

## UNCOVERING WHISPER (ED) NARRATIVES

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**Abstract:** "I am in my periods; I cannot enter the assembly of men!" --- Draupdi to Dusshasanna when she is dragged to court to be disrobed.

(She had) "blood coming out of her wherever" ---Donald Trump on Fox News host Megan Kelly

**Abstract:** It is customary to think of the issues of education, nutrition and safety when one opens the discussion on children's rights. This paper, however, proposes to unearth the links between the above mentioned issues and that of the oft neglected topic of menstrual health in India. While analyzing the popular sanitary napkin advertisement and socio-cultural mores, the first part of the paper would analyze the predominant ways in which menstruation is viewed/treated in India. The paper explores how the politics of stain and shame is intricately linked with the entire notion of pollution, dirt, impurity and even sin in some cultures. This, then, is cited as a justification to not only subjugate women to the position of the inferior 'Other' but also to discriminate against them by relegating them outside the periphery of the 'sacred' domain, including places of worship in the public realm and the kitchen in the private sphere. In order to raise the vexed question of right to menstrual health, hygiene and dignity as one of the central Human Rights, the paper proceeds to analyze the current state of women's menstrual health in India. The paper weaves in some of the responses to the predominant representations of menstruation from the literary world along with closely reading the breakthrough in the field of menstrual health that has been achieved by Arunachalam Muruganantham, who has been hailed as "menstrual man of India" and organizations such as Menstrupedia.

**Introduction:** The above mentioned epigraphs serve to underscore how issues of menstruation, often shrouded in silence, are closely aligned to the politics of shame and subordination of women in hetero-patriarchal cultures and, surprisingly, the attitudes toward it have not changed much. It is customary to think of the issues of education, nutrition and safety when one opens the discussion on children's rights. This paper, however, proposes to unearth the links between the above mentioned issues and that of the oft neglected topic of menstrual health. The first part of the paper analyzes the predominant ways in which menstruation is viewed in most hetero-patriarchal societies. The paper explores how the politics of stain and shame is intricately linked with the entire notion of pollution, dirt, impurity and even sin in some cultures. This, then, is cited as a justification to not only subjugate women to the position of the inferior 'Other' but also to discriminate against them by relegating them outside the periphery of the 'sacred' domain, including places of worship in the public realm and the kitchen in the private sphere. This paper seeks to look at a topic which is often considered to be in the domain of Social Studies/Social Work from the perspective of a student of literature. I, thus, wish to unearth literary voices on the subject as offering possible solution to the issues at hand. Writers such as Gloria Steinem, Lucille Clifton and Dominique Christina create a 'counter-hegemonic' discourse to challenge the master narrative of shame and silence surrounding menstruation by recasting menstruation in a more empowering fashion.

We as a society seem to be preoccupied with the exterior appearances. Most advertisements of sanitary napkins are replete with phrases such as "protection," "cleanliness" and "freedom." When one pauses to think as to from what are they promising protection and freedom, one unearths a tacit understanding between the product makers-advertisers and consumers-viewers that the freedom and protection is from the 'stain' which is projected as being the seminal concern when it comes to menstruation. Issues of hygiene and infection are conspicuous by their absence in this discourse. This is disconcerting especially in a country in which "more than 70% of the women suffer from reproductive tract infections, increasing the risk of contracting associated cancers" as about 88% of women resort to using ashes, newspapers, dried leaves and even husk sand during their periods"(Sadhna 1) as per a report called *Sanitary Protection: Every Woman's Health Right* conducted by AC Nielsen in 2011. Furthermore, only 12% of women use or have the means to being able to use sanitary napkins in India. This is not the only problem as this meager number is also blissfully unaware of the problems that they court by using these napkins and tampons which contain many toxic ingredients, such as dioxin, "artificial colors, polyester, adhesives, polyethylene (PET), polypropylene, propylene glycol (PEG)," and several pesticides to name a few, that have the potential to seep in the body/bloodstream through the thin and sensitive skin around the vaginal area. "Andrea Donsky, founder of Naturally Savvy and co-author of *Label Lessons: Your Guide to a Healthy Shopping Cart*, reveals how little we're told about the materials

in feminine products. In fact, tampon and sanitary pad manufacturers aren't required to disclose ingredients because feminine hygiene products are considered "medical devices." Several reports confirm that many of these products could cause "abnormal cell growth throughout the body, immune system suppression and hormonal and endocrine system disruption"(Mercola 2). Thus, their sole marketing and probably manufacturing strategy zeroes in on this socio-cultural pressure/obsession with avoiding stain at all costs.

The politics of stain when unpacked becomes a window to explore two closely related issues. First, it is intricately linked with the entire notion of pollution, dirt, impurity and even sin in some cultures which is cited as the justification to not only subjugate women to the position of the inferior 'Other,' but also to discriminate against them by relegating them outside the periphery of the 'sacred' domain, including places of worship in the public realm and the kitchen in the private sphere. Furthermore, the tendency of reducing and /or tracing everything women do or don't do to their bodies which has long been criticized by feminists seems to me lies at the root of deploying menstruation as one of the excuses to term them as irrational creatures who are governed by their body and body is strategically placed lower than the mind hierarchically. Whether something is upheld or denigrated is not innocuous but is a conscious choice made by those in power. This becomes much evident in a 1978 satiric essay by Gloria Steinem (1934- ) where she imagines what would be like "If Men Could Menstruate." She succinctly opens her argument by saying that since "the characteristics of the powerful, whatever they may be, are thought to be better than the characteristics of the powerless," "menstruation would become an enviable, boast-worthy, masculine event: Men would brag about how long and how much. Boys would mark the onset of menses, that longed-for proof of manhood, with religious ritual and stag parties. Congress would fund a National Institute of Dysmenorrhea to help stamp out monthly discomforts. Sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free..." (1). Moreover, she shows how menstruation which is now projected as an impediment and an obstacle for women would actually be cited as "proof that only men could serve in the Army ("you have to give blood to take blood") by "Military men, right-wing politicians, and religious fundamentalists". ... Steinman turns the entire argument of inferiority of women owing to their celebrated 'mercurial' temperament and irrational instincts which result, in part among other things, due to their "that time of the month" by ingenuously demonstrating how the very same 'phases' would enable men to master "all" sciences and philosophy

and would be used to keep women out of the circle of learning: "How could a woman master any discipline that demanded a sense of time, space, mathematics, or measurement, for instance, without that in-built gift for measuring the cycles of the moon and planets—and thus for measuring anything at all? In the rarefied fields of philosophy and religion, could women compensate for missing the rhythm of the universe? Or for their lack of symbolic death-and-resurrection every month?" (2) Steinman continues to mock at the male ideological tyranny by further stating how women who now suffer from "penis envy" (Freud's term) would now suffer the terrible pangs of "menses envy"! (2) Steinman in a masterstroke exposes the hypocritical attitude of the patriarchal society as on the one hand women are denounced as unclean inferior beings on account of menstruation but, on the other hand, men would be further raised to pedestal, rather, deified as their act of shedding blood would be likened to that of Christ. "Your husband's blood is as sacred as that of Jesus" would be a constant refrain, she exclaims. Steinman, thus, exposes the manner in which menstruation is viewed/projected in a demeaning fashion is part of the larger (patriarchal) ideological agenda to denigrate women and constrict them both psychologically and physically.

Having encountered tyrannical customs such as female genital mutilation that scar women physically and emotionally for life at close quarters, African American women writers have spearheaded the movement to visualize women's experiences especially menstruation in alternate, more liberating and empowering fashion. Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) in her "Poem in Praise of Menstruation" raises series of rhetorical questions, thereby, overturning the usual associations of periods as being a stumbling block by comparing the menstrual flow to that of a "beautiful," "faithful", "ancient" and powerful river that evokes diverse emotions of both "passion" and "pain." She, further, underscores the naturalness of periods by stressing its "ancient" nature and its links with the natural order: "this wild/water/pray that it flows also/through animals/beautiful and faithful and ancient/and female and brave. Clifton, thus, successfully undermines the entire gamut of demeaning notions of dirt, pollution and sin that are often associated with menstruation and envisions it as a strong life force instead.

The politics of stain apart from being associated with the concept of impurity and, thus, resulting in segregation, also lies at the heart of the deep rooted feelings of shame when it comes to menstruation. The very fact that according to a recent international survey, conducted by Clue with The International Women's Health Coalition, women across the globe (around 190 countries) deploy close to five thousand

euphemisms to talk about periods (News report published in *The Times of India*, March 6, 2016) points to the climate of silence, embarrassment and shame that is associated with something which ought to be viewed as natural a bodily function as breathing or sweating for that matter. Drawing from her own experience in the seventh grade when she was shamed by the boys in the classroom for rushing to the washroom, African American poet Dominique Christina adopts a more militant approach in addressing the psychological trauma of shame and fear of being spotted and ridiculed that is associated with menstruation in "The Period Poem" (2014).

Christina understands that the responsibility to change the manner in which periods are viewed and the way it affects the life of her daughter lies with her. She states her intention to write the poem is "to undermine the shaming that happens to some girls around menstruation". So when her daughter "starts her period and she's stricken and walks out the bathroom looking like she's died or something" she "wanted to undermine that" by "throw(ing) every part of my experience...toward her, to sustain her, to offer her language that lifts her up and keeps her up." Recognizing that one of the potent ways to counter the taboo surrounding menstruation is to openly talk about it, Christina states that she "threw her a period party, my home is red up, dressed in red, and there was red food and red drinks. It was great." Christina, however, realized that this was not enough when she receives a tweet screenshot that was full of bravado by a boy who audaciously declares that he dumped his girlfriend, "that bitch immediately," because she "she started her period" when "he was having sex with her." Christina minces no words in denigrating the "the nameless dummy" and decides to give him "an anatomy lesson infused with feminist politics" in order to counter "your disdain for what a woman's body can do". She rightly patriarchal ideology impersonated by this "dude" as the reason why "the sudden grief all young girls feel after the matriculation from childhood, and the induction into a reality". She also voices the curious bind in which woman's body is placed in hetero-patriarchal ideological worldview. The female body which is seen as quintessential source of progeny and carnal pleasure is at the same time looked at with disgust and hatred. With an acerbic wit, Christina reminds him that this very female body that he disdains actually made his existence and his twitter account possible! Moreover, in a twin stroke, Christina re-envisions the monthly visits by the blood not as a sign of inferiority and discomfort but as something that is empowering as it makes women "warriors." She turns tables on men and continues her lesson in "feminist politic" by arguing how menstruation, a process where uterus "itself every 28 days" is extremely empowering as it enables women

to discard something which is dead and renew their body and soul as opposed to masculine self which appears static and, thus appears, stale, rather limited, in comparison: "*The feminist politic part, is that women know how to let things go, how to let a dying thing leave the body, how to become new, how to regenerate, how to wax and wane, not unlike the moon and tides, both of which influence how you behave.*" Christina further stresses the power of women's sorority as "women have vaginas that can speak to each other and by this I mean, when we're with our friends, our sisters, our mothers, our menstrual cycles will actually sync the fuck up." As a reply to oft celebrated narratives of male bonding, she argues how "My own cervix is mad influential, everybody I love knows how to bleed with me". Not only does she emphasize the revitalizing power of the feminine body, she also counters the taboo associated with staining by announcing that women will introduce men not only to their insides but also to the power of blood and take pride in leaving indelible blood stains. She dares her daughter and all other women to expunge the stigma associated with periods with menstrual blood: "*Just bleed anyhow, spill your impossible scripture all over the good furniture. Bleed, and bleed, and bleed on everything he loves, period.*" She also urges women to exercise agency in countering anyone who tries to abuse/insult/subjugate them: "*So to my daughter: Should any fool mishandle that wild geography of your body, how it rides a red running current like any good wolf or witch, well then just bleed, boo.*" Widening the contours of the debate, Christina is successfully able to unearth the oft hidden links between the shaming of women on account of menstruation with all the other acts of violence and oppression, such as female genital mutilation and "unreported rape cases," that are committed against women. Thus, breaking the silence around menstruation, Christina's call to "*Name the blood something holy, something mighty, something unlanguageable, something in hieroglyphs, something that sounds like the end of the world*" sounds like a clarion call to spur women into action and end the culture of 'euphemisms.' Taking cue from Steinman, Crofton and Christina, one needs to analyse the ways in which issue of menstruation, the physical act of bleeding, is tied up to score of other issues such as cultural, class, socio-familial set up that one inhabits. One can conclude by arguing that it behooves women to recast the ways in which menstruation is perceived and dealt in hetero-patriarchal societies so that adequate attention is accorded to issues of female hygiene and menstrual health, both physical and emotional. Lastly, women ought to take pride in their body and accept periods as natural part of female growth and cycle.

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