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Vee is for Voiceless

Abigail Ritz

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ABSTRACT

In *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith explores the nature of beauty in art, in academia, and in relation to ethnicity, revealing the myriad ways societal conceptions of beauty affect expressions of self. What does it mean then that the most canonically beautiful character in a novel focusing so explicitly on beauty and justice is not given her own voice? Eighteen-year-old Victoria Kipps is consistently objectified, stereotyped and sexualized throughout the narrative, both by the male gaze and by female judgment. Her objectification is reflective of the way society fetishizes the beauty found in women who are not white, and of a hegemonic stereotyping of her identity that separates her from her sense of self, thus rendering her unable to fully come to voice.

“Speech *is* beautifully useless
They *are* the damned.
The beautiful know this.”
—Nick Laird, “On Beauty,” emphasis his own

Slut. Not terribly interesting. A dangerous commodity. Purely decorative. A typical, pretty-girl, power-game-playing deeply shallow human being, vain, evil, jealous lover, virgin, lovely, gorgeous, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, countless times beautiful: this is Victoria Kipps in the eyes of others. Yet, never once does the most beautiful character in Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* possess her own voice, her own mind. Of course, Victoria is not necessarily an exception as the other Kipps—Monty, Michael, even Carlene—do not entirely possess voices within a novel focused primarily on the drama of the Belseys. However, when necessary, the narrative is given over to the dispossessed voice of Carl, the perhaps over-possessed voice of Claire—even illustrating the thoughts of the seemingly irrelevant Katie Armstrong. On the other hand, the pivotal character Vee—Victoria’s chosen name—exists only within the conception of others—solely visualized and never realized. Victoria herself declares to Howard upon ending their affair, “I know you think [...] that you...*know* me. You *don’t* know me. This,’ she said and touched her face, her breasts, her hips, ‘that’s what you know. You don’t know *me*” (Smith, 2005, p. 390). And, obviously, she is correct, not only in terms of the ways in which Howard knows her, but in terms of the ways in which *anyone* knows her. What does it mean, then, that the most typically beautiful character within a narrative based upon exploring concepts of beauty is not given full subjectivity? In being framed almost entirely through

the eyes of others, Victoria reflects the myriad ways in which beauty, when objectified, overtakes a sense of self in the beautiful.

As the most typically beautiful character in the novel, Victoria embodies aesthetic and theoretical relevance both as a literary entity (that is, as a character to be read) and as a person with whom other characters interact within the world Smith creates. In this theoretical heaviness, Victoria loses, to the reader, a sense of personal individuality or subjectivity—this is to say, in being characterized as so beautiful Victoria’s character is imbued with a level of meaning within the narrative that overwhelms any relation of her individuality to the reader.¹ In the context of Claire’s poem “On Beauty” (borrowed from Nick Laird), this overwhelming symbolism is related in the line directly following those included in the epigraph to this essay: “They [the beautiful] stand around as unnatural as statuary” (Smith, 2005, p. 153). This association of the beautiful with art—thus the association of the beautiful to all that is found in art—theory, truth, ideals, and so on—dehumanizes the beautiful. With this being said, Victoria’s beauty as a black woman is not only recognized, but seen as the idealized human expression of beauty; as Ulka Anjaria (2008) notes, “Victoria’s beauty... is unflinchingly canonical, and in this way so overpowering, to herself and to others, that it is able to express itself only in a misguided and indiscriminating sexuality” (p. 47). In portraying black beauty as representative of the canonical ideal, Smith firmly positions her narrative and the debates encapsulated in her narrative firmly within a postcolonial space. However, while this portrayal of blackness as an ideal is revolutionary in a certain sense, the canonical acceptance of Victoria’s beauty is still situated within or supporting of a larger hegemony which promulgates a stereotype of beauty exclusionary of the less accepted, though more traditional, beauty represented by Kiki. In critic Anjaria’s point that Victoria’s beauty can only be expressed within the framework of the environment surrounding her through “misguided and indiscriminating sexuality,” we see how this beauty, or rather its effect upon others, portends such significance to those in contact with her, and thus to herself through her interaction with these individuals, that people are unable to accept Victoria’s presence simply as a person.

However, her beauty can only be processed within the strictures of society, thus it is expressed or seen through a sexualized lens. Thus, throughout the narrative it can be understood that the function of her beauty is not so much reflective of a revolution but of a fetishization by society of stereotypical expressions of beauty found in ethnic identities. This societal fetishization of beauty is reflected in Victoria’s association with—and, due to her lack of overt development throughout the narrative, seeming affirmation of—the stereotype of the jezebel, which Tracy Walters (2008) describes as a hypersexualized caricature of the slave woman created by white males in order to justify their consistent objectification and violation of black women (p. 134). The

1 This is a common critique of Smith’s characterization of women: she places in these characters so much symbolic meaning that they seem, to some, to be underdeveloped as individuals and seen only as concepts. While this may seem like a mistake to some, I think that in Victoria’s case this overt and overwhelming symbolic characterization is reflective of people’s tendency to invest in beauty meaning which overwhelms the individuality of that which is beautiful.

jezebel stereotype reveals itself today in the hypersexualization of the black female form not only in hip-hop, but in the entertainment industry in general, particularly in pornography.² These environments portray black women as sexual deviants or sexual “freaks,” and this deviancy is reflected in Victoria’s own imitation of and distribution of pornographic and hypersexualized images of herself based on sexual encounters throughout the novel. In being ascribed to a certain stereotyped sexualized form, Victoria’s individuality and ability to express herself beyond the strictures of this stereotype are stunted.

Victoria’s beauty enables her obfuscation through an objectification of her body, and thus herself, throughout the narrative, especially in sections devoted to or focused upon the male gaze. It is in this sense that she most obviously relates to the stereotype of a jezebel—in recognizing her beauty, men immediately define Victoria (in a sexual context) as a sexual object, as is perhaps best related by Erskine’s comment that, ““You have to have your cock strapped to your leg when you pass that girl in the corridor” (Smith, 2005, p. 345). Her silence throughout the plot forces readers to look at Victoria through this hypersexualized male gaze—thus, much of Victoria’s humanity must be read through subtext. The most obvious culprit of Vee’s objectification is clearly Howard, who sees in Victoria a representation of concepts, a fulfillment of subconscious urges and an escape from issues within his own life—never fully realizing her as a person, and thus never relating her as such within his narrative. In engaging in a sexual relationship with Victoria, one in which neither party is truly interested, Howard attempts to escape the issues and confines of his present life and live not only a different life, but, given Victoria’s overt contrasts and similarities with Kiki, to relive his youth. In this sense, a relationship with Victoria affirms a view of himself wherein Howard is virile and free of the conflict between his ideology and his reality.

To a certain extent, Victoria uses this objectification by males, such as Howard, Erskine, and Carl, to promote herself and her power within male-dominated spaces; she does, after all, exert some level of agency, even control, in her various sexual encounters and objectified portrayals. Through utilization and assertion of her sexuality (i.e. through actualization of and acting upon how others perceive her beauty) Victoria exerts control over her own life and attempts to subvert the oppressive control of her father’s ideals on her actions. As stated upon Victoria’s return from her European travels she was “flush with social and sexual success;” she has thus realized her ability to obtain power and self-confidence through her sexuality and through the affirmation of her beauty in the eyes of others (Smith, 2005, p. 45). However, having been raised entirely within the parochial framework of a strikingly male-dominated environment she only knows how to exert power *within* this structure, she does not know how to exist in defiance to the established structure—given her family’s ideological basis in structuralist and modernist ideals it follows that Victoria would not be taught to exert power outside of the established structure, and in fact she is taught to “fiercely defend

2 To explore a historically oriented examination of the jezebel figure in American culture, read Dr. David Pilgrim’s (2012) historical overview “The Jezebel Stereotype,” published through Ferris State University’s Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia website.

[her] faith and [her] politics” (Smith, 2005, p. 279). As is noted in literary theory, inverting a binary, or inverting an established power structure (i.e. replacing male dominance with female dominance, females wielding male established aesthetics to gain power) does not break down this structure, but rather reinforces it. Thus, in a certain sense, the association of Veronica’s aesthetic with a deviation from the female form into a more masculine or androgynous aesthetic—which can be seen in her initial description by Howard wherein he cannot identify her gender from her scalp (Smith, 2005, pp. 39-41) and her outfit of a “nice suit” on the night of the Emerson Hall (Smith, 2005, p. 343)—allows her to associate herself and her beauty with the masculine aesthetic and thus assert power within the hegemony. In the words of Kanika Batra (2010), her embodiment or display of “masculinity enhances... [her] desirability since she shows herself to have a sexual appetite similar to her male counterparts” (p. 1087). It would be simplifying to entirely equate the utilization of the masculine aesthetic, especially when it leads to androgyny (an aesthetic generally related not to inverting the binary, but breaking it down) with giving in to a binary, but this does not overrule the fact that Victoria wields her beauty in such ways so as to assert her own power. Additionally, as previously stated, neither Howard *nor* Victoria were truly interested in one another, as for Victoria Howard serves not so much as an object of sexual desire but as an opportunity to escape from her grief over her mother. Not only this, but engaging in a sexual relationship with Howard allows her to exert some level of control over a life thrown into upheaval. In sleeping with Howard in the midst of her grief, Victoria uses her sexual instinct to combat the reality of her mother’s death. She is thus playing into Freud’s conception of a death drive, wherein sexual and life instincts—called *Eros* (the Greek word for love, specifically sexual love)—balance out a drive to death and self-destruction known as *Thanatos* (death).

Additionally, engaging in a relationship with Howard allows Victoria to subvert the power and influence of her father’s oppressive patriarchal beliefs as Victoria’s lack of voice in the narrative and within the wider societal structure ultimately takes root in these patriarchal beliefs as she lacks voice within the family, this lack that is enabled by her mother’s subservience to Monty’s beliefs. Thus, the familial narrative is ultimately controlled by her father and brother. She cannot exert power in the familial context so these attempts to flout power through buying into society’s sexualization of her beauty serve as the only way she knows to subvert the repression she experiences at home. Of course, Victoria’s family’s imposition of voicelessness upon her is not due to her beauty, but rather due to her womanhood.

A more successful manifestation of Victoria’s attempts to subvert (subconsciously or consciously) the stifling structures imposed upon her identity and expression thereof by her family, is her renaming, and thus redefining, of herself as Vee. By renaming herself, Victoria is escaping the pressure of those ideals imposed on her by the name Victoria—the name, due to its association with the Victorian age, which implies domesticity, a devotion to family and home. More than this, it implies a deep-rooted loyalty to Britain and British ideals rooted in imperialism. Thus, her name, and her subsequent renaming, reflect Victoria’s difficulty in reconciling the roots of her name

with the roots of her identity both as a privileged, intellectual, modern woman, and as a black woman with Caribbean roots living not only in England, but in America. Howard notices the manifestation of her mixed roots and the structured effects of her upbringing in her accent, noting, “She was already developing the woozy transatlantic accent of Howard’s own children. It was a shame. He liked that North London voice, touched by the Caribbean and, if he was not mistaken... an expensive girls’ school” (Smith, 2005, p. 257).

In that Victoria not only represents the pinnacle of beauty, but the pinnacle of black female beauty within the novel, we cannot ignore her contrast with Kiki’s beauty, especially in the context of Howard’s affair with Vee. Vee is, physically, all that Kiki has once been: young, thin and hot; she thus contrasts Kiki’s present body, which Walters (2008) describes as a “black fat body [which] stands at the margins of white America’s standard of beauty” (p. 130). Additionally, our conception of Victoria exists in stark contrast to Kiki’s complicated inner narrative—Vee’s perceived lack of complexity due to her lack of subjectivity means that she is perceived by Howard as easier to engage with than Kiki. This lack of complication is perhaps best seen in the difference in the sexual interactions between Howard and Kiki and Howard and Vee. Sex with Victoria is, on the surface, everything which sex is made out to be in the modern world—pasteurized and clean, filled with orifices and moans—but it is empty and unsatisfying. Sex with Kiki, on the other hand, is real, filled with experience and actual and legitimate passion (fueled by anger and disappointment though it may be); Kiki is thus allowed to possess within the novel an authenticity which Victoria does not have.

Despite this, Kiki and Vee *do* share similarities, in that their different types of beauty are stereotyped by surrounding society (or structured by Smith within the stereotypes of society)—whereas society perceives Vee as the hyper-sexualized jezebel, Kiki is perceived as the mammy, the faithful black female servant relegated to service in the home and subservience to whites—Kiki herself reflects on her embodiment of this stereotype in the eyes of others, thinking, “I’m the Aunt Jemima on the cookie boxes of their childhoods, the pair of thick ankles Tom and Jerry played around. Of course they find me funny” (Smith, 2005, p. 51). Thus, this comparison reflects the ways in which society stereotypes both of their types of black beauty—Vee’s more canonical beauty, and Kiki’s more traditional beauty—thus rendering them both voiceless, at least when they ascribe to these views (Kiki’s development throughout the narrative serves to subvert the societal perception of her, whereas Victoria’s lack of development continues a lack of subjectivity).

Interestingly, it is in Vee’s comparison to Kiki, and the exploration of the various ways in which society objectifies their bodies and their sexuality, that Victoria’s possible manifestation of a type voodoo of loa (spirit)—the Erzulie-Freda, an empowering female figure—becomes clear. In her relation to this manifestation of Erzulie, Victoria’s character is still caught up within a realm of symbolic meaning (thus, there is little exploration of her subjectivity), however, she achieves a certain development and positive association outside of her stereotyped associations with beauty in her rela-

tion to the Erzulie-Freda. Madame Erzulie, the voodoo spirit represented in Carlene's Hyppolite painting, is representative of "love, Beauty, purity, the ideal female" (Smith, 2005, p. 175), and exists in various different manifestations. Kiki's association with and representation of various manifestations of Madame Erzulie are clear throughout subtextual hints in the narrative and in Carlene's association of Kiki with the spirit. It is Vee's potent and overpowering sexuality that associates her with the manifestation of Erzulie-Freda, who is represented by a "beautiful young woman of lush appearance...who embodies the possibility of transformation" (Fischer, 2008, p. 114). In embodying certain aspects of Erzulie-Freda, Victoria is embodying the power of the Freda to initiate transformation in the narrative. This is reflected in the fact that she is the key agent of change in the narrative: the affair with Howard reveals how deeply entrenched his conflict between ideology and reality is; the subsequent revelation of the affair allows for the effects and transformative power of truth on the Kipps and Belsey families. In the context of Scarry's theories on beauty, the transformative power of Erzulie-Freda allows her to move others to look beyond themselves and enact justice.

However, one could argue that Vee is in no way representative of the Erzulie-Freda throughout the narrative as not only does her character not experience a visible and overt transformation in the narrative to a more empowering and realistic (as opposed to stereotypical or ideological) individual as other characters—such as Kiki and Howard—but nobody else, not even her mother, sees in her beauty the transformative power (and thus, in the context of Scarry's theory the ability of her beauty to force others to move toward justice) of Erzulie. By this I mean that her mother chooses to give Kiki the painting over anyone else in the family, despite, as Victoria relates, the fact that the painting is "their *birthright*, for fuckssake" (emphasis Smith's own), thus overtly associating the Erzulie with Kiki as opposed to any members of her own family (Smith, 2005, p. 279). Additionally, this view of Victoria as Erzulie-Freda still plays into the idea that due to her beauty, Victoria's individuality is overwhelmed by associations to entities—theories, characters—beyond herself. Yet, this association of Vee's sexuality with an empowering manifestation, especially one outside of the marginalizing and sexualizing Western canon is a rare glimpse into one of the ways in which Vee's beauty aligns with Elaine Scarry's theories of beauty and social justice. In the sense of her associations with the Erzulie-Freda, Victoria's beauty will not—if she fully develops into an individual able to be associated with this manifestation—wield power over her, but rather she will wield her beauty. Her associations with the Erzulie-Freda³ are overt in her physical descriptions and actions throughout the novel, but arguably Victoria requires further development beyond her current self-centered conception and her current state of expressing internalized hypersexualization as a rebellion to her own voicelessness.

Throughout the narrative of *On Beauty*, Victoria—Vee—in all of her overwhelming beauty reflects the myriad ways in which societal perceptions of and fetishizations of

3 The Erzulie is said by Carlene to represent, "love, beauty...the *mystère* of jealousy, vengeance and discord" (Smith, 2005, p. 175).

beauty can render those perceived as beautiful entirely voiceless within their own narratives and their own lives. Thus, the beautiful, in being imbibed with an overwhelming number of stereotypes and theories and concepts and ideals, are distanced from their own individuality and rendered speechless. Voiceless. Marginalized as sluts, jezebels, mummies. It is only through becoming aware of the hidden individuality of these characters, by acknowledging the silencing effects of our own overwhelming views on beauty, that we can begin to allow those beautiful people to express their beauty in a way that is empowering to both themselves and others.

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