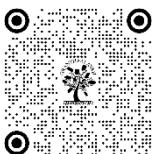


THE SILENT FLOW: MENSTRUAL EXPERIENCES AND THEIR SUPPRESSION IN POPULAR DISCOURSE

Anjaly Nair M. K. ¹

¹ Assistant Professor of English, Nehru Arts & Science College Kanhagad, Kasaragod (Dist.), Kerala. Research Scholar, School of Social Sciences & Humanities, Srinivas University, Mangalore



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.2946](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.2946)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Menstruation, a biological phenomenon experienced by half the global population, has historically been shrouded in stigma and silence across cultures. This paper examines the suppression of menstrual experiences in popular discourse, focusing on cultural taboos, media representation, and societal norms. It highlights how this silence perpetuates gender inequalities and restricts open discussions about health and well-being. The paper also explores emerging literature, film, and social media counter-narratives that challenge these taboos, advocating for menstrual equity and normalization. Through a critical analysis of cultural practices and media portrayals, this study calls for reimagining menstruation as an integral, natural aspect of life.

Keywords: Menstruation, Stigma, Popular Discourse, Gender Inequality, Menstrual Equity, Media Representation

1. INTRODUCTION

Menstruation, an integral aspect of reproductive health, is a natural biological process that occurs in approximately half the global population. Despite its universality, menstruation has been historically treated as a taboo subject, deeply embedded in societal discomfort and cultural silences (Fingerson, 2006). Across different societies, it is framed as an embarrassing or even polluting phenomenon, leading to significant misinformation, stigma, and discrimination (Bobel, 2010). The pervasive silence around menstruation marginalizes those who experience it, fostering environments where ignorance and inequality thrive.

Popular discourse including media, literature, education, and social practices has played a critical role in perpetuating this marginalization. Menstruation is often either omitted entirely or depicted in euphemistic and sanitized ways. For example, advertisements for menstrual products routinely use blue liquid to symbolize menstrual blood, reinforcing the notion that menstruation is unfit for candid representation (Chrisler, 2012). Similarly, in film and television, menstruation is frequently portrayed as a source of embarrassment or ridicule, trivializing its significance and reinforcing societal discomfort with discussing it openly (Steinem, 1978).

The suppression of menstruation in public narratives is intrinsically linked to broader structures of gender inequality. Historically, patriarchal systems have associated menstruation with impurity and weakness, leading to

practices that isolate menstruators from public life and limit their opportunities. These discriminatory practices, coupled with the absence of menstrual health from policy agendas, institutionalize menstrual inequity, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and exclusion.

Nevertheless, recent years have witnessed a shift in how menstruation is represented and discussed. Counter-narratives in media, literature, activism, and education have begun to challenge entrenched taboos, advocating for menstrual equity and normalization. Initiatives such as Menstrual Hygiene Day and social media movements like #PeriodPositive have amplified voices calling for openness and acceptance, while works like *Padman* and *Period. End of Sentence* have brought menstrual experiences to the forefront of public discourse.

This paper examines the dual forces of suppression and resistance, analyzing how menstruation is represented—or omitted—in popular discourse and its impact on societal attitudes and public policy. By exploring cultural, media, and activist narratives, the study underscores the need for a paradigm shift toward normalizing menstruation as a vital and natural aspect of life.

2. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Menstruation has long been surrounded by myths, taboos, and cultural restrictions that portray it as impure or shameful. These beliefs, often rooted in patriarchal traditions, dictate social norms and practices, significantly shaping the lives of menstruators. From ancient societies to modern cultures, menstruation has frequently been framed as a polluting or weakening condition, reinforcing systemic gender inequalities. Menstruation and Cultural Practices

In ancient societies, menstruation was frequently associated with spiritual impurity. For instance, religious texts across various traditions have framed menstruation as a condition requiring isolation. Menstruators were often prohibited from participating in communal activities, touching objects, or preparing food. These restrictions were justified by associating menstruation with pollution or divine displeasure. For example, in Hindu traditions, Menstruators are barred from entering temples or engaging in religious rituals, a practice still observed in parts of India. In 2018, the Sabarimala Temple controversy highlighted the tension between religious beliefs and gender equality when India's Supreme Court lifted a ban on menstruating women entering the temple, sparking nationwide debates. In Nepal, there is the tradition of forcing menstruators to live in isolated huts during their cycles. Despite its prohibition in 2005, Chhaupadi persists in rural Nepal, exposing menstruators to unsafe conditions and even death from animal attacks or cold temperatures. In parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, menstruators are considered impure, facing restrictions on mobility and interactions with others. Taboos surrounding menstruation often discourage discussions, perpetuating silence and misinformation. In Islamic Traditions, while menstruators are exempt from certain religious obligations like fasting or prayer, the exclusion has also led to the marginalization of menstrual experiences in spiritual contexts.

"Historically, menstruators were often segregated during their menstrual cycles due to beliefs that their presence could contaminate their surroundings. These cultural practices reflect deeply entrenched patriarchal traditions that have systematically marginalized menstruators (Young, 1980; Martin, 1991)." In some ancient religious texts, menstruators were prohibited from participating in communal activities, touching certain objects, or preparing food. Such restrictions were justified by associating menstruation with spiritual impurity, a narrative that persists in various cultural practices today.

These cultural taboos have far-reaching consequences. They not only isolate menstruators physically but also create psychological stigmas, portraying menstruation as a condition to be concealed and endured silently. The normalization of these practices institutionalizes menstrual inequity, reinforcing broader patterns of gender-based discrimination. Menstruation is relegated to the private sphere, excluded from public discourse, and treated as a subject unworthy of acknowledgement or discussion.

By marginalizing menstruators and silencing conversations about menstrual health, these cultural attitudes perpetuate cycles of ignorance and inequality. Understanding this historical and cultural context is critical to addressing the deeply ingrained biases that shape societal attitudes toward menstruation and advancing efforts to normalize it as a natural part of life.

3. MENSTRUATION IN MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE

Media and popular culture have historically reinforced the stigma surrounding menstruation through euphemistic, sanitized, or omitted representations (Chrisler, 2012). Films, television shows, and advertisements have often treated the subject with euphemism, sanitization, or outright omission, perpetuating societal discomfort and misconceptions.

For decades, menstrual hygiene advertisements have used blue liquid to symbolize menstrual blood, avoiding realistic depictions and reinforcing the idea that menstruation is too shameful or inappropriate for public display. Similarly, mainstream media has often portrayed menstruation as a source of embarrassment or comedic relief. Films and TV shows frequently depict characters trying to hide their periods or facing ridicule, trivializing the physical and emotional experiences of menstruators. Such portrayals obscure the lived realities of menstruation, perpetuating stigma and reinforcing cultural silences.

Despite these challenges, recent works in media and popular culture have begun to break the silence surrounding menstruation. Films like *Padman* (2018), inspired by the story of Arunachalam Muruganantham, highlight the challenges of menstrual hygiene in rural India and advocate for affordable menstrual products. The Oscar-winning documentary *Period. End of Sentence* (2018) sheds light on the stigma and barriers menstruators face globally while celebrating grassroots efforts to promote menstrual equity. These works have sparked critical conversations, encouraging audiences to question societal norms and engage with menstruation as a subject worthy of respect and discourse.

Social media has also emerged as a powerful platform for challenging menstrual stigma. Campaigns like #PeriodPositive, #MenstruationMatters, and #EndPeriodPoverty have brought discussions about menstrual health into the public domain, amplifying voices that advocate for openness and equity. Activists, influencers, and organizations have used social media to share personal stories, raise awareness, and demand systemic change. These movements have not only disrupted the silence surrounding menstruation but also empowered individuals to reclaim their narratives and push for societal transformation.

By shifting portrayals of menstruation from sources of shame to symbols of empowerment, media and popular culture are playing a crucial role in normalizing menstrual experiences and challenging entrenched taboos.

4. THE CONSEQUENCES OF SILENCE

The cultural silence surrounding menstruation has profound consequences, affecting health, psychosocial well-being, and systemic equity. By treating menstruation as a taboo subject, societies limit access to accurate information, resources, and support, exacerbating the challenges menstruators face daily.

One of the most significant consequences is its impact on health. In many regions, menstruators lack access to sanitary products, clean water, and safe sanitation facilities. This scarcity often forces individuals to rely on unhygienic alternatives such as rags, leaves, or even sand, which increase the risk of infections and other health complications. Additionally, limited education about menstruation perpetuates misinformation, leaving many unprepared to manage their cycles safely. This lack of knowledge is particularly harmful for young menstruators, who may face fear, confusion, and stigma when they begin menstruating.

The psychosocial impact of menstrual stigma is equally significant. The pervasive narrative that menstruation is dirty or shameful fosters feelings of embarrassment and isolation among menstruators. Many individuals are socialized to hide their periods, avoiding discussions even with close family members. This silence creates a sense of alienation, as menstruators feel unsupported and unable to share their experiences. The stigma also affects self-esteem and confidence, particularly among young menstruators, shaping their self-perception and ability to advocate for their needs.

Policy gaps further exacerbate these challenges. Many governments and institutions fail to prioritize menstrual health in their policymaking, viewing it as a niche issue rather than a fundamental aspect of public health and human rights. This oversight results in inadequate access to affordable menstrual products, insufficient sanitation infrastructure in schools and workplaces, and limited support for menstrual education programs. Without systemic changes, menstruators are left to navigate these barriers on their own, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and inequity.

Breaking the silence surrounding menstruation is essential to addressing these consequences and promoting a more informed, inclusive, and equitable society.

5. COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND ADVOCACY

In recent years, counter-narratives and advocacy efforts have emerged as powerful tools for challenging menstrual stigma and promoting menstrual equity. These initiatives span literature, art, activism, and education, creating spaces for open dialogue and empowering individuals to reclaim their menstrual experiences.

Menstrual counter-narratives represent a transformative approach to addressing deeply ingrained social taboos and misconceptions surrounding menstruation. These efforts emerge from a critical recognition that traditional discourse has long marginalized and silenced menstrual experiences, treating them as something shameful, hidden, or inappropriate for public discussion. There should be a multifaceted approach to counter-narratives which will help develop a positive approach to menstruation.

Counter-narratives prioritize personal storytelling as a powerful mechanism for challenging existing stigmas. By creating platforms where individuals can share their authentic menstrual experiences, these initiatives normalize conversations about menstruation. This approach helps deconstruct myths, challenge embarrassment, and create a more inclusive understanding of a natural biological process. It should promote interdisciplinary advocacy, spreading the movement among multiple domains including academic research that critically examines menstrual health, grassroots activism focused on policy changes and educational reforms, community-based educational programs that provide accurate, compassionate information etc.

A core principle of these counter-narratives is restoring agency to menstruating individuals. By reframing menstruation from a source of shame to a natural, powerful aspect of human experience, advocacy efforts aim to challenge restrictive cultural practices, promote menstrual health education, and ensure access to menstrual hygiene products. Modern counter-narratives recognize the diverse experiences of menstruation across different socioeconomic, cultural, and gender identities. This intersectional perspective ensures that advocacy efforts are inclusive and address the unique challenges faced by marginalized communities. Advocacy efforts focus on redesigning educational approaches to menstrual health.

The power of these counter-narratives lies in their ability to transform social perceptions. By creating spaces for open, honest dialogue, they challenge long-standing stigmas and promote a more compassionate, informed understanding of menstruation. These efforts are not just about changing conversations; they're about fundamentally reshaping societal attitudes towards a natural biological process. This comprehensive approach demonstrates that counter-narratives and advocacy are crucial tools for promoting menstrual equity, challenging deep-rooted stigmas, and empowering individuals to embrace their bodily experiences with dignity and pride.

6. LITERARY AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS

Works like Nadya Okamoto's *Period Power: A Manifesto for the Menstrual Movement* have brought menstruation to the forefront of public consciousness, blending personal narratives with calls to action. Art projects such as Rupi Kaur's Instagram series, which depict menstrual blood unapologetically, have sparked critical conversations and challenged societal discomfort with menstruation. These works reclaim menstruation as a natural and powerful experience, encouraging audiences to confront their biases and embrace menstrual narratives.

Activism and Policy Advocacy:

Activists and organizations worldwide are advocating for menstrual equity by addressing issues such as period poverty, taxation on menstrual products, and inadequate education. For example, campaigns to abolish the "tampon tax" have gained traction in countries like India, Australia, and the UK, emphasizing the need to view menstrual products as essential goods. Grassroots organizations like The Pad Project and Days for Girls are working to provide affordable menstrual products and education to underserved communities, empowering menstruators to manage their cycles with dignity.

Educational Initiatives:

Comprehensive menstrual education programs are essential for dismantling stigma and equipping individuals with the knowledge and resources they need. Schools and community organizations are increasingly integrating menstrual education into their curricula, fostering environments where students can learn about menstruation without fear or

shame. Such initiatives are critical for normalizing menstruation and creating a foundation for future generations to approach it with openness and respect.

By amplifying counter-narratives and supporting advocacy efforts, societies can challenge entrenched taboos and move toward a future where menstruation is embraced as a natural and essential aspect of life.

Breaking the silence surrounding menstruation requires a collective effort to challenge cultural taboos, dismantle patriarchal narratives, and prioritize menstrual health in public discourse and policy. To normalize menstruation, there should be an inclusive dialogue, encouraging open discussions about menstruation in open spaces such as families, schools, workplaces, media etc. New policies should be implemented to provide free and affordable menstrual products with no side effects, proper sanitation facilities, and menstrual leave in workplaces. Menstruation is not something to be concealed and such an awareness will make society more free to discuss openly about the menstruation process, menstrual hygiene and menstrual activism. In media, menstruation should be portrayed more realistically and respectfully so that the cultural stigma surrounding menstruation can be removed to an extent.

7. CONCLUSION

Menstruation, though a universal biological experience, has been subjected to centuries of cultural suppression and stigma, shaping societal attitudes and policies. The silence surrounding menstruation marginalizes those who experience it, perpetuating cycles of ignorance, inequality, and exclusion. However, recent shifts in media representation, activism, and education have begun to challenge these taboos, advocating for menstrual equity and normalization.

By embracing open dialogue, dismantling stigma, and prioritizing menstrual health in policymaking, societies can promote greater equity and inclusion for menstruators (Bobel, 2010; Chrisler, 2012). Normalizing menstruation as a natural part of life is not only a matter of individual dignity but also a critical step toward achieving gender equality and empowering communities worldwide.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

Bobel, C. (2010). *New Blood: Third-wave feminism and the politics of menstruation*. Rutgers University Press.

Chrisler, J. C. (2012). Leaks, lumps, and lines: Stigma and women's bodies. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 36(2), 194-203.

Fingerson, L. (2006). Girls' experience of menstruation in the contemporary United States. *Gender & Society*, 20(6), 735-752.

Lock, M. (1993). *Encounters with aging: Mythologies of menopause in Japan and North America*. University of California Press.

Martin, E. (1991). The egg and the sperm: How science has constructed a romance based on stereotypical male-female roles. *Signs*, 16(3), 485-501.

Shuttle, P., & Redgrove, P. (1978). *The wise wound: Menstruation and everywoman*. Marion Boyars.

Steinem, G. (1978). If men could menstruate. *Ms. Magazine*, 7(4), 102-104.

Tavris, C. (1992). *The mismeasure of woman: Why wrong conceptions of femininity and masculinity dominate science and society*. Simon & Schuster.

Weideger, P. (1976). *Menstruation and menopause: The physiology and psychology, the myth and reality*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Young, I. M. (1980). *Throwing like a girl and other essays in feminist philosophy and social theory*. Indiana University Press