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Comprehending the Bleeding Body: Epistemological Violence and (Un)Tabooing Menstruation in Selective Media Texts in India

By Argha Basu¹ and Priyanka Tripathi²

Abstract

The representation of menstruation in Indian media texts (films, short films, and advertisements) is limited. Besides the advertisement of industrially produced sanitary napkins, we hardly come across their mention. Even in cinematic spaces with female leads, the issue remains unuttered. Since the last half of the previous decade, there has been a conscious attempt to raise awareness around menstruation. Considering menstruation as a socially mediated biological process, in which bodies become sites where social constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings to inflict violence upon the subject, these works have resisted this systematic patriarchal oppression by asking an appropriate question, “which bodies are producing knowledge about which other bodies?” (Harcourt, 2009, p. 13), indicating that this assigning of impurity to menstruation through myths, taboos, and restrictions is a patriarchal construct. In many parts of India, menstruating women are not even allowed inside the kitchen or the temple. This forced isolation is indeed gender-based violence, which is driven by socio-cultural and religious beliefs compounded with gender norms. The research paper argues that by reading menstruation through the lens of body politics and in the context of media representation currently prevalent in India, it is now possible to understand and decode menstruation as a phenomenon of gendered oppression. Additionally, through these compelling narratives, it is also possible to reflect on the process by which these interventions contribute to the altering of everyday practices and their limitations. This might lead to social change by demystifying taboos around the menstrual body and showing women their situation in a way that affirms they can act to change it and reconstruct a meaningful relationship to their bodies.

Keywords: Menstruation; Body politics; Taboo; Sexual violence; Media texts; India

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Introduction

The girl of five does not make any use of lateral space. She does not stretch her arm sideward; she does not twist her trunk; she does not move her legs, which remain side by side. All she does in preparation for throwing is to lift her right arm forward to the horizontal and to bend the forearm backward in a pronate position [...]. The ball is released without force, speed, or accurate aim [...]. (Straus, 1966, as cited in Young, 2005, p. 27)

Iris Marion Young's essay "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality" (1980) opens with this observation from Erwin Straus's study of photographs of boys and girls throwing balls, revealing a stark difference (generic) when it comes to physical attributes. The root of this incongruity stretches deep into the socio-cultural practices of the repression of the female body through the patriarchal tools of idealised body image (shaving, waxing, colouring of hair, aiming for the hourglass contour, and so on to arrive at a grand narrative of perfection), surveillance, and instilled self-consciousness about one's appearance. Rational construction of prohibitions stands impervious to the test of space and time. The dearth of scientific or empirical data about the foundation of ideological constructs manifests itself to perfection by shifting structures from one cartographic/socio-cultural/socio-economic space to another. The eventual narrative cloud becomes too overwhelming to dissuade.

Besides the global telling of anthropological and pseudo-scientific foundations, the taboo(s) hovering around the spectre of menstruation in India roots deep into the mythological narratives, body politics, and the nuances of marginalising women. One of the rudimentary problems in addressing the period question is to consider the information overload concerning its origin. And in the case of a developing nation like India, the problem brings issues of poverty, intersectionality, and religion into the conversation. The biology of the elimination of the thickened lining of the uterine wall (endometrium) from the body through the vagina as a phase of the menstrual cycle (menstruation, the follicular phase, ovulation, and the luteal phase) has long been associated with impurity. The archaic conviction addressing the possible toxicity of menstrual blood dates back to the Latin encyclopedia. Olive and George Smith's discourse on the soiling effects of menotoxin³ on organic materials appeared convincing till the late 1950s. But the reversed discourse never reached the common people, helping them unlearn the stigma.

Besides the impurity narrative of the discharge, the anthropological origin of the taboo, primarily discussed in *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture* (1995) by Chris Knight (1995), settles the global platform of the taboo. Knight discusses how the practice of segregating women for their own benefit has reversed over the ages. What initially started as a practice of hunting during moonlit (full moon) nights to ensure a fair chance against ferocious animals (sabertooth, hyena, etc.) with better night vision, and to ensure an equitable distribution of hunted flesh between both sexes (Knight, 1995, p. 329), eventually turned out to be a tool of repression. As the population increased, these grand rituals were replaced with more frequent occurrences of hunting, and the menstrual narratives started to lose their significance. But the purity of blood as a symbol remained as men started engaging in the practice of shedding blood before hunting. The menstruation huts for women were replaced by men's huts of sacrifice. And thus, the foundation of patriarchal religion was written. Knight (1995) believes, "[...] it was only an extremely masculinist and non-periodic culture which could impose its one-sided constraints so deeply as to make women conclude that it was they

³ The theory of Menotoxin was developed in the 1920s by the Hungarian-born American pediatrician, Béla Schick. It was conceived as an invisible substance that added toxicity to menstrual blood (King, 2013).

- but not men - who would have to suppress and deny their own biology as the condition of feeling liberated” (p. 36). Theories addressing the origin of the stigmatisation abound, from Freud’s notion of our inherent fear of blood, to anthropologist Shirley Lindenbaum’s idea of natural population control through the pollution stigma, to historian Robert S. McElvaine’s discourse of non-menstrual syndrome (NMS).⁴ The theories take us away from the root and leave the origin obfuscated (Druet, 2021).

Within the multilingual, multicultural, and intersectional space of a developing nation, it becomes really challenging to locate a specific practice of social oppression as a single thread of development. To understand the spectrum of violence associated with and around the menstruating body, it’s important to take up samples from microcosmic spaces to produce an unbiased analysis. As religious identity and practices claim a front seat in India, hence, considering the Hindu mythological origin⁵ of menstruation as an overarching portrayal of the nation would be preposterous, though most of the available academic narratives fail to escape the labyrinthine politics of majoritarian representation. Nitin Sridhar’s chapterization of *The Sabarimala Confusion: Menstruation across Cultures: a Historical Perspective* (2019) allows us a glimpse of an informed and sensible take on the subject. He takes up the responsibility of archiving and locating menstruation narratives within the discourse of multiple religious texts and traditions, Indic traditions (Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism), Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), ancient western civilization (Greek, Roman, Mesopotamian, Egyptian), and indigenous communities (North American, South American, African, South Asian, South East Asian, and European). Despite the multiplicity, there exist terrains of contentions (castigation of body, question of purity, patriarchal oppression) that need to be addressed through counter metanarratives. The primary focus of this research paper is to identify these existing metanarratives as reflected through selective media texts (films and advertisements).

The function of media text as a tool to implicate the narrative of the so-called “other” by breaking the silence of the sociocultural stigma is an emerging trope in India. In popular cinematic texts like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021), *Badhaai Do* (2022), and so on, the audience has been subjected to issues like gay marriages, normalisation of transsexual identity, and homosexual parenthood, respectively. While streamlining the idiosyncratic features of popular culture within a popular-elite binary, Gary L. Harmon, in his essay “On the Nature and Functions of Popular Culture” (1983), writes that popular culture is “more formulaic, standardised, mass-produced, and mainly commercial” (6). In India, where access to intellectual texts is a luxury for most people, popular media texts wield significant hegemonic power over the populace’s pulse (Bhandare, 2019). When it comes to the issue of menstruation and mass consciousness, the release of *Padman* (2018) claims more significance than the Supreme Court Verdict on the Sabarimala Case⁶ addressing the entry of women into the temple premises (28 September 2018).

The threads addressing the arguments and discussions around menstruation in India can be divided into three primary segments, i.e. the notion of hygiene as roughly 36% of

⁴ The theory of “non-menstrual syndrome” or “notawoman” posits that men have segregated and marginalized women in an attempt to overcompensate for their primordial envy of the female capacity to carry, bear, and nourish a child.

⁵ According to the *Rig Veda*, Indra’s act of killing a Vritras, the withholder of the waters, the demon of droughts, a snake or dragonlike figure who dwells in the rivers or celestial waters (Chawla, 1994, 2818), or a cavern in the earth, but also a *brahmana*, who appears every month as menstrual flow, as women who have taken upon themselves a part of his guilt (Garg, 2015).

⁶ Among the many temples of Ayyappan in Kerala, the most significant one is located at Sabarimala hill. From 1991, women and girls of reproductive age were legally prohibited from entering the temple premise as the lord is considered to be a celibate deity. In September 2018, the Supreme Court judgment allowed the entry of all Hindu pilgrims, regardless of gender, and it was stated that the ban violated the fundamental rights of freedom of religion (Article 25 of the Indian Constitution) and right to equality (Article 14 of the Indian Constitution).

menstruating women use either locally made or commercially produced sanitary pads (Upadhyay, 2019), the practice of raising consciousness and inspiring sensitization as it enables people to talk about menstruation freely and takes the shroud of the uncanny away from the simple biological process, and the taboo surrounding the menstruating body. The taboos invite two perspectives, pseudo-scientific (issues around toxicity) and cultural (concerning corporeal mobility). Previously, the hypothesis surrounding the toxicity of menstrual blood and its denunciation has been discussed. The cultural taboo in India is a major concern as the rational investigation of these practices is never encouraged and a set of actions recur out of no logical foundation in the name of values, culture, religion, and myth. The analysis of the filmic texts (*Padman* [2018], *Phullu* [2017], and *The Great Indian Kitchen* [2021]), several short films, and selective commercials (after 2018, a watershed moment in the history of affirmative action in favour of women) will depict the idea of “shame” (both corporeal and psychological) around menstruation and how this abstract ideological tool of marginalisation subjects individuals to a lifelong trauma of epistemological violence. Moreover, the research paper intends to bring forth the limitations of the resistance hitherto showcased through these media texts.

Among the mentioned media texts, our consideration of the question of consciousness-raising brings in the notion of availability, acceptability, and absorption of these texts. The consumer's identity becomes key. Before *Padman* (2018), some media texts attempted to destabilise the myth and violence around menstruation, but the limited exposure dismantled the efforts. The South Asian space has allowed film actors to retain their divine stardom despite multiple mass media, changing the nature of the audience and of celebrity culture (Sengupta, 2021). And this recognition enables them to determine the hegemonic structure of the country. Exposing the topic of menstruation through a film like *Padman* (2018), starring one of the most prominent mass media actors, Akshay Kumar, brought the hitherto clouded period debate to the drawing rooms and porches of common households, inviting men and women alike to take part.

Impurity, Shame and the Castigated Body in Selected Media Texts

Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), has discussed how a body is condemned, alienated, and castigated not only in order to discipline it but to assert power. He writes,

But we can surely accept the general proposition that, in our societies, the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain “political economy” of the body: even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even when they use “lenient” methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue - the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission. (Foucault, 1984, p. 172)

Constant surveillance and examination through these practices ensure control of the individual's conduct and help “the optimisation of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility” (Foucault, 1984, p. 261). Objective observation of the intention of a heteronormative patriarchal society identifies women as subservient and exploits the vulnerability they are subjected to by the system itself. The menstruating woman and her relocation are examples of marginalising the “diseased” body to create a stratum of knowledge spawning from power dynamics. Keeping them on the watch out simultaneously strips them of their bodily agency and implements a sense of weakness. The function “knowledge” plays in repressing women in the form of epistemological violence will eventually be discussed.

In a country where sanitary pads are still sold furtively, wrapped in black opaque plastic bags or newspapers (Parmar, 2018), the nuance of “shame” needs no fresh exposition. Set in a fictional town in North India, *Padman* (2018) offers the fictional life story of Arunachalam Muruganantham, an entrepreneur who is known for the production of low-cost sanitary pads in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. Lakshmikant Chauhan (played by Akshay Kumar), the fictionalised version of Muruganantham, intervenes in the “women’s affair” out of sheer concern for his newly married wife Gayatri (played by Radhika Apte). He asks her to come inside the house (as she’s supposed to live in the outer extension like other women in the family during her period) and meets an uncanny resistance when he is implored to stay away from her vicinity in the name of purity and allow her to use the dirty clothes.

Gayatri: ... It’s women’s problem. Please stay away. ... As per our tradition, it’s considered impure.

...

Lakshmi: Come inside and create a new ritual. (Balki, 2018, 0:08:02 - 0:08:40)

Figure 1: *Padman* (0:08:13)



As Lakshmi’s easy-to-resolve proposition does not change the course of action, his determination to manufacture a low-cost pad for his wife and eventually all menstruating women who cannot afford commercially produced products turns into an obsession. His desperate attempts are met with ineradicable notions of shame in almost all the women he wants to help with his invention, starting with his wife, to his sisters, to the young girl next door hitting menarche. Even the depiction of the medical college students (one of whom wanted to help him) is not free from the partially rational prejudices of questioning a man’s intent and knowledge around female health products. In a desperate attempt to test the durability of his creation, he gets exposed and eventually turns into a castaway when his wife is forced to leave him as his ways label him a pervert at the *panchayet*.⁷ The novelty of his ideas and the ingenuity of his mind fall apart in front of the accusing villagers and the narrative of shame offered by his wife, whose conditioning disempowers her to practice her agency:

Lakshmi: Gayatri. Tell me. Do you want to leave?

Gayatri: I told you. For a woman, nothing’s worse than shame, not even a disease. (Balki, 2018, 0:56:00 - 0:56:35)

⁷ Panchayet is the systemic body of self-governance of villages in rural India.

A contrasting image is offered through the character of Bigni (played by Jyoti Sethi) in Abhishek Saxena's *Phullu* (2017). However, there is a sense of ignorance and indifference on her part. Apparently, she remains in a state of unawareness and denial and performs the role of an ideal wife by supporting her husband Phullu (played by Sharib Ali Hashmi), but close to the end of the film, while sharing a moment of subtle reflection with her husband, she takes up one of the pads he made and says, "Wow. Have you made this? It looks exactly like the pad you get on the market. You turned out to be an artist. Had I not been pregnant, I would've definitely tried it on and helped with your experiment" (Saxena, 2017, 1:11:42 - 1:12:12). This does not liberate the filmic space from the nuances of shame. In one of his repetitive visits to the medicine store, when the shopkeeper asks him what he wants, he mentions the female doctor who inspired in him the drive to go to any extent to manufacture economical pads. His mention of the sanitary napkin invokes the wrath of a stranger, and he is beaten up despite his constant pleas. A second occasion that showcases the shame narrative in a brighter hue is the incident with the young married women (*bhabhi*/sisters-in-law) of the village. Like Lakshmi, he too wants to run tests for his creation and asks the women to help him do that. And the moment he brings out one of the pads, they start abusing him.

One of the women: Sinner, shameless. The city has spoilt you to this extent.

Phullu: Look. all this is for your own good. This will not cause any infection. You won't get any disease.

...

One of the women: Go put it on your mother and sister. Drive him out of the village. (Saxena, 2017, 1:10:40 - 1:11:07)

Figure 2: *Phullu* (1:11:19)



Saxena's cinematic journey is not specifically inspired by the life of Arunachalam Muruganantham but by all the endeavours of producing low-cost sanitary pads. But the film falls short of striking a popular chord as the telling remains propagandist and the film lacks grandiloquence.

The Great Indian Kitchen (2021) does not revolve around the course of oppression surrounding menstruation or resistance against it, but a considerable section (roughly 16 minutes) of the film invests in the discourse of menstrual taboo as a part of domestic violence and its reception. And among the selective samples from media texts, this is the only film set in Kerala (the southern part of India). When the young dancer (played by Nimisha Sajayan) was married off into a prestigious family, little did she realise that the conservatism and the

subtle bouts of oppression and emotional manipulation would make her life a living hell. Her aspiration of becoming a dancer and working as an independent woman is squashed in the name of tradition as the domestic space (specifically the kitchen) becomes a space of violence. On the occasion of the commencement of her first period at her in-laws, her socio-cultural conditioning trumps her rational judgement and she voluntarily moves into the outhouse. But that act of separation is not enough, as her husband (played by Suraj Venjaramoodu) and her father-in-law (played by T. Suresh Babu) are performing a month-long ritual of venerating the lord Ayyappan.⁸ Jeo Baby has craftily put the wife's menstruation in conflict with the celebration of the lord of Sabarimala. The fastidious nitpicking of the aunt-in-law concerning the dos and don'ts of one's menstruation aggravates the wife's resistance:

Aunt-in-law: Under running water, wash everything that you have used, including the spread. Put your washed clothes away from those of others. Burn the sanitary pads, don't leave them lying around. Don't evoke the wrath of the Snake God. After seven days, purify everything you have used with holy water. Don't think that Gulf returnees are exempted from God's wrath. (Baby, 2021, 1:16:35 - 1:16:58)

Figure 3: *The Great Indian Kitchen* (1:13:44)



Baby has consciously presented the character of the aunt and the mother-in-law to showcase the institutionalised socio-cultural position of women and their acceptance of their lack of agency. The phase of menstruation and the lack of consideration from the in-laws reaches an extreme when her attempt to help her husband when he falls off a scooter meets with reproach as she is considered impure. The film does not offer a solution to the problems of menstrual taboos but focuses on an unbiased telling of the everyday experiences of most women in India. The film also represents the mob violence against the woman who supported the Sabarimala verdict of the Supreme Court on social media:

Mobster 1: Come out, you feminist bitch!

Mobster 2: She hasn't seen real men, that's what. Come out, we'll show you.

...

Mobster 3: You know to show off only on Facebook? Come out (Baby, 2021, 1:23:44 - 1:24:06)! (And then they leave, torching a scooter).

⁸ According to the Hindu mythology, Ayyappan or Shasta is a deity symbolizing dharma, truth, and righteousness.

The husband's aggression (instigated by the head priest during their month-long offerings) against the wife's act of sharing arguments about menstruation on social media strengthens the film's argument:

The head priest: Tell her to delete it from her mobile. Does her behaviour befit a well-reared woman?

The Husband: Delete the video you shared on Facebook.

The Wife: I shared because I felt it was right. I won't delete it.

The Husband: I am asking you to delete it (Baby, 2021, 1:24:19 - 1:25:34).

Besides these mainstream and parallel cinematic initiatives, there are countless short films addressing the issues of menstruation. But taking them into account for analysis might turn out to be counterproductive for two primary reasons. Firstly, there is a sizeable research gap in identifying the gender and age of consumers within the urban, semi-urban, and rural populace in India when it comes to the consumption of the platforms (YouTube and others) where these short films remain available. The low viewership of the short films becomes a concern as well. Though most of the newspaper reports identified the growing impact of short films during COVID-19 (Ramanujam, 2021), coincidentally, the country has witnessed the a digital divide⁹ during the same time period. Unlike mainstream works, these creative projects fall out of the range of accessibility of the majority of Indians, and this qualifies as the second reason. The conspicuous low views amount between the upper range of 35M to 2K. And against the reference frame of the gross 467 million (GMI Blogger, 2022) daily consumers of YouTube from India, the number looks even smaller. But a close observation uncovers some of the predominant themes abounding in these works from India. Barring a few unconventional works like *First Period: An MHM Story* (2018)¹⁰ or *Gaokor- A Period House* (2018),¹¹ most of these films reflect a few idiosyncratic but similar ideas—the period gets discussed by people with more comfort, there is an emphasis on menstrual hygiene with a focus on the use of sanitary napkins, and a hefty number of male characters are involved.

Though these works explore the normalisation of the period as an issue of discussion and implore female bodily movements, there still remain a couple of points of serious contention. Firstly, the work is predominantly urban. According to the available data from 2017 to 2019, with a prediction for 2022, the rural population count is almost twice as much (Kanwal, 2020) as that of the urban one. Hence, the creative narratives from this neglected space remain unheard. Secondly, the reductionist approach convolutes the issue. Between the quantifiable problem of women not being able to access sanitary pads (resulting in health issues) and the abstract problem of their hindered mobility (creating ideological repression from early years), the first one receives more attention. Anita Panicker (2018), in her article “The men in menstruation” writes, “while this moment offers a chance to have nuanced discussions on class,

⁹ The digital divide refers to the chasm between individuals with and without access to digital technology. In India during the surge of COVID-19, this became conspicuous as children from the rural parts of the country could hardly attend online classes and switching the mode from offline to online became too challenging to realise.

¹⁰ Directed by Mozez Singh, the short film *First Period* presents a fictional, all-male world where men and boys have periods. The film bears close reference to or inspiration from Gloria Steinem's essay “If Men Could Menstruate” (1978), which celebrates menstruation and offers a non-stigmatized series of treatments and reception.

¹¹ Directed by Priyanka Pathak, *Gaokor - A Period House* (2018) narrates the life of a young girl, Rani, who on her menarche was isolated into a thatched hut outside the village of her in-laws as a part of a brutal, life-threatening age-old custom. Based on real-life events, this short film creates a hard-hitting spectacle from one of the microcosmic, intersectional slices of rural India.

gender and sex, these dialogues are often wrung out to fit into a predictable frame that oversimplifies a complex problem.”

These problems of reductionism might provide an opportunity for objective academic intervention through non-fictional documentary narratives. The previous sampling would remain incomplete without mention of *Period. End of Sentence* (2018). As a documentary, the film successfully offers an insight into the lives of women from the semi-urban/rural parts (though limited to Hapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India) of India. The sense of combating shame is writ large on most of the individuals present on screen, from schoolchildren to adult men and women. But on the brighter side, most of them appear willing to discuss the issues.

Figure 4: *Period. End of Sentence* (0:02:18)



The work primarily focuses on the lives of a few women: Sneha, a young woman in her early 20s who wants to join the police force; Shabana, an old woman who has taken up the initiative of convincing women to purchase pads to earn a livelihood out of the business; and Suman, the woman who is in charge of the production of the “Fly Sanitary napkin.” While the documentary successfully exhibits how the smallest beacon of determination and positive intent can enlighten hundreds, it also remains limited to the production and use of low-cost sanitary napkins. Their awareness of their socio-cultural position, its hindrances, and novel measures of resistance help destabilise the taboo, as Suman replies to the question about exercising their agency: “The thing is, when there’s patriarchy, it takes time to talk about something related to women. It’s taking time, even among us women, but we’ll get there” (Zehtabchi, 2018, 0:11:10 - 0:11:21).

From Shrouding to Celebrating the Politics of Stain in Advertisements

Advertisements for sanitary napkins and awareness campaigns are another type of media text that sometimes attempts to problematize the issue of menstruation. The majority of sanitary pad advertisements that recur on-screen as commercials focus on the fear of stains and how to avert them. The improvisations introduced to the architecture of sanitary napkins are to make sure that the menstruating woman does not feel conscious of the stain and experiences carefree activity. Ironically, the same advertising industry, while creating advertisements for detergents, uses the tagline “*daag lagne se agar kuch achcha hota hai, to daag achche hai*” (translated as “if a stain paves the way for something nice, then the stain is good”). Since childhood, women have been systematised into the narrative of disciplining their bodies to remain within boundaries. The lived experience of the body for men in India bears a stark contrast. One extremely common practice that might substantiate the argument is the act of

urination in the open for Indian men (Tandon, 2012). India works on two extremities on issues concerning body mobility. Sandra Lee Bartky, in her essay “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power” writes,

[...] it is women themselves who practice this discipline on and against their own bodies [...]. The woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara run, who worries that the wind or rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle, or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self-committed to a relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy. (1990, p. 80)

In 2021, The Body Shop launched an advertisement campaign with the #BloodyNatural. There, probably for the first time, the idea that “it’s just a stain” (The Body Shop India, 2021) was celebrated. Even the creative content suffers from the issues of approaching the castigation of the female body. At some level, these arguments might sound too fastidious and unnecessarily convoluting. But so is the problem. One of the sanitary napkin manufacturing companies has long been running campaigns to help young girls stay at school as they constantly suffer from a serious lack of period hygiene. Between the spaces of ideological construction (places of religious practices) and material values (kitchen, school, and so on), the interest pivots around the material. Among the forbidden spaces where women are prohibited to tread during their menstruation, religious sanctums are the most significant ones in India as the cultural root of the taboo bears a mythological lineage. Significantly, the Indian media has not witnessed an advertisement catering to that idea. If legal undertakings and court verdicts are to be considered tangible changes, then it’s worth noticing that most of the verdicts addressing issues around menstruation emerge out of an “impure body”/“access to religious space” conflict (Analytical Study of Sabrimala and Other Similar Cases). On the other hand, access to the domestic space of a kitchen during menstruation becomes a necessity because it serves a utilitarian purpose. There’s a Greek proverb that reads, “a society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit” (Snyder, 2018). When it comes to the eradication of the violence spawning from menstrual taboos, we must focus on access to spaces for non-utilitarian purposes as well.

Menstruation and Epistemological Violence

During one of his popular lectures, when asked whether women should be kept separate from the spaces of everyday access during menstruation, Sadhguru¹² explained,

And above all, you need to understand the level of physical activity for a normal woman in those days. Cooking for 15-20 people, taking care of the cows, taking care of the children, everything is hers. It’s a tremendous amount of physical activity. So a woman who is going through a certain phase of her cycle gets a three-day or four-day break from everything. Isn’t that a wonderful thing? (Sadhguru, 2019, 0:01:43 - 0:02:10)

The strongest aspect of epistemological violence is that, apparently, it sounds rational and convincing. Taking into account the perspectives of postcolonial researchers (Spivak, Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o) we might argue that epistemological violence is the delineation of the “other,” but within the purview of empirical social sciences, the definition demands a wider

¹² Founder of the Isha-Foundation, Sadhguru is known for sharing knowledge of yoga and secrets of well-being. He is also known for his oratory and rational (scientific) approach to answering philosophical queries.

scope. The culture of interpreting data (texts) without proper hermeneutic awareness and passing that information off as knowledge are the cornerstones of epistemological violence, which is carried and processed through generations to be sculpted into its monstrosity. This form of indirect, non-physical violence is almost always unconsciously nurtured with a desire to implement an equilibrium through mass acceptance, but a lack of subjective control in this regard blurs the inevitable outcome. The discussion of eradicating violence against women essentially boils down to the idea of educating (and sensitising) individuals irrespective of their sexual identities and differences from their early childhood, as well as implementing effective laws and policies, creating safe spaces, imparting and exchanging information, sensationalising the acts and aftermath of violence, and so on. This invokes a continuous and toilsome process of affecting the existing body of knowledge or rather challenging the established epistemological structure that is contained within the deep structure of innumerable components of our lives (fairy tales, oral narratives, religious practices, socio-cultural practices, everyday communication, use of words, distribution of responsibility within the family structure, recognition of economic inflow, and so on). Researchers in the book *Understanding Violence against Women* (1996) write, “Research on the causes of violence against women has consisted of two lines of inquiry: an examination of the characteristics that influence the behaviour of offenders and consideration of whether some women have a heightened vulnerability to victimisation” (49). Both these sets of inquiries can be addressed (among other factors) as an outcome of the epistemological violence to which they have been subjected since childhood. Though he denounces the question of impurity, still, the explanation offered by Sadhguru can be interpreted as an example of contextually dislocated knowledge. The idea of respite from domestic chores might appear as a logical impetus behind accepting the segregation of a menstruating body, that feeds into the scope of the popular imagination, but within the contemporary socio-cultural dynamics, this hardly holds concrete ground and prepares a fertile space for other extended acts of violence to bloom. During a conversation between Phullu and Fazlu Rehman Qureshi, the derelict who sings on the street for a livelihood in the spirit of a Shakespearean fool, Qureshi explained the bigotry of various periods in India. This, in a nutshell, registers the essence of misinterpretation and heedless acceptance:

Phullu: Oh woman’s disease. So say it straight. Why beat around the bush?

Qureshi: Why do you call something that’s not a disease a disease? It’s natural.

...

Phullu: I see. I thought there is restriction only in our Hindu religion. Can’t you go to a sacred place in that condition, even in Islam?

...

Qureshi: Every religion is just as messed up. ... And this is nothing. Have you heard of Kamakshi Devi? There’s a huge temple in Guwahati. She’s called the Goddess of periods. Women are not permitted to visit the Goddess during their periods. (Saxena, 2017, 0:51:45-0:52:44)

The discourse of menstruation and its interpretation gets complicated and invites extremely sensitive and aware interpretation as multiple factors start accumulating with exclusive case studies. This creates a barrier to the metanarrative of depiction that we usually come across. The experience of physical strain is a truth for some menstruating bodies. Besides inviting support and consideration, this renders the subject vulnerable and weak. Hence, neither the discourse of physical mobility is the only concern, nor the sensitisation. The catalogued issues can never be addressed within a holistic narrative. Therefore, the process of early sensitisation must be coupled with peripheral issues to arrive close to a terrain of a comprehensive understanding. In the selective cinematic texts, the revulsion observed in most of the

individuals is an outcome of a knowledge foundation that has long been instilled in them, as the production of knowledge has always been gendered according to feminist epistemologists (Anderson, 1995, p. 50).

Conclusion

The “pattern of minimal to no representation of menstruation in Bollywood becomes even more profound and problematic when it becomes a part of contemporary ‘female-centric’ films—a relatively new phenomenon which focuses on female protagonists and stories,” writes Purna Singh in her article “Omission of Menstruation in Female-Centric Bollywood Movies” (2021). The problem manifests a sense of conscious oblivion when it comes to addressing the issue of menstruation. If menstruation is identified as an integral component of female anatomical existence, then its denial is analogous to that of recognising only a partial identity. Referring to Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of transcendence and immanence, Young puts forth the improbability of women in finding a balance between the two as they simultaneously live as subjects and objects. The patriarchal society recognises them as objects (bodies), designed to serve the system and help to sustain it. Simultaneously, women can never deny their subjectivity. This leaves the very essence of female existence chaotic and the body’s identity convoluted (Allen, 2021). The depiction of the menstruating body in selected media texts in India focuses primarily on aspects of hygiene, is limited to urban spaces, and discusses limited corporeal mobility. The emergence of the male figure as the saviour sometimes sounds condescending. But then again, there are a considerable number of individuals with a serious vision for the future. The eradication of the menstrual hygiene crisis or the stigma around its discussion are only parts of the problem. The (un)tabooing demands more. It demands an optimization of the female body to achieve its full potential, beyond the utilitarian motif of a heteronormative patriarchal society. Throwing the ball is not enough; reaching the distance is.

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