

Pertinence of Literature in Destroying Menstrual Taboos

Shalini*, Ajoy Batta

Department of English, School of Liberal and Creative Arts, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

* Corresponding author: shalinipathania90@gmail.com

Abstract. The impurity of menstrual blood is a universal myth that spans across all societies and cultures. This notion has also established a barrier to gender equality, as females are instructed, throughout cultures, that menstruation is disgraceful. This belief restricts their capacity to conduct regular duties when they are bleeding, hence making them organize their lives around their menstrual period. The need to fill the inadequate understanding of the menstrual cycle in society is a necessity. The third wave of feminism encouraged society to discuss certain challenging topics, which led to considerable breakthroughs in beliefs around menstruation. The day when feminist discussions were limited to people who could pay to express their opinions has long since passed. The concept of feminism in the twenty-first century encompasses a larger spectrum of opinions. Strong arguments on women's cleanliness and the need for understanding menstruation only serve to emphasize how crucial and significant the issue is. The present paper attempts to explore the myths and taboos, cultural and political perspectives on menstruation, and the role literature is playing in altering society's attitudes about menstruation. The paper will attempt to comprehend how important literature is in eradicating the stigma associated with menstruation and how it contributes to raising awareness of menstrual hygiene among people.

1 Introduction

Societies generally uphold common moral principles and guidelines for appropriate conduct that its members are expected to follow. By establishing shared norms and expectations, a culture controls its members' actions and thinking. This set of social rules can be termed as social taboos. In their work "Taboos and Identity: Considering the Unthinkable" (2009) Chaim Fershtman, Uri Gneezy and Moshe Hoffmandescribe how taboos are considered as "...strong social norms" that are "... supported by severe social sanctions". Moreover, they state that 'Even thinking about violating a taboo is problematic' [1]. Existing taboos cannot be addressed until there is sufficient knowledge to disprove them.

One prevalent sociocultural taboo is the taboo related to menstruation. Menstrual cycle education is extremely lacking in society, hence existing taboos cannot be challenged until there is enough information to debunk these false beliefs. In her study "A Cross-Cultural Study of Menstruation, Menstrual Taboos, and Related Social Variables" (1974), Rita E. Montgomery explains the "... wide variations in menstrual taboos found cross-culturally" [2]. Furthermore, the study establishes a connection between the development of menstrual taboos and a variable that may be used to correlate this development. Montgomery states how menstrual taboos are imposed on women by society, which imposes certain limitations on women, and several societies also isolate women during the menstrual period. "These taboos are transcultural in nature, represented along a continuum that ranges widely from mild uneasiness and distrust of menstrual fluid and menstruating women, to elaborate complex of restrictions, and ultimately to complete seclusion during the menstrual period" [2].

Despite the fact that menstruation is a natural process, many cultures and communities still hold certain taboos and misconceptions about women during their menstrual period. In her work "Reconsidering the Menstrual Taboo: A Portuguese Case" (1982), Denise L. Lawrencelists various beliefs and taboos followed by various societies and cultures, "Cross-cultural descriptions of menstrual taboo restrictions often include: abstinence from sexual intercourse; altered personal hygiene and eating habits; temporary non- participation in normal household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing and child care; avoidance of contact with certain 'masculine' items such as tools and weapons, and the handling of food to be eaten by men; avoidance of certain economically and religiously important public areas such as gardens and temples; and more extreme forms of social exclusion such as banishment from usual living areas or from the community itself to a menstrual hut" [3]. This situation is also prevalent in India, where several taboos associated with menstruation still prevail. Menstruation is still seen as unclean and disgusting on a cultural level in many regions of India. In many parts of the country, menstruation limits the everyday lives of girls and women. They are forbidden from praying as well as touching sacred objects. Entering the kitchen is a significant limitation for many in rural areas

of the country. This myth has its roots in cultural notions of the impure nature of menstruation. Furthermore, it is believed that during menstrual cycle, women become unhygienic, which increases the risk of food contamination when they touch or prepare it. Similarly, “In nineteenth-century France, ..., menstruating women were barred from wine-making, mushroom-picking, silkworm-tending, and sugar-refining, to safeguard the products of these industries from ruin” [2].

Women find it embarrassing to talk about menstruation because of the taboos attached to it that have been imposed on them by their cultural communities. Moreover, the lack of knowledge about menstruation also hinders open discussions on the topic. Menstruation has been a source of oppression for women due to the shame attached to it and the challenges women face when discussing it in public. Although it is a natural occurrence, instead of discussing it openly, both men and women use popular expressions and phrases to indicate and describe a woman’s menstrual cycle. In her work “Top Euphemisms for ‘Period’ by Language” (2016), Katrin Freidman has listed several euphemisms like ‘red week’, ‘strawberry week’, ‘these days’, ‘red army,’ and many more, which are used in different countries and languages to talk about menstruation. Clue, a leading femtech company that imparts education about menstrual health, conducted an international survey in year 2016. The survey discovered that there are “... over 5,000 euphemisms for the word ‘period’. And a ton of interesting stats about education and cultural norms around menstruation” [4].

For women, periods are a regular and unavoidable phenomenon. Once a woman reaches puberty and up until menopause, she naturally experiences the physiological phenomena of menstruation once a month. Understanding the underlying biological foundation of menstruation is necessary to overcome the beliefs surrounding it [5]. Discussions on women’s periods are now emerging in societies with the aim of altering society’s attitudes about menstruation. New global debates are refuting the stereotypes according to which periods are considered stigmatised. It is being promoted to not feel embarrassed about having periods and to encourage individuals to talk about them more openly without worrying about how others may react. Initiatives are starting to appear worldwide to disprove assumptions and provide women in need with information on period hygiene. Literature is also essential in educating people of all genders about menstruation and dispelling taboos and misconceptions regarding it.

2 Empowering Menstrual Discourse through Literature

Literature does more than simply describe reality; it also enriches reality. In the 2014 article “Literature Is Powerful. Literature Defines Humanity” by Angelo Lorenzo, it is stated that “Literature is the foundation of humanity’s cultures, beliefs, and traditions. It serves as a reflection of reality, a product of art, and a window to an ideology. Everything that happens within a society can be written, recorded in, and learned from a piece of literature” [6]. Literature is a reflection of life, an expression of words based on the sorrows, joys, sufferings, aspirations, and various emotions of people. It has the power to create miracles, motivate a generation, and provide knowledge. Literature has limitless, dynamic, and multifaceted nature, and thus serves an important function in the world. Whether in the form of poetry or prose, literature offers readers understanding, wisdom, and emotional experiences. It is not only a means of expression but also a repository of information and a source of entertainment. It provides individuals with a platform to share their ideas on various issues, including economics, politics, health, culture, religion, and other spheres of life. As readers can identify with the stories and narratives, literature can be a powerful tool in educating people about menstruation.

Literature plays a vital role in portraying menstruation in a realistic and non-judgmental way, helping readers to understand that it is a natural bodily process and not something to be ashamed of. Moreover, literature educates people about menstruation by debunking myths and misconceptions and shedding light on the negative consequences of menstrual taboos. Additionally, literature possesses the power to challenge existing stereotypes and reshape societal perceptions. By presenting diverse narratives and perspectives, including those of menstruating individuals, literature confronts the notion that menstruation is dirty, impure, or a source of shame. It effectively showcases the experiences, emotions, and struggles of menstruators, humanizing their stories and fostering empathy among readers. Literature’s ability to portray menstruation in a realistic and non-judgmental manner, while simultaneously debunking myths and shedding light on the consequences of menstrual taboos, empowers readers to embrace and normalize the natural process of menstruation. By challenging stereotypes and presenting diverse perspectives, literature helps shift societal perceptions surrounding menstruation, promoting understanding, empathy, and stigmatisation.

The third wave of feminism has brought new insights to feminist theory, and it has also brought attention to menstrual politics, abortion, and women’s reproductive rights. It has promoted a woman’s right to make her own decisions regarding her body. Many women have come forward with stories, anecdotes, and narratives that focus on the menstruating body, thus making significant contributions to menstruation education. Books like *What’s the Big Secret* (2021) by Sonali Shenoy, *Go with the Flow* (2020) by Lily Williams and Karen Schneemann, *The Moon Within* (2019) by Aida Salazar, *When Girls Grow Up: Puberty Book for Girls* (2018) by Niyatii N Shah, *Period* (2018) edited by Kate Farrell, *The Period Book* (2017) Karen Gravelle and Jennifer Gravelle, *Periods Gone Public* (2017) by Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, *Period Power* (2017) Maisie Hill, *Odes* (2016) by Sharon Olds, *Moon Time* (2015) by Lucy H. Pearce, *Menstrupedia Comic: The Friendly Guide to Periods for Girls* (2014) by Aditi Gupta and Tuhin Paul, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010) by Chris Bobel, *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation* (2009) by Elissa Stein and Susan Kim, *Red Moon* (1994) by Miranda Gray and many more have covered

the taboo topic of menstruation. These narratives have not only aimed to shatter long-associated myths, prohibitions, shame, and taboos associated with menstruation but have also imparted knowledge to females and individuals of other genders, encouraging them to embrace this natural gift.

The majority of the stories are personal accounts of the authors' own struggles and experiences, where they felt compelled to step outside of their comfort zones and discuss the unspoken. The mentioned books are simple, gender-neutral works that anybody can read to learn about the reproductive system. They are particularly helpful for girls approaching puberty, aiding them in understanding the changes happening in their bodies.

Shenoy's book *What's the big secret? Why You Need to Know . . . Period*, is an illustrated book designed for young readers to familiarize themselves with the menstrual cycle. The book addresses menstruation-related issues that often remain unanswered in many households, highlighting how these unanswered questions only contribute to misunderstandings. The author skilfully approaches this sensitive subject with a narrative that is both light-hearted and filled with humor [7].

There are several books in the same genre aimed at young readers to help them understand the topic of menstruation. One example is *Menstrupedia Comic: The Friendly Guide to Periods for Girls* by Paul and Gupta, this vibrant and educational comic is making its way to young girls throughout India, reshaping cultural misconceptions and challenging taboos associated with menstruation. [8]. In addition to penning the book Gupta has taken the initiative to educate girls, especially in India, about the taboos and myths associated with menstruation, as well as menstrual health hygiene, through the website menstrupedia.com [8]. This book is particularly well-suited for Indian readers, as it avoids explicit material that may not be appreciated in many Indian cultural contexts. As noted by Audrey Marie Lamborn in "It's About 'That Time' to Break the Cycle: A Rhetorical Analysis of Challenging Menstrual Taboos" (2017), "Western books have too much nudity for Indian audiences and cause discomfort among children and parents due to the topic and how it is discussed" [9].

Lamborn's research delves deeper into the pervasive cultural misconception of menstrual impurity and its adverse effects on gender equality. The stigma surrounding menstruation creates significant barriers for women, compelling them to conceal their periods and structure their lives around them. This predicament is aggravated by the absence of open dialogues concerning menstruation, which in turn hampers women's access to education and proper sanitary products [9]. To confront these entrenched taboos, the texts like *Menstrupedia Comic*, proposes an examination of artifacts that defy the established norms. Such artifacts can offer valuable insights into the origins and repercussions of these taboos. Through the analysis of these artifacts, one can grasp how messages are communicated within a culture and how language can be harnessed to instigate transformation. Conquering these taboos is of paramount importance for women's overall well-being, given that these taboos presently impose limitations and health hazards on them. Eliminating these taboos holds critical significance in advancing gender equality and safeguarding women's holistic health and hygiene.

Another notable story on menstruation is Salazar's book, *The Moon Within*. The story revolves around Celi, a twelve-year-old girl who is experiencing many physical changes in her body during puberty. The narrative highlights how children often feel uncomfortable and bewildered by the sudden changes happening in their bodies. When Celi encounters her first bra and first period, her initial reaction is to hide these changes from her friends due to a sense of shame regarding her body's new functions. However, during this challenging time, Celi's mother becomes a true supporter, teaching her not to be embarrassed by menstruation but to embrace it as a magical gift of womanhood. Celi's mother does not want her to experience the same embarrassment she faced during her own puberty [10]. Salazar's book is an essential read for parents and children as it helps them understand how to embrace menstruation as a magnificent and significant gift of femininity rather than feeling ashamed of it. The impact of this narrative on children's lives can last a lifetime.

Go with the Flow by Williams and Schneemann is a graphic novel that revolves around the topic of periods. The story centers on a group of friends who embark on a quest to obtain free sanitary products for their school, which has always prioritized the football team's uniform and equipment. The novel covers various aspects, including the unjustified stigma and bullying that make high school even more challenging for girls. It highlights the fact that many girls and women cannot afford these products, while others suffer and miss school due to unbearable period pain or a lack of access to sanitary products. It has highlighted the fact that many girls and women cannot afford these products and that others are suffering and missing school due to unbearable period pain or a lack of access to sanitary products. This book is ideal for readers who will eventually receive their periods, those who are already experiencing them, and those who will never experience them. It offers something for every reader to connect with or learn from. It is one of those rare books that promotes awareness among parents, educators, and young readers alike [11]. These literary works truly comprehend the importance of eradicating the stigma associated with menstruation and how they contribute to raising awareness of menstrual hygiene among people.

Each literary piece, to a varying extent, incorporates a broad picture of human society, making literature a social discourse that requires analysis from various angles. Readers often relate to the situations, concepts, and themes presented in books, which helps widen their perspectives and encourages critical thinking about the issues they

encounter in their daily lives. With millions of books published worldwide each year, literature provides a pathway to discover new information. As aptly noted by S. Keerthika in “Literature and Society: How Literature Reflects Society” that “... literature is really not a reflection of the world as it is but an effort to transcend these facts to arrive at the real fact” [12]. Keerthika further emphasizes that “Literature greatly influences younger generations, enabling them to comprehend past mistakes and explore ways to make amends. In addition to influencing political systems, literature also shapes civilizations” [12]. Menstruation education is crucial in our time, and literature plays a significant role in spreading awareness and education on this subject.[13]

Menstrual taboos often thrive in silence and secrecy. However, literature is playing a vital role in normalizing conversations around menstruation by addressing it openly and candidly.[14] Authors incorporate menstruation into plotlines and character development, thereby encouraging readers to engage in open discussions, ask questions, and challenge societal norms.[15] Literature possesses the power to inspire social change by shaping public opinion and influencing attitudes.[16] Well-crafted narratives that challenge menstrual taboos and present alternative perspectives can prompt readers to question and reject outdated beliefs and practices. This, in turn, creates a ripple effect, fostering discussions and actions that lead to tangible change in communities and societies.[17]

3 Result and Discussion

The impact of literature on awareness of menstrual hygiene is profound, extending beyond the mere dispelling of myths to actively fostering a more open and informed dialogue about menstruation. Through compelling narratives, writers have succeeded in humanizing the menstrual experience, dismantling entrenched taboos, and creating a space for candid conversations. Literature has the unique ability to delve into the intricacies of personal experiences, allowing readers to empathize with the challenges and societal pressures surrounding menstruation. By portraying menstruation as a natural and integral aspect of human life, literature has contributed to the normalization of the menstrual cycle. This normalization, in turn, has played a pivotal role in breaking down the barriers of silence and shame, empowering individuals to engage in informed discussions about menstrual hygiene. Through the power of storytelling, literature has not only corrected misconceptions but has also catalyzed a cultural shift, fostering a more inclusive and enlightened society regarding the menstrual experience.

The influence of literature on menstruation has instigated observable cultural shifts, permeating various facets of society. Language, once burdened by stigmatizing terminology, has undergone a transformation, with authors challenging derogatory expressions related to menstruation. Additionally, media representations have shifted towards more realistic and inclusive portrayals, moving away from sensationalism or avoidance. The discourse surrounding menstruation in the public sphere has evolved, spurred by literary narratives that challenge societal norms. Where silence and discomfort once prevailed, there is now a growing openness and acceptance. Literature's impact extends beyond the written word, shaping the way menstruation is discussed, depicted, and perceived in broader cultural contexts, thereby contributing to a more enlightened and progressive societal outlook.

Integrating literature addressing menstruation into school curricula holds significant potential benefits for breaking down taboos and cultivating a positive attitude toward menstruation from an early age. By incorporating such literature, educational institutions can provide students with a nuanced understanding of menstruation, dispelling myths and promoting information. Exposure to diverse narratives can foster empathy among students, allowing them to appreciate the varied experiences associated with menstruation. Moreover, including these discussions in curricula contributes to a normalization of the topic, reducing the likelihood of perpetuating stereotypes or stigmatizing beliefs. By engaging with literature that addresses menstruation, students are not only equipped with knowledge but are also encouraged to develop a respectful and empathetic perspective, laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and informed society.

4 Conclusion

There is a significant lack of menstrual cycle education in society, which prevents the challenging of existing taboos until sufficient information is available to debunk these false beliefs. However, ongoing discussions about menstruation have gained international attention, and literature is playing a crucial role in dispelling myths and taboos associated with menstruation. Moreover, literature is also promoting the normalization and acceptance of the significant changes that occur in a person's body during menstruation. The aforementioned writers and their works are persuading individuals and communities to reevaluate their beliefs surrounding menstruation. To prevent the stigmatization of menstruating girls, social assistance should involve providing them with emotional support and educating various segments of the public. Additionally, incorporating the above-mentioned literary pieces into school curricula can contribute to raising awareness of menarche.

It is important to note that while literature can be a powerful tool, it should be complemented by comprehensive education, advocacy, and policy interventions to address menstrual taboos effectively. By combining these efforts, we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable world, free from the stigma and discrimination associated with menstruation.

5 References

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