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Bloodlines of the Sacred: Menstruation, Myth, and Cultural Memory in South Asian Traditions

Modern Day Menstruation: A Study of Myths and Manipulations

Abstract: *The world suddenly unites when it comes to inflicting pain on women. One of the most common instances of the world uniting and inflicting pain upon women is seen in case of menstruation, a time when the body of a woman is already going through a lot of physical pain. Instead of providing women with minimal care the society comes forth with a list of absurd rules that the women are expected to follow. These rules end up making the physical menstrual pain a psychological one. The women have been made victims and an object of shame for centuries based on the bodily fluid that flows from within her every single month. Though the women earlier followed these absurd rules. The modern day women question these age old notions and demand scientific proof for the mentally burdening acts carried on the women every single month until menopause. This analysis aims to explore the various myths and manipulations that the Indian women have been expected to follow and also highlights how the perception of menstruation has finally evolved and matured in the current items.*

Keywords: Menstruation, Myth, manipulation, Indian women, Society.

Modern Day Menstruation: A Study of Myths and Manipulations

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Introduction

As an individual and a part of society we are surrounded by different values, beliefs, norms, regulations, restrictions etc. Sometimes these belief systems and restrictions are so harsh on us that we start to feel disgusted and ashamed of our own self, majorly due to our body. The same is seen with a girl when she goes through her first period. In most of the cases girls don't understand what has happened to them when they get their first period. Many think it to be some life threatening disease, later they understand that it is not that severe. But eventually by bleeding every month it becomes evident for a woman how society makes a simple biological phenomenon a severe one. All these experiences make the one going through them numb from inside. The numbness is not due to the bodily fluid. But it is more due to the various cultural aspects that start to circulate around the girl going through her period. Suddenly it starts to become clear for a girl why her mother isolates herself from her normal everyday routine for five days every month. The deeper the understanding the darker the world starts to feel.

Menstruation has always been subject to taboo in society. People avoided talking about it. What worsens it even more is the different myths and a black plastic wrapper surrounding it. Society fails to understand that though the girl has matured physically into a woman but mentally she is still a girl, trying to understand why she is being treated like a social outcast. In circumstances like this problem is definitely not associated with the girl who has started to bleed, but the problem lies in the society itself, that makes a normal biological phenomenon in a girl's life a shameful issue. But with the changing times the perspective towards menstruation is changing. In order to understand this change of perspective we will have to delve deeper into the culturally rooted ideologies that have been blindly followed for years.

Literature Review

As mentioned by Farah in the introduction of the book *Period Matters* "Menstruation, despite being a natural, healthy occurrence, is a topic often buried in fear and shame, and its discussion is even taboo in many societies." But it has been mentioned in different ancient texts despite the fact that people hesitate to speak about it in public. The account of the ancient texts, the different rituals and mythological texts along with the various dimensions of looking at menstruation have been taken into

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consideration while writing this paper. The idea of looking at menstruation changes with the individual. Educators like Aarushi Ma'am have explained the biological way of looking at menstruation in modern scientific terms in the YouTube video named "What are Periods?" whereas menstrual educators like Sinu Joseph have mentioned the ancient science of looking at menstruation in the YouTube video named "Unwrapping the gifts of menstruation." An analysis of the existing literature review reveals a significant gap, as there is limited discussion on the changing perspectives toward menstruation in modern times. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how perceptions of menstruation have evolved with changing social and cultural contexts. Also, it emphasizes the gradual shift from viewing menstruation as a taboo to recognizing it as a normal biological process experienced by women for a certain period of their lives.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative literature review methodology to examine the changing perspectives on menstruation across historical, cultural, and contemporary contexts. The review draws a wide range of sources including ancient texts, mythological and ritualistic accounts, scholarly books and contemporary digital media, to capture the evolution of attitudes toward menstruation over time. The selection of sources was guided by their relevance to themes such as taboo, ritual, biology, gender and cultural perception of menstruation. Particular attention has been paid to how menstruation is framed as a source of impurity, a sacred or powerful phenomenon, or a normal biological process and how these framings reflect broader social and cultural ideologies. The study ultimately seeks to highlight the transition from silence and stigma to awareness and normalization, while also acknowledging the coexistence of multiple, sometimes conflicting, perspectives in modern times.

Menstruation and the Beliefs

The women were isolated in their own house, kept in a separate room forced to sleep on the floor. Not allowed to enter the puja room and kept away from the kitchen. And also kept away from plants to ensure that life continues in them. Sadly, these practices have been a part of different cultures in the world. The women earlier accepted all these restrictions without questioning them. But modern day women refuse to do so. As the women now are making arguments which clarify that menstruation is a simple biological phenomenon and should be left as one without unnecessarily complicating it. The society is trying to accept these new and modern ideas but still hesitates and at times refuses to accept these arguments, mainly due to the deeply conditioned and rooted myths and beliefs especially in places like India.

Menstruation and the Indian Myths

Mortal or immortal, women continue to be the victim of patriarchy. The same is seen in case of the Goddesses. In the Indian, especially the Hindu culture there are several beliefs according to which the Goddess herself menstruates. This in itself is a time of celebration as seen in the case of the Raja Parba festival of Odisha where there is a belief that once a year mother earth menstruates for three days. The similar beliefs are associated with the Kamakhya temple situated in the Northeast of India. It is believed to be a place where the womb and the uterus of Sati fell. Also, there is a celebration during this time mostly known as the Ambubachi festival. These are the two common instances and are widely known amongst the masses. But apart from these there are several temples in the South of India which could be seen carrying similar notions.

A synonymous belief is carried by the people of Kerala. As the Indian YouTuber Keerthika Govindhasamy in her *YouTube* shorts video named “The Bleeding Goddess Of Kerala” talks about a temple called the Chengannur Mahadevar Temple in Kerala, which is dedicated to Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati where it is believed that in this temple Goddess Parvati literally bleeds. Whenever the Goddess bleeds she is separated from Lord Shiva and kept in a different sanctum for three days. During this time the temple is completely closed for the outsiders. And on the fourth day the Goddess is brought out and taken to the nearby Pamba river where a ceremony called Aaraattu is performed, which is basically the water bath of the Goddess Parvati after which she reconciles with Lord Shiva. During this time even a four day festival is said to be celebrated in Kerala.

On one hand these celebrations could be seen as a great sign of respect that is shown towards womanhood. But it also can't be neglected how they also promote certain ideas which should be changed with time. For instance the Raja Parba festival or the Ambubachi festival is a way of showing respect to the goddess. But in the case of the Chengannur Mahadevar Temple we see that Parvati is separated from Shiva and the temple is closed for the masses. After following the holy bath only Parvati could reconcile with Shiva. This idea of separation makes the entire idea questionable. It starts to penetrate beliefs in the people that the menstruating woman is a threat for her husband and the people surrounding her. But this should not be the case as it not only psychologically disturbs the mental state of the woman but also spreads misconceptions in the society. When this separation from the level of gods enters to the human level it takes the form of trauma and shame. As seen in case of the different menarche festivals in South India where a woman is initially separated from the family and after apparently a holy bath is reconciled with the family, which could be seen as an event of great celebration.

Even the South Indian movies seem to celebrate the celebration seen during the time of menarche as seen in case of multiple movies one of them being Kovelamudi Raghavendra Rao's movie

Gangotri which stars Allu Arjun and Aditi Agarwal. Thus, all these instances taken together could be seen to promote the age-old belief system associated with menstruation in the current times too.

Menstruation and Indian Household Rituals and First Menstruation

There are many household rituals associated with the first period across India. In some communities it is louder i.e. celebrated on a large scale whereas in some communities it is voiceless as the customs are limited to the four walls of the house. For instance across different communities in South India the first period is a celebratory instance. When the girls of these regions get their first period they are kept in a separate space. For six days they are kept separately, during this time the girls enjoy a lavish treatment as the friends and family cook various delicacies for the girls. On the seventh day the girls go through a bath ceremony which is believed to purify them. And also on the seventh day there is a feast for the friends, family and other acquaintances. All the families living in these areas are expected to perform such ceremonies or else they could be treated as social outcasts.

The beliefs like these are also a part of many other communities in India. But they are not very popular or known to others because the celebrations are not performed on such a large scale but the rituals are a silent one performed in the home itself. The time span for which a girl is separated when everyone hesitates to touch her adds to a sense of mental toll on her equally in both the cases. In case of the loud celebrations the situation for the girl worsens as they are expected to be a part of celebration for which they were treated as an object of shame. This memory of the first period gets rooted like a scar till death. And it could only be understood by the person going through it.

Menstruation and Indian Household Rituals From the Second Period to Menopause

Once the customs of the first period have been performed, from the second period to the menopause the women are expected to follow several rules which are passed on from women to women verbally, which is believed to be the holy word of the grandmothers and which has to be followed and most importantly without being questioned.

These rules which are meant to be followed include statements which are seemingly absurd and heart and soul wrenching to follow. As Sashi Deshpande in her short story named "Menstrual Matters" published in the book *Period Matters* writes about how in all orthodox families, women had to 'sit out' three days of their periods. This meant they sat on the ground, sometimes on a small mat, with some essentials including a plate, cup and glass in which they would be served food and water - from a distance, of course. Women were impure during their periods and would pollute anyone or anything they touched. So, they sat in isolation, doing absolutely nothing until the fourth morning when they would be given a bath. After this, they could return to their normal lives. (Deshpande, par. 8)

After elaborating on the almost harassing treatment that the women are forced to go through, Deshpande finally puts forth her opinion, which though manifested through her is the voice of every woman. As she says,

those who defend traditional practices said that this gave women some much needed rest. What kind of rest was it, sitting on the ground, leaning against a wall, sleeping on a hard surface? This, while she suffered from cramps, backache, and heavy bleeding too. It was a punishment. It is not surprising that one of the names for menstruation is ‘the curse’ (Deshpande, par. 8).

As talked about in the *YouTube* video named “What Are Period Huts?” In some of the villages of India there is belief that women during their time of menstruation bring evil to the house, so they are forced to stay away from the house in secluded huts often known as “kurma ghar” or “gaokar.” These period huts are mostly found in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Orissa. They lack basic amenities and life here is miserable. Many women lose their lives staying in these houses being attacked by scorpions or snakes. But despite this the villagers continue these practices.

We talk about generational trauma at length. But we forget that things like this could also be a form of generational trauma. No one enjoys being treated in such a way every single month. And it would only stop when a mother would not encourage her daughter to follow these seemingly illogical rules which she went through as an individual herself. Though this scenario has changed much in the modern day world, these beliefs continue to persist even today.

Menstruation and Mahabharata

Mahabharata is a holy book, and a famous Bengali saying is associated with Mahabharata which reads *ja nei bharat e, ta nei bharat e* which means “Whatever isn’t in Mahabharata doesn’t exist in Bharata” the main intention behind this saying is that Mahabharata consists of all the possible human situations within itself and that no situation outside Mahabharata exists. The situation of abuse during menstruation and the fight against it is something which is one of the majorly mentioned and talked about instances of Mahabharata.

When Yudhisthira loses everything in the game of dice, he decides to bet his wife. He ends up losing her too. She is summoned into the assembly hall. But she tries to avoid the situation to her best. The reason being that she was menstruating. But despite that Dushasana drags her by her hair into the royal assembly hall against her wish. Draupadi questions all the elders sitting in the court. No one finds themselves in the state to answer her back. Though her honour was saved, the truth was that she was insulted. And no human came to help her. Thus, in anger she curses the entire Kuru clan, as Divakaruni in her *Palace of Illusions* writes,

All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I've wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenseless woman. (Divakaruni 194)

Thus, this shows how Draupadi too has revolted against the injustices done to her especially during the time when she was menstruating. Though the revolt was more because she was insulted, the fact that her menstruation wasn't at all considered is also something that added to her anger.

Menstruation and Ancient India

Ancient India unravels to us a totally different side of menstruation. A side which is totally different from how society has been perceiving menstruation for years. The ancient India's perception of menstruation is more about the strength in the body of a woman rather than making it an object of taboo, shame or sin. In the *YouTube* video named "Unwrapping the gifts of menstruation," Sinu Joseph a menstrual educator from India talks about how menstruation in early India was considered a sacred process and that the menstruating women were believed to have magical powers. It is believed that men often relied on menstruating women for their wisdom and intuitive powers during this time. This instance totally ridicules the idea of sin or the concept of being othered during menstruation.

The menstrual cycle of women is ideally divided into four parts. When seen from a biological perspective these four parts or phases are mostly about how a woman's body and sometimes her mood is like during this time. But Sinu Joseph in "Unwrapping the gifts of menstruation" talks about the cosmic significance based on the ancient ideal during these times. The first week which is considered the week of menstruating and bleeding was often considered a time of cleansing and removal of negative thoughts, thus during this time women chose to be silent and go inwards. In the second week, which is called the pre-ovulation phase or in biological terms, the follicular phase is the time when women feel most energetic and creative. In the third week or the ovulation phase women look and feel attractive. This is the time when women feel like connecting with others. In the fourth and the final phase which is known as the pre-menstruation week, is when the women experience a peak of emotions. In the modern day world we treat it as a time of mood swings but in ancient times it was considered a highly intuitive phase and the messages that came during this time were taken very seriously. Men heavily depended on women during this time.

Menstruation and Mental Stress

All these observations make it evident that menstruation in ancient India was more of a sacred process than a thing of shame. The idea of women wanting to be left alone during the time of menstruation over

the period of time seems to have taken a different interpretation. A woman willing to separate herself is different from a woman being forcefully kept separate and ripped of all the comforts. Treatment like this makes a woman feel more like an outcast than imagining herself as a great source of energy.

The change of interpretations over time also prove how the patriarchy seems to have moulded the things according to their own convenience. The strengthful side of women seems to be cunningly turned into a shameful and stressful side of women. The power of intuition is something which is often talked about as something that the women have been blessed with just like the physical strength that only men are blessed with. But by associating menstruation with all elements of taboo women have almost forgotten or it would be better to say we are totally unaware that things like this exist. Thus, a thing of high cosmic connection suddenly turns into a source of mental stress. The premenstrual week which is supposed to be a time of connection with the cosmos becomes a time when women are consumed with the thoughts about how they will once again be treated as an outcast adding to unnecessary stress and feeling of discomfort with one's own body and all the greater good associated with during this time remains unattended and unachieved.

Women Writing Through Bodies

Helen Cixous in her essay *Laugh of the Medusa* has coined the term *Ecriture Feminine*. P. K. Nayar describes *écriture feminine* as a language which is “fluid, non-linear, elliptical, part-mythic and part-realistic, mystic and slippery. It is part autobiographical and part fictional” (Nayar 98). Further Nayar also mentions that “Maggie Humm (1998) proposes the term *gynographic* writing to describe such experimental modes. *Gynographic* writing uses the body as a source of language and metaphor” (Nayar 98). Thus, taking into consideration the terms such as *écriture feminine* and *gynographic* writings we can understand that the various short stories, poems and novels written on menstruation too come under these categories. By writing such stories a woman can motivate other women to come forth and share such stories. It not only develops a feeling of sisterhood but also makes the women feel confident about themselves making it easier to break the social shackles that bind, limit and captivate. Tishani Doshi who in the book *Period Matters* comes up with a poem named “I Carry My Uterus in a Small Suitcase” as she writes

I carry my uterus in a small suitcase
For the day I need to leave it
At the railway station.
Till then I hold on
To my hysteria
and take my

nettle tea
with
gin. (Doshi)

The poem could be seen as one of the best examples of the écriture feminine as the poem not only talks about the menstrual taboo but it also highlights the place from which the menstrual taboo originates i.e the uterus and vagina. .

Menstruation and Modern India

People are coming forth and most importantly are showing interest in understanding how a woman's body reacts and how beautifully complex the body of a woman is. Today the identity of women is much more than a baby making machine. Women today have their say in their life and all of this has not only transformed the treatment of women but also the way menstruation is looked at. The modern day world loves to refer to the pre-menstruation week as the time of premenstrual syndrome or PMS. Britannica describes PMS as “a medical condition in which a group of characteristic physical and emotional symptoms are felt by women before the onset of menstruation.” Late but finally it is being understood that the women's body goes through multiple play of hormones and these hormones reach a peak during menstruation thus the seemingly odd behaviour before period is understood despite not being felt by the patriarchal forces.

Conclusion

The way people have perceived menstruation has changed over time. In the ancient times where menstruation was perceived as a gift bestowed upon the women by the almighty that fetches the women with the intuitives skills, with changing times it began to be seen as a thing of taboo and shame where the women have to be isolated and outcasted or else they would end up polluting everyone surrounding them. This view of menstruation was once again changed as in the modern times the way in which menstruation is being perceived is totally different. Unlike ancient times it is not perceived as a gift also it is neither perceived as a polluting agent. But in the current times people have come to understand that it is a biological phenomenon that is normal for every woman to experience and that the women during this time need utmost care and love. The credit of this change goes to the women who rebelled against their state and the treatment met with them during menstruation and also the men who came forward to take a stand for these changed opinions of women on menstruation. But we should also not forget that there are still some areas in India where women continue to suffer during their menstruation. We can hope that this new wave of menstrual awareness that is spreading in the urban areas touches the rural

areas too and not only India but the entire world becomes a safe and happy place for the women during the time of menstruation.

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