrual blood, then, deserve to experience the pain and suffering caused by giving birth and having menstrual cramps can be seen as a punishment imposed on women to atone for their female ancestor’s sin resulting in the fall of mankind. It is arguable that the belief that women are responsible for the original sin was adopted as a way to subjugate women by imposing beliefs of guilt so that they remain as well as submissive to discriminate them from the public sphere such as in religious activities. This has the limiting effect of allowing only men to exclusively occupy the public domain. In addition, some ancient beliefs affirm that menstruants are cursed and able to invoke evil power;

[I]n the Talmud it is said that if a menstruating women walked between two men, one of the men would die. Persian religion shared a belief with many of its Middle Eastern counterparts that to lie with a menstruating woman would cause a man to be cursed in various ways: he would beget a demon, he would fall sick and die, and so on. (Kramarae and Spender 282)

Such beliefs point to the arbitrary discriminatory practices against women which could be seen as the product of patriarchal society that cannot uphold women's right to equality in the same way as Lucy Costigan writes in *Women and Healing about the History of Menstrual Taboos* that the negative view towards menstruation, causing women's shame, physical pain and emotional discomfort, is largely created by "ignorant and fearful patriarchal societies" (100), and as *Peripheral People: the Excluded Minorities of Ethiopia* indicates that the segregation of menstruants from other people, especially men, attests to the contention that the menstrual taboo is a "symbolic subordination of women in patriarchal societies" (Freeman and Pankhurst 156).

In American culture, three menstrual taboos that are stigmatized are; 'concealment' which means menstruation should not be revealed in public; 'activity' dictating that menstruating women should avoid physical activities such as, swimming and bathing; and 'communication' suggesting women should not discuss menstruation with men (Laws; Britton and Houppert; Williams; Kissling qtd. in White 9). Any evidence of menstruation, for example, menstrual blood and other signs of menstruation such as products used during menstruation should be kept discretely<sup>2</sup>. The notion that menstruation should be kept secret is perpetuated from generation to generation as Helene Deutsch, Austrian-American psychoanalyst known for her feminine psychology theories, claims that girls' perception of menstruation is partly based on what they have consciously learned in their cultures, and modern

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<sup>2</sup>There exists a study about attitudes towards menstruating in which several groups of people were asked to evaluate women on their competence and likability. During the evaluation women would intentionally drop a tampon, which is a signal of menstruating, or a hairclip in front of the subjects. The result shows that the women who dropped a tampon had significantly lower scores in the evaluation of competence and likability than ones who dropped a hairclip. Moreover, the subjects clearly avoided sitting next to the tampon dropper (White 9-10).

western women are framed unconsciously by the menstrual taboos existing in Western cultural consciousness. Deutsch points out girls refuse to learn about menstruation from their mothers because it is presented to them as an “unclean” and “dirty” thing by their mothers’ concealment of menstruation (qtd. in Ulman 236). Breanne Fahs asserts in her article, “Menstruation” published in *Encyclopedia of Women in Today's World* that the social pressure on menstruation secret might relate to the attitudes of men towards menstruating women as there is a study showing that men believe menstruating women are less intelligent and less attractive than non-menstruating women (929). Gloria Steinem, as well, insists in her well-known essay, “If Men Could Menstruate” that menstruation is considered as something embarrassing because it belongs to women. If men could menstruate, the attitude towards menstruation would most likely be “an enviable, worthy, masculine event”;

Men would brag about how long and how much.

Young boys would talk about it as the envied beginning of manhood. Gifts, religious ceremonies, family dinners, and stag parties would mark the day. To prevent monthly work loss among the powerful, Congress would fund a National Institute of Dysmenorrhea. Doctors would research little about heart attacks, from which men would be hormonally protected, but everything about cramps. Sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free. ... (haverford.edu)

The essay points to a paradigm shift where men experience having menstruation which belongs to females and is used as a reason to compel women to think they are weak, and to take a submissive role. At the same time, men claim that they are capable of looking after women and leading the society. The shift Steinem suggests

seems to provoke readers to seriously consider the fact that discrimination against women in the public sphere is a result of the patriarchal framework imposed on social structure, claiming that women are incapable of working in a public domain like men, since if men were to have menstruation they would celebrate this natural cycle and rationally enumerate the advantages of having menstrual blood. Thus, it can be argued that the prevailing negative attitude towards menstruation is arbitrary, and it is largely the result of the belief that men have more power than women and the ancient belief that male bodies are considered normal and females' bodies are abnormal (Fahs 930) or an inferior form of male bodies (Laqueur 61-2).

Even though Ensler does not present her monologues dealing with negative attitudes towards menstruation as boldly as Steinem did, it seems that her monologues tend to demonstrate that the negative perceptions of menstruation influence how females think about their sexual organ: If women have a deep conviction identifying their vaginas with impurity and sinful deeds, they are more likely to avoid talking about or accepting it as a part of their anatomy. This avoidance, later on, could lead them to accept various forms of subjugation, or even sexual violence perpetuated against them. Therefore, Ensler's monologues illustrate the varying reasons of maintaining a feeling of disgust at a woman's genitals that women should not concede nor adopt as a means to subjugate themselves under the patriarchal framework that restrains the capability of women.

The second view point on menstruation and menarche presented in the monologues is positive since they actually function as a female rite of passage which normally is a formal or informal process marking the transition of human movement through each stage of life (Gennep qtd. in Shambley-Ebron 147). Laura Fingerson

writes in *Girls in Power: Gender, Body, and Menstruation in Adolescence* that lately, menstruation has been examined and culturally portrayed in a positive light. New cultural tradition related to menstruation and menarche also is suggested in order to reconceptualize the meaning of menstruation into a wonderful experience for women (151). This can be seen in the monologues describing how a father greets his daughter with a greeting card celebrating her maturity when the girl experiences the onset of menstruation; “My father bought me a card; “To my little girl who isn’t so little anymore.” (*The Vagina Monologues* 35), and when a young girl’s family creates a positively impressive event for her; “My friends Marcia, they celebrated when she got hers. They had dinner for her.” (37). The two examples demonstrate how family members are able to set a fairly positive family atmosphere during girls’ menarche which helps shape a positive view towards menstruation. Such positive, even though private, events can help girls reconsider menstruation as an important and respectful thing and it, as well, helps eradicate negative attitude towards female sexuality as Fingerson argues;

This respect [for menstruation] is vital for equalizing gender relations and empowering girls in their own physicality and sexuality. This empowerment boosts girls’ self-confidence, such as in sport, academic, professional, and sexual contexts. (Fingerson 150-1)

It is possible to view the monologue, which indicates the importance of a family’s role in shaping females’ attitude towards their sexuality and sexual organ, as a positive step to remove negative perceptions from a family where female self-esteem,

reproductive and sexual maturity are firstly developed while there are traditional practices that force women to stay in a cow-shed during their menstrual cycle.

Normally, in Coming of Age literature, male characters are devised to present the transition from childhood to adulthood. This is also applicable to female characters as shown in the monologues. Transition into adulthood is a crucial moment for young women who are entering maturity both emotionally and physically, as menstruation is considered as a process of stepping out from childhood into adulthood. Menstruation is also considered as a commencement of young women's adult life where the sense of responsibility is essential. In fact, Van Gennep, a European anthropologist, studies the life transition and identifies its three dimensions which are separation, transition and incorporation. At the stage of separation, individuals will be removed from society so as to be initiated to their new roles and responsibilities. After being isolated, they will be transformed to a new social role, only then are they ready to return to society with the new roles and responsibilities they are now endowed with (qtd. in Shambley-Ebron 147). This change and added function of the girl is shown in a monologue of a Vietnamese girl, who claims "[menstruation] [c]hanged my whole feeling about myself. I became very silent and mature. A good Vietnamese woman—quiet worker, virtuous, never speaks" (*The Vagina Monologues* 39), pinpoints how the onset of menarche could be regarded as a form of the transition in life; the monologue shows that the young woman is initiated to womanhood after the arrival of her menarche which normally isolates young women from girls. After acknowledging the significant difference between a woman and a girl, the young woman in the play becomes a mature member of her family and society. Maturity, in this case, means both physical and psychological maturity. The

girl in this episode seems to have emotionally matured as she is ready to work, support her family and understand social reality as well as being a role model for the next generation. In terms of the physical aspect, the onset of menstruation indicates the capacity for procreation which is one of several signals of puberty when girls experience a 'growth spurt'; "I was fifteen and I'd been hoping to get it. I was tall and I kept growing." (38) Normally, puberty in girls, starts anywhere between eight to thirteen years of age, during which time girls might notice changes in their body shape because they may gain more weight on their hips and their breasts increase in size. In addition, there are some obvious changes coming along with puberty such as the appearance of hair; "in junior high—brown drips before it came. Coincided with a little hair under my arms, which grew unevenly: one armpit had hair, the other didn't" (*The Vagina Monologues* 36); or pimples on the skin that are precipitated by puberty hormones. Not only are obvious physical changes mentioned in this episode, but also an emotional change takes place—sexual desires, in particular as when one girl makes the revelation that "I got horny". This emotional development signals that girls are ripe to become sexual beings, which is the natural progression of physical development that should be openly discussed like other physical changes. Sex education can therefore help develop young women's understanding of human sexual behaviors in different aspects such as the method of physical changes relating to sexuality, contraception and reproductive rights.

The last viewpoint on menstruation presented in "I Was Twelve. My Mother Slapped Me" is the ambivalence related to the menstrual taboo of communicating on the subject. Bearing taboos of this nature in mind, parents in general might avoid discussing menstruation with their daughters, causing confusion in the minds of their

daughters and making them unprepared for the menarche (Kissling qtd. in White). Ensler illustrates this notion of social prohibition in the monologues featuring girls talking about their parents' reaction to the question about menstruation;

I went to my mother. "What's a period?" I said. "It's punctuation," she said. "You put it at the end of a sentence. (*The Vagina Monologues* 35)

Fifteen years old. My mother said, "Mazeltov." She slapped me in the face. Didn't know if it was a good or a bad thing. (38)

I was twelve. My mother slapped me and brought a red cotton shirt. My father went out for a bottle of sangria. (40)

The word 'period' used in the first sample monologue has several implications; while it means "the flow of blood that comes from a woman's body each month", it is also, especially in American English, "the mark (.), used in writing to show the end of a sentence or of an abbreviation" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 1221). The mother in the first monologue seems to be referring to the former meaning, but she also intends to evade the question by talking about the punctuation instead of enlightening the daughter by introducing her to the new information of menarche and sexuality because the mother might think her daughter is too young to learn or even talk about menstruation. Moreover, the meaning of 'period' she explains to the daughter (a full stop) could be seen as a signal for the daughter to end the conversation and the prevention of any further discussion on the subject she is uncomfortable with and wishes to avoid. The last two sample monologues portray how bewildered the girls can be when experiencing the onset of their menstruation and their parents' incomprehensible reactions. The mother in the second monologue



chants “Mazelto” which is “an expression of congratulations and best wishes, used chiefly by Jews on an occasion of success or good fortune” (Dictionary.com). Even though, the phrase carries a good message, the mother’s reaction seems the opposite. Naava Piatka, a Jewish playwright, wrote in *No Goodbyes: A Father-Daughter Memoir of Love, War and Resurrection* (2009) about her feelings towards the ‘Mazelto’ tradition that “what kind of crazy celebration has you get hit in the face and applauded for something you didn’t even do” (11). Even though the ‘Mazelto’ tradition could be seen as a rite of passage indicated to girls who have their first menstruation that they are now women, the lack of background knowledge and the ambiguity of the tradition could lead the girls to confusion. Similar to the ‘Mazelto’ tradition, the way the mother in the last sample monologue gives her daughter a red cotton shirt and the father goes out to drink some red wine makes the girl puzzled whether her menarche is good or bad since giving a red cotton shirt could be seen as a celebration of womanhood, but drinking sangria is the way to cleanse men of intoxicating excess (G. Black 269). It seems to suggest that the father thinks of his daughter’s first menstruation as a form of impurity. Certainly, if the girls cannot talk with their parents about their physical and psychological changes, feeling ill-prepared, they must turn to their female peers. Stolzman’s study notes that even though parents are open to discussing menstruation, the daughters tend to find out more information about it from their friends of the same sex (qtd. in Daniluk 59) like the one in the monologues who consults her friend and a Ouija board; “Twelve years old. I was happy. My friend had a Ouija board, asked when we were going to get our periods, looked down, and I saw blood (*The Vagina Monologues* 39)”. The result cannot prove that her friend is correct and has any actual knowledge on the subject of menstruation.

It is good if her friend can educate and help her prepare for the change, but “the exchanges between less-informed, albeit well-meaning friends can result in erroneous and inaccurate information being passed on about menstruation” (Daniluk 60).

With a multitude of perceptions on menstruation, it can be argued that menstruation is not interpreted in the same way, depending on beliefs and background knowledge and each perception affects the attitudes towards vaginas differently. It seems Eve Ensler includes the monologue about menstruation to encourage better understanding of menstruation as it implicitly associates with female sexuality and women’s genitals – vaginas, a word Ensler herself concedes as difficult to articulate as it “stirs up [her] anxiety, awkwardness, contempt, and disgust” (*The Vagina Monologues* xi) since it has always been represented as a lewd, if not taboo subject.

Despite the fact that Ensler selects the word vagina to qualify her monologues, she also features other words referring to female genitalia such as vulva, clitoris, pussy and cunt in her set of monologues as well. Her intention to adopt various terms of female sexual organs could be seen as a stimulant to the ability to talk about female sexuality explicitly. One particular instance is the monologue called “Reclaiming Cunt” which is devoted to a massage therapist in Pittsburg, who actually came up to Ensler after a performance claiming that Ensler did not actually understand the word ‘cunt’, and later helped Ensler reconceive it by elaborating on the word for a half-hour (*The Vagina Monologues* 100). The monologues might be intended to diminish the negative attitude society has towards the word cunt by including this word in the set of daily used words starting with C, U, N and T and encouraging the audience to chant the word ‘cunt’ out loud while the play is performed. In the opinion of Stefanie

Thomas, an actress who performed the “Reclaiming Cunt” episode staged in the Kay Theater of the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, on 13 February 2002 by students of Maryland University, “cunt is not a derogatory word. [It] is a word that [she has] reclaimed to transform into something positive, and that is an important message” (qtd. in Monheit).

In fact, in the English language, ‘cunt’ has been considered as a taboo and extremely offensive word so much so that for the long duration from 1700 to 1959 publishing the word in its entirety was avoided. Francis Grose’s *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785) first edition represents the word with four stars – \*\*\*\*. Later, in the second edition, the definition given to the word is “a nasty name for a nasty thing”. It was not until 1976 that the word ‘cunt’ made its appearance in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Kick 271). According to George Carlin’s *Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television* (1972), ‘cunt’ is indeed one of those seven words banned on TV. (The other six words being ‘shit’, ‘piss’, ‘fuck’, ‘cocksucker’, ‘motherfucker’ and ‘tits’) (qtd. in Sullivan 131). Even though recently cunt officially has its place in reliable dictionaries, it still ranks as the most vulgar English word and is definitely still forbidden on television. In 1999, the word ‘cunt’ was featured in an episode of *Sex and the City* screened in England, it provoked criticism of how inappropriate it was to allow this word on air as, according to England’s Broadcasting Standards Commission, “‘cunt’ is by far the most offensive followed by ‘mother-fucker’, which has moved up the rankings in recent years after overtaking ‘fuck’”. It is likely that the word is considered vulgar because it is associated with obscenity<sup>3</sup>. Hence, there is no

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<sup>3</sup> It is evident in Ian McEwan’s novel *Atonement* (2001) that the term can even arouse Briony’s suspicion of Robbie’s sexual intent when she helps him deliver a letter with a word ‘cunt’ written on it to her sister; she thinks Robbie intends to sexually harass her sister without knowing that both of them

doubt that the term such a vulgar word rarely or never appears in polite public discourse. However, the word ‘cunt’ could simply mean a woman’s vagina if it refers to a description of female sexual organ, not a disparaging remark on people, which indicates devaluation of femininity and female sexuality.

Instead of implicitly advocating the freedom of female sexuality, Ensler seems to adopt an explicitly confrontational strategy to fight against female sexual oppression when she urges her audience to shout the word “cunt” out loud in “Reclaiming Cunt”. This rhetorical tool might be adopted to evoke strong feelings and hostile response from the audience like it once did when *The Vagina Monologues* was performed as a part of the National VDAY College Campaign at Hunter on March 8<sup>th</sup> 2003, as part of the celebration for International Women's Day;

...the favorite of the night was “Reclaiming Cunt,” performed by Hunter student Suzanne Harvin. ... As the monologue explored all the sound possibilities in C-U-N-T, Harvin gave us a shoulder-shaking, stomach-pumping, head-tossing orgasmic word ride. When she called to us all to say it, to scream it, the immediate ceiling-raising cry, "CUNT!" was mixed with shouts, clapping and laughter. (The Hunter Envoy)

Ensler does not, however, induce women to resort to verbal brutality, physical violence or terror tactics, her confrontational strategy is reasonably radical because it could be seen as an indication of refusal to accept any form of sexual oppression. At

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are actually in love with each other and that their love making in the library is not rape, but consensual sexual intercourse.

the same time, confrontational rhetoric<sup>4</sup> expands to silent activity but cheerful ones because it is all about communicating the truth to urge the audience to end oppression (Gandio 185). In the case of Ensler's *The Vagina Monologue*, each monologue coming up on the stage is regarded as conveying the truth of female sexuality and sexual oppression. Then there comes the "Reclaiming Cunt", which could be claimed as a climax of the play where the audience are given the chance to cheerfully yell out the word 'cunt' without the attached nasty connotation. Moreover, bellowing out the word demonstrates the appreciation of the female sexual organ as it is, female sexuality and the demolition of obnoxious sense embedded in female genitalia.

Throughout the play, Ensler clearly states her motivation to encourage women to articulate the key word of the play, 'vagina,' as she feels saying the word out loud is a first and necessary step towards addressing the subject of violence against women. Since vaginas have been largely treated as though they did not exist, when this unmentionable area is violated, women fall silent. Thus, if a vagina, like other parts of the human body, becomes a commonly spoken about issue for women, violence committed against their sexual organs should, and could, be freely reported as well. Furthermore, the presence of the word vagina throughout the play could be seen as a means of representing the polar opposites of a penis for the purpose of bringing about a female community and arousing an affinity centered around the female sexual organ and female sexuality which could subsequently lead to activism.

*The Vagina Monologues* depicts the vagina in its various functions that yield both pain and pleasure to women because Ensler might intend to imply that female

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<sup>4</sup> *Rhetoric for radicals: a handbook for 21st century activists* by Jason Del Gandio asserts that confrontational rhetoric includes "yelling, screaming, shouting, stomping, clapping, drumming, fists in the air, Black Bloc, loud slogan, passionate manifestos and declamatory speeches" (185).

sexuality should be mentioned openly which could inspire the audience to think and get involved in their sisters' conditions. Some monologues in the play explore the sexual pleasures women claim to have discovered in the vagina workshop which provided women with a means of freedom of expression rarely accepted in the past where the only appropriate form of sexual expression was missionary heterosexual sex (vaginal intercourse with the male partner on top of the female). According to an article in *New Dimensions in Women's Health*, there is clinical evidence that both males and females have performed masturbation since ancient times, but all studies concur that the practice is more common for men than women. Many women are embarrassed to admit to masturbating as it is said to be a sinful, shameful and harmful deed, when in fact, sex experts and therapists argue that masturbation is actually a healthy sexual outlet for men and women alike (Alexander et al. 79).

Luce Irigaray's comments regarding female sexual pleasure in *This Sex which Is Not One* contends that women own their sexual pleasure since it exists within themselves, unlike men who need mediation—their hands and women's genitals—in order to gain pleasure (Irigaray 24). Ensler presents a similar idea in the episode entitled "The Women Who Love to Make Vaginas Happy" and an interview with a lesbian woman regarding homoerotic behavior suggesting that women's sexual functions can be fulfilled by women themselves or their female partners without the need for male support. This episode illustrates as well the sense of 'unity' among females which happens when men are excluded from female communities and presents a positive lesbian relationship which, nowadays, have become more acceptable in most societies, but a few decades ago, perceptions towards lesbians were fairly negative.

*Sex, Power and Pleasure* (1985) by Mariana Valverde, mentions popular wisdom suggesting two possible explanations for being lesbian. The first explanation deals with a genetic disorder affecting females. In short, lesbians are “born this way”. Another explanation claims that lesbians might have experienced psychological traumas, such as incest or being sexually molested, which make them frightened of having a relationship with men. However, these two explanations cannot be proven to be true because there are some women who have been lesbian for many years and later became heterosexual and vice versa. In addition, Canadian statistics suggest that women who were sexually abused in their childhood are still heterosexual while many lesbians have never been through sexual abuse when they are young (76). The explanation why lesbianism exists might suggest that there is the belief that being lesbian is a form of sexual deviancy, thus it can or should be cured.

The fact that Enslar, as a feminist, openly supports lesbianism through her play might be to show that women have the right to choose their own way of life, even though they might be labeled as being deviant from traditional standards of femininity. Valverde comments that if lesbianism is identified as the way to seek for love, sex and support independent from men, this sexual orientation is defended by all feminists as a positive choice. On the other hand, if lesbianism is associated with women who are “too ugly to get a man” or “aping men”, even the heterosexual feminists who support a homosexual pattern will be attacked (103). Valverde seems to require all feminists, regardless of their sexual orientation, to support women’s choice. Mankiller asserts in *The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History* that

lesbians and feminists communities actually overlap. Particularly, in the 1970s lesbianism was used as a weapon of the feminist movement encouraging feminists to pay attention to every aspect of female life (213).

Furthermore, Ensler's "The Women Who Love to Make Vaginas Happy" seems to imply that women in the play who represent the early feminist movement, where the major focuses were on female emancipation, the right to vote (Tuin 10), and the right to receive education, do not truly know and understand their bodies, especially from the aspect of deriving pleasure. It often seems as if it is men who know more about the vagina while women gain knowledge only through hearsay or their own imaginations and often with repugnance.

It can be said that women's negative attitudes towards themselves become the key factor in their own subjugation. In one monologue, Ensler criticizes the influence of social conceptualization on women's lifestyles and self-perceptions;

Our self-hatred is only the internalized repression and hatred of the patriarchal culture. It isn't real. Pussys unite. I know all of it. Like, if we'd grown up in a culture where we were taught that fat thighs were beautiful, we'd all be pounding down milkshakes and cookies, lying on our backs, spending our days thigh-expanding. But we didn't grow up in that culture. I hated my thighs, and I hated my vagina even more  
*(The Vagina Monologues 53-4).*

The excerpt seems to indicate that female attitudes and behaviors and their gender roles are prescribed by social expectations and beliefs which are learnt through social conceptualization. If women want to be accepted, it is important for them to conform



to social norms, for example, they have to reduce the size of their thighs if society views having big thighs as a deficient body image. Ensler, then, argues that this kind of norm is unreasonable and has been adopted by patriarchal society to coerce women to be obsessed with their physical appearance. Similarly, the attitudes women tend to have about their vaginas are shaped by a patriarchal framework that intends to overthrow female authority by lessening female self-esteems and self-confidence.

An example of how women's low self-esteems are formed is presented through the monologue entitled "The Flood", which is based on the experience of a woman living in the first wave of the women's movement in America during the 1840s-1920s where women are conditioned to think that they should be silent about their personal lives and that sex is a personal issue that should not be mentioned in public. When the character in "The Flood" representing a typical woman of the early twentieth century, where traditional romances focused only on male seduction and the sexually passive position of women, goes on a date with a boy, she is treated with disgust for showing how sexually aroused she is physically. After the incident, the character dares not to have sex with anyone or even touch her own vagina. The character has been conditioned to think that to be passive of male sexual desire is a social expectation and that women must keep their desires secret. At times, the sexually ideal role of women can even lead to sexual harassment when men improperly interpret a female's refusal or lack of positive response as a woman's total surrender. In a way, both men and women are indoctrinated into believing that they have a specific role to play – men are dominant and women are submissive. Ensler's character in "The Woman Who Loved to Make Vagina Happy," relates that when she made her sexual experience audible with her moans, her male sexual partners were

startled into thinking that she was mentally deranged (108). The moan given by women in this sense can be interpreted as Ensler's own metaphor for a women's voice that can be heard only when women are granted free expression of their own sexuality.

Not only is the pleasure related to female genitals portrayed in the play, but more so pain and pressure caused by having a vagina such as the pain associated with the reproductive system. Procreation is one of the vaginal functions portrayed in *The Vagina Monologues* through which Ensler conveys the perennial social expectations that a woman should be a good mother. The expectations required to fulfill the biological role of a mother can be viewed as an approach used to tie women up in the domestic sphere where they are forced to cope with household chores that provide no economic benefit. Working in largely unpaid or low-paid jobs, women are forced to count on their partners for economic support. The only time women are permitted to step out of the domestic sphere is when they are able to fulfill the expectations of a perfect wife and play a complementary role to their husbands;

He took me to dinner,  
made me go out with his boss.  
I didn't want to go.  
He kicked me under the table,  
told me to look happy,  
told me to smile.  
I smiled. (151)

As expected, some of the monologues further explore the sexual function of vaginas as a requisite to male gratification. For instance, the wife in the “Hair” episode is urged to shave her vagina as a means of satisfying her husband who persists with his philandering nature and carries on having extramarital affairs with other women even after his wife has rejuvenated her vagina as he had dictated. Shaving a natural part of the human body is a means of taking control over one’s nature. The fact that men are willing to go as far as to shave female pubic hair indicates the male’s desire to exercise their control over women. The monologue further draws attention to the fact that both males and females perpetuate the inferior status of women when it comes to sexuality. The female therapist in the monologue could represent the perspective of women who assent to the notion of female inferiority as she urges the wife to give in and succumb to her husband’s desires.

Furthermore, Ensler’s “Vagina Fact” describes the use of female genital circumcision as a means of preventing women from using masturbation as a deliberate way of gaining sexual pleasure;

In the nineteenth century, girls who learned to develop orgasmic capacity by masturbation were regarded as medical problems. Often they were “treated” or “corrected” by amputation or cauterization of the clitoris or a “miniature chastity belt,” sewing the vaginal lips together to put the clitoris out of reach... (65).

The use of genital circumcision in this instance is an indication that women were not permitted to enjoy any sexual pleasure whatsoever. Those who experienced female genital circumcision were only allowed to ‘learn’ about sex when they got married

implying that their role and the function of their vaginas was primarily for procreation and male indulgence. In 1593, at a witch trial, the clitoris, the symbol of female sexuality, was also pejoratively identified as a devil's teat (*The Vagina Monologues* 31). William E. Burns suggests in *Witch Hunts in Europe and America: an Encyclopedia* that a "witch hunt was an expression of misogyny." There was a widely held belief that women were vulnerable to succumb to Satan, such as the character Eve in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* who gave in to temptation after being seduced by the serpent. Furthermore, women who were accused of witchcraft were often viewed as aggressive and open to challenging male dominance (109).

Even though female genital circumcision is related to Christianity and witch hunting which used to be widely conducted in Europe and America, it is evident that the practice of female genital mutilation is performed in 28 countries in Africa and other countries in Middle East and Asia when girls are between two to fifteen years old by older women or men who have strong relationship with the girls' family. During the practice, the girls are undressed and held down by three or four people before being mutilated (World Health Organization qtd. in Branson). According to *Female Genital Mutilation* by Comfort Momoh, a midwife working at an African Well-Woman clinic in Guy's Hospital in London, the practice is separated into four types; excision of the prepuce, with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris; excision of clitoris with partial or total excision of labia minora; excision of part or all of the external genitalia stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening; picking, piercing or incising of the clitoris or/and labia, then sewing close the remaining tissue. In the past, this practice was used to reduce female sexual desire that may be caused by the enlargement of the clitoris from the rubbing of women's clothes. Until now, it has

been used to control female sexual behavior in the societies where women's virginity and virtue are emphasized. There is evidence that in the UK and the USA, gynecologists have performed female circumcision to cure nymphomania, insanity, masturbation, and some other female disorders (5-7), but the practice actually causes intense physical and psychological trauma for women. In terms of the physical trauma, females might encounter immediate and long-term effects. All types of female genital mutilation can cause serious pain or bleeding. Particularly, if the bleeding is uncontrolled, it may lead to death. Furthermore, the genital area might be inflected because of using unsterile equipment which results in blood poisoning since there are bacteria in the bloodstream. In long-term complications, there are many possible aftereffects of genital circumcision, for example, pain during sexual intercourse, repeated urinary tract infection, stone in the urethra or bladder and etc. Not only physical, but also psychological pains from female genital mutilation affect the lives of women. After undergoing this practice, many infibulated girls suffer from emotional disturbance such as eating disorder, sleeping problems and cognitive disorder (Rahman and Toubia 8-9).

Additionally, the practice is seen as 'patriarchal sado-ritual' and derogation of human rights which is the key to women's liberation since circumcision suppresses female sexual pleasure (clitoral orgasm) (Daly qtd. in Iroegbu 548; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 227), and it helps subjugate females. To this point, Agnes Pareyio, a Maasai woman who has been educating women in Kenya about the dangers of female genital mutilation, discovered that a number of girls left schools earlier due to circumcision and marriage; "are married, they must stay home and take care of their husbands" (qtd. in Rosenberg). A few decades ago female genital mutilation was adopted as a

“symbol par excellence” of patriarchal oppression and attacked by Western feminists and development organizations since the 1970s (Keyi-Ayema qtd. in *Canadian Anthropology Society* 44; Gamble 172). Nevertheless, the attempt to abort the practice of female circumcision is a formidable task for organizations such as the United Nations, since in many countries the practice is regarded as a rite of passage like taking part in religious rituals. Those organizations do not have the right to judge whether the practice is culturally wrong. They can merely confirm that the practice of female circumcision is inhumane (Branson).

Even though a series of “Vagina Facts”, especially the practice of female circumcision added in the monologues, is rarely seen in American culture where the female genital circumcision was actually proposed in the nineteenth century to cure female mental illness (Gamble 172), it is alluded in the play to create a shared consciousness among women and to suggest that women should be active in preventing violence against their sisters regardless of religion or race because they are the same. However, there is a criticism pointing out that Western feminists do not understand the plight of those who have first-hand experience. In *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses*, Nnaemeka puts it that African women have different experiences from Western women whose understanding and knowledge of sexuality are not relevant to non-Western societies. Western feminists understand female circumcision in the dimensions of sexuality and female subjugation with the notion that men are the miscreant of female subjugation, forgetting to pay attention to the value and culture aspects and to consider women themselves as the perpetrators. Moreover, African

countries are constantly portrayed as backward societies (121-2), where females are labeled as 'prisoners of ritual' (Lightfoot-Klein qtd in Abusharaf 13).

While some of the monologues in the play clearly present a picture of women in torment, other monologues by Ensler could be perceived as a weapon used to fight back against a culture that objectifies women which, in a way, could be claimed as a confrontational strategy. For example, "Because He Liked to Look at It" explores the life of a woman who develops hatred for her own sexual organ. However, after beginning a relationship with a man who expresses his love for her vagina and "[loses] himself there," her attitude is forever changed and her self-esteem boosted. It is arguable that even though the monologues are created to celebrate female sexuality and raise awareness of violence against women, Ensler does not oppose men, instead, the playwright tends to communicate with male audience as well for the issue of gender equity needs the understanding between males and females. In addition, "Because He Liked to Look at It" implies that women would feel greater empowerment if more men accepted them and their sexuality. Accordingly, a V-Men workshop was conducted to encourage male audience to get involved in feminist activism, and it allows men to express their perceptions or memories of violence against women from their perspectives<sup>5</sup>. However, the major target group of the play or female audience should gain the insight into their own sexuality before reaching a compromise between men and women. Therefore, the word vagina is selected to play a major part throughout this play as it constitutes female sexuality which is the subject women have always been silent about, but once women say the word repeatedly, the

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<sup>5</sup> V-Men stories can be found in <http://www.vday.org/v-men> where men with different ages, ethnicities and occupations have presented their awareness about violence against women.

word happens to be their own word that represents their body and their most essential place. At the same time women would find out that the shame and embarrassment they feel when articulating the word has been tantamount to silencing of their desires, eroding their ambitions (Kranz 26). Originating from *The Vagina Monologues*, Eve Ensler's VDAY organization advocating protection against every kind of violence done to women uses the play as a mechanism for revitalizing women and encouraging them to break free from the patriarchal framework. The organization's commitments are based on three core beliefs; "that art has power to transform thinking and inspire people to act; that lasting social and cultural change is spread by ordinary people doing extraordinary things; and that local women know what their communities need and can become unstoppable leaders" (*The Vagina Monologues* 170). It can be seen that the performance of *The Vagina Monologues* is merely a beginning step leading to activism because together with the play campaigns informing and educating are mounted to reform social attitudes towards violence against women. Moreover, instead of obscuring facts or discussion about vaginas and allowing men to be vaginal experts, the play depicts women as an authority on their own sexuality which incites the female audience, who might have previously been reserved, to talk about their vaginas and sexual desires openly. To have experienced the courage each character showed on stage, the female audience will not only articulate the word 'vagina' and express their sexuality, but also be brave enough to discuss and unite against sexual violence committed against them. Therefore, the play and the V-Day campaign can be viewed as striving to break the silence about female sexuality to stop every form of sexual violence against women of the modern feminist movement.



In conclusion, Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* is a play that adopts the word vagina as a starting point to ignite women's movement and stir them to rediscover their own sense of womanhood and female sexuality in particular. From the play the audience could infer that the vagina is treated with disgust because it is associated with sexuality, which is considered as a taboo, and menstruation, which is viewed as an impure feature of women. Ensler, therefore, added a few more monologues portraying the vagina and female sexuality in a positive way to change the long-held perceptions women have about their sexual organ. The positive monologues also affirm that women are able to have control of their sexuality. Moreover, that Ensler has the word vagina and other terms related to female genitalia presented throughout the play reaffirms her intention to encourage the audience to talk about female sexuality explicitly. Ensler deliberately makes the play bold and turns it into a mechanism to spur people into action when she established the V-Day organization that helps increase awareness about violence against women as well as raise the money to fund other anti-violence organizations through activities and the performance of *The Vagina Monologue*.

### CHAPTER III

#### ***THE GOOD BODY: EVE ENSLER AND WOMEN'S BODY***

#### **DISSATISFACTION**

*The Good Body* began with me and my particular obsession with my “imperfect” stomach. I have charted this self-hatred, recorded it, tried to follow it back to its source. Here, unlike the women in *The Vagina Monologues*, I am my own victim, my own perpetrator.

(*The Good Body* xii)

Whereas in Chapter 2 this thesis explored how in *The Vagina Monologues*, Eve Ensler resoundingly declares the essence of womanhood, this chapter moves on to her subsequent play, *The Good Body*, where she presents yet another set of ten monologues that deal mainly with modern women's dissatisfactions with their physical attributes. As such, Ensler presents a collage of women in the post-women's liberation world who appear to be extricated from the traditional notions of chastity, sexual submission and male domination. Each monologue preceded by Ensler's own voice is based on true stories of women the playwright has met. The stories she learned from those women become the source of fictional characters illustrated in the play such as Bernice, Carmen, Dana, Nina whose names become the title of their own personal narratives. The play also makes use of famous real-life figures like Helen Gurley Brown and Isabella Rossellini who appear as partially fictional characters in the monologues entitled with their names. As the play deals with the American consumerist culture and an ideal image portrayed through American popular culture

that expand beyond the U.S.A., Ensler depicts how some other countries such as India is also affected by the notion of beautification and the ideal body image in the monologue entitled “Priya”, which at the same time portrays cultures celebrating natural beauty in the same way as “Leah”, a monologue of a Masai woman, does. In one monologue that is not entitled with a woman’s name, “Everywhere”, illustrates the capability of women to work side by side with their male counterparts in the public sphere and perfect their household responsibilities. Since the play draws attention to the subject of violence against women, *The Good Body* can be viewed as an extended project of the V-Day organization and its objectives. In *The Good Body*, however, women themselves perpetrate much of the violence, albeit in a different form. Ensler blames this violence on the fact that “[women] have been taught, trained and programmed to focus on fixing and mutilating [themselves]. That’s a core reason why women do not have power in the world” (Mother Jones). By presenting women in American consumerist culture in the plays and observing Ensler’s activist projects, this chapter, then, aims at proving that the female characters reflect modern women who have been influenced by the idealized image of women represented through the media and conditioned to pay much attention to their physical appearances to the point of becoming an obsession.

Through the play, Ensler seems to play with the word ‘good’ that is a concept used to praise and oppress women at the same time. The audience learn from the *The Vagina Monologues* that, in terms of sexuality, the women in the play often feel that they should not be seen as sexual beings. This notion obviously limits female sexual expression because women cannot express nor explore their sexual desire explicitly if they want to be included in a good-woman group. Actually, the implication of *The*

*Good Body* is that the concept of virtue or being ‘good’ as it applies to women has been constantly changing through the ages. For Ensler;

If you ask me now what this means, to be good, I still don’t know exactly. When I was growing up in the fifties, “good” was simply what girls were supposed to be. They were good. They were pretty, perky. They had a blond Clairol wave in their hair. They wore girdles and waist cinchers and pumps. They got married. They looked married. They waited to be given permission. They kept their legs together, even during sex. (*The Good Body* 4)

Ensler enumerates the characteristics of a good woman that came to be associated with the notion of being virtuous and moral, and then continues the list by adding the characteristics of what might constitute a good woman in today’s world, particularly in America;

In recent years, good girls join the Army. They climb the corporate ladder. They go to the gym. They accessorize. They wear pointy, painful shoes. They wear lipstick if they’re lesbians; they wear lipstick if they’re not. They don’t eat too much. They don’t eat at all. They stay perfect. They stay thin. (4)

It is obvious that Ensler’s message in *The Good Body* shows how problematic the paradigm shift of how to be perceived as a ‘good’ woman has become in the twenty-first century as the indications above illustrate that women of today are able to work in a realm that used to be occupied exclusively by men such as in the army or the corporate business world. Furthermore, they are more likely to be promoted to a higher position to work alongside their male counterparts. Despite that, however,

women still uphold the notion that their femininity is based on physical attractiveness that the need to apply make-up or restrain themselves from having too much food to keep in shape is indeed paramount.

The obsession with the pursuit of beauty forces women to perennially strive to be physically attractive in the eyes of men since the patriarchal social structure somehow objectifies women by setting a standard of a normative physical appearance that women should conform to. In general, it is clear that women nowadays are living a life far different from those living in the early twentieth century. For one thing, sex is no longer a taboo subject as they can express their personal desires freely and openly. In addition, being bad, for them, is no longer identified with notions of sexual misconduct, but instead manifests itself in physical attributes like “our thighs, our butt, our breast, our hair, our nose, our little toe” (5). Through this perspective, an internal conflict arises for women that despite having overcome sexual constraints and now being free to express their sexual desires more openly, and working professionally alongside men, there are doubts, as articulated in *The Good Body*, as to what extent women are truly independent.

Furthermore, one realizes that American women living in the twenty-first century have gained access to contraceptive devices and abortion, which is now legally permitted in most states. This capability to protect themselves from pregnancy and sexual transmitted diseases helps women distinguish sex for pleasure and procreation. With the conventional belief that women are born to fulfill the role of procreation, birth control or prevention of unwanted pregnancies used to be a process women had to manage on their own. Before the time of contraceptive devices such as condoms, hormonal contraception and injected contraceptives, one natural birth

control method that appeared to be practical and popular throughout history was sexual abstinence (Notare 128) as it is “an intentional act to keep away from any sexual activity” (Corporation 223). In Christian tradition, there are two types of sexual abstinence which are lifelong abstinence and premarital abstinence. Lifelong abstinence reveals that early Christianity viewed sexuality as a connection to the earth that could interrupt the immortality of soul. Therefore, the virgins seemed privileged and higher than married people as they have a special bond with God. With the break away from the Catholic Church, Protestants such as John Calvin and Martin Luther said that the long-term abstinence was against “God’s creative design of sexual companionship”. In other words, human beings are created to ensure the continuation and proliferation of mankind. They tended to support the idea of premarital sexual abstinence encouraging youths to have sexual relationship only when they were of age to “fulfill God’s mandate of reproduction and to channel their lust” (Gresle-Favier 1-3: Hartwig 19). Abortion is another controversial method of pregnancy termination that has been performed throughout history. In the early nineteenth century, abortion was allowed in America only if it was performed before the quickening, which indicates the first move of an unborn baby during 18 to 20 weeks of the fetal stage. It seems that in the United States, in the early period of the nineteenth century, abortion was widely open since services for termination of pregnancies were advertised in newspapers and women could talk about abortion and have it if they desired (Mohr 4). This positive attitude towards abortion in American society changed in the 1860s when economic growth was largely boosted, and a new middle-class was also rapidly growing. Together with the new class that expanded in the post-civil war period, there was the influence of the culture of the English Victorian era that glorified morality

and placed emphasis on mannerism over American society. Additionally, the middle-class tended to adopt the Victorian values, such as sexual restraint and the value of honorable behavior, to mimic the upper-class society. However, the middle-class was inclined to be stricter and more extreme about the morality and mannerism than those in the upper-class society they imitated so as to differentiate themselves from both above and below. Therefore, it is possible that abortion, which is considered as a result of sexual indulgence, was apt to be banned in the American Victorian era leading, even, to the start of anti-abortion legislation;

Between 1860 and 1880 the regular physicians' campaign against abortion in the United States produced the most important burst of anti-abortion legislation in the nation's history. At least 40 anti-abortion statutes of various kinds were placed upon state and territorial law books during that period; over 30 in the years from 1866 through 1877 alone. ... More significantly, most of the legislation passed between 1860 and 1880 explicitly accepted the regulars' assertions that the interruption at gestation at any point in a pregnancy should be a crime and that the state itself should try actively to restrict the practice of abortion. (Mohr 200)

One can see that in the late nineteenth century the society limited women's freedom to make their own choice. It was not until *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 that state laws making abortion legal for the purpose of saving the mother's life during the first trimester, women's rights, to some extent, were approved. Even though the amount of abortion providers, between 2005 (1,787) and 2008 (1,793) remained stable (Facts on Induced Abortion in the United States), indicating that women's right to make

decisions about their own bodies and their reproductive system has once again been restored.

Some view the availability of contraceptives and abortions as an inevitable urge encouraging American women today to be more sexually active due to the fact that they can avoid the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. Although it seems women have earned their sexual freedom in the twenty-first century, they are heading towards a new form of bondage which is normative beauty that motivates women to pay more attention to maintaining attractive physical appearance. According to “Does Body Image Play a Role in Risky Sexual Behavior?”, a study by Pennsylvania State University conducted in 2006, body image and sexual activity are significantly associated. The researchers observed the attitudes of 434 first-year university students including thirty nine percent of European Americans, thirty two percent of African-Americans, and twenty nine percent of Hispanics who are in their late teen years. The researchers were interested in this group of students because they are set amid a period of adjustment to the university life which is fairly challenging for some students who claimed that they had never lived on their own before. The study shows that men with a positive body image are sexually active and tend to have more unprotected sexual activity with a large number of partners. On the other hand, sexually active women with a positive body image are less likely to have unprotected sex than those with a negative body image. According to Mindi Brown, a subject of the study “[g]irls who have a good body image respect themselves more and are less likely to feel pressured to have unprotected sex.” Moreover, as expected, the result of the study implies that for females, “a positive view of one's body may provide the confidence to protect



themselves when engaging in sexual behaviors" (Chapman). This study could also be interpreted that women with a positive physical appearance seem to have the potential to negotiate with their partners if they want to have safe sex. At the same time, women with a negative body image appear to be less inclined to converse with males, especially ones in good shape. It indicates that if women want to be able to discuss their desire to have safe sex, they should first learn how to keep fit.

*The Good Body* presents several reasons why women should be physically attractive and provides descriptions of what constitutes 'beauty'. In the play, both American women and women of different ethnic groups who are products of the American consumerist culture, are made to believe that they must have flawless skin, tanned skin, a flat abdomen, a slim body and thin thighs in order to assure a contented and happy life. According to *The Beauty Myth* (1991) by Naomi Wolf, while more women break free from the patriarchal structure and gain more power in areas previously occupied and dominated by men, women are still trapped by the pursuit of beauty;

We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement; the beauty myth. ... As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it wanted to carry on its work of social control. ... The contemporary backlash is so violent because the ideology of beauty is the last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies that still has the power to control those women ... (10)

Ellen Whiteman points out that in Western culture the norm of beauty is a slim body, fair skin and perfect hair. If women cannot be categorized as such, regard themselves as failures, then only women who are successful will be rewarded by men (92). Wendy Chapkis writes about the association of beauty and female success in *Beauty Secret: women and the politics of appearance* confirming the notion that;

The pursuit of beauty is one of the few avenues to success over which a woman has some measure of personal control. You can mold your body much more easily than you can force access to the old-boy networks or get the job you want, the promotion you deserve, the salary you need, the recognition you are owed. And implicit in the effort is the belief that after beauty follows the job, the money, the love. (95)

Therefore, women are constantly struggling to obtain the goal of beauty, often with no comprehension of the confining nature behind these beauty myths. To some extent, women who are able to embrace all characteristics of the ideal image are often the well-to-do who can afford expensive cosmetics in order to maintain flawless skin, pay for fitness memberships to keep slim and fit, and afford a beach vacation in order to maintain a tanned complexion. Consequently, it is often the case that such norms of beauty are an indication of one's social class and economic wellbeing.

In addition, in 2003, ELLE magazine, a worldwide women's magazine, ELLE.com and MSNBC.com, a leader of original journalism on the Internet, released their survey on "Sex and Body Image" saying that among the participants the number of overweight males are larger than females, but surprisingly females are more worried about their body image and allow the negative attitude towards their body

image to affect their sexual confidence (L. Carroll). The survey reveals that thirty-seven percentage points of female participants believe their stomach is the worst part of their body, and during their sexual activity they even try to hide their midriff. The fact that women's sexual confidence and self-esteem is decreased by their negative views towards their body image, and that women could be pressured into having unprotected sex if they do not have a normatively perfect physical appearance, implies that it is true that women in the twenty-first century, who are able to take full advantage of contraceptive devices and abortion service in order to possess sexual pleasure, are heading to a new form of female bondage—a slim body.

In addition to the reasons explaining why modern women strive so hard to be physically attractive, the play seems to ascribe the obsession with the beauty myths mainly to media and family. Anna Gough-Yates argues in *'Hazardous Beauties': Feminism and Femininity in Charlie's Angles* that through guides to female sexuality, such as *Cosmopolitan* magazine in which sexual issues are addressed and discussed openly by its 'experts', women are introduced to a newfound confidence and enthusiasm in their sexuality that can be viewed as a form of women's liberation. At the same time, however, these publications also encourage women to build up their image and strive to be attractive in order to get a man;

It was *Cosmopolitan* magazine, however, that became the self-proclaimed bible of the single girl during this period, with the editorial message that stressed the importance of freedom, particularly sexual freedom as a route to fulfillment. Although *Cosmopolitan* promoted an image of femininity which had abandoned the shackles of sexual 'repression,' the newfound freedom was conceived of in explicitly

consumerist terms, suggesting that sexual freedom (and implicitly women's liberation) were only available to those who worked at being physically attractive to men. (361)

Indeed, so pervasive and influential has popular culture been that women have been constantly upholding their 'false' image of femininity. In the 1970s, during the second-wave feminism, the media and popular culture were a key factor that socialized women into a traditional femininity. Prior to that, Betty Friedan launched her phenomenal book called *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) where she explores how women's magazines usually present a picture of supposedly happy housewives doing chores, managing the house and taking care of the husband and children whereas working women are depicted as a women suffering from hard work outside the domestic sphere. Moreover, Friedan claims that those magazines were put on the market by men (Friedan) which implies that men play a crucial part in representing women in a falsified image. Majorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus: Women Movies and the American Dream* (1973), which analyzes images of women in the movies between the 1900s and the early 1970s, claims that female characters, in most cases, are portrayed as virginal women who for decades have been appealing to movie audience. At the same time, Rosen points out that women's image of femininity represented to the audience is far from the reality and it bends the perceptions of both men and women towards women in reality (qtd. in Fremont-Smith 98). The influence of popular culture over women's femininity is continual, but instead of presenting women's virtuous characteristics, popular culture in the twenty-first century highlights female physical appearance. The image of ultra slim models, sexy skinny singers or celebrities squeezed in a size-zero dress are so pervasive—they can be seen every day

and everywhere in fashion magazines, music videos, the movies, billboards and television. Ensler, thus, describes in *The Good Body* how people are bombarded with this body image;

*I'm walking—actually, I'm limping—down a New York City street, and I catch a glimpse of this blond, pointy-breasted, raisin-a-day-stomached smiling girl on the cover of Cosmo magazine. She is here every minute, somewhere in the world, smiling down on me, on all of us. She's omnipresent. She's the American Dream, my personal nightmare. (The Good Body 9)*

Not only is the ideal image emphasized, it can even harm women as the picture of Ensler “limping” on the street could be interpreted as a metaphor for the damage and abuse suffered by women at the hands of popular culture. The images of women with a provocative and sexy body on the front covers and column titles appearing in the women’s magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan* are, somewhat, paradoxical. The



Figure 1. Cosmopolitan Magazine

readers see alluring women and read articles with suggestive titles like “Top 10 Sex Scenes We Hope to See This fall”, “4 Secret Signs a Guy’s into You”, “Man-Meeting Tips from a Professional Wingwoman” and etc. which implies women’s state of sexual liberation, but the skinny bodies on the front covers and some columns titled “The Five New Ways to Lose Weight”, “Tracy Anderson Reveals the Secrets to Flat Sexy Abs”, “7 Ways to Look Fitter in Your Bikini” (Cosmopolitan) and so forth tell

readers what the physical standard for women should be. In the first place, magazines that motivate women to cope with their jobs, household management, sex appeal and physical appearance appear to be promoting feminist ethics, reversing traditional gender roles assigned to women, but it seems as if those magazines end up with commodifying the appearance of independent and beautiful women. Norman Solomon, in an article for the American Humanist Association entitled “Still not good enough--from Barbie to Botox”, points out the similar idea of how women’s magazines and advertisers nowadays make profit from female images and push women into constant preoccupation with their physical appearance;

And for the past thirty or so years new waves of feminism have effectively critiqued a lot of such destructive role-modeling. We may prefer to think that Barbie-like absurdities have been left behind by oh-so-sophisticated twenty-first-century media sensibilities. But to thumb through the *Cosmopolitan* now on the racks is to visit a matrix of "content" and advertising that incessantly inflames--and cashes in on--obsessions with seeking to measure up to media-driven images.

Moreover female images represented through popular culture are described by Ensler with the term “American Dream”<sup>6</sup>, a term coined by James Truslow Adams in

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<sup>6</sup> The current protest in New York’s financial district that began on September, 17 2011– the Occupy Wall Street, demonstrates that maybe “American Dream” is just a daydream. According to [occupywallst.org](http://occupywallst.org), the movement is fighting back against “the richest 1% of people that are writing the rules of an unfair global economy that is foreclosing on [American’s] future”. The protesters believe that American society, at the moment, is separated into the poor and the rich, who are the only ones benefiting from the economic inequalities. While ninety-nine percent of American citizens, who are middle-class and lower-class people, are suffering from the lower wage, unemployment, higher university tuition fees and unaffordable health care. The wealthy minority “pay lower tax rates than millions of middle-class households. Some billionaires have a tax rate as low as 1% lower tax rate” (Obama qtd. in Sahadi) and they become more prosperous.

his study titled *The Epic of America*. The term contends that the notion that every single person living in America has the opportunity to be successful without being limited by social borders such as social stratification and ethnic backgrounds. When the ethos is used to describe female ideal body in *The Good Body*, it sounds fairly positive at first. Women seem to have a chance to win the perfectly normative beauty as long as they have the ability to do so, but a problematic situation occurs when achieving the ideal body is, actually, a minefield. It is as tough as struggling in the society to reach a goal according to “American Dream”.

Like its socioeconomic meaning, Ensler’s definition of the American Dream which refers to the female ideal body could become either a daydream or even a nightmare for women. Stout female characters in the play, such as Bernice, who are depicted as “low, disgusting, and as gross as you can get,” (*The Good Body* 20) are marginalized by mainstream sentiments and made to believe that they should be ashamed of their weight and disgusted with their bodies. Bernice relates that, “when I’m shopping in the regular stores they always keep the plus sizes in the back like porn. I feel like a ho trying things on and the PLUS SIZE sign is always so huge. Just ‘cause I’m fat doesn’t mean I’m blind” (20-1). Bernice’s character could be selected to represent marginalized women who are overweight because she, as an African American teenager, belongs to a group who is disenfranchised not only for their race and gender, but also for their weight, and have hence become invisible figures in American society. Incidentally the government is one key factor that pushes these oversized people to deal with their health problem of obesity. It cannot be denied that obesity is perilous and different from being overweight as obesity is defined as “having too much body fat” while overweight is simply “weighing too much”

(PubMed Health). Society, however, views overweight people with revulsion often implying, especially in the case of African-American overweight people who seem to be treated as social outcasts because of their race, that these people are responsible for their condition from over-eating. Normally, African-American women usually judge whether they are overweight or underweight by looking up to their peers, not a health-based standard. Unlike white women, African-American women will be contented as long as their weight is similar to their significant others, and they tend to accept fatness and do not necessarily view it negatively (Parnell et al.).

To this point, Ensler, as well, expresses her concern through Bernice once again when a disenfranchised overweight girl says ...

I don't look fat when I'm with my mom. My family, we are big people, I do not know why they are trying to get me act small. They're worried. All this talk from the government should be worried about blowing up from all these bombs. ... fat girls are good people. Aren't we, Eve? We deserve to be skinny bitches. (*The Good Body* 22)

From the excerpt, the audience can infer that Ensler not only sees how the “American Dream” can alienate fat women from society. In this case, Bernice, who is put in a fat camp that helps rehabilitate overweight people, and forces them to internalize the normative ideal body, but also how much the government devotes its energy and money to the issue of fatness while there are bigger problems out there, such as global warming, terrorism, violence against women and “all these bombs” which could mean the Iraq War that began approximately one year prior to the launch of this play (March 20, 2003), where a large number of civilians and soldiers were killed;



In the midst of a war in Iraq, in a time of escalating global terrorism, when civil liberties are disappearing as fast as the ozone layer, when out one of three women in the world will be beaten or raped in her lifetime, ...(*The Good Body* ix)

It is obvious that the media perpetually plays a major role in forming women's self-perception and it helps carry on normative beauty, therefore, feminist intervention, especially in the second period of feminist movement, has been preoccupied in calling for a realistic image of women. One example is in feminist documentary film-making, which has become one of the ways to reveal a more accurate and honest image of women and an alternative to Hollywood version. The process makes use of what is shown as 'autobiographical discourse' to tell women's true stories (Hollows and Moseley 4). A number of women's documentaries are now adopting the personal monologue as a core device. Moreover, the vital domain of women's documentaries is about self-reliance with additional issues, for instance, abortion, work and marriage, and lesbianism included as well (Rosenthal 16). It would be appropriate to point out that most of the time women want to reveal their 'real images' the characteristic of consciousness-raising process seems to be involved. Like *The Vagina Monologues*, *The Good Body* allows female characters to dramatize their stories dealing with their body image with the intention to open up a space for female audience to reach out to one another and internally forming a bond. Even though the characters are fictional, some of them allude to actual real-life personalities such as Helen Gurley Brown or Isabella Rossellini and to true stories of 'sisters' which help underscore factual occurrences in the society.

Inevitably, when considering a self-proclaimed sexual manual for women, like *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the figure of Helen Gurley Brown, the editor, could not be ignored. Interestingly, Brown emerges as one of the characters in *The Good Body* who could be viewed as both a fictional and an actual figure as she exists in reality and as a character in this play. Although Brown should be categorized as a woman belonging to the second wave feminist movement, Ensler makes use of Brown's real-life characteristics to depict modern women whose character and provocative book, *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), portrayed her as a modern woman so advanced she precedes others of the same period. In addition, her book overthrows conventional notions of American's femininity in the early twentieth century and presents instead the notion of modern women who can have sexual freedom and look after themselves without male support while maintaining an attractive and alluring physical appearance.

The first monologue found in *The Good Body* presents Helen Gurley Brown as the ideal image of a successful American woman of today. Brown defies the image usually assigned to the domestic creature of American women as she claims she does not cook nor has she ever had a child. She also claims that there is no nurture gene within her; "Come on in, Eve, let's

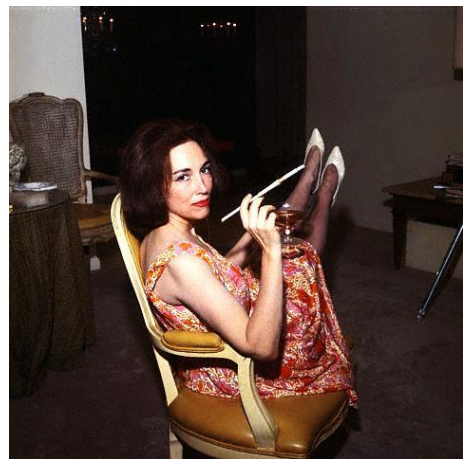


Figure 5 Helen Gurley Brown

get cozy. Help yourself to some pumpkin seeds, dear, they're toasted. Energy. That's the closest I ever come to cooking. I never did get the nurture gene" (*The Good Body* 12), and this is proved when she lets slip that her daughter might call her "Helen"

instead of mother; “I never had a daughter. But if I did have a daughter, I would tell her she was beautiful and lovely every minute. If she asked, “Helen”—oh God, she wouldn’t say Helen, [because] she’s not my assistant” (13). Not only does Brown shatter the picture of a caring mother and a domesticated woman, she also contributes towards building a new image of American women. In the play, Brown is sexually active. Sex, for her, should not be restrained. She indulges in it, shares, and expresses her thoughts about it; “One thing I never had to practice was sex. I took to it like a duck to water. It’s been a good week. My husband and I had sex two days in a row. Not bad for eighty” (14).

According to an article in *New York Magazine*, when Brown was asked in real life to reveal her list of men she had slept with, she declined to answer because she thought her response would prove to be too shocking and scandalous for other people (Kornbluth 39). It is clear that Ensler uses the character of Helen Gurley Brown in *The Good Body* to present a modern woman who hardly conforms to the conventional expectations of what a woman should be. Brown openly embraces the characteristics commonly ascribed to a ‘bad girl’—enjoying sex for pleasure and working to gain fame and success outside the domestic sphere.

In the play, Brown reveals how she learned from her mother society’s valorization of good looks and a pleasing appearance saying that “people make a fuss over girls who are pretty” (*The Good Body* 13). Brown, who claims she did not meet her mother’s high standards of beauty, feels the needs to compensate for that lack with other attributes in order to gain the attention of others. However, in the play, Brown later seems to realize that her intellect alone is not enough for her to succeed in life—she still needs to be physically attractive. Dabial Hamermesh has written about

physical beauty and economics in his book, *Beauty Pays*, stating that workers with attractive physical appearance can make more money than the average-looking ones. Obviously employers are likely to hire attractive employees because they can generate more business for the company and project the kind of image the company wishes (qtd. in *The Economist* (US)).

The normative beauty that is influential in shaping women's attitude towards their physical appearance also plays a major part in the family, especially the one that is influenced by patriarchal framework because such a family is likely to indoctrinate the subjugation of women through placing a high value on physical appearance. The patriarchal frame work within *The Good Body* is evident in the family setting where the beauty myth is deeply rooted. Ensler's own family is drawn upon as the first example illustrating how false values placing emphasis on physical appearances begins with upbringing one receives within the family. Ensler's father, who is punctilious, attractive and often said to have been compared to Cary Grant, a charming Hollywood star of the 1950s with very conventional masculine attributes, shows his disgust for bread claiming that eating bread shows desire<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, the father's control over Ensler's eating habits depicts how the father, a representative of patriarchal dominance, trains women to produce a desired shape or effect. Besides Ensler's father, a white man, who can hide his desires with his movie star good looks

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<sup>7</sup>For Christians, bread is the flesh of Jesus Christ, and God facilitates the production of bread. God helps grains grow properly in the sun and rain, and he helps bakers to know how to make bread which is considered to be a creative ability human beings received from God (Goodman and Blumberg 317). Ensler could be seen to add this scene as a means of implying that to refuse to eat food, especially bread, is to reject God, human nature and creativity. It is possible that Ensler emphasizes the waste of female capabilities and creativity when women focus the majority of their attention on achieving a slim body.

and refined manners of a Cary Grant, could be seen as the polar opposite of Bernice, a fat African American girl from the marginalized sector.

Although one cannot say for certain that parents' eating behaviors and attitudes towards their body images can affect children's eating attitudes and the body image, there is a study suggesting that parent's comments on children's body images do have an impact on a child's body esteem (Smolak and Striegel-Moore 207-8). The play seems to suggest that no matter how much a child disagrees with his or her parents' ideas, such as in the case of Ensler who at times wants her father to see how much her partner eats because she knows it will scare him and challenge his authority, it is undeniable that their ideas do inevitably affect and are transmitted onto their children. In the play, Ensler admits to being plagued with guilt every time she sees her partner having bread or consuming a lot of food.

Ensler's mother, on the other hand, who is not as authoritative as the father, serves as the role model of how to be a good support within the patriarchal framework. In fact, Ensler's mother could be seen as a typical representation of a woman within the American culture as she is compared to Doris Day, the classic portrayal of a decent, chaste and virginal woman committed to



Figure 6 Doris Day

performing the role of a generous mother or wife. The character of Ensler's mother illustrates the expected role of American women whom the audience was previously exposed to in *The Vagina Monologues*. Ensler further ties the ideal image to fatalism as the appearance of Doris Day reminds the audience of the lyrics for the song she

made popular in the 1950s “Que Sera Sera”; Que sera sera/Whatever will be will be/The future’s not ours to see/Que sera sera.” When considering the lyrics alongside the scene where Ensler, who is viewed as imperfect in her mother’s eyes, is made to be good and silent like the mother who never raises her voice, the play seems to imply that the fate that befalls women is unavoidable.

The character Carmen’s mother is also a product of a patriarchal expectation. She hates the idea of having big thighs and persuades her daughter, Carmen, to undergo a cosmetic procedure in order to reduce the size of her thighs. Carmen was indoctrinated by her mother with the idea that “you better work hard on a nice waist and a brain or no one will ever fuck you (*The Good Body* 30).” Ensler implies that women are required to be smart and slim in order to be admired by men. Harry Schaumburg states in *Undefined: Redemption from Sexual Sin, Restoration for Broken Relationships* that men and women equate physical beauty to being sexy. The beauty myth links sexuality with beauty to form the notion that when it comes to a sexual relationship between men and women, women have to be beautiful so as to be sexually alluring. This idea proves to be incredibly hurtful for Carmen who not only has to practice hiding her big thighs in order to avoid being treated disdainfully by her mother to the point that she willingly undergoes liposuction procedures on her thighs in order to attempt to attract a partner. The scene depicting Carmen’s partner grabbing her thighs the night after she has undergone thigh liposuction surgery, which causes her to scream in pain, illustrates how women are made to have an unhealthy interest in an ideal body image which can bring them painful consequences. Ensler, who seems to be dissatisfied with her parents’ manipulation of her physical appearance and eating behavior, finally ends up hating bread and being obsessed with having a good shape.

In contrast, the family beauty myth affects Carmen's life differently. After her mother dies, she gains a lot of weight until she reaches the point where she is too embarrassed to go out and is forced to join a weight loss camp. In fact, it is clear that parents embed cultural beliefs within their children through the comments they make to them and values they pass on. Furthermore, it seems that girls are more easily prone to being emotionally influenced by others (Worell 208). The play clearly indicates that a family affected by a patriarchal framework is one of the factors forming beauty myths that become fixed in women's minds. These myths can be incredibly powerful and lead to drastic results, such as causing eating disorders, even though some women strive to resist the beauty myths instilled by their families.

The torment and pain women could gain when they are obsessed with beauty myths are portrayed when Tiffany, a thirty-five-year-old model, describes going through the ordeal of having plastic surgery performed on her by her own husband. According to Naomi Wolf, if women nowadays cannot meet society's standards of beauty, they will look for a solution to their dissatisfaction with their physical attributes (qtd. in Siann 155). Through Tiffany, Ensler does not show the audience her negative view on plastic surgery directly as Tiffany's story sounds sanguine that Tiffany is not disturbed by the fact that the surgery is bound to have had effect on her life. In a way, she might want to present the idea that women have a right over their own bodies.

On the other hand, self-creation like Tiffany's story could become gallows humor because the incessant pursuit of beauty which is provided to be a near fatal procedure that can cost her life, but she, instead of realizing the harmful situation,

blames herself for that she stops breathing might force her husband to press her brand new breasts after having her second breast implant;

It was during my second breast implant that my heart kind of stopped. I felt so bad for Ham. He had just finished this beautiful work on my breasts and he was going to have to ruin it by compressing my chest. Fortunately he waited and my heart started on its own. (*The Good Body* 38)

Furthermore, Tiffany's body, which is scared with red marks, becomes a metaphor for female territorial submission. After being told by her husband that some of her body parts needed to be renovated, Tiffany seems to have lost her sovereignty over her own territory—her own body. The husband becomes the decision-maker of the project and she allows him to dictate and transform her with “his hand, with his instrument, with his vision” (35).

Isabella Rossellini, a famous actress and daughter of one of the most iconic beauties and famed actress of the 1950s Ingrid Bergman; a former spokesperson for the cosmetics firm Lancôme and a model, appears as a fictional character in this play to demonstrate clear evidence in the play illustrating that beauty myths, and all the expectations that come with

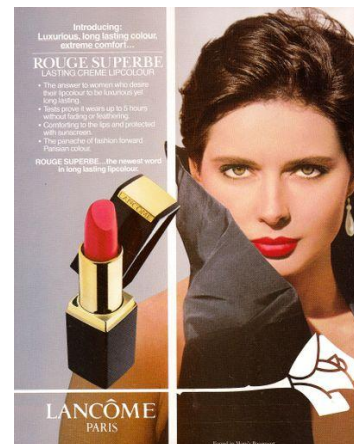


Figure 7. Isabella Rossellini

them, can push women down to a subordinate status. Rossellini's presence reminds us, in the play, that she was popular as long as she conformed to the ideal image of youthful beauty. But she was treated much like an outcast when she reached the age where wrinkles started to appear and the skin began to lack in firmness or suppleness;



I was forty.

I was at my best.

I knew who I was.

Women wanted that more than the

lipstick or eye shadow or creme.

They fired me

because I was strong.

They told me not to talk.

I am talking. I am talking. (*The Good Body* 65)

The play illustrates the irony of how women nowadays are allowed to step out of the domestic sphere but are in fact still trapped and expected to remain submissive to the ideal image of beauty. If they cannot conform to the expected role, they will not be accepted or even face being ostracized. While it is true that they have seen the success of female emancipation, traditional opinions regarding beauty still dominate people's minds. Deborah Gorham describes in *The Victorian Girl and the Female Ideal* the characteristics of an expected ideal woman as being "willing to be dependent on men and submissive to them, and having a preference for a life restricted to the confines of home" (qtd. in Chi 95). Therefore, there is no exception for a strong woman like Isabella Rossellini, whose criticism of such perspectives eventually lead to her forced isolation from the fashion business.

Contemporary media reinforces unrealistic norms of beauty at any time and therefore Rossellini, at age forty-two, had her contract terminated by Lancôme because of her age (Mead 46). In the article *mag-lifecrisis*, an 'ideal woman' appearing in a magazine is described as appearing more childlike and pubescent. The

desirable trends of a woman's looks are images described as waif, baby doll, and schoolgirl. A young model is transformed into an adult through the application of heavy make-up. Women are forced to maintain their youthful appearance, and looking twenty years younger is the acceptable way to be old (Vienne 65). When forty-year-old women look at magazines, they cannot expect to see any woman of their own age. Thus, the preference for youthfulness is formed. Laura Randolph Lancaster, a columnist of EBONY magazine, mentions about the myth of youthfulness that the message sent through popular culture such as movies, music videos or magazines is problematic. It is embedded with the consensus saying beauty is young and white. She shares an experience of a forty-year-old friend of hers who was dumped by a man because he thought she was too old. Additionally, she gives an example of how erroneous beliefs about the female image are described in media;

How over-35 women are portrayed in movies is an especially galling example. Remember the 1988 film *Punchline* in which Sally Field played Tom Hanks' love interest? Suffice it to say that a mere six years later in the movie, *Forrest Gump*, She played his mother. *His Mother!* (Lancaster 26)

In doing so, Lancaster shows how the myth of youthfulness represented through media can affect women's and men's mindset. Obviously, the film viewers might know that Sally Field in *Forrest Gump* is not old enough to play a mother role, but as long as they perceive the picture of young women playing an aged character, it is possible that the media would, one day, inculcate the myth of youthfulness into the audience.

Along with female characters who express their dissatisfaction with their physical appearance, Ensler creates several characters such as Leah, Priya and Lakshmi who reveal their positive attitudes towards female body. These characters are not created as antagonists, but actually protagonists like those who always see the flaws in their physical appearance. Leah, a Masai woman, who urges Eve to love her body and draws a parallel between the female body and a tree, might be put in the play to convey the value of life and food since the Masai, which refers to people of an African nomadic tribe living in Kenya and Tanzania, have strong connection with nature up until now; they live sufficiently and their living is heavily dependent on nature rather than on modern technologies. For the Masai, food is their source of energy; they eat normally for fuel not pleasure because of the lack of diet. “The traditional diet consists of milk, cow's blood, and meat on special occasions” (Savacool). Therefore, Ensler might want to provoke the audience into thinking seriously about the issue of eating disorder which large members of American women are now suffering from. While many American women willingly endure hunger and starvation because they want to stay thin, destitute people in other continents, such as Africa, are facing severe famine. Moreover, through Leah, Ensler probably depicts the significance of life by comparing female body to a tree which its roots connect to the earth. Then if women were a tree that belongs to the earth, instead of wasting their lives by adopting a fatal practice like starving, they deserve to live their lives.

In addition to the image of Leah that is added to emphasize the positive attitudes towards the female body, Ensler also makes use of characters like Priya and Lakshmi who are used to represent happy “*jadhi*” (fat) Indian women. At the same

time, in this age of Globalization, Indian society may, however, have changed and adopted western standards of beauty;

“It’s because of Miss India becoming Miss Universe becoming Miss World—now all the young girls want to be Miss Skinny India World. ... This beauty pageant business is getting uglier every day. All the girls look like TB patients. (*The Good Body* 80-1)



Figure 1. Sushmita Sen,  
Miss Universe 1994

It seems that in recent years, beauty pageants have had a heavy influence on Indian women’s perceptions of their body image since each beauty competition glorifies not only intellectual capability, but also physical appearances. Many young women realize that the beauty contests can also mark their bright future like many beauty pageant winners have made it. Aishwarya Rai could be a good example of a beauty pageant winner

whose fame and success are gained through her Miss World crown in 1994. After being crowned, Rai became a professional model, featured in several Hollywood films, and has been starring in many Bollywood films (Nazir). Even though, a number of women agree that beauty pageants could pave way for their future career, several groups of people such as the right-wing Hindu party BJP of India were protesting against the 1996 Miss World contest in India.



Figure 2. Aishawara Rai,  
Miss World 1994 Winner

These groups argue that “beauty contests are degrading to women, that they turn women into commodities and propagate unrealistic and damaging images of beauty” (Inter Press Service English News Wire). Indian women’s perceptions of beautification are not only influenced by the beauty pageant, but also by media such as films, advertisements and fashion magazines, which mostly are joint-venture products like Cosmopolitan and Femina magazines, in which women are instilled specific notions of westernized concepts of beauty and made to believe that beautification can pave the way for their outstanding accomplishment. However, through the play the audience may see that most of Indians still grasp the ancient concept of beauty that values the curvy shape of female body. Moreover, the curvy shape is respected by men; Priya’s husband even pleads with her to preserve her “*jadhi*” which makes women feel free and accepted. At the same time, Ensler employs the image of a Hindu goddess, Lakshmi, who is the symbol of beauty, prosperity and the patron of all females, to depict Eastern philosophy that worship well-endowed women symbolizing maternal prowess.

In terms of activism, even though there is no campaign directly associated with the play, Ensler has performed the play in the play *The Good Body* in twenty cities in North America in 2005-2006 in order to present her audience the issues related to the cultures of beauty through the eyes of women from different ethnic groups to encourage women to reconsider the freedom they have attained and question if they can truly break free from the patriarchal framework concealed in social construction of beauty or even in women’s perception of the beautification in order to truly empower and enrich their lives. Furthermore, *The Good Body*, could be seen as an extended project of V-Day, which firstly advocates protection against

violence by adopting a play as a tool to spur women in to breaking free from the patriarchal framework, because it places strong emphasis on the fact that feminist activism cannot be accomplished as long as women continue to exert energy and money in order to “fix” their bodies. These actions clearly indicate the presence of many deeply rooted and wide-ranging social issues needing to be resolved. In the scene when she is eating ice cream with the women from the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan organization (RAWA) in Jalalabad, a place where women could be severely punished for enjoying the frozen dessert regarded as a representation of American imperialistic dominance and decadence, she thinks, “... the ice-cream is no longer my enemy. [B]eing fat is clearly less important than being free. I eat the ice-cream” (*The Good Body* 88-9). The scene underscore’s strong feminist conviction and opposition to patriarchal construction of beautification that expects women to focus efforts on their physical appearances rather than paying attention to more important social issues.

Similar to *The Vagina Monologues*, throughout *The Good Body* Ensler intends to use the monologues to reveal the pain and torment women undergo when they are obsessed by the beauty myths since the monologues is a good way for the actresses to interact with the audience, who could feel like each character talks to them directly. The atmosphere they would get from viewing the monologues is different from watching a well-made play with dialogues, where the audience can only observe a story and characters without participation. Moreover, with each woman sharing their own stories, the play could set the sense of sisterhood among the audience: women would feel connected with each other because they have these common sentiments. In addition, Ensler wishes to highlight the fact that women are forced to be physically

attractive by patriarchal expatiations and highlight the violence against women that manifests itself in diverse areas such as the family and popular culture. These are significant factors instilling in women beauty myths and the play could be considered as a space that opened up for them to share a feminist ideology that could spur them into action later on.

## CHAPTER IV

### ***I AM AN EMOTIONAL CREATURE: THE SECRET LIFE OF GIRLS AROUND THE WORLD: EVE ENSLER'S FEMINIST IDEOLOGY AND ACTIVISM AIMED AT YOUNG WOMEN***

It's a call to your original girl self, to your emotional creature self, to move at your speed, to walk with your step, to wear your color. It is an invitation to heed your instinct to resist war, or draw snakes, or to speak to the stars. (*I Am an Emotional Creature* xxv)

Eve Ensler's *I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World* (2010) is a very recent play that targets young women all over the world. As is the case with her other two plays, *The Vagina Monologues* and *The Good Body*, the play is again written in the form of a combination of monologues, which has become her signature style. Nonetheless, this time, the narrative is not based on interviews, instead the monologues come from the narratives of girls Ensler encountered and their stories related to her. The play is separated into three sections. The first one opens with a monologue entitled "You Tell Me How to Be a Girl in 2010", which enumerates current situations happening in society and ends with a phrase "you tell me how to be a girl in 2010" implying the playwright's respect for young women's freedom to choose how to react towards those situations. The first section also deals with gender socialization and its effect on girls as the audience can see in the episodes called "What's a Good Girl?", "What Don't You Like About Being a Girl?", "Things I Heard About Sex" and "Don'ts" that demonstrate how women have been taught and



trained to be a 'proper' female from the time they were young. These monologues illustrate the indoctrination young women are subjected to by their female ancestors or their parents, which, to some extent, limit their emotional expression and their true self. The first section of the play also includes the monologues discussing the state of identity crisis such as "Stephanied", which tells the story of a young girl who rebels against the tradition of categorizing genders into only male and female, and "Moving Toward the Hoop", which illustrates how a young female basketball player becomes alienated from a feminine community and labeled as a tom boy merely because she involves herself in an activity usually attributed to males. "Let Me In" and "Bad Boys" of the first section of the play illustrate the fact that young women, when they cannot rely on their family, are likely to turn to their peers which can affect their sense of identity. In addition, Section I seems to depict young women's solutions to their problem in "Sophie et Apolline, or, Why French Girls Smoke" where the audience learn that the two girls in the monologue prefer smoking as a way to cope with their problems. When it comes to Section II, the audience are shown instances of violence against women such as eating disorders in "hunger blog", beauty myths in "The Joke About My Nose", sexual molestation in "I Have 35 Minutes Before He Comes Looking for Me" and child exploitation in "Free Barbie". The last section of the play appears to be more encouraging and designed to boost self-esteem that includes monologues like "What Do You Like About Being a Girl?" "Asking the Question", "Things I Like About My Body", "My Short Skirt" and "I Am an Emotional Creature". These monologues urge young women to be truthful to their emotional selves and possibly ignite a rebellion against patriarchal framework imposed on young women's socialization. Apart from the episodes mentioned earlier,

there is “I Dance” and “Would You Rather” that appear in every section of the play. “I Dance” could be seen as a monologue telling how young women express their inner feeling whether it is sad, happy or mad. “Would You Rather” is different from the others as it is written in a form of a dialogue between two girls. One of them plays a role of an interrogator throwing various questions to the other girl who seems to be forced to make a choice that limits her freedom of choice and expression.

Whereas we have seen in Chapter 2 of this thesis the emphasis placed on the celebration of womanhood and female sexuality, in Chapter 3 the discussion on *The Good Body* makes it seem as if Ensler throws doubt on women, who still appear to be their own victim, whether or not they have attained true independence after having gained emancipation and the right to obtain education. After achieving initial success amongst grown up women in declaring their territory and encouraging modern women to see their new bondage of physical appearance, Eve Ensler now shifts to women in a lower age bracket whom she sees could be the future of feminist activism. In fact, the third wave of the feminist movement pays more attention to generational and youth feminism, which take advantage of young females’ experiences as foundation for figuring out the interaction between feminism and the lives of young women from a multiplicity of social location (Findlen; Walker qtd. in Mack-Canty 156). Therefore, it may be argued that the issues raised in *The Vagina Monologues* and *The Good Body* like female sexuality, violence against women, eating disorders and beauty myths are reemphasized as young females in the twenty-first century still encounter them. Moreover, Ensler, who belongs to the new wave of the feminist movement that is interested in young women’s experiences and the use of popular culture, tries to involve young people in feminist activism by employing new

technologies and popular culture such as a music channel like MTV to promote her form of feminist ideology.

In the last play, *I Am an Emotional Creature*,. The play implies that masculine ideologies that play a key role for centuries are influential in socializing young females. When Ensler asks girls to tell her “how to be a girl in 2010”, the play demonstrates a paradigm shift of the twenty-first century where authority relations according to the patriarchal social structure are subverted. Girls who have always been subdued have a chance to express their opinions and needs.

Youth feminism, which in the United States is currently regarded as a basic element of feminist ideology and activism (Mack-Canty 162), requires a particular skill, such as a literacy skill, a musical skill, theatrical skill, and cultural or social values from a girl in order to form a certain movement. Therefore, according to Collen Mack-Canty, generational feminism and youth cultures are likely to go without



Figure 1. Riot Grrrl's performance in 2006

“inclusivity regarding other women”. In *Third-Wave Feminism and the Need to Reweave the Nature/culture Duality* Mack-Canty provides two good examples of generational feminist and youth cultural contingents

that call for certain skills together with social and cultural values. The first example is the group of authors appearing in Findlen’s and Walker’s anthologies, and the second

is a young female rock group called 'Riot Grrrl'<sup>8</sup>. The former includes young feminist authors in their twenties to early thirties whose common background is in Women's Studies and who do not identify themselves with second-wave feminists. Writers use literacy skills as a tool to express their experience which later on is developed into a theory representing a catalogue of racial, ethnic and sexual identities. 'Riot Grrrl' is another example of young feminism and youth culture that Mack-Canty argues is unable to embrace all women. 'Riot Grrrl', a punk feminist movement, was formed in the U.S. in the early 1990s to set up a community where girls could talk and write about their experience through the zine dealing with different issues related to girls such as "racism, sexism, child abuse, domestic violence, sexuality, classism, privilege, media spectacularization, aids, consumer pacifism, and girl power". Moreover, this group involves such forms of popular culture as punk rock musical performance to show how girls nowadays are no longer passively silent and submissive; instead these punk girls tend to appear loud and belligerent (159-162). Apparently this feminist musical group seems to bring in different groups of girls, who need to have musical competence and writing and computer skills to produce zines in order to join the group. As a result, most girls participating in 'Riot Grrrl' are identified with the white middle upper-class group that causes the group the derision from outsiders (Rosenberg and Garofalo qtd. in Mack-Canty 811). Unlike those two movements, *I Am an Emotional Creature* is a fictional group trying to embrace voices of different young women from diverse places to express their emotions and provide

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<sup>8</sup> Riot Grrrl is a Punk Rock movement that uses music as a tool to embrace young females to fight against sexual violence and sexual discrimination against women. Further information about 'Riot Grrrl' can be found in a documentary film by Kerri Koch entitled *Don't Need You* that is featured with interviews with musicians and zinesters, and excerpts from the Riot Grrrl manifesto (Corvid).

an account of their lives. As a play, which like Ensler's previous plays, could be performed all over the world, *I am an Emotional Creature*, of course, requires the competence of actresses to participate in, but the play script dealing with multicultural settings makes it possible for a wide-ranging group of girls to contribute to the play as both performers and the audience.

Additionally, the V-Day organization that was launched in line with *The Vagina Monologues* has now evolved through the years and extended its project to support young feminist activism by initiating a global feminist network of girl activists and advocates inspired in particular by Ensler's play, *I Am an Emotional Creature* in order to, as the V-Girls website puts, serve as "a platform for girls to amplify their voices and ignite their activism" (V-Girls). The V-Girls network takes advantage of modern technologies such as the Internet, which is recognized as "giving rise to new types of communities" helping rectify communities' inclination towards isolation and individualization (Ollivier, Robbins and Beauregard), to serve as a channel to encourage girl power. The network creates a virtual community through social network sites or websites available for young women to join in to discuss, share and exchange established media like their videos, vlogs, blogs and pictures that matter to girls. Internet access is effective in helping promote more powerful cross-cultural collaboration among people as each individual is able to broadcast their own stories and ideologies, and spread the multimedia works at a faster pace. To a certain degree, the internet could be regarded as challenging the power of the Establishment that has heretofore enjoyed defining the concept of femininity. In addition, via the Internet, girls have found ways to represent themselves and consume the information they need without censorship.



Figure 2. A group of V-Girls leaders in South Africa

Even though the Internet is regarded as “a means of achieving a true democracy” (Beate Gersch qtd. in Ollivier, Robbins and Beauregard) because people are free to discard controversial issues, some might say that adopting the

Internet as a tool of activism is partially a form of class segregation insofar as only people who have access to the Internet are able to access such information. It is evident that Eve Ensler’s vision is to expand her activism and feminist ideology to people outside the cyber realm, considering that she energizes different sectors to take feminist activism seriously. For example, there exists a free *V-Girls Emotional Guide* to be found in V-Girls website for whoever prefers to start an Emotional Creature Club whether in a school, youth program or community. The club serves as a platform for girls to assemble and talk over personal issues, not unlike a consciousness-raising group that employs the face-to-face interaction technique to create a psychological orientation. Since the technique that encourages young females to share their experiences should help generate political theory and action (Chesebro, Cragan and McCullough qtd. in Sowards and Renegar 536), this club may, to a certain degree, spur female youths into taking action to start engaging with those

issues in their own ways. At the same time, the feminist ideology infused in the play is brought up to the club inasmuch as girls are encouraged to read the play together. Having exchanged personal experiences and been inspired by the play, the girls are likely to create and perform their own monologues since the guide itself, according to the V-Girls website, also serves as “a tool kit for girls to produce a V-Girls Art & Activism Event” (V-Girls).



Figure3. V-Girls march in Johannesburg, 2011

In addition, Eve Ensler tries to reach out to her young female target group by cooperating with MTV, a worldwide music channel serving as an outlet for the younger generation to exchange information, voice their desires and be entertained.

Via the music channel, Ensler embarks on a new project of taking the play onto the TV screen with well-known figures like Aubrey Plaza, Rosario Dawson and Jessica Stroup to “[address] hot button teen issues including safe sex, sexual pressure, sexting, constant connectedness and dating abuse” (Emotional Creature). Ensler seems to find MTV as an ideal vehicle for spreading feminist ideology to the young generation and the audience, who could be parents and caretakers as she claims, animatedly, that she is “thrilled to be part of this project with MTV where girls and the empowerment and protection of girls are front and center. It's really been a pleasure helping put a new “V” in MTV”

(VDAY). It is interesting to look at the monologues MTV puts on its website and channel, namely “You Tell Me How To Be a Girl in 2010”, “I Dance”, “Dear Rihanna”, “Asking the Question” and “It's Not a Baby, it's a Maybe”. These monologues effectively represent the problems young females in modern times are encountering. One reason that MTV has lent its cooperation with the V-Girls network to raise the awareness of girls’ self-esteem is because the themes of the plays are compatible with MTV’s major campaigns which are *A THIN LINE*, that arouses consideration about drawing a line between “digital use and digital abuse” (*A THIN LINE*), and *It's Your (Sex) Life*, where young people can obtain support when they are about to make a decision about their sexual health (*Its' Your (Sex) Life:Take Control*). It is possible to view that working together with popular youth culture like MTV would be conducive for Ensler to promote her feminist ideology and activism. In some cases, a feminist group adopting techno-culture as a means to promote their feminist ideology and activism is blamed for propagandizing, for example, The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), which is partially funded by the V-Day organization. This association makes use of a website, videos, sound-records and print media to communicate with Afghan women and promote activism aiming at fighting against misogynist governments. However, in the opinion of the association’s representative, media is an effective tool to fight against their government and to reveal its “inhuman policies and brutalities” (Waltz 128).

Up to this point, we may say that the play tries to fill in the gap between the modern day feminists and their foremothers whose same feminist notions, such as beliefs that women and men are different and women tend to be superior to their male counterpart, at some level, come to be rejected in the third-wave period. To no small



degree, it is quite hard for modern women to imagine what the women in the second-wave feminist movement period have been through since nowadays women no longer have to struggle to attain equal education or fair pay and good opportunities in the workplace as much as the women of the second wave movement period did.

In terms of the alleged essentialized feminine quality, the title of the monologues, *I Am an Emotional Creature*, conveys the message to girls that they should be honest to their own self despite being labeled as being emotional. Ensler's definition of being emotional indicates the trope of the third wave feminist discourse that embrace one's femininity which once used to be regarded as an inferior characteristic of females especially in the period of the second wave feminist movement where emphasis is placed on women's rights issues. Moreover, during the second wave of the feminist movement, the notion that 'the personal is political' was widely adopted by the second-wave feminists who claimed the family is the primary source of sexual oppression where women are subordinated doing household chores, raising children without proper wages while men are the breadwinner making money working in the public sphere. Therefore men are ranked in the superior position of authority and women, who are engaged with 'feminine duties', are merely the dependents. Because men occupy positions of authority and they are also in charge of writing social history and determining conformity to social expectation roles, their characteristics are likely to be valued. This drives some second-wavers to employ masculine values and behavior rather than feminine ones. These days, after the feminist backlash in 1980s, which is regarded as the period of the so-called the third wave of feminist movement, women appear to be different from their second-wave

feminist mothers as Helene A. Shugart, in her article *The Intersection of Third-Wave Feminism and Generation X* points out some characteristics of modern women that;

[Women of today are] confident, bold young women, self-identified feminists. You might see them at the local cigar bar, as likely to be describing their indignation at not being granted paid maternity leave as they are to be chastising a female colleague for filing a sexual harassment suit. They're educated, independent, assertive, and, often, unsettlingly conservative. In many respects, they're a diverse lot; they are likelier than earlier feminists to count among them different classes, different races, different affectional orientations. While their dress may range from grunge to baby-doll T-shirts to power suits, they appear to agree that their own sexualization (however defined) is an appropriate aspiration; in fact, they seem united in their rejection of earth tones and their exasperation with "traditional" feminist critiques of "male-defined sexuality" and "sexual objectification." "We own it now," they are likely to respond; "It doesn't mean the same thing now."

It might appear that women of today have more chances to exercise their rights unlike women a century ago. Generally, modern women seem to have their individual lifestyles and are fully aware of their rights while rejecting the notions of their second-wave pioneers because in their opinion those ideas have been rendered "naive, obsolete, or otherwise somehow lacking in relevance to their lives" (Bailey qtd. in Shugart). Ana Marie Cox et al argue in "Masculinity without Men: Women Reconciling Feminism and Male-Identification" that third wave feminism place its

emphasis on 'the politics of gender' in which male and female social roles are evaluated in a different way which would promote greater understanding between men and women. Moreover, the authors suggest that commonalities, not differences, between men and women should be radically emphasized (199). In a way, they might want to imply that there is no absolute characteristic used to define a particular gender role. Women and men possibly share certain traits; some men may have tendency of a maternal instinct while some women probably have strong self-assurance in themselves.

*I Am an Emotional Creature* could be regarded as a product of the third wave of the feminist movement that no longer rejects femininity. Instead, the play embraces the state of being emotional, one feminine trait which many people agree on, to encourage feminist ideology and activism. It is arguable that perception of the norms of femininity can be changed through cultures and times, but being emotional could be claimed as the most common feminine characteristic in many cultures. At times, a gender stereotype that deems women to be sensitive and emotional unlike men who are more rational and sensible as they are endowed with *logos* is heard and appears to confirm the ability to be emotional of women. According to Wendy Brown's *Manhood and Politics*, in the nature and culture dualism men are regarded as "representing culture, and needing to be unconstrained by and to have domination over natural process, both of a nonhuman nature and of human embodiment". Furthermore, the author affirms that while women are likely to be associated with "embodied characteristics" such as "disorder, physical necessity, darkness, and passion", men were associated with order, freedom, light and reason (qtd. in Mack-Canty 155). It is possible that the myth of defining a woman as an emotional creature

in Western cultures may have originated from the biblical story dealing with the fall of mankind like John Milton's *Paradise Lost* that portrays Eve as a vulnerable creature, who is easily tempted by the serpent to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Moreover, Eve is portrayed as far less intellectual than Adam, who is able to converse with angels. Even though there exists a moment illustrating Eve's reasonability when she suggests to Adam that they work separately in order to get the work done, it ironically ends up with Eve making the wrong decision to leave her husband since she is seduced by the serpent which subsequently and disastrously brings about humans' original sin. This, to some extent, emphasizes females' intellectual incapacity since Eve's suggestion sounds logical at best but at the end it falls into impractical advice that leads to a calamity proving that females should remain subordinate to males. In the *Mirror of Human Salvation*, which is a Middle Age version of the fall of mankind, the author even maintains that Satan deliberately chooses to pervert Eve because she is more gullible and less reasonable than Adam (qtd. in Crowther 29). It may be argued that people internalize the myth originating from the biblical story, considering men as a more rational creature. The third wavers, instead of repudiating the professed characteristic of women, embrace and celebrate it in the same way Ensler has done with *I Am an Emotional Creature*. Ensler's promotion of girls' freedom of emotional expression and her quote could be seen as a way to spur young women to renounce the so-called masculine values; being tough, stern and harsh just to name a few. In so doing, young women tend to respect themselves more and be truthful to their emotion which helps generate their self-esteem as she insists "I just don't want you [girls] to wait that long" to "know the

difference between pleasing and loving, obeying and respecting” (*I Am an Emotional Creature* xxvi).

*I Am an Emotional Creature* presents to its audience the issue of gender roles which is one key element that forms the notion of femininity and masculinity. It is true that human beings are born with either chromosomes XX or XY that determine their assigned sex and reproductive system whether one would have a vagina or a penis, ova or sperms, but one’s gender identities may be more related to culture which, in a way, affects ones’ personalities and behaviors. At times, sex and gender are associated to one another since “social expectations usually are enacted once body parts reveal the biological makeup of the individual” (Salkind 162). Femininity and masculinity are constructed by surrounding cultures and how one is brought up in the way that renowned French feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir asserts one is not born a woman but becomes one. The doctrine is also applicable to men, who were definitely born with a biological marker like a penis, but their masculine roles and identity are formed later by society. According to an article, “Gender-Role Development” in *Child Development*, it is evident that children tend to form their gender identity roles in their early childhood or at the age of two to six years old. With gender stereotypes influenced by significant agencies like school, family, friends and media, specific roles and behaviors depending on the idea of “I am a girl” and “I am a boy” become clearer to children at this stage as well. The article also presents a social learning theory developed by Albert Bandura saying boys learn how to behave in a masculine way by observing and imitating other men and their fathers, and similarly girls normally learn to behave in a particular way from other women and their mothers (Salkind 163). This point appears to be an issue in the monologues

when Ensler portrays a father and a brother who have abused a girl physically; “My father kicks me out/ My brother beats me up” while the mother does not take any action to help the girl (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 31). The only thing she does when the girl is abused by the male family members is keeping her in. The role performed by the mother, to a certain degree, alludes to Ensler’s own family background as she was also abused by her father while her mother, who was said to have witnessed the situation, remained silent. Even though the character of the mother in the particular episode of *I Am an Emotional Creature* appears in a Muslim country, she performs a similar role as American mothers like Ensler’s mother. However, the audience does not know what the mother in the play actually thinks; why she does not help her daughter. The way she behaves, according to Bandura’s social learning theory, might be crystalizing the feminine role. Moreover, the mother’s action infers that she herself might have been taught and trained to keep silent by her female ancestors. If young people tend to be narrow-minded seeing things in black and white if they are inputted stereotyped information (Salkind 164) determining specific roles for women and men, Ensler’s monologues, then, lead a thought-provoking question like ‘do we want it this way?’

One major biological factor that segregates notions of femininity and masculinity is the timing of puberty in which girls are having the menarche while boys, at the same age, have a slight change. For girls, menstruation tells them they are ready for procreation. It establishes a link between their social roles and femininity. Some people even regard menstruation as “a mark of womanhood” (Martin qtd. in Elson). The womanhood they talk about might not be only fertility, but expected roles and behaviors, which should be different from boys. After experiencing menstruation,

in some cultures, young women are told to be careful with their relationship with males, or, in some extreme cases, girls are forbidden from playing with their male friends since having too much physical contact with a member of the opposite sex might lead to a sentimental relationship, sexual intercourse and possibly pregnancy. For some parents, pregnancy could not only serve as evidence of misbehaviors of the girls themselves, but also it can discredit their family name. Therefore, to lessen the risk, girls are encouraged to be aware of the chance of getting pregnant and of tarnishing the family's reputation, and in so doing the myth that girls have "[m]ore chance of being raped" (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 16) is thus created, and subsequently used as a cunning excuse for retaining females in the domestic sphere. Moreover, in "Don't", Enslar points out the demands given to girls in order to prevent them from challenging authority in a public area; "Don't go to the dreams program" (30). This dreams program mentioned in the play could refer to any youth community encouraging girls to create their own life and improve their self-esteem. If girls have a chance to participate in this community, they tend to be confident enough to control and look after themselves without depending on male support. Before reaching that stage, girls, should not be allowed to join a particular program or become part of any such community. The word 'dreams' used to define the characteristic of a program may convey the sense that to improve yourself or to challenge patriarchal society is a perverted dream.

While women are learning the negative 'don'ts', boys are still able to enjoy their positive freedom from fear of bringing their family into disrepute, or even if they get girls pregnant, the blame put on them might not be as serious as girls could get. In addition, menstruation, which relates girls to femininity, perpetuates the myth about

female weakness like Ensler writes in the monologues; “Blood, cramps, seven days/ People thinking you are weak” (16). From time to time, women are seen as physically weak when they are having menstruation because at that time some women have to endure the loss of menstrual blood and abdominal pains. However, women do not lose enough blood to become ‘weak’ and they can do exercise which helps them to remain healthy (Byers 10). Another influential myth about menstruation illustrating women’s inferior roles to men’s is Aristotle’s theory asserting menstruation evidently shows that women are not as good as men. Aristotle, a prominent figure of Western philosophy, averse to how a female body with menstrual blood contributes to the inferior status of women; “the physical part, the body comes from the female, and the soul comes from the male, since the soul is the essence of a particular body”, and the symbol of females’ inferiority is menstruation. He asserts that women are incapable of producing semen which needs “enough natural vital heat” from the producer. Thus women, with their colder body, will end up menstruating, which is a dysfunctional process of semen production (qtd. in Delaney, Lupton and Toth 46). Correspondingly, Aelius Galenus, an important figure of medical research in the Roman period, demonstrates that the female body is regarded as imperfect because women were born from the left ovary connected to the left kidney containing tainted blood. Afterwards, Nicco Massa, an Italian anatomist, argues the left and the right kidney have no difference. However, with his new assumption stating “female seed was weaker than male seed”, he still proves that females are inferior to men (qtd. M. Rogers). It is arguable that the menstruation myths and gender formation existing in the society, to a certain extent, not only determines certain characteristics of men and women, but also limits their personalities and expressions.



Enslar presents common expected characteristics of boys and girls in an episode entitled “What Do You Like About Being a Girl?”. Through a girl’s voice, the audience learns how girls perceive the characteristics of femininity which they are



Figure 8. *I Am an Emotional Creature* performed at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2011

taught to be proud of such as being kind, tender, soft and shy (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 113-4). In a way, most of the feminine traits listed in the episode could be considered as a misconception of how to be a woman, for instance “Girls don’t force boys to do stuff” that implies the inferior role of females. Actually, girls might not notice they are subjugated by this misconception as it seems like a natural characteristic of women. As well, Enslar includes a line saying “Girls are close to their fathers” prior to “Girls don’t force boys to do stuff” to illustrate the hierarchical relationship between men and women since the close relationship between daughter and father Enslar points out cannot be that intimate because as a daughter, women are normally taught to respect their fathers. Similarly, when it comes to the relationship with their male peers, women tend to behave towards boys as they do with their own fathers. Another misconception portrayed in this episode could be seen in the female duty to remain physically attractive. “We get to be glamorous/ We can wear makeup.../Girls wear pretty clothes”; these lines implying that being beautiful is a woman’s duty could be seen as Enslar’s attempt to raise an issue about the beauty myth ideology, which has been discussed in *The Good Body*. The misconception of staying attractive

might plays a major role for young women's life inasmuch as they tend to be obsessed to the pursuit of beauty if they internalize the beauty ideology when they are young. Sinikka Aapola, Marina Gonick and Anita Harris maintain in a chapter of *Young Femininity* called "Sexuality and the Body: Old Binaries and New Possibilities" that girls are taught to see their bodies as an object that exists for aesthetic pleasure of others, and hence to improve their physical appearance. Then the body is not related to oneself, and it is judged by its attractiveness or unattractiveness. Additionally, they are informed when they are very young that they should enhance their looks which, according to D. Smith quoted in the chapter, turns them to be "the object being worked up to correspond to the textually defined image" or, in other words, the object of their project (136). To some extent, the feminine misconception leading young women to pay attention mainly to their physical appearance could prevent them from contributing to their society in as far as they would ignore their intellectual ability, and other people tend to judge them by looking more at the physical appearance rather than their ability, as Rita Freedman writes in *Beauty Bound*;

The expectation of feminine beauty, inflates its importance, making women more vulnerable to 'lookism', a stereotype similar to ageism or racism. Lookism is a form of social control that influences how people see themselves, and how they are seen by others. (qtd in Weissman 20)

It seems that the play not only illustrates common expected characteristics for females, but also points to the suffering of how females find themselves unequal to their male counterparts, which in feminist theorists' point of view society is inclined to value (Crawford and Unger qtd. in Lipppa). The play presents the misogynistic

societies in “What Don’t You Like About Being a Girl”, when a girl says “My brother is adored/ I am ignored” and in “Don’t” in which a girl emotes;

My father hates girls

He says they used to bury them

when they were born.

No value

No personality (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 30)

These monologues demonstrate how the family, the so-called smallest and most basic unit of society, places girls in a lower position. The play alludes to the reality in which the first choice of child’s sex, in most societies, is a boy. In many cultures, boys are preferred because they can carry on the family name, and they can make more money than women as they work outside while women cannot earn from doing domestic chores. In some cultures, preference for sons is a result of religious rituals and beliefs. For example, in Thailand, Buddhism allows only males to be ordained as monks, an act which brings in considerable merit to the parents, thus highlighting the importance of males (Knodel et al. 145). Furthermore, there exists a study about male preference as offspring in China, India and Korea, which claims that Indians’ discrimination against having daughter is the consequence of a dowry culture that is deeply rooted in India. Because of such a culture, women are under an obligation to give money or property to their groom’s family. As a result, Indian parents consider having a daughter as putting a great financial burden on the family. Similarly, in South Korea there is a belief that the parents’ spirits would be looked after in the afterlife by the son only, then parents prefer to have a son to carry out this duty. For families which do not have male descendants to perform this duty, parents would ask their daughters

to give them a simple funeral which could be interpreted as their dying in shame. The preference for male babies in India, Korea and China also comes from the rigid logic of patrilineality which includes transferring assets through the male line whereas daughters are given only movable properties. This fact, to some degree, compels women to be dependent on men (Das Gupta, Zhenghua and Bohua). Additionally, Masako Ishii-Kuntz's study might present a clear example of son preference in Asian communities as she reveals that the Japanese families migrated to the US during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century still value "the commitment to a hierarchical and male-head-of-household view of the family";

The Issei (first-generation immigrant families) customarily designated their eldest son the successor to the family business. ... Accordingly the eldest Nisei (second-generation) son usually received special treatment and privileges from his parents. In many Issei families, he was the second to be served at meals, after his father, and he was generally indulged by his mother. ... Younger siblings were instructed to obey his directions, and even older sisters were expected to defer to him. (qtd. in B. Newman and P. Newman 248)

Such a family reflects how the presence of women is ignored while the boy, especially the eldest son, is identified with the father who has the absolute power in the family, even the mother and the older sister have to follow his orders. This comes to another point stressed in "What Don't You Like about Being a Girl"; "Girls can't control anything / Boy can do anything they want" (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 16) which calls attention to what girls do not like and may have a question in their mind about the patriarchal structure in the society that deprives them of suggesting opinions

and taking action. It might be important for Ensler to expose the audience, young females in particular, to the biased hierarchy because as soon as they are aware about this, they can overcome their inferiority and domestic sphere.

In the long run, the lower position can harm a girls' self-esteem and be detrimental to her self-confidence in the future. According to Lawrence Kohlberg, a noted psychologist best known for his theory of stages of moral development, while young children judge what is right or wrong based on their needs, teenagers make decisions according to their parents' and teachers' preference and social norms (qtd. in Brym and Lie 102). 'To please' is a key word Ensler uses to identify with girls nowadays; they do things to mainly ingratiate themselves to other people, not themselves. This episode, therefore, could be a message being transferred to the society that girls in real life might not be content with the state of merely a crowd-pleaser.

In addition to femininity formation, Ensler addresses the issue of homosexuality in her play since nowadays gender identity has become very fluid. There are not only men and women, but also lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgendered persons in today's society. However, the way children are raised in a heteronormative sphere might lead them to see gender identity in a binary opposition; female/male, which sometimes makes them mortified to express their sexual identities for they might be labeled 'deviant'. In *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, the poet Adrienne Rich claims that "the process of growing up is highly gendered". For girls, the institution of heterosexuality determines their "experience of entering in to the adulthood" (qtd. in Aapola, Gonick and Harris 147). Aapola, Gonick and Harris comment that girls and young women have to position themselves as

“properly female and mature” according to the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality related to power ruling females’ life. While successfully achieving sexual maturity is behaving heterosexual normatively, being lesbian and bisexual is seen as a trial run to test other kinds of sexual orientations;

[Some possibilities for young people to explore their sexuality outside the mainstream] are seen as experimental with the expectation that they will end when an individual achieves a more ‘mature’ i.e. heterosexual identity.

It is arguable that young females are afraid of expressing their true sexual identities because they believe that they might be directly harassed by homophobia (147-55).

To affirm that homosexuality is a form of normality, not a crime or mental illness, and to encourage girls to come out of the closet and be truthful to their sexual identities, Enslar creates a specific episode entitled “Stephanied”. The episode seems to be intended to show the audience an alternative way of sexual orientation that cannot be defined with any gender term because the protagonist who obviously admires her friend, Stephanie, denies reducing herself into only one description of sexual preference; “I’m not gay/ I’m not straight/ I’m Stephanied” (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 35), even though she tends to be labeled as a lesbian due to a crush she has on one of her female friends. Consequently, the girl employs the term “Stephanied” to describe her gender identity implying that sexual preference is undoubtedly fluid and probably cannot be built around any particular concept.

At times stereotyping girls who have a crush on their girlfriends, like the one in “Stephanied” or girls engaged in sports activities like the one in “Moving toward the Hoop”, who is really in to playing basketball, as a lesbian or a tomboy could make

them feel uncertain about their femininity. Generally, sports is a realm associated with masculinity rather than femininity as Jan Wright and Gill Clark maintain that “sporting practices are overwhelmingly associated with tough, aggressive, competitive often violent and sometimes dangerous practices combined with the rejection of that which is associated with femininity”. In fact, at present, the number of women involved in sports and female athletes is increasing. There exists the record of the rising number of female athletes participating in the Olympic Games that recorded the number of 37 female participants in 1908 while in 2000 the number has grown to 4069. Furthermore, women participated in only three events out of 107 events in 1908, but in 2000 they joined 132 events out of 300 events (The International Olympic Committee qtd. in Mac and Ghail and Haywood 175; Maps of World.com). Even though these numbers prove the increased acceptability of females partaking in sport events, there still is a conflict between traditionally normative femininity and active embodiment. The conflict might exert pressure on females to choose between femininity or active embodiment since these two characteristics do not seem to get along well. In the past, female athletes appearing in the media probably acted as an alternative role model for girls by embracing the active embodiment, but at present, with pressure on them to look feminine and attractive, female athletes are expected to be skillful at doing sports and attractive at the same time (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 160-1). This similar pressure might, as well, be placed with the girl in “Moving toward the Hoop”, who performs her sport very well, but she does not conform to feminine qualities of being attractive. Hence, she is labeled as a tomboy causing much confusion of where she should position herself. In addition, the sports girl in “Moving toward the Hoop” seems to be befuddled not only

with her gender identity but racial identity as she is a person of color. Ensler previously made use of a woman of color with an overweight body in *The Good Body*– Bernice, in order to show the sense of otherness of the character who is alienated in the society preferring a thin white woman. *I Am an Emotional Creature*, again, employs a colored female character to convey bewildering feelings of disenfranchised girls struggling with racial, class and sexual discrimination. What Ensler does with the play suggests the white feminists' concern about women of color which, according to *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, has been a growing trend since 1970 whereby women of color, women in the low economic bracket and lesbians are visible in feminist discourse and accepted by traditional white feminists. However, women of color argue that white feminists are still not able to represent their lives accurately since they believe that, for them, "racism [is] as much or more of a problem than sexism". For this reason, there comes a question asking whether or not there exists one particular crux. In addition, intersectionality, a new area of feminism, was developed. The front runners of this area such as Kimberley Crenshaw, Irene Browne and Joya Misra assert that racism and economic factors influence women's gender, social and economic roles and experiences. Then there comes the equation "race + class = gender" which implies that women of color experience gender issues differently from white women ("Feminism and Race" *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*). Notably, Ensler's play could be seen as stratified girls' space enthusiastically embracing indigenous girls in the feminist discourse where their oppressions are voiced, despite the fact that it is written by an American white feminist, albeit half-Jewish.



As mentioned before, the play's major focus is on girls' expressing their emotions, girls' pressures, which could be one of the reasons girls tend to be emotional about, are illustrated in three different issues. The first issue deals with the concept of 'good girl' and 'bad girl', the second is concerned with 'peer pressure' and the last issue is about violence against girls. Normally, girls tend to be grouped into two types which are 'good girl' and 'bad girl'. The former type is usually associated with traditional femininity while the latter alludes to sexuality as Christine Griffin contends in "Good Girls, Bad Girls: Anglocentrism and Diversity in the Constitution of Contemporary Girlhood"...

"Normal" femininity is constituted in part through a series of contradictions, especially around tensions between "good girls" and "bad girls," that tend to be played out with respect to representations of femininity and sexuality. (29)

At one point, Ensler raises the crucial issue of categorizing women dichotomously as 'good' and 'bad' types in *The Vagina Monologues*, here again she draws back the issue, but this time with special focus on girlhood which later could influence the construction of womanhood. Typically, when one thinks of the concept of being a good girl, one is likely to come up with the picture of a virtuous, chaste and submissive girl. The description of an allegedly good girl is also portrayed in "What's a Good Girl" in which expectations placed on girls are built around the notions of demureness; "Doesn't argue/ Polite/ Quiet", domestic embodiment; "stays in on the weekends", chastity; "She doesn't speak to boys at all", morality; "Has morals/ Tells the truth even if she pisses people off/ Respectable/ ... Goes to church every sunday", erudition; "She brings her homework with her", a crowd-pleaser "Doesn't step out of

the line/ Follows her parents in everything/ Even if she doesn't agree/ ... Doesn't know more than she should/ Ask questions even if she knows the answers" (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 27). Actually, the concept of 'good girls' is volatile depending on periods and cultures, then it may be argued that the concept is only a myth created to oppress girls in a particular society and period since every deed mentioned in "What's a Good Girl?" could be seen as a limit imposed on them. For instance, girls are deprived of sharing opinions and expressing critical thinking which could be seen as challenging the authority of adults or parents or even the patriarchal society that take control over them. If the girls are able to 'think', the power of those figures is more likely to be overthrown. Consequently, they have to create a myth stating that an obedient girl fits the good girl type while critically sharing opinions is aggressive behavior of bad girls.

One more outstanding characteristic of a bad girl is being sexually active because society usually expects women to be chaste and demure. To understand this expected role, we might have to look back at the influence of Christianity towards Western societies. In her book *Sexuality Now: Embracing Diversity*, Janell L. Carroll contends that St. Paul was a prominent figure of Christianity in the Western World whose Christian view of sexuality suggests that "the highest love was love of God and that the ideal was not to allow sexual or human love to compete with love for God". It could be inferred that sexuality itself is not disgraceful, especially when it is in a marital realm. The author also maintains that sexuality, the nonprocreative type in particular, in early Christianity is associated with sin. During the Middle Ages, the view on sexuality was moderately the same, but by the latter part of the period,

women, who used to be seen as a temptress, were regarded as a virtue creature like the mother of God–Mary, who came to symbolize perfect womanhood (12).

In some cultures, girls’ sexual desire is considered as evil, resulting in preventing them from gaining sexual pleasure or engaging in premarital sex by means as severe as genital circumcision. Seemingly Ensler puts this information in “Girl Fact” in order to reveal factual information related to the monologues. This element is very similar to “Vagina Fact” in *The Vagina Monologues* whereby the audience and the readers are given the chance to learn more about actual situations happening in women’s lives. Normally, drama is considered sensational, but including factual elements probably makes the play pragmatic and rational. It stimulates a discussion among the audience, especially girls, whose hearts might be touched by the plight of their sisters. Furthermore, the element could turn the play into what is called agitprop or agitational propaganda<sup>9</sup> which aims at transforming the audience’s beliefs and arouses resentment against what have been done to girls. At the same time, it encourages girls to participate in feminist activism like the V-Day or V-Girls organization. Swati Pal writes in her article, *Theatre and Activism: The Agit Prop Theatre Way* that it is hard for a good agit prop theatre to survive on mere propaganda. Pal observes the progress of Red Ladder Company, which has been active in theatrical work for forty-two years, and learns that “artistic intent and application cannot be made subordinate to the revolutionary message, at least not for

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<sup>9</sup> Agitprop was first created in the U.S.S.R. after the Russian Revolution of 1917 in order to communicate news to illiterate Russians in the same way of the early European tradition of town crier that political officials read bulletins to local inhabitants. Its activities were usually ended with the Communist anthem, *the International*, to arouse public enthusiasm. Therefore, it can be seen that Agitprop activities embrace the basic elements of theatre such as a speaker, an audience, emotional involvement and rational communication. Generally, agitprop activism includes stage plays, pamphlets, leaflets and other art forms that deliberately carry political messages (Innes 23).

so long” (48). Apparently, Ensler’s *I Am an Emotional Creature* not only offers space for factual information, but also theatrically aesthetic elements such as plot, fictional characters and captivating script. In terms of factual information presented through the play, the audience might recognize that this play lessens its concentration of women’s authentic details, unlike *The Vagina Monologues* and *The Good Body* that present monologues based on true stories and make use of actual individuals such as Helen Gurley Brown and Isabella Rossellini.

Even though *I Am an Emotional Creature* pays more attention to aesthetic elements, its “Girl Fact” still provides factual information about the number of women undergoing female genital mutilation in Africa. Ensler emphasizes the fate of our sisters, who underwent the practice prohibiting them from resorting to masturbation as a deliberate way of becoming sexually aroused. Incidentally, *The Vagina Monologues* mentions that in 1593, at a witch trial, the clitoris, the symbol of female sexuality, was also pejoratively identified as a devil’s teat (*The Vagina Monologues* 31) that was in need to be eliminated. Moreover, women who were accused of witchcraft were often viewed as being evil and aggressive women open to challenging male dominance (Burns 109). Even though the practice of female circumcision was bound up with witch hunting considerably performed in Europe and America, it was also done to the girls aged between two to fifteen years old in 28 countries in Africa and other countries in Middle East and Asia. During the ritual, which is generally performed by older women or men who have strong relationship with the girls’ family, the girls are undressed and held down by three or four people before being mutilated (World Health Organization qtd. in Branson). The action obviously demonstrates girls’ reluctant surrender which is also alluded to the play;

“Don’t fight it the razor/ Wake up/ Don’t cry, he needed to cut it off/ Don’t look for it/ It would have made you crazy/ and out of control” (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 30). Since the practitioner is a “he”, the monologue probably indicates the male authority and domination over girls, who are required to preserve their virginity and remain chaste until they are married. Accordingly, the practice constitutes a form of human rights violation done to women simply because women are intentionally alienated from male dominant societies as Mona El Tobgui, an Egyptian pediatrician, asserts ...

It is an insult that stays with them throughout their lives. Circumcised women have no enjoyment of life, they have nothing. No education; no rights; and they cannot join in the development of their communities.

(Inter Press Service English News Wire)

The play illustrates the similar situation that after undergoing genital mutilation, girls “stop asking questions” (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 130) referring to female social and emotional deprivation. According to UNICEF, female genital circumcision is “one of the most hidden forms of rights violations” that should be eradicated with the support from governments and communities. UNICEF also claims that the practice of female genital mutilation is not a religious tradition, instead it is only a social custom (Deeb) separated into four types; excision of the prepuce, with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris; excision of clitoris with partial or total excision of labia minora; excision of part or all of the external genitalia stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening; picking piercing or incising of the clitoris or/and labia, then sewing close the remaining tissue. The practice is mainly employed as a way to control female sexual behavior in societies celebrating females’ virginity and virtue.

Furthermore, in America and the United Kingdom, gynecologists have used circumcision in procedures to cure nymphomania, insanity, masturbation, and some other female disorders (Momoh 5-7).

Nevertheless, female genital circumcision obviously leads to physical and psychological trauma. For example, in Ethiopia, seventy five percent of girls underwent unhygienic mutilation when they were only seven or eight days old of age which results in blood poisoning since there are bacteria in the bloodstream. Furthermore, unsterile equipment is used on many girls, which could cause the spread of AIDS. In long-term complications, there are many possible aftereffects of genital circumcision, for example, pain during sexual intercourse, repeated urinary tract infection, stone in the urethra or bladder and etc. In terms of psychological effects, many infibulated girls suffer from consequent emotional disturbance such as eating disorders, sleeping problems and cognitive disorder after mutilation (Inter Press Service English News Wire; Rahman and Toubia 8-9).

This practice separating girls into two extreme groups of “bad girls” and “good girls” derives from the notion that it is unnatural for girls to have sexual desire while, for boys, it is a thing parents could be proud of as it represents the real masculinity of their sons. Consequently, girls must be restrained from showing any sign of sexual desire. All too often they are regarded as sexually active when they are wearing revealing clothes which Ensler interestingly discusses in “My Short Skirt” that girls have the right to wear what they want, and it is not the green light given to anyone to sexually harass them. In the play, Ensler does not demonize sexuality, instead she encourage girls to see sexuality as a natural behavior and points out how girls learn about sexuality, which sometimes might be only a myth, in “Things I

Heard About Sex”. It appears to be that pieces of information about sexuality girls perceive contradict each other and the fact remains unclear, even if sexuality and sexual desire are natural and all around. Girls could learn about sexuality from their parents’ sexual behavior as in the monologue; a girl can hear sounds and noises made by their parents while they are having sex. Lacking a clear explanation, the girl tends to perceive that as a sound of suffering as if “[her] mother was dying” (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 50). From time to time, girlfriends become a useful source of information for girls due to their intimate relationship, but inexperienced girls might perceive false ideas such as the myth about sexuality or learn how to be popular by having sex with multiple partners.

The play depicts not only good girl femininity dealing with sexual expression, but also unrealistic expectations that could bring pressures to girls’ life such ones portrayed in “Bad Boys”;

Straight A’s

Super-thin

Being intelligent and happy

Really good at everything (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 18-9)

Looking closely at this monologue, the audience could recognize that the parents demand high academic performance as well as a perfect physical appearance for a girl. The high expectations might originate from parents’ background like the father mentioned in the play who is “very successful” (18). Hence, it is possible that he uses his standard to determine how his daughter is expected to behave. Likewise, the mother, who expects the girl to be a fashion model like her aunt, fails in her self-expectation since she is overweight, depriving her the chance to be a model. Thus, to

be strict with the girl's body image, in a way, is fulfilling her own dream. Both the mother and the father seem to create a little adult out of the girl, who tries to express her emotions and thoughts via poems given to her mother, but is misunderstood to be a sign of abnormality. With the high expectations society and the family place on them, girls might need someone whom they can rely on. In the case of the girl in "Bad Boys", she deals with her pressure from her family by turning to her boyfriend branded by the girl's parents as 'a bad boy' because his background fits the type of a juvenile delinquent; "Yesterday he got grounded/ He spray-painted a bomb on his bedroom wall/His parents got divorced" (20). The reason behind her behavior could be that she finds that they match, since in her opinion "[they're] both troubled" (18), and the boy is admirable for he is truthful to his emotions; he dares to express it while the girl cannot. Moreover, when the parents explicitly forbid her friendship with the boy, the girl seems to rebel against the parents' authority. One thing that the parents in the monologue might be afraid of is that their girl might be lured by the 'bad boy' and led into premarital sexual relationship. Typically, parents' social control over their daughters implies preventing girls from having early sexual experiences. Even though parents often make the excuse that they are more concerned about protecting their daughters, they frequently prohibit girls from experimenting sexual activities. There exists a study showing that American parents are likely to "dramatize" and "problematize" their teenage children's sexuality, insofar as they can exclude sexuality from family context and simply put it down to "raging hormones" (Näre; Thompson; Schalette qtd. in Aapola, Gonick and Harris 96). In contrast, Ensler whose play seems to position her as a kind and open minded mother figure, albeit with her admission that she would like to write it through the eyes of a fifteen-year-



old girl, tries to encourage girls' sexual experiment and focuses more on preventing unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. In the past, Ensler encouraged women to reconsider their own sexuality in *The Vagina Monologues* where women are persuaded to vocalize the word "vagina" which has always been considered as a social taboo. Women are exposed to female sexuality; they learn that they have the right to gain sexual pleasure in the same way that men do. "Know your vagina/ It's yours/ Ask questions" (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 51) is what Ensler persuades girls to do in her latest play. To know one's vagina is to learn about one's own sexuality which implies that it is a natural condition girls are facing. Parents, caretakers or the significant others should learn how to help develop girls' self-confidence in sexual issues like Ensler does when writing "Asking the Question" where the girl portrayed in the monologue finds it awkward to ask her partner to use contraception. She is afraid that the boy would hate her and break off the relationship or even think of her as an experienced girl (115). From the monologue, the audience would learn that girls who dare to request sexual protection are labeled a "nymphomaniac". This preconceived notion does not help protect girls from sexual activity, but rather leads to more serious situations such as teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. The monologue thus shows girls that asking for sexual protection is not as hard a thing to do;

"Would you mind  
using a condom please?"  
(I sound just like my mother)  
and he says, without even missing a beat,  
"Sure, I have one right here."

and I think

oh my God

that wasn't so bad.

Kind of easy (117)

This episode also points out the role of honesty that plays a part in a dating relationship. The girl seems to rely on her boyfriend, believing that he is 'clean', but later she reminds herself about another girl who acquired AIDs from her partner just because she had trusted his honesty when he said he never slept around, and the girl appears to be suspicious about her boyfriend's experience which pushes her into 'asking the question'. However, girls will be confident enough to ask the question if they are encouraged by their parents and caretakers who should not view girls' desire and sexuality as an unnatural condition. At times, sexual abstinence is promoted in educational establishments as the best option for avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. In America, teaching sexual abstinence is a controversial issue since some schools agree on teaching about both sexual abstinence and birth control while other schools opt for mere sexual abstinence teaching. Christian tradition separates sexual abstinence into two types which are lifelong abstinence and premarital abstinence. Lifelong abstinence might stem from the early Christianity belief viewing sexuality as a connection to the earth that could interrupt the immortality of soul. As a result, the virgins are regarded as privileged and higher people than married people as they have a special bond with God. However, there exists another belief by Martin Luther and John Calvin saying the long-term abstinence was against "God's creative design of sexual companionship" or human beings are created to procreate. Therefore, there comes the idea of premarital sexual

abstinence encouraging youths to have sexual relationship when they are coming of age to “fulfill God’s mandate of reproduction and to channel their lust” (Gresle-Favier 1-3; Hartwig 19).

Ensler seems to be critical of the practice of sexual abstinence taught to girls when she portrays a girl who experiences unplanned pregnancy while she is practicing sexual abstinence. Obviously, Ensler, who clearly supports girls’ sexual activities together with practicing safe sex, disparages sexual abstinence by illustrating the ineffective result of the practice. Accordingly, a government-funded evaluation of the Title V program reveals that “abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are ineffective at delaying sexual initiation or reducing unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections”. Furthermore, the study points out that teens practicing sexual abstinence along abstinence-only education programs tend to equally use contraceptives or less likely to use any contraceptive device than other teens in comprehensive education programs (States News Service). In addition, a study by the University of Oxford finds that sexual abstinence does not help cut down the risk of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases in teenagers since abstinence-only programs lack of promoting safe sex behaviors while other programs promoting the use of condoms significantly help reduce the risk of contracting HIV (Hindustan Times).

It is possible that when girls cannot raise sexual issues within their family, they tend to rely more on their friends rather than their parents or caretakers. Sometimes, the help girls get from their friends, which at first seems like support, could turn to be pressure like Ensler illustrates in “Would You Rather”, the episode presenting to the audience the feeling of girls being pressured by their girlfriends through conversations between two girlfriends. Each question the “Girl 1” asks is like

having the “Girl 2” stand on an intersection where she has to choose whether she would like to turn left or right;

GIRL 1

Would you rather get caught stealing or cheating?

Would you rather ask him to put on a condom or  
give him oral sex?

GIRL 2

I don't want to play this.

GIRL 1

Would you rather lose your mother or your father?

Be in a tsunami or an earthquake? Be buried alive or  
freeze to death?

GIRL 2

I'm going to sleep. GIRL 1 Why won't you ever  
play?

(Silence)

It's just a game.

(Silence)

You're no fun. (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 68-9)

“Girl 2” looks as if she is caught in a dilemma and being pressured into making a decision when she does not feel like doing it. In real life, some girls dare not to resist their friends and end up with unexpected behavior done against their will simply because they want to be accepted. Additionally, through “Let Me In” the influence of ‘peer pressure’ girls have to face in their teenage is presented. Elaine Slavens and Ben

Shannon explain that peer pressure occurs when teenagers are urged to act or to look a certain way (3). Normally, teens want to fit in a particular group, therefore, they probably act in a specific way in order to be accepted by their friends. Moreover, at this moment, they are prone to criticism from friends, being afraid of “being different and not having friends”. Peer pressure, somehow, gets more intense when parents believe that teenagers do not need them like before (Havelin 16-9), and it usually becomes substantial when teens start “learning about their peers’ product favorites and take them into account when evaluating products on their own” (Gunter and Furnham qtd. in Elliot 348). In the play, Ensler presents a vulnerable girl who is implicitly influenced by her friends to have branded gear like other girls in the group in order to blend in with them like Childers and Rao put that “peer pressure is most likely to be experienced for ‘public luxuries’ such as branded fashion items” (qtd. in Elliott 347). The girl portrayed in the play is obviously from a lower-class family living with a mother who makes a living as “a temp secretary and sometimes for weeks doesn’t even get called” (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 11). It is possible that her unsuccessful mother and poverty contribute to the girl’s low self-confidence and self-esteem. Girls’ low self-esteem, in some cases, causes susceptibility to peer-group purchase influence in teenagers (Achenreiner qtd. in Elliot 348). It is obvious that in the play, the girl’s need of luxurious or in-trend items like UGG boots does not fit her financial status which leads to the problem between the girl and her mother;

It’s all about purple UGGs. My mother will not even consider it. She doesn’t get it. She constantly jeopardizes my position. I mean she’s the reason I can’t keep up. I hate my mother and I hate these painful riding boots even more. (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 11)

One learns, through the girl's voice, that the mother fails to understand her daughter's alleged necessity of having fashionable items, even though she first buys her brown leather riding boots, which is later looked on by her friends as "so pre-Britney" (11), so as to stop her hyperventilating.

The same episode also depicts how aggressive girls, who force others to be compelled to follow them, are actually weak. The submissive girl describes her abusive peers as "they're always showing off. They're not so sure of themselves when they're alone. But in the posse—giddyup" (10). The monologue indicates that sometimes weak girls can turn into mean girls once they lose self-confidence. This phenomenon, according to Havelin, is called "scapegoating others" which occurs when teens feel uncertain about themselves. They, then, need to ridicule others or make others feel bad only because they want to exercise their power and break their weak points making themselves more authoritative (Havelin 17). The series of scapegoating others referred to in the play goes further when the vulnerable girl is inevitably influenced by her abusive friends to be nasty to Wendy Apple, a girl who epitomizes the girls' self-truthfulness since she is truthful to her emotions and herself, and also her name apparently alludes to Wendy Darling, a girl character in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* who, unlike Peter Pan, is certain that she is grown up and reasonable;

Wendy is so out. She's got wild hair and her family lives in this ugly house and she has the dumbest laugh. She can't help herself and she really doesn't care. To be honest, I sort of like Wendy. Well, I admire her. She's pretty sarcastic and draws these amazing pictures of slutty

angels who are always falling from somewhere like outer space. But it's familiar. (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 11)

The main character of this episode seems to show considerable admiration for Wendy Apple because Wendy helps expose her to her own needs and emotions. In addition, the last name, the reference to the apple here appears to be associated with the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden eaten by Eve and Adam, who, after having the fruit, avail themselves of the magical power it supposedly has, to endow them in the greater wisdom and ability to develop their selves. Ensler, therefore, employs Wendy Apple as a positive role model for girls who might lose their own sense of self-esteem in the process of forming their identity. The last scene of the episode in which Wendy Apple draws the girl's picture (15) vividly demonstrates how the vulnerable girl is being transformed to being herself and has higher self-esteem like Wendy does.

In addition to social expectation and peer pressure, young females in the play are depressed by the amount of sexual violence against them. We learn that Ensler first raises the issue about violence perpetrated against women in *The Vagina Monologue* and *The Good Body*. While the former deals with sexuality and sexual violence women might encounter if they are unable to talk about their sexual organ, the latter is about the violence coming together with beauty myth that is committed by women themselves. These issues are reproduced again in *I Am an Emotional Creature* with light casted on child exploitation. In terms of sexuality, Ensler points out how girls should be aware of preventing unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. She voices the concern for violence against girls in "Dear Rihanna" in which the notorious news of a renowned pop singer, Rihanna, who was physically abused by

her boyfriend, Chris Brown, is retold. The monologue portrays the story through a girl, who appears to blame Rihanna for leaving Chris. The girl emotes that she herself has also been abused by her boyfriend, but she is still with him since she feels that an abusive relationship is ordinary and it does not matter as long as the boy still loves her. Interestingly, Jay G. Silverman from Harvard University's School of Public Health has conducted a survey about dating abuse and finds that among 4,100 female participants studying in the ninth through the twelfth grade in the Massachusetts public school system, the number of girls aged fourteen to eighteen who admit to regularly "being hit, shoved, slapped, verbally or emotional abused, and coerced into sexual activity by the male they are dating" is about twenty percent (Githens). Sometimes, girls like the one in this particular episode, are not even aware that they are being abused due to the fact that the girl might view an abusive relationship as normal behavior that could happen in a relationship such as her parents', which she might adopt as a model;

It's like my parents' arguments. They feel like they've been going on since I was born and they basically are always pissed off about the same things and she makes him feel so bad about himself and then he gets ugly. And sometimes he hurts her and then she gets meaner and we all just go to our rooms and pretend we don't hear, but really we're all part of it. I mean sometimes it's one of us that makes them start arguing. Usually me. My dad says someone's always asking for it. (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 72)

The episode illustrates that parents could be the key to the question why the girl tolerates the abusiveness she encounters in her dating. The mother, who is the



girl's only role model, does not seem to fight against her father; she rather accepts the blame for driving the father wild. There is no doubt that the girl probably learns to put up with her aggressive boyfriend from the submissive mother, which is the character adopted by Ensler to present the vital importance of parents as models for a healthy relationship to girls. The audience might also detect that rather than fighting strongly against violence against girls by condemning males for their brutality, Ensler allows her young female audience to take time to observe the episode that makes them sympathetic to the boyfriend. Moreover, the episode appears to omit the boy's ferocity, but explore the girl's submissive role to the point that she illustrates the girl blaming Rihanna for leaving her abusive boyfriend. This strategy demonstrates the respect shown by Ensler for her young female audience and their intellectual capability to distinguish the difference between a healthy and miserable relationships and whether or not they should abandon this kind of relationship if they happen to experience it themselves. Even though Ensler does not tell her young audience directly that they should protect themselves from abusive relationships, the depiction of the desperate girl being repeatedly abused by her boyfriend could be interpreted as a thought-provoking message to them that if they tend to prolong their helplessness, they will be, according to Martin Sligman's theory, led to depression and apathy, resulting in the inability to leave the relationship" (qtd. in Humphreys and Campbell 74).

The issue of eating disorders and beauty myths prevalent among girls is also addressed in this play as a form of violence against women. Not unlike *The Good Body*, *I Am an Emotional Creature* seems to strongly suggest that the source of the beauty myth stems from a woman's family. *The Good Body* portrays a mother who

considers having big thighs to be ugly and urges her daughter, Carmen, to reduce their size. Carmen is influenced by her own mother that she must have a slim body in addition to being smart in order to be accepted by a man; “you better work hard on a nice waist and a brain or no one will ever fuck you” (*The Good Body* 30). The parents in an episode called “The Joke about My Nose” in *I Am an Emotional Creature*, apparently share the same values as Carmen’s mother. However, instead of suggesting beautification in a way that reinforces their daughters low self-esteem, the girl’s parents appear to be sympathetic towards her appearance to the point that they give her nose surgery as a gift which the daughter, who appears to have high self-esteem, rejects. The girl feels outraged to be told that her nose should be aesthetically augmented. Accordingly, the girl explains how her nose is actually her own self;

It is hard to describe, but my nose gave me permission. It inspired me with wicked ideas. It made me daring. It was like you’ll never be one of them so you might as well be yourself. I was the one in my classes who was the clown. They called me Gonzo. Like the muppet. (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 65)

The girl knows that her image is not perfect, but it is evident that the sense of satisfaction with her appearance could help improve her self-esteem and self-confidence. Furthermore, Ensler might want to suggest that girls can take advantage of their otherwise flawed part to motivate themselves and be contented like the girl in this episode who makes use of a nose her family considers as imperfect to start a conversation and make friends with other people. In other words, she compensates for her physical imperfection with a strong personality and social skills.

While showing the girl's satisfaction with her nose, Ensler simultaneously criticizes the way parents or other significant adults try to indoctrinate girls with the concept of beautification which they believe can help strengthen her self-esteem ignoring the fact that there is no absolute definition of beautification that may be applied to everyone. In addition, the standards of mainstream beauty, to a certain degree, can even destroy a girls' self-esteem like the parents in "The Joke about My Nose" do in this particular situation where the girl, who is the subject of such treatment reflects ...

My parents are not bad people. I know they love me. I know they want what's best for me. But that involves their idea of what is best. And it has meant they know better than me. My parents who loved me planned, strategized, and eventually succeeded at killing my nose. Murdering it. (65)

Here it is clear that the parents have good intentions towards their daughter, leading them to decide to improve her facial features, but the generosity they purportedly have seems to be strongly influenced by normative beauty which contradicts with the girl's own satisfaction, and could even cause self-deprecation. According to Polly Young-Eisendrath's opinion written in *Subject to change: Jung, gender, and subjectivity in psychoanalysis* "beauty is a condition that lives mostly in the eye of beholder", and it is hard to find an objective standard of beauty. Furthermore, culture partakes in defining beauty and sets the standard for subsequent beauty reproduction (85). The play strongly suggests that the meaning of being beautiful depends on aesthetic satisfaction. A person can define his/her own meaning of being beautiful, which changes over time and cultural definition, but, at the same time, when it comes to

criteria for physical unattractiveness the norms are more specific and permanent. Some values of beauty may be seen in the following monologues where a girl asks ...

I look so pretty, right? Aren't I pretty? Pretty girls don't really look like anything particular. They look like everyone dreams of looking, but they do not look like anything you can really identify. When you describe someone pretty you say things like, "Oh, that girl, Ashley, she's so pretty." But when you describe not so pretty girls you always say something special about them, something about how they look. Oh, Maria, she's the one with the wild hair, or Taina, her legs are a little short but she has great breasts. (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 64)

Even though Ensler depicts the parents in "The Joke about My Nose" as being influenced by mainstream beautification, she also does not seem to explicitly place the blame on them for perpetuating the beauty myth since she, as well, illustrates parents who are worried about their girl's eating disorder in "hunger blog" that appears to be a printed version of a web log the girl uses to keep her journal. It is evident that the girl practices starvation without her parents' agreement as once she is caught by her father when she skips a meal and gets too tired to go to school (62). Therefore, parents are not always to be blamed for girls' behavior.

Through the blog, the audience have a chance to follow the girl's thoughts and emotions towards her body. In the very first blog, the audience would learn about the sense of human-degradation via the girl's eating behavior that is compared to a cow's eating behavior; "learning to graze. used to watch cows. they move their mouth around the grass. hover, hang, munch a little, rest. don't swallow too much" (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 61). The first blog foreshadows the girl's eating disorder and how

less human the girl is going to be when she rejects having food, a source of nutrition that gives human beings energy. The image of a less human girl with her “bone jutting” is juxtaposed with the illustration of “hundreds of people in Africa forced to leave their land ’cause of war. they were drinking dirty water. everyone was so hungry and sick” (62) in order to remind girls that there are people out there in the world who are suffering from severe famine while many girls are bombarded by a pile of food and a bunch of super-stores where they are able to purchase food, but they accept only a small amount of food and feel frustrated when having a big meal. Similar to *The Good Body*’s message, the contradicting images thus are a thought-provoking allusion to the issue of eating disorder which a number of American females are suffering from as a result of the pursuit of thinner body, and are in fact distracting a new generation from serious social issues.

In addition to pressure and problems modern girls possibly encounter, Ensler depicts several solutions for them together with a boost for girls’ self-esteem. In “Sophie et Apolline or, Why French Girl Smoke”, Ensler portrays two girls who tend to cope with the pressures and stress they encounter in their lives by smoking. Normally, girls with a smoking habit are stigmatized by society. Many campaigns are launched to discourage girls from smoking, for instance, England’s stop smoking campaign called SUPPORT that urges girls to reconsider that smoking is not only damaging to their health but also their appearance (Daily Post). Moreover, some scientific studies are employed to dramatize the situation of female smoking. For example, Dr. Morten Grundtvig of Innlandet Hospital, Lillehammer, Norway points out that smoking is likely to increase the risk of cardiovascular disease to a relatively greater degree in women than in men (Bruce). In contrast to anti-smoking campaigns

and scientific studies, Ensler does not depict smoking habit as a serious matter; she tends to talk about smoking as a choice girls are able to make and girls should not be judged by their smoking habit. Evidently, the title of the episode, implies that the issue of women's smoking is debatable and there should not be an absolute judgment on their means of curing themselves since the meaning of 'Sophie', a popular French form of the Greek word Sophia, refers to wisdom which could be interpreted as a metaphor for girls' decision based on knowledge, good sense and sound judgment. Furthermore, the name of Apolline alludes to Apollo in Greek and Roman mythology, the god of prophecy. The image emphasizes girls' ability to make their own choice and project their own future. Ensler's use of the Greek mythical gods probably indicates her desire to give girls, the new generation of feminism, moral support, and strengthen girls' hand.

Throughout *I Am an Emotional Creature; The Secret Life of Girls Around the World*, young women, who are Ensler's target audience, are exposed to monologues that emerge from the personal stories Ensler has gathered about girls, and voiced through the young female characters. In so doing, Ensler explains that in her opinion it is better for girls to learn what they want and what they are earlier. With the younger target audience, there is no doubt that the language and tone adopted to emote the monologues must be mellow, unlike the more aggressive tone in *The Vagina Monologues*, that employed strong provocative language to trigger a massive response from the audience and to establish Ensler's position in a feminist drama and activism arena. Setting off with the episode called "You Tell Me How to Be a Girl in 2010", Ensler encourages girls to bring out their confidence and ability to work on current social issues surrounding them such as war, pollution, global warming,

poverty and etc. She discusses the turmoil dominating the world with the intention to provoke girls into thinking seriously about the brutal truth people are facing while some of their 'sisters' indulge themselves in wasted trivial matters such as "not getting out of bed", "eating or starving" and "getting nose jobs or implants". However, Ensler does not make it a point to dictate what the girls should do, she, instead leaves it to them with respect to analyze the situation and come up with what they can achieve and attain as part of the self-actualization that a girl of the twenty-first century might consider, listening to them instead of dictating them what to do. Over the centuries, the trend of authority relations is identified with a patriarchal social structure. If the structure is graphically depicted as a pyramid, males will be on top, followed by female adults, and then girls at the bottom. It can be argued that the dominion attributed to men might be the result of the belief that the male is the most excellent sex according to Biblical references maintaining God created Adam first, and then Eve was made out of Adam's rib. This myth also indicates that Eve was created to be Adam's helper, not his equal companion. Therefore, women or Eve's descendants are supposed to be subordinate to males. This belief also affects the socialization process to the point that women are required to perform a submissive, passive and dependent role that leads them to be a pleaser. In addition, in the past, literary works produced according to this hierarchical structure appear to work as an instruction telling women how to behave themselves in the public sphere which places them in the position of a listener being dictated to by males. In terms of a domestic sphere, women's behaviors are also determined by patriarchal ideologies that assign the father or husband the role of making important decisions and having control of family business and properties while women are given the role of a homemaker.

Moreover, with the notion that females are endowed with a nurture gene that associates them with being a mother and a wife, they are instilled with a number of doctrines dealing with femininity. When it comes to young women, the feminine wisdom and feminine qualities are passed along to them by female adults. Like their foremothers, young women are taught and trained to attain feminine characteristics, such as virtue and chastity. Moreover, they are expected by “panoptical male connoisseur” that disciplines female behaviors. At present times, although the trend of authority relations are slightly changed inasmuch as women are more independent, masculine ideologies that play a key role in our society for centuries are still influential in socializing young females. Therefore, that Ensler asks the young female audience to tell her “how to be a girl in 2010” (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 9) could be interpreted as a paradigm shift of the twenty-first century where authority relations according to the patriarchal social structure are being subverted. The line reflects how young women should no longer be placed in the position of a subdued listener or at the bottom of a social structure; they are able to voice their needs and concerns. In so doing, Ensler shows them that the older generations represented by Ensler herself, are open to listen to their opinions when she says “I say let’s speak it/ let’s fight it/let’s right it” (9).



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The discussion of Eve Ensler's plays rendered by this thesis; *The Vagina Monologues* (1996); *The Good Body* (2004) and *I Am an Emotional Creature* (2010) demonstrates that Eve Ensler has not only made significant contributions, especially in terms of her experiments with the use of monologues, to contemporary American theatre, but also reaffirms her strong feminist conviction and advocacy for activism in the women's movement.

In terms of feminist conviction, the audience would recognize that Ensler's three plays reflect her feminist ideology quite clearly. In the first play, *The Vagina Monologues*, it is made clear that female sexuality, which has long been restrained, can be expressed if women simply start talking about their sexuality and articulating their needs. The play presents that the pervasive negative perception towards the vagina, such as believing that menstrual blood leaked from the vagina is associated with impurity and evil deeds that are claimed as women's embarrassment, hinders articulation of a word like vagina. At the same time through *The Vagina Monologues* Ensler tries to revamp long-held notions that identify the vagina with impurity and sinful deeds by adding a monologue demonstrating the onset of menstruation as women's rite of passage.

After presenting several factors causing negative perceptions of vaginas to the audience, Ensler is critical of women's avoidance of sexual issues which to her leads to misconceptions of female sexuality including subduing sexual desires and perpetuating women's inferior status when it comes to sexuality.

In the second play, *The Good Body*, Ensler still pursues her intention of presenting to the audience her feminist ideology as she points out some doubts in the play as to what extent women are truly independent of patriarchal social structure, which somehow objectifies women by setting a standard of a normative physical appearance women should conform to. In this play, Ensler employs the word ‘good’ to illustrate social expectations imposed on women and how to be perceived as a ‘good’ woman in the twenty-first century. The paradigm shift of the concept defining a good woman could be easily recognized if the audience compare the characteristics of a good woman in the twenty-first century portrayed in *The Good Body* and the ones that are associated with the notion of being virtuous and moral in *The Vagina Monologues*.

In the last play, *I Am an Emotional Creature*, Ensler still continues with her strong conviction of presenting her feminist ideology, spurring women into breaking free from the patriarchal framework and extending her V-Day project that advocates protection against violence by adopting play as a tool, but this time her target group shifts to young female audience. The issues raised in *The Vagina Monologues* and *The Good Body* i.e. female sexuality, violence against women, eating disorders and beauty myths are reproduced in this last play as they are the problems encountered by young females of the twenty-first century where the trend of authority relations are slightly changed inasmuch as women are more independent, but the influence of masculine ideologies that play a key role for centuries on socializing young females is pervasive. Instead of dictating the young female audience what they should do, Ensler asks them to tell her “how to be a girl in 2010” (*I Am an Emotional Creature* 9). The

question could be regarded as empowering young women, who have always been subdued, to express their opinions and needs.

In terms of feminist activism, the three plays have shown that Ensler makes use of her theatrical skills to gain attention before planting the seed of feminist ideology which helps pave the way for feminist activism. In line with the three plays, Ensler always launches a campaign or activity to facilitate her feminist movement. Firstly, in 1998, Ensler established the V-Day organization in 1998 to fight against female sexual abuse and intent in funding local anti-violence groups and communities not only in the U.S., but also in such countries as Kenya, Egypt, Iraq, Haiti and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She also allows the three plays to be performed free of charge, in order to raise awareness of relevant issues such as violence against women which suggests that for Ensler activism purposes are more important than aesthetic ones.

As mentioned earlier that the last play, *I Am an Emotional Creature*, is targeted at expanding feminist ideology and activism to the younger generation, Ensler has established a V-Girls network to involve the young audience in feminist activism. She also takes advantage of modern technologies such as the Internet to create a virtual community for young women to join in, discuss, share and exchange their experience to one another. At the same time, Ensler tries to embrace young females outside the cyber world into a female community by providing a free V-Girls Emotional Guide in V-Girls website for those preferring to start an Emotional Creature Club in a school, youth program or community. In the club, which employs the face-to-face interaction technique to create a psychological orientation, girls are able to assemble and talk over personal issues related to family or relationships.

Furthermore, to help teenagers to understand the play's message, Ensler cooperates with MTV, an influential music channel with a teenage target group, to broadcast some of the monologues on the channel and its official website.

This thesis has shown that Eve Ensler has assumed a dual role: to be a playwright and to be an activist, but her activism seems to take precedence in her plays and overlap her role as a playwright because all the three plays are performed together with activist devotions. Moreover, she intends to add a new monologue into her plays whenever there emerges an interesting social issue related to the violence against women. That she has underscored how she is "interested in how theatre is a tool for revolution and social change" and that she was granted Tony Awards' Isabelle Stevenson Award for "substantial contribution of volunteered time and effort on behalf of a humanitarian, social service or charitable organization" (Rothstein) also underscore her role as an activist who adopts a play as a tool to pave way for feminist ideology and activism. However, Ensler does not ignore her role as a playwright as the audience could see the development in her three plays, for example, her language style is altered depending her target audience.

It should be noted that these three plays featured here in this thesis are written in the form of monologues having women talking about their personal experience giving women the chance to listen to and learn about the plight of their sisters as if they are talking to each other. This technique is actually similar to the consciousness raising activity used by feminist activists in the second wave movement to stimulate social discussion and reformation, unlike the third wavers who pay more attention on empowerment of individuals. The three plays have demonstrated that Ensler tries to change personal attitudes of ordinary women in order to encourage them to get

involved in feminist projects and activities that are not a main focus of the third wavers. Moreover, that Ensler continues her V-Day and V-Girls activities in line with these three plays demonstrates that her feminist plays are a reflection of her strong conviction of feminist ideology which goes hand in hand with her feminist activism.

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## **VITAE**

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