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Retrospect and Prospect: Iyanla Vanzart and *The Woman That I Am*

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*What is it that would make a creature
as fierce, majestic and powerful as a lion is,
subject itself to the intimidation of
a man, a whip and a chair?
The lion has been taught to forget what it is.*

- Iyanla Vanzart, *Peace from Broken Pieces* xviii

Iyanla Vanzart's *Peace from Broken Pieces* meanders through various genres: a memoir of a rape victim, an autobiography of a woman on a journey to find the value of herself and; through its subtitle – *How to Get Through What You're Going Through* – also crosses over to the genre of self-help: defined as books that help its readers to solve and address their own personal problems. At the same level, her other work - *Yesterday, I Cried: Celebrating the Lessons of Living and Loving* - also deals with the nuances of being and becoming a woman, highlighting the ripples of self-realization that took years to reach the mind's shore.

There is a complex dialogue that the writer engages in - one of reaching in to hear her own voice, not muddled by noises from outside; and the other of reaching out beyond her immediate self to others - people, women, and readers. This simultaneous reaching in and reaching out allows her voice to be heard by others. Vanzart tells tales – of her past, her memories, her pains, and; teaches others how to use retrospection to repair the cracks left from aching experiences. How are generations of families, of women specifically, involved in the reassessment of the past to make sense of the self? Why is there a need to go back to “Grandma’s Story”? How does retrospection repair the broken pieces of the self? Lastly, how are Vanzart’s works involved in relearning what one has “been taught to forget”?

The word ‘retrospect’ comes from Latin word *retro-spicere* and simply means to ‘look back’ (“Retrospect”) while the word ‘prospect’ comes from *pro-spicere*, to ‘look forward’ (“Prospect”). They are not only patterned similarly on the basis of etymology, but can be seen as two processes that complement each other: looking back and looking forward form a part of the attempts of humanity to understand itself and of the human need to gauge how far we have come and how far we have yet to go. The positive connotations that the word ‘prospect’ carries within itself (like prospecting for gold), are only possible when retrospection is done and when the dirt of the past has been dug up for gold. Such a form of retrospection is a core element of memoirs and autobiographies. The gold found at the end of it is for the one making a journey through the labyrinths of the past, and is also shared with others who become readers and learners of the ability to do so. In “Personal Resonance to Literature: A Study of Reminders while

Reading”, an empirical study was done to show that the personal involvement is an important factor in reading:

However, it is hardly sufficient to explain one of the most conspicuous aspects of reading literary texts which seems closely connected with the perception of verisimilitude in a story, namely, that a reader feels a literary work to be deeply relevant and personally meaningful to him or her - the work elicits a *personal resonance* in the reader, so to say. This experience of personal resonance may not occur very often, and it may also occur when reading non-fiction; but phenomenologically it appears to be a particularly important ingredient of ‘great’ literary experiences (emphasis in original, Larsen and Seilman 167).

The practice of learning from each other’s experiences and sharing those via storytelling or even a simple everyday conversation, is the real prospect of retrospection and the richness of reading literature. For her ability to cause this personal resonance, Vanzart was named one of the “100+ most influential Black Americans” by *Ebony Magazine* in 2000 (84). The healing power of her words, gained after a rebirth from the ashes of the past, made her a motivational speaker on *Oprah* with her own television show titled *Iyanla, Fix My Life!*

Yesterday, I Cried was published in 1999 and *Peace from Broken Pieces* came out eleven years later, in 2010. In the span of these years, Vanzart saw professional failure, bankruptcy, death of her daughter to cancer, a divorce and suicidal depression. The two works can then be seen as reference points in the development of Vanzart as a writer and depict the various stages of her healing that helped her make peace with the broken pieces of herself. The first step was a realization that the story has to be told because it can contagiously heal:

I’ve cried many tears for myself and, in the work I do, for other people. What I’ve discovered is that most tears come from our inability to tell our story. One of my teachers once told me, “Tell your story. Your story will heal you, and it will heal someone else”...My story is not so much a story of the things that I have been through and done, but the things that I have grown through, the things that I have learned, the things that I now understand. My story is what some would call “a triumph of spirit.” Others would call it “a victory of goodness over evil.” I just call it a story, and I tell it because I have learned that the telling helps me continue healing. Telling my story gives me something to celebrate (*Yesterday* 25).

The power of storytelling has been reiterated time and again by women from across ethnic groups: Leslie Silko, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Mitsuye Yamada, and Sherezada Vicioso to name a few, have all revealed how the reaching in and reaching out process of storytelling is a part of the common thread running through humanity.

The book is in the form of nineteen chapters, each presented in a series of lessons that the writer has learnt and these function as guides for a reader looking for answers to questions like “What’s the Lesson When You are an Unwanted, Neglected, and Abused Child?”, “What’s the Lesson When You are Raped as a Child?”, “What’s the Lesson When You’ve Been Taught That You are Unlovable?” to “What’s the Lesson When You Lose Someone You Really Love?”. Each

chapter gives the lesson in the very beginning, for example, the lesson on losing someone you love is: “There is a place in you where there is perfect peace. There is a place in you where nothing is impossible. – A Course in Miracles” (*Yesterday* 191).

Then come the truths, the pains, and the trials of time like a series of bullets to the mind of a reader that make possible these lessons to be felt so that they are remembered, but in language that touches spiritually. This particular lesson ends with one such spiritual note:

There always comes a time of elimination. The earth sheds each year. The trees and flowers let go of their identity. As the old identity dies, a new identity is born. The body sheds constantly. Some of it happens invisibly, so naturally and silently that we do not realize it is happening. The heart and the spirit also shed. They shed the emotions and experiences that we no longer need. They shed the things that stunt our growth. This, too, is an invisible process. Yet because of the energy involved, the emotional energy, we often feel the emotional and spiritual shedding. It feels as if we are dying. We are. Just like the flowers and the trees, we are dying to an old identity. This shedding, or death, is not the end of us. It is the beginning (215).

The spirituality of her language, and its ability to stir emotions by enabling ‘personal reminders while reading’ causes a catharsis, a venting out of the tears of yesterday, for both the writer and the reader. The world of these words, subsumes the lived world of the reader, where the two merge and become one. The chapters, therefore, have a universal appeal based on human experiences beyond the specificities of gender, race or age: love, loss, rejection, pain, and humiliation – about human feelings that are a part of our daily existence. *Yesterday, I Cried*, therefore, becomes both a memoir and a self-help guide: reaching in to the experiences of one woman, and reaching out to many others.

Peace from Broken Pieces is Vanzart’s narrative of the people, the events, from the episodes of life that she encountered while on her path to fame. By the time Vanzart was thirty, she had already survived childhood rape, an abusive relationship and teen pregnancy. The hard hitting descriptions of these events touch the heart of the reader who becomes a pillion rider as she takes him/her on a journey to experience fragments of her life. The most beautiful part of the book, apart from its simplicity, is her concept of pathology of human emotions, the broken patterns that are passed on from one generation to the other:

I believe that my story, like so many other stories, is a demonstration of the generational karma visited upon women as a result of the families we are born into...My story is also what I call a story of pathology. Pathology is the study of the nature and origin of dis-ease, and disease is readily carried in the blood. The disease I discovered in my life experience was cancer. Not just the breast cancer that killed my mother or the colon cancer that stole my daughter’s life. I am not just talking about physical cancer. I am addressing pathology of mental, emotional, and behavioral disease, patterns that infect the foundations of my life (5).

This then becomes a part of our DNA and we unknowingly become enmeshed in the repetition of these patterns. Vanzart's mother was a teenager when she was conceived and she unknowingly becomes a mother when she was about the same age and; her daughter too becomes one when she was a teenager: an example of the unexplained inherited patterns. Her story therefore becomes the story of her mother, and her daughter - the gyre widens. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* remarked that "we think back through our mothers if we are women"(76), but it also true that while thinking back as women, we also look ahead through the lives of our daughters. Like in a "Letter to Ma", Merle Woo, writes to her mother about the past that they have shared, but also writes about her children, her daughter – and about the patterns that are necessary to transmit, and the patterns worth breaking. It is in retrospect, that this filtering can be done. One has to go search for her mother's garden, to find her own (Walker 516) – the past has to be revisited.

This form of retrospection, of tracing back patterns through the umbilical cord that links one generation of women to another, is what Marriane Hirsh calls the growth of "maternal subjectivity" (Hirsch qtd. in Zimmerman 197) and is a transnational phenomenon in the literature written by women. It is these patterns that are mostly voiced by a daughter and are also sometimes critiqued in the process of doing so. In "Two Kinds" by Amy Tan, a daughter narrates the beliefs of her mother that dominate her life and the piano lessons she had to take because her mother wanted her to be 'best anything'. The story, like Vanzart's *Peace from Broken Pieces*, highlights the everlasting impact of the mother-daughter relationship on both the mother and the daughter. The inseparability of this relationship becomes a key theme that emerges no matter which of the two is narrating the tale. Hirsch, however, argues that when a daughter becomes a voice for the mother, there is also a risk of marginalizing and silencing her as someone else has the authority over the words (Zimmerman 70). But, how many mothers have had the chance to be a voice for themselves? bell hook's "Homeplace (a site of resistance)" and Alice Walker's "In Search for Our Mothers' Garden" are cultural narratives that highlight the invisibility and the silence that surrounded women who did not have the time or the resources to voice themselves. Therefore, it is not always marginalization and silencing that are the result of a daughter speaking about or on behalf of her mother. It is visibility that has long been overdue to these figures.

The book can also be seen as a girl's journey to womanhood. The various men and women that Vanzart encounters in her life teach her disrupted and conflicting notions of being a woman. Her grandmother, a strict, rough and often violent woman taught her that a woman needs to be just that in order to survive. Her father taught her that men can come and go whenever they feel, as she was abandoned by him on many occasions. Her father's girlfriend, Lynette, taught her to be docile and that a woman should 'serve' her man. These lessons in turn make her a broken woman who can't even tell a cab driver, a man, to turn down the air conditioner as she sat shivering in the back seat. The voice fails, the words choke up, and a failed request becomes a lesson and a prayer:

Dear God:
Please untie the knots.
All of the can knots, should knots,
may knots and have knots.
Please erase from my mind the thoughts,

That I am not good enough(*Peace* 192).

The untying of these ‘nots’ is one that leads to a realization of her strength as a woman. The metamorphosis of this process of growing up involves crossing thresholds and transgressions that are necessary to help come out of the cocoon. “Preciousness” (Clarice Lispector) can only be found when these ‘nots’ are cut open.

As an African-American, looking back also involves re-viewing her own “Rootedness” (Morrison). In the absence of timeless ancestral figures to feed her wisdom when she was on a journey to womanhood, she reaches out to the community by becoming a Yoruba priestess. Yoruba is a large tribal community of West Africa, an ancestor-worshipping polytheistic community and “is gaining in popularity among African-Americans” (Maver 3). One reason for this popularity is that the popular platform of television, and highly watched shows like *Oprah*, have given African-American women a channel to know and understand their roots. Vanzart’s own appearance on the show (about twenty times) as a spiritual healer, worked as a catalyst:

Nowhere has the dissemination and discourse on African-derived religions been so profoundly affected and transformed for African American women than in the texts of Iyanla Vanzant and Luisah Teish. Since the late 1980s, the works of the two African American Yoruba priestesses have ushered in a new era and genre in black women's religious readership in North America. Although both women draw their primary spiritual sustenance from the African tradition of Yoruba, their works have attracted a large audience of black women from multiple religious faiths. Both women attempt to facilitate meaningful ways for African American women to negotiate issues of identity, health and well-being, and empowerment (Hucks 99).

This empowerment is provided by instigating women, who read and watch her shows, to come out of the silence of solitude to solidarity: “[T]he wounds of slavery, racial violence, segregation, poverty, and contemptuous disregard for life ... not one of these wounds will be healed until the Black woman in the United States is healed, or rather heals herself (Vanzart qtd. in Carey 2)” echoing Toni Cade Bambara’s assertion that “revolution begins with the self, in the self” (Bambara qtd. in Carey 5). The enabling of the self, is the aim of the genre of self-help books, but Vanzart’s heals at a wider level by reaching out to the African-American women community.

The prospects of self-empowerment can be made possible when retrospection of the past is used to turn inwards and re-view the self. The mind works as a repository of experiences: from the most insignificant to the most life-changing. Looking back might not always be a pleasant experience, but not looking back can hint at a denial, a refusal to acknowledge, or a false aura of forgetfulness even when the memory remains fresh for years. Sometimes, ignoring and silencing the bad gone by, can help but, it will be a hurried, superficial bandaging of the mind. At least once, one needs to take his/her own mental memoir, wipe the dust from it, read it, note down its lessons, and share the findings with others. This is how we make our lives a story of triumphs – one needs to remember the falls, to know how many times we got back up again. And, by narrating this, we heal – “Your story will heal you, and it will heal someone else” (*Yesterday* 25). Both the works, display the power of retrospection to reassess, and re-examine lived experiences

and make the reader go on a journey and gain the strength to say: *Yesterday, I Cried* to make *Peace from Broken Pieces* and to strengthen, *The Woman That I Am*:

Yesterday, I cried.
I came home, went straight to my room, sat on the edge of my bed,
kicked off my shoes, unhooked my bra,
and I had myself a good cry.
I'm telling you,
I cried until my nose was running all over the silk blouse I
got on sale.
I cried until my ears were hot.
I cried until my head was hurting so bad
that I could hardly see the pile of soiled tissues lying on the
floor at my feet.
I want you to understand,
I had myself a really good cry yesterday.

Yesterday, I cried,
for all the days that I was too busy, or too tired, or too mad
to cry.
I cried for all the days, and all the ways,
and all the times I had dishonored, disrespected, and disconnected
my Self from myself,

only to have it reflected back to me in the ways others
did to me
the same things I had already done to myself.
I cried for all the things I had given, only to have them stolen;
for all the things I had asked for, that had yet to show up;
for all the things I had accomplished, only to give them
away, to people in circumstances,
which left me feeling empty, and battered and plain
old used.
I cried because there really does come a time when the only thing left for
you to do is cry.

Yesterday, I cried.
I cried because little boys get left by their daddies;
and little girls get forgotten by their mommies;
and daddies don't know what to do, so they leave;
and mommies get left, so they get mad.
I cried because I had a little boy, and because I was a little girl, and
because I was a mommy who didn't know what to do, and
because I wanted my daddy to be there so badly until
I ached.

Yesterday, I cried.
 I cried because I hurt. I cried because I was hurt.
 I cried because hurt has no place to go
 except deeper into the pain that caused it in the first place,
 and when it gets there, the hurt wakes you up.
 I cried because it was too late. I cried because it was time.
 I cried because my soul knew that I didn't know
 that my soul knew everything that I needed to know.
 I cried a soulful cry yesterday, and it felt so good.
 It felt so very, very bad.
 In the midst of my crying, I felt my freedom coming,
 Because
 Yesterday, I cried
 with an agenda. (*Yesterday* 17-18)

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